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Gatekeeping in the Nigerian Press

by Charles Okigbo*

Abstract

This baseline study of gatekeeping in the Nigerian press follows the tradition of White (1950) and Swider (1967) and reveals that as a concept, gatekeeping holds great promise in African mass communication research. It used a survey research method to collect data from 21 senior reporters and editors in four Nigerian newspapers and found that: (1) corporate philosophies and policies of newspaper organizations affect gatekeeping operations without distinction as to whether the newspaper was privately or government owned; (2) journalists working in privately-owned newspapers reported giving less consideration to ownership factors in their selection of news; and (3) that prejudice and personal preferences are played down considerably by the journalists.

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Traitement des nouvelles dans la Presse Nigérienne

Résumé

Cette étude sur le traitement des nouvelles dans la presse nigérienne à l'instar de celle de White (1950) et Swider (1957), révèle qu'en tant que concept, le traitement des nouvelles porte en elle de grands espoirs dans les recherches sur les communications de masse. Elle utilise une méthode de recherche basée sur l'enquête pour collecter des données d'après de 21 reporters et rédacteurs au long cours travaillant dans quatre journaux nigériens et aboutit aux conclusions suivantes:

- 1) Les philosophies et politiques morales des organisations journalistiques ont des effets sur les opérations des traitement des nouvelles dans les journaux, qu'ils soient privés ou gouvernementaux.
- 2) Les journalistes travaillant dans des journaux privés font des reportages sans la pression des propriétaires (de ces journaux) dans la sélection de leurs nouvelles.
- 3) Les préjugés et préférences sont considérablement minimisés par les journalistes.

Introduction

A large proportion of mass communication research is concerned with the contents of the media and the characteristic structure of media institutions. Such research concerns have found eloquent expression in dominant and popular mass communication theories such as agenda-setting (McComb and Shaw 1972), uses and gratifications (Blumler and Katz 1974) media imperialism (Fejes 1981) and knowledge-gap (Tichenor *et al.* 1970, Gaziano 1983). A growing research concern among communication scholars is not so much about content and structure, as about the journalists who determine the content, in the context of the structure. This concern has found expression in one of the common strands of gatekeeping theory — i.e. that dealing with individual journalist decisions rather than with the news stories per se, groups of people within media institutions, or news organizations.

The term gatekeeper was first used in a research context by the Austrian psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) who was primarily concerned with producing desirable social changes in food habits by controlling the type of food that passed through the various gates or portals existing between the farm and the family table. Lewin aptly noted that the gates were governed either by impartial rules or by gatekeepers, who are individuals or groups charged with the responsibility of deciding what passes, and what is denied entry. Lewin extrapolated the metaphor of the food gates to news gathering and dissemination. In essence, a news gatekeeper is whoever governs the journey of news items in the communication channel.

Bittner (1980) expanded Lewin's original definition and explained that a gatekeeper is 'any person or formally organized group (that is) directly involved in relaying or transferring information from one individual to another through a mass medium.' This expanded interpretation allows for the inclusion of film producers who cut scenes from original scripts, propaganda artists who prepare leaflets to be dropped from an airplane, engineers at the local control centres for cable television, etc. An effective communication gatekeeper can do one of three things in the process of keeping his/her gates: limit information by selective editing, increase the amount of information by expansive editing or reorganize the information through reinterpretation.

Regardless of the functions fulfilled by specific gatekeepers, there are two broad strands of gatekeeping studies. The first strand employs the concept of 'gatekeepers' and focuses on the responsibilities and practices of specific individuals who are actively and directly involved in deciding what news stories get into the media, and which ones don't. The second strand employs the concept of 'gatekeeping' to examine the organization and contextual processes as well as institutions that play some part in news selection. In a perspicacious differentiation between the two

concepts, Dennis (1978) explained that the two terms are not the same because 'gatekeeper studies focus on individuals (while) gatekeeping studies . . . are concerned with either groups of people within a news organization or the organizations themselves.'

Review

As a communication theory, gatekeeping (or keepers) has not been thoroughly researched, although its origin dates back to the late 1940s. In the earliest study of the gatekeeper, following Kurt Lewin, David Manning White (1950) concluded from his study of one telegraph editor (Mr Gates) that in his position as gatekeeper, the telegraph editor selected and rejected certain stories based on the criteria of fit and appropriateness. According to White, the editor based his decisions on idiosyncratic and subjective perceptions. The telegraph editor 'passed' only those stories that he, as the representative of his culture, believed to be true.

Gieber (1956) developed and elaborated on the White methodology. While White based his analysis on data gathered from only one telegraph editor, Gieber expanded the base of his investigation to include 16 daily newspaper telegraph editors. It was found that as gatekeepers, the editors considered 'their essential function to be providing the reader with 'top news' of the day. The pertinent value was 'consequence' — the factor of importance to the largest number of persons.' The wire editors' perception of news is consonant with the axiom in all news rooms: 'all news is local.' They selected items containing information that would interest segments of their reader audience.

Another study that borrowed from the pioneering effort of White was Paul Snider's (1967) 'Mr Gates Revisited', which in fact re-examined the operations of White's original Mr Gates. Snider found that Mr Gates still worked as the telegraph editor of the same morning paper. However, the circulation had gone up by 30% and the city had become highly industrialized. Incidentally, in 1949, Mr Gates used more human interest stories (23.2%) than any other type of story, followed by national politics (15.8%), international politics (13.6%), state politics (6.8%), national farm (6.0%) and international war (5.6%).

In 1966, the leading category was international war (17.1%), followed by crime (16.8%), national economics (13.6), human interest (13.6%) and disaster (10.3%). As he had done in 1949, in 1966 he still picked the stories he liked and believed his readers wanted. By and large, the 1966 answers did not differ significantly from those of 1949.

In a Q-analytic study, 12 television news editors were required to sort 64 news stories representing all possible combination of 12 elements of news. The editors sorted the stories in rank order along a continuum from 'most probably use' to 'least probably use'. These editors were found to be

greatly alike in their selection of news stories and these five news values were found to be dominant: normality, significance, proximity, timeliness and visual availability (Buckalew 1969).

Other gatekeeping studies include Bailey and Lichty's (1972) investigation of cybernetic gatekeeping by focusing on organizational structure and decision processes; Waxman's (1973) examination of the effects of crises on gatekeeping operations in a broadcast medium; and Peterson's 1979 critical elucidation of the factors that guide gatekeepers in their selection of foreign news stories.

Gatekeeping studies have shown that all kinds of media and news agency personnel serve as 'gates' and in their various functions, can restrict or enhance the transmission of news stories based on idiosyncratic, sociological and contextual factors (Bass 1969).

To examine the manifestation of gatekeeping in the Nigerian press, these three research questions were selected to guide the conduct of this study:

1. Do the philosophies and editorial policies of newspapers affect news selection?
2. Does the pattern of ownership affect gatekeeping functions?
3. How do idiosyncratic dispositions affect the selection and rejection of news by journalists?

The ultimate objective was to ascertain why journalists select some news stories for publication, while others are kept outside the news-gates.

Methodology

The survey research method was used to collect data from 21 senior reporters and editors in these four national newspapers: *The Guardian*, *National Concord*, *New Nigerian* and *Nigerian Standard*. Six respondents worked for *The Guardian*, and each of the other three newspapers accounted for five respondents.

A 20-item questionnaire designed to elicit biographic as well as gatekeeping-related information was administered to the journalists. As in the pioneering studies of Mr Gates, all the gatekeeping questions were open-ended. The obvious limitation of this methodology is that the researcher has to rely solely on journalists' interpretation of their decision processes, there being no objective standard to determine the accuracy of the responses. This limitation notwithstanding, the journalists, who are the gatekeepers, are the best judges of their actions.

Results

The respondents' educational qualifications ranged from diploma (in journalism) to master's (in mass communication or humanities). Their

ages ranged from 27 to 45 and they had been in journalism for varying amounts of time that ranged between three to 27 years. The respondents were asked to discuss the effect of advertising on their newspapers. Thirteen people (62.0%) said that advertising affects what goes into their newspapers while seven people (33.3%) said it had no effect. One respondent was neutral. This question referred to giving consideration to advertisers in the selection of the news of the day. There was a general consensus that advertising affects news selection in terms of space.

Asked to comment on the impact of press laws and decrees in gatekeeping, the respondents mentioned Decree No. 4 of 1984 (the Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation Decree), the Newspaper Act of 1964, and sedition and defamation laws. The consensus of opinions was that these legislations had a restraining effect on their gatekeeping functions as they tried to balance their readers' right to know with the dictates of the legislations.

In terms of the specific questions guiding the conduct of this study, it was found that 16 respondents (76.2%) averred that their corporate philosophy and editorial policies affected what they selected as the news of the day. Four respondents (19.0%) said they gave no consideration to corporate philosophy and formal editorial policies, while one person (4.7%) was neutral (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies of Corporate Philosophies And Policies

Newspaper	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Total (%)
The Guardian	6(28.6%)	0 (0%)	—	6 (28.6%)
National Concord	3(14.3%)	2 (9.5%)	—	5 (23.8%)
New Nigerian	2(9.5%)	2 (9.5%)	1 (4.8%)	5 (23.8%)
Nigerian Standard	5(23.8%)	—	—	5 (23.8%)
Total	16(76.2%)	4 19.0%)	1 (4.8%)	21 (100.0%)

On the question of the impact of newspaper ownership on gatekeeping, 12 respondents (57.1%) admitted the restraining effect of ownership structure, while nine people (42.9%) denied being constrained in this respect. A breakdown of the answers shows that *The Nigerian Standard* and *New Nigerian* (both government newspapers) are the most restraining. On the other hand, the two private papers, *The Guardian* and *National Concord*, were found to be least restraining (Table 2).

On the effect of idiosyncratic dispositions and personal prejudice, 9 respondents (42.9%) admitted that these affected their news

selection, 11 others (52.3%) said these considerations did not affect them, and one person (4.7%) was silent on this. *The Guardian* provided the greatest number admitting the effect of idiosyncratic considerations and prejudice, while *National Concord* accounted for the greatest number that denied these considerations (Table 3). Some of the personal considerations were predicated on religion, culture, editorial and writing preferences.

Table 2. Frequencies on Ownership Patterns

Newspaper	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
The Guardian	1(4.8%)	5 (23.8%)	6 (28.6%)
National Concord	2(9.5%)	3 (14.3%)	5 (23.8%)
New Nigerian	4(19.0%)	1 (4.8%)	5 (23.8%)
Nigerian Standard	5(23.8%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (23.8%)
Total	12(57.1%)	9 (42.9%)	21 (100.0%)

Table 3. Frequency on Idiosyncratic Dispositions

Newspaper	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Total (%)
The Guardian	4(19.0%)	2(9.5%)	—	6(28.6%)
National Concord	1(4.8%)	4(19.0%)	—	5(23.8%)
New Nigerian	2(9.5%)	3(14.3%)	—	5(23.8%)
Nigerian Standard	2(9.5%)	2(9.5%)	1 (4.8%)	5(23.8%)
Total	9(42.9%)	11(52.3%)	1 (4.8%)	21(100.0%)

Discussion

It is not surprising that about 80% of the gatekeepers took their corporate philosophies and editorial policies into consideration in selecting the news of the day. There is no clear distinction between the private and government newspapers in this regard. Of the four journalists who said they had no regard for corporate philosophies and policies, two were from *National Concord* and the other two were from *The New Nigerian*.

Every successful news organization has a personality built by consistently projecting a specific image through its news presentation. Such an image is predicated on stated or implied corporate philosophies and policies (Nwakanma 1985). Disregarding such considerations is: not in the best interests of the journalists and their organizations. The best gatekeepers know and respect their organizations' philosophies and policies. Commenting on Mr Gates in 1966, Snider noted that he 'knows and agrees with the written and unwritten news policy of his newspapers...' (Snider 1967).

The Guardian, generally believed to be the most elitist newspaper in Nigeria, not surprisingly had all its respondents in this study averring that they respect corporate philosophy and policies. For *The Nigerian Standard*, all whose representatives also said they respect corporate philosophy and policies, this may be as a result of the strict expectations arising from stringent government controls.

Whereas 16 (76.2%) respondents felt constrained by corporate philosophies and policies, only 12 (57.1%) said that newspaper ownership pattern affected their news selection. Also, whereas there was no clear distinction between the private and government newspapers on corporate philosophies and policies, there is a clearly discernible distinction in respect of perceived effect of ownership. All but one of the respondents from government newspapers averred that ownership pattern affected their gatekeeping. On the other hand, only three of the 11 journalists from the private papers said ownership was a consideration in news selection.

Journalists from *The Guardian* said they gave less attention to ownership than their counterparts in the *National Concord*. This is neither surprising nor disconcerting. *National Concord* is pervaded by the ebullient personality of the publisher, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, whose wife is the Managing Director. His personal feelings often find expression in the corporate policies. For instance, the paper does not accept advertisements for alcoholic beverages because of the religious beliefs of the publisher. Be that as it may, the journalists in the private newspapers expressed less regard for ownership considerations than their counterparts in the government papers. The axiom in the government papers seems to be: 'All the news that fit government's expectations'.

About half of the journalists admit the effect of prejudice and personal tastes in their news selection. Four out of the six journalists from *The Guardian* and only one out of the five from *National Concord* admitted these influences; so did two each of the five people from the *New Nigerian* and the *Nigerian Standard*. Journalistic objectivity is an ideal which many aim at but only few achieve (Dennis 1978).

Many journalists attempt to achieve it through balance and equal representation. In answer to the question on prejudice in news selection,

the original Mr Gates had replied: 'Prejudice in news is a constant, as long as I can come up with 'equal space' and 'play'. I have had to overcome some personal feelings as far as politics and religion are concerned by the 'equal' treatment. One should be strictly neutral and I feel that I am neutral' (Snider 1967).

Conclusion

This is a baseline study of gatekeeping in selected Nigerian papers, there being no published investigations of the phenomenon among Nigerian journalists. As in the tradition of White and Snider, this study has raised more questions than it has provided answers for. Among the few answers it has provided are:

- (1) Corporate philosophies and policies in themselves affect gatekeeping operations; and on these factors, there is no distinction between private and government newspapers.
2. Journalists with the private newspapers report giving less consideration to press ownership factors in their selection of news.
3. Prejudice and personal preferences are played down considerably by the journalists, in the tradition of journalistic objectivity.

As a concept, gatekeeping holds great promise in African mass communication research. Unfortunately, because of lack of interest in this concept in Africa, the foundation has not yet been laid for even cursory or rudimentary research on gatekeeping, and so this theory remains largely unknown, uninvestigated and unutilized.

There is need to go beyond the examination of only those gatekeeping factors suggested by Western scholarship, and Africanize the gatekeeping concept. Waxman (1973) has shown how the American public's definition of news prevails over the journalists' in crisis situations. What kind of pattern obtains in the media in Africa? There is need to probe into the patterns of news selection among African journalists. As Okigbo argued:

if news is the published reports of events, then we may not understand the context of African news in African media without an understanding of how and why African gatekeepers select certain events to be carried in their media, and reject others (Okigbo, forthcoming).

Future research should try to relate gatekeeping to press controls and performance, two of the key concepts that give national journalism its characteristic colour. It should also endeavour to identify gatekeeping practices in traditional African communication. If it is true that a nation's journalism reflects its civilization, then we may never account for our civilization unless we truly understand our traditional journalism, especially how news gates were operated in that native journalism.

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