

Routledge Companion to Political Journalism

Section: 'Public engagement in Political Journalism: Audience Reception, Interaction and Participation'

### **Protecting the citizen: Political Journalists as gatekeepers in the digital age**

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#### **Abstract**

The gatekeeping function of political journalism has never been as important. What has become known as the 'infodemic', the spread of spurious and false claims, has shown itself a threat to public health and well-being. Journalism is uniquely placed to reassert its role as arbiter within the information environment. We argue that professional standards must be central to the work of journalism, empowering them to ensure they determine what is news, who are the credible sources and rebalance their attention away from the loudest and most controversial voices to create a more pluralist news environment to inform and educate citizens. The Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the problematic nature of disinformation, we argue journalists must protect citizens from being misinformed, from making unwise choices, so protecting the overall health of democracies.

#### **Bios**

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### **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century communication environment is complex and mainstream news media finds itself in a battle in the attention economy as well as over being a credible source of factual information (Peters & Broesma, 2017). Information and communication technologies now allow a range of actors to present themselves as arbiters of truth. On 15 February, WHO Director General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus declared “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous” (WHO, 2020). He highlighted here the significant damage and harm that can result from disinformation and misinformation being allowed to spread unchecked. Specifically, the anti-vaccination claims to scientific facts, spurious medications that can prevent infection and claims that COVID-19 is a hoax, have all directly impacted the behaviors of some citizens, leading them to reject using protective equipment (namely masks/face coverings), dying from ingesting chemicals touted as ‘game changers’ and refusing to accept a vaccine. The belief in claims of election fraud in the US led to four deaths and many being imprisoned for storming the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021. These examples show the real consequences and significant risks posed to public health and wellbeing that result from accepting disinformation as truth. Hence we argue that the evidence suggests citizens need protection from exposure to such false information. Citizens can navigate across platforms, become exposed to myriad claims to fact from a range of sources which may appear credible and knowledgeable but may have dubious intentions. Citizens may gain a diverse range of perspectives or be reliant on one single source of information. Patterns of media use are increasingly fluid, unpredictable and context-driven. The complex patterns of consumption mean that the mainstream political journalists’ gatekeeping position has been seriously challenged and, with the term fake news being widely used, undermined. We suggest there is real danger that the information environment can easily become a disinformation environment as news increasingly blurs with views, campaigns bypass news media using social media and citizens retreat into echo chambers and believe those they disagree with are peddling misinformation. Hence there is a need for journalists to reassert their role as gatekeepers and watchdogs to ensure citizens are protected from those who use disinformation as a political weapon.

### **Journalism as gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping theory argues simply that information is filtered to the public by media. Media, or in fact the editors of a small number powerful news outlets in the first iteration of the theory, decided what information was important or interesting to their audiences and so gave life to or killed off news stories (Park, 1922). The essence of this theory remains a truism of newsrooms. Editorial teams still select which news should be relayed and which news sources are given prominence. The continued explanatory power of the theory means this article is not a debate about the relevance of gatekeeping theory itself. Rather, we use gatekeeping theory as a lens for thinking about the complexities of journalism practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century given the wider environment in which it operates. Scholars have

continually developed the theory to explain the complexities of the news environment as it has changed over time (see for example Shoemaker et al, 2001; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Wallace 2018). Some of those contributions are particularly useful for our argument here, specifically that the theory:

- describes the facilitation and constraining of information to determine what becomes news at various decision points – the gates;
- discusses the forces on those gates, which can include the relative newsworthiness of the information, journalistic practices within that newsroom and of any individual journalist, and (for our purposes) political actors, organisations and structures;
- considers elements of framing by considering the emphasis within individual news stories, the prominence of them in the news agenda, and the ongoing relevance of news items on the agenda and how the agenda changes over time
- analyses the role of digital technology in the process, including social media, news aggregators, artificial intelligence, search engine algorithms, etc.

The challenges which journalists face in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, however, lead us to question their ability to be effective gatekeepers; we discuss these challenges before offering ways in which gatekeeping theory help us to rethink how journalists can reassert their role in informing citizens by challenging misinformation and disinformation through rigorous reporting and factchecking, thereby protecting citizens and democracy.

### ***Challenge 1: deciding what is news***

There is a nearly endless supply of information and communication that journalists receive and must assess to determine what will eventually become ‘news’. News flows from city hall, Westminster, the White House, and other seats of political power and the routines and processes that offer ongoing sources of news. Strategic political communication responds to and attempts to influence the political agenda through news; trending topics in social media that are proven to be attracting audiences. News aggregators and algorithms supply and curate news; a range of data sources show what arguments are trending and what could become news. Also, and with increasing pace and sophistication, disinformation is created to corrupt the information environment. News selection in this environment is much more complex than in early studies of gatekeeping where content was primarily drawn from newswires (e.g. White, 1950). The political process and the routines of politics and government fit within the event orientation of news. Similarly, pseudo-events like daily press briefings, political party conferences, and election campaign events provide ready-made news. However, editors need to demonstrate careful selectivity when dealing with all forms of strategic political communication. Parks (2017) argues many manufactured events could be seen as a form fake news. Although the term has myriad definitions and is arguably over-used, the argument still holds that journalistic coverage of these events tends toward ‘autopilot’ and that interventions into how to cover these political events are necessary. As is, coverage of these political events tends toward the superficial in the form of a murder a day and scandal driven focus-to-grab headlines. That is not to say that all journalism fits this description, as there are plenty of excellent examples of robust, issue-oriented, deep journalism. However, there is evidence of a lack of criticality when journalists are attempting to meet tight deadlines and report

directly from the floor of party conventions and conferences in the same way as when dealing with press releases (Lewis et al, 2008).

### ***Challenge 2: deciding who is a credible news source***

The routines and practices of journalism, which permit working at speed, restrict the journalist's ability to critically evaluate information. A longstanding challenge has been the well-documented over-reliance on elite sources for information (Manning, 2001). Not only do these official sources hold positions within politics and government that confers a level of credibility, but they also have privileged access to information, thereby providing additional credibility to a news story. The global political and media environment today, however, poses several challenges for journalists as gatekeepers. In particular, when key sources act in controversial ways which makes their words and actions newsworthy, while less dramatic but important voices and events can be drowned out.

An example of this would be Donald Trump's approach to politics and public communication. Trump has made dangerous comments about the potential for injecting chemical disinfectant as a means for combatting COVID-19 and various divisive comments on immigration, environmental protection, and women's reproductive rights. But Trump stands as having newsworthiness and credibility however his statements can be inflammatory, polarizing, inaccurate or dangerous. As President, but also as a personality, Trump is a regular source of news though with that comes a series of problems in terms of fact checking claims he makes when speaking publicly. Equally, there is a challenge when actors are given space and their credibility is framed in terms of their position not their arguments. The mediated spat between Donald Trump and teenage climate change activist Greta Thunberg created a situation where media had to exercise its power to interpret politics and translate it for citizens. The focus on these 'major' characters led to a polarized debate between extremes. It also depicted a verbal fight between an aged white man and a neuro-diverse young white female, while offering minimal critical commentary. Other voices and stories are stifled in this environment and alternative perspectives, especially many most effected by climate change, such as Isra Hirsi, Bruno Rodriguez, Helena Gualinga, Leah Namugerwa and other young activists, do not gain the same attention. While some news stories may highlight these individuals and their work on behalf of a range of communities, the focus tends not be sustained and the wider issues relating to climate change, are not discussed in as much detail as the clash of the conflict between higher-profile sources.

While there is some research that indicates citizen voices are increasingly appearing in news content (see for example Hopmann and Shehata, 2011; Kleemans, Schaap and Hermans 2017), there is significant variability of that across organisations and countries and elite sources continue to dominate news (De Swert and Kuypers, 2020). These citizen sources are a welcome addition and can play an important role in news discourse, although the relative prominence and the roles these citizen sources play within news content suggests there is more work to do. Research has demonstrated that these citizen voices are positioned in particular ways within news narratives, such as responding or reacting to what elite actors are doing (including to fit a particular narrative of public opinion (Cushion, 2018)), acting as eyewitnesses or participants in newsworthy events, or representing particular groups that are relevant to the story (Kleemans, Schaap and Hermans 2017). This links back to questions of credibility

and how journalists determine the relevance of individual sources to news based on a range of social and cultural factors – both within the newsroom and in wider society (Cottle, 2000). Negotiating the relative credibility, expertise, and value of information from individual sources – citizen or official – is a challenge at any time, but is increasingly challenging in the contemporary news environment.

### ***Challenge 3: deciding whether attention equates to importance***

The focus on what might appear to be a newsworthy spectacle is not limited to the coverage of pseudo-events. Welbers et al (2016) found audience clicks affect news selection; in other words, journalists selecting news based on a perception of the potential popularity of an item that appears to drive what is deemed newsworthy based on the attention it has been given by an audience. The result of this is that media and social media algorithms can make some stories prominent - while others are marginalized regardless of their importance. Media therefore pander to the consumer, producing news that is popular, as opposed to serving the needs of democratic citizens. Such practices cannot meet the lofty expectations of Peters and Broesma (2017) who argue media should inform citizens and enable them to make rational decisions. The problems journalists face are exacerbated as they compete within the attention economy where news stories may be judged on the basis of the number of clicks they receive. Fengler and Ruß-Mohl (2008) argue this drives the herd mentality of journalists while also placing journalism as part of the entertainment industry. In order to compete for attention stories must contain elements that are eye-catching, shocking, controversial or scandalous and headlines need to draw in the reader, this has led to critiques of practices under the term of clickbait journalism (Bazaco et al, 2019).

### ***Challenge 4: deciding what is true and what is fake***

Searching for items which should be news, while also keeping up the frantic pace required to feed a 24-hour news cycle that updates moment to moment, poses a range of well-documented challenges for journalism and journalists (Cushion and Sambrook, 2016). A key issue is that this environment reduces the time available for fact checking. In such a context, fake news becomes incredibly problematic as journalists are not only determining what is news, but also attempting to arbitrate between what is real and what is false. The sophistication of some fake news and the way that digital technology is used to help disseminate it, can help to make it appear legitimate. This makes it increasingly challenging to fact check, but still imperative as journalists and journalism can lose credibility if the accuracy and legitimacy of an item comes into question (Peters and Broersma, 2016). At the same time, other professional norms of journalism like objectivity are challenged in this environment. While objectivity remains contested in academic literature, it continues to be asserted by professional journalism as fundamental way of demonstrating the credibility and independence of the journalist. However, covering the competing claims from various stakeholders in high-profile and highly politicized debates from climate change to vaccines to Brexit has led to alternative facts gaining equal weight in news (see for example Dixon and Clark, 2013 (vaccines); Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004 (climate change); Cushion and Lewis, 2017 (Brexit)). Though more recent studies have shown a shift in the coverage of climate change to more closely align with the scientific consensus reporting continues to include denial and a focus on the debates between 'warners vs deniers' (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2016). In the context of fake news and populism, the rituals of journalism, which to an extent protect professional journalism or at least

differentiate professional journalism from other communication, hold significant potential to undermine it at the same time.

The above challenges all take place against a backdrop of shrinking newsrooms and the proliferation of independent publishers (including some that are set up to appear like legitimate independent news sites but that are, for lack of a better way to put it, arguably partisan propaganda outlets), exacerbating these challenges for journalism to assert its gatekeeping role. These factors all contribute to a credibility problem. Kroll quotes *The Times* David Charter "In a world with ever more sources of information, people are increasingly suspicious of the agenda behind any presentation of news" (Kroll, 2015: 27). With mainstream media being labelled as biased or fake by a range of political actors a gap opens to allow alternative media to make truth claims while reinforcing the existing biases of their audiences.

### **Rethinking gatekeeping for a digital age**

In order to meet and overcome these challenges, we argue news media need to re-establish themselves as the credible arbiters of political information in society. Many mainstream media outlets continue to hold credibility and therefore lend credibility to political actors when their voices and ideas are printed/broadcast by journalists. However, to remain credible as a news organization, claims of objectivity and balance are now insufficient. Journalists must therefore play a more overtly interventionist role in analyzing the content which has the potential to be news. Credible and objective journalism faces challenges from the norms and practices of the digital age, however journalists cannot simply succumb to the weight of these challenges. As Kroll argues, in a report on the future of journalism prepared for the Reuters Institute:

"The role of a good journalist has always been to filter, edit, check, pack, analyze and comment – fundamentals of verification that have existed for decades and won't become obsolete. Not even in the Digital Age. What has changed is the speed, the methods, the fact that economic pressures force an increasing information and work load on fewer journalists and that journalism is no longer about being the first to break a story, because you can never beat Facebook nor Twitter" (Kroll, 2015:26).

Kroll recognizes the contemporary challenges but suggests the academic and journalism communities must make it their mission to find solutions. In order for journalism to appear relevant, journalists must be able to decide what is news, package it for audience consumption while also checking its accuracy. However, they must also be aware they are competing with a range of other outlets, each of which may have credibility within their own audiences.

Gatekeepers now have a different role, not just deciding what is news but also adjudicating the validity of claims of independence and facticity. Journalists must protect the information environment against pseudo independent claims makers as well as false arguments made by extremist or anti-democratic voices. This is particularly relevant when established and mainstream outlets are challenged and populist voices emerge which claim not only to be a form of journalism - but also a more authentic and unbiased voice of the people. The UK's left-wing commentator Another Angry Voice, who engages in myth-busting and opinion pieces to provide ammunition for activists, claims the role of independent

left-wing commentator. At the other end of the ideological spectrum, Breitbart News offers a right-wing perspective claiming to promote “truthful reporting and the free and open exchange of ideas... essential to maintain a robust democracy” (Breitbart, 2019). Both perform these roles. However, neither perform their roles from an objective stance and for these and similar outlets objectivity is neither attainable or desirable and that philosophy is creeping into broader journalistic norms (Serrano, 2020). Meanwhile public service broadcasters, such as the BBC, can become paralyzed by the requirement to produce objective and balanced reporting. As readership and audiences shrink for professional journalism, newsrooms are squeezed as is the time to incorporate critical discussion from a variety of perspectives, fact checking and other news routines and rituals into reporting. Therefore, to maintain balance public service broadcasters allow all perspectives to have equal weight, a critique of the BBC during coverage of arguments during the Brexit referendum (Cushion & Lewis, 2016). With equal weight given to all sides of an argument, the audience has to make decisions on the ‘truthiness’ of arguments presented (Lilleker, 2018).

The BBC’s main line of defence against claims of bias is to highlight that accusations come from all sides of the spectrum (for example see Robinson, 2012). However, we can also suggest that absolute balance pleases no-one. The BBC’s stance on balance and objective reporting, one shared by many public service platforms, can lead to accusations of liberal elite bias as alternative outlets, as well as more extremist voices, challenge the version of the truth they offer. With public service broadcasters castigated as part of a self-serving media elite by populist voices and with anti-institutionalist platforms offering alternative facts it becomes more difficult for the citizen to navigate the information environment. It is not just that facts are contested. It is the concepts of independence and objectivity which have become blurred as media offer alternative perspectives to uphold their role as a news outlet.

Hayes et al (2007) argue journalists must display authenticity of voice, accountability to their audiences and autonomy from political, corporate or editorial constraints. However, achieving these is a challenge in the face of the constraints imposed by the speed and complexity of the information environment as well as when dealing with accusations of being fake news outlets. Bruns (2003) suggests the gatekeeping role should be revised to one of gatewatching. Within this model journalists become curators of items of interest, building large online archives of stories based on their prominence and availability, and merely decide which items are given the most prominence. While this model works for the Indymedia outlets Bruns focuses on-it is more difficult to see this model as appropriate for a credible arbiter of political news. Journalists are relegated to the role of archivists, no longer creating news, the user becomes the source. While this may permit the entry of myriad voices onto the news agenda, who is to determine which voices are more credible? Who is to filter out extreme, discriminatory or hate-inducing speech? Hence, as Bruns (2018) notes, the forms of news-making which represent gatewatching, involving open source platforms to which any user can contribute, represent more of a challenge to mainstream journalism than an alternative to the practices which constitute credible journalism.

It is also worth noting here that contributors to open source platforms, and those who perform the role of citizen journalist, represent a very small minority of users. As Hindman (2008) notes these contributors also mirror the gender, race and education profiles of mainstream journalists and offer little that is new in terms of diversity. The broader audience for news tends to have lower levels of

engagement and is ~~are~~ more likely to ~~be~~ passively consumers of a variety of news in a fragmented and non-instrumentalist fashion. They are accidentally exposed to items of news shared by close contacts and made prominent by social media algorithms and consume them irrespective of their credibility or veracity - or the alleged facticity or veracity of their arguments. Pearson and Kosicki (2017) describe this practice as way-finding, idly browsing the information environment pausing occasionally when a news item catches their eye. Such audience practices lead journalists to compete within the attention economy exacerbating the problems identified earlier where media converge on stories that have proven popularity (Welbers et al, 2016) and use clickbait tactics to capture attention (Bazaco et al, 2019).

Hence, many of the new ways of thinking about journalist practices do not undermine the core tenets of what makes for 'good' journalism. A journalism that fulfils its democratic functions and attempts to educate and inform citizens. In order to do this the gatekeeping function of journalists retains its importance, in fact its importance is emphasized. But gatekeeping, as both a theory and a practice, must evolve to take account of the changes within the information environment. So how might the gatekeeping role look for media to reassert its credibility?

- Media should offer audiences a wider window on the world, to borrow Lippmann's phrase, seeking an array of perspectives and arguments around topics that are both of high interest as well as importance;
- In doing so, the media should focus its spotlight on a wider array of actors and prevent a small number from hogging screen time or column inches due to their controversial or populist styles.
- To achieve this journalists need to cultivate relationships with a broader range of actors, making coverage more inclusive and representative;
- Journalists need to also be more careful in their curation and dissemination of items that appear to be news coming in on feeds from social media, evaluating the accuracy of claims and the credibility of sources;
- In order to cover this content media need to re-establish themselves as educators, showing their audiences what is trending, discussing the news item, its source and highlighting content that is fake;
- Using this approach media can also act as a watchdog on their rivals, not simply creating a sterile environment around their own content but reporting what other outlets claim and evaluating the veracity of differing perspectives.

### **Conclusion: gatekeeping during a pandemic**

What we propose therefore is an alternative perspective on gatekeeping that addresses the challenges we have identified. We also offer a set of normative practices which we propose allow journalists to reassert their role in educating and informing their audiences. The problem with any normative model is it can simply play the role of ~~the~~ straw man, one easily dismissed and debunked. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the role of public service broadcasting become central to public communication across a range of systems (Lilleker et al, 2021). Across a range of nations media platforms had to play the role of informer, highlighting the guidelines and rules the public must follow to prevent spread and



avoid contagion. Media also had to evaluate the claims made by government spokespersons and health experts to ensure public understanding as well as avoiding becoming outlets for propaganda. Hence, media pursued investigations regarding claims relating to the availability of protective equipment for front line health workers, the efficiency of testing systems, inadequacies in the track and trace system, and the veracity of arguments made to support containment measures. Importantly, the media also had to discuss, evaluate and debunk the various items of misinformation and fake news circulating on social media and alternative news platforms which linked COVID-19 to 5G technology or suggested cures ranging from drinking tea to the unproven benefits of hydroxychloroquine. Alongside these roles, media also gave a voice to frontline and key workers, covered the effects of lockdown on people with disabilities and severe health conditions, and exposed health crises in retirement homes. The fact that these practices can be identified across a range of nations and media platforms demonstrates that at times of crisis media can perform the normative gatekeeping functions we suggest. The challenge is to translate these new norms into everyday practice.

Within a normal, post COVID-19, news environment the same practices are necessary for a political journalist. They must challenge the arguments within strategic political communication effectively while also taking on misinformation and shining a light on propaganda from all sources. Equally, to re-engage citizens with the core notions of democracy, journalists must give air and screen time to a multiplicity of voices, necessitating a rethinking of source credibility to include a broader range of expertise. They also need to offer the opportunity for a greater range of stories and ways of understanding politics today, including the lived experiences of politics – not the lives of politicians, but the wider experiences and impacts of politics on and through citizens and communities. In this way, it is argued, political journalism can reassert and renegotiate its meaningfulness and relevance (Swart et al, 2017). Hence, we assert that rather than lacking their previous sovereign role over information, this complex information environment offers opportunities for political journalists to reassert and renegotiate their role in society. They must assert their roles over the verification, curation and sense making of political information, as many platforms have done during the pandemic. Equally, they must negotiate a role between political actors and citizens where they are seen as presenting arguments in an unbiased way while also weighing arguments according to their credibility. In this way the gatekeeper function is reasserted for the digital age as the professional journalist is seen as best placed to protect citizens and indeed democracy from the risks posed by disinformation.

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