Social Media’s Influence on American Sport Journalists’ Perception of Gatekeeping

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Using gatekeeping theory as a conceptual framework, this study examines social media’s influence on American sports journalists’ perception of gatekeeping, particularly sports journalists who cover elite sports. Seventy-seven print sports journalists covering professional sports were asked if their definition of gatekeeper has changed since they began using social media for news-gathering purposes. Thirty-six participants did not think their definition of gatekeeper had changed. The 26 respondents who did think it had changed were asked to explain how. Responses were coded into 1 of the 5 categories in Shoemaker and Reese’s Hierarchy of Influences model—individual, media routines, organization, extramedia, and ideological. Results suggest that for practitioners who do believe there has been a change, they see social media as changing their day-in, day-out job routines, as opposed to extramedia influences.

Keywords: professional sports, hierarchy of influences, professionalism

The advent of social media has created new opportunities for gatekeeping research. An unexplored component of research in this area is whether sport journalists perceive that their gatekeeping role has changed since they began using social media as a news-gathering tool, and, if so, how? This is particularly important among sport journalists who cover elite sports. Oftentimes, high-profile sport journalists face public scrutiny if they violate professional roles. This could potentially result in job loss and industry-wide credibility setbacks (Reinardy & Moore, 2007). Scholars and practitioners have examined social media’s effect on gatekeeping in levels of Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) Hierarchy of Influences model—individual, media routines, organization, extramedia, and ideological levels. Looking at extramedia influences, Singer (2004) argued that journalists have struggled to see how their profession, traditionally built on selecting and vetting
information before disseminating, fits into a world where the audience can also now publish. In a 2010 *Nieman Reports* article, Kindred (2005) said the sport beat today has reporting routines that previously did not exist. Hermida (2010) echoes this change in media routines, concluding that journalists’ unease with Twitter, for example, is rooted in their traditional working routines such as gathering, selecting, editing, and disseminating information.

But which level of the Hierarchy of Influences do sport journalists covering elite athletics perceive to be most influenced by social-media use, assuming they perceive gatekeeping to be influenced at all? Using gatekeeping theory as a conceptual framework, this study examines social media’s influence on sport journalists’ perception of gatekeeping. In this study, 77 print sport journalists who cover professional sports were asked if their definition of gatekeeper has changed since they began using social media for news-gathering purposes. Respondents who said yes ($n = 26$) were asked to explain how their definition has changed. All but one of these respondents ($n = 25$) provided explanations. These open-ended responses were then coded and categorized into one of the five levels of Shoemaker & Reese’s (1996) Hierarchy of Influences: individual, media-routines, organization, extramedia, and ideological levels.

**Literature Review**

**Gatekeeping**

In her often-cited seminal 1991 work, Shoemaker defined gatekeeping as “the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day” (p. 1). Although gatekeeping as a concept has been thoroughly studied in mass communication research, it did not originate in this field. Lewin (1947) introduced the concept of gatekeeping while working on a wartime experiment that examined the effects of one-way mass communication on housewives’ shopping behaviors, determining housewives to be the “key gatekeepers” who control what food is purchased.

As the concept of gatekeeping gained salience in mass communication research, it was sorted into distinct, theoretical categories of research outlined in Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) Hierarchy of Influences model: individual, media-routines, organization, extramedia, and ideological levels. To explain how these categories relate to one another, Shoemaker (1997) summarized the five levels (italics added for emphasis):

The *individual* gatekeeper has likes and dislikes, ideas about the nature of his or her job, ways of thinking about a problem, preferred decision-making strategies, and values that all impinge on the decision to reject or select (and shape) a message. But the gatekeeper is not totally free to follow a personal whim; he or she must operate within the constraints of communication routines to do things this way or that. All of this also must occur within the framework of the communication *organization*, which has its own priorities but also is continuously buffeted by [extramedia] influential forces from outside the organization. And, of course, none of these actors—the individual, the routine, the organization, or the social institution—can escape the fact that it is tied to and draws its sustenance from the social system [ideological]. (p. 62)
For example, media-routines-related research may examine the predictable routines journalists rely on to gather news (Sigal, 1973). Dependence on these routine channels leads to news that is dominated by official sources (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). An example of extramedia research would focus on how the audience or market influences gatekeepers, like Kim’s (2002) study, which determined that local journalists select events to cover based on audience demand. By using this Hierarchy of Influences model, scholars are able to better understand the factors related to media production.

Some scholars have called for a reconceptualization of Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) Hierarchy of Influences model, citing a lack of established routines in “new” media production and organizational influences for independent Web-content producers. Keith (2011), for example, proposed moving individual influences from the inside circle to the outermost circle of the hierarchy model to more accurately gauge gatekeeping influences. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue that new or modified methods for analyzing online media are also needed in order for gatekeeping theory to advance. But for the purposes of the current study, the placement of influences within the model is not important. The focus of this study is to determine which levels sport writers perceive to be most altered since they began using social media for news-gathering purposes. Although hierarchical influences have previously been examined to understand and to categorize influences on individual gatekeepers, the current study uses Shoemaker and Reese’s model to categorize sport journalists’ comments regarding their perception of how gatekeeping has been influenced by social media. This use of Shoemaker and Reese’s model distinguishes influences as occurring at five separate, connected levels.

**Print Sport Journalism**

Historically, sport journalists were perceived to have different objectives and professional values than their news counterparts. As Garrison and Saltwen (1989) wrote, sport reporting is frequently viewed as “conceived out of journalistic wedlock” (p. 57) or as “the toy department” of news media (Garrison & Sabljak, 1985). Sport journalists’ adaptation of ethical guidelines does indicate that the divide between the news and sport departments is not as wide as it once was (Hardin, 2005).

But sport journalists are not all equal. Or at least, the levels of athletics they cover are not equal. Sport coverage of elite athletes, more so than prep-level athletics, has been the content of choice in sport journalism research. For example, studies assessing how sport writers reinforce heterosexism and homophobia examined coverage of former Major League Baseball (MLB) player Nolan Ryan (Trujillo, 1991) and HIV-positive former Olympic diver Greg Louganis and former National Basketball Association (NBA) player Magic Johnson (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998). Interested in steroid-era discourses, Von Burg and Johnson (2009) examined coverage of former MLB player Mark McGwire. Besides the potential national exposure that comes from covering professional sport, there are also journalism practice differences that may come with covering elite athletes. In this article’s pilot study, none of the 10 sport writers followed any prep-level coaches or athletes on Twitter (Reed, 2011a). Respondents said in feedback e-mails that their motivation for “following” or “friending” someone on Twitter or Facebook, respectively, depended on the level of athletics the sport writer covers: “The weight given to a professional athlete’s Twitter feed was heavier than that of a prep athlete, and there was more
pressure to quickly turnover breaking stories about professional athletes than prep athletes” (Reed, 2011a, p. 23).

Regardless of the level of athletics they cover, sport journalists’ production routines, work environments, and relationships with sources, competitors, the public, and one another have been altered by technical changes (Pavlik, 2000; Paterson & Domingo, 2008). The Internet gives users unprecedented ease in participating in the creation and distribution of media, which can be seen in Web 2.0 applications like Twitter and Facebook. Sheffer and Schultz (2010) determined that sport journalists most often use Twitter for breaking news, promoting their work, and connecting to fans. The sport journalists in an earlier study by Schultz and Sheffer (2010) also said that their daily news work routines remained mostly the same, although younger journalists had different attitudes about Twitter than older journalists. Similarly, Reed (2013) found that most sport writers who cover professional sports use Twitter for professional purposes, with more than half of respondents checking their accounts more than five times a day. Facebook use was more split, with fewer than half using Facebook for professional purposes (Reed, 2013).

How sport journalists covering elite athletes perceive social media’s influence on gatekeeping is the focus of this study. Facebook and Twitter, launched in 2004 and 2006, respectively, will be the social media of focus.

**Current Study**

The current study examines how sport journalists’ perception of gatekeeping has changed since they began using social media for news-gathering purposes. It expands on a pilot study conducted in the spring of 2010, which included in-depth, in-person interviews with 3 sport journalists from the Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN, area (see Reed, 2011b). The results and past literature were then used to create a survey, which was piloted on 10 sport writers in the fall of 2010. Of the 10 sport journalists, 6 people said their definition of gatekeeping had not changed with the use of social media, 2 said it had, and 2 said they did not know.

From these results and the gatekeeping literature review, this study’s overarching research question was composed:

**RQ:** How has the use of social media changed sport writers’ definition of gatekeeping?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Potential subjects were recruited through professional sports teams’ press relations offices. Thirty-two National Football League teams, 30 NBA teams, 30 MLB teams, and 30 National Hockey League teams’ press relations offices were contacted via e-mail or telephone and asked for their respective lists of newspapers that hold season press passes. Personnel from 35 teams either did not return phone calls or refused to participate. Based on the information provided by press relations personnel, a list of 304 newspapers was created. Forty-two of these newspapers were eliminated from the sample either because e-mails bounced back or because the recipients said they had no professional sport-beat writers. This left 262 eligible
newspapers. These newspapers were sent e-mails, either to sport editors or to general managers, asking to direct the e-mail to the appropriate sport journalist. Overall, 77 sport writers completed the survey. Some of these sport journalists covered multiple professional sports: 38 respondents cover professional baseball, 20 respondents cover basketball, 51 respondents cover football, 19 respondents cover hockey, and 19 respondents listed “other.”

**Measures**

Research materials consisted of a survey question that asked if participants’ definitions of gatekeeper had changed since they began using social media. In the survey, gatekeeper was defined as “someone who decides if and how a message will be distributed by mass media.” This was deliberately vague, leaving it up to participants to interpret and to describe social media’s influence on gatekeeping.

Applicants who responded with “yes” were asked to explain how their definition had changed. A “yes” or “no” was used instead of a Likert scale, as was used in Schultz and Sheffer (2010), because the current study was not measuring a degree of change but whether the sport journalist believes or does not believe something has happened. These open-ended responses were then coded into one of the five levels outlined by Shoemaker and Reese (1996):

- **Individual level:** Communicators’ personal and professional backgrounds, personal attitudes, ethnicity, gender, values, and beliefs (Shoemaker & Reese).
- **Media-routines level:** “Patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs” (Shoemaker & Reese, p. 105). Statements coded in this level refer to occupational settings, which include altered routines and craft norms that are part of information gathering (Shoemaker & Reese).
- **Organization level:** Organizational structures’ influence on occupational culture and the degree of independence media organizations have from one another (Shoemaker & Reese). The difference between organization and routines levels are that routines include communication practices common throughout many newsrooms, whereas organization factors include factors that vary from organization to organization (Shoemaker, 1991).
- **Extramedia level:** Influences from outside the media organization, like sources of information and revenue, as well as interest groups and audiences (Shoemaker & Reese). Responses categorized into this level would state different relationships with sources, interest groups, and the audience (Shoemaker, 1991).
- **Ideological level:** The “relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a ‘world-view’ or a class outlook” (Williams, 1977, p. 109). This level governs the way we perceive our world and ourselves and is connected to “culture, societal interests, societal structure, and ideology” (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 68).

Two coders each coded the responses for a reliability check. After definitions were clarified, two coders recoded the 25 responses. Krippendorff’s alpha was used to check reliability (Krippendorff, 1980), which was .899.
Results

Preliminary Analysis

The sample consisted of predominantly White (87%), male (93.5%) sport writers (55.8%) with an average age of 45.32 (SD = 10.46) years and 22.37 (SD = 10.54) years of professional experience. Most (77.9%) have a 4-year undergraduate degree, work for daily newspapers (92.2%) with circulation sizes of more than 100,000 (55.8%), and belong to professional journalism associations (79.2%).

Gatekeeping

The survey question asked participants, “Has your definition of gatekeeper (someone who decides if and how a message will be distributed by mass media) changed since you began using social media?” Results were nearly split. Thirty-six participants (47.4%) said no, while 26 respondents (34.2%) said yes. Eight people (10.5%) did not know and 6 respondents (7.9%) said the question was not applicable. Twenty-five people who answered yes also explained how their definition had changed. Of the 25 responses, 13 (52%) responses referred to media-routines-level influences as being different post-social media, 8 (32%) responses referred to extramedia-level influences, and 4 (16%) responses referred to organizational-level influences. No one referred to individual- or ideological-level changes.

Twenty-five of the 26 respondents explained how they thought their definition had changed in an open-ended part of the survey. Responses that referred to media routines, the most common change, made specific references to how work-related routines had changed since they began using social media. For example, respondent 168 said, “There’s more info to sift through and ultimately to pass on,” and respondent 170 said, “Simply by the need to quote from such media if the person in question cannot be contacted directly.” Responses that referred to extramedia-level influences, the second-most common change, made specific references to the influences from outside the media organization, like audience members and sources. As respondent 155 said, “There are few gatekeepers now—Many people can distribute information, regardless of their credentials and credibility.” “Athletes don’t need the media to deliver their message,” respondent 183 said. “They do it themselves, many quite poorly.” There were a few responses that referred to organizational-level influences like changes in hierarchy or new roles. An example is respondent 156’s statement, “In the past an editor was in effect my gatekeeper. Now, increasingly, I serve that role myself with my blog and Twitter account.” None of the responses were determined to be individual- or ideological-level changes.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the homogeneous nature of the study, results were divided. Thirty-six participants did not think their definition of gatekeeper had changed. This reinforces Schultz and Sheffer’s (2010) findings that sport journalists did not see change taking place in these areas. This also builds on Sheffer and Schultz’s research because this sample is of a specific demographic: sport journalists who cover professional sport. Although 36 participants did not see change, 26 did. Of the participants who explained how their definition had changed (n = 25), 13 (52%) respondents referred
to media-routines-levels changes, followed by 8 (32%) participants referring to extramedia-level changes and 4 (16%) participants referring to organizational-level influences. This suggests that even among this homogeneous niche group of sport journalists, the perception of gatekeeping is anything but uniform. To those who did see a change, most saw media-routines-level change.

This is important because, on the surface, social-media use appears to be an extramedia influence: It gives the audience a publishing platform previously unavailable. The version of reality processed and published by these extramedia sources is "extremely influential in determining what comes to the attention of the media" (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 61). Some responses in this study reflected this influence, but most suggest that sport journalists' perception of gatekeeping since the advent of social media focuses more on media routines. Social-media tools are not just used by audience members to bypass journalism gatekeepers. They are news-gathering and -disseminating tools that have altered journalistic work routines.

Whereas the findings of this study are important, there are limitations. First, the sample size of this study was 77 people, and only 25 of them described how gatekeeping had changed. Although that may be a considerable percent of the sport journalists' population covering professional sport, it is not large enough to generalize the results to the greater sport-journalism population. Replicating this study, but with a larger demographic of sport journalists (e.g., sport journalists who cover prep-level sport), is an area of further research that would strengthen scholars' understanding of how sport journalists perceive gatekeeping and how this perception differs from those of other journalists. As stated earlier, prep athletics are arguably covered differently than professional athletics. Repeating this study with sport journalists who cover prep sport or even sport journalists at news organizations with different circulation sizes could also shed light on professional differences between various groups.

Second, the survey only asked for further detail from participants who thought their definition of gatekeeping had changed. It did not ask for further information from participants who did not think there was a change, which was the majority of the sample. This is a drawback of using a survey in this context, as it leaves a glaring hole in this article: Why did these particular sport journalists not think there was a change? This study echoes the findings of Schultz and Sheffer (2010) in that measuring the perception of change is challenging. An area of further research would be to explore sport journalists' perception of change, but to use interviews instead of a survey.

Third, the sample population's close involvement with professional journalism organizations may have skewed the results, as the most likely participants in a study like this may potentially be the population that cares most about professional issues. Participants have been found through professional associations in past studies (See Garrison & Salwen, 1989; Reinardy, 2006); how different this group is from their non-association-member colleagues is unknown and is another area for further research.

Fourth, the 114 professional sport teams that participated varied in depth of newspaper information they provided. For example, some teams provided organized lists of sport journalists receiving season passes, while other teams said they had no listing, compiling from memory the newspapers that consistently receive passes. This may have biased the sample to larger-circulation newspapers and toward sport writers who cover football, as most NFL teams had "black books" listing this information.
Finally, it is unknown how many sport writers at the 262 newspapers contacted were eligible to participate. The number of sport writers on the NFL black-book lists, for example, who considered themselves to be beat writers and participated is unknown. Along with the lack of cooperation from several professional sport organizations, these challenges suggest that the population parameters are unknown.

Overall, this study sought to extend previous gatekeeping studies by assessing how social-media use had changed a specific demographic of sport journalists' perception of gatekeeping. Results show that participating sport journalists who cover professional sport are divided: Thirty-six participants did not see change, while 26 did. These participants saw the use of social media most influencing media-routines, extramedia, and organizational levels of gatekeeping. This may come as a surprise, as social media have been discussed in previous studies as being a threat to traditional gatekeeping because of their ability to give the audience its own publishing platform, or extramedia influences. The results of this study suggest, however, that practitioners have taken more note of how social media have changed their day-in, day-out job routines, as opposed to the extramedia influences on their work. This area of research should receive more attention in future studies.

Notes

1. All pilot respondents were White U.S. citizens, although their coverage areas ranged from the St. Paul–Minneapolis area (4 people) to Orlando, FL (2), Dayton, OH (2), and Augusta, ME (2). Eight respondents were men and 2 were women. Eight people had 4-year undergraduate degrees, while 2 had vocational or community college degrees. Eight respondents were newspaper employees, while 2 people considered themselves to be employed primarily in online news. All respondents worked in news organizations with circulations of 10,001–50,000. All respondents used social media, although 2 respondents said they used it solely for personal use.

2. The pilot survey’s participants were chosen because they were professionally acquainted with the author. None of the pilot respondents participated in the final survey.

3. Because journalistic practices vary between the United States and Canada, Canadian teams were eliminated from the sample.


5. First, through an introductory e-mail; second, through a follow-up e-mail 2 weeks after the initial e-mail; and third, with a reminder e-mail 2 weeks after the second e-mail. The second and third e-mails included the survey link.

References
Social Media, Sport Journalists, and Gatekeeping 381


Appendix: Participants’ Written Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent number</th>
<th>Response to the Question, How Has Your Definition of Gatekeeper Changed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>117</td>
<td>Supervisory editors pay much more attention to Twitter and Facebook and have made it a more mainstream source of info.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>126</td>
<td>I never post anything that one of my competitors can steal until it’s been published/posted for a little while.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>129</td>
<td>I think the standards for accuracy have diminished overall in the business because of the practice of retweeting others’ work. It’s common practice now and I do it to keep up with what’s trending that day, but it endorses work that I personally haven’t verified. Occasionally, I have passed on news that was either inaccurate or incomplete or later clarified because of the rush for immediacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>130</td>
<td>A little less fact checking in the name of speed. This is true in retweets rather than personal posts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>131</td>
<td>Social media allows for distribution of news that readers would have never seen 10 years ago. Quick opinions, brief observations, etc. now make it to readers where they were often lost in the shuffle in the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136</td>
<td>As a gatekeeper prior to the advent of social media, you got your story and developed it over the course of an entire day then hit the public with one completely detailed story the next morning. Now, it’s done in drips and drabs, sending out breaking news in one or two sentences and updating it throughout the course of the day as more information becomes available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137</td>
<td>Because of social media, you can add publisher to the list of hats I wear. In today’s world, we are building our own audience rather than relying on a circulation director to do it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>141</td>
<td>With no space minimums or maximums, every little tidbit can be considered for publication. And there is a greater need to get the information out quickly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>146</td>
<td>The athletes can directly communicate to the fans without going through us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Respondent number | Response to the Question, How Has Your Definition of Gatekeeper Changed?
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149 | I think the public dictates the news more often. If a subject gains heavy traction on Facebook or Twitter, the mass media is virtually compelled to address it.
150 | First off, I’m not real comfortable with that term. Sounds ... Elitist? Fascist? ... Anyway, the biggest change since the rise of social media is the way it has fragmented the message. Is there breaking news? Get the very first inkling of it out there before you do anything else. Then release information as it comes, instead of presenting a cohesive whole. I feel like we all need to be on Ritalin.
155 | There are few gatekeepers now—many people can distribute information, regardless of their credentials and credibility.
156 | In the past an editor was in effect my gatekeeper. Now, increasingly, I serve that role myself with my blog and Twitter account.
158 | I have to be leery of comments and make sure they are appropriate for our site.
159 | Twitter (with links) is a great way to distribute news.
160 | From newspapers and the accepted professional “media” to anyone, anywhere today.
168 | There’s more info to sift through and ultimately pass on.
170 | Simply by the need to quote from such media if the person in question cannot be contacted directly.
172 | Players can get out a message on their terms and with their spin. My job involves more analysis.
179 | Stories and news are pursued sometimes whether relevant or not because it’s already in the public arena.
181 | We make editorial judgments on newsworthiness of stories by what we Twitter or Facebook and how we present it.
182 | News judgment decisions often are made these days based on social media updates.
183 | Athletes don’t need the media to deliver their message, they do it themselves, many quite poorly.
185 | Tougher to distinguish accuracy.
186 | You feel like only a partial gatekeeper—if it’s on someone else’s Twitter account, sometimes, you wind up retweeting the information just to let folks know the information’s out there.