

**TO POST OR NOT TO POST:  
Gatekeeping Effects Of Breaking  
News On Internet Newspaper Websites**

**By Scott Lambert**

It used to be a morning ritual, wake up, pick up the morning paper and read the news before you get ready for work. But times have changed. Today, a reader may get up, head to the computer and call up the online edition of his newspaper to see what's happening. People are increasingly headed to the internet before they go to their doorstep for a paper for many reasons, including the search for information and the ease with which they can get on the internet.<sup>1</sup>

As society and technology have advanced, the newspaper industry has been forced to advance as well. Newspaper web sites are now the norm with over 4,000 newspapers playing host to web sites<sup>2</sup> and with each site comes different ways to handle the news. Many web editions simply reprint the day's news from the newspaper. Others, mostly at larger newspapers, have interactive web sites and staffs to fill up some extra news for online readers.<sup>3</sup> This means that as the news heads to the web, the Gatekeeper heads there as well.<sup>4</sup>

Who runs the gate for an online newspaper when breaking news occurs? Does the Gatekeeper hold off on running a story online in order to save it for the newspaper or will the Gatekeeper choose to run the story online first? What factors go into this decision?

This paper will examine the role of the Gatekeeper at a small or regional newspaper when it comes to running an online story of breaking news before it hits the street in print.

## Literature Review

Shoemaker defines Gatekeeping as the process in which many potential news images are shaped and cut down into a few news images, or the process in which billions of messages are cut down into hundreds of messages per day.<sup>5</sup>

Gatekeeping first appeared in a study by Kurt Lewin who proposed that power moves through certain gates. His study was done in food consumption.<sup>6</sup> David Manning White brought Gatekeeping to the study of media with his 1950 study.<sup>7</sup> His study was an in-depth look at Mr. Gates, a copy editor. He waited until after Mr. Gates had finished putting out the daily edition of the newspaper and looked over all the material he hadn't used to put into the paper the next day.

Through interviews, White got an idea of what went through Mr. Gates' mind when making his decision to run or not run a story. White found that factors such as bad writing, timing, and subjective factors played into what Mr. Gates put into the paper every day and, more importantly, left out of the paper on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup> It showed how subjective choosing stories for a newspaper could be. The results were much the same when Snider did a follow-up study on Mr. Gates as well, during the Vietnam War.<sup>9</sup>

As studies advanced, it became clear that there are certain channels in which information flows.<sup>10</sup> These channels include the workings of reporters and editors and the organizations they work for. Daily routine plays a very large role in

Gatekeeping. It gives the Gatekeeper parameters from which to work. This all builds into the Gatekeeping process.

All of these build into a force that gives the Gatekeeper some freedom in the information he chooses to put in the paper but at the same time, gives him guidelines via work routines that will take some of the subjectivity out of his choice.<sup>11</sup> Some of the factors that will help the Gatekeeper choose what news is include organizational structure, accepting influence from opinion makers and keying on the output of a reference institution (the AP or New York Times are cited examples)<sup>12</sup>.

White showed that Mr. Gates relied on his own subjectivity as well as routines to make his decisions.<sup>13</sup> Routines can include many different things. For television, a routine could be how visual a story is, for newspapers, it can be how close it is to deadline when the story comes across.<sup>14</sup> Routines can also be as simple as the way things have always been done before.

Another key factor is how the newspaper publisher feels about a certain event and how he or she perceives the public's opinion of that event as well.<sup>15</sup> The publisher wields influence at a newspaper and the Gatekeeper must always keep that in mind.

All of these factors combine to make the process for a Gatekeeper both easier and, at times, more difficult to process. The Gatekeeper's job is, simply, to select what stories readers will read in the paper the next day.

Gatekeepers have traditionally played a very large role when it comes to newspapers. That prominence has made its way to the internet as well. While users of online news can in some ways determine their own gates, the Gatekeeper still plays the role of clearing the path to that gate.<sup>16</sup>

As the rise of the internet advanced, Gatekeeping studies moved to that arena. Some studies focused on what made newspapers adopt websites. A Lowrey study showed that competition and owner size is the largest factor in bringing a paper to the internet, along with corporation size.<sup>17</sup> Once the online paper is adopted, many of the old Gatekeeping rules still apply.

A Singer study<sup>18</sup> showed that many regional papers were mainly local news dominated on their online sites, not using the AP for online stories. Also, many newspaper websites imitate their paper in look as well as style.<sup>19</sup>

There have been very few studies that have studied the effects of breaking news on an internet web site.

Gatekeepers also play a role in a newspaper's credibility. And even though credibility is often an issue on other websites, studies have shown that readers believe in internet newspapers and that many people prefer to read their local news online.<sup>20</sup>

The Gatekeeper has a very large role in selecting the newspaper's online content. Much of it is academic, with the Gatekeeper placing the top stories from the day in the updated web site.<sup>21</sup>

These studies were all done on newspaper web sites that posted news the day the stories hit in their newspaper. These are all very important studies.

But none have asked questions about breaking news. What stories should go on the web the day they happened? With the advent of the internet, the newspaper has the opportunity to become as timely as the radio or television. This is a study about content hitting the web before it hits the print newspaper and the Gatekeeper's role in this.

**R1** -- What is the Gatekeeper's role in putting breaking news on the web site?

**R2** -- What are the effects of the Gatekeeper putting breaking news, or a scoop, on the web before it hits the ground in the actual newspaper?

**R3** – What Gatekeeping factors will come into play as the decision is reached?

These questions are very important in the news industry. Newspapers are fighting to maintain circulation and learning to deal with the emergence of the internet. Questions about how to handle the internet and still have a solid print product are vital to the newspaper industries future. Answers to how to handle the Gatekeeping process and how important it is in the current newspaper environment then become very important as well.

## Methods

This study will examine these questions. Using in-depth interviews with five newspaper editors<sup>22</sup> from small to regional newspapers with circulations ranging from 10,000 to 35,000, I will examine their thought processes as they make these decisions on a daily basis. The interviews are the best way of gaining an understanding of how a Gatekeeper goes through the process of choosing his information to put on an internet web site.

Of the five subjects, two were interviewed in person and three were interviewed via telephone. I found no difference in length of answers or attention to detail from the telephone interviews or the in-person interviews.

The subjects were all asked a series of questions that related to the Gatekeeping aspects of putting breaking news onto a web site. Each subject was asked 10 questions in an opening round. The questions were arranged to get direct answers and also to provide an idea of the process in which these editors use both daily routine and their own news judgment to select breaking online news. As the interview progressed, each subject gave their insights on the subject of breaking news and online newspaper use. Those insights often led to follow-up questions that strengthened their points-of-view and led to a more concrete field of data for me to work with.<sup>23</sup>

All of the editors have at least 15 years of experience in the newspaper industry. Many have over 20 years of experience in the newspaper industry. All have played vital roles in maintaining an internet newspaper web site, of putting

material on that site and of choosing what materials will go on the web site. Since we have some managing editors involved, we also get a look at how the routines are made that contribute to the Gatekeeping process.

The subjects were selected because they represent a varied range of newspaper size and age range. The oldest of the editors is in his late 50s. The youngest is 38. The newspaper circulations range from just over 33,000 to less than 10,000, giving a good sample of the small to mid-sized newspaper and their web sites.

The group consists of Bill Lair, Managing Editor of the Mattoon Journal Gazette/Charleston Times-Courier. Lair has been in the newspaper business for 35 years and has been an editor for over 20 years. He is currently the managing editor of the Charleston Times-Courier/Mattoon Journal Gazette, a pair of sister papers with a combined circulation of approximately 23,000.

Eric Fidler is currently the faculty manager of the Daily Egyptian, Southern Illinois University's student run newspaper. Fidler has been in the newspaper business for 25 years, including 15 years at the AP bureau in Chicago.

Tim Crosby, former city editor of The Southern Illinoisan. Crosby was the key decision-maker in what went onto The Southern's (27,446 circulation) web site and was an editor at the Freeport Journal Standard before his stint at The Southern. He also played a role in building the internet routines at the Decatur Herald. He has been in the news business for over 15 years.

Tim Smith, sports editor at The Morris Daily Herald. The Daily Herald is a small newspaper, with a circulation under 10,000. A sports editor for 10 years, Smith has 16 years in the newspaper business total. He has been involved in many aspects of the newspaper business, including stints as a circulation manager and in the advertising department.

Gary Sawyer is the managing editor of the Decatur Herald-Review (33,692 circulation). An experienced editor, Sawyer has been involved in the newspaper business for 28 years. He's been a publisher or an editor for 15 years.

The answers to these questions give people a clearer view of how Gatekeepers make decisions about putting breaking news on a newspaper's internet web site.

## **Findings and Results**

The results of the interviews showed that Gatekeeping still plays a large role in breaking news online. The Gatekeeper has made the move and, even though the internet is a more interactive forum than the newspaper, the Gatekeeping process is even more involved than it used to be, with the Gatekeeper adding new roles to his function.

*R1 -- What is the Gatekeeper's role in putting breaking news on the web site?*

The Gatekeeper still plays a traditional role. Balancing organizational routines and his own news judgment, earned over years of service, the Gatekeeper still has a number of decisions to make when it comes to putting content online,

especially when it comes to breaking news. The interview process showed that while formal policies are not in effect for most newspapers, all seem to have an informal set of routines that serve to help the gatekeeper.

Fidler commented that even though his publication doesn't have any policies in effect, his belief is that information should go up right away, before it goes onto the printed page. Crosby feels that if you have a solid foundation for an internet plan, then much of the uploading of information becomes a matter of routine.

News judgment also plays a role in selection. Lair works on a group premise, where the editor, the internet technician and the reporter work together to determine stories.

Fidler feels that news judgment is a key.

"I just follow my news instincts and my news judgment and I think that my instincts line up with an informed and aware reader," he said.

The Gatekeeper must constantly be talking with the newsroom, looking for stories that may go onto the web. He must work with the reporters to break some long-held beliefs about competition and giving away information. He must be constantly planning and updating his daily budgets in order to know what will be coming later and what news is already available for him.

"In order for this to work you have to be constantly updating your budgets and you have to have a system in place so that your writers are constantly updating as well," said Crosby.

*R2 -- What are the effects of the Gatekeeper putting breaking news, or a scoop, on the web before it hits the ground in the actual newspaper?*

The subjects were fairly clear in their agreement that breaking news is important in making the internet web site a success.

Maybe there was some argument in the early days of the web about putting breaking news up early but not anymore. The feeling is, get it up online first and let your reader know it's going to be there. And don't worry about your competition catching up to you either.

"The fact is, readers aren't interested in who gets stuff first," said Sawyer.

Crosby sees the journalistic competition moving from newspapers to the web. "For those who want the scoop, you have to give them the mentality that 'if I get it on the web first, I win,'" said Crosby. "That's difficult for some of us because we're so stained in ink we just can't let it go. The world has moved on. We have to also."

The consensus opinion is that breaking news is important to make a web site work. The key factor for most is consistency. If the internet web site is to make a major difference for the newspaper the Gatekeeping process must be consistent. Stories need to be updated and uploaded at regular intervals. Readers need to know they can find the latest breaking news as soon as it happens on their online newspaper. The Gatekeeping process must be instant and consistent.

Second, there is a difference in opinion as to whether an entire story should be run on the internet. Many of the editors want a four or five paragraph story on the internet and the entire story in the paper the next day.

“That will help drive readers to the paper the next day,” Lair said.

Others disagree. “I hate it when I see a newspaper site that does that,” said Fidler. “It certainly isn’t going to drive advertising sales up. It’s not going to raise traffic to your site because nobody is going to read your site if that’s all you have.”

This disagreement makes it even more important for a Gatekeeper to have a solid organizational routine to fall back on. The Gatekeeper must decide whether a story is run in its entirety or in a brief style that will draw readers to the paper the next day.

***R3 – What Gatekeeping factors will come into play as the decision is reached?***

The Gatekeeper is entering a new world. In the past, his job was to make the decisions about what news did and did not go into the newspaper. He culled all the unnecessary information as he, and his organizational routines, deemed fit.

But as the interviews clearly showed, the Gatekeeper’s role has changed. He or she must now be constantly looking for information to put onto the news web site. He must constantly update the web site to make it interesting for readers to come back to multiple times during the course of the day.

The Gatekeeper’s job has become much more constant. He must always make decisions on what should be going up on the web site.

He has to use his news judgment, take some input from his readers, and rely on established routines to give him an idea of what is important and when it's important to put news online.

There can be many routines, including the time. Just as deadline played a big role for Mr. Gates, the time can play a key role for today's Mr. Gates as well.

"It may be as simple as this is all I've got," said Crosby. "You have to put updates at certain times of the day and maybe that's all you have at the moment. "If that's what you've got, that's what you've got. That's not the ideal way to do it but sometimes that's how it happens."

In order to stay abreast of his new duties, the must have an organizational guideline of some kind, a routine that will make many of his decisions automatic. Combining these routines and his news judgment, the Gatekeeper must be ready for his new responsibilities.

### **Other Findings**

While doing this research, other questions and answers were provided that seem to be very important.

First, size of the newspaper seems to matter when it comes to online content. Smaller papers, with smaller staffs seem to struggle to get news on the internet on a timely matter.

Larger newspapers seem more likely to have an organizational routine (even if they don't have any firm policies) that allows them to make decisions on

whether to upload information constantly. The consistency, as answered in research question two, is important because it gives a newspaper web site credibility and drives eyes to the newspaper.

Smaller papers still seem to be more focused on getting people to read their actual paper and don't want to give away information that will be in the paper the next day. Larger newspapers take the approach that a good story on the internet may actually drive someone to the newspaper.

One editor, who spent time at both smaller and mid-sized newspapers believes that smaller papers can put enough updates on their web site to make them a viable alternative without extra help. "I don't think you need to hire more people," said Crosby. "If you plan well and you've got the construction in place, it becomes a matter of routine. If you can get your writers into the routine of thinking internet first, you can make it work."

Second, the competitive battleground has either moved or disappeared. The battle to get a story out first in print has changed to the battle to get the story on the net first. While Sawyer may be right in his comment that people don't really care who gets it first, Crosby also made a strong point that the battleground for scoops has moved from the newspaper to the internet web site. The Gatekeeper must be looking for breaking news and pushing to get it out on the web as early as possible in order to be ahead of the competition.

A final point to make is that much more information is available to the public. Many internet web sites now make documents and press releases available

to the public. “One thing we like to do is not only put up breaking news but documents, press releases or a court document,” said Sawyer. “It gives the reader who is looking for something in particular, the chance to find it.”

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to determine the Gatekeeper’s role in breaking news on a newspaper internet web site. While the Gatekeeper’s role has previously been to narrow the process in which many images are cut down into a few messages,<sup>24</sup> today it is even more important. Today, the Gatekeeper must continue to narrow the images into a manageable amount for a reader to digest and, at the same time, work as a Gatekeeper inside his own newsroom and convince the staff writers to update their stories and get information ready to be put on the web site at a moment’s notice.

The interviews proved that putting breaking news on the internet web site is necessary although there is still much discussion as to how much news should be put on the web site before the story runs in the actual newspaper. Size of the paper plays a big role in the importance of breaking news on the internet. Smaller papers, with smaller staffs and less time seem to be less willing to place their stories online before they hit the print edition, looking instead for the “huge” breaking story before they put it online.

As papers grow in size, so does the importance of their web sites. Larger, regional newspapers want to put their information up as soon as possible in order

to generate more hits to their site. By putting breaking news online, the subjects were convinced that their newspaper's credibility rose in the eyes of its readers because they were able to get information quickly.

The subjects made it very clear that newspaper routine played a large role in the Gatekeeping process for an internet newspaper. Although there were very few official procedures that were used, all of the sites had an unofficial process that gave the Gatekeeper guidelines which are very necessary. News judgment also plays a key role in the process, according to the subjects.

The subjects also made it clear that there is little fear from competition when putting breaking news on the web site. In fact, the internet may increase the newspaper's relevance. While radio and television have always had the chance to jump ahead of the newspaper in timeliness, the advent of the internet has allowed the newspaper to become more immediate. The newspaper already has the ability to give the viewer a more in-depth perspective of the news than a radio or television report and the timeliness only increases the newspaper's advantage.

The key to this, according to the subjects, is consistency. As the reader becomes accustomed to going to his newspaper web site to get the breaking news, it becomes very important for the Gatekeeper to make sure there is news for him to read.

The Gatekeeper's job now entails deciding which news will be presented to the audience and in which format. He must decide what breaking news goes onto the internet web site and what will be held to run in the newspaper edition.

He must constantly be updating the web site and he must still find a way to keep the newspaper interesting. Third, more and more information is available for the Gatekeeper to process and make available to the reader. The Gatekeeper must organize the constant flow and put it in a recognizable format so the reader doesn't become overwhelmed with information.

The interviews showed that as the larger, regional papers, achieve more success with their online product, they look for more information to enhance their product. While breaking news is the major ingredient in driving eyes to the site, the papers have made more information available, like court documents or press releases. These give the reader a more individualized product. He can choose what he wants to read or not. But it is also the job of the Gatekeeper to keep this information organized for the reader.

This makes the job of a Gatekeeper even more important. The interviews showed that newspapers are moving into the direction of "news organizations," an entity whose purpose is to get as much pertinent information to the reader as quickly as possible.

This shows that newspapers are looking for a way to remain relevant as they battle dropping circulation. Newspaper internet web sites are working hard to find ways to bring people to their web sites and this study proves that breaking news is an essential element in achieving that goal.

This study has shown the importance of the Gatekeeper in today's internet world. It also raises questions about the importance of breaking news and the Gatekeeper's role in putting that news on the internet as soon as possible.

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