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## Lessons for Academics: What Journalists Know About Gatekeeping

By Aaron Barlow

February 15, 2012

In preparing my talk on peer review for the MLA conference in Seattle last week, I forgot that few of my fellow academics have much familiarity with 'gatekeeping,' certainly not to the extent that journalists have, especially after the upheavals of the past decade. Though the situations are different (journalists working with a responsibility to the public sphere directly where academics look to the needs of specific disciplines away from more generalized discussions), academics should know as much about the responsibilities and ramifications of gatekeeping as do journalists. But they don't.

In journalism, the discussion of the problems of gatekeeping have been public and even heated ever since Benjamin Franklin's 1731 "Apology for Printers." The responsibility of the venue, both to the public and to the author, is keenly felt and its implications hotly contested. As this is something I have written about, both in the first two of my blogosphere books (*The Rise of the Blogosphere* and *Blogging America: The New Public Sphere*) and in "The Citizen Journalism as Gatekeeper: A Critical Evolution" (for *Public Journalism 2.0: The Promise and Reality of a Citizen-Involved Press*), I made the mistaken assumption that editors and writers in academia have parallel concerns.

In a way, of course, they do. But the discussion has never been as public as in journalism. The academic gatekeepers, also, have never been challenged from outside, as gatekeepers in journalism, given the nature of the profession, always have been. In addition, the field of journalism, in keeping with the concept of freedom of the press, is not limited to credentialed professionals. As Gary Hudson and Mick Temple write in "We Are All Journalists Now":

Despite the belief that the forums that debate the question of "what is journalism" are controlled by communities (for example, the journalism academic community) with a vested interest in a limited definition, we have no wish to limit access to "the profession". Indeed, such a wish would be ludicrous in today's world. The blogger, the online pundit, the producer of an online community newsletter *can* call themselves journalists, but unless they are committed to writing new and accurate material they have no right to do so. (73-74)

Things are, of course, quite different in academia. In addition to entry qualifications, scholars have found themselves beholden to the gatekeepers in other ways never the case in journalism, where stepping outside the establishment has always been easier than in academia. It is much simpler to start a newspaper than a college; an academic journal needs more behind it than *The Journal from Joe's Garage*.

Gatekeeping is a major topic in journalism today, and has been for quite some time. It should be in academia, too, but the conversation has yet to be either as broad or as deep as in journalism. One reason for this is that the gatekeepers have tremendous impact on scholars—through editorial and review functions for journals and presses and through procedures for tenure and promotion. People are loathe to challenge, for fear for their own careers. Gatekeeping has greater impact on individual scholars than is found in journalism on individual reporters, for journalism has less formulaic structures and more alternatives.

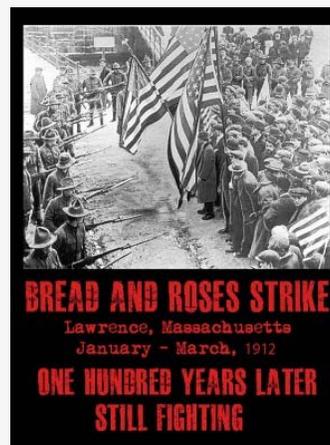
As I write in "The Citizen Journalism as Gatekeeper: A Critical Evolution":

During the second half of the twentieth century, theories of gatekeeping began to appear, generally extending the work of Kurt Lewin (1947) whose explorations of leadership and group dynamics provided a starting point and initially were applied to journalism by David Manning White (1950). Examinations of gatekeeping continue today in the work of Pamela Shoemaker, whose recent book (with Timothy Vos) is *Gatekeeping Theory* (2008). Shoemaker has provided the framework for study of gatekeeping on a theoretical level since the 1980s, with her 1991 work (written with Stephen Reese), *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content*, examining the gap between experienced and mediated version of events. (46)

Over the past half century, journalism has developed a complex understanding of gatekeeping that, perhaps, still eludes most academic publishing. This goes back at least to White, who [studied](#) the gatekeeping of an editor he calls "Mr. Gates":

It is a well-known fact in individual psychology that people tend to perceive as true only those happenings which fit into their own beliefs concerning what is likely to happen. It begins to appear (if Mr. Gates is a fair representative of his class) that in his position as "gatekeeper" the newspaper editor sees to it (even though he may never be consciously aware of it) that the community shall hear as a fact only those events which the newsman, as the representative of his culture, believes to be true. (171)

Though, even in academia, as Shoemaker and Reese [write](#), "gatekeeping involves the selection, shaping, and repetition of information" (255), we don't really question the ability of academic gatekeepers to do this competently and honestly, referring to academic credentials as proof enough that they can and will. Journalism has never been quite so complacent, recognizing that, as Shoemaker and Reese also [claim](#):



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the media gatekeeper must winnow down a larger number of potential messages to a few. The book publisher chooses from many possible titles; the network programmer selects from among several ideas for sitcoms, serials, and dramas to compose a prime-time schedule; and the newspaper editor must decide on a handful of stories to run on the front page. These decisions directly affect the media content that reaches the audience. But are those decisions made at the whim of the individual? (100)

Their question needs to be addressed in academia also, especially by anyone who is going to argue in favor of retaining blind pre-publication peer review, where the possibility of “whim” decision-making can warp a field of study in all sorts of unanticipated ways. This is especially important when “whim” can have great impact on careers, far more than in journalism, as well as on the course of future research.

Unlike journalism, where traditional forms of gatekeeping are being re-assessed in light of changes brought on through new digital possibilities, the grip of traditional academic gatekeepers is still strong. The forces granting tenure and promotion continue to use “peer review” as a shortcut in their decision-making and there is no alternate system of higher education for scholars to turn to. That is beginning to change, and it will have to, as digital possibilities make themselves even more strongly felt in scholarship and its publication.

The question is, can we academics learn enough quickly enough to replace reliance on peer review with a fair and open system that promotes genuine effort and scholarship without placing limitations on either means or avenues of exploration? I'll try to provide a few suggestions for such a system.

Journalists today know how to use the internet for research so well that they don't even know they know it. That is, digital tools now come so naturally to hand, and have been tailored so expertly to the needs of the specific individuals and projects, that the journalists don't even think about them—they just use them. In this, most academics are a decade or so behind. “Traditional” news aggregators (“newspapers” and the like), sources, and depositories of information no longer suffice, in journalism. At least, not in the forms they once exhibited. Nobody trying to keep up with international affairs will rely on *The New York Times*, for example. They will read it, yes, but differently than they read it twenty years ago. Then, it was often the only available source; now, it is one of a tight weave of information possibilities. This fact has changed *The Times* as much as it has changed how the newspaper is read.

Today's news stories aren't over once they see “print.” They are changed, updated as new information is found, as errors are pointed out, as events unfold. The writer constantly looks to comments and to related stories, among other things, to make to make the story stronger. Unlike the way it was when I was trained as a reporter in the 1970s, stories aren't over once they are in the paper.

In most areas of news gathering and news utilization, everything has changed (to use the cliché) over the past decade. In fact, in most areas of media, everything has changed. Book publishing is moving beyond reliance on a single (paper) platform. Magazines no longer center on print and the demands of print timetables. Television shows aren't schedule bound. Movies exist everywhere.

Academic publishing is one of the only areas where digitally sparked changes aren't yet universally manifest. There are at least two reasons for this: First, academic structures are inherently conservative, loathe to change, and academic publishing is tied directly to those structures. Second, academic communities are walled off, to some degree, from the forces at work in the broader culture. As a result, they don't feel the pressure towards change that entities in journalism, for example, have had to respond to. In addition, and (rather ironically) partly as a result of digital possibilities, the amount of money being made through academic publishing has grown substantially over the past decades, making the publishers (many of them outside of academia itself) protective of the way things are and unlikely to tolerate experiment.

At the same time, some of the most interesting experiments in publishing are occurring within academia. There are new types of journals with flexible and inclusive editorial structures and openness to multimedia presentation, book creation that begins online and that embraces contribution from various quarters, and much beyond. Change is happening. It is just slow in comparison with much of the rest of the publishing, media, and information worlds.

When an assistant professor hears that re-appointment, tenure, and promotion are greatly influenced by publication in ‘significant’ peer-reviewed journals, she or he almost instinctively pulls back from work that tends toward the experimental or new—for self-preservation. And even their supporters on the various committees find themselves retreating to defense of the candidate's work in traditional venues, recognizing that as the safest ways of getting the candidates through the process successfully. This ends up providing push-back against any pressure towards change, keeping the new and wonderful work being done on the sidelines.

So, it is not sufficient that the journals and publishers change, though that is part of the equation. Until those responsible for hiring, promotion, and tenure processes willingly back away from emphasis on peer review as a requirement, academic publishing will continue to lag far behind. Already, the continued focus on peer review seems anachronistic; soon, it will seem bizarre.

Why?

The means for replacing peer review are already present, and are in use in many other areas of the media world. These allow academics to engage more actively in a world of scholarship, to experiment with avenues of research, and to demonstrate the contribution of their work.

Social networking can become academic networking, for one thing, as is happening at academia.edu, on ‘faculty commons’ sites across the country, on area-specific websites, and even through the communities that online academic journals are building. Academic organizations are doing much the same, even setting up digital versions of their conferences, allowing the papers presented to be housed in places where they can become parts of on-going conversations.

Each scholar becomes something of an aggregator, much in the way each journalist does, utilizing certain pieces and ignoring others. When each scholar has a vigorous online presence (something that is coming), those who react to them positively can look at their connections, at the papers and books they ‘follow,’ and at the work they are cited in to then make their own decisions without having to look at each paper or other item purporting to deal with a particular area of interest.



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Communities of scholars are most certainly becoming the center of much of our activity—and these communities are increasingly anchored online.

As younger scholars become more and more involved in public research and writing, it also becomes easier to evaluate what they are doing. Who has cited them? Even now, that is easy to find. And how often? Who links to their work? It is becoming easier and easier to discover the impact of the scholarship even of someone outside of our own particular specialties.

Soon, as has already happened with journalists, we academics will have each developed online methodologies for our own work, ways of skipping over that which we can safely ignore, ways of pointing ourselves to work we really should be examining. Soon, we will be able to use these skills in evaluating the contributions of each other in our institutional capacities.

Soon, and probably (for many of us) without even knowing it, we will find that we have by-passed blind peer review altogether, replacing it with open (to the writer, at least) systems of editorial evaluation and improvement and public means of viewing just how much, or how little, each of us has accomplished.

Aaron Barlow | Associate Professor, New York City College of Technology. Aaron is the author of several books including *The Rise of the Blogosphere*, *Blogging America: The New Public Sphere*, and *Beyond the Blogosphere: Information and Its Children*.

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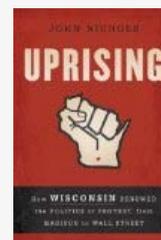
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