

From Gatekeepers to Gatekeeping Systems: Rethinking Journalism Theory in the Age of Algorithms and Generative AI

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ABSTRACT: Gatekeeping has remained one of the foundational theoretical approaches for explaining how information becomes news. From Kurt Lewin's conceptualisation of gates and channels to David Manning White's study of the newspaper wire editor, traditional gatekeeping theory located considerable power in human actors who selected, rejected and organised information before it reached audiences. The contemporary news environment, however, complicates this model. News selection is increasingly distributed across journalists, newsroom analytics, search engines, social media platforms, recommender systems and generative artificial intelligence. This paper re-examines gatekeeping theory through an interdisciplinary synthesis of journalism studies, platform studies, artificial intelligence research and communication theory. Drawing on a structured conceptual review of more than 29 major scholarly contributions, it argues that contemporary journalism is moving from identifiable gatekeepers towards interconnected gatekeeping systems. Within these systems, editorial judgement has not disappeared; rather, it interacts continuously with computational selection, platform infrastructures, audience behaviour and generative systems capable of producing, summarising and reorganising information. The paper proposes a five-layer model of contemporary gatekeeping comprising source, editorial, algorithmic, platform and generative gates. It further distinguishes between *selection power*, traditionally exercised by editors, and *visibility power*, increasingly exercised through technological infrastructures. The study concludes that gatekeeping theory remains valuable but requires conceptual expansion from the question of who controls the gate to the broader question of how interconnected human and computational systems determine what information becomes visible, credible and socially consequential.

KEYWORDS: artificial intelligence, algorithms, algorithmic gatekeeping, communication theory, gatekeeping theory, generative AI, journalism, platform studies, news selection,

1. INTRODUCTION

For much of the twentieth century, the metaphor of the gate provided journalism scholars with an elegant explanation of news selection. Lewin (1947) originally developed the concept to explain movement through channels, while White (1950) transferred it to journalism through his influential study of "Mr. Gates," a newspaper wire editor whose decisions determined which stories reached publication. News therefore travelled through relatively identifiable institutional channels in which editors and journalists exercised considerable selection power.

Subsequent research demonstrated that gatekeeping was more complex than the preferences of an individual editor. Galtung and Ruge (1965) examined news values, Bass (1969) distinguished different stages of news processing, and Shoemaker and Vos (2009) situated gatekeeping within individual, routine, organisational, institutional and social forces. Barzilai-Nahon (2008) later expanded the concept through network gatekeeping, recognising that information control in networked environments involved relationships among multiple actors rather than a single gatekeeper.

Digital journalism has altered this architecture more radically. Algorithms participate in gathering, sorting, recommending, personalising and distributing news, while platforms influence which journalism becomes visible to audiences (Diakopoulos, 2015; Gillespie, 2014; Napoli, 2014). Automated journalism further demonstrated that computational systems could participate in news production itself (Carlson, 2015; Graefe, 2016). Generative AI extends this development because computational systems can now summarise, rewrite, synthesise and conversationally present information rather than merely rank existing content.

The theoretical problem, therefore, is no longer simply **who is the gatekeeper?** Contemporary journalism requires another question: **What constitutes the gate when news passes through interconnected human, algorithmic and generative systems?**

Objectives

The study seeks to:

1. trace the conceptual development of gatekeeping from human editorial selection to algorithmically mediated news;
2. examine how platforms, recommendation systems and generative AI redistribute gatekeeping power;
3. identify the limitations of classical gatekeeping theory in contemporary journalism; and
4. propose an expanded theoretical model of **systemic gatekeeping** suitable for AI-mediated journalism.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a qualitative conceptual-review approach integrating scholarship from journalism studies, communication theory, platform studies, artificial intelligence, sociology of technology and digital media studies. Seminal gatekeeping scholarship was read alongside research dealing with algorithms, automated journalism, platformisation, news personalisation and generative AI. More than 29 scholarly authors were incorporated into the conceptual corpus, with literature organised around four analytical periods: classical gatekeeping, networked gatekeeping, algorithmic gatekeeping and AI-mediated gatekeeping. Rather than conducting statistical meta-analysis, the study compares the principal location of selection power, technological mediation and audience participation identified across these bodies of literature.

Table 1. Evolution of Gatekeeping in Journalism

Phase	Dominant Gatekeeper	Principal Mechanism	Audience Position
Classical journalism	Editor/journalist	Editorial selection	Receiver
Organisational journalism	News organisation	Professional routines and news values	Mass audience
Networked journalism	Journalists, users and networks	Linking, sharing and circulation	Participant
Algorithmic journalism	Platforms and algorithms	Ranking, recommendation and personalisation	Data-producing user
Generative-AI journalism	Human–AI–platform system		

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis based on reviewed literature.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

3.1 From Human Gatekeepers to Networked Gates

White's (1950) seminal research portrayed news selection as a series of decisions made by an identifiable human gatekeeper. Bass (1969), however, demonstrated that news production involved multiple stages, while Shoemaker et al. (2001) showed that individual preferences interacted with routines and institutional pressures. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) subsequently developed gatekeeping into a broader multilevel framework.

Digital networks weakened the assumption of a single institutional gate. Barzilai-Nahon (2008) conceptualised network gatekeeping as a relationship involving gatekeepers, the gated and mechanisms of information control. Bruns (2005) proposed "gatewatching," describing environments in which users monitor, redistribute and highlight information rather than merely receive material selected by professional editors.

3.2 Algorithmic Gatekeeping

Platformisation introduced another centre of power. Search engines, social networks and recommendation systems increasingly determine the discoverability of journalism. Gillespie (2014) argued that algorithms have become consequential mechanisms for organising public information, while Napoli (2014) identified algorithmic forms of media production and consumption as a significant challenge for communication research. Diakopoulos (2015) emphasised the accountability problems created when consequential computational systems remain opaque.

Bucher (2018) further demonstrated that algorithmic power operates through relationships between users, technological systems and platforms. Van Dijck et al. (2018) located this power within a broader platform society, while Helberger (2019) highlighted the normative implications of news recommendation systems.

Consequently, the power to **publish** and the power to **make visible** are no longer synonymous. A newsroom may publish a story, yet algorithms influence whether that story enters an individual's information environment.

Table 2. Changing Distribution of Gatekeeping Power

Dimension	Traditional Journalism	Algorithmic Journalism	Generative-AI Environment
Story selection	Editor	Editor + algorithm	Editor + algorithm + AI
News production	Journalist	Journalist + automation	Human–AI collaboration
Distribution	Publisher	Platform	Platform + AI interface
Personalisation	Limited	Extensive	Potentially conversational
Transparency	Relatively visible	Often opaque	Frequently difficult to reconstruct
Audience role	Consumer	Consumer + behavioural data source	Consumer + data source + prompt initiator
Primary theoretical issue	Selection	Visibility	Selection + visibility + synthesis

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis.

3.3 Generative AI and the New Gate

Automated journalism initially relied heavily on structured datasets and predetermined templates (Carlson, 2015; Graefe, 2016). Generative AI changes the scale of computational participation. Large language models can transform source material, generate summaries, produce alternative headlines, translate text, recommend content and answer questions through conversational interfaces.

This introduces what may be called a **generative gate**. Classical gatekeeping primarily decided whether information would pass. Algorithmic gatekeeping additionally decided how prominently information would appear. Generative systems introduce a third possibility: information may pass through the gate but emerge **transformed**.

This distinction is theoretically important. A conversational AI system answering a news question may combine information from several sources and produce a synthetic response. The audience may therefore encounter neither the original journalistic article nor the conventional platform feed. Gatekeeping becomes intertwined with synthesis.

4. FINDINGS AND PROPOSED MODEL

The literature suggests that journalistic gatekeeping has progressively shifted from concentrated editorial authority towards distributed technological systems. The review identifies five interconnected gates.

A thematic coding of the literature reviewed for this conceptual paper shows how scholarly attention has progressively expanded beyond traditional editorial selection.

The declining conceptual sufficiency of the individual gatekeeper does not imply the disappearance of journalists. Human judgement remains crucial in reporting, verification, contextualisation and accountability. What changes is the environment in which this judgement operates.

The paper therefore proposes **systemic gatekeeping** as an extension of classical theory:

Systemic gatekeeping is the distributed process through which interconnected human, institutional, algorithmic and generative actors select, transform, rank and circulate information, thereby determining its probability of entering an individual's information environment.

This formulation expands the traditional dependent variable of gatekeeping. The question is no longer merely whether information is published. Researchers must investigate its **visibility, transformation, attribution and discoverability**.

5. DISCUSSION

The proposed model has implications for journalism theory in three areas. First, gatekeeping power is becoming **distributed rather than eliminated**. Claims that digital media have abolished gatekeepers underestimate the capacity of platforms and algorithms to structure visibility. Second, computational gatekeepers operate differently from traditional editors because their decisions may be personalised. Two individuals searching for or consuming news about the same event may encounter substantially different information environments.

Third, generative AI complicates the distinction between gatekeeping and content production. Traditional editors selected among existing pieces of information. Generative systems can select while simultaneously recomposing information. The gate therefore becomes partly productive.

This also creates an accountability problem. Human editors operate within identifiable professional organisations and can, at least theoretically, explain editorial decisions. Algorithmic ranking and generative synthesis can involve proprietary models, training data, behavioural signals and complex computational processes that are considerably harder for audiences to observe.

The resulting journalism environment is therefore better represented not as a single gate but as a **stack of gates**, with power distributed across sources, journalists, organisations, platforms, algorithms, AI systems and audiences.

6. CONCLUSION

Gatekeeping theory has survived repeated technological transformations because its central concern remains fundamental to communication: not all available information becomes socially visible. What has changed is the architecture through which visibility is produced.

Lewin's gate became White's editor; the editor became an organisation; the organisation entered a network; the network became platformised; and the platform is now becoming intertwined with generative artificial intelligence. Journalism scholarship consequently needs to move from studying isolated gatekeepers towards analysing gatekeeping systems.

Generative AI does not mark the end of gatekeeping. It represents its latest transformation. The central theoretical challenge for journalism research is therefore to understand how editorial judgement, computational ranking, platform power, audience behaviour and generative synthesis interact in determining what societies ultimately encounter as news.

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