

Refining the Gatekeeping Metaphor for Local Television News

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Refining the Gatekeeping Metaphor for Local Television News

Abstract

A book review of "Refining the Gatekeeping Metaphor for Local Television News" by Dan Berkowitz.

“Refining the Gatekeeping Metaphor for Local Television News,” by Dan Berkowitz in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, (Winter 1990); Vol. 34, No. 1. Broadcast Education Association: Washington, D.C.; pp. 55-68.

Dr. Dan Berkowitz's new formulation of the gatekeeping metaphor should be of interest to all ACE members, particularly those in the television section of the Electronic Media SIG. This article explores the media's selection of stories for local television news shows.

The Indiana University study combines qualitative and quantitative observations gathered over a seven-week period at a network affiliate newsroom in Indianapolis, IN (the nation's 24th largest TV market). Unlike previous researchers who have portrayed single gatekeepers, Berkowitz found six key decision makers for the two evening newscasts. Although he also discovered in a related study (Berkowitz, 1989a) “that 77.5% of potential stories were discarded by the assignment editor before the news day began,” this study concludes that group dynamics have replaced the lone copy editor who previously decided an item's newsworthiness.

The study used five criteria for coding a story's newsworthiness: 1) conflict, 2) timeliness, 3) proximity, 4) significance, and 5) known principal (familiarity of people, institutions, or issues). These types of stories were developed from literature concerning newscast quality (e.g. Wulfemeyer, 1982a): 1) “issues” stories, 2) “unexpected events” (spot news), and 3) “entertainment” (soft news, human interest stories, etc.).

In addition, Berkowitz coded 14 categories for topics of potential news stories. He collapsed several of those categories into one (“miscellaneous”) category because each contained fewer than five percent of the total number of stories included in this study. Seven categories remained: accidents & disaster, government & politics, crime, miscellaneous, business & economics, education, and health & welfare.

Over a four-week period, a total of 391 stories survived the assignment editor's desk (first gate) and were coded. Slightly more than half of them (57.8%) aired. By story type, more than 55% of the issue-related stories aired, 66.7% of unexpected event items and 53.7% of the entertainment items aired. Chi-square analysis showed these differences were insignificant.

Analyzed by topic, those stories that aired most frequently were accidents & disasters (73.4%), government & politics (62.0%), and crime (60.7%). Unplanned events aired considerably more frequently than did stories about planned events (66.0% to 49.5%).

Discriminant analysis of the five news values revealed that timeliness ($FC = .85$) was the greatest determinant of a story airing followed by significance (.46) and proximity (.25). However, the five criteria accounted for only 19.4% of the variance in why potential news stories were aired. Interviews with newsroom decision makers revealed that the easier a story

is to report, the greater its chances of airing. In explaining their use of news values, decision makers described a balance of importance, interest, and visual impact.

ACE members dealing with newsrooms should remember that television news content is built from easily explained information that can provide a good audience draw and can be assembled efficiently. Although visual impact was rarely mentioned during the decision makers' daily planning sessions, it was mentioned frequently when they were later asked to describe their decision making framework. Berkowitz concludes that spot news can "close the gate" on planned events. But even resource and logistical constraints can "close the gate" on spot news coverage.

The fundamental message here is make it interesting enough to pass through the first gate (the assignment desk), keep it simple, make it easy to report, and make it visual. Then keep your fingers crossed.

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"Structure and Constraints on Community Newspaper Gatekeepers," by G.A. Donohue, C.N Olien and P.J. Tichenor, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol 66, No. 4, Winter 1989, pp. 807-812+.

Editors have always been recognized as gatekeepers who decide where, when and how information will be published. However, editors do work within a certain structural context that may affect the outcome of the gatekeeping process. In this study, 155 Minnesota community newspaper editors, including 59 weeklies, and editors of 90 dailies in six Midwestern states were interviewed by telephone in 1985 for their perceptions of some of these constraints. The sample was restricted to non-metropolitan communities of 60,000 or less, and each newspaper was from a different county.

For their purposes, the authors limited constraints to values, routines and organizational management. Among the factors which may cause media organizations some problems are the professional standards that determine the use, nonuse, the modification and layout of news. This includes the major priorities of gatekeepers and their professional ethics.

Another factor is the implementation of standards in routines of news selection, including time and space pressures. The organizational structure for personnel recruitment, management and change also is a concern. An important question is how information generation, together with maintaining economic support through advertising and circulation, affect editors' decisions.

In examining those issues, the researchers compared newspapers in small, less pluralistic communities with those in larger, more pluralistic ones.

While both rural and urban editors share the value orientation of the power group, the small-town editor has a more limited pool of advertisers. How does this affect reporting on power groups or prominent individuals who deviate from the norm?