

# Are The Media Gates Closing? Rethinking Media Gatekeeping Function in User Generated Contents

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## ABSTRACT

Gatekeeping is a traditional function of the mass media that involves selecting, vetting and determining news and information disseminated to the public. This paper examined the changes in media gatekeeping resulting from innovations in information technology such as new media, and modifications in the present news gathering process which allowed for user generated contents. It examined power shift, plurality of news sources, self as source as undermining the gatekeeping function of the mainstream mass media. It supported the position that gatekeeping may no longer be strictly applicable in this era of online news communication, rather the concept of gatewatching which entailed the media taking up the role of identifying relevant news and information from the various news source and directing public attention to them, appeared to be more suitable.

Keywords: New Media, User Generated Content, Gatekeeping, Gatewatching

## INTRODUCTION

The mass media has always been regarded as the major institution in society charged with the gathering of news and information, processing, packaging and dissemination to the public. Imbedded within these operations is the gatekeeping function; that involves selecting, vetting and deciding what news and information to deliver to the public.

The emergence and widespread use of the Internet and its attendant technologies tagged the New Media seem to be creating shifts and changes as regards news and information dissemination in society. One of such is emergence of audience members as active participants in the news and information dissemination process. Mass media organisations are no longer the sole participant in news and information dissemination business. With digital technologies of the Internet, smartphones, tablets, camera available to them, audience members now gather and share news. Audience members have thus become active seekers and producers of information for themselves. Lee (2012:1) express this thought saying:

With the explosive growth in internet connections worldwide, people are now finding their own ways to news online. It is carrying a vast array of news services and information resources and helping its users make sense of their social environment.

The pattern of news consumption is changing as the audience is being empowered by the new media. News and information is no longer mainly from traditional media sources to audience members but now a flow from audience to audience, even, audience to media. This no doubt has implications for media gatekeeping. According to Ukonu, Okoro and

Agbo (2013: 33) “new media undermine old bases of social power, ... many more people have been empowered by new technologies.” Reynolds School of Journalism, (2010) notes “large number of news outlets, low barriers to entry, 24/7 availability and global access to sources made possible by the internet creates changes the process of gatekeeping.” It allows information providers to avoid media gatekeepers and enable audiences gain control over communication (Lee, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper draws theoretical strength from the uses and gratification theory and the technological determinism theory

The **uses and gratification theory** of Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1974) assumes that audience members are active in the communication process not passive, as they choose and use media and contents to fulfil specific gratifications.

Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008:71) opine that the theory is “concerned with what people do with the media instead of what the media do to people.” Audience members determine and choose media and contents for their own purposes; without the media influencing them otherwise. The uses and gratification theory enunciates that in the mass communication process, much initiative in connecting need gratification and media choice lies with the audience members. And so, audience members have power over their media consumption; interpreting and integrating media into their own lives.

Applying this theory to this discourse, audience members are not passive but they are active in this age of new media and engaging in user generated contents. They act as content creators and distributors of news, information, pictures and videos for public consumption. People no longer just wait for the mass media to gather and disseminate news to them. Nwafor, Odoemelam, Orji-Egwu, Nwankwo and Nweze, (2013:66) note that with the new media (social media) people can now consume media as wanted and needed rather than allowing media producers schedule consumption time and content. A person can now communicate with anyone from any place at any time.

The thrust of the **technological determinism theory** is that technological developments are the sole or prime antecedent causes of changes in society, and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organisation (Chandler, 1995 in Ukonu, Okoro and Agbo, 2013). It implies that human society is transformed with the emergence and adoption of new technologies. These technology reshapes and polishes activities in human societies. McQuail (2005) relating this theory to mass communication notes in Ukonu, Okoro and Agbo (2013:4) that technological determinism theory is based on the following:

1. Communication technology is basic to society
2. Technology drives changes in media industries
3. Each technology is tilted towards particular communication forms, contents and uses.
4. The sequence of invention and application of communication technology influence social change
5. Communication revolutions engender social revolutions
6. New media undermine old bases of power.

In aligning this theory with the thesis of this paper, the new media, social media and user generated contents are borne out of technological development in the area of information communication and they have visibly changed the media industry. Media outfits (newspapers, magazines, television) now have online versions and social media platforms, there is now the integration of new media tools in traditional media operations, the gatekeeping power of the media is diminishing. Also there is the rise of audience as active participant in information gathering and distribution through user generated contents and social media. All these are resultant effects of new media and user generated contents on the media industry.

### **The New Media and User Generated Contents**

The Internet and its communication technologies referred to as the new media have emerged as significant tools for information and communication all around the world. The new media allows one-to-one communication, as well as one-to-many communication. Its uses and application ranges from business, to political, to religious, to social and personal uses.

The distinguishing attributes of the new media enunciated by McQuail (2005) in Ukonu, Okoro and Agbo (2013) are interactivity, media richness, autonomy, social presence, playfulness, priority and personalisation.

New media through social media platforms allow users to express themselves, publish their views and opinions, make and interact with friends and share personal information. Social media platforms include: *Facebook* (for connecting with friends, sending out messages, posts pictures and videos), *Twitter* (used to send short messages on happenings to followers), *YouTube* (used to upload videos), *Flickr* (used for pictures).

The use of new media and social media has grown appreciably in Africa and all around the world, with more people increasingly relying on social media for news and information. Abdulrauf-Salau (2013) reports that the social media became one of the most powerful sources for news updates through platforms such as *Twitter* in the year 2012. Ozuro and Ekeanyanwu (2013) asserts that in some countries, there are more social media users than traditional media users. Citing (Lim 2015) they note that in Egypt, *Facebook* is the second most accessed website after Google and there are more *Facebook* users than newspaper readers. In Nigeria, *Facebook* users was estimated at 5, 357, 500 in January 2012 by Social Bakers (2012) in Haruna and Danladi (2013). For *Twitter*, 1, 646, 212 was given as the number of tweets emerging from Nigeria during the last three months of 2011 in a study conducted by Premium Times (Abdulrauf-Salau, 2013).

The production of news and media content by non-journalists facilitated by new technologies is now referred to as user generated content. User generated contents expresses the idea of news, information, pictures and videos created, uploaded on the internet and shared around the world by audience members who have the basic tools of smartphones, camera and access to the internet.

Beal (2015:1) describes it thus:

the term 'user generated content' is used to describe any form of content such as video, blogs, digital images, audio files, and other forms of media that was created by consumers or end-users of an online system or service and is publically available to others consumers and end-users.

It is through this process that end-users and audience members participate in news production. Individuals on their own capture breaking news and other news events, upload the stories, pictures and videos. These contents are displayed and shared through social media networks (*Facebook, Twitter, Instagram*), wikis, blogs, video sharing sites (*YouTube*), and can be accessed by anyone in the world with portable devices such as smartphones, laptops and tablets.

Social media have become the first source of breaking news stories (Dominick 2011) as individuals at the scene with their phones can record the event, take pictures and share it online. With the click of the button, the world become aware of recent occurrences and events. The Virginian tech shooting in the US, the Britain train bomb all broke on the internet.

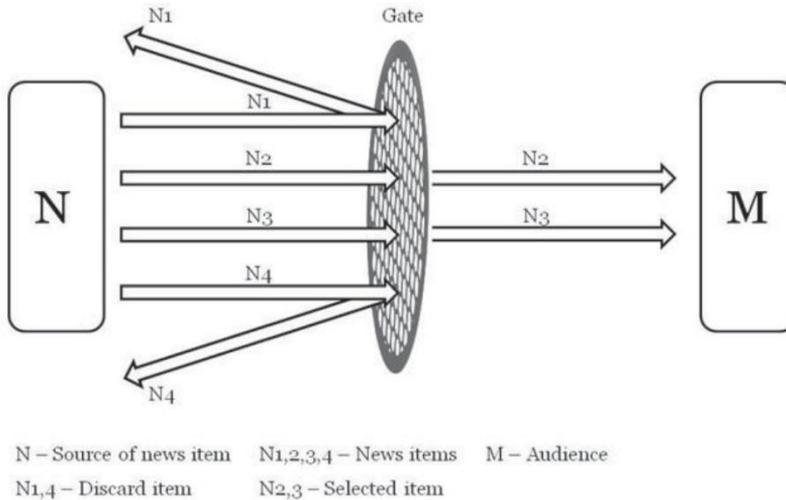
Audience members no longer have to wait for the mainstream media to select and decide what will be news for the public. They can now on their own access news sources online to get whatever story they want. Ukou, Okoro and Agbo, (2013) stress that social media have become a serious warning to the media that the audience is playing increasingly greater role in the process of mass communication, far from being just recipients.

### **Mainstream Media and the Gatekeeping Function**

Gatekeeping describes the process in which media professionals and outfits select and disseminate newsworthy stories to the public. It is a function of news selection, prioritizing and determination in media outfits by reporters to editors to proprietors.

Several events and occurrences happen every day in different places in society. It is impossible for any media organisation to report all of them thus, filtering and gatekeeping is inevitable. In line with this, Shoemaker (1998) in Channel (2010:11), posits that gatekeeping is the daily process by which the many messages in the world are reduced by newsmakers and shared with the public. It explains the process by which news is gathered, filtered, vetted and distributed to audiences by media professionals and organisations.

Thus gatekeepers are the decision makers influencing information flow to the public. In a way gatekeeping is about the control of news and information that get to audience members and what audience members are aware of. It invariably means that not all information that comes to a media organisation is disseminated to the public. Bruns advances that "Gatekeeping is a regime of control over what content is allowed to emerge from the production processes in print and broadcast media; the controllers (journalists, editors, owners) of these media...control the gates through which content is released to their audiences" (Bruns, in Reynolds School of Journalism, 2010). Gatekeeping results in a situation that covers some kinds of news more than other kinds; favors some groups over others, some places more than other places; promotes some ideals more than others and is influenced by economic concerns (Reynolds School of Journalism, 2010).



## Gate Keeping Theory

**Figure 1: The Gatekeeping Process in Media Organisations**

*Source: Google Images*

According to Fougler (2005) gatekeepers have the ability to decide what messages others see, the context in which they are seen and when they see them. Also, they often have the ability to change messages or inhibit them from reaching an audience. The process of gatekeeping workthrough:

1. Reducing the message: Removing some portions of the news and information gathered. This could be to fit space/airtime for print media or broadcast media or for societal safety. The reduction of the message could also be based on news worthiness and value.
2. Modifying the message: The nature of the message or certain elements in the message is changed. It involves removing implied meanings, rewriting sentences or paragraphs in a story better understanding by the audience,
3. Expanding the message: This implies drawing linkages, giving background and context to the message.
4. Removal of Portions of the News: This entails deleting portions and details that are deemed not news worthy.
5. Placement of stories: This involves determining the position where stories will be and at what prominence.

This unique function of the media does not only determine which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of news and messages will be. Thus gatekeeping limits, controls and shapes the public's knowledge of the totality of actual events occurring in reality.

### **User Generated Contents and Implications for Traditional Gatekeeping**

The new media and its user generated contents have facilitated shifts and changes in media operations. Channel (2010) notes that it is changing the way news is gathered and disseminated. News processing and dissemination is no longer operated only under formal structure of a media organisation but in a system of independent outlets of news facilitated by the Internet. The implication of this on gatekeeping is that the far reaching effects of selecting, filtering and controlling news and information by mainstream media is diminishing. Reynolds School of Journalism (2010) declares that user generated contents and social media makes gatekeeping more chaotic as secrets are very difficult to keep; anyone can publish any time; control moves from the publisher to the audience, from the source to the receiver, from the institution to the individual. The changes or influence of user generated contents on traditional gatekeeping function will be examined from the perspectives of: power shift, plurality of media sources, self as source and the enthronement of “gatewatching” as “gatekeeping.”

**Power Shifts:** By being able to generate contents for public consumptions; users and media audience are increasingly gaining significant role in news process. This signifies power shift as noted by media scholars. Li (1998) in Lee (2012) notes this saying that with the new media the balance of power is shifting from news sender to the news receiver. In the same vein, Nwafor, Odoemelam, Orji-Egwu, Nwankwo and Nweze, (2013:66) remark that “technology and the social media in particular have brought power back to the people; with it, established authorities are now undermined and users are now the experts.”

Explaining the impetus for user-generated contents and power shift, Benkler (2007) in Agboola (2013:213), mentions that:

the capacity to infer meaning, as entailed in encoding and decoding of human meaningful statements, as well as the capacity to communicate one's meaning around the world, are no longer the prerogative of few individual users, but millions around the globe.

What this means is that individuals on their own are rational enough to make meaning of the world around them, audience members utilising the tools of the new media create and distribute contents for others. Buttressing this point, Singer (2006) in Channel (2010:11) states “the power of gatekeepers seems to diminish in a modern information society. The internet defies the whole notion of a 'gate' and challenges the idea that journalists (or anyone) can or should limit what passes through it.” By its nature, the internet is an all comer affair without restriction thus makes null the concept of gatekeeping. This is why Ukonu, Okoro and Agbo (2013: 33) averred that “new media undermine old bases of social power.”

Describing media operations in this age of social media and user generated contents, Abdulrauf-Salau (2013:199) reveals that “often (media) professionals and managers determine what the audience needed, and give it to them but these days posting news via social media platform in general and *Twitter* in particular is not a prerogative of the

journalist and media organisation but citizen journalists as well.”

What the above mean is that audience members do not only look up to journalists and media organisations for news. They know what they want, get the information and share them among themselves. Lee (2012) citing Patterson (2005) explains that “in online environment, news readers are able to bypass traditional gatekeepers who are considered influential as to their role in shaping the media agenda. Rather, they are able to seek information in meeting their own interest while ignoring the intermediary processors of news.”

One example that illustrates the increasing power shift as regards gatekeeping is the fact that it was an online source, DrudgeReport.com, that broke the Monica Lewinsky/President Clinton scandal in January 1998 (Channel, 2010). If it was just mainstream media, the news may not have come up; as it could have been removed through the process of gatekeeping.

**Plurality of News Sources:** The new media can be said to have opened the 'gates' of information flow. Bruns (2003) in Channel (2010) explains that the online news environment is made up of open communities where people can add to the collective knowledge. Thus, user generated contents provide platform for alternative sources and angles to news stories. Individuals can generate and report aspects of a story that would have been omitted through media gatekeeping. The result is that the public is able to enjoy expanded quantity and choice of news, information and entertainment contents. The powerful gatekeeping function ascribed to the media stemmed from the fact that the media was the central institution for information gathering, processing and dissemination. But with the advent of the new media came plurality of news sources such that audience members on their own can access news and information. This gradually reduces the far reaching effect of the media gatekeeping function.

In pre-new media times, media organisations could 'kill' a certain story by not publishing it and the public will not get to know about it. But with this system of user generated contents, audience members can still access news and stories that mainstream media may have removed in the process of gatekeeping. Once an individual gets wind of the information, uploads it online, instantaneously it becomes public news. A clear example of how user generated contents provide alternative news sources for the public is the case of the Egyptian protest that led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. Papacharissi and Oliveira (2012:266) in Ozuru and Ekeanyanwu (2013:105) states that “during this period, access to mainstream media were variably blocked, foreign and native journalists were intimidated, and access to the internet was controlled and eventually shut down. Twitter, however, provided a continuous stream of events in real time throughout the crisis.” This shows the changing face of gatekeeping; as much the government tried to keep information from spreading by shutting down mainstream media, the social media served as a platform of news. People still got information on a continuous basis that strengthened their resolve leading to the eventual removal of the president. Social media thus provided the space and tool for information that the authoritarian government could not control.

Here, in Nigeria, the episodes of the former First Lady of Nigeria, Dame Patience Jonathan illustrate how the new media and user generated contents cannot be fully kept in check, thus weakening the power of traditional gatekeeping. On several occasions, the First Lady's poor use of English and grammatical constructions went viral in hilarious and sometimes embarrassing manner. The case of her speech made during the capture of the Chibok girls, popularly known as "Diaris is God" still resonates today. This was replete on the social media. There were pictures, mimics, videos, jokes, even musicals built around the incident. In the days of non-user generated contents, government institution would have directed that the story be omitted from news broadcast, or it would have ended with the broadcast for that day. But with the social media, it could not be controlled, the story went on for months.

**Self as Source:** Online content generators perform the gatekeeping function for themselves; serving as news source as well as news editor. This is what Li (1998) and Sunder and Nass (2001) described as the "self as source" concept.

The internet gives people access to information and so people can choose by themselves what to read, listen or watch. In the same vein, individuals decide what is news worthy and share it via the internet and social media platforms.

### **From Gatekeeping to Gatewatching?**

Lee (2012), opined that the development of the online news medium can yield a change in the function of traditional gatekeeping. Channel (2010) citing Bardoel (1996), put forward the notion that traditional media would change from information publishing to directing the flow of information. This is what Bruns (2003, 2005, 2007) terms 'gatewatching'.

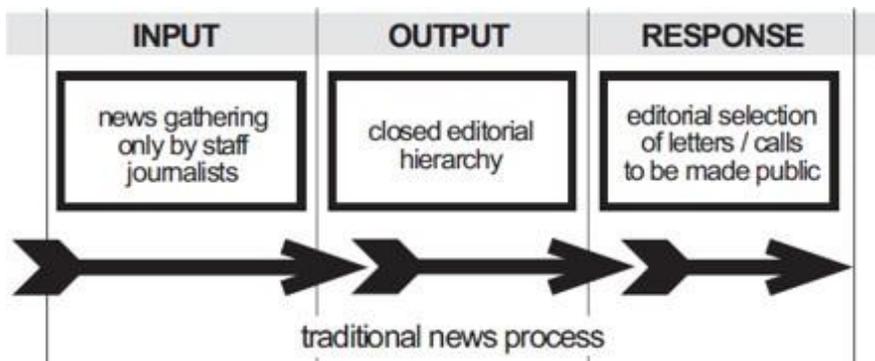
Bruns declares that the original concept of gatekeeping as a means of ensuring broad and balanced coverage of news events is not strictly applicable in this sphere of online news communication as the gates have multiplied beyond control. He states that:

gatekeeping practices were simply a practical necessity: printed newspapers and the news bulletins of radio and television broadcasting could never offer more than a tightly edited selection of the day's news; judgments of which stories were most important for audiences to learn about (that is, which stories could be squeezed into the available newshole the total space for news content available in the publication or broadcast) had to be made (Bruns 2014:226).

Thus, Bruns (nd:5), defines gatewatching, as the alternative to gatekeeping, as: a form of reporting and commenting on the news which does not operate from a position of authority inherent in ... ownership and control of the newsflow, but works by harnessing the collective intelligence and knowledge of dedicated communities to filter the newsflow and to highlight and debate salient topics of importance to the community.

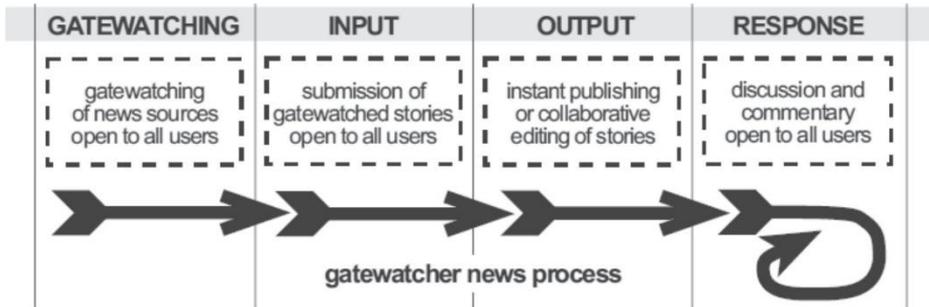
In the gatewatching function, journalists and content creators (citizen journalists) using new media tools, observe multiple sources of information (gates) noting and commenting on the salient topics and directing audience members to these information as they may be interested. This indicates that in this sphere of online news communication media, the role of mainstream media organisations will be observing and watching out for users generated contents from various sources, identifying the important/relevant contents and directing the public's attention to them.

What this connotes is that the gatewatching function is not for professional journalists alone but it incorporates members of society who are involved in the process of gathering and disseminating news as well as citizen journalism communities. It creates a situation where audience members do not wait and rely only on journalists and media information, opinions and comments but they now have direct access to multitude of news sources, form their own opinions and make public their positions through new media outlets (blogs, social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook). In clearly delineating the differences between gatekeeping and gatewatching, Bruns presents diagrammatic illustrations of the processes involved in each.



**Figure 2: The Process of Gatekeeping by Mainstream Media**

*Source: Bruns, A. (nd:4) [snurb.info/files/News%20Blogs%20and%20Citizen%20Journalism.pdf](http://snurb.info/files/News%20Blogs%20and%20Citizen%20Journalism.pdf)*



**Figure 3: The Gatewatching News Process in the Era User-Generated Contents**

*Source: Bruns, A. (nd:8) [snurb.info/files/News%20Blogs%20and%20Citizen%20Journalism.pdf](http://snurb.info/files/News%20Blogs%20and%20Citizen%20Journalism.pdf)*

The gatewatching process differs from the gatekeeping process in that it is not concerned with publishing a single news report on an event but it is concerned with compiling “a number of related reports on a newsworthy event, thereby publicising the event and the stories (Bruns nd:6).” It goes beyond this to 'create' an open space where audience members read or view the news and in responding further add their own gatewatched information.

The process of gatewatching thus enables an ongoing coverage of the event(s) beyond the initial report. According to Bruns (nd:6),

Through such responses (audience addition of gatewatched information), the initial reports are fleshed out, examined, critiqued, debunked, put into context, and linked with other news, events and background information; this process externalises and turns into a widely distributed collaborative effort.

The news production process thus shifts from a one-time reporting of single news items to a continuous reporting process of collaborative efforts involving many players (professional and non-professional journalists) resulting in well informed and critical audience members. The role of professional journalists will be “one of guide rather than leader, of (complementary) service provider rather than (sole) content producer professional journalists can participate most effectively when they contribute original research and promote public debate, rather than acting as gatekeepers to summarise, contain, and conclude public debate.” (Burns, nd:8)

## CONCLUSION

The effects of new media and user generated content is far reaching in society and even on the media industry. In traditional journalism, professional journalists act as the gatekeepers, filtering and reporting on world events but the increasing role of users as participants in news sourcing and disseminating gradually diminishes the significance of the gatekeeping function.

The overall implication is that mainstream media organisations can no longer rely on their control of news and information flow but should seek ways to engage audience members and incorporate user generated contents in their operations.

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