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WHO KEEPS THE GATE? DIGITAL GATEKEEPING IN NEW MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article is the result of noticing the need to transpose the gatekeeping theory. Technological progress has left its mark on the media ecosystem, generating and then strengthening the convergence processes, and has also changed the understanding of gatekeeping. The architecture of new media, especially social media, places gatekeeping in the context of the network. This allows one to look at the classically understood process from a new perspective, in which the key is to base the concept on network diffusion. Contemporary gatekeeping should be analyzed in the context of such mechanisms as: information bubble, echo chamber, filtering information by users and algorithms. Basic conceptual categories, the gate and the keeper, are also modified. There is a noticeable trend towards the transformation of gatekeeping towards gatewatching, in which social media users do not create their own gates, but observe and use already existing gates. Gatekeeping in the era of social media makes the audience an important element of it, moving towards secondary gatekeeping.

Keywords: gatekeeping, network gatekeeping, gatewatching, algorithm, social media

Introduction

With the development of new communication technologies, gatekeeping has evolved as a process. In the digital age, consumers and producers of information often take over the role of gatekeepers in deciding what is worth publishing. The categories of the source, channel, and recipient of information have also changed.

The signature of our times is information overload with the accompanying avalanche of information, and even information smog (Szpunar 2013, p. 63). The avalanche of information makes it impossible to convey everything to the public, therefore the inherent mechanism accompanying the information circulating in the

new media is filtering it, which is the basis for currently understood gatekeeping. As Szpunar notes: "We live dominated by a data fetish, with the imperative of the computable and quantifiable world" (Szpunar 2018, p. 1).

The turbulent and dynamic conditions of the digital environment require a new look at the phenomenon of gatekeeping. In the light of the following considerations, two main research problems have been identified. They concern the concept of social gatekeeping, which places the focus on users acting as guards, and the influence of algorithms on this process, as an inherent element of social media architecture. In this context, the following questions were considered crucial: "Is it valid to claim that every social media user acts as a gatekeeper?" and, "Are social media algorithms replacing the classically understood guards?"

The classical theory of gatekeeping, coined in the conditions of traditional media – at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s – does not fit the dynamic face of the new media due to technological development. The gatekeeping theory proposed by Lewin, referring to the way food reaches the family table (Lewin 1947), is an allegory of the flow of information to society, and explains many social changes taking place in the communication process.

Schoemaker defines gatekeeping as „the process by which billions of information available around the world are selected and transformed into hundreds of information that reaches a given person on any given day" (Barzilai-Nahon 2008, p. 1495). Classical gatekeeping is based on the sender-receiver relationship model, a new dimension of this process leans on the production of a huge amount of information in a digital society. Welbers claims that „due to the speed of communication and the high level of interconnection on social media, messages with a high level of sharing ability can spread quickly even without mass communication, just as a contagious virus can spread rapidly in a population" (Welbers 2018, p. 4731). As Ernste concludes, the basic feature of modern gatekeeping is that journalists do not define media content (Ernste 2014, p. 17).

Gatekeeping as it is commonly understood is synonymous with filtering what is published or shared on the basis of various criteria. In mentioned theory, there are two approaches to gatekeepers. The first implies the existence of primary gatekeepers, such as media editorial teams, the second indicates the existence of secondary gatekeepers in the form of regular social networks. The literature indicates several variants of gatekeeping, based on the instruments at its disposal.

Taking the gatekeeping process through the prism of the broadly understood media system, including traditional media and new media, the following variants can be distinguished:

- editorial gatekeeping;
- link-based gatekeeping, filtering information based on the number of links;
- gatekeeping based on affinity (the degree of affinity between users, the algorithm used by the Facebook platform); and
- gatekeeping based on the audience (selective content delivery) (Carvalho 2017, p. 5–6).

Link-based, affinity, and audience-based gatekeeping express the flow of information on social networks. It is based on algorithms that profile relevant customer segments.

Network Gatekeeping

The development of the network and the accompanying changes in the communication process caused structural and functional changes to gatekeeping, translocating it towards network gatekeeping (Network Gatekeeping Theory, NGT). This theory emphasizes the audience that generates and proliferates information in the digital space. It is not limited to editors and journalists, but refers to a wide spectrum of entities, as it becomes the domain of governments, deliverers of search engines and Internet services, various organizations and individuals (Kuhles-Heiney 2016, p. 7–8).

Network gatekeeping modifies the basic conceptual categories: gate and guard. Barzilai-Nahon defines a gate as an entrance or exit to a network. These gates are characterized by variability due to the dynamism of the network, so the existence of a fixed one is almost impossible under network communication conditions. A network gatekeeper is an entity that, using the gatekeeping mechanism, can select the scope in which it will be implemented (Barzilai-Nahon 2008, p. 1499). Xu and Feng argue that network gatekeeping focuses on the dynamics of information transfer, from media to citizens who use digital media offerings (public forums, websites, and social media) (Kuhles-Heiney 2016, p. 9). Xu and Feng point to two trends that influenced the shape of the analyzed theory. The first is the emergence of partisan media. In this variant, gatekeeping involves not only selecting information, but to a large extent manipulating it in order to create a reality construct that meets the expectations of the target audience. The second trend – repeatedly signaled by theoreticians of communication – is based on shifting the focus from the producer of information towards the consumer, who by using social media becomes an information generator (Xu, Feng 2014, p. 421). According to this approach, social media users must constantly decide which information is relevant enough to exist in the information space (Knoll, Matthes, Heiss, 2020, p. 142). While gatekeeping in journalism has focused on one-way mass communication, gatekeeping in network theory focuses on interpersonal interactions. (Welbers 2018, p. 4732).

Wallace combines the positions of Michael and Vos and Barzilai-Nahon by basing his considerations on gatekeeping on the contemporary achievements in the field of communication. According to the former, gatekeeping should use a relational approach in which the guards are hubs of communication. In contrast, Barzilai-Nahon's concept of *network gatekeeping* focuses on the role of the audience, which she called *the gate.* The researcher notes that gates are an active factor that determines information-seeking decisions, rather than just being the receiving entity. Barzilai-Nahon calls gatekeepers *network administrators*. According to Barzilai--Nahon, there is a great deal of freedom and variety in the guard-gate relationship that is determined by power, interactions, information production prospects as well

as the existence of alternatives in the network domain. This concept rejects the one-way flow of information, and instead it profiles active gatekeeper-gate relationships that can change over time. Barzilai-Nahon points out, that anyone can become the guardian of the network by cultivating relationships with other users (Wallace 2018, p. 279). This approach seems to confirm the thesis of Shoemaker and Vos that "we are all gatekeepers". Relationship-based gatekeeping can take two forms, centralized and decentralized: centralized as being symptomatic of the distribution of information by the authorities; decentralized as characterized by micro-level user interactions, the selection of the most important topics depends on the aggregation of individual opinions (Shaw 2012, p. 349–350).

Barzilai-Nahon points out that the network gatekeeping theory represents a political process that seeks to control information. The gates in the digital ecosystem are strengthened in relation to those typical of traditional media, as evidenced by the following attributes: political power, information production, relations with gatekeepers and alternatives. The political power of the gates manifests itself in the integration and mobilization possibilities of digital media, which have the potential to activate politically in order to introduce systemic changes (e.g. the Arab Spring). The ability to generate information shapes the flow of information in a digital environment. Digital media make it possible to build relationships, interact with gatekeepers, in the form of other users. Alternatives indicate the diversity and richness of information and, as a result, a broad autonomy in the selection of information and sources (Xu, Feng 2014, p. 422).

According to Shoemaker and Vos, the determinant that will reduce the role of gatekeeper in modern societies is general Internet access, which eliminates the traditional gates. Instead, audience gatekeeping is becoming commonplace, which focuses on internet users acting as guards (Ferreira 2018, p. 488). In other words, public gatekeeping in the era of new media consists in giving the public – as a communication link which in the era of traditional media was only passive recipients of information – the rank of generator, distributor of information. In this understanding of the process, the audience category plays the role of both a guard and a communication gate. Gatekeeping is characterized by polyphony, depending on how many people there will be in the audience, there will be gates and guards. As Goode points out, this type of gatekeeping is an example of „meta-journalism", the main goal of which is to expand the circles of influence of information already existing in the information space, using network algorithms. Audience gatekeeping corresponds to gatewatching in that it focuses on gathering information rather than generating it. Social media users don't have to create information, they can only share it. Twitter is a specific platform on which audience gatekeeping is carried out by placing a link with the address or retweeting on the website. Some researchers treat the mechanism of placing hyperlinks as gatekeeping because it influences the choice of information (Kwon, Oh, Agrawal, Rao 2012, p. 214–215). Twitter's gates are Twitter users, while gatekeepers are the 12 most popular Twitter users – not Twitter itself (Mehrotra 2017, p. 13).

Gatekeeping in Social Media

The mechanism of gatekeeping in social media explains the location of gatekeeping in the context of the network, which has been the subject of research since the 1980s, and the concept of Bavela's network centrality brings further development (Welbers 2018, p. 4732). When making the theoretical analysis of gatekeeping in social media, it should be based on the concept of network diffusion. This hypothesis assumes that proliferation of information in the web space is analogous to the spread of an infectious disease among the population (Goel, Watts, Goldstein 2012, p. 623). According to this concept, in order for information to reach many social media users, not only is the number of direct recipients important, but also whether these people will pass the information on, acting as an intermediate link in the information spreading process. This mechanism is closely related to secondary gatekeeping and gatewatching.

The definition of gatekeepers in social media differs from that in traditional media. This distinction highlights the alternative information pathways available to social media users. Social media gatekeepers are users who receive messages from both sides of the political continuum but only produce messages from one option by filtering the information (Garimella, Morales, Gionis, Mathioudakis 2018, p. 915). Such an approach to the guards should be considered in the context of the echo chamber in social media. The assumption that users perceive information about extreme ideological and ontological loads contradicts the commonly understood theory of echo chambers.

The high level of interactivity and participation guaranteed by communication in social media makes all users gatekeepers; in an increasingly distorted sense of the word. When the consumer becomes the producer of information, the gatekeeper function mutates significantly. According to some researchers, the theory of gatekeeping in social media conditions ceases to make sense, as there is no classically understood gate (Ferreira 2018, p. 488). As Wallace points out, two trends are discernible, the first of which questions the role of gatekeepers in the social media ecosystem. The second, presented by Shoemaker and Vos, assigns this role to all social media users (Wallace 2018, p. 277). In opposition to the concepts of Shoemaker and Vos, there is the theory of graphs, which assumes a simple understanding of the network as a flat structure devoid of hierarchy. In this approach, individual nodes constituting the basic building blocks of the network take the form and shape of the so-called full matrix or all channel networks (Aleksandrowicz, Liedel 2014, p. 18), in which everyone is connected to everyone. Such a look at the functional dimension of the network results in equal chances of participation (of all nodes) in public communication, which undermines the validity of the gatekeeping theory in network media (Ernste 2014, p. 15).

Critics of contemporary gatekeeping theory argue that in the digital age, which is characterized by a multitude of communication channels and a multitude of information, there are no gates, so there are no guardians. However, contemporary literature offers a different perspective on the theory of digital gatekeeping, interpreting

the term more broadly, seeing it as a tool for understanding how news is generated and distributed today. It seems justified to propose a new theoretical framework for the original theory of gatekeeping. Researchers note that social media users do not maintain their own gates, but observe and use existing gates. This process is moving towards gatewatching (Welbers 2018, p. 4731).

Gatewatchers, instead of creating and publishing content, make it public by pointing to the source of information. This mechanism causes the entire cognitive-affective load from the original source to be made available to other network users. Gatewatching, as Bruns observes, expects information recipients to be more involved in the process of consuming and generating information. In social media conditions, when looking for information, the user uses the gates indicated by the gatewatcher, and in effect becomes their guard. This concept is based on the intuition of the gatewatcher, which determines the potential attractiveness of information for recipients (Bruns 2003, p. 36).

It can be assumed that the general model of gatekeeping in social media can take the following form: in a virtual community, there is a small group of users who provide links to information. While other users consume information on the site, this small group of users acts as gatekeepers. However, in order for these users to be considered as gatekeepers, there must be a psychological premise, that is, users as consumers – given the wealth of alternative sources of information – must consider them as a source of information (DeIuliis 2015, p. 19–20). As a result, any actor who is exposed to content is a potential gatekeeper, albeit at different levels of influence.

The mechanism of gatekeeping in social media will include the following aspects:

1. channeling – search engines, databases place information in various locations on the network;
2. censorship – removing information or users from the network;
3. internationalization – adjusting information to local conditions;
4. security – managing access to confidential data;
5. cost-effect mechanism – value of entry / exit to the network and information use;
6. adaptability – the ability to adapt information to network conditions;
7. infrastructure – the algorithmic dimension of the network;
8. level of interactivity;
9. content editing; and
10. regulation metamechanism (governmental, national) (DeIuliis 2015, p. 13–14).

These elements affect the contemporary dimension of the analyzed phenomenon, adding further attributes to both information and the overall communication process.

The factor that allows social media to become an important link in gatekeeping is their status as one of the basic communication channels that makes modern communication increasingly dependent on them.

Social media is algorithmically coded. This means that they derive from the logic of the algorithm, which is programmed to correctly solve the problem while effectively using its computing power. Similarly, the architecture of social media

is designed to ensure effective communication on equal levels. Algorithms are part of the quantification civilization trend. The role of algorithms in digital gatekeeping is growing and they have become part of many processes in constructing social reality (Carvalho 2017, p. 5). A significant number of algorithms and platforms enabling users to publish information influenced the gatekeeping process and information circulation mechanisms.

Algorithmization of social media is a reaction to the avalanche of information growth, which determines the necessity to collect and process huge data sets. As a result, algorithmic media (social media, search engines) transform the basic paradigm of information flow. Frizzera argues that algorithmic media represent a new form of gatekeeper because they not only coordinate the dissemination of information, but also interpret information in the name of the public interest (Frizzera 2018, p. 40).

Most of the social media shots of the algorithm place a strong emphasis on the process of filtering and selecting the information that is most relevant to users. In light of the above, their basic functionality is based on the action fundamental to gatekeeping, i.e., deciding on the further life of information.

Conclusions

According to Rusdi and Rusdi, the contemporary information environment is characterized by far-reaching fragmentation processes and a high degree of audience autonomy. This results in noticeable media fragmentation, internal media fragmentation and audience fragmentation, along with a high level of autonomy, manifested in deciding when, where and how to consume information. In addition, the ability to generate your own content at minimal cost gives you many more alternatives (Rusdi, Rusdi 2020, p. 543).

Due to the evolution of contemporary media systems towards networking, the previously recognized processes of information circulation in the information environment are undergoing the pressure of change. The social character of the new media strongly emphasizes the role of recipients of information, placing them in the role of producers. These aspects changed the basic concepts of gatekeeping theory. A modernized version of gatekeeping treats social networks as gates, and media users become gatekeepers. A specific variant of selecting and filtering information in social media has been recognized as gatewatching.

As part of the structural and functional aspect of the theory of gatekeeping in new media, the role of algorithms that filter and proliferate information should be indicated. Modern gatekeeping, due to the fact that it functions on the level of social media, is burdened with the algorithmization process. The extent to which the algorithms affect communication is an issue worthy of in-depth analysis.

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STRESZCZENIE

Kto jest strażnikiem? Cyfrowy gatekeeping w nowych mediach

Artykuł jest odpowiedzią na potrzebę transponowania teorii *gatekeepingu*, od której powstania minęło ponad pół wieku. Postęp technologiczny wpłynął na ekosystem mediów, generując i wzmacniając procesy konwergencji, zmienił też dotychczasowe rozumienie *gatekeepingu*. Architektura nowych mediów, zwłaszcza mediów społecznościowych, pozwala rozpatrywać *gatekeeping* w kontekście sieci oraz spojrzeć na klasycznie pojmowany proces z nowej perspektywy, w której za kluczowe uznaje się oparcie koncepcji na dyfuzji sieci. Współcześnie rozumiany gatekeeping odnieść należy do takich mechanizmów, jak: bańka informacyjna, *echo chamber* oraz filtrowanie informacji przez użytkowników oraz algorytmy. Modyfikacji ulegają również podstawowe kategorie pojęciowe: bramy oraz strażnika. Zauważalny staje się trend do tranformacji *gatekepingu* w kierunku *gatewatchingu*, w którym to użytkownicy mediów społecznościowych nie tworzą własnych bram, lecz obserwują i wykorzystują już istniejące bramy. *Gatekeeping* w mediach społecznościowych sprawia, że publiczność staje się ważnym elementem procesu, zmierzając w kierunku wtórnego *gatekepingu*.

Słowa kluczowe: *gatekeeping*, *gatekeeping* sieciowy, *gatewatching*, algorytm, media społecznościowe