

“When One Door Closes: The Evolution of Journalists’ Gatekeeping Role”

by

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## **Abstract**

The internet irrevocably altered how consumers receive news and who they consider news sources. The internet, and later social media, wrested control of the news cycle from legacy media and provided innumerable access points for the public to consume and engage the news. The purpose of this study is to understand how Louisiana journalists are executing a hybrid gatekeeping-marketing role using digital platforms. In-depth interviews with Louisiana newspaper reporters were used to collect data. Findings revealed evidence supporting the existence of this hybrid role. Gatekeeping's emphasis has shifted from the gate to the delivery channel. Today's gatekeeper recognizes that the final channel has grown longer and more complex, requiring increased involvement on the part of the gatekeeper to ensure the message reaches its destination. This requires the reporter or editor to market both themselves and the story. This hybrid gatekeeper-marketer role represents a rebranded gatekeeping theory in which the gatekeeper acts more as a liaison, with a focus on facilitating conversation and engagement instead of controlling information flow. To execute this role, journalists are cultivating forward facing social media presences, emphasizing trust and transparency online, engaging readers and heeding reader feedback.

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## Introduction

“The News Gatekeeper is Dead! Long Live the News Gatekeeper!” a headline on Techdirt.com trumpeted a decade ago (Techdirt, 2007). The night before, Associated Press CEO Tom Curley addressed news executives at the Knight-Bagehot Fellowship dinner in New York City. The Techdirt headline succinctly captured the premise of Curley’s speech: the vestiges of the old news business were gone and news organizations needed to adapt.

The first thing that has to go is the attitude. Our institutional arrogance has done more to harm us than any portal....Our focus must be on becoming the very best at filling people's 24-hour news needs. That's a huge shift from the we-know-best, gatekeeping mentality. Readers and viewers are demanding to captain their information ships. Let them. (NewsOK.com, 2007)

Nothing more ironically confirmed Curley’s assertion than the existence of the Techdirt headline. Techdirt, a technology and business analysis blog, was founded in 1997 in the first wave of blogging (Techdirt, 2018). Only news and publishing professionals likely would have had knowledge of Curley’s speech prior to the internet. With blogs like Techdirt, everyday citizens were invested in Curley’s comments and free to conjecture about the future of the mass media.

Take a comment from Techdirt user Max Power on November 3, 2007: “Things have changed with the introduction of the Internet to such a wide audience and AP better realize it and adjust or they will be in trouble” (Techdirt, 2007). Power’s comment was one of 35 under the article, while a news article on Curley’s speech from The Oklahoman featured no comments.

The internet irrevocably altered how consumers receive news and who they consider news sources. The internet, and later social media, wrested control of the news cycle from legacy media and provided innumerable access points for the public to consume and engage the news.

According to an August 2017 Pew Research Center study, 43 percent of Americans reported often getting their news online while 20 percent often got their news from social media (Pew Research Center, 2017). The study reported 67 percent of people received at least some news from social media, with 78 percent of 18 to 49-year-olds turning to social media platforms for information. The top three sources were Reddit, Facebook and Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Media websites often aren't the first point of contact for readers to access a story. In 2017, search engines accounted for 34.8 percent of site visits while social media platforms drove 25.6 percent of traffic, according to content amplification platform Shareaholic (Shareaholic, 2018). Analytics tracker Parse.ly, a favorite among newsrooms and large media companies, reported similar trends, with Google search driving 49 percent of site referrals and Facebook driving 26 percent in the last 12 months (Parse.ly, 2018). The platform has roughly 2,500 clients, while Shareaholic has over 250,000 (Parse.ly, 2018; Shareaholic 2018).

This change shifted legacy media's control over the public's access to information. The image of media gatekeepers as powerful agenda setters has weakened, but Techdirt's Mike Masnick was wrong to say it is dead (Techdirt, 2007). Today's gatekeeper, like modern journalism, is different but not dead.

The purpose of this study is to understand how Louisiana journalists are executing a hybrid gatekeeping-marketing role using digital platforms.

This study is important because the journalism industry continues to rapidly change, and understanding the impact and effectiveness of those changes is important to determine not only how journalists have adapted to the changing landscape, but also how information is being relayed to audiences.

### **The Origin of the Gatekeeper**

The concept of gatekeeping first entered the journalism vernacular in 1950, when David Manning White conducted his seminal study of a wire editor he branded “Mr. Gates” (Bro & Wallberg, 2014). White was inspired by the research of German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin, who developed the concept of gatekeeping to describe food’s journey to the table (Bro & Wallberg, 2014).

Lewin’s research explored the importance of social management in persuading war-time households to change their eating habits (Lewin, 1947). Lewin called the decision-making process a channel the food traveled along en route to the home. Each channel was comprised of several sections, or action points, where decisions were made. The decisions were influenced by a series of internal and external forces acting on the chief decision maker, who Lewin deemed the “gatekeeper” (Lewin, 1947, p. 145). This gatekeeper controlled the food’s procurement, the type and brand of food selected, the food’s transportation and the food’s storage. He noted education efforts aimed at changing behaviors needed to focus on the gatekeeper to create social change.

Lewin (1947) explained that the gatekeeper makes a “...decision between ‘in’ or ‘out.’” and “their decisions depend partly on their ideology, that is their system of values and beliefs

which determine what they consider to be ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ and partly on the way they perceive the particular situation” (p. 145).

White, spurred by a suggestion from Lewin to apply the concept to the transportation of other products, recognized the gatekeeping theory could be applied to the transmission of information from wire service to newspaper, and decided to explore how wire editors selected stories for publication (Bro & Wallberg, 2014). To do so, White conducted the first field study of gatekeeping in the journalism profession.

White, then the journalism chair at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, asked “Mr. Gates,” a wire editor at The Peoria Star and former Bradley University adjunct professor, to track his decision-making process in selecting stories for print (Roberts, 2005). Gates maintained copious notes for one week in February 1949, detailing which stories came through his wire, which he selected and discarded and his reasoning for which stories went to publication (Bro & Wallberg, 2014). About one-third of Mr. Gates’ discarded stories were rejected based on his assessment of their merits, especially their truthfulness, while the other two-thirds were rejected due to space constraints or similarity to stories currently running (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

White’s findings examined the forces and ideology influencing Mr. Gates’ decisions, including his sense of new judgement. White’s work “brought into focus the intuitive notion that not all that happens in the world gets into the news and introduced the notion of subjectivity among gatekeepers” (Roberts, 2005, p. 6).

Academics have continued to explore gatekeeping’s possibilities and developed more complex analyses than White’s simplistic wire editor study. In 1956, University of Wisconsin,

Madison doctoral student Walter Gieber completed a similar analysis of 16 wire editors across Wisconsin. Gieber (1956) concluded the wire editor was:

...caught in a strait jacket of mechanical details. To him, the most significant force in processing the news is getting copy into the newspaper. He is concerned with the immediate details of his work rather than the social arena in which news is made and given meaning. (p. 432)

Gieber noted the greatest influences on the wire editors' selections were the pressure of the publishing cycle and the selection provided by the Associated Press' wire service, which he identified as the true gatekeeper in his study (Gieber, 1956). Albeit implicitly, Gieber's research took into consideration internal and external forces on the news process that White's work overlooked, such as time constraints and pressures to get copy into the newspaper.

Bruce Westley and Malcolm S. MacLean (1957) further solidified the importance of Lewin's theory to the mass communication field. In a reprinting of their original 1955 article, Westley and MacLean combined Lewin's gatekeeping theory with social psychologist Theodore Newcomb's co-orientation model of interpersonal communication. This proposal became the Westley-MacLean model of communication. Newcomb's theory asserted that person A communicates to person B about object X, with feedback immediately exchanged between the two communicators (as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The Westley-MacLean model added a third channel, C, which represented the mass media (Westley & MacLean, 1957). In this model, C selectively combs through the messages being sent by A and selects which ones reach B. Feedback still occurs, but it isn't as linear or instantaneous as in Newcomb's proposal. Feedback in a mass communications setting is often infrequent and delayed (Westley & MacLean, 1957).

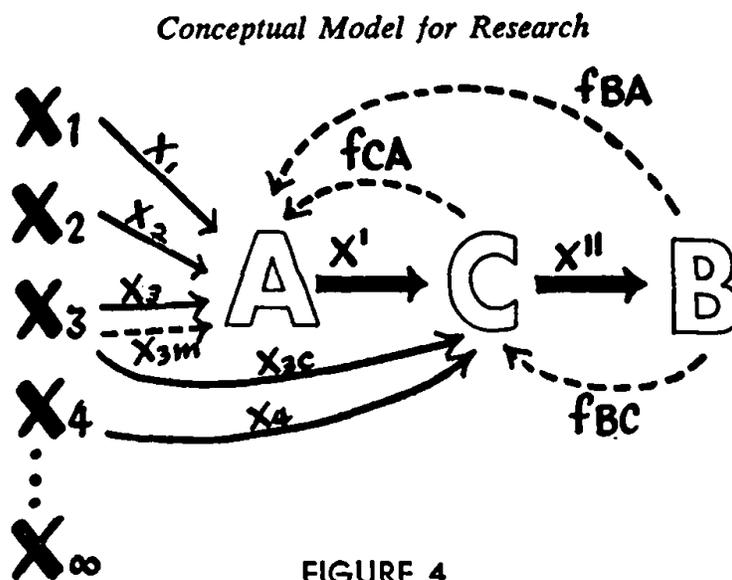


Figure 1. Depiction of the Westley-MacLean model of communication (1957).

The concept of feedback is important because feedback from B can influence both what A sends C and what C chooses to send to B. In their 1957 *Journalism Quarterly* article, Westley and MacLean noted Cs will communicate information relevant and interesting to the selected Bs.

...the C role can survive only to the extent that this is true. For B is still a selector among the offerings of various Cs and this means that Cs are in effect competitors for the attention of Bs (and for that matter competitors with As and Xs in B's immediate field). Cs therefore survive as Cs to the extent that they satisfy needs for Bs. And Bs, on the basis of the most obvious propositions of learning theory, will tend to return to those Cs which have provided past need satisfactions and problem solutions. (p. 34)

This observation is one of the first gatekeeping theories to acknowledge the mass media as a business as well as a public service. The information media organizations offer is a product and providing news relevant to each audience is crucial to capturing market share.

Other expansions on White's study explored gatekeeping beyond the editor. In 1959, John T. McNelly proposed a multitiered gatekeeping structure more reminiscent of the structure of traditional news rooms and wire services. McNelly's study followed the journey of an international news item through layers of gatekeeping and editing before reaching the audience

(as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In the model, a story (S) written about event (E) passes between multiple gatekeepers (Cs). The story undergoes revisions and additions as each gatekeeper leaves his or her imprint on the item (as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Different internal and external forces affect each gatekeeping tier, with different considerations influencing the decisions of the foreign correspondents, editors, wire editors and copy editors (Roberts, 2005).

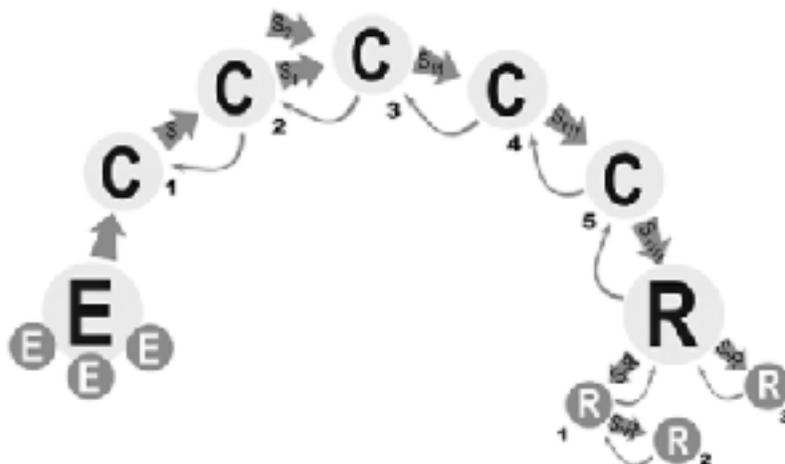


Figure 2. Depiction of the multistage international news flow described by McNelly (1959).

Following McNelly's lead, Abraham Z. Bass reiterated the importance of the reporter as the frontline gatekeeper in his 1969 publication "Refining the 'Gatekeeper' Concept: A UN Radio Case Study." Bass' article explored the existence of the "double-action internal newsflow," in which a story passes through two classes of gatekeepers: news gatherers and news processors (as cited in Roberts, 2005, p. 9). The two groups exercise different levels of influence on the copy and have different forces working on them, he wrote. Bass encouraged researchers to focus greater attention to the reporter's gatekeeping practices because "it is he who makes the significant decisions" (Bass, 1969).

Steve Chibnall (1977) wrote in his analysis of English crime reporting:

...the reporter does not go out gathering news, picking up stories as if they were fallen apples, he creates news stories by selecting fragments of information from the mass of raw data he receives and organizing them in a conventional journalistic format” (as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p.19).

By the time the news reaches the editor the most important gatekeeping decisions have been made, he wrote, making the “journalist/source nexus...the most important area of gatekeeping” (as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 19).

Chibnall (1977) also conducted seminal studies of the relationship between crime reporters and English law enforcement (Mawby, 2010). In those works, Chibnall noted the police informants serve as gatekeepers to information on crime trends, investigations and department developments. The reporter influences the police officer’s gatekeeping decision by actively cultivating a relationship and delivering accurate reporting that meets both the police officer and reporter’s objectives. The reporter builds rapport and captures the officer’s respect by meeting his expectations, at the same time accessing better information (Perez, 2014). Chibnall’s report “captures the negotiated nature of the relationship, the recognition that the relationship is in tension, but can deliver mutual benefits” (Mawby, 2010, p. 136).

Reporters’ methods for negotiating relationships and gatekeeping information have changed following the advent of the internet and social media.

### **Gatekeeper turned Liaison: Journalists in the Digital Age**

The internet changed the media industry forever. In under three decades, the communication landscape shifted from a finite number of newspapers, radio shows and television stations to a seemingly infinite number of content creators. The internet acted as a

democratizer, stripping communication authority away from the “elites” and allowing the public to exercise more agency in when, what and how they access the news.

It can be difficult to understand where gatekeeping fits into the current media environment, and some scholars and practitioners believe it is dead.

Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini (2000) argued that the emergence of “multiple axes of information” made legacy media’s gatekeeping efforts obsolete (p. 62). In their article, Williams and Carpini analyzed how coverage of President Bill Clinton’s affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky unfolded across traditional and new media platforms. Most prominently, they noted how Matt Drudge “breaking” the Clinton-Lewinsky story on his blog, “Drudge Report,” changed the balance of power between traditional news media and pioneering digital outlets. Drudge’s scoop and his blog’s sustained reach lent legitimacy to the blogger movement as a viable third-party news option (Williams & Carpini, 2000).

When the scandal broke, "one could literally spend 24 hours a day watching, listening to, and reading about the Clinton scandal. More tellingly, one could do so without ever tuning in or picking up a traditional news source” (Williams & Carpini, 2000, p. 75).

This illustrated the end of the mainstream media’s control over information, they wrote. Williams and Carpini’s assertions were echoed in the texts of Axel Bruns and others. In 2014, Bruns wrote about the need for a transition from a gatekeeping focus to a gatewatching focus. Bruns wrote that the internet ushered in a more equal playing field for journalists and the public to collaborate on the news process. This new playing field valued curation and an unbridled news flow over limiting the information allowed through the gates, he said (Bruns, 2014). Instead of controlling what enters the public arena, gatewatchers sort and curate content streaming from

multiple channels. The number of gatekeepers is limited, but the number of gatewatchers is infinite. As such, gatewatchers are able to highlight a larger number of potentially newsworthy items (Bruns, 2014).

While it's true "traditional journalists are now one among many agenda-setters and issue-framers within the media," Pamela Shoemaker and Tim P Vos contend the role still has relevance today (Williams & Carpini, 2000, p. 79). "The challenge is for scholars to think creatively about applying the theory to a changing world and to adapt research methodology that keeps pace," they said (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 130).

Applying gatekeeping theory to a changing world means being mindful of gatekeeping's increased interaction with outside forces. Kjerstin Thorson and Chris Wells (2015) wrote:

The question is not whether conventional gatekeeping continues to play a role: it clearly does. But the gatekeeping processes we associate with journalists and news organizations have been joined by others: beyond news communicators, the underlying dynamics of how citizens receive and interpret information are changing as a result of the networking of civic communication. (p. 12)

Thorson and Wells proposed that the end of the traditional gatekeeping process did not necessarily signal the news reaching its final destination. They said that instead a number of curation factors, including social, personal, strategic and algorithmic, were increasingly influential in determining community members' exposure to news. For example, a Facebook algorithm could analyze a user's engagement on the site and filter newsfeed content to better meet the user's interests (Thorson & Wells, 2015). Understanding how to influence curators to read or view your content hence became an element of gatekeeping, and the role became intertwined with an increased marketing focus.

In their 2014 article, “How the Service Characteristics of News Require Media Organizations to Transition to a Marketing Orientation,” T.F.J. Steyn and Elanie Steyn insisted media organizations must shift from a production orientation to a marketing orientation to survive in today’s more competitive environment. No longer enjoying the benefits of a “quasi-monopoly” over advertising revenue, media organizations must find new ways to attract loyal readers and build a strong financial base (T.F.J. Steyn & E. Steyn, 2014, p. 342).

The production orientation is viable when competition is weak, as was the case pre-internet. News organizations were able to build business models that were internally focused — resources were assessed, products were produced that fit the organization’s capabilities and a “if we can make it, it will sell” mentality reigned (T.F.J. Steyn & E. Steyn, 2014, p. 338). These businesses were characterized by narrow product lines, limited market research, minimal promotion and a low emphasis on customer experience (T.F.J. Steyn & E. Steyn, 2014).

This is not the case for post-internet media companies. With declining advertising revenues and increased competition, media companies must adopt a “sense-and-respond” attitude focused on “creating, delivering and communicating superior customer value” (T.F.J. Steyn & E. Steyn, 2014, p. 346). This requires newspapers and other media groups to shift their understanding of the newspaper, radio broadcast or television broadcast from a limited product to a service. This new focus touts the importance of building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships, absorbing audience feedback and offering clients more than simple product dissemination (T.F.J. Steyn & E. Steyn, 2014).

Reporters and editors on the front lines of the news experience are central to this new business model. Ann Brill was the first researcher to explore how “online journalists” were

creating a new marketing role for reporters. Brill (2001) wrote that digital reporters rated competition with other media outlets, understanding the audience and serving the widest possible audience as main focuses of their jobs. Fifteen years later, Edson C. Tandoc and Tim P. Vos bore out Brill's findings and explored how journalists at three online newsrooms deployed this marketing role.

Tandoc and Vos found that marketing had grown from an interest to a central focus of reporters' duties. Most importantly, they found this marketing role was indeed intertwined with the gatekeeping role in daily work life.

The results of the case studies point to a keen awareness among online editors of how important the audience has become. Editors are particularly mindful of the audience channel, that gatekeeping no longer culminates in publication of a story, for reaching the audience in an information-saturated online environment is no longer easy. Journalists are coopting social media, trying to turn these sites into allies instead of alternative information channels. Gatekeeping has extended outside the journalistic space (Vos and Heinderyckx 2015), with journalists now finding themselves part of the complicated news distribution process. (Tandoc & Vos, 2016, p. 961)

Tandoc and Vos noted the reporters and editors interviewed used social media to monitor breaking news events and competitors' work. They also emphasized a knowledge of distribution channels and knowing when to publish, how to publish and which channel to publish on to best reach the audience (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Once disseminated, social media was used to drive traffic to the publication's website and occasionally increase page views for lower performing content (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Finally, reporters and editors used social media to engage with the public, both to build their brand loyalty and to solicit tips or crowdsourced reporting (Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

Today's gatekeeper recognizes that the final channel has grown longer and more complex, requiring increased involvement on the part of the gatekeeper to ensure the message reaches its destination. This requires the reporter or editor to market both themselves and the story. This hybrid gatekeeper-marketer role represents a rebranded gatekeeping theory in which the gatekeeper acts more as a liaison, with a focus on facilitating conversation and engagement instead of controlling information flow.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** To what extent does developing a forward-facing persona on social media aid reporter's news construction and dissemination efforts?

**RQ 2:** To what extent do reporters feel they must promote transparency and media literacy online?

**RQ 3:** To what extent do reporters take reader feedback into account?

### **Methodology**

This study focuses on reporters' gatekeeping practices and aims to provide evidence for a modern approach to gatekeeping. To prove this theory, I conducted in-depth interviews with full-time reporters working at Louisiana newspapers. Each newspaper had a digital presence and a minimum once weekly print schedule. The newspapers were divided into three categories: small, medium and large circulation newspapers. The small circulation papers had a print readership between 100 and 10,000, the medium circulation papers had a print readership of 10,000 to 20,000 and the large circulation papers had a print readership of 20,000 and above.

A notice was sent to editors at these publications seeking journalists for interviews related to the journalist's social media use and his or her thoughts on gatekeeping's relevance in the modern journalism industry. In cases of low response, contact was also established with reporters to advertise the study to their peers and elicit reporter participation.

The reporters self-selected into the study. In total, we spoke to nine reporters across the state, three from each circulation group. The average participant age was 27. The study pool was skewed to white females, with eight of the nine participants identifying as Caucasian and eight of the nine participants identifying as female. The participants had an average 4.6 years of experience in the journalism industry.

Interviews were conducted either in-person or via phone, and each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. Each participant was asked a series of 21 prepared questions and a variety of follow-up questions. The interviews added spanned a total of 647.5 minutes. Participants were compensated for their participation with a \$40 Amazon gift card. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service, and additional notes were taken during the interview's duration.

The transcribed interviews were coded into categories including social media use, gatekeeping perceptions, public trust and personal branding. Anecdotes from these categories were then used to answer the three research questions. Each reporter or editor was also assigned a pseudonym for identification in the analysis and discussion section.

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years as a Journalist</b>	<b>Newspaper Circulation Size</b>	<b>Journalist Role</b>
Emily	3	100-10,000	Managing editor
Robert	10	20,000+	City hall reporter
Kathy	3	10,000-20,000	Education reporter
Brittany	8	20,000+	Breaking news reporter/columnist
Kendall	12	20,000+	Entertainment reporter
Sarah	1	100-10,000	News editor
Hannah	2	10,000-20,000	Environmental reporter
Heather	1	100-10,000	News reporter
Jessica	2	10,000-20,000	Staff reporter

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The first research question investigated how journalists' presence on social media impacted their role as reporters. The interviews revealed that social media is a powerful tool and has become an invaluable resource for reporters to connect with their audience. Each reporter I interviewed was active on at least two social media platforms professionally. In most cases, this entailed co-opting personal accounts for professional use, while in three cases journalists had "likable" professional accounts on Facebook. These reporters indicated an interest in promoting their work and engaging with the community, while having some division between their personal and professional lives. Each reporter used Facebook and Twitter for work, with Instagram the most popular secondary platform with five active users. Those using Instagram said the platform

had strong reporting capabilities, but there were few opportunities to successfully use it in local reporting settings. Other platforms mentioned included Reddit and YouTube.

Three reporters at small circulation papers cited Facebook as their top source of referral traffic, and frequently their strongest source of traffic overall. One reporter at a large circulation paper said what's trending on Facebook is what people are reading, and called the platform "wildly influential" (personal communication, March 22, 2018).

Emily, an editor at a small circulation paper in south central Louisiana, said Facebook is their primary traffic driver. She said Facebook has boosted the newspaper's site visits and increased community buy-in. This wasn't always the case. The newspaper's editor and publisher — both older — didn't understand the impact the platform could have, and Emily explained it was being neglected before she took over in 2015. Since then, the newspaper's Facebook page has grown from 2,000 followers to nearly 6,000, and she said the influence on story reach is evident. To test social media's boosting effect, Emily posted a Sunday column to the newspaper's website without promoting it on social. The column had approximately 800 views by Monday evening. After posting the column to Facebook Monday night, page views rose to nearly 2,000. Emily said it's important to recognize digital media and social media have become necessary for successful news operations.

I love the hard copy of the newspaper and it'll be a sad, sad day if I ever have to see it go away. I don't want that to happen; however we have to find a way to marry the two concepts.... because social media could very easily kill what we have if we don't transition into this new digital age in the right way. (personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Transitioning the “right way” entails developing not only active and consistent company social media accounts, but encouraging reporters and editors to develop strong personal accounts.

In a networked gatekeeping world, developing a strong network of online friends and followers is fundamental to successfully disseminating and promoting articles. To build a following, reporters and editors must earn the trust of their audience. Kathy, an education reporter at a medium circulation paper in central Louisiana, said trust and familiarity online is centered on humanization and a sense of “artificial closeness” (personal communication, March 15, 2018). Each reporter reiterated similar views, saying Facebook and other social media platforms were valuable because they allowed the public to receive a peek at their personal lives and personalities. Kathy, whose husband and father both work in local television, said newspaper reporters were previously at a disadvantage when it came to building public sentiment. “You can’t put a face to somebody’s byline,” she said (personal communication, March 15, 2018). That changed with the internet, and in a world where newspapers are competing more directly with radio and television, that development is important, she said.

The nine reporters interviewed each took similar approaches to building rapport and familiarity with their communities. Kendall, an entertainment and lifestyle reporter at a large circulation paper, said she posts on her Facebook page daily, promoting a combination of quips, observations and journalistic content. Some of the posts are directly related to her work life, such as checking into events or restaurants she’s covering, while others focused on more personal tidbits, like her favorite song of the moment. Kendall said her effort to be open with her followers has helped her build reader loyalty.

I know that constant presence going through the day is letting people know who I am....I just have conversations with people, whether it's thoughtful or something fun and silly. I know that those are the people who are going to keep coming back and looking for what I post. Those are the people who tell me, 'Every time you post an article, I click and read it, and this is what I think about it.' (personal communication, March 18, 2018)

Brittany, a breaking news reporter at a large circulation paper, said building familiarity and reader devotion begins with showing humanity. For Brittany, that includes posting blooper videos of herself in the field to her professional Facebook page. The blooper videos are a nice way to establish herself as a "professional person who is fun," she said (personal communication, March 22, 2018). Humor was a unifier for several other journalists. Robert, a city hall reporter for a large circulation paper, said he peppers his Twitter with witty and informative observations about his coverage area, as well as state and national politics. Robert said the off-the-cuff tweets help communicate "I'm somebody who likes to have fun, I'm somebody who I like laughing at other people's raw observations and I like trying to get people to laugh at me a little bit" (personal communication, March 23, 2018).

Illustrating personality and a connection to the community is especially important at a time when trust in the media is at an all-time low. According to the 2018 Louisiana Survey, 78 percent of Louisiana residents surveyed trust the information they receive from local news organizations, while only 57 percent trust information from national news organizations (Henderson & Davis, 2018, p. 3). Though the majority expressed a sense of trust in local media, many also said they perceive bias in the local media. Of the 852 respondents, 60 percent said local media favors one side in news coverage while 36 percent believed local media represents issues fairly from all sides (Henderson & Davis, 2018, p. 3).

Social media allows reporters to remind readers of their personal ties to the community and assuage reader concerns about the person behind the keyboard. “We don’t curate the news in a dark room in a back alley somewhere,” said Sarah, the news editor at a small circulation paper near Baton Rouge (personal communication, March 7, 2018). She continued, saying that having a defined social media presence helps communicate that to readers.

Humanization online can help curb those assumptions and assuage reader anxiety and distrust, making readers more forthcoming with tips and information when reporters reach out. Each journalist interviewed said social media is a powerful reporting tool. Each recalled times when they used the platform to crowd source media, opinions, sources, story leads or eyewitness accounts quickly, executing reporting tasks that otherwise would require considerable man hours.

For example, Brittany said she used Facebook to quickly source a breaking news story with national ties. In the aftermath of the Las Vegas mass shooting that left 50 dead, Brittany used Facebook’s search function to identify a local resident who worked at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. She got an exclusive story and was able to further localize a major national story. “I don’t think that would’ve happened before social media. It would’ve required a hell of a lot more leg work. Leg work takes time and takes resources,” Brittany said (personal communication, March 22, 2018).

Social media can also be used to crowdsource information for day-to-day stories. Hannah, an environmental reporter at a medium circulation paper in south Louisiana, said social media was helpful when covering a new area. Hannah grew up and attended college outside of her coverage area, and despite living in the community for three years she said she had trouble meeting residents and making connections. While developing a story focused on oil-field layoffs,

Hannah's editor recommended she put out an all-call on Facebook seeking residents' personal testimony. She did, and was soon flooded with over 100 comments from residents both tagging potential sources and openly sharing their experiences. After seeing her post, others privately messaged her to discuss their hardships, she said.

Social media, especially Facebook, has also helped reporters feature more user-generated content online and in the newspaper. Emily, the editor from a small paper in south central Louisiana, said residents feel encouraged to submit photos of their children from sports games and successful hunting trips because others have been published. Incorporating human interest content from the community has gotten people excited and more interested in the newspaper. Emily said featuring the photos also helps drive home that her newspaper is community focused.

Once reporting is complete, the reporters said they use social media to promote their stories. Kendall said her newspaper takes a proactive approach: "instead of waiting for the audience to come to us and happen to find it in some kind of way, we go to the audience" (personal communication, March 18, 2018). She said reporters post their stories on social media, but also utilize Facebook groups to identify potential interest groups and promote pertinent stories to those subgroups. Kathy also follows this approach with education-related groups in central Louisiana. She said she posts school-focused articles to Facebook groups for local teachers and school PTAs, later circling back to respond to comments and answer questions from readers. Kathy said connecting with these groups has boosted her story engagement metrics. The interest generated by her stories has also carried over to her general social media presence, she said. Teachers will follow her live tweets of parish school board meetings,

screenshotting the posts and sharing them on the Facebook group to facilitate discussion. Kathy said the conversations routinely generate hundreds of comments.

Though the nine reporters interviewed used social media, there was considerable variation in the frequency of their social media engagement. Three reporters, two of whom worked for large circulation newspapers, reported engaging online every day. This included original posts, promoting stories and responding to reader comments and questions. Three reporters said their social media involvement changed week to week, depending on their assignments and the strain of their work schedules. Sarah, the editor near Baton Rouge, said she usually tweets once or twice weekly from her personal account, while posting on the newspaper's Facebook two to three times daily and Twitter at least once daily. Kathy, the education reporter from central Louisiana, said she posts on Twitter two to three times weekly, with the potential for live tweeting. She said she only posts to Facebook a few times each month. Emily also followed the weekly formula, posting stories three to four times each week.

Robert, the city hall reporter, was the most inconsistent. He said he has a professional Facebook page but isn't confident how to effectively utilize the page for reporting purposes, and it typically languishes. He posts on Twitter, the main source of his online engagement, anywhere from five to 10 times daily, or not at all, sometimes going days between posts. Robert said he'll leave meetings or events and question "Why weren't you tweeting during that? You really should have been tweeting" (personal communication, March 23, 2018).

Some of the newspapers didn't leave social media engagement to chance, instead mandating requirements for online. Three reporters and editors from two newspapers reported this trend. The newspapers were both owned by corporate media companies. Heather, a reporter

at a small circulation paper near Baton Rouge, said her newspaper is required to post to Facebook and Twitter three times daily, and produce three Facebook Live videos per quarter. Hannah and co-worker Jessica said their newspaper requires them to post daily from the company's Facebook and Twitter accounts, and once daily from their personal accounts. Jessica said she'll promote her stories occasionally outside of what's mandated, while Hannah said she aims to engage with readers online two to three times weekly.

The second research question explored to what extent—if at all—reporters felt they needed to promote transparency and media literacy online. Per the Westley-MacLean communication model, newspapers and other media companies are in direct competition for readers' attention. Readers will return to those publications "which have provided past need satisfactions and problem solutions," and under a service model "need satisfaction" isn't limited to the print or digital product (Westley & MacLean, 1957, p.34). Readers also need to trust how the story was reported and the accuracy of the publication's reporting. If trust is lost, the reader will turn to a new publication or outlet for news. Building trust and transparency is the onus of the modern gatekeeper, and a central element to the role's success. If readers don't trust you or your publication, capturing reader attention and fostering constructive dialogue around reporting becomes impossible.

Each of the nine reporters interviewed said trust and transparency are the cornerstones of the profession. Without trust, what's the point? Despite the focus on transparency and trust, few reporters identified making concerted efforts to foster transparency and media literacy skills on social media. All recognized the importance, but most said they either conducted these efforts

through their stories or offline. Several questioned how social media and the internet could be leveraged for this effort.

Counter to their assertions, each reporter detailed behaviors that implicitly fell under both categories. The reporters indicated an attention to reader questions and expressed faithful efforts to use their responses to educate readers. They also outlined efforts to increase transparency about the reporting process by detailing reporting steps in articles, embedding documents and media in stories, and thwarting misinformation on social media.

Promoting transparency and media literacy begins with reader interface. Most media literacy concerns stem from readers being unable to distinguish between reported news and columns, and misunderstanding the strenuous processes behind producing a reported news article. Brittany, the breaking news reporter, said news organizations “probably thought they were being transparent beforehand, I just think the reality is reporters and media companies did not realize how little people understood about how journalism gets done” (personal communication, March 22, 2018). Transparency efforts are a direct reaction to this realization. Most of the reporters’ transparency efforts centered on correcting readers’ misconceptions about reporting, or establishing what is and is not newsworthy.

Several reporters recalled seeing the truth of Brittany’s observation in their daily lives. Kathy, the education reporter, said whenever her adolescent brother does something foolish her mother tells her not to report it in the newspaper. Kathy said the comments are always odd, especially given the complete lack of news value. “I’m just so confused. Like I said, my family all works in media, and she literally doesn’t have a clue how we work,” she explained. “It’s

funny that people, yeah, they really don't understand our jobs" (personal communication, March 15, 2018).

While Kathy's mother's statement may be innocuous or joking, other reporters said they commonly hear similar sentiments from their community members. Heather said in her community there's tension surrounding the paper "missing the mark" and not "making every event [organizations] have" (personal communication, March 8, 2018). A prime example is the city's local Rotary Club, which meets weekly and has a weekly lunch. The club was highly offended the paper wasn't attending their meetings, and expressed their frustration to the newspaper staff, she said. With at least four other Rotary Clubs in the parish, covering one regularly without covering the others would be unfair. Additionally, the newspaper has "a limited number of reporters, a limited number of cameras and a limited number of hours in the day," she explained (personal communication, March 8, 2018). Finding time to cover everything is impossible, and events with higher news value take precedence. "Trying to explain to these people that, 'Just because you had lunch doesn't make it news,' is a delicate conversation to have," Heather said (personal communication, March 8, 2018). To counter the backlash, the newspaper has begun accepting more reader submitted content featuring meeting recaps and local club events, she said. The balance is a nice compromise that appeases readers while freeing reporters to cover more pertinent stories.

Most confusion bubbles up after a story makes it into the newspaper or online. Hannah, the environmental reporter, said she frequently receives negative feedback on stories related to coastal erosion. It's easy for readers to develop conspiracy theories surrounding the media because there are fewer reporters in the community, she said. With smaller numbers, it's less

likely residents will routinely interact with reporters, raising their suspicions. Hannah explained that this makes education more important:

Our whole purpose is to engage and inform the public and the community. And if we've got community members reaching out to us saying, you know, 'I don't really understand this, I think it's our role to help them understand.' (personal communication, March 23, 2018)

To help readers understand, Hannah details her reporting process and presents evidence to refute claims that her work is rooted in “government conspiracies” or “liberal trash.”

If I see people commenting and it's very clear that they've misunderstood or they're just completely not grasping the story or they're calling my sources fake, you know, I'll reach out to them and be like, 'Hey,' and I'll lay out like how I reported on the story, why I thought it was newsworthy, what we consider when we think something's newsworthy. (personal communication, March 23, 2018)

The misunderstandings aren't limited to hard news stories. Kendall, the entertainment and lifestyle reporter, recounted several interactions where readers were upset when a certain pizza restaurant or antiques store wasn't included in a “Five \_\_\_\_\_ to visit this weekend” style story. Readers fail to recognize not all establishments can be included in each story, and their initial reaction is to believe the newspaper is taking a narrow view of the community, she said.

I cover arts, culture, entertainment, things that are typically the fun stories, but people can still get upset for things like that because, again, they don't realize that we are covering the community as much as possible and the best ways possible. Just because we might cover one topic, doesn't mean that we're saying that it's the be-all-end-all to that conversation. (personal communication, March 18, 2018)

To assuage their concerns, Kendall said she directs readers to past stories where the restaurant or venue in question was covered. Redirecting to other stories both educates them how to utilize the newspaper's archives and reiterates Kendall and the newspaper's commitment to

community. If the venue hasn't been reported on, she said she thanks the reader for their recommendation and makes a note to consider the business for a future story.

Sometimes misconceptions aren't focused on the reporting, but the reporter. Sarah, the small newspaper editor near Baton Rouge, said lack of information in a story recently led to calls online that she "had an agenda" and was omitting the truth. The article, a small news item about a local parade, failed to include that a local organization funded the parade after city government decreased the parade's funding. The group's leader shared the story widely on Facebook, tagging group members and others as he complained about the organization's exclusion. She said she didn't report on the money because she wasn't aware the parade's main financial supporter had changed. Sarah was embarrassed by the mistake, but quickly penned an editorial to clear the air and address the claims about her "agenda."

I'm like, 'I don't have an agenda. I don't have time to have an agenda'....[The Facebook post] helped in making me and a lot of other people aware of the problem, but it also helped me to solve the issue because I was able to very quickly reach out and say, 'Anytime y'all have anything like this, next time let me know. I would have loved to have covered it, I just didn't know.' (personal communication, March 7, 2018)

Though it's sometimes difficult to change people's minds, misunderstandings from the audience can be rectified. The same isn't always true when misinformation is being purposely spread by third parties. This was the case with Heather, whose newspaper frequently had to contend with falsified reports from a local political blogger. The blogger, whose website is regularly cited by residents skeptical of her newspaper's reporting, has established a sense of legitimacy by attending local government meetings and taking photographs on his camera phone, Heather said. Though citizen journalists can contribute meaningful work, this blogger traffics in rumor, she said. Some of his claims, including a report about a fabricated District Attorney's

investigation, have sown “distrust between the public and their elected officials with no basis” (personal communication, March 8, 2018). Unlike reporters at Heather’s weekly newspaper, the blogger does not report to a membership organization like the Louisiana Press Association or a larger ethics board, leaving him free to spread gossip with abandon, Heather said.

It's frustrating, for sure, to work so hard on something and then have other people who are not held to the same standard as you, come up and try to steal your thunder.... There's times I want to stand up and scream and say, "He's not a journalist at all," but you just can't do that because you can't alienate any of your readers, or anyone who might put any faith in what he has to say. (personal communication, March 8, 2018)

Having a website and social media platforms has helped the weekly have more of a “cutting edge” over the rumors, she said. Now, the newspaper can post a story online and broadcast it to a wide audience quickly before his blog post goes online, whereas before the paper was limited to an after-the-fact response several days later. The flexibility allows the paper to “enlighten people a little bit before they read other things. Maybe they can go into it with a different mindset,” Heather said (personal communication, March 8, 2018)

Having defined reporting standards also helps reporters establish legitimacy over third parties’ unverified reporting. Brittany, Robert and Jessica all stated that consistent quality is key. If you’re “consistently putting out well-researched, fair, balanced content, then people will eventually pick up on that,” Jessica said (personal communication, March 27, 2018). Brittany agreed, explaining that strict accountability and adherence to established standards is also needed:

You maintain your own standards all the time, and you hold everyone on your team accountable to them. When it doesn’t happen, when something goes wrong, you’re upfront about it. (personal communication, March 22, 2018)

Robert said he adheres to this philosophy as well in his reporting.

I worry less about the Hayride's of the world and those crazy bloggers, because I think that if you are doing a slow build over time of using your consistent approach to build your audience, I think the audience is smart enough to be able to tell the difference. (personal communication, March 23, 2018)

Increasingly, reporters are finding creative and digital friendly ways to illustrate their reporting process and draw readers in. Robert was the biggest champion of this approach. He said the old mathematics adage "if you just show your work it's more important than actually getting the answer right" also holds true for journalism (personal communication, March 23, 2018). While not promoting inaccurate reporting, "showing your work" through links, embedded documents, data visualizations and other digital media elements can be just as useful as the actual reporting, Robert said. Providing readers with the source documents that influenced your conclusions is enlightening. Robert said he uses Document Cloud, a nonprofit journalism database of primary source documents, to embed PDFs into his stories. Document Cloud is a tool for journalists founded on the belief "that if journalists were more open about their sourcing, the public would be more inclined to trust their reporting" (DocumentCloud, 2018). He said he's also hosted Reddit 'ask-me-anything' sessions to connect with readers and answer questions about enterprise reporting.

Several reporters said live streaming tools, like Facebook Live, provide audiences a more visceral and less filtered experience when covering breaking news or a live event. Brittany said streaming platforms are powerful for breaking news. They simulate a firsthand experience and help establish a sense of time and place beyond what's possible with words. Facebook Live situations also force reporters to be candid about what information is and is not available. It can

be stressful when viewers are peppering the reporter with questions in real time, but it's also a perfect opportunity for transparency, Brittany said.

One of the best things, and it sounds counterintuitive, but one of the best things you can say to your readers is, 'I don't know.' What you're saying is, I'm not going to make this up. I'm not just going to tell you something that I don't have verified. You can trust what I'm telling you, because I'm willing to tell you when I don't know something. I think that's really key. (personal communication, March 22, 2018)

Video streaming was also leveraged for entertainment value. Heather said her company's quarterly Facebook Live requirements pushed her creatively when reporting in the field. When covering concerts or other live events, she conducted stand-ups on camera and interviewed attendees off-the-cuff for fresh, colorful reporting.

Robert said he uses the streaming platforms to interview local political officials. The videos, coupled with lightly edited Q-and-A interviews, provide readers with an unvarnished view of the official and a greater understanding of their turns of phrase, mannerisms and opinions. The approach is more transparent than the typical candidate profile, he said.

The third research question assessed reporters' consideration of reader feedback. Each of the nine reporters interviewed indicated newsrooms are paying more attention to reader feedback — whether they want to or not. This change prominently signifies the shift from legacy to new media. Feedback in previous gatekeeping models was considered infrequent and delayed, leaving newspapers and reporters to develop their own conceptions of the audience and their desires (Westley & MacLean, 1957). Now, newsrooms can access real time data detailing page views per minute, most read articles, the percentage of mobile versus desktop users and the number of minutes engaged, among other metrics. Reporters and editors can see the influence of likes, shares and retweets on an article's reach. Additionally, readers are more willing to “voice what's

in their head” in the comments, revealing their feelings toward an article, Kendall said (personal communication, March 18, 2018).

The internet and social media was a “reckoning” for media companies, Brittany said. Analytics illustrate the disparity between reporters’ news value and what stories readers are actually reading, she said. For example, Sarah, the small-town editor, said she’s always surprised when she’ll post a story on Facebook, expecting “nobody’s probably going to interact with this,” and then the article receives 20 shares (personal communication, March 7, 2018). It’s difficult to predict what will capture attention, and media companies are still adjusting.

Difficult or not, possessing a vague conception of the audience and their interests is no longer tenable. Now, “you always need to be aware of what your audience is thinking,” Hannah said (personal communication, March 23, 2018). With more competitors in the market, newspapers must understand how to position themselves to capture page views. Sustained or increasing page views are appealing to advertisers, and advertiser dollars are still central to mass media’s financing formula. Reporters and editors must appeal to readers’ interests, leveraging knowledge from readership analytics to produce content the audience will engage with. The reporters interviewed said this yields both positive and negative results.

Robert said analytics put news organizations in a stronger position and allows the newspaper to “change and grow with our readers” (personal communication, March 23, 2018). He said he couldn’t comprehend how newspapers accurately reflected the public interest before, unless they conducted readership surveys and actively polled the community. Others expressed similar sentiments. “There are certain days I really do think, I don’t know how journalists did it

back in the 70's," Kendall said (personal communication, March 18, 2018). Now, selecting story ideas readers will engage with is less of a gamble.

Emily said publishing appealing stories is essential to the success of her newspaper. "If you want to keep a newspaper alive, we've got to know what the people are going to want to read in it," she said (personal communication, March 15, 2018). Reader feedback has been especially influential at her newspaper. Running counter to trends, her readers pushed the paper toward reporting more hard news, rather than more human interest content. Emily said the change has given the newspaper the courage to hold local leaders accountable for their behavior. That wasn't always the case, she said.

We're in a very small community, and it's always kind of been like, you can't put the hard news out there because you're going to upset the people who buy the ads, and without the ads, you don't have a newspaper. But with Facebook, we started to see that people want to know what's going on in government, whether it's good or bad....I would definitely think that social media has made us more willing to put those hard crime stories out there, even though we're going to upset people, because we see that overall, that's what the general public is wanting to know. (personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Emily said the newspaper has been more dogged pursuing public documents and information officials are withholding, and they aren't as hesitant to challenge the parish's existing socioeconomic power structure. Now, the newspaper feels like it's better serving the community, she said.

As mentioned above, many media companies have seen readers leaning more toward entertainment content than hard news. The shift has pushed publications to place a greater online focus on celebrity news, viral online content and entertainment value. Robert, the city hall

reporter, said increased entertainment value doesn't need to be a dirty concept. News can be both fun and informative without compromising integrity, he said.

What we're seeing, what we've learned from metrics, what we've learned from social media, is that news has played a larger entertainment role. A lot of serious reporters will be more concerned about that than I am, but I think if we're gonna entertain people with news, at least we're helping them understand that news is happening, you know? We are getting them interested in issues. (personal communication, March 23, 2018)

Several reporters said the practice of kowtowing to reader demand is troubling, and extends beyond adding pizzazz to news stories. Reporters detailed instances where newspapers published articles and multimedia elements solely to cater to the reader, regardless of news value. Jessica said she's covered articles she felt weren't newsworthy because she was told to by higher-ups. Brittany said repeated reader inquiries about Hurricane Harvey and the Cajun Navy pushed her newspaper to investigate rumors that Houstonians were shooting at Cajun Navy members. Though newsworthy if true, sufficient evidence didn't exist to verify the story and resources were diverted prematurely under reader pressure, she said.

Trying to confirm a myopic experience like that in the state of a massive natural disaster is incredibly difficult. We were having to make this decision about how or whether to cover something that we weren't even sure was a story yet, and it was a conversation we were forced into having really before we should've been having it. (personal communication, March 22, 2018)

Hannah said weighing news value versus reader interest is a constant negotiation.

There's two sides to every coin. Sometimes people say, 'Oh, it's great that we're listening more to our readers.' Other times we say, 'Oh, we're catering too much to what the readers want versus news value.' (personal communication, March 23, 2018)

Several of the reporters acknowledged managing both is a balancing act. At least two reporters specifically referenced the need to give readers both "the meat and potatoes" and the "dessert." For example, Kendall said she's passionate about community theater, but those stories

don't necessarily receive the clicks to justify the hours spent reporting them. She said it hurts when you realize editors "would rather me write about chicken and biscuits, than for me to write about this life-changing theater performance that's happening tomorrow" (personal communication, March 18, 2018). Kendall said she's finding ways to support both. First, she's working to find deeper angles that give the theater features broader community appeal. Recently, a local high school performed a production of "Carrie: The Musical," a story inspired by Stephen King's popular horror novel. Her coverage resonated because it highlighted the school's mission to create a dialogue about bullying in schools, a theme many can relate to, she said. The story became one of her most widely read theater features and was published on the front page. When her priorities for community arts coverage are met, Kendall said she recognizes she needs to pivot. For each theater article, she said she recognizes "I need to do a list tomorrow of the top five tacos to eat in town, because people want to know that" (personal communication, March 18, 2018).

Several reporters said reader feedback also taught them how they can improve their coverage. Both Robert and Hannah said helpful reader feedback allowed them to reflect on their reporting choices and include coverage. Hannah said reader suggestions revealed new avenues for reporting her newsroom hadn't considered or was unaware of, while Robert said reader responses showed him where he could explain concepts better.

## **Conclusion**

The internet changed the world, and there's no going back. No industry was left untouched by the changes the internet and social media ushered in, and the journalism field was

especially affected. As we expand our understanding of what these changes mean it's important journalists recognize their position in the puzzle has also shifted. I started this project interested particularly in the gatekeeping role and how journalists have adapted it to fit a mass media environment. At its core, the gatekeeping theory is about the transmission of information, the forces influencing the transmitter's decision-making process and the information's delivery. Over time, the theory became associated with control and legacy media's air of self-importance. While the internet wrested control from the media, the gatekeeping theory is still relevant and adaptable to modern life.

Based on my interviews, I found evidence to support the development of a hybrid gatekeeper-marketer role. This hybrid gatekeeper-marketer role represents a rebranded gatekeeping theory in which the gatekeeper acts more as a liaison, with a focus on facilitating engagement and promoting content instead of controlling information flow. Standard publication decisions are still made, but with increased competition the gatekeeper's focus has shifted from the gate to the delivery channel, and the journalist-source nexus at its end.

To execute this rebranded role, reporters must have a forward facing social media presence. They must be engaging online, observe what readers are discussing and build rapport with them. When familiarity is established, readers are more willing to contribute to crowdsourcing efforts and provide journalists with tips. Reporters must also seek to deepen the public's sense of trust by communicating their decision-making processes and providing clarifications when possible. Digital media tools provide journalists new avenues to invite readers into the story.

This social media structure is mutually beneficial. Readers are better able to assert their opinions and influence output, while reporters can promote their work, build loyal reader networks and remain abreast of changes in reader interest.

There were some limitations to the study. The study pool was skewed heavily female, white and young. As stated in the methodology section, seven of the eight participants were white, seven were female and the average age was 27. Ideally, I would have liked the interviews to be more balanced. I chose to allow participants to self-select into the study instead of selecting specific reporters to avoid the influence of my own bias. While this was well-intentioned, men, minorities and older reporters did not opt to participate. Executing a mixed selection process — calling for participants while making selections to balance the pool — would have yielded more diverse opinions. Additionally, more participants would be preferable. I contacted editors at over 90 newspapers, but the response rate was small, even with follow-up contact and outreach from mutual professional contacts.

Future studies could correct for these limitations and deepen our understanding of this evolving role. In future efforts, researchers could incorporate observation hours of reporters on the job, conduct a statewide survey of newspaper reporters, and review and code the reporters' personal and professional social media profiles for work activity. Studies could also be expanded to research how these changes are affecting radio and television reporters.

An intriguing element that emerged from the interviews was the idea of increased stress in the newsroom. Reporters noted the “always on” nature of social media blurs the lines between work and personal time and creates greater risk of burnout. One reporter said, “if I didn't have to use it for my job, I don't even think I'd want to be on social media anymore” (personal

communication, March 23, 2018). Reporters noted feeling beholden to reader comments and activity on their stories, even when off the clock. A joint mass communication-psychology study could yield insights into the changing mental health of reporters and the effects of work stress on personal health and wellbeing.

Despite its limitations, this study is important because it provides insights into how the internet has influenced news dissemination and reporters' relationships with their communities. Gatekeeping studies have polled reporters at the country's largest publications, but few or no researchers have focused on changes at a state level. Local influence was evident in the reporter's experiences. Further, determining how the media can foster trust and transparency has never been more important. The country is in a turbulent period of social and political change, and producing truthful, fact-based reporting and promoting it to the public is necessary to counter "fake news."

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## Appendix A

### **Demographics**

Age

Gender

Race

Industry experience

Job title

### **Interview questions**

1. Does your news organization have a formal social media policy? If not, are there informal guidelines?
2. Does your publication preclude you from engaging with readers online, either in the comments section of your article or on social media?
3. How many social media platforms are you active on for professional purposes?
4. Do you have your professional association included in your social media biographies?
5. How frequently do you use social media to promote your work and the work of your publication?
6. How frequently do you engage with readers online?
7. How frequently do you respond to reader comments on your publication's website?
8. Have you ever used social media or your publication's online forums to improve readers' media literacy skills?
9. If you do not engage with your readers online, why not?
10. Has social media improved your understanding of your beat?
11. Has it improved your relationship with your readers?

12. What is your perception of journalism's gatekeeping role?
13. Do you see yourself as a gatekeeper?
14. Do you think the role of the gatekeeper is still relevant in today's journalism industry?
15. How have you seen the gatekeeping role change over the course of your career?
16. How important do you think transparency is between a publication and its readers?
17. Recently, publications like The New York Times and The Washington Post have been issuing blog posts and articles detailing how their journalists reported out controversial stories, including the Roy Moore allegations. What do you think of this practice?
18. Do you think the decreased separation between readers and reporters on social media and online platforms is creating undue influence on reporting?