GATEKEEPING SOCIAL MEDIA IN TODAY’S NEWSROOMS

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Social media has changed the face and function of today’s traditional newsrooms. But, more than that, social media has changed how editors and reporters report the news and, perhaps more importantly, control the flow of information via social media channels. Because social media has sped up the news gathering process, the way news and information in controlled from newsrooms to the general public and vice versa has changed.

This study examined seven news professionals ranging in title and duty and asked how big of a part social media played in their day-to-day professional lives and how their respective news outlets “screen” social media news, both incoming and outgoing. The respondents were interviewed and asked a series of 15 questions related to social media, newsroom strategy and news judgement in their respective organizations. Shoemaker’s gatekeeping theory is the basis for this research. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) suggested gatekeepers maintain the flow of information and help that information flow onward. However, the research here shows that downsizing of newsrooms has made an impact on the traditional role of editor to serve as the newsroom gatekeeper, specifically when it comes to social media news and information.

The seven respondents were asked a battery of questions to determine how social media plays a role in their daily professional lives and how the flow of news and information works in their respective newsrooms. Those newsrooms varied in size from small community newspapers to larger metropolitan organizations and also included citizen journalism organizations. While this research did show patterns in newsroom gatekeeping processes for social media news and information, additional studies into the dynamics of downsized newsrooms and the evolution of the gatekeeping process with news and information not obtained by social media channels is necessary to paint a more complete picture on the status of overall gatekeeping in today’s newsrooms.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Importance of the Study

Social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter, have made a significant impact on how people choose to receive their news and information. With the Internet comes access and access has led to various sources of news such as citizen journalists and bloggers producing news. Social media has also played a large role in the way traditional news organizations, specifically newspapers, choose to send out news and information as well as how they communicate and receive news and information from the general public. This thesis explores how social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter are used in today’s newsrooms by, not only reporters, but also editors. Drilling deeper, this thesis examines how news and information is filtered in and sent out in those newsrooms.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center, for around half of the top 50 news sites – which do include a traditional print product – visitors from mobile platforms such as tablets or mobile phones spend more time on the site than desktop users (Mitchell, 2015). A natural inference from this is that news is becoming easily accessible and easily shared due to the ability of mobile devices to allow users the ease and quickness of sharing links to news stories via social media channels. Along with the rise of mobile news consumption has been the social Web, where information flow is a new dynamic (Mitchell, 2015). Any earlier study by the Pew Research Center showed that close to half of Web-using adults got political and government news in a week from Facebook where “influence is driven to a strong degree by friends and algorithms (Mitchell, 2015).” This consistent shift towards where the general public receives its news and information has had an impact on how and to what extent we function as an informed
society as well as the state of those organizations producing news and information and making it available to the general public on a daily basis (Mitchell, 2015).

Focusing specifically on the traditional newspaper outlets, the Pew study reported circulation (papers delivered) dropped another 3 percent from 2013 to 2014 according to the Alliance for Audited Media data – the most recent data available (Mitchell, 2015). Consumption of news from traditional newspapers also changed in the same year. From 2013 to 2014, mobile audience distribution – the number of those accessing newspaper news via only a mobile device – jumped from 3 percent to 5 percent. The digital-only audience – those only getting newspaper news via a desktop or mobile device went from 5 percent to 7 percent. With the ability to share news via mobile platforms becoming easier because of enhanced technology and the increase in readers getting their newspaper news from a digital device, the relationship of people toward news has evolved into a more participatory process, specifically with Facebook and Twitter being two of the three most common social media networks used for media consumption (Holcomb, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2013). Approximately half of both Twitter and Facebook users get news on those social media channels and 39 percent of print newspaper readers get news on Twitter and Facebook. (Holcomb et al. 2013).

**Statement of the Problem**

This thesis will examine how social media has augmented news gathering and redistribution in traditional newsrooms. Information collected from interviews of traditional news journalists and citizen journalists will show how newsrooms are dealing with the changes social media has created and the broader ability for reporters and editors to communicate with
the general public. The study will also show how traditional newsrooms view the usage of social media by reporters and editors in their daily job functions.

The problem with the increase in connectivity of news consumers and how social media channels like Facebook and Twitter have become sites where news and information is shared is newsrooms facing increased challenges in keeping up with the consistent flow of news and information via those social media channels. Coupled with the fact that newsroom employment has dropped nearly 5 percent from 2013 to 2014 (Mitchell, 2015) the ability for newsrooms to manage the flow of news and information from the general public, through the newsroom and on to newspaper pages and vice versa, will be examined though the interviews with news professionals.

**Definition of Terms**

In this study there are terms used consistently throughout. It is necessary for those reading the study to understand those terms to realize the impact of the overall study. The terms will be explained in more detail as they are brought deeper into the study.

**Gatekeepers** – Those in the news industry responsible for filtering information from a newsroom to the general public.

**Traditional journalism** – News organizations like newspapers, television and radio stations.

**Citizen journalism** – Organizations independent of traditional news organizations and reliant on independent and sometimes not professionally trained journalists.
Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter two includes the theoretical basis for which the framework of this study is formed. It also includes reviews of literature on this subject and forms the research questions for the study. Chapter three describes the scope of the study and reveals the methodology used for the collection of data. Chapter four produces the results of the study, shows how the results relate to previous research and provides discussion regarding the implication of the research findings in relation to the previously formed research questions. Chapter five discusses the limitations of the study, proposes additional areas of research related to the topic and provides a summary of the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Philosophical Considerations

A journalist is trained to uphold a certain degree of ethics ("Journalist’s Ethical Code," 1996), but those ethics may come into question due to the sheer amount of information passing through a news room and on to the desk of an editor on a daily basis. It is the editor’s job to uphold the strongest of ethical and journalistic standards, but this can come into question because of the sheer amount of news and information coming across his/her desk daily. It is important for traditional news organizations to maintain these ethics in lieu of the increasing number of citizen journalists who may or may not follow these same ethical guidelines.

That strict code of ethics that suggest journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know ("Journalist’s Ethical Code," 1996). Within that, we are bound to be free of outside association and avoid pressures from advertisers and special interests that may skew the objectivity of the newspaper and its mission ("Journalist’s Ethical Code," 1996). We must also be accountable to readers, listener and viewers who rely on our content for information. However, by the same token, we also must avoid doing harm and we must show compassion for those affected adversely by news coverage.

It is suggested by Kovach and Rosenstiel that there are 10 principles of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2006, p. 5). The first obligation of journalists is to the truth, and their primary loyalty is to the citizens (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2006, p. 5). There is a need for verification and a strict line between the journalists and what they are covering (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2006, p. 5). In their role as the Fourth Estate, journalists have an obligation to oversee those in power and serve in a watchdog function as well as provide a form for public criticism in addition to being relevant (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2006, p. 5). The code of ethics for
journalists must be followed and information should not be left out of news on purpose (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2006, p. 6).

The standards also include the understanding that journalists have an inherent responsibility to protect the reputations of people whose names are published or broadcast (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2008, p. 380). The use of the word “allegedly” has allowed media to say nearly anything, and the competition between media outlets in the race to be first with a story has led to consistently sloppy reporting (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2008, p. 89). Even with that drive and desire for individual journalists and the organizations they work for to be first with news, the obligation to uphold the standards and ethics should outweigh the need to be first.

There are other suggestions that the ethics code also suggests that private people is not as newsworthy as information about public figures (Gajda, 2012, p. 1760). It is courts that tend to decide the public value of the news published versus the right to privacy (Gajda, 2012, p. 1760). One issue that comes up regarding this matter is the lack of a delineated line between the right to privacy and the freedom of the press, both of which are constitutional values (Gajda, 2012, p. 1761). News should not just be predicated on the public’s need for information and should be more broadly construed (Gajda, 2012, p. 1761).

**Theoretical basis**

Editors in news organizations are meant to be the final line of defense between incoming news and what is seen by the general public. This means the editor is the one tasked with filtering information from journalists, determining its value (news worthiness) and also deciding on the best possible presentation of that news and information. Social media and the Internet has transformed how editors (gatekeepers) undertake the responsibility of sifting through story ideas
and information on a daily basis. The task of a gatekeeper is simply defined as “the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the works get cut down and transformed into hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day” (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 1).

Gatekeeping has grown to be even broader in terms of the digital age. Gatekeeping can be seen as the process by which social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed and is not just a series of in and out decisions (Nahon, 2009, p. 3). To go a step further, news organizations suffering from down-sizing, forced the gatekeeping role of an editor to become broader.

The concept of moving content back and forth through the channels of a newsroom is grounded in the gatekeeping theory. Similar to the movement of a gate letting someone in, this is the process of gatekeeping. Simply put, in this particular reference, gatekeeping is the process by which an editor passing information on to a newsroom and when at editor chooses to halt that information (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Gatekeepers maintain the flow of information and help that information flow onward (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 21). In a traditional media setting, news creation starts with raw news collected by news gatherers, such as reporters, before it is turned into tangible copy or video. News processors, such as editors, then move through that copy or video before it is translated into a completed product, like a newspaper or newscast (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

There are several different levels of gatekeeping analysis, according to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), however one that applies specifically to this study is the individual institution. The individual level is an individual gatekeeper acting as the force moving information forward or pushing it backward (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 48). The role of the gatekeeper can be second-
guessed, where information is not taken at face value and may be inaccurate or untruthful (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 35).

The gatekeeping theory can focus on the selection mechanism. The identification of broad trends in news, including news outlets as well as individuals, have made the gatekeeping theory a solid theory in relation to news gathering (Soroka, 2012, p. 515). Here, gatekeeping goes beyond an individual’s preferences, whims or errors. No matter the editor or even the media outlet, certain stories will be selected while others will not (Soroka, 2012, p. 515). Soroka (2012) suggests biases in news selection can be based on a variety of factors such as:

- Organizational-level factors such as administrative characteristics, working procedures, and cost and/or time constraints (Berkowitz, 1991).
- Story-level factors such as the geographic proximity of the story in relation to the media outlet coverage area, visual features (for television), the clarity (ability to be interpreted) of the story, and the story type – disasters, crime, economics, etc. (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989);
- Professional factors such as journalistic values, ethics and norms, and views of “newsworthiness” (Gans, 1979).

The Literature

**Gatekeeping Theory and Journalism**

William Cassidy (2006) suggests the gatekeeping theory is an “effective conceptual approach to studying online journalists (p. 6). Early studies suggest journalists viewed themselves as “an impartial link dispensing information to the public” (, p. 7). These neutral journalists saw their role as being that of getting information to the public quickly while
maneuvering around stories that could not be verified or contained information not valid to the overall storyline. Additionally, these journalists suggested their primary function was to also investigate claims made by government entities, give context to complex issues such as budgetary matters and discuss national policy and develop the intellectual and cultural interests of the public (Cassidy, 2006, p. 6).

Translating that into the digital age, a 2007 study looked at the characterization of the gatekeeper in the digital age (Pantic, 2014, p. 3). Earlier studies focused on individuals, such as journalists or editors (gatekeepers). However, there is the argument that gatekeeping choices “do not take place in a vacuum but are constrained by institutional factors such as editorial routines, journalistic culture, and market needs” (Enli, 2007, p. 49).

The difference between social media and other mass media

Shoemaker and Vos suggest the Internet differs from other forms of mass media and mass communications as it increases the prospect of two-way communication and interaction between the individuals (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 9). Furthermore, Web 2.0 and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow various audience to take part in the dialogue, interacting with businesses, institutions and newsmakers (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 9). Finneman (2011) stated “hypertextual, interactive and multimodal features [are] unique to digital media (Finnemann, 2011, p. 83). This leads to the potential for interaction in digital media and increases how many different ways individuals can transform the flow of news.

A first phase of public journalism rested in the traditional media forms such as newspaper, then radio and finally television. This advent of online media and even the inclusion of online media into more traditional media outlets such as television and newspaper, has created a second phase of public journalism and within that there have been five separate models
identified: traditional journalism, public journalism, interactive journalism, participatory journalism and citizen journalism (Nip, 2006, p. 216). They are defined as followed (pp. 216-218):

- **Traditional journalism** – professional journalists act as the gatekeepers, filtering and reporting on events. The only public involvement is from news sources that provide information and opinion to journalists. Public interaction is from letters to the editor and complaints;

- **Public journalism** – an attempt to engage citizens in defining the focus for news gathering and news consumption. Journalists use town hall meetings and polls to gauge community concern and provide feedback. Professional journalists keep their role as gatekeeper in framing and presentation;

- **Interactive journalism** – a concept that has no clear definition. It can refer to communication and news consumption that is facilitated through the Internet. Users can select stories they read and interpersonal interactivity allows for engagement with reporters, but only when reporters respond to initial communication requests;

- **Participatory journalism** – allows news users to take an active part in gathering news and to work with journalism professionals to distribute the content. Users create the content, but the outlet provides the publishing platform;

- **Citizen journalism** – here, independent news content is generated and produced by non-professional individuals or an organization that is not paid staff. These can include blogs, independent news websites and community radio stations and newspapers.
An alternative definition of participatory media is networked journalism, which explains how professional journalists and non-professionals work together to share facts, questions and perspectives to get to the heart of a story (Channel, 2010, p. 6).

The rise of participatory and citizen journalism hit a stride in 1998 when the DrudgeReport.com broke the affair between Monica Lewinsky and President Bill Clinton. Two years later, Williams and Delli Capini (2000) said the reporting of news this significant by a non-traditional media source was “a complete obliteration of the boundaries between mainstream press and other media outlets” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000, p. 73). Larger news events have caused a need for user-generated content such as photos, text and video that can then be shared on the Internet (Channel, 2010, p. 9). The Internet enables sources beyond traditional news media to become alternatives (Channel, 2010, p. 9), and citizen journalists have developed a stronger voice during disasters because they can capture events via text, video and photo that is deemed newsworthy and picked up by traditional mainstream media (Lizza, 2006).

User-generated news has found integration into network news via outlets like CNN’s iReport. In 2006, CNN began soliciting audience-gathered content including photos and video. This content would be featured on CNN programing or on CNN.com, but only after all the information was reviewed by CNN journalists (Channel, 2010, p. 14). In 2008, the cable media outlet launched a website dedicated to the placement of content that was not edited or reviewed. CNN explained “CNN makes no guarantees about the content or the coverage on iReport.com” and the site was built to develop an online community to help the network determine what people consider to be news and place the community in a position to drive news conversations (Channel, 2010, p. 14).
There have been some concerns about content uploaded unmoderated by CNN staff. An example includes an iReporter, who was also a media consultant, who posted a video of a former client that had 10,000 hits on the CNN iReport website. After it was uncovered, the iReporter said they fully disclosed that they once worked for the person in the video. It was suggested the reporter was “testing” the system and that “anyone can use iReport, under just about any guise, if they choose to be less than transparent” (Channel, 2010, p. 14). Another incident involved the posting of a report that Apple CEO Steve Jobs had suffered a heart attack. The effect the un-edited report had was a drop in Apple stock price by 5.4 percent following the information being published. CNN suspended the user’s account and the Securities and Exchange Commission launched an investigation into the hoax and whether or not it was intended specifically to devalue Apple’s stock price (Channel, 2010, p. 14-15). The report was not aired nor was it published on CNN.com, but the dean of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism suggested “the event underscores the need for news organizations to verify content by users before it is published” (Callan, 2008).

**Technology and media**

Communication technologies can open new gates and show the need for new studies to measure changes in gatekeeping and, in turn, help develop new theories (Livingston & Bennett, 2003). New technologies such as cellular phones with cameras allow anyone to take newsworthy images and share those with the media (Gordon, 2007).

Interactivity is used to explain the process of how people engage in communication over the Internet (Channel, 2010, p. 7). Interactivity can also be defined as “the many-to-many and one-to-one communication spaces such as forums, chat rooms and user-authored sites, in addition to the one-to-many mode of traditional media” (Boczkowski, 2004). Other definitions of
interactivity include “the increasing opportunity to communicate across ‘old’ boundaries of time and place, and between journalists and citizens” or that interactivity “cultivates some element of user control of the narrative content in a new media text” (Channel, 2010, p. 7).

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) suggest gatekeeping has been redefined because of the global influence of the Internet (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 133). Because gatekeepers can rely on audience demographic information to control the flow of information though gates, globalization further complicates gatekeeping (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 10). Additionally, because digital media has shifted in relation to the audience dynamic and how that relates to professional gatekeepers and even as the audience themselves act as gatekeepers, the movement of information has grown beyond moving unidirectionally (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 135).

**The New Age: Web 2.0 and Gatekeeping**

Web 2.0 technology has increased the speed of information online (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 14). A 2011 study by Ira Basen (2011) looked at changes in journalistic practices online by discussing digital media platforms, citizen journalism and engaging with the gatekeeper theory in the 21st century (Basen, 2011). Basen suggests Twitter and Facebook are the two pre-eminent social media networks, and they have actually gone so far as to change the way we communicate and the language we speak. This can suggest a redefining of the gatekeeper theory online (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 14).

By its very nature, digital media platforms have fewer filters and gates online, which leads to any individual to determine what is news and what is important (Basen, 2011). The reduction of gates online is further characterized by citizen journalism because “anyone can post anything [online] and no one will fact check it, edit it or filter it in any way” (Basen, 2011). Basen (2011) suggests news aggregation and crowdsourcing “are new filters or gates in the Web
2.0 age, highlighting that news gathering and production are ‘becoming a collective pursuit’” (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 14).

One argument is that Web 2.0 actually has a negative impact on gatekeeping because of the reduction in gates or official gatekeepers, accountability, professionalism and expert information (Keen, 2008). There is the suggestion of a shift in gatekeeping practices on digital media platforms, and Keen offers that gatekeepers are a necessity because of the flood of information coming digitally. Those gatekeepers are necessary to filter “what is useful, credible, reliable, and important” (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 15).

The gatekeeping theory has “gained new interest” due to the Internet making it easier than ever to publish news and information without moderation or traditional gatekeeping (Pantic, 2014, p. 19). With new technology and the further advancement of the Internet, Shoemaker said, “Each time we come across a new media, we ask new questions that are really old questions” suggesting the gatekeeping theory, while possible to augment, remains prominent (Pantic, 2014, p. 19).

**Rationale**

The literature reviewed in this chapter shows that journalists continue to have an obligation to maintain the truth and relevance in reporting news and information to the public. To go a step further, editors (or gatekeepers) have a wider array of news and information to sift through because of a significant increase in platforms for user-generated content via specific platforms such as social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.).

The Internet has opened up a vast ability for anyone anywhere to publish news and information and to publish it unchecked. While there is no ability for traditional gatekeepers
(editors) to police the entirety of the Internet, this study will explore how reporters and editors deal with the amount of news coming in via social media, going out via social media and how that incoming news and information is checked.

Over the course of 20 years in journalism, the author has worked with organizations that have engaged in online gatekeeping practices that are more aligned with an interactive audience and some that have engaged with a more participatory journalism approach.

In traditional media, however, the communication between newsrooms (organizations) and the news consumer has been more along the lines of following traditional gatekeeping. This includes informing readers more of certain topics over others. For example, I have worked for news organizations that have focused more on political and government coverage. This rolled over into our communication digitally as postings and other forms of digital communication were heavier in government and political interaction. This translated into deeper engagement between the organization and its readers on the political sphere.

Due to the technical and organizational changes occurring in traditional newsrooms, gatekeeping is something that requires analysis. In the past, gatekeeping practices were defined within the sound structure of the newsroom. Reporters reported and editors edited and served as those gatekeepers. However, changes to structure and even the reduction of numbers inside a traditional newsroom has caused a need for that traditional gatekeeping to be examined.

For the purpose of this study, three different social media sites will be looked at as models for news gathering and for news production and dissection. The three – Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, will be defined more specifically later in this paper.
Research questions:

*RQ1: What role does social media play in daily news gathering operations for news outlets?*

*RQ2: How do media outlets “screen” social media news, both incoming and outgoing?*
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Study

What this study hoped to discover is how newsrooms deal with the influx of news and information coming in and how that information – along with the information generated from their own newsrooms – is parsed back out to the general public for consumption.

In its scope this study examines how editors and reporters decipher content coming into a newsroom and how information is then sent back out via social media networks. The intent is also to determine if newsrooms have moved more toward working with participatory journalism and away from models of traditional journalism. The sample size will be a total size of seven and consist of editors and reporters across five different newsrooms and two citizen journalists with a remote newsroom. The main criteria for those included in the study are: (1) they must be a working editor/reporter in a newspaper, television, radio or online newsroom, and (2) must have either a work or personal social media account in one of their three delivery options considered in this study.

Methodology of the Study

Overview

Qualitative studies can be pivotal in understanding how citizen journalism and social media is integrated into news organizations, especially in considering the limited tools and methods of research created so far (Bruns, 2008). To keep with Cresswell’s rationale for conducting qualitative research (Channel, 2010, p. 16), this study looked at an area of journalism and newsgathering that “does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and changing constantly” (p. 16). This research follows a similar methodology of a study done by
Beard and Olsen (1999), which was a qualitative study where college and university webmasters were interviewed to determine values and principles that were used to make gatekeeping decisions (Beard & Olsen, 1999). The researchers conducted long interviews to gather data for their study which found that gatekeeping was a valuable approach “to study those responsible for the selection of messages in online media” (Channel, 2010, p. 16). The study concluded that college and university webmasters do have a similar role and encounter the same constraints as traditional media gatekeepers (Channel, 2010, p. 16).

The Beard and Olsen (1999) study used guidelines established by McCracken (1988), which concluded that in-depth interviews can be used to qualitatively gather data. Those guidelines suggested the long interview allows respondents to “tell his or her own story in his or her own terms” (McCracken, 1988, p. 22). This study’s purpose is to “gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17).

A semi-structured questionnaire was built for the purpose of this study. Subjects were interviewed while the researcher transcribed the discussion. Questions were nondescript in nature and, once completed, analysis began, including the transcription of the interviews.

Seven individuals identified as either editors or journalists working in a newspaper, television, radio or online newsroom were interviewed for this study. Each uses one of the three social media channels identified in this study as part of their daily working habits. The initial phase of this study aimed to locate journalist-participant with the appropriate qualifications. Participants were asked which kind of media outlet they worked for and what their job title is. Questions also included which of the three social media networks are used by their news organization and in what order of importance each of those networks is ranked. Participants were
asked how those social media networks are used in daily job function and on to whether they
trust news and information they receive via social media channels.

Validity and Reliability

Neuman (2011) suggests validity is truthfulness and how well that truthfulness fits with
reality. It addresses how well reality being measured in a study relates with the constructs
researchers use to understand it (Neuman, 2011). This study’s validity comes from the sampling
of participants in the study in that they come from a wide range of newsgathering outlets,
including newspapers and online media outlets. Additionally, the literature review section of this
research suggests the increase in participatory journalism and the uses of social media in today’s
traditional newsrooms. Between the increase in social media usage in traditional news
organizations and the sampling of editors and journalists from various newsrooms, the validity of
this study is apparent.

Neuman (2011) also said the reliability refers to the dependability or consistency of a
study. It would also suggest the same thing recurs under similar situations or conditions
(Neuman, 2011). Representative reliability is used in this study across groups, which would have
similar results under similar social groups. This study’s reliability rests in the array of editors and
journalists used for interviews. The social group consists of a combination of traditional and
participatory journalists, which widens the overall social group and increases the potential of the
results being similar under similar conditions.
Ethical Considerations

Concerns regarding the issue of privacy were addressed in the anonymity of the interview participants. Each participant is identified by an alphabetical letter, rather than a name. Additional identifying is in the job title of each participant. Respondents were afforded voluntary informed consent. Interviewees were instructed they could decline to answer any and all questions and could desist from participating in the survey at any time during the interview. All interviewees provided verbal consent at the time of the interviews.

Distribution of the questionnaire began with a call to each person considered for the study and an explanation of the research questions and how the questionnaire would be delivered and returned. All participants were made aware of the fact that any and all data collected via questionnaires would be used strictly for educational purposes and for no other. None of the data compiled was revealed to other members of the study or to any media competitors inside or outside of a particular market. Participants were told any information they did not wish to disclose would not be used and personal information was kept confidential from any other participants. Individuals were identified in this study by an alphabetical designation. A table is provided in the study to indicate the function of each participant for clarification and validation of the information provided.

The interviewer in this study is a newspaper editor/journalist with more than 20 years of experience working for newspapers in Pittsburg, Kansas; Forest City, North Carolina and Greenville, South Carolina. The interviewer also worked in radio news in Wichita and Chanute, Kansas, where he reported on various news stories ranging from sports to politics. In addition, the interviewer helped redesign and continues to consult for a citizen-journalism site based in Rutherfordton, North Carolina. Consultation includes discussing story structure and online
promotion of the organization and individual stories written by citizen journalists. The interviewer has won awards for news and sports reporting, website design and investigative journalism in Kansas and North Carolina.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

The study aimed to show how newsrooms determine how incoming and outgoing news is shared on social media channels, specifically Twitter and Facebook. This research section will show responses of seven respondents who fit the criteria set forth in a previous chapter. Each respondent was asked a battery of 15 questions with a final addition question and those responses were collated to help answer the two research questions determined in the previous section of this study. The research questions posed were:

RQ1: What role does social media play in daily news gathering operations for news outlets?

RQ2: How do media outlets “screen” social media news, both incoming and outgoing?

Each respondent answered each of the 15 questions (Appendix A at the end of this paper) and the transcripts of those answers are provided in subsequent appendices at the end of this research paper.

Definitions

This study focuses on the usage of three social media networks: Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Respondents all said their news organizations use Facebook and Twitter regularly, and none said they used LinkedIn for news gathering or lead generation. These are the definitions of the social media networks discussed in this research:

- Facebook – a digital media platform that allows users to create individual user profiles, business pages, group sand causes to help individuals “connect and share with the people in [their] life” ("Facebook log in," n.d., para. 1). In the third quarter of 2015, Facebook was deemed the largest social media platform with over 1.01 billion
daily active users. They contain a daily log-in rate of over 50 percent, making it not just a large audience but an active one as well ("Facebook: Our Mission," 2015). Stratten (2010) also concluded that because Facebook operates in real-time, all interaction flows immediately, and all participant’s voices are relevant (Stratten, 2010, p. 45).

- **Twitter** – a digital media platform that has over 320 million active users worldwide ("Twitter story," 2015). The most-notable aspect of Twitter is that, unlike other social media, communication involves “posts, or tweets, are restricted to 140 characters or less” ("Mashable," 2011, para. 4). That format augments communication in that it forces users to communicate in an abbreviated fashion ("Mashable," 2011, para. 2). A study by the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project reported 19 percent of American adults “use Twitter or other status update methods” (Rainie, slide 17). Twitter is a prime example of media expediency as it operates in real-time based on user-generated content (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p. 12). Users can connect publicly or privately with other users via direct messaging and can follow other users similar to that of a blog RSS feed ("Mashable," 2011, para. 2).

- **LinkedIn** – this media platform focuses on “networking professionals through a database, connecting co-workers and professionals in the workplace, while simultaneously connecting recruiters and job seekers” (Grant, 2010, para. 7). The site focuses on three levels: “getting back in touch” ("Windmill Marketing," 2009, para. 8); “acquiring and sharing expertise” ("Windmill Marketing," 2009, para. 9); and “career management” ("Windmill Marketing," 2009, para. 10). The site summarizes information using headings similar to resume headings, such as, but not limited to:
“Profile Headline,” “Summary,” “Education,” and “Company” ("Windmill Marketing," 2009, para. 3). In 2015, LinkedIn reported having over 300 million users with 107 million in the United States alone (Levenson, 2015, para. 4).

### Breakdown of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Type of publication</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Digital Media Director</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Managing Editor</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Online news</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>News Editor</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
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<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>Online news</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
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### Results

**Social media in daily use**

Respondents were asked about their use of social media in their daily professional lives as news journalists as well as whether using social media to gather news and information gathered in this way was viewed positively, negatively, or neutrally by immediate supervisors, employers and parent companies. Respondent C, a staff writer for a metropolitan newspaper said social media usage is “welcome but not encouraged” and that it was not a “big part of the day-to-day functions of the newsroom, but it’s come in handy when there is breaking news.” The relevance of that statement will be evaluated in an upcoming section. Respondent D, a managing editor of a metropolitan newspaper in the South commented that “it’s highly encouraged to
engage with readers, to keep up with what’s going on in the news and, on occasion, to source stories.” This respondent said “if I see one of my reporters on Facebook during working hours, I’m giving them a high-5, not a reprimand.”

Respondent E, the editor of an online news site situated in a rural area in the South, said “social media is highly encouraged as a professional post … the lines between a personal and professional post must be kept clean as issues of liability come into play.” Respondent F, a news editor for a metropolitan publication in the South, said “our affiliate publication places higher emphasis on social media, but they are generally a younger office. Our editor is pretty active
with social media, but our reporters are the least bit resistant to using it.” All but one of the respondents said the usage of social media in their daily jobs was encouraged and the same number of respondents said they use social media in their daily job function.

Six of the respondents said the uses of social media related to their jobs included using personal Twitter and Facebook accounts to promote their own stories and information as well as general news and information. The respondents also used Twitter to search out news ideas and information in instances when news leads were not prevalent at the time. This closely aligns with the charts above that show a majority (five for Facebook and six for Twitter) use social media for the dissemination of news and information three or more times a week for their jobs.

**The Trust Factor**

**Why and when to disseminate social media information**

Respondents were asked how their operations determine if a social media submission has news value and who, in the newsroom, makes the final determination on what is newsworthy. None of the respondents indicated their organizations had a dedicated social media person on staff in their newsrooms to disseminate or research news and information received via social media channels from the public.

Respondent B, a digital media and marketing director for a media conglomerate based in the Northeast, said the first line of determination is the reporter, “or whoever receives the (social media) submission and that an executive editor directs the news strategy for all publications in the group. “They are ultimately responsible for this decision, but we have several editors in print, online and in video who also makes this determination.” Respondent C said “if it’s in the wheelhouse of our coverage then, sure, we’ll give it a go. Our niche is so specific that generally, if someone submits something, it’s pretty on the nose.” In that newsroom, the respondent said the
editor determined what was newsworthy, “but I’m always welcome to pitch my own stories.” Respondent G, a public information coordinator for an online media organization, said “news value is determined based on relevance and immediate impact. If it is a story that requires a lot of detail, quotes and a follow-up, it will be written as a news article and then posted to social media.” Conversely the respondent said if the same story did not have the requirements of extensive reporting, “it will go to social media first and then a follow-up will be done on the news website.”

To use or not to use social media

Respondents were also asked if there were any factors that would prevent their respective news organizations from using social media submissions. Respondent B suggested the need to verify a claim “or find sufficient supporting information, are big factors.” Respondent F said the biggest hindrance to using social media within their media organization was infrastructure. “If we had one more hand on board, it’s something we could have a dedicated social media handler who is also in the newsroom.” Respondent D said relevance was a key factor in determining whether a social media submission to their organization would not be used. Additionally, a submission may not be used “from a source (not) considered reliable, not timely enough to be newsworthy, not in the interest of furthering our mission of providing news and information.”

The interviews yielded information to conclude that the use of social media has increased to become more and more a part of the daily function of a journalist. Most newsrooms will use and disseminate news and information received via social media channels when, and only when, it is within the coverage of the reporter and the organization. If the news and information is not pertinent to the coverage of the reporter, editor or newspaper, the information will not reach the dissemination phase of the news process.
Another factor in the use of social media is directly correlated to the source itself. Reporters and editors will actually vet the source before vetting the information they are providing. If the source does not check out, the information is usually not considered for follow-up or even reposting. If the source turns out to be credible, the information he/she/it provides will enter the dissemination process with reporters and editors.

**Is there a downside?**

Respondents were asked if they believed there is a downside to allowing the general public to share their media and news information with news organizations. Most respondents said there was little to no downside to allowing the general public from sharing news and information with organizations. Respondent F said “social media is a two-edged sword for sure. I think the edge facing in is infinitely sharper than the one facing out. You can mitigate that by instituting solid social media policies and sticking with it.” Respondent E, the editor of an online publication said there was a downside to the process because “the public may claim rights to a photograph that is not theirs, plagiarize other articles, and also reject an editorial decision.” That respondent also said the inevitability was that news would be shared more and more using social media channels, “however, that leaves more time for deeper investigation and more magazine pieces.” Respondent G capitalized on that thought by suggesting errors to information passed from the general public can cause issues “or new info that comes in that changes the story/content a lot of times is already out in the World Wide Web before the updates happen.”

Respondents summarized that newsrooms using news and information from the general public has little to no downside. The only instances when there is a downside is if the information provided isn’t properly sourced from the person providing it to a reporter, editor or newsroom. For example, if a person submits a photo to a newsroom to be reproduced in print or
online and that photo was not taken by the source and that source did not disclose to the reporter, editor or newsroom that fact, it is the reporter, editor and/or newsroom that becomes liable for not giving proper credit – which can lead to potential legal action against the news organization and individual reporters or editors involved with its reproduction.

**A change in news gathering**

Respondents were asked directly if they believed social media was changing the way news was gathered. Almost all suggested there was an impact – small or large – that social media had in the way their organizations gathered news. Respondent A, a publisher for a group of newspapers in the Midwest, said social media did not have a large impact on how news was gathered, but “more so on how news is disseminated.” Respondent B suggested social media has made it easier to gather news “but also easier to gather inaccurate news. Social media should have caused us to become more careful, but instead it has caused us to be quicker, which can cause more public mistakes.” Respondent C, a reporter, indicated age may be a factor with the way social media has changed newsgathering because the respondent suggested they were younger, but others in the newsroom “are the old school vets and the explosion of social media, I would imagine, is still relatively new to them … I can imagine it’s challenging for the grizzled vets to come around to these platforms. It’s second nature to me though.” Respondent D, an editor, said there is not a downside other than “I’m afraid we end up missing something that is newsworthy in a timely way or that we unintentionally alienate a consumer of our information by not responding quickly or appropriately or at all.” Finally, Respondent F said “I think the potential for interactive journalism is nearly limitless. It’s always going to be contingent on the journalist.”
Social media has changed the manner of which reporter, editors and news organizations receive, aggregate and subsequently pass out news and information. The biggest change respondents said social media has made on news gathering and dissemination is the speed of which it is done. Respondents suggested the processes have become quicker, but that there is a downfall in that speed because information can be missed or not properly vetted because of the speed each news organization repurposed news and information received via social media channels.

Discussion

As alluded to in Chapter two, this study is rooted in the gatekeeping theory. According to Nehon, gatekeeping can be seen as the process by which social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed and is not just a series of in and out decisions (Nahon, 2009, p. 3). This study sheds light on how social media is used by traditional and citizen journalists and how news organizations actually encourage the use of social media by journalists and editors.

This study found all surveyed use social media in some form of fashion over the course of their day (See charts above under ‘Results’ section). The uses varied, but Twitter and Facebook were the prevailing social media channels those surveyed said they, and their new organizations, used most often. Those various media organizations, whether traditional newspaper or citizen digital platforms, all encouraged the use of social media. In most cases, the idea of using social media was not necessarily a requirement of the job, but not looked upon as a job distraction.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) stated the concept of moving content back and forth through the channels of a newsroom is grounded in the gatekeeping theory. Similar to the movement of a
gate letting someone in, this is the process of gatekeeping. Simply put, in this particular reference, gatekeeping is the process by which an editor passing information on to a newsroom and when at editor chooses to halt that information. Half of the respondents in this survey suggested the flow of information starts and stops with the editor of the newsroom while the other half of the respondents said the flow was freer as reporters and editors determined the movement of the information equally, without a distinct hierarchy.

Basen (2011) said digital media platforms have fewer filters and gates online, which leads to individuals to determine what news is and what is important. Keen argued that Web 2.0 actually has a negative impact on traditional gatekeeping because of the reduction in gates or official gatekeepers, accountability, professionalism and expert information (Keen, 2008). There is the suggestion of a shift in gatekeeping practices on digital media platforms and Keen offers that gatekeepers are a necessity because of the flood of information coming digitally. Respondents said that because everyone uses either Facebook or Twitter, the number of gatekeepers has actually expanded, but it has become more individual. Editors are no longer the single final authority of what is and what isn’t newsworthy. Now, reporters can repost or re-tweet news and information at will, even without the inherent gatekeeper, the editor, providing guidance in determining relevance and/or newsworthiness.

Trust in the information received via social media was another key research question looked at in this study. Callan (2008) said that because of certain events involving social media submissions and a lack of fact-checking, the dean of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism suggested “the event underscores the need for news organizations to verify content by users before it is published.” All respondents suggested the trust in a social media-referred story started with the validity of that particular story. If a story was considered a valid story by
either the reporter, the editor or both, the newsroom would proceed with looking at the story for future development. Conversely, all participants said if the story was not considered topical or relevant, it would not progress. Once a story was considered valid, it would then go through the fact-checking, or verification stage of the news process. If the story was considered valid and verified, the story or information would be reposted, re-tweeted or even regenerated as a news story for the organization.

Six of seven respondents said a dedicated person in a newsroom would be needed to properly disseminate any and all social media interactions with the public and information coming into a particular newsroom. The other one said their news organizations had sufficient infrastructure to properly disseminate most, if not all, interactions with the public sent in via various social media channels.

The answer to the first research question (What role does social media play in daily news gathering operations for news outlets?) posed in this study is relatively easy to answer. With six of the seven respondents, social media played an active part in their daily professional lives as journalists. All respondents said they used social media in some form or fashion at least three times a week for their jobs. The usage could be to conduct interaction with the public, news gathering or even disseminate news and information. Six of the seven respondents said their use was related to gathering and/or dissemination of the news and information available on social media channels. Only one respondent said their usage was actually interacting with the public.

The second question asked by this study (How do media outlets “screen” social media news, both incoming and outgoing?) is a little more difficult to answer. Six of the respondents said they lacked the necessary infrastructure in their newsrooms to adequately disseminate news and information garnered from the public. That led to respondents suggesting that anyone serves
as an interaction screener or even gatekeeper, moving away from the traditional editor-gatekeeper organization. This fact has led to increased workloads for editors – the traditional gatekeepers in newsrooms – which has filtered down to additional work for reporters, including that of initial vetting of news and information received from social media channels. From there, respondents suggested the information comes to editors for a secondary look, however, in a majority of circumstances, if the reporter suggested the item was valid, the editor proceeded with assigning the story.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Study Limitations

The limitations of this study include the conclusion of results as well as data interpretation. The questionnaire was conducted via email for all of the group and it is dependent on the honesty in the responses provided. Corroboration of the initial findings of this study is needed in the form of additional research to determine the gatekeeping structures used in various traditional newsrooms and citizen journalism organizations. Social media and its usage in today’s newsrooms continues to be an evolutionary process which does cause difficulties in reaching solid, definitive conclusions. Applications of social media in today’s traditional newsroom and citizen journalism organization varies by organization and will continue to be augmented as technology and demand evolves.

A second limitation of the study includes the procedures used in gathering the interviews and information from those included in the study. Interviews were conducted either over the phone or via email which allows each of the respondents to falsify or exaggerate their answers.

Recommendation for Future Study

Social media and its role in today’s traditional newsrooms and citizen journalism organizations will continue an upward trend of usage and that usage should continue to be monitored and examined. Drilling down to singular, specific social media channels and their usage, or lack thereof, would be a beneficial extension to this study. In terms of social media channels not being utilized, it would be helpful to get a better understanding as to why they are not and what challenges/obstacles news organizations face in attempting to implement those channels.
In relation to the gatekeeping theory used in this research and its use in relation to social media and newsrooms, a better understanding as to the finances and dynamics of newsrooms is also an area for future consideration. Just as social media and its usage across the globe continues to change and evolve, so does the makeup and demands of a newsroom.

Another area for future research is a need to discover whether those who obtain a majority of their news and information via social media channels are also receiving news and information from traditional newsrooms. Additionally, a study can be done to compare news and information trending on social media channels with that of what news and information is being reported by traditional newsrooms. These studies may reach deeper into understanding how the connection between newsrooms and the gatekeeping of news and information is working with the general public.

Conclusions

There are still insufficient studies looking at how editors and reporters utilize social media in the daily fabric of the newsroom operations. All of the respondents said they use social media channels Twitter and Facebook daily and six of seven respondents said they use those social media channels for their work. Previous research found that more than half of Twitter and Facebook users get news on those social media channels and 39 percent of print newspaper readers get news on Twitter and Facebook (Holcomb, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2013). Five of the seven respondents said the usage of social media related to their jobs included using personal Twitter and Facebook accounts to promote their own stories and information as well as general news and information. Six of the seven surveyed used Twitter to search out news ideas and information in instances when news leads were not prevalent at the time. This indicates a trend
for reporters and editors to increase reliance on social media channels like Facebook and Twitter
to not just parse personal information but also to use those channels for work-related tasks such
as communicating with sources and developing news story ideas as well as just basic
information-sharing.

Knowledge of gatekeeping within traditional newsroom operations leads researchers to
suggest the newsroom leader, or editor, would serve as the gatekeeper of news and information
flowing between the newsroom and the general public. However, respondents suggested that was
not the case in relation to the use of social media to send information. Because of a 3-5 percent
decline in newsroom employment, the roles inside the newsroom have shifted. All respondents
suggested the flow of news and information between the newsroom and the general public does
not necessarily begin and end with the editor. In some cases, the reporter makes the decision as
to what to send out via social media to the general public. This can lead to potential trust
questions because a social media source is not properly vetted through a reporter and an editor.
However, in terms of vetting news tips received by newsrooms via social media networks, the
newsroom editor does assume more of a gatekeeping role. In those instances, all of the
respondents suggested the tip may come in to a specific reporter and that reporter may look at the
validity of the story as well as the source, but when both are confirmed, it is the editor who
makes the final decision as to whether the incoming news tip is followed up and proceeded as a
story. In terms of traditional gatekeeping and its place in today’s traditional newsrooms and
citizen journalism organizations, anything received by a newsroom via a social media source and
deemed worthy of additional follow-up includes the newsroom leader, or editor, as the keeper of
that information and the person responsible for its flow from reporter to fruition. However, in the
direct passage of news and information not followed up, the gatekeeper has become the reporter
more than the newsroom leader. Additional studies on how the information flows and how various other social media networks are used are topics that should be considered for the future.
References


https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/44314/research.pdf?sequence=1


Welcome to Facebook - Log In, sign up or learn more (Web log). (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.facebook.com


Appendix A - Questionnaire

Current job title:

Current market (what city do you work in):

1) How long have you worked in news and what is your experience?
2) What is your definition of news?
3) Who, in your organization, determines what is newsworthy?
4) What role would you say you play in the decision-making process of content in your current position?
5) Based on your past experience, explain the traditional news selection process, in a traditional newspaper/online newsroom.
6) Explain the types of social media networks you/your organization utilize.
7) Does your current news organization encourage or discourage using social media as part of your daily job function?
8) How do you determine if a social media submission to a reporter/editor/newsroom has news value?
9) Who decides if a social media news submission is used?
10) Is there a process for monitoring social media submissions to your newsroom? If so, what is it?
11) Describe the process used to ensure social media submissions used in your news organization either in print or online is accurate.
12) Is there a downside to allowing the public to share their media and news with you or your news organization?
13) What factors prevent you or your news organization from using social media submissions?
14) Does social media represent a significant change in the way news is gathered?
15) Is there a focus on developing relationships with social media members who submit content regularly? If so, why?
16) Do you have anything else you would like to add?
Appendix B – Consent Form

Consent form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study, which will examine gatekeeping methods at various news-gathering outlets.

The purpose of this study is:

- To gain insight into how news outlets pick and choose what social media information is released to the public.

The benefits of the research will be:

- To better understand how editors/reporters use and pass out information received via social media networks.
- To potentially identify new and improved procedures for news outlets to control the in-flow and out-flow of social media information.

The methods that will be used to meet this purpose include:

- One-on-one interviews

You are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of this study or methods being used. Please contact me any time at my school email (mclark13@zagmail.gonzaga.edu) or by phone (864-235-9530).

Because of the distance of all the participants, questions will be emailed along with this consent form. Answers of these questions will be reported verbatim in the form of an appendix entry as part of the overall study document.

Insights gathered by you and other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research report, which will be read by myself, my professor (Dr. Pavel Schlossberg) and members of my thesis committee. Though direct quotes from you will be used in this paper, your name and other direct identifying information, except current job title, will be kept anonymous.

By signing this consent form, I certify that I agree to the terms of this agreement.

_____________________________________
Name (printed)

___________________
Date (printed)