

ICA 年度雙語論文

## 超級把關人：社交媒體時代的把關

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翻 譯：徐來

### 摘要

當前主要有三種類別的把關人：傳統觀念裡主要從媒體組織到受眾的單向傳播中通過選擇、塑造和發布新聞內容的大眾媒體把關人；於社交媒體集團服務器上創建和發布內容的個人與組織類社交媒體把關人（用戶）。社交媒體集團不僅擁有和管理著社交媒體用戶發布的內容，同時還提供他們自己的新聞服務。因此，本文認為，從社交媒體用戶及大眾媒體中選取與發布內容的社交媒體集團亦是把關人。這三類把關人之間的大量互動形成複雜的把關系統，需要進行系統/整體性的理論分析。

關鍵詞：超級把關人、把關人理論、系統思維、社交媒體、新聞

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## The Supra-Gatekeepers: Gatekeeping in the Age of Social Media

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### Abstract

There are now three major groups of gatekeepers. *Mass media* gatekeepers are those traditionally thought of as selecting, shaping and publishing news content, with primarily unidirectional communication from the media organization to an audience. *Social media* gatekeepers (users) are the individuals and organizations that create and publish the content housed on social media conglomerates' servers. These conglomerates not only own and manage the content of social media users, but also publish their own news services. This essay proposes that these conglomerates are gatekeepers because select and publish content from social media users and from the mass media. The many interactions among agents of these three groups create a complex gatekeeping system that should be theoretically analyzed through a systematic or holistic approach.

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*The Supra-Gatekeepers*

**Keywords:** supra-gatekeeper, gatekeeping theory, systems thinking, social media, news

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## 導言

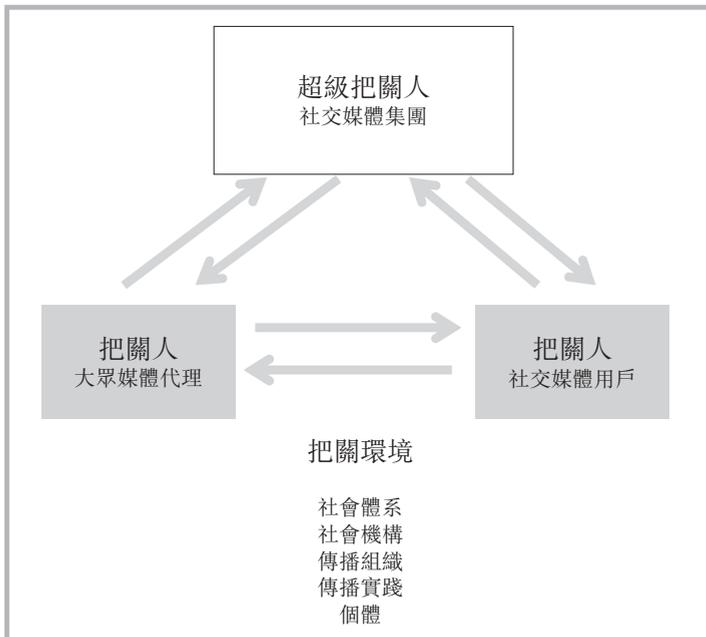
從20世紀中葉開始，把關人理論被應用到傳播學中，用以描述事件的部分信息如何受到大眾傳媒記者及編輯(把關人)決定(關卡)的影響。這一理論最早由社會心理學家Kurt Lewin (1947a, 1947b)提出，並被傳播學者迅速擴展到新聞選擇研究中(如White, 1950; Westley & MacLean, 1957)。信息、關卡與把關人在渠道(channels)中發揮作用，或將媒體工作路徑常規化。一些渠道被劃分為若干環節，使我們認識到信息和由其組成的訊息在發布之前必須經過多重關卡和把關人。按照Lewin的說法，決策過程是在一個力場中進行，場中的壓力源不同程度地對信息通過關卡起到促進或限制的作用。在20世紀中葉，把關人理論的基本結構成分包涵了信息、關卡、渠道、環節、力量，以及它們運作的場域。

由於公共信息受制於大眾媒體、社交媒體用戶及社交媒體集團三組把關流程，把關人理論的當前應用實質上更為複雜(如Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Bro & Wallberg, 2014; Carlson, 2018)。我們用「社交媒體」一詞來指代各式各樣的數字技術，這些技術不僅允許個人和組織在網絡上創建和發送他們自己的內容，還賦予集團公司聚合用戶內容、銷售周邊廣告的權力；並且區分了兩種類型的社交媒體技術，首先，通過運用社交媒體「用戶」一詞來描述利用數字技術創建自己在線網站的個人和組織。這些個人和組織作為把關人，通過審視其所處環境以獲取、創造並傳遞訊息給他人；其次，社交媒體「集團」一詞則是指擁有和管理媒介技術、既維護用戶內容、又提供集團自身新聞服務的公司。社交媒體集團同時也參與把關流程，不僅從自身用戶、亦從大眾媒體中選取、聚合和傳輸內容，提供新聞服務。借助這些行為，他們充當了「超級把關人」(supra-gatekeepers)的角色，「超級」(supra)一詞表明他們隨社交媒體用戶和大眾媒體機構其後、凌於其上，參與到把關過程中。正因如此，把關人可以是在任何媒體機構中收集和傳播信息的任一個人、組織或算法程序。

圖一展現了兩大類媒體機構——大眾媒體與社交媒體、以及社交媒體集團。這兩大類媒體機構應在兩個層次上作為三個實體進行研究：較低層次上是兩個高度複雜的媒體機構——大眾媒體的總和及社

交媒體用戶的總和。大眾媒體機構和社交媒體用戶都扮演著把關人的角色，他們不僅在自身媒體機構內選取信息、創建消息及分發內容，而且還服務於彼此。儘管這兩類媒體機構的把關行為都具有很大的波動性，但將其視為較低層次分析中的兩類把關人非常重要（我們將在下文對其進行更為複雜的討論）。之所以將大眾媒體和社交媒體機構歸為較低層次的分析，一個重要的原因在於：運營著諸如Facebook和微博等平台的社交媒體集團通過訪問、選擇、塑造和傳輸大眾媒體及社交媒體機構上的內容，從而提供自家新聞服務，因此，它們是對低層級把關人已經處理過的內容進行把關的把關人。

圖一 把關系統示意圖



註：具有兩個分析層次、高度簡化的把關系統。信息通過大眾媒體及社交媒體用戶的選取、塑造、作為內容發布。內容在把關程序中經由較低層次的篩選，進入到新一輪社交媒體集團的把關層次，由社交媒體集團在其新聞服務中予以重新發布。內容受到來自把關環境中的力量的制約（層級分析見Shoemaker & Reese, 2014）

這兩個層級的把關行為以一種不易理解的方式相互作用著。把關人理論需要進行修正和擴展，非一篇論文論述之所能及。但我們依然可以從圖一對三個實體的探查中啟程。大眾媒體作為當中最先出現的

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社會機構，無論其新聞內容的影響力、還是受眾的規模，都發生了翻天覆地的變化。今日之大眾傳媒，正是始於20世紀末並持續至今的經濟、技術及文化變革的幸存者 (Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014)。一些大眾媒體組織轟然倒閉，一些利用在線技術轉為互聯網出版物重獲新生，而另一些則在紙質格式與在線版本間並駕求存。而今大眾傳媒依然是政治、經濟和文化體系中的重要組成部分：儘管我們在圖一中將其視為一個整體，但顯而易見，無論在技術的使用上、還是經濟模式與文化影響上，大眾媒體之間都存在很大差異。然差異固存，它們從事把關的行為卻是一致的 (Robinson, 2011)。其所提供的視覺與語言內容是一套長期把關程序的結果，這些例行程序包括監測事件信息發生的環境、搜集相關事件的訊息、從同事處獲得信息反饋、編輯內容，以及敲定定稿予以發布。我們把各種大眾媒體聚合為一類社會機構，只是為了簡化我們對把關的討論。故而當我們說大眾傳媒應當被放置於較低分析層次時，我們承認大眾媒體實質上是一個由許多組織和所有制模式組成的、寄居於各種文化之中、與其他社會機構有著千絲萬縷聯繫的宏觀層面的機構。除此之外，我們還必須考慮到媒體組織的工作常規及其個體新聞工作者。

其次，20世紀發展起來的互聯網技術促進了個體和組織間視覺與語言信息的流動。我們將社交媒體用戶定義為在社交媒體集團所有的在線位置上創建內容的個人和組織。作為社會機構，社交媒體用戶的聚集轉變了全球信息的流動。此間意義不僅在於它們廣泛擁抱了新技術和新設備，還在於它們利用這些技術將自身與世界各地相聯。社交媒體用戶的範疇小至單一個體、大至其代理人將其信息與公眾連結的大型組織。不同於大眾媒體，其信息流動是多向性的，甚至在每個個體用戶與其他一個或多個用戶交流、其他用戶又將信息交流行動不斷衍生下去的過程中，信息的流動朝著令人難以置信、變幻莫測的方向行進，其結果陷入兼具美感的複雜與令人驚訝的混亂之中。社交媒體用戶在個體所能考量的幾乎任一維度上也各不相同，包括參與人數、信息指向的人數以及它們對大眾媒體的使用與貢獻。然而，它們最大的相似之處在於通過選取、塑造並發布信息的方式來創建內容——所有社交媒體用戶本身即是把關人。即使用戶身份是個體而非組織，他

也會在網絡上選取相應信息，以語言或視覺的形式組織訊息並將其發布，以此創建內容。如果內容是由不止一個人整理而成，那麼把關程序會變得更加複雜。對於同為社交媒體用戶的大型組織，把關操作則可能與那些大型大眾媒體組織類似。

第三，社交媒體集團的聚合被認為是位於圖一分析上層的社會機構。社交媒體集團（超級把關人）位居上層，原因在於他們通過從大眾媒體和社交媒體中選取、塑造和重新發布內容來參與把關過程。這些集團不僅發明和運營着允許社交媒體用戶創建和分發內容的技術平台，而且還觸及其他活動業務（如流媒體新聞、為用戶創建遊戲以及共享視覺資料）。例如，互聯網公司Facebook最初僅作為面向大學生的網絡平台，供其創建與他們生活息息相關的內容，通過內容衍生的廣告業務來獲取利潤。儘管Facebook的首要目標是從廣告中營利，但它也日趨扮演溝通者的角色；公司旗下眾多把關人——個體人員與算法系統為其流媒體新聞服務提供內容的選擇與處理。這項新聞服務的目標客戶既包涵社交媒體用戶，也涵蓋廣告商。

然而，這三類社會機構顯然不是相互獨立的。沒有社交媒體用戶，社交媒體集團便不可能存在，反之亦然。但它們之間有一個主要的區別，即「用戶」是指個人及個體組織，而集團則是既為用戶提供機會、又對其進行控制的公司。大眾媒體和社交媒體用戶為這些集團新聞服務提供了大量內容。此外，社交媒體集團成為許多新聞故事的素材庫及評論提供平台。大眾媒體和社交媒體用戶之間亦存有密切關聯，許多記者既為大眾媒體服務，亦是社交媒體用戶，他們採用社交媒體內容作為文章創意和內容建構的素材。作為回報，社交媒體用戶向記者和編輯提供文章質量和媒體表現的反饋，並將大眾媒體內容作為發帖素材，間或將其發布到社交媒體平台上。

我們建議使用系統思維（Systems Thinking）來理解由此產生的複雜的把關過程。這種方法是恰當的，因為多個參與者組成了三個子系統——大眾媒體系統、社交媒體和超級把關人——它們共同構成了一個複雜的把關系統。除了超級把關的新構想外，系統法（Parsons, 1975; Meadows, 2008）亦引入其他幾個可供研究的概念：元素（參與公共交流的個人或組織）、互動（元素間的關係）、功能（系統有意或無意的目

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標)，以及系統(元素、互動與功能的結合)。本文描述了這種複雜的把關系統，並展示了把關人理論(Shoemaker & Vos, 2009)如何在演化中進行研究，在詳盡闡述新舊「把關人」概念的同時，提出學者們應如何利用這一新的把關範式來研究當今複雜傳播環境之路徑。

## 作為模型的把關人理論

應用於傳播學的把關人理論，是由社會心理學家Kurt Lewin發表於1947年的兩篇論文(1947a, 1947b)演化而來。Lewin將分析路徑或渠道概念化，學者們用其描述零碎信息是如何在當時大眾媒體中從發現到發布的。雖然可供研究的渠道(如報紙和電視新聞頻道)不止一個，但這都屬於信息傳播和處理的線性路徑。例如，一位報社記者收集到一次空難的信息，選取其中一些發給編輯——其所在組織層級的直接上級。編輯將選擇或拒絕該訊息在媒體渠道中的繼續流通，甚至可能選取或剔除部分訊息、或通過要求獲取其他信息來重塑訊息。一旦編輯批准這一事件及訊息作為可能的新聞報導，他會將這一訊息發送給上一層級的其他編輯們。如果這一作為潛在新聞故事的訊息得到層級中所有把關人的核准(及可能的修改)，那麼它就會被正式發布。

信息在一個或多個渠道中來回穿梭，直到其中一組信息被批准分發給受眾。但信息不會在渠道間傳播。Lewin論文(1947a, 1947b)中最初提出的把關模型是線性的，因其中系列關係(如A到B，B到C，C再到A)在數學上均是線性呈現。參見Shoemaker及Vos(2009)提出包含曲線的線性模型，線條的形狀並不影響模型中的關係。Lewin的渠道是一種用以描述把關領域中訊息位置、操作行為及把關決策的路徑。關於20世紀把關模型的描述，可以在Shoemaker(1991)及Shoemaker及Vos(2009)的研究中找到。這些模型中的主要概念包括：

- 信息：關於事件的詳情
- 信息收集者：活動參與者或信息來源，以及記者和編輯
- 關口：一個信息要麼被批准、要麼被拒絕通過渠道的決策點
- 把關人：作出把關決策的主體

- 力：鼓勵或阻礙信息通過的要素
- 渠道：作出把關決策的新聞慣例化路徑
- 環節：渠道的一部分
- 領域：上述所有因素發生的環境。把關領域不僅包涵新聞領域，也涵蓋新聞工作運作其中的更大範圍的社會環境。

## 媒體的演變

自20世紀末開始，把關人理論隨著傳播環境的顯著變遷不斷演化。其中一個最重要的影響，即互聯網技術作為新聞機構平台的引進，給本已混亂不堪的大眾傳媒新聞業帶來浩劫。報紙的發行人量在本世紀後半葉銳減，最終新聞機構開始頻臨破產，或徹底停業，或完全轉向互聯網，或將網絡版與通常更少量的印刷版本相結合。記者們被要求承擔起許多過往把關人的角色，譬如一名電視記者將同時負責視頻拍攝、編輯並做好分發準備。這種把關過程的縮短 (Robinson, 2011) 在印刷/廣播媒體和互聯網媒體上均曾發生。引起這些變化的原因是經濟上的，廣告商對是否應支持線還是在線出版物備感困惑。儘管互聯網新聞是大勢所趨，但營銷商不確定如何核實受眾對廣告的接觸程度。最終，一個由用戶點擊新聞和/或廣告、花費一定時間瀏覽、訪問相關鏈接等行為組成的系統，被用來展示受眾對新聞產品和廣告的接觸程度。此外，一些互聯網新聞網站開始對使用其應用程序和網站的訂閱行為收費。雖然對20世紀的媒體收益而言，訂閱收入顯得微不足道，但它最終卻成為許多在線商業模式的重要收益部分。

第二個主要的進化動力是社交媒體技術的引入。社交媒體網站起始於個人在Facebook、Twitter或微博等社交媒體巨頭上創建帳戶。Facebook一開始著重於服務高校學生及教職員工，使他們人人都可以上傳關於自身生活的文字和照片，但Facebook並非一個學術性服務機構，而是利益驅動型組織。它的客戶頁面刊登了Facebook出售廣告的內容。一段時間之後，Facebook開始向所有個人和組織開放網頁，並且開發了諸如在戰爭遊戲中銷售虛擬武器等其他賺錢工具。

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Facebook和其他社交媒體集團內容的爆炸式增長是互聯網時代破壞大眾媒體穩定性的另一股動盪力量。記者和媒體組織創建了自己的社交媒體帳戶，導致獨立大眾媒體與社交媒體間並無嚴格區分。社交媒體用戶的內容可供記者使用，而記者採寫的新聞則為社交媒體提供了素材(Vujnovic, 2011)。社交媒體集團的新聞服務採用計算機算法來選取與放置其用戶及在線大眾媒體先前發布的內容，故而集團公司的算法、間或工作人員，成為整個把關過程中的超級把關人。儘管如此，算法的使用並不能抹去人為的把關，因為人類決定了如何編寫新聞流算法，例如選擇內容類型、將優先權放在所選媒體上、確定內容在新聞流中的突出程度，以及在新聞流中保留多長時間。編碼人員及其僱主本身即是把關人。

## 把關系統

一個系統是由組成的元素、元素間的相互作用，以及它的功能或目標構成。儘管部分把關系統或許有著更為具體或不同的目標，但通常而言，把關系統的一大功能即傳播。圖一三類機構中的組織及其代理人構成系統中元素的總和，彼此之間的訊息亦相互交織。後者的關係類似，兩種元素交互越多，我們可能得出的其交互、甚或交流的結論也就越多。在一個系統的圖譜中，交互作用由元素間的連線表示。圖一是一個非常簡單的把關系統，因為這些元素僅僅被描繪成宏觀的社會機構，但如果我們把這些元素看作是人和組織，那麼顯而易見，即使是將一個局部把關系統進行可視化呈現並且繪製出來，也是一項非常複雜的任務。

這一點尤為確切。因為所有系統、無論是整體的還是局部的，都存在於一個把關場域之中；所有的把關系統都存在於其社會系統的總體環境——把關場域中。社會體系從城市或社區、到國家或全球，規模各不相同。該場域包涵社會系統、社會機構及生活工作於其中的人類所產生的所有力量(Shoemaker & Reese, 2014)，這些力量的作用即鼓勵或阻止信息的發布。它們或採取靈活變通的方式，對大眾媒體、

社交媒體用戶及社交媒體集團的內容創建產生影響。譬如在2020年美國總統大選中，政治力量導致Facebook最初接受了據說含有虛假信息的支持特朗普的競選廣告，但稍後其中一些即被移除(Glazer, 2020)。政黨之爭助力關乎特朗普總統的信息通過一些信息關口和把關人，但亦難逃被其他把關人清掃出局的結果。

在圖一，三個主要把關人群體中，第一個代表了最主要的社交媒體集團，如Facebook或新浪(微博的母公司)，它們對現有在線內容的選取執行把關操作，之後在其新聞服務中重新發布部分內容。其次，社交媒體用戶、無論個體還是更為複雜的組織，應用他們自己的把關流程來創建內容。第三是在線大眾媒體代理的集合，他們生產的內容有時與社交媒體用戶內容大相逕庭、有時又呼應一致。這些內容創造者和操縱者中，每一組都參與了其把關過程。大眾媒體有著眾所週知的常規化的把關實踐(Shoemaker & Reese, 2014)，社交媒體用戶的把關過程，從其特殊性(內容創造個體)到更大、更複雜的操作，都類似於大眾媒體的把關。而社交媒體集團的把關程序是如此複雜，以至於單靠人類無法直接做出創建和發布新聞服務所需的決策。取而代之的是計算機算法，這一人類創造的虛擬把關者在大多數超級把關過程中已經取代了人的作用。

正因為超級把關者重新發布大眾媒體及社交媒體用戶創建的現有內容，我們將把關系統看作兩個層次的分析：上層由超級把關者組成，這些社交媒體集團創造提供了用戶發布內容的技術。超級把關者所提供的新聞服務，由社交媒體用戶及大眾媒體發布的內容組成，從而對已通過其他把關者的內容實施自己的再把關過程。這些集團在一定程度上扮演著超級把關者的角色，他們從大眾媒體和社交媒體中選取、塑造、組織和重新發布內容。我們知道這一定是確切的，因為他們的新聞服務意味著對所有可能發布的內容的選取。如果沒有把關程序的話，新聞服務可能是按發生時間順序排列，甚至更糟的是，對所有大眾媒體和社交媒體用戶內容信息流進行隨機發布。這將使新聞服務的消費者們不堪重負，他們在找到感興趣的內容之前必須先對信息世界進行一番調查，而消費者中間的不滿情緒也將降低廣告投放的可能性。

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在這兩級把關系統中，內容首先要經過大眾媒體代理和社交媒體用戶的把關程序，然後通過社交媒體集團的把關渠道，才能在新聞服務中發布。這三類主要把關組中，每一組都可以、並且已經被進行過單獨的研究，但有必要認識到它們是在一個完整的把關系統中共同運作。雖然每一組都是一個子系統，但總體比各局部的總和更富有意義。我們所說的子系統，指的是共享目標的元素及其交互的任一子集；例如，大眾媒體是更大範圍把關系統中的子系統，而報紙則屬大眾媒體把關系統下的子系統。僅研究大眾媒體或報紙內部的把關並不能提供內容是如何被移動與操縱的全景。儘管之前網絡被當作局部把關系統進行了研究(Hellmueller, 2017; Barzilai-Nahon, 2018)，但研究重點是聚焦在個別路徑(Pearson & Kosicki, 2017)而非整個系統上。

因此，我們建議將系統思維(Parsons, 1951, 1975; Schuster, 2018)應用到把關人理論及實證研究中，並觸及對把關人理論未來發展的探索。在國際傳播體系中存在許多子系統，並且這些子系統通常都是按層級排列(Rutherford, 2018)。譬如全球是由亞洲等地區構成，亞洲由中華人民共和國等國家構成，國家內部又劃分了地理區域。城市位於地理區域之中，擁有多種多樣的大眾媒體和社交媒體平台(如微博)或企業集團(如新浪)等等。每個子系統都是更大系統的組成部分。雖然對大眾傳媒系統的研究已屬普遍(Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1957; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Chang, Berg, Fung, & Kedl, 2001)，但對系統的建構卻有著不同闡述，通常世界區域或國家被認定為系統(如Hughes, 2006)。這些重要的研究缺乏系統理論的形式特徵，因而會發生把國家當做獨立的子系統來研究，從而忽略了它們都是在所有把關元素與交互作用的把關環境和場域中進行操作這一事實。

Chadwick (2017)將大眾媒體和社交媒體稱為混合媒體系統，混合性意味著全球各地都是相互聯繫且不斷變化的一個系統。一旦將變革的思想引入把關研究中，就有必要引入時間的考量。雖然對於靜態把關過程的「一次性快照」研究頗有價值，但對整個把關系統如何隨著時間的推移而發展的理論分析將更為有用。事實上，儘管很少有人承認，時間因素一直在把關行為中不可或缺。Lewin (1947a, 1947b)的原始模型只有在信息被選取、訊息被書寫以及內容被發表前發送給編輯

過目，這一系列的時間順序完成後才能起作用。通過一個關口（作出決策之處）意味著有前（關口前）有後（關口後），只有在作出決策的情況下，信息才能通過渠道。發布則意味著信息已經被發現、選擇、塑造、組織和分發。之所以說把關行為是一個過程，意味著整個行為（過程的開始、推進與結束）均隨著時間的推移而依次發生。

我們提出時間在把關人理論中的作用更為重要，信息處理沈浸在時間之中，人們對現實的看法也在不斷變化。變化只能在時間的推移中進行研究，因此，要對把關系統中的變化進行理論化研究，就需要將時間作為一種重要因素。我們知道，即使在某一時間點去研究一個系統也是困難的，而事實上，真正的靜態系統並不存在，每個系統都無時無刻不在經歷着變革。如果我們為一個把關過程拍一張快照，它就是發生在同一地點和時刻的二維把關。即使我們足夠聰明，能夠對一個系統進行三維描繪，依然是不夠的，因為在時空中沒有哪個時刻能夠代表一個不斷變化的體系。留給我們的是增加了時空維度的四維理論模型的構思，即空間的三維與時間維度相聯。因此，任何不考慮時間和空間的因果關係推斷都是缺乏有效性的：任何觀察到的因果關係都存在於過去，甚至在被分析之前僅存在於某一時間節點，故而它無法準確地對未來產生預測。Chadwick (2017) 提出混合媒體系統處於不斷變化之中，因此只能將其部分理解為過去與未來的狀態兼具。

如若把時間因素納入到把關人理論中，那麼空間的概念——元素棲息之處也應增加進來。我們從許多跨文化和國際研究項目中了解到，例如，新聞在不同地方的處理方式亦不同 (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Chan & Lee, 2017; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018; Jung & Villi, 2018; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006)。對兩個或多個地方傳播過程宏觀層面的比較分析，忽略了每個子系統中元素間的相互作用。

## 結論

之所以現有把關系統的複雜性幾乎超出我們的理解範圍，原因在於數以億計的元素（譬如個體或組織）越時空維度、以不同頻率進行著互動。系統理論之前並非把關人理論的一部分，甚至許多學者已經對

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如國家或地理區域一類子系統中的把關過程進行了比較。這些研究中的系統概念缺乏本文所探討的系統理論形式特徵。從系統理論中引入新的構思有利於把關人理論的發展。除去先前列出的概念外，我們還應對以下因素進行研究：

- 元素：系統的組成部分
- 交互：元素之間的關聯
- 功能或目標：系統實現的目的
- 時間：系統貫穿過去、現在、未來的進程
- 空間：系統中元素的物理位置

元素及其交互的目標發生在其所在環境中，這一把關場域是社會系統、其他社會機構、媒介組織、媒體工作慣例及個體傳播者的總和。每一種元素都會對有關信息流的決策產生影響，這些影響力有著不同的強度與極性（如限制或促進內容的流動；量化研究中從積極到消極的排列範疇）。雖然每個元素（個人或組織）都有可能與其他元素交互，但很有可能一些個體和組織會選擇避開使用社交媒體。也有可能一些元素與系統的其他部分並無太多交互，成為系統圖景中的局外人。另外，考慮到數以億計的個體和組織可以產生相互作用，研究相互作用的元素系統很快就會變得非常複雜，可能產生的交互數量不可估量。研究如此龐大而複雜的傳播互動似乎遙不可及，但系統思維提供了一個理論上可以解決這些問題的研究框架。誠然，定量分析可能會產生許多問題，但定量研究方法的進步可能會使對把關系統的分析變得輕鬆可行。

我們採用系統思維作為一種分析局部或整體系統把關過程的方法。系統思維不僅涉及系統構成的要素、交互及目標，而且引入了系統特徵的概念。例如，如果一個把關系統中的所有元素都對系統共同目標持不同意見（缺乏穩定性），結果差異可能會從系統內部的輕微不和諧（衝突）到徹底的混亂和系統故障（公司倒閉或民族革命）。在過去的幾十年中，大眾傳媒體系被所處環境中文化、經濟和技術的力量所破壞，然而，這種情況之所以持續存在，是因為一些新聞媒體有足夠

的彈性，能夠在組織內部作出改變（比如減少員工數量或將業務完全轉移到互聯網上），並且依然能夠將新聞傳播出去。一個系統的彈性在於包容這種不和諧的能力，或許通過消除一些元素、改變元素的交互作用或修改其目標來進行。在一個高度穩定的系統中，元素及其交互作用的運作相似，只有遭遇外部強力反對系統目標時，才會發生變化。

這些外部力量構成了系統的環境，類似於Lewin (1947a, b) 所提出的「場」的概念。把關領域中的許多力量 (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) 會影響到系統的穩定性，比如當一位國家元首抨擊某些大眾媒體合法性時。通過這種方式，政府破壞了系統各要素協同工作以達到其目標的程度。除了研究子系統及塑造它們的力量之外，我們還應考慮把關系統如何穿越時間和空間在不同的地理位置上運行。自把關人理論首次應用於新聞研究以來，傳播學領域發生了翻天覆地的改變，不僅新聞的定義起了變化，而且在任一時間點上傳遞的信息量都有了驚人的增長。我們的方法是從研究三類社會機構——大眾媒體、社交媒體用戶和社交媒體集團之間的互動開始。在一個把關的經驗體系中，可能發生的相互作用的數量以萬億計，繪製一個僅有三個元素的微型系統或許看起來有悖常理，但複雜的問題需要一個力所能及的研究起點。

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# **The Supra-Gatekeepers: Gatekeeping in the Age of Social Media**

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## **Introduction**

Beginning in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Gatekeeping Theory was applied to communication to describe how bits of information about an event are subject to decisions (gates) by mass media reporters and editors (gatekeepers). The theory was first proposed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947a, 1947b) and was quickly extended to the study of news selection by communication scholars (e.g., White, 1950; Westley & MacLean, 1957). Information, gates and gatekeepers function within *channels*, or routinized paths of work within the media. Some channels were broken into *sections*, recognizing that information and the messages composed from it had to pass multiple gates and gatekeepers before publication. According to Lewin, the decision-making process operated within a field of forces, stressors that variously facilitated or constrained the passage of a message through a gate. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Gatekeeping Theory's primary constructs included information, gate, gatekeeper, channel, section, force and the field within which these operated.

Current applications of Gatekeeping Theory are substantially more complicated (e.g., Barzilai-Nahon, K., 2008; Bro & Wallberg, 2014; Carlson, 2018), because public information is subject to three sets of gatekeeping processes, by the mass media, social media users and social media conglomerates. We use the term social media to include a wide variety of digital technologies that not only allow individual people and organizations to create and send their own content online, but also give conglomerates the power to aggregate users' content and to sell advertising around it. We differentiate between two types of social media technologies, first, by applying the term social media "user" to describe individual people and organizations that draw on digital technologies to create their own

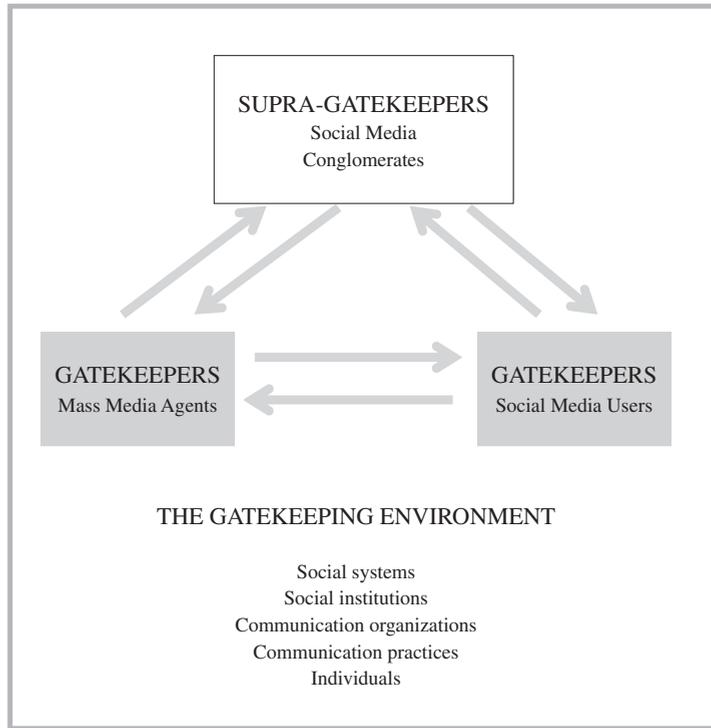
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online sites. Social media users are gatekeepers in that they survey their environments for information, create messages and transmit them to others. Second, the term social media conglomerate refers to corporations that own and manage the technologies, maintaining both users' content and the conglomerates' own news services. Social media conglomerates also engage in gatekeeping processes, publishing news services that select, aggregate and transmit content not only from their own users, but also from the mass media. By these actions, they act as *supra-gatekeepers*, with the term *supra* indicating that they engage in gatekeeping processes following and beyond the gatekeeping by social media users and agents of the mass media. Hence, a gatekeeper can be any person, organization or algorithms that collects and disseminates information in any medium.

Figure 1 shows that the two types of media institutions—mass and social—and the social media conglomerates should be studied as three entities on two levels of analysis: On the lower level are the two highly complex media institutions—the aggregate of the mass media and the aggregate of social media users. Mass media agents and social media users all act as gatekeepers, in that they select information, create messages and distribute content not only within their own media institution, but also for each other. Although there is much volatility within the gatekeeping actions of each media institution, at this point it is important just to think of them just as the two sets of gatekeepers in the lower level of analysis in (we discuss them in more complexity below). Both the mass and social media institutions belong on the lower level of analysis for one important reason: social media conglomerates such as Facebook and Weibo access, select, shape, time, and transmit content from the mass and social media institutions to create their own news services, hence they are gatekeepers of the content that lower-level gatekeepers have already processed.

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**Figure 1 The Gatekeeping System**



Note: A highly simplified gatekeeping system with two levels of analysis. Information is selected, shaped and published as content by the mass media and by social media users. Content that has gone through gatekeeping processes in the lower level is subject to another round of gatekeeping by the social media conglomerates when they republish the content in their news services. Content is subject to forces from within the gatekeeping environment (hierarchy based on Shoemaker & Reese, 2014)

These two levels of gatekeeping interact in ways that are not well understood. Gatekeeping Theory needs revision and expansion, a task impossible for a single essay. However, we can begin by inspecting the three entities in Figure 1's model. As the first social institution, the mass media have changed dramatically in the amount of power they have over news content and in the size of their audiences. Today's mass media are survivors of the economic, technological, and cultural changes that began in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and continue to the present (Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014). Some mass media organizations went out of business, some have

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used online technologies to be reborn as internet publications and others maintain both their physical paper formats and online editions. The mass media remain an important part of political, economic and cultural systems: Although we treat them as one entity in Figure 1, it is obvious that the mass media vary significantly, not only in use of technologies, but also in their economic models and cultural influence. In spite of these differences, they all engage in gatekeeping (Robinson, 2011). The visual and verbal content they provide is the result of a long set of gatekeeping routines that include examining the environment for information about events, preparing messages about the events, getting feedback from colleagues and editing the content, as well as preparing the final form and publishing it. We aggregate the various mass media as one social institution only to simplify our discussion of gatekeeping. Thus, when we say that the mass media should be on the lower level of analysis, we acknowledge that the mass media are in fact a macro-level institution, made up of many organizations and ownership patterns, residing in different cultures, having relationships with other social institutions, plus we must consider the organizations' routines of work and their individual workers.

Second, online technologies developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century facilitated the flow of visual and verbal information among individual people and organizations. We define social media users as people and organizations that create content on an online location owned by a social media conglomerate. As a social institution, the aggregate of social media users transformed the flow of information globally. Their significance lies not only in their wide acceptance of new technologies and devices, but also in how they use the technologies to connect themselves with the world both near and far. Social media users range from single people to large organizations whose agents relate their messages to the public. Unlike the mass media, the flow of information is multi-directional, even moving in unbelievable and unstable directions as each individual user communicates with one or more others, who communicate with others, who do the same. The result is both beautifully complex and amazingly chaotic. Social media users also vary on almost any dimension one can consider, including the number of people involved, the number of people to which information is directed, and their use of and contribution to the mass media. Their major similarity, however, is that by the creation of content—selecting information, shaping it and publishing it—all social media users are

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themselves gatekeepers. Even a social media user who is one person, not an agent of an organization, selects some bits of information to include online. The user puts it in verbal or visual format, organizes the messages and publishes it, thereby creating content. To the extent that the content is prepared by more than one person, gatekeeping routines become more complicated. For large organizations that are also social media users, gatekeeping operations may be similar to those of large mass media organizations.

Third, the aggregate of social media conglomerates are considered a social institution that resides on the upper level of analysis in Figure 1, the social media conglomerates (supra-gatekeepers) belong on the upper level, because they engage in gatekeeping processes by selecting, shaping and republishing content from the mass and social media. These conglomerates have not only invented and operated the technologies that allow content to be created and distributed by social media users, but they also have evolved to engage in other activities (e.g., streaming news, creating games for users and sharing of visual materials). For example, the online company Facebook was begun as a platform for college students to create content about their lives, with Facebook making money by selling advertising that accompanied the content. Although Facebook's primary goal was to make money from the advertising, it has more recently also acted like a communicator; it has many gatekeepers—people and algorithms—that select and organize content for its streaming news service. This news service is targeted both to social media users and to advertisers.

It is obvious, however, that these three social institutions are not independent of one another. Social media conglomerates could not exist without social media users, and the reverse is also true. Yet there is a major difference between them, in that the users are individual people and individual organizations, whereas the conglomerates are the corporations that both provide opportunities for and control the users. The mass media and social media users provide much of the content of the conglomerates' news services. In addition, the social media conglomerates are fodder for many news stories and provide comments. There is also a strong relationship between the mass media and social media users, in that many journalists are social media users as well as agents of the mass media, and they use social media content as source material for article ideas and content. In return, social media users provide feedback on article quality

and medium performance to journalists and editors, as well as using mass media content as fodder for their own posts. Occasionally users send in content that is published in the mass media.

We recommend that *Systems Thinking* be used to understand the resulting complicated gatekeeping processes. This approach is appropriate because there are multiple actors that comprise three partial systems—the mass media system, the social media, and the supra-gatekeepers—and that together make up a complex gatekeeping system. In addition to the new construct supra-gatekeeping, the systems approach (Parsons, 1975; Meadows, 2008) introduces several other constructs for study: elements (individuals or organizations that engage in public communication), interactions (the relationships between and among them), functions (the goals, intended or not, of the system), and systems (the combinations of elements, interactions and functions). This article describes the complex gatekeeping system and shows how Gatekeeping Theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) has evolved to study it. Both old and new gatekeeping constructs are elaborated, and it suggests ways in which scholars may use this new gatekeeping paradigm to study today's complex communication environment.

## Gatekeeping Theory as Model

Gatekeeping Theory, as applied to communication, evolved from work by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in two 1947 papers (Lewin, 1947a, 1947b). Lewin conceptualized a path or channel, which scholars adopted to describe how bits of information flowed within the day's mass media from discovery to publication. Although more than one channel could be studied, such as newspaper and television news channels, these were linear paths through which information traveled and was processed. For example, a newspaper reporter gathered information about an airplane crash, selected some of it to put in a message that is sent to an editor, his immediate superior in the organizational hierarchy. The editor selected or rejected the message for continuation in the media channel and may even have selected or rejected parts of the message or shaped it by requesting additional information. Once the editor approved the event and message as a potential news story, he sent the story up the hierarchy to other editors. If the

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information, now a potential news story, was approved (and possibly shaped) by all gatekeepers in the hierarchy, then it was published.

Information traveled back and forth within one or more channels until a subset of it was approved for distribution to the audience. Information did not travel between channels. Lewin's (1947a, 1947b) original gatekeeping model is linear, because the series of relationships (e.g., A to B, B to C, C back to A) are mathematically linear. See Shoemaker and Vos (2009) for a linear model that includes curved lines; the shape of the lines does not affect the relationships. Lewin's channel is a path that was adopted to describe the locations of messages, actions on them, and decisions within the gatekeeping field. Descriptions of 20<sup>th</sup> century gatekeeping models are available in Shoemaker (1991) and in Shoemaker and Vos (2009). Primary constructs in these models include:

- Information: details about an event
- Information collector: event participants or sources of information, plus reporters and editors
- Gate: a decision point, at which information is either approved or rejected to move through the channel
- Gatekeeper: the person who made this decision
- Force: a factor that either encouraged or discouraged approval of the information
- Channel: the path of routinized journalistic practices within which such decisions were made
- Section: segment of a channel
- Field: the environment within which all of the above took place. The gatekeeping field included not only the journalistic field, but also the larger society within which journalism operated.

## Evolution of the Media

Gatekeeping Theory has evolved as major changes in the communication environment occurred, beginning in the late 20th century. One of the most important influences was the introduction of internet technology as a platform for news organizations, which caused havoc in an already chaotic mass media news business. Newspaper circulation had been decreasing in the last half of the century, and finally news organizations began failing—

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going out of business entirely, moving to the internet entirely, or combining an internet edition with an often substantially smaller print edition. Journalists were asked to take on the roles of many previous gatekeepers, for example, a television reporter who takes video, edits it and readies it for distribution. This truncating of the gatekeeping process (Robinson, 2011) occurred in both print or broadcast media and on the internet. The reason for these changes was economic, with advertisers confused as to whether they should support off- or on-line publications. Although the trend was toward news on the internet, marketers were uncertain about how to verify audience exposure to advertisements. Eventually a system of users clicking on stories and/or ads, spending a certain amount of time, following links, and so on, were used to demonstrate audience exposure to both the news product and to ads. In addition, several internet news sites began charging subscriptions for using their apps and sites. Subscription income, which was trivial to profitability in the 20th century, eventually became a significant part of many online business models.

A second major evolutionary force was the introduction of social media technologies. Social media sites began as individuals created accounts with overarching social media conglomerates, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Weibo. Facebook began with an emphasis on college students and faculty, each of whom could upload text and photos about their lives, but Facebook was not a scholarly service organization, but rather profit driven. Its clients' pages provided the content alongside Facebook sold advertisements. After some time, Facebook opened its pages to all individuals and organizations and developed other money-making tools, such as selling virtual armaments in a war game.

The explosion of content in Facebook and other social media conglomerates was another volatile force that worked against the stabilization of the mass media in the internet age. Journalists and media organizations created their own social media accounts, resulting in no strict division between what had an independent mass media and the social media. Social media users' content was available to journalists, and journalists' content fed the social media (Vujnovic, 2011). The social media conglomerates' news services use computer algorithms to select and place previously published content from both their users and from the online mass media. Thus, the conglomerates' algorithms, and occasionally humans, became supra-gatekeepers in the overall gatekeeping process. The

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use of algorithms, however, does not eliminate human gatekeeping, since humans make decisions about how to code news stream algorithms, such as selecting the types of content, putting priorities on the media selected, determining the prominence of the content in the news stream and deciding how long to keep it there. Coders and their employers are themselves gatekeepers.

## A Gatekeeping System

A system is made up of its elements, interactions among them, and its functions or goals. In general, one function of the gatekeeping system is communication, although partial gatekeeping systems may have more specific or different goals. The three institutions in Figure 1, their organizations and their agents make up the population of elements in the system, and their messages to one another are interactions. The latter are similar to relationships, in that the more two elements interact, the more we may conclude that they relate, perhaps communicate. In a map of a system, interactions are shown by the lines drawn between elements. Figure 1 is an extremely simple gatekeeping system because the elements are portrayed only as macro social institutions, but if we think of the elements as people and organizations, then it is clear that visualizing and drawing even a partial gatekeeping system is a highly complicated task.

This is especially true because all systems, whether global or partial, also exist within a gatekeeping field. All gatekeeping systems exist within the total environment of their social systems—the gatekeeping field. Social systems vary in size, from a city or neighborhood to a nation or the planet. The field encompasses all forces generated by the social system, its social institutions, and the people who live and work within it (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), and these forces work to encourage or discourage the publication of information. Forces affect content created by mass media agents, social media users and social media conglomerates, but not necessarily in the same way. For example, in the 2020 US presidential race political forces caused Facebook to initially accept pro-Trump advertising that allegedly contained false information, but later some campaign ads were removed (Glazer, 2020). Political partisanship helped the distribution of President Trump’s messages pass some gates and gatekeepers, but they were rejected by others.

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Of the three major groups of gatekeepers in Figure 1, the first represents the overarching social media conglomerates, such as Facebook or Sina (the owner of Weibo). These perform gatekeeping operations on the selection of extant online content and then republish part of it in their news services. Second, social media users apply their own gatekeeping processes to create content, whether the user is one person or a more complex organization. Third is the aggregate of online mass media agents, who produce content that is sometimes different and sometimes in concert with that of social media users. Each of these groups of content creators and manipulators engages in its own gatekeeping processes. The mass media have well known, routinized gatekeeping practices (Shoemaker & Reese 2014), whereas social media users' gatekeeping processes range from the idiosyncratic (individual content creator) to larger, more complex operations similar to gatekeeping in the mass media. The social media conglomerates' gatekeeping processes are so complicated that humans alone cannot directly make the decisions necessary to create and publish their news services. Instead, human-created virtual gatekeepers—computer algorithms—have replaced humans in most supra-gatekeeping processes.

Because the supra-gatekeepers republish existing content from both the mass media and from social media users, we think of the gatekeeping system as having two levels of analysis. The upper level consists of supra-gatekeepers, the social media conglomerates that created the technologies which allow their users to publish content. The supra-gatekeepers publish news services made up of both from social media users' and mass media content, thereby bringing to bear their own gatekeeping processes on content that has already passed many other gatekeepers. The conglomerates act as supra-gatekeepers to the extent that they select, shape, organize and republish content from the mass and social media. We know this must be true, because their news services represent a selection of all possible content. If there were no gatekeeping processes, then the news services might be a chronological—or even worse, random—stream of all mass and social media users' content. This would overwhelm consumers of the news services, who would have to survey a world of information before finding anything of interest, and dissatisfaction among consumers would make advertising less probable.

In this two-level gatekeeping system, content is first subject to gatekeeping processes by mass media agents and social media users, then it

moves through the conglomerates' gatekeeping channels before it is published in their news services. Each of the three major gatekeeping groups could be and has been studied alone, but it is necessary to recognize that they operate together within a total gatekeeping system. Although each group is a partial system, the totality is more meaningful than the sum of the parts. By partial system, we mean any subset of elements and interactions that shares goals; for example, the mass media are a partial system of the larger gatekeeping system, and newspapers are a partial system of the mass media gatekeeping system. Studying gatekeeping only within the mass media or within newspapers would not provide a picture of how content is moved and manipulated overall. Although partial gatekeeping systems have been previously studied as networks (Hellmueller, 2017; Barzilai-Nahon, 2018), the emphasis there is on individual paths (Pearson & Kosicki, 2017) and not the system as a whole.

As a result, we recommend that *systems thinking* (Parsons, 1951, 1975; Schuster, 2018) be applied to both the theoretical and empirical study of gatekeeping and to the future development of Gatekeeping Theory. In a global communications system, there are many partial systems and these tend to be hierarchically arrayed (Rutherford, 2018). For example, the globe is comprised of regions, such as Asia. Within Asia are countries, such as People's Republic of China, and within this nation are geographic regions. Within these regions are cities, which have multiple mass media and social media platforms (e.g., Weibo) or conglomerates (e.g., Sina), and so on. Each partial system is a component of a larger system. Although the study of mass media systems has been common (e.g., Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1957; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Chang, Berg, Fung, & Kedl, 2001), the construct of system has been differently elaborated, often identifying regions of the world or countries as systems (e.g., Hughes, 2006). These important studies lack the formal features of system theory and therefore study countries as independent partial systems, ignoring the fact that they all operate within an environment or gatekeeping field that connects all gatekeeping elements and interactions.

Chadwick (2017) calls the mass and social media a hybrid media system, with hybridity meaning that the parts of the world are all connected and always changing, a system. Introducing the idea of change to the study of gatekeeping makes the introduction of time necessary; although one-time snapshots of static gatekeeping processes have been valuable, a theoretical

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analysis of how the entire gatekeeping system develops over time would be much more useful. Actually, time has always been integral to gatekeeping, although rarely acknowledged. Lewin's (1947a, 1947b) original model could work only if time passed as information was selected, messages written and sent to editors before publication. To pass a gate (where a decision is made) implies that there is a before (in front of the gate) and an after (behind it), and information can move through a channel only if decisions are made. To be published implies that information has been discovered, selected, shaped, organized and distributed. To say that gatekeeping is a process implies occurrences over time; the process begins, advances and ends.

We propose an even more important role for time in Gatekeeping Theory; information processing is immersed in time—people's views of reality are constantly changing. Change can only be studied over time, and therefore to theorize about changes in gatekeeping systems requires making time an important construct. We are aware that studying even one system at one point in time is difficult, but in fact there are no truly static systems—every system is undergoing transformation in every moment. If we take a snap-shot picture of a gatekeeping process, it is two dimensional—gatekeeping that occurred in one location and at one moment in time. Even if we are clever enough to make a three-dimensional picture of a system, it is still inadequate, because no one moment in space or time can ever represent an ever-transforming system. We are left with the idea of a four-dimensional theoretical model, adding space-time: The three dimensions of space tied to the dimension of time. Therefore, any causal connections inferred without considering time and space would lack validity: Any observed causal relationship existed in the past and in only one location even before it was analyzed; it is therefore an uncertain predictor of the future. Chadwick (2017) writes that hybrid media systems are in flux and thus can be only partially understood as both past and future states.

If time is to be included in Gatekeeping Theory, then the concept of space—where the elements are located—should also be added. We know from many inter-cultural and international research projects that news, for example, is processed differently in different locations (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Chan & Lee, 2017; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018; Jung & Villi, 2018; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). Comparisons made between communication processes in two or more locations operate on the macro-

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level analysis, ignoring interactions among elements within each partial system.

## Conclusion

The complexity of the existing gatekeeping system is nearly beyond comprehension, because billions of elements (e.g., people or organizations) interact with one another with various frequencies across both time and space. System theory has not been a part of Gatekeeping Theory previously, even though many scholars have compared gatekeeping processes within partial systems, such as nations or geographic regions. The concept of system in these studies lacks the formality of system theory as discussed here. The introduction of new constructs from *systems thinking* can aid in the evolution of Gatekeeping Theory. In addition to the concepts listed earlier, we should study the following constructs:

- Element: a component of the system
- Interaction: a connection between elements
- Function or goal: the purpose that the system fulfills
- Time: the system's progress through past, present and future
- Space: the physical location of elements in the system

The goals of elements and their interactions take place within their environments, which is the gatekeeping field—the totality of social systems, other social institutions, media organizations, routines of media work and individual communicators. Each can bring forces to bear on decisions about the flow of information, with the forces having various strengths and polarities (constraining or facilitating the flow of content; in quantitative research, ranging from positive to negative). Although it is possible for every element (person or organization) to interact with every other element, it is likely that some people and organizations choose not to be social media users. It is also probable that some elements do not interact much with the rest of a system, being outliers in a picture of the system. Alternatively, studying the system of elements that do interact becomes highly complicated very quickly, given the billions of people and organizations which could interact with one another. The number of possible interactions is immense. Studying such an enormous and intricate

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set of communication interactions may seem impossible, but *systems thinking* provides a framework within which these can be tackled theoretically. Admittedly, quantitative analyses may be problematic, but advances in quantitative methodology may yet make it feasible to easily analyze a gatekeeping system.

We adopt *systems thinking* as one way to analyze gatekeeping processes within either partial systems or the system as a whole. *Systems thinking* not only offers the constructs element, interaction and goal, but also introduces concepts about the characteristics of the system. For example, if all elements in a gatekeeping system disagree about their common goals (a lack of stability), the result could vary from mild dissonance (conflict) within the system to complete chaos and system failure (a company goes out of business or a nation experiences revolution). In the last decades, the mass media system has been destabilized by cultural, economic and technological forces in the environment, and yet it persists because some news media have been resilient enough to make changes within their organizations (such as reducing the number of employees or moving operations totally to the internet) and still get the news out. The resilience of a system is its ability to tolerate such dissonance, perhaps by eliminating some elements, changing their interactions or revising its goals. In a highly stable system, the elements and their interactions function similarly, and change occurs only if there are intense outside forces working against the system's goals.

These outside forces make up the system's environment, a concept similar to Lewin's field (1947a, 1947b). The many forces within the gatekeeping field (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), affect the stability of the system when, for example, a head of state criticizes the legitimacy of some mass media. In this way, the government destabilizes the extent to which the system's elements can work in concert toward their goal. In addition to studying partial systems and the forces that shape them, we should also consider how the gatekeeping system operates over time and across space—different geographic locations. The communication universe has changed substantially since Gatekeeping Theory was first applied to news, and not only has the definition of news changed, but also the amount of information transmitted at any point in time has increased monumentally. Our approach is to begin by studying the interactions among three sets of social institutions—the mass media, social media users and social media

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conglomerates. In a gatekeeping universe where the number of possible interactions is in the trillions, drawing a miniature system with only three elements may seem absurd, but a complex problem requires a manageable starting point.

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