Gatekeeping in the Digital Age

English summary

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News messages have the power to shape the agenda and opinions of citizens. The news workers that select and shape what the news is about thereby fulfill a delicate role in society. Scholars have conceptualized this role as gatekeeping, referring to the task of selecting which messages pass through the gates of communication channels (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950). One of the primary focal points of gatekeeping research has been to study how gatekeepers such as newspapers and television news select and shape news messages (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). With the arrival of the digital age, however, a more basic question is back on the table: who are the gatekeepers of the news? In particular, are the traditional news organizations still in control now that there are many new online communication channels through which news can reach the public? This dissertation addresses these questions, focusing on the media landscape of the Netherlands.

Vos (2015) discusses two general developments in the gatekeeping process. The first development is that "space and outlets are no longer scarce" (7). New technologies, in particular the internet, provide virtually everyone with the means to publish news. As a result, the selection and distribution of news is no longer reserved for large organizations that had the privilege and resources to use the limited amount of traditional mass communication channels (e.g., newspapers, television). The second development is that "news production is no longer unidirectional" (Vos, 2015, 7). The new technologies provide audience members with more freedom of choice and more ways to express their interests and viewpoints. Consequently, audience members can participate in the gatekeeping process, and journalists have access to new information that enables them to better cater to the interests and preferences of the audience (Anderson, 2011; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

There is an ongoing debate about how these developments have changed—and continue to change—the news circulation process, and what the consequences are for democracy (see e.g., Hindman, 2008; Pariser, 2011; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). A central question in this debate is whether the influence of gatekeepers is decentralizing, leading to a democratization of news circulation (Vos, 2015). That is, if there are more gatekeepers, and if audiences are becoming more influential, then control over the selection and distribution of news could be slipping out of the hands of traditional news organizations, and instead become more equally spread out over members of society.

However, this outcome cannot not be taken for granted. Firstly, even if there are many new gatekeepers that publish news, the news-gathering process might still be performed primarily by traditional news organizations that have the required resources and expertise (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2010). Online news can then filter or shape this information in diverse new ways, but the initial selection of information still has to pass traditional gates. Secondly, regarding the new audience feedback channels, there is still little empirical research that shows whether and how this feedback affects journalistic decision making (Anderson, 2011; Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014).

This dissertation addresses these issues by investigating three channels in the gatekeeping process:
the channel from traditional to online news, the news agency channel, and the audience feedback channel. It thereby investigates whether traditional news organizations still fulfill a central role in the gatekeeping process. In addition, a methodological contribution is made regarding the analysis of channels using computational text analysis, including software in the form of a package for the R programming language. The remainder of this summary discusses the three channels, corresponding to the three research questions addressed in chapters 2 to 5, and the R package presented in chapter 6. It closes with the general conclusion of this dissertation.

Traditional news → online news.

Online news outlets can undermine the influence of traditional gatekeepers by providing alternative channels for news to reach the public (Williams & Carpini, 2000). However, many online news outlets do not gather news themselves (Baum & Groeling, 2008), either because they cannot afford it or because their format does not require them to (e.g., content aggregators, opinion-oriented blogs). These online news outlets could therefore rely on traditional news outlets as sources of information, meaning that a large portion of the news that circulates online has already passed traditional gates (Pew Research Center, 2010; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Furthermore, traditional news outlets might set the agenda of online news by determining what the important issues for debate are in society (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Meraz, 2011). This is investigated with the first research question of this dissertation: To what extent do traditional news outlets influence the online media agenda?

To address this question, chapters 2 and 3 analyzed the extent to which Dutch news sites followed the stories and themes covered in the national newspapers. The results show that the influence of newspapers needs to be considered from two different perspectives. Chapter 2 shows that newspapers do not set the agenda at the level of specific news events. Online news outlets often did cover the same stories, but the newspapers were not the ones to break the news. This shows that the online news outlets often could not have used the newspapers as a source of information. Chapter 3, on the other hand, shows that newspapers do appear to set the agenda at a more thematic level: attention for certain news themes in newspapers predicts the attention for these themes in online news outlets. This indicates that even if the new online gatekeepers do not rely on the newspapers for information, the newspapers can still influence what the important issues for debate are.

News agencies → traditional and online news

The second channel investigated in this dissertation is the channel through which news outlets receive information from news agencies, or wire services. News agencies are organizations that gather news facts and sell them to news outlets, often on a subscription basis. They have long been used by many news outlets as a relatively cheap source of information, which makes them important gatekeepers of news facts (McNelly, 1959).

The extent to which news outlets rely on news agencies appears to have increased in the digital age, mainly due to news outlets cutting costs on news gathering (Frijters & Velamuri, 2010; Klinenberg, 2005). Online news outlets in particular are expected to rely heavily on news agency content due to the lack of independent news gathering, and because they need to keep up with the fast pace of online news (Johnston & Forde, 2011). If the influence of news agencies has indeed increased, then an important element of the gatekeeping process—the selection of information—is now in the hands of a smaller group of gatekeepers—centralization, instead of the aforementioned decentralization. Accordingly, the second research question is: Has the gatekeeping influence of news agencies increased?

The Netherlands currently has one national news agency, the Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (ANP). The gatekeeping role of this news agency is investigated in Chapter 3 and 4. Chapter 3 showed that ANP has a strong impact on the media agenda in the Netherlands. Chapter 4 furthermore showed that the influence of ANP on print newspapers increased over time, and that its influence on online newspapers is
substantially stronger compared to print newspapers. Most notably, for the online newspapers with an *ANP* subscription around 50 to 75 percent of the political news articles contained verbatim copy of *ANP* content in 2013, and were often nearly identical copies. It is also found that most of these articles (roughly 75%) were published within one hour after the *ANP* publication, which shows the importance of speed in online news. Overall, this indicates that the gatekeeping influence of news agencies has indeed become stronger in the digital age.

**Audience → gatekeeper**

The third and final channel investigated in this dissertation is the channel through which the audience provides feedback to the gatekeepers, which Shoemaker and Vos (2009) refer to as the *audience channel*. Specifically, the issue of whether journalists monitor *online audience metrics*, such as page views, is addressed. Compared to the past, where journalists had limited technologies to study their audience, these online audience metrics provide cheap and relatively detailed insights in audience preferences (Gans, 1979; Lee et al., 2014). Journalists can use this information to cater to these preferences, which would reflect a *Market model* approach to journalism (Schudson, 2003). However, it seems that many professional journalists still adhere to a *Trustee model* perspective, which dictates that they themselves, as professionals, should decide what news is most important for their audience to know (Anderson, 2011). Thus, despite the new technological means for audience feedback, it is still an open question as to whether and to what extent the gatekeepers actually listen to this feedback. This is addressed with the third research question: *Has the influence of audience preferences on the gatekeeping process increased?*

This question is addressed in *chapter 5* based on a mixed-method study. Specifically, it is investigated whether journalists monitor page views for individual articles, referred to as *audience clicks*, and whether this affects their news selection choices. On the other hand, a time-series analysis showed that news stories that ended up in the top-5 most-viewed articles did get more subsequent coverage, which indicates that audience clicks likely boosted the perceived newsworthiness of these stories among journalists. Taken together, these results indicate that online audience metrics do affect the gatekeeping choices of journalists, and that journalists are engaged in a struggle to balance this factor with their own professional judgment. Whether and how journalism as an institution embraces the use of audience metrics, and how this affects their role as gatekeepers, is an important emerging topic for gatekeeping research.

**Analyzing channels using computational text analysis**

In this dissertation channels are analyzed based on patterns in news diffusion. The essence of this approach is that channels cause patterns regarding where content is published or used (e.g., viewed, shared, commented on) over time. A common way to perform this type of analysis is to first categorize news items using content analysis, and then using time-series analysis to analyze whether the attention for a certain category in one news outlet can be predicted by the attention for this category in another news outlet (Meraz, 2011; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008).

However, this approach is problematic for the analysis of diffusion patterns at the level of specific events, because it would be a herculean task to categorize news articles at this level. As a solution, this dissertation presents an alternative method for which no coding is required. Using techniques from the fields of information retrieval and natural language processing, the content of news items can be compared to see whether they address the same events, or even more specifically contain verbatim similarities. An R package was developed that can be used to compare all news items that were published around the same time, and to aggregate the results in order to identify patterns. This package was used for the study in *chapter 4* to analyze what percentage of news items in newspapers could be traced back to news agency
articles. The vignette for the package is presented in chapter 6, and the package itself is available from the Comprehensive R Archive Network (CRAN) under the name RNewsflow.

Conclusion

This dissertation shows that the influence of gatekeepers in the digital age is highly contingent on their interdependence with sources, audiences and each other. This is particularly visible in the intermedia agenda-setting influence of traditional news outlets, the strong influence of news agencies on online news, and the use of online audience metrics in newsrooms. Based on the investigation of these interdependencies, this dissertation concludes that traditional news organizations still fulfill a central role in the gatekeeping process regarding the selection of news, meaning that the alleged democratization of the gatekeeping process is currently still constrained.

However, this dissertation also shows that this could be a pivotal point in time. The news-gathering market is in a fragile state: many news publishers rely on the same news gatherers, while news gatherers are having difficulties coping financially. This makes it likely that we will be witnessing changes in the near future, possibly driven by government intervention. Regarding the impact of the audience channel, we are also likely to see changes, given that the journalistic institution is currently still growing accustomed to the new audience measurement technologies. The news-gathering market and the audience feedback channel thus remain important topics for gatekeeping research in the years to come.

More generally, the results of this dissertation underline a view shared by several prominent gatekeeping scholars: the field of gatekeeping research needs to develop new theories and methods to conceptualize and analyze the complex communication channels of the digital age (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Vos, 2015). Luckily, the digital age has not only transformed and complicated the communication channels of society; it also introduced the data and tools to map them in greater detail. Digital communication can be extracted and analyzed with the help of computer algorithms, paving the way for a computational approach to gatekeeping research. The current dissertation contributes towards this approach, in particular regarding the application of content-analysis based methods, where news diffusion patterns are analyzed based on the temporal order in which the same or similar news is published by different outlets. The use of such computational methods can be a powerful addition to the toolkit for gatekeeping research in the digital age.

References


