

A reality check in contemporary indian media media essay



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The paper discusses the evolution of the Gatekeeping Model over the years and examines how the traditional roles of ' gatekeeping' have witnessed a change. From editors and reporters, the news and information is now being filtered by corporate houses, sponsors, advertisers, politicians and in case of the social media, the audience themselves. The research also offers an overview of the trend of cross media ownership in India and how the sponsors are influencing the information carried where corporatization of the media has affected the flow of news. Besides, it also studies the idea of ' gatekeeping' in India in the context of social networking where the users themselves are gatekeepers. The paper suggests that the traditional methods of ' gatekeeping' have decayed and hence it should be understood in novel contexts keeping in mind the rapid growth of new technologies and different ways of mass communication.

Keywords: Gatekeeping, Advertisers, Social media, Indian media.

Which news is more valuable? Twenty one persons killed and dozens injured in train collision or The speeding train kills seven elephants. Most people would say both are equally important but the people who are actually involved in the process of news selection and placement will be holding a different view. One of the news stories will be given more value than the other and so would be placed accordingly in the news paper. One of them might take a position on the front page while the other might have to be satisfied by being on some inside page. Most of the times, the stories with comparatively less value might not even get a chance to be published if the space on the page is not enough. Everyday numerous events take place that need reporting but not all of them can be published in a news paper or be

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flashed on a TV screen or announced on a radio set. The idea of 'gatekeeping' seems logical at first since there is a limitation of time and space in publications and channels and very simply put, not everything can be shown or published. Thus, some kind of filtration is but natural. However, there are conscious processes involved which decide what has to be transmitted and what has to be withheld. The earliest concept of 'gatekeeping' has assigned this conscious role to the editors of media houses.

Traditionally, such decisions were based on the principles of news value and making such decisions used to be the major task of a 'gatekeeper' which was taken up by the 'editor' of a news paper. Every story that used to enter the newsroom had to go through the scrutiny of the editor and only after the editor approves, it was allowed to be published. Hence, it can be said that an editor used to have the final say in what is to be sent to the readers and what not. Editor was the sole authority holding the 'gate' through which the stories pass. The traditional theories and models on 'gatekeeping' also laid emphasis on the importance of the role of an editor in the paradigm of news communication. The famous model of gate keeping given by D. M. White(1950) focused only on the role of an editor as the man who made decisions. However, his theory was criticized when the other factors influencing the decision started gaining recognition.

The editors started losing their say in the news selection process as the media got "locked into the power structure, and consequently as acting largely in tandem with the dominant institutions in society. The media thus reproduced the viewpoints of dominant institutions not as one among a number of alternative perspectives, but as the central and 'obvious' or '<https://assignbuster.com/a-reality-check-in-contemporary-indian-media-media-essay/>

natural' perspective" (Curran et al, 1982). The element of 'biasness' affects the information that is received by the reader. The editor is required to keep in mind a number of things other than the news value principles for letting a story be published. The flow of information is being regulated by the gatekeepers who are not directly involved in the news gathering process but are the managers and the owners of the media firms or the advertisers or other stake holders. ' Money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The political affiliation of a media outlet determines the ideology it would stand for and hence the ' gatekeeping' will be done accordingly. The ' gatekeeper' moulds the stories in a way that satisfy the interest of a political leader or a group and so changing the angle and slant of the real truth. ' Mass media content is influenced by media workers' socialization and attitudes. Their professional training, personal and political attitudes and affiliations lead them to produce a social reality' (Riaz, 2008).

To a certain level, ' gatekeeping' is very important for communication planning but as the news media has been overpowered by the top tier of corporate, it is becoming more of a negative term. Commercial advertising is the principal source of revenue for media and is very important for ensuring the survival of the media houses. In fact, the biggest regulators of the flow of information are the commercial organizations providing financial support to the media outlets in the form of advertisements. This has not only changed the nature of flow of news but also the entire set up of a news paper. Twenty five years ago, we could never imagine that first page of a newspaper in

India would be full page advertisement. The news paper today looks more of a product catalogue than a news journal.

On one hand, the globalization and liberalization provides a better scope of mediating while on the other it has given rise to commercialization of news. The profit making motive of the owners and publishers has led to backroom negotiation and encouraged payola which further leads to withholding of information and possibilities and hence preventing the readers from realizing the importance of truth in order to create the desired effect in the society. This can be easily related to agenda-setting. The ' gatekeeping' today, is a vital part of the agenda-setting function of media as it is vastly used as a helping tool by the agenda setters. ' According to the agenda-setting theory, because of the fact of paying attention to some issues and neglecting and ignoring some others, the mass media will have an effect on public opinion' (Riaz, 2008). For example, while watching a cricket match on television, one cannot watch the action taking place in the whole ground and also the spectators present in the pavilion from every angle at the same time. Even though today the information is coming from all corners, newspapers still remains as the top most trusted source in India and so the editorial decisions made in the dark without proper justification is not only an irresponsible act but also a corrupt practice. Keeping the gate is a serious responsibility and if the gatekeeper's integrity is lost, the news paper too will loose its integrity. The gatekeeper has the power to forward the selected news items to the consumers. Therefore, the gatekeeper must have a moral justification of selecting a news story over the other because with power comes the accountability. News comes from the people and goes back to them. People

are the ultimate source and the consumers of information. Hence, it is very important to ensure that the interests of the people are met. But the commercialization of media has led to conscious manipulations in sending back to the public what they are interested in and what can be 'discussed'. 'Gatekeeping' today can be called as one of the barriers to communication because the gatekeepers decide the nature of thoughts that will be created in the minds of the people and dictate what is worthy of the attention of the receiver. Here, one can raise an eyebrow and can ask for one's right to information. There has been numerous instances where biased 'gatekeeping' created false or skewed notion of an institution, event or an individual. These will be discussed later in the paper.

'Gatekeepers' of news and information: The theoretical underpinning

The gatekeepers' model has been the bedrock of many communication studies in India and abroad and it has been the most debated theory as well. Communication scholars like Wilbur Schramm have outlined the basic tenets of the process of communication. A message is sent by a sender to a receiver through a channel and the receiver gives feedback making the communication process a dynamic and continuous one. However, the gatekeepers model has been seminal in the sense that it has identified influences of the institutional roles of editors on the information, especially information in news form, being passed on to readers, listeners and viewers.

The evolution of the Gatekeeper's theory has been charted by Chris Roberts, a Doctoral student at The University of South Carolina in a paper titled '

Communication Theory and Methodology Division Association for Education

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in Journalism and Mass Communication' presented in August 2005 at Communication Theory and Methodology Division Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication San Antonio, Texas. Roberts has termed the concept as the 'vanilla ice cream of mass communication theory.' He says- 'this is so since it may not be everyone's favourite, but nearly everyone can tolerate it and while it may have an unremarkable flavour, it serves as a building block for other theory and methodological approaches'. In post-war America in 1947, it was Prussian scholar Kurt Lewin who coined the term 'gatekeeping.' He concluded in a study of sweetbreads on Iowa housewives that they are the "gatekeepers who control what food enters the channels that ultimately bring it from the garden or supermarket into the household and onto the dining-room table. Each channel is walled into sections surrounded by gates - the decision-making points that determine whether the food will enter the channel to start with, or move to the next section. But there are forces which exert pressure along the way to accept or reject food." He however added that the theory "holds not only for food channels but also for the travelling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group..." (Lewin, 1947). It was in the same year 1947 that David Manning White decided to observe how an editor of a newspaper chooses or leaves out news. Aided by a telegraph wire editor Mr Gates for his study on a newspaper titled The Peoria Star, White proposed the flow of communication in 1950 which was later integrated into Lewin's theory(Figure-I). The theory was published in Journalism Quarterly, 27.

FIGURE I

<http://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Media,%20Culture%20and%20Society/gatekeeping.doc/gatekeeping-1.gif>

White suggested that a news source has several items some of which are filtered by the organization's editors who act as 'gatekeepers'. The news that thus reaches the audience is selected consciously.

However, editors can also publish only what is provided to them by the sources like news wires. This aspect was elaborated by Dr Walter Gieber in 1956 whose dissertation at the University of Wisconsin expanded White's early study to 16 wire editors. Where Gieber differed from other scholars was that he gave equal importance to the processes surrounding the agents who act as gatekeepers. Chris Roberts outlines that in Gieber's theory, these gatekeepers are passive and reactive, unable to do much to influence the copy they receive. A very key factor in the news flow process was overlooked by White which is the organizational influences like work culture, work routines and story deadlines which were also noted by Gieber.

The Westley-MacLean model (Figure-II) introduced the idea of gatekeeper C and feedback between the three centres. According to them, C filters some component of the message which is being sent to B. But feedback between the sender and receiver remains all throughout.

FIGURE II

<http://communicationtheory.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/westley-and-macLean%E2%80%99s-model-of-communication-diagram.jpg>

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(Available at: <http://communicationtheory.org/westley-and-maclean%E2%80%99s-model-of-communication/>)

Here, X1 and X2 are news items which reach the client A (media house, reporter) who passes it on to audience B. There is the intervention of C, a gatekeeper who can also receive some news directly (X3, X4). Westley and MacLean have suggested that communication begins when receivers start to give feedback (f) according to their own surroundings. This model was applicable for both interpersonal and mass communication and identified the very important element of feedback despite the presence of a gatekeeper. If we take an example from India, a newspaper reporter might get news and the editor might edit it before publishing. But whatever information reaches the audience is acted upon by them- the thriving 'Letters to the Editor' section, especially in the Hindi press, being a good example of that.

But if one talks about 'gatekeeping', it should be kept in mind that it is not only about the selection and presentation of news but also about gathering of news from various sources. J T McNelly(1959) focused not on editors but also on reporters, who according to him were the first of the multiple gatekeepers(Figure-III). According to him, news can be modified in different ways and by different authorities.

FIGURE III

C: UserssargamDesktopDocs n FilesThird SemDev CommShowcases-McNelly-and-News-Flow-4. jpg

Available at <http://www.alanmachinwork.net/Showcases>

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The scenario in contemporary Indian media industry

In terms of investment in men and machinery, the Indian media industry has become a corporate structure both in operation and management. And it has witnessed a definite transformation from a mission to a profession.

Commercialization of media is almost complete and all sorts of manipulations are being used as are done in the case of product marketing. This has tremendous impact on 'gatekeeping' functions also. It has given rise to many gatekeepers of news and information apart from traditional gatekeeper like editors. Today, there are different powerful gatekeepers who influence the media and their coverage because of either their economic clout or influence. Broadly speaking, the 'gatekeeping' scenario in the Indian media has undergone a change due to three key factors, viz., Cross-media ownership, Corporatization of media, Popularization of social media.

'Gatekeeping' in cross media ownership situation

Post the reforms of 1991, the Indian economy has opened up many sectors for private entrepreneurial interest. Since the last two decades of liberalization, the phenomenon of concentration of wealth has been marring the economy. A 2009 study "India 2039 - an affluent society in one generation" funded by the Asian Development Bank has shown that a handful of 50 people (50 billionaires in a country of more than 120 crore) controlled wealth equivalent to 20 per cent of India's Gross Domestic Product(Available at: http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/ai/rti/international/laws_papers/india/india_2039_an_affluent_society_in_one_generation.pdf).

The corporate world has been able to carve

its own huge space in the economic domain of the country in a short span of <https://assignbuster.com/a-reality-check-in-contemporary-indian-media-media-essay/>

time. This space has also in a sense intruded into the media in a hegemonic manner. Both in the print and electronic media, the corporate sector has become an investor and a power to reckon with.

Quoting a research conducted by Dilip Mandal and R. Anuradha, that has been published in *Media Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2011), Paranjy Guha Thakurta, (member of the committee set up by the Press Council of India to check ethical and legal violations by the media) has elaborated how the boards of directors of a number of media companies now include (or have included in the past) representatives of big corporate entities that are advertisers (Guha Thakurta, *Media Ownership Trends in India*, The Hoot, July 3, 2012). The board of Jagran Publications has had the Managing Director (MD) of Pantaloon Retail, Kishore Biyani, McDonald India's MD Vikram Bakshi, and leather-maker Mirza International's MD Rashid Mirza; besides the CEO of media consulting firm Lodestar Universal India, Shashidhar Sinha, and the chairman of the real estate firm JLL Meghraj, Anuj Puri. The board of directors of HT Media, publishers of Hindustan Times and Hindustan, has included the former chairman of Ernst & Young K. N. Memani and the chairman of ITC Limited Y C Deveshwar. Joint MD of Bharti Enterprise Rajan Bharti and MD of Anika International Anil Vig are a part of the TV Today's Board of Directors. The board of directors of DB Corp (that publishes the daily, Dainik Bhaskar) includes the head of Piramal Enterprises Group, Ajay Piramal, the MD of Warburg Pincus, Nitin Malhan, and the executive chairman of advertising firm Ogilvy & Mather, Piyush Pandey. NDTV's Board of Directors has Pramod Bhasin, President and CEO of the country's biggest business processing outsourcing company GenPact as a member of its board of directors. The

idea behind giving such details is to show the constant overlapping of corporate and citizen's interests. News and information published/broadcast was traditionally meant to inform, awaken or entertain people which now has become a tool for publicity, public relation, relationship management and veiled advertising for the corporate firms. They do so through having an interest in media houses via investment and ownership.

As Guha Thakurta has said, " Instead of media houses relying on advertisers to fund quality journalism, the relationship becomes insidiously reversed. Advertisers and corporate units begin to rely on news outlets to further their interests." In 2003, Bennett Coleman Company Limited (publishers of the Times of India and the Economic Times, among other publications) started a " paid content" service, which enabled them to charge advertisers for coverage of product launches or celebrity-related events.

' Radiagate' and the control of information by the corporate media

In late 2010, ' Open' magazine published records of leaked telephonic conversation between corporate lobbyist Nira Radia and influential media persons, politicians and corporate houses which seem to point to a nexus between the three sectors in the appointment of ministers and in important corporate deals. Among the mainstream newspapers in India, newspapers The Hindu and The Pioneer were one of the first to publish the records and carry the story. However, a highly conscious process of selection went into the coverage of what came to be known as ' Radiagate'. Many news publications and news channels did not carry the story at first and the tapes leaked were also allegedly selective. In an article ' Media ethics: Why we

need both panic and a pinch of salt' (Tehelka Magazine, Vol 7, Issue 48, Dated December 04, 2010), Shoma Chaudhary has pointed out how the media is under immense pressure while reporting a story. She says that one of the most damaging symptoms in Indian media today is its slavish relationship with corporate power. Political misconduct is often brought to book, corporate crime almost never. ' Big business' has its tentacles everywhere. Almost all the premier publications and channels - The Times of India, Times Now, The Economic Times, CNBC etc - come across as ' compromised' in differing percentages, she has stressed. Therefore, even if the editors and reporters wish to play out the role of gatekeepers, they have corporate concerns in mind since the private sector has become a major source of revenue for the media houses. Prominent media houses have a diverse set of people with varying financial interests investing in them and thus proving to be a huge financial support which is how the corporate sector can also be considered a gatekeeper- a force that controls or influences the selection and consequent flow of information. Senior Associate Editor, The Hindu Business Line, Rasheeda Bhagat has discussed the media blackout of the issue pointing out that the TV channels (employing journalists allegedly involved in the scandal) remained silent on the issue for long. (' Those Living In Glass Houses', The Hindu Business Line, November 23, 2010).

Though the print and electronic media tried to control the information, the traditional role of gatekeeping by the editors or even the new role of gatekeeping by the corporate sector eventually failed when it came to Radiagate. This was due to the alternative of social media which proved to be a powerful tool in mounting pressure on the government to start

investigating in the 2G scandal. Face book and Twitter helped people to access opinions of fellow citizens and thinkers while the leaked tapes were also available online on video-sharing websites like YouTube.

Advertorials have been another form of corporate intrusion into the business of news and information. They are actually advertisements furthering the commercial interests of a corporate house, a firm or an organisation presented in the manner of a piece of news or an editorial. Bart Pattyn (Media Ethics: Opening Social Dialogue, 2000) says that advertorials employ a language not directly persuasive but more oriented at conveying information about the product. Generally, the editor has no role to play while an advertorial is being carried since it is the advertising department of the media house which decides in this matter. While it is not illegal or unethical to publish or carry them, many experts feel that the concept of advertorials has made media houses compromise on their ethics since they try to avoid conflict of interest between them and the sponsors. The level of investment that the advertisers and sponsors have achieved indicates that they have become the main source of revenue for media houses. However, Professor J. J. Soundararaj (' Try Advertorial to Overcome the Challenges of Commercial Clutter', Excel International Journal of Multidisciplinary Management Studies, Vol. 1 Issue 2, November 2011) points out that advertorials are costly. Hence not all firms can afford them. Thus, it is the financially sound organisations that use this method of promotion. Hence, this can be another example of how the corporate sector is acting as a gatekeeper and controlling and selecting what information should reach an audience.

Politicians as ' gatekeepers'

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Several politicians in India today run a news channel or publication.

Commenting on this trend, journalist Archana Shukla studies the case of Piccadilly Group, owned by Kartikeya Sharma which manages Hindi newspaper Aaj Samaj and runs news channels under the name of India News. (' We also make TV news', The Indian Express, August 19, 2012).

Sharma is the son of Congress leader Shri Vinod Sharma. " It is said that Sharma senior took a vow to launch his own newspaper and TV channel after he felt that it was media activism that led to his son Manu Sharma's conviction in the Jessica Lal murder case of 1999," Shukla says.

In the South India, AIADMK's J Jayalalitha owns Jaya TV while rival DMK's M Karunanidhi owns Kalaignar TV and his nephew Kalanidhi Maran owns Sun TV. Mediapersons have pointed out how they give favourable coverage to the political parties of their owners. Election Commission officials have said that they do not receive complaints about paid news in Tamil Nadu since the party affiliations are already clear. Even if the channels are not owned directly by the politicians, the evil of paid news has hit the Indian media showing how anyone with money can be a gatekeeper. Guha Thakurta has pointed out that many candidates have fixed rates in case they want a newspaper to impart favourable coverage during elections.

There have been instances when even the government and its machinery have controlled the flow of information for safety and strategic purposes. ' Gatekeeping' of information can also be beneficial in instances where the media goes overboard with reportage. During the coverage of the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, the editors at first went ahead with the complete coverage focusing only on Nariman House and Trident Hotel, completely

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sidelining the attack on Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. Television channels broadcast gory images and were also in competition with each other for exclusive footage which interfered with the ongoing army operations. The government and military authorities had to finally intervene to urge the media for a balance and controlled coverage.

People as 'gatekeepers': The rise of social media

It is very interesting to note that in areas untouched by technology (like many villages), the tradition of sitting together to discuss the day's happenings is strong. Here, the better read people in the village or those who own a radio or television set can gatekeep and let out selective information to fellow villagers. Hence, the audience itself doubles up as a gatekeeper. The same phenomenon can be noticed in areas completely engulfed by technology. India has been witnessing a growing craze for social networking with more than 50 million Indians registered on leading networking site Facebook. The very idea of social media activities like chatting, posting and blogging is the concept of Freedom rather freedom from censorship. A blog is a free platform where people or bloggers themselves are gatekeepers who control information and decide what their fellow netizens will read. A tweet by a celebrity (as a note on social networking site Twitter is called) can be read by anybody following the celebrity. The followers can also comment on the tweets and there have been instances of uncontrollable and harsh commenting on scams and scandals on Twitter. Commenting on the social media scenario today, noted filmmaker Shekhar Kapur says: "As Newspaper and Media empires fade, 'Gatekeepers' as we know them, are being replaced by 'Platformers' that <https://assignbuster.com/a-reality-check-in-contemporary-indian-media-media-essay/>

enable communities to share ideas, thoughts, knowledge, news, between themselves at an unprecedented speeds, letting them transact and exchange even real goods and services between themselves. Communities will now reject Gate Keepers that thrive on a system that tries to control that flow.”

Social networking has become a rage precisely because of the free flow of information it allows on an immediate basis. There is no editing authority which can delete or control what a user writes on several websites. As a result, one can also come across inappropriate content online showing how people themselves have the power to gatekeep and decide what can be filtered.

In the wake of the recent misuse of social networking websites by groups trying to spread rumours regarding dangers to lives of the residents of the north-eastern states in India, Union Minister for Information Technology Kapil Sibal has called for some regulation to avoid such instances. As a result, a few websites have agreed to share user information with the government authorities.

Conclusion

The concept of ‘ gatekeeping’ in India has undergone a transformation due to the trend of cross-media ownership, corporatization of the media and increasing popularity of social networking websites. Consequently, the traditional role of ‘ gatekeeping’ by the editors or reporters are now being performed by sponsors and advertisers who influence content selection due to their economic clout and politicians who own news entities or have

significant financial holdings in them. A platform where the audience itself can gatekeep is the arena of social networking where the absence of strong censorship allows users to generate the desired content and share it with fellow users. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Orkut and others. The Indian authorities have recently called for some kind of regulation in this arena to prevent the misuse of this platform.

Disregarding the older concept of 'gatekeeping', it is now recognized that gatekeeping is exercised at almost every stage in the whole process communicating news. Earlier, due to the lack of space and time the editors used to leave out or ignore so many things but today, in the era of information over flow, the gatekeeping starts from the very first stage i. e. from the place of origin of event. The sources give some information and leave some and so the people who are the source of events act as a gatekeeper; a reporter is a gatekeeper as she might not send the full information to the newsroom or might send biased information and the chain goes on and stops back with the people as the consumers of the news by choosing what to consume and what to leave. So, the earlier notion of editors as the only gatekeeper is no more true. Some exogenous factors like pressure groups and flak (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) are also keeping the gates and mark their presence by pressurizing the media outlets to stop certain information from being conveyed to the citizens. For an example, Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* received the highest level of criticism by the religious pressure group accusing Rushdie for blasphemy. This not just banned the readers to read this book but also did not allow Rushdie to openly address the public.

Not allowing people equal access to information is also a form of 'gatekeeping'. This creates information gap and disparity between the haves and the haves-not of knowledge. In a democratic set up like India, everyone should have the right to equal access to information. For example, the Internet service providers including both private and government provide higher speed at higher prices. Therefore, somebody who cannot afford higher prices cannot have the information. Similarly, the uploading speed provided is much less than the downloading speeds. This again acts as a gate for the citizen journalists who wish to share some important piece of information they have with the world. "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 else) can or should limit what passes through it (Shoemaker et al, 2001)." The statement is an eye opener for many, who have still not realized the power of internet to control the information at various levels, and which is indeed proving out to be real in the current scenario. As after its unparalleled debut in the information sector, it has set a bench mark for its competition, and in a very short span, the internet became one of the most viewed and dependable source and controller of information, with a global consumer base at its disposal, and hence a very powerful gatekeeper.