Quasi-Gatekeeping and Quasi-Gatewatching: The Dual Role of Public Relations Practitioners in the Social Media Domain

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ABSTRACT

Background Existing literature depicts public relations practitioners as gatekeepers. Despite this, limited research exists on how much of a gatekeeping role public relations practitioners play in their organizations’ communication with the publics in the social media domain.

Analysis This article bridges the research gap by examining the dual role of quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching performed by public relations practitioners in their attempt to communicate, regulate, and manage information in the social media domain and market-space media environment.

Conclusion and implications Discussion of these two distinct roles expands the frontiers of gatekeeping studies in public relations practice and communication studies, through the introduction of a new mixed-flow model of the gatekeeping function of public relations practitioners in the digital media landscape.

Keywords Quasi-gatekeeping; Quasi-gatewatching; Public relations; Mixed-flow model; Communication; Social media

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte En dépit de la littérature existante montre que les spécialistes des relations publiques en tant que gardiens, cependant, il y a peu de recherches sur la quantité de rôle de surveillance les spécialistes en relations publiques jouent dans leurs organisations la communication avec le public dans le domaine des médias sociaux.

Analyse Par conséquent, cet article se ferme cette lacune en examinant le rôle de la dualité de pouvoirs quasi-control et quasi-gatewatching effectuée par le spécialistes des relations publiques dans leur tentative de communiquer, réglementer et gérer l’information dans le domaine des médias sociaux.

Conclusion et implications La discussion sur ces deux rôles distincts a enrichi la compréhension et les frontières d’un contrôle dans la pratique des relations publiques par l’introduction d’un nouveau modèle de flux mixtes de contrôle dans le paysage médiatique numérique.

Mots-clés Quasi-contrôle; quasi-gatewatching; relations publiques; modèle des flux mixtes; la communication; les médias sociaux

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Introduction

Gatekeeping has been a subject of investigation in many academic disciplines for many decades. In the field of public relations, this investigation has consistently focused on the decision-making authority/power of public relations practitioners in communicating with the media and other publics (Achor, 2017; Achor, Nwachukwu & Nkwocha, 2015; J Grunig, 2006; L Grunig, 1992; Porter & Sallot, 2003; Ruth-McSwain, 2011). Public relations scholarship is rife with studies that have identified the public relations practitioner as a formal gatekeeper of organizational information (Nahon, 2011; Porter & Sallot, 2003), particularly if the practitioner is a member of a dominant coalition (Bowen, 2015; Mulnix, Cojanu, & Pettine, 2012; Reber & Berger, 2006; Ruth-McSwain, 2011; Wilcox & Cameron, 2006).

Gatekeeping, as enunciated by Tushman and Katz (1980), confers on important people within organizations the ability to permit or forbid access to organizational information. This description, however, shows that organizational gatekeepers are those “key individuals in an organization who are both strongly connected to internal audiences as well as external audiences, and who are capable of translating organizational information across communication boundaries. (Tushman & Katz, 1980, p. 12)

The Public relations practitioners, in communicating with those internal and external audiences (publics), serve as the gatekeepers of organizational information, because of their role in interpreting organizations’ information. As a result, the communication decisions of public relations practitioners can greatly impact an organization, “making it important to understand the gatekeeping process of organizations and the role that public relations practitioners play in that process” (Ruth-McSwain, 2011, p. 2).

In spite of existing literature that depicts public relations practitioners as gatekeepers, there is, however, limited research on how much of a gatekeeping role public relations practitioners play in their organizations’ communication with the public in the social media domain. This present study attempts to bridge that gap in the research literature by examining the dual role of quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching performed by public relations practitioners in their attempt to communicate, regulate, and manage information in the social media environment.

The advent of social media and its proliferation has been acknowledged in the public relations domain (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011 Eyrich, Padman, & Sweeter, 2008; Lee, Sha, Dozier, & Sargent, 2015; Wright & Hinson, 2011). Nonetheless, it has not only altered some conventional communication orthodoxy (Achor & Moguluwa, 2012; Kaul, 2012; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Taylor & Perry, 2005), but has also modified the public relations media landscape, media relations, and communication ecology. For this reason, there is limited understanding of the gatekeeping role of PR practitioners specifically in selecting and communicating organizational information using social media platforms, which allow members of the public to be more in control of what they read, hear, and watch, determining what seems to be the truth to them, what news is, and what is important. The purpose of this article is to expand the frontiers of gatekeeping studies in public
relations practice by introducing and discussing two distinct roles (quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching) performed by public relations practitioners in their attempt to exercise gatekeeping authority or manage information in social media (Achor, 2017). The article also attempts to partially refute the notion within existing literature of a lack of control over content (information) and its flow in social media, through the introduction of a new conceptual model of the gatekeeping function of public relations and media practitioners in the digital media landscape.

The balance of the article is divided into four sections. The first section, the literature review, presents an architectural road map of the key conceptual issues that underpin gatekeeping, information management, and public relations practice. This section demonstrates that corporate communication and media relations aspects of public relations aptly underscore the essence of information gatekeeping, which is tied to the decision-making authority of public relations practitioners. This section tangentially examines the traditional gatekeeping role of public relations practitioners as a route to understanding the theoretical and operational issues associated with social media challenges to practitioners’ gatekeeping role. Other topics also discussed in this section include the gatekeeping process; social media and the essence/role of information gatekeeping in public relations practice. This section also draws attention to the expansion of gatekeeping frontiers through the workings of social media technologies. The second section examines the dual role of public relations practitioners through the lenses of information production and control. It also critiques theoretical foundations that underpin the article, highlighting the conceptual model of social media effect on quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching. The third section examines the implications of the dual role for public relations practice and theory, and the last section draws the curtain by giving concluding remarks on the key issues discussed.

Literature review: Conceptual framework
Gatekeeping is the generic term that aptly underpins public relations’ information management function; it literally describes information regulation and control but technically gives decision-makers and other designated personnel the authority to facilitate or constrain the flow of information to designated publics or audience using designated channels of communication (Achor, 2017). Within the context of this article, discussion of the gatekeeping function is domiciled in corporate communication, which is housed in mainstream public relations (Goodman, 1994), information management, and communication literature (Achor et al., 2015). Corporate communication is considered to be an interdisciplinary academic field, but it is predominantly associated with public relations (Goodman, 1994; Goodman, Michael, 2011).

Stripped of technicalities, public relations has been recognized as a basic concept that entails management of the communication between an organization and its publics (J. Grunig, 1992). Grunig emphasizes that public relations and communication management include planning, implementation, and evaluation of the organization’s communication process. In the communication process, the external and internal publics are groups that can influence the organization’s ability to achieve its goals. Excellence Theory in public relations, formulated by Grunig, states that “public relations facilitate the organization’s efficiency by helping in harmonizing the organiza-
tion’s goals with the strategic audiences’ expectations” (J. Grunig 1992, p. 54). As part of this approach, public relations is built as a high-quality, long-term process, where the public relations manager is a decision-maker in the company (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Kazaka, 2012).

Gatekeeping, through whatever lens one uses to examine it, means controlling the use of and access to information in an objective or subjective manner. It also means regulating information for the purpose of protecting society from the dangers of disinformation or misinformation. The public relations (PR) practitioner is assumed to be a gatekeeper (depending on the decision-making authority vested in them) and has the authority to regulate organizational information in such a way that it serves both public relations and other organizational or corporate goals and interests (Bowen, 2015; Ruth-McSwain, 2011). Such authority is exercised through withholding, censoring, choosing, forbidding, and allowing access to organizational information; these actions help to regulate the spread of sensitive information and avoid it falling into the wrong hands.

Operationally, the public relations practitioner performs this function and/or exercises the gatekeeping authority (Achor et al., 2015) using designated or controlled channels and also by providing information subsidies to the mass media or news outlets and other publics (Dozier, 2010; Kiousis, Laskin, & Kim, 2011). The practitioner may also intentionally or physically withhold information from some internal or external publics, based on their risk assessment of the release of said piece of information. Based on the organization’s media relations policy, the practitioner may give reasons for giving or declining access to certain organizational information.

From the media relations context, gatekeeping starts within the organization and is practiced by information managers who are regarded as the information source and the primary gatekeepers (Achor, 2017; Gandy, 2007; Sinclair, 2007). Traditionally, information (e.g., news releases, reports, backgrounders) allowed to pass through the organization’s controlled channels is provided to the news media in the form of information subsidies (Dozier, 2010; Kiousis et al., 2011). Here, the information is controlled; the channel used and the flow are also controlled. The flow of information here is unidirectional. The way social media operates might make information control by the PR practitioner a bit challenging, given that information flow is multidirectional. This scenario, however, makes it possible for institutions, network individuals, everyday individuals, and other entities, for example, to influence one another and determine what is news, what is important, and what is not (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Nahon, 2011). Some users of social media are now posting anything at any time in the public domain, without consideration of what effect this release of information can have on people and organizations. They also post on organizations’ social media platforms as third parties (employees, potential and actual customers, and other stakeholders) and as unidentified persons who pose as friends. Most times, both the content and sources of information posted by these third parties are not verified, thereby posing great risk to the organization’s reputation (Aula, 2010).

The gatekeeping concept
Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947, 1951) coined the concept of gatekeeping to explain
decision points in social settings. He developed his theory of channels and gatekeepers to explain the focal points of social changes in communities (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Lewin used the analogy of the food selection process and the different channels that food has to pass through (e.g., the grocery stores and the vegetable garden, with “gatekeepers” such as the housewife) to explain decision points and the power of certain individuals in a social setting or organizational context. Lewin stated that an individual or group has the power to make the decision on whether something is “in” or “out.”

The gatekeeper decides what information should move to a group or individual and what information should not. At this juncture, the gatekeepers are the decision-makers who control the whole organizational social system. They have their own influence on an organization’s social, cultural, ethical, and political spheres, and based on their personal or social influences, they can pass or not pass information to any group or individual. Through this process, the unwanted, insensible, and controversial pieces of information are removed by the gatekeeper, who helps to control the society or group by limiting their information.

Gatekeeping as conceived in the communication literature depicts mainly a selection process through which content creators decide what stories get covered and reported, and thus, what information is released to consumers (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). It is a selection process where gatekeepers pick and choose which news articles and/or visual images to run in the media. In the communication field, gatekeeping theory was first coined or introduced by David White (1950) and expanded by other communication scholars (McQuail, 2010; Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Snider, 1967).

**Essence of information gatekeeping in public relations**

An extensive review of the research literature indicates that gatekeeping in public relations practice operates in three noticeable stages or forms. The first stage begins at the dominant coalition, where the PR practitioner, after analysing and selecting from the myriad quantity of information that comes in and goes out of the organization, provides the needful information for decision-making (Achor 2017; Achor et al., 2015; Bowen, 2015, Reber & Berger 2006).

At a given moment in a decision chain, a gatekeeper must first find a piece of information, evaluate it, and pass it on to the person who has the power to ultimately decide what to do with such information—that is, the power to facilitate or constrain the flow of information and its utilization in the organizational setting (Polesi, 2011). Secondly, to communicate the most important information to the organization’s publics, the PR practitioner frames the information the way they think best and chooses the news medium or channel for its dissemination.

As part of their media relations function, the PR practitioner passes information to the traditional media in the form of information subsidies or backgrounders, often released via news releases and features, et cetera (Dozier, 2010; J. Grunig, 2009; Kiousis et al., 2011; Polesi, 2011). Similarly, as an information source, the PR practitioner exercises their gatekeeping authority/role in the organization communication process by filtering and selecting certain information that supports organizational goals and policies. In an ideal context, the PR professional working for a corporate body is assumed
to be an expert in information management. For this reason, the PR practitioner is expected to regulate the content of whatever the organization disseminates to its publics as information so that the organization does not face credibility and reputational risks (Jankauskaite & Urboniene, 2016; Schulze Horn, Taros, Dirkes, Hüer, Rose, Tietmeyer, & Constantinides, 2015; Shullich, 2012). Through this gatekeeping role, the practitioner discards those pieces of information that are likely to impact negatively on the organization’s reputation or expose its shortcomings.

Given this fact, within the confines of this article, gatekeeping can be described as a model to find information and understand and analyze it in a given context, contributing to a form of regulation that enhances the utmost use of information by organizations and their publics (Achor, 2017; Polesi, 2011). Furthermore, the purpose of gatekeeping is to regulate the use and dissemination of information “in and out” of the organization in such a way that effective management decision-making is enhanced and the organization protected against undue misinformation or disinformation.

**Social media and the gatekeeping role of PR practitioners**

The definition of social media and what it constitutes is still developing, due to the proliferation of channels used in social and corporate communication (Achor et al., 2015; Komito & Bates, 2009; Lee et al., 2015). A cornucopia of scholarly definitions of social media can be found in the literature. These definitions have been categorized into three definitional perspectives or paradigms due to their functional and theoretical relevance in communication studies, computer-mediated communication, and extant communication technologies (Breslow & Allagul, 2016; Carr & Hayes, 2015; Husain, Abdullah, Ishak, Fauzi Kamarudin, Robani, Mohin, & Hassan, 2014; Karakas, 2009; Komito & Bates, 2009; Lee et al., 2015).

The first definitional perspective sees social media as interactive platforms or places where people gather online to share information and converse. Exponents of this definitional perspective refer to social media as means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Ahlqvist, Bäck, Heinonen, & Halonen, 2008). Correa, Willard Hinsley, and de Zúñiga (2010) described social media as a mechanism for an audience to connect, communicate, and interact with each other and their mutual friends through instant messaging or a social networking site. For Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr (2010), social media use involves creating online personas and connecting with others, as well as communicating about one’s own life and updating one’s activities for friends and associates.

The second definitional perspective perceives social media as technology-based sites that encourage person-to-person and machine-to-person information sharing and production. Exponents of this perspective include Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011), Carr and Hayes (2015), Macnamara (2010), and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). Kietzmann and colleagues (2011) described social media as mobile and Web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. For Kalplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is a group of mobile marketing applications that allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content.
The third definitional perspective attempts to conceptualize social media as a way to promote organization-public relationships and platforms for supporting collaborations, facilitating knowledge management, strengthening social connections, and fostering awareness of connection activities (Holtzblath, Drury, Weiss, Damianos, & Cuomo, 2013; Smith, 2015).

A synthesis of the three conceptual perspectives indicates that social media are digital-mediated platforms and applications that allow individuals, groups, organizations and their publics, or a community of people to gather online to converse, sharing information, knowledge, and opinions. Its features include openness, participation, interactivity, collaborations, sharing, conversation, and harnessing collective intelligence (Achor et al., 2015; Holtzblatt et al., 2013; Husain et al., 2014).

Literature indicates that social media technologies take on many different forms, including magazines, internet forums, Weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, social networks, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating, and social bookmarking (Achor et al., 2015; Carr & Hayes, 2015; Eyrich, Padman, & Sweeter, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Technologies include blogs, picture sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over IP. It is important to note that many of these services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms (Gruffat, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media may be segregated into classes of collaboration and sharing; here Bard (2010) classifies social media into 15 categories: microblogging, publishing, photo sharing, aggregators, audio, video, live-casting, RSS, mobile, crowd sourcing, virtual worlds, gaming, search, conversation apps, and social networking. Boundaries between these different forms or categories have become increasingly blurred; this is largely due to their interface and similarities in information (content) production and delivery (Achor, 2017; Achor et al., 2015).

Recent scholarship in the fields of computer-mediated communication, information science, and management science recognizes two broad types of gatekeeping: traditional gatekeeping and network gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, 2011; Nahon, 2011; Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo, & Wang, 2011; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Traditional gatekeeping centres on the selection process often exercised by formal gatekeepers, such as editors of news media, PR practitioners, members of an organization’s dominant coalition, government, et cetera (Nahon, 2011). Often, information selection and the framing process appear subjective, while consumers and receivers of such information may likely accept it as truth. The underlying framework in traditional gatekeeping is that the gatekeeper decides what is included in the news channel (as information) and has control over the flow—which is unidirectional (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

In journalism, the gatekeepers or the media set the agenda by determining and framing what issue comes into the public domain for discussion. In this context, the receivers of public information have no or fewer alternative means to get information, so whatever issue is brought to the public domain as framed or reported by the traditional news media becomes news. Similarly, in media relations, the PR practitioner becomes a gatekeeper by providing basic and the most important information about the
organization to the media via news releases, features, advertorials, press statements, et cetera. At the same time, the PR practitioner facilitates access for journalists to interact with or interview the chief executive or any other top-ranking member of the organization authorized to represent the organization as a spokesperson.

The latter, network or refined gatekeeping, is conceptualized to reflect the new media environment and proliferation of new information and communication technologies. Barzilai-Nahon (2006, 2008) wrote a number of articles on the gatekeeping concept and theories that cut across disciplines; through such interdisciplinary writings, she promoted a deepened search among scholars for both conceptual and practical methodologies in the study of gatekeeping beyond the newsroom setting. Distilling from and merging theories from the disciplines of communication, information science, and management, Barzilai-Nahon (2008) proposed a “refined theory of gatekeeping” as a new way of looking at gatekeeping. Contrary to traditional mass communication gatekeeping theory that focused on how we get news, Barzilai-Nahon’s refined approach applies to all forms of information.

The concept/theory of refined network gatekeeping sees gatekeeping as a process that encompasses not only selection of information but also all forms of information control that may arise in decisions about message encoding, such as the selection, shaping, display, timing, withholding, or repetition of entire messages or message components (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). The concept addresses the gated relations (i.e., the entity subjected to gatekeeping) through four attributes: information production ability, relationship with the gatekeeper, political power in relation to the gatekeeper, and alternatives in the context of gatekeeping. The theory also emphasizes the dynamism of information control, which is contingent upon the context. It provides opportunity for analyzing and explaining gatekeeping through an understanding of political and social relationships. Beyond this updated look at gatekeeping, network gatekeeping is classified in a number of ways, including the bases for gatekeeping, mechanisms used in network gatekeeping, and types of authority of network gatekeepers (Barzilai, 2008).

Smith (2015) has also provided an expanded view of gatekeeping, which highlights the challenges of traditional gatekeeping due to technological advances, such as the internet or Web 2.0—the social media enabler. Web 2.0 in lay terms refers to the developments in the way that people use the internet that allow users free access and give them more control over information. Web 2.0 is about relinquishing control; it is about openness, trust, and authenticity in the social media usage and application. However, other theories of gatekeeping within the communication and information science milieu have built on Web 2.0 and network frameworks (e.g., audience gatekeeping/theory, the theoretical framework that underpins this article). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) proposed audience gatekeeping theory as a way to address the failure of traditional gatekeeping theory to recognize the audience (or the gated) on whom gatekeeping is exercised, as posited by refined network gatekeeping.

Literature on the traditional gatekeeping models exclusively focused on the role of professional media workers as gatekeepers and the factors that affect their decision-making, but failed to include the audiences in the theoretical conceptualizations (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Barzilai-Nahon (2008) insightfully
pointed out that the absence of vocabulary that refers to the message recipients subjected to the gatekeeping effect reflects the relative negligence toward this entity in the traditional gatekeeping literature. She calls the recipients of the processed information the “gated” (p. 1496). In her view, “although the gated are the message receivers, they are not the last stop. Instead, they do intervene in the gatekeeping process to varied degrees, depending on their level of political power, ability to produce information, relationship with traditional gatekeepers, and ability to find and choose alternatives as substitutes for elite news content” (Barzilai, 2008, p.1496).

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) also pointed out the unassigned role of audiences in traditional models; they proposed one more mechanism (audience gatekeeping) to identify this role in the digital media space. This new role entails “audience members providing information to each other about their favored news items” (Shoemaker et al., 2011, p. 61). Audience gatekeeping emerges as an important process, particularly on the internet, where user sharing has an even greater impact on determining the importance of news agendas than conventional forms of interpersonal communication.

Studies that followed those of Shoemaker and Vos indicate that social media platforms enable audience members to participate in the dialogue, interacting directly with business, institutions, and newsmakers (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Sheldrake, 2011; Solis, 2011). The implication of this in the information management context is that the interactive potential of digital media increases the ways in which individuals can transform the flow of information.

The audience participates in gatekeeping by emailing news items that they select, or by sharing them through social media channels, such as digg.com, reddit.com, newsvine.com, twitter.com, and facebook.com (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Although some theorists (Kovach & Rosentiel, 2007; Schwalbe, Silock, & Candello, 2015) argue that gatekeeping theory does not apply to digital media, increased audience interactivity has, in fact, introduced a new stage in the gatekeeping process whereby audience members participate as secondary gatekeepers on the internet (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Audience gatekeeping has also been described by Bastos and colleagues (2013) as a form of “meta journalism with the primary purpose of expanding the circulation of already existing information by leveraging aggregation algorithms of web 2.0 and public participation” (p. 7).

Once audience gatekeeping is included in the bigger picture of information production and distribution, content made by media and PR professionals cannot be regarded simply as a finalized product anymore; instead, contents are being modified and shared among a community of friends and others. Professional (information) sites and/or social media platforms are options utilized by individuals or groups to select and post information that suits their needs. Access to these platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, is less restricted than the traditional media channels, which were once raw information providers accessible only to media professionals. Kwon, Oh, Agrawal, and Rao (2012) have extended this theory to use of Twitter as a platform for information sharing and acquisition, while Bastos, Raimundo, and Travitzki (2013) explored the structure of gatekeeping in Twitter by means of a statistical analysis of political hashtags.
Expanding gatekeeping frontiers through operationalizing social media technologies

The mechanisms through which some of the social media technologies operate seem to give credence to the main thesis and purpose of this article. For this reason, we tangentially explain those social media technologies that are frequently used in public relations practice (Achor, 2017; Wright & Hinson, 2011) and how they expand our analysis in this article. We begin with microblogging, which encompasses microblogs, weblogs, Twitter, et cetera.

Microblogging platforms (e.g., Twitter, WhatsApp) enable PR professionals to connect privately or publicly with other users through direct messages. Both the mechanism on which microblogging platforms are anchored and the choice of connecting either privately or publicly trigger a mixed-flow information paradigm; that is, information moves or flows simultaneously in unidirectional and multidirectional ways. This gives the practitioner the latitude to control content posted in these platforms; however, control becomes quasi when third parties (online publics) delete tweets, retweet or modify an original post (tweet/message) by the PR practitioner, and share messages publicly through microblogging platforms, such as Twitter and blogs.

This scenario validates what is now gradually being referred to as soft-copy and post-production gatekeeping (in the online information production setting), which is facilitated through deletion and/or modification of content originally posted in microblogging or similar sites (Almaghlooth, 2013). Another form of gatekeeping that a microblogging site like Twitter facilitates is blocking. This mechanism has been used by PR practitioners and other information managers in their attempt to manage information online. A detailed explanation of blocking is offered in the next section that treats the dual role: quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching in the social media environment.

According to Stephenson (2018), “[A] microblog is a small bit of information that reflects an idea, informs people about something or tries to start a discussion. Microblogs are designed to provide quick information; they convey between 50 and up to 150 words or 1 to 3 paragraphs” (p. 4). A personalized blog is an example of a microblog, with a similar operating mechanism to other text-based platforms.

Twitter, a microblogging platform originally developed for mobile phones, allows users to post short text updates or tweets to a network of others. The mechanism that drives it allows the use of 140 or fewer characters in a single post, thereby offering PR practitioners the option to use fewer words to communicate to target publics without jettisoning the main purpose of the message. Although users of Twitter can only communicate a few lines of information, the platform has proved to be effective in real-time propagation and dissemination of an organization’s information (e.g., short comments, corporate event pictures, and links to news releases, articles, or video) to target audiences (publics) directly from the news source (PR practitioner).

Picture sharing and video forms of social media platforms include Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube. The technology that propels these platforms enables users to upload videos or pictures and share them on the Web. By uploading and editing pictures and videos of corporate events, the PR practitioner directs the content to individuals or to the public, depending on the objectives to be achieved. The internet forum is also
used in public relations. An internet forum, or message board, is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages. It is similar to a newsgroup or discussion board or group often used to show people information. Pictures, hyperlinks, and images can be posted in the forum. PR practitioners can sift through posted messages and pick the information that can help the dominant coalition of the organization make informed decisions. By filtering and selecting the right information for decision-making, the PR practitioner performs a gatekeeping role.

Blogs are special types of websites that usually display date-stamped entries in reverse chronological order (OECD, 2007, cited in Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). They are managed by one person only, but provide the possibility of interaction with others through the addition of comments. Blogs are similar to personal webpages appearing in different variations, such as summaries of all relevant information in one specific content area. Most blogs are text-based but also can allow “users to create personalized television channels via which they can broadcast images from their webcam in real time to other users” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 62). The PR practitioner who creates and manages a blog controls what is published on it. The practitioner edits and updates their organization’s information in such a way as to create a positive image of the organization.

The podcast is another form of social media technology related the thesis and/or purpose of this article. The word “podcast” is a generic term for any audio or video broadcast that people can subscribe to over the Web. Generally, producing a podcast requires little equipment, and the internet is used as the distribution medium. The technology offers the PR expert the opportunity to create a video podcast on any topic (e.g., the social corporate performance or responsibility of their employer) using a camcorder or even a mobile phone and upload it to the company’s website or a third-party website, such as Archive.org. The medium allows the creator to update their own website(s) each time they post a new podcast episode. By so doing, the PR practitioner partially controls the podcast, since they can edit, delete, or remove the content at any time, but cannot determine how viewers subscribe to or view it; this is quasi-gatekeeping because control is not total.

**PR practitioners frequently use social networks to disseminate information.**

Social networking sites can be described as applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other. These personal or corporate profiles can include any type of information, including photos, video, audio files, and blogs. The technology behind them has redefined traditional gatekeeping theory by making the audience on whom gatekeeping is exercised into secondary gatekeepers. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 64)

A social network is a dedicated website or other application that enables users to communicate with each other by posting information, comments, messages, images, et cetera. Facebook, MySpace, and WhatsApp are typical examples of social networking
sites used in public relations. Note that WhatsApp is also a microblogging platform. The PR practitioner who uses these platforms for conversation, discussion, and promotion of PR messages mediates both unidirectional and multidirectional information flow on the Web. The practitioner also applies blocking and post-production forms of gatekeeping to perform both the quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching roles.

The trend of content marketing through the use of owned media has impacted theories that relate to information management in public relations (e.g., gatekeeping and agenda-setting) through the changing communication/information production dynamics brought about by digital media. This shift in communication dynamics revalidates Grunig and Hunt’s two-way symmetrical model (J. Grunig, 2001; Turney, 1998), which aptly represents the model being used by PR practitioners in the digital era. In the words of Scopelliti (2014),

since they are taking on an increasingly transparent, dialogical and audience-focused approach, PR practitioners are engaging directly with their audiences using inclusive and discursive tactics as opposed to the unidirectional, persuasive ones this discipline was previously associated with. (p. 3)

Above all, the mechanism upon which these social media technologies operate introduces two forms of gatekeeping in the social media domain: blocking and post-production gatekeeping (Almaghlooth, 2013), which are enabled by deleting and blocking content produced by either the PR practitioner or third parties. These submissions are explained in detail in the next section, which discusses the dual role of PR practitioners, and also in Figure 1, which conceptually depicts the quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching roles of PR practitioners in the digital media space.

The dual role examined through a lens of information production and control

The public relations literature on social media has focused primarily on how social media platforms can be leveraged by organizations for relationship building and so-called dialogue with publics. Studies have acknowledged relationships in social media as opportunities for information exchange (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Smith, 2015), but failed to identify the effect of the online/offline dialogue and information exchange on the information regulation and control (gatekeeping) function of PR practitioners. A recent study by Achor (2017) extensively probed the information production and consumption capabilities of online publics in the social media realm and how such opportunity impacts the original information production power of the news source, the PR practitioner.

Traditional literature on gatekeeping in the fields of information science, management, and communication emphasized the capabilities of traditional gatekeepers (e.g., mass media, PR practitioners, and government) to produce information (Bagdikian, 2004; Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Nahon, 2011). However, networks have shifted the focus to the ability of not only the gatekeeper but also the gated (an organization’s publics or stakeholders) to produce information (Achor, 2017; Nahon, 2011).

Now, the question that has become pertinent in this article is: How does the ability of third parties (online publics) to produce information impact PR practitioners’ gate-
keeping role? Before this question is examined, we must first reiterate here that the essence of gatekeeping information in any organization is to regulate the inflow and outflow of information that either positively or negatively impacts decision-making and the organization’s reputation. Not every piece of information that originates from inside or outside the organization is considered valuable. Given the reputational risk associated with most information that passes through social media platforms, a social media risk analysis becomes mandatory (Shullich, 2012). The findings of such an assessment allow the threshold value of information to be determined, and strategies to mitigate or avoid risks associated with third parties’ release of unauthorized information can be prescribed (Aula, 2010; Schulze Horn et al., 2015; Scott & Walsham, 2005; Shullich, 2012).

Now back to the question posed earlier: How does the ability of third parties (online publics) to produce information affect PR practitioners’ gatekeeping role? The emergence of multiple ready-to-use technologies and easy-to-use tools to produce and design content empower the gated (publics) with greater autonomy; the ability to post content in an organization’s or individual’s social media accounts has changed the dynamics of the gatekeeper-gated relationship (Barzilia, 2008; Nahon, 2011). This new reality suggests that the PR practitioner has no latitude to totally stop third parties from posting about an organization on social media. Since social media platforms are decentralized, offering multi-access to third parties (Barzilia-Nahon, 2008; Nahon, 2011), there is a need to critically look at how PR practitioners can perform a gatekeeping role for their organizations in the digital domain.

It is argued here that public relations practitioners operate a dual role in the new (social) media environment: quasi-gatewatching and quasi-gatekeeping. The idea of gatewatching describes the new role assumed by traditional media gatekeepers (i.e., journalists, editors, PR practitioners) in the new media landscape whereby they have no control over information posted on social media by individuals who are now “producers,” that is both consumers and producers of information (Bruns, 2013). The traditional gatekeepers (PR managers, editors) can only watch as information passes through social media, then can only professionally sift through the vast quantity of information, pick and frame a particular piece of information, and disseminate it to the publics or masses (Bruns, 2013). Such a scenario has (re)defined the traditional theory and concept of gatekeeping and media agenda-setting theory (Bruns, 2013; Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Polesi, 2011).

The notions (or terminologies) of quasi-gatekeeping and quasi gate-watching have been minimally explored by Achor (2017) through his proposed mixed-flow model, which explicates the flow of information as it affects the gatekeeping function of PR practitioners in the social media domain. The model is a further expansion on the multidirectional flow model that re(de)fined gatekeeping in the digital networks (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Shoemaker et al., 2011). The mixed-flow model assumes that PR professionals operate in two different media environments: the marketplace media environment and the market-space media environment (Achor, 2017). These media environments support Kaul’s (2012) description of the new media landscape. The former is physically mediated, as when the practitioner communicates face to face with the organization’s publics (interpersonal), via word-of-mouth, physically mediated di-
alogue, and issuing news releases, press statements, et cetera. The latter is digital, as when the practitioner uses social media and other digital-mediated or computer-mediated communication platforms and Web 2.0–enabled platforms in sending and receiving information to and from an organization’s publics or stakeholders.

The public relations practitioner exercises different levels of control in these two media environments. In the marketplace media environment, the practitioner wields a great deal of influence and authority by determining what to include or not to include in the channels used in communicating to the publics. The practitioner has absolute control of both the channels and the information flow. The best the practitioner does in the market-space media environment is to assume the dual but distinct roles of quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching.

As quasi-gatewatchers, PR practitioners are unable to externally control the gates (social media platforms) through which information passes; rather they keep a passive eye on the gates and allow certain content (information) to pass or flow through the gates (the organization’s social media platforms) on to others who then make the choice about the information relevance. The open participation feature of social media gives rise to this role, invariably allowing third parties to post unverifiable content on social media. This scenario, in turn, causes source credibility risk to the organization’s information managers. As quasi-gatekeepers, PR practitioners select, analyze, and determine relevant information that meets both the organization’s and its publics’ needs and disseminate it through designated channels or social media.

Paradoxically, the internet that facilitates communication in the market-space media environment has the potential to reduce the organization’s power to control information, and can also increase its power via the use of certain social media platforms, such as a blog, Twitter, and Facebook. As gatekeepers, PR practitioners select, frame, and encode information, and post this information to a corporate blog, Facebook consumer page, and other microblogging sites as an e-news release, e-bulletin, and short online or offline messages. They have control of the process and control of these messages when disseminated through the platforms mentioned, particularly corporate blogs. Figure 1 below aptly depicts the aforementioned dual roles of PR practitioner in the social media environment.

Figure 1 provides more insights into the two distinct roles (quasi gatekeeping and quasi gate watching) that public relations practitioners assume in their attempt to function as gatekeepers in the new (social) media environment. At the centre of the diagram is the organization and its social media platforms functioning as a hub. Three ethical considerations—transparency, authenticity, and credibility—define the organization’s social media use. The padlocks in the hub are used in locking the gates or entrance to the organization’s social media platforms. The spherical shapes represent actors (e.g. institutions, professional communicators, networked individuals, and everyday individuals) in the new (digital) environment. These actors or third parties converse, chat with one another, tweet, retweet and share information, and comment on posts by others; by so doing they mediate the multidirectional flow of information as supported by the refined gatekeeping model (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Shoemaker et al, 2011; Shoemaker, & Vos, 2009).
However, PR practitioners can also facilitate a unidirectional information flow when they communicate separately and directly with or to each member of a category of publics (e.g., employees, customers, stakeholders) using social media platforms, such as a blog, Facebook, Twitter, et cetera. This is depicted by the small arrows pointing at each of the social media users or actors.

The ring arrow in the diagram shows how content/user-generated content (post, messages, comments, etc.) are shared among the influencers/social media actors or users. The hub offers PR practitioners the mechanism to block or lock certain channels or gates against unwanted publics or comments (e.g., by blocking or deleting unsolicited friends or third parties in Facebook, Twitter accounts, etc.). This ability is also depicted by the padlocks inside the organization’s communication hub, thereby indicating a partial or quasi control. The PR practitioners operating within the encrypted social media domain perform quasi-gatewatching and quasi-gatekeeping roles, implying that the gatekeeping authority or information control of the PR practitioners is not totally relinquished in the social media domain.

Implications of the duality role for public relations practice and theory

Since there are divergent opinions in existing literature concerning control and decentralization of social media (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Shoemaker et al., 2011), the preceding discussion depicts a scenario in which PR practitioners operating within the encrypted social media domain have not completely relinquished their gatekeep-
ing authority or roles; rather, they play a dual role of quasi-gatewatching and quasi-gatekeeping. This situation depicts a mixed flow of information; that is, information flow is unidirectional at one extreme and multidirectional at the other extreme, since information can be directed to a particular group and/or member of an organization’s public (online publics) via a corporate blog, Facebook, Twitter, et cetera. The views expressed above lend support to White and Raman’s (1999) postulation that the World Wide Web (including Web 2.0, PR 2.0, and social media) are the first controlled public relations mass media of communication. According to White and Raman, the World Wide Web offers PR practitioners the rare opportunity to circumvent the traditional mass media by posting corporate news in the marketing and corporate blogs or websites of the organization without passing through traditional media gatekeepers. This idea has been extended to social media platforms, which also give the PR practitioner and other users a form of control in posting, editing, and updating content (information) published online.

The view expressed above gives credence to Webster and Ksiazek’s (2012) the theory of the “dynamics of audience fragmentation” in the digital age, which also strongly supports the idea of audience gatekeeping. Audience gatekeeping refers to “audience members providing information to each other about their favored news items” (Shoemaker et al., 2011, p. 61). Audience gatekeeping emerges as an important process particularly on the internet, where “user sharing” has an even greater impact in determining the importance of news agendas than conventional forms of interpersonal communication. Studies following that of Shoemaker and Vos (2009) and Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo, and Wang (2011) indicate that social media platforms enable audience members to participate in a dialogue, interacting directly with businesses, institutions, and newsmakers (Böttcher, 2014; Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011; Sheldrake, 2011; Solis, 2011). The implication of this fact in the context of this article is that the interactive potential of digital media increases the ways in which individuals can transform the flow of information.

The role of audience gatekeeping in information production and distribution makes content produced by media and PR professionals undergo further processes (e.g., recoding, reshaping, filtering, or deleting) in the hands of third parties (an organization’s publics) or other users of the digital media platforms. As a result, content produced by PR managers may not be regarded simply as a finalized product any more. Social media platforms provide options for users to select information they like, unlike the conventional media channels that used to be only raw information providers in the past. (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). In fact, the quasi-gatekeeping and quasi gate-watching roles, by implication, support the notion that “social media seem to have challenged public relations to the next concept of gatekeeping that borders on exposing the facts of information sharing or dissemination against obstructing facts” (Achor, 2017, p. 5).

**Conclusion**

Research into the use of social media and the gatekeeping theory in the field of communication and information science exists. However, none of this research was directed toward finding out the extent to which public relations practitioners (as primary gate-
keepers) exercise control over and/or manage information in a digitally mediated world. This article has attempted to bridge this gap by introducing two new theoretical and practical concepts—quasi-gatekeeping and quasi-gatewatching—into the literature of gatekeeping in the communication, information science, and public relations milieu. This article marks a turning point in redefining the gatekeeping role of PR practitioners operating in a social/digital-mediated world or market-space media environment. The views presented in this article have practically demonstrated the extent to which PR professionals can exercise information control in their organizations’ communication with the publics in the social media domain. Indeed, a PR professional working for any corporate organization is now guided on how to use social media to achieve information regulation, plus management and media relations goals. Finally, this study has opened a new vista in the search for methodologies for studying, expanding, and understanding the frontiers of the gatekeeping concept in a non-newsroom setting. The bottom line, however, is that by performing quasi-gatewatching and quasi-gatekeeping roles, PR practitioners’ gatekeeping role is not totally relinquished in the social media domain, but expanded with a reasonable degree of authority to control and mediate a mixed-flow model of information.

References


