

Online Gatekeepers and the Future of Gatekeeping Theory: The Case of Karen Klein

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Introduction

As the Internet continues to spread and become an increasingly key means by which people gather, organize, and process information, it is essential to analyze and comprehend its effects on nearly all areas of human communication. Traditional communication models and theories have been forced to adapt to the changing media--some well, others more awkwardly. This paper is an examination of "gatekeeping theory" in the age of Twitter and Reddit. Can a theory developed to explain news filters at a time when media space (whether the physical space of the newspaper or the temporal space of the news program) was limited still usefully explain how information flows in a time of many-to-many communication? After a brief overview of gatekeeping theory and the challenges facing it in recent years, this paper will look at a specific case study: the case of Karen Klein, an elderly woman whose bullying was captured on video and launched an online blizzard of activity. Klein's case illustrates the growing power of three different kinds of communication and activism online: social news networks (Reddit), anonymous imageboards (4chan), and crowdfunding sites (Indiegogo). As Klein's story unfolds through this paper, each type of communication will be highlighted and its effects on gatekeeping theory explored.

Gatekeeping Theory: An Introduction

Gatekeeping theory started life as an explanation not for media, but grocery shopping. Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist researching food rationing and diet during World War II in the United States, was attempting to answer the question "why do people eat what they eat?" Through questionnaires and interviews, Lewin tracked the course of food on its way to the table. He concluded that in order to change eating habits, it was necessary to understand "The Gatekeeper," as he termed the person who generally had the power to decide what was served to the family--in the 1943 study, invariably the "housewife"

of the household. His article on the topic examined different channels by which food reached the table, and different techniques which could be used to alter the "food ideology" of the women who controlled food consumption in the household.

David Manning White was one of the first researchers to apply Lewin's terms and concepts to the distribution of news. In "The 'Gate Keeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News" (1950), White wrote about the choices made by a the wire-editor of a midwestern American city, whose job it was to sort through the reams of news items that arrived over the paper's wire feed and choose which stories would appear in the limited space available in the final print version of the newspaper. White's study was one of the first to start to detail the the editor's "extremely complicated set of decisions to make regarding the limited number of stories he can use" (384). Over the decades, researchers have fine-tuned the mental algorithms that go into selection of the news, first in the newspapers and then, as television arose in popularity, on the television news.

Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos's recent book *Gatekeeping Theory* (2009) defined gatekeeping as "the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day" (1) and went on to address the key question of this paper: "some people. . . say that the internet represents the death of Gatekeeping Theory, arguing that there is no gatekeeping on the internet" (7). Although the sense of limitlessness on the Internet might encourage a perception that there are no longer gates or gatekeepers, Shoemaker and Vos reject the idea: "Information units are not spontaneously and entirely created at the moment a blog entry is posted, and the information often is neither original nor different from that in any other blog or news site. Information from blogs is highly redundant and includes information that bloggers could not have experienced first hand. Information diffuses through mass media and interpersonal channels to the bloggers and their staffs, and they combine it with their own understanding of the world. The result may be idiosyncratic, but it is based on information that has traveled through many gates" (7).

Shoemaker and Vos's basic defense of gatekeeping theory is sound, especially when looking at blogs focused on discussing the news. Most blogs are based on a fairly

traditional model of information dissemination, and much of the information they distribute has first come from mainstream, commercial news sources. However, there are corners of the Internet--fast-growing corners--where this form of information dissemination is not the norm. In these places, sometimes a small item, not newsworthy enough to be considered worth mentioning by commercial news sources, can garner enough attention to rise upward through various informal gates--and occasionally become deemed worthy of notice by the mainstream news. Such cases illustrate not a lack of gatekeepers, but a new approach to gatekeeping, one which involves gatekeeping by a crowd of relatively anonymous, amateur sources. The case of Karen Klein is one of these.

Karen Klein: The Incident

Karen Klein's case, which began with bullying and ended with the creation of an anti-bullying foundation, began in Greece, New York, on June 19, 2012. Klein was a bus monitor--a member of the community paid a small sum of money to travel with students and chaperone them on school trips. On June 19, the students were bullying her on the bus. One of the kids decided that it would be fun to make a cell-phone video of the bullying and post it to Youtube to share with their friends later, so about ten minutes of the bullying ended up being recorded.

The jibes started with the students calling her poor, old, and fat, but escalated quickly from there. As the group of middle school kids encouraged each other, they called her a child rapist, said that she should kill herself, and told her that her own son had killed himself because she was such a terrible mother--Klein's son did in fact kill himself ten years ago (Chowdhry 2012). Klein attempted to ignore or shrug off the attacks, but at one point she started to cry, which merely inflamed the bullies. Eventually the teens started asking for her address and saying that they wanted to cut her with a knife. At this point Klein was visibly frightened, and a couple of the kids closed in close to her, one even reaching out to poke her arm.

Upon getting home, the boy who recorded the incident uploaded it anonymously to Youtube with the title "Making the Bus Monitor Cry" (CapitalTrigga). The video was one of the thousands posted every hour on Youtube, just a tiny bit of information in the vast sea of videos, until it happened to get seen by the right person. An unrelated person who went by "Jelloleaf" on Reddit happened to notice the video, watched it, and was horrified. Jelloleaf posted the video to the social news site called Reddit, and it is at this point that things begin to take off dramatically.

Reddit

Reddit is a social news site which filters news through what a Guardian article called "the wisdom of crowds," "by offering a front page of links to articles submitted by users, with individual users then able to vote for or against each article" (Adams, 2005). In this way, items that are deemed more newsworthy by the users of Reddit are "upvoted" and literally rise to the top of the list of links on the front page of the site, while items judged less interesting sink below notice. No one person makes any of the decisions of what is important or valuable; the gatekeeping is done by an aggregate of people from all backgrounds and walks of life.

Obviously this often means that what rises to the top appeals to the lowest common denominator (although there are "subreddits" that cater to specific interests as well). However, certain items tend to catch attention quickly and rise very rapidly through the ranks. Jelloleaf's posting of the Karen Klein video was one of those cases.

Hours after a link to the video was posted, people were upvoting it in very large numbers, and discussing it passionately in comments. The experience of being tormented on a school bus was clearly one that many users of Reddit could identify with: "I don't know what kinds of schools you all went to, but the daily bus ride for me was exactly like this or worse every single day all the way from kindergarten up through high school," was a typical response (thesacred, 2012). It was only a matter of time until people began to put together clues from the video to try and figure out who the bus

monitor was and who her tormenters were. "Identification and public shaming shall commence in 5...4...3...2..." as one poster put it (Hardigree).

Although the video was uploaded anonymously, it took only hours until the users of Reddit had located the school, found Karen Klein's Facebook page, and started to post the real names, Facebook pages, and phone numbers of some of the bullies.

At this point, the moderators of Reddit started to shut the thread down for violations of privacy, as sharing information about the students was outside of Reddit policy.

However, this did not deter people--now that Reddit had served its purpose of bringing attention to Karen Klein's plight, they were ready to move to the next corner of the Internet: 4chan.

4chan

4chan was created in 2003 by the then-15-year-old Christopher Poole to be an entirely anonymous message board, based on the same structure as Japan's 2chan (Brophy-Warren, 2008). People can post with complete anonymity, and there are no archives--all communication is ephemeral unless users vote to have a thread archived. The result is a "lunatic, juvenile community [that] is at once brilliant, ridiculous and alarming" (Michaels, 2008), full of graphic images of sex and violence as well as fast-moving humor and discussion.

Once Reddit banned discussion of Klein's tormentors, 4chan was the natural next place for people to go. On 4chan they reposted the Facebook information and home addresses of the kids they were able to identify--again, all of this taking place within hours of the original posting on Reddit--and people started to call the Greece school system as well as the houses of the kids and demand action. In the long run, the children involved were disciplined (Hardigree, 2012), but the most striking part of the story was in what people did for Klein, not to her bullies.

Upon finding Klein's Facebook page, the readers of 4chan discovered that she had to work as a bus monitor because she was a widow and needed the 15,000 dollars a year

she received from the job to live on. People felt strongly that this wasn't fair, considering the kind of abuse she had to face on the job, so they began discussing ways to raise money for her. It was at this point, now that Reddit had raised awareness of the situation and 4chan had done the legwork to dig up necessary information, that the Internet turned to a fairly new phenomenon called crowdfunding, and the web page Indiegogo.

Indiegogo

Indiegogo is a web page that does something called crowdfunding: giving a platform to people with various projects to raise money to fund them. Whether a music album, a book, or a new design for a phone case, people can set up a page to ask for money, and if the goal is met, they receive the money to use on their project. The more famous crowdfunding web page is probably Kickstarter, but Indiegogo is a close second.

Once people began talking about how to help Karen Klein, it was only a matter of time (less than a day) until someone set up a crowdfunding page for her. The page was called "Let's give Karen--the bus monitor--H. Klein a vacation!" and its goal was \$5,000 to let Klein take a vacation. However, in the execution, events quickly snowballed. According to the home page for the Indiegogo fundraiser, 169,000 people shared information about it on Facebook, and another 6,793 people Tweeted about it on Twitter. The goal of the fundraiser was reached in a matter of hours, but money continued to pour in--far more than could have been imagined. By the time the fundraiser hit its time limit, over \$700,000 had been raised, with more than 32,000 people contributing between one and three thousand dollars each. Clearly Klein's ordeal touched a nerve with people, who wanted to feel like they were an active part of a process to make one woman's life a little better. An overwhelmed Klein eventually decided to create a charitable foundation to fight bullying with the money (Hardigree, 2012).

Mainstream Media

It is at this point--after Internet sleuths had discovered, outed, and harassed the bullies, after hundreds of thousands of dollars had been raised--that the mainstream media and traditional gatekeepers entered the equation for this story. Magazines like *People*, newspapers like *The Washington Post*, and television stations like ABC noticed and picked up on Klein's story, interviewing her, the bullies, and the administrators for the Greece school system. But this is not a news story that trickled down from the traditional gatekeepers to the masses on the Internet, it is a news story that moved upward from a small video on Youtube, through the upvoting process of Reddit, into the chaotic discussions of 4chan, and finally into the practical activism section of Indiegogo. The story had passed through a variety of gates well before ever coming to the attention of the institutions that traditionally would have controlled the flow of such information.

Whither Gatekeeping Theory?

As Shoemaker and Vos point out, the proliferation of Internet sources have inspired some people to suggest that gatekeeping theory is no longer useful as a model for explaining how information moves to audiences. The Internet certainly throws some assumptions about the paradigm of information dissemination into disarray, but to jettison the model entirely seems too stark a conclusion. Already there are researchers examining ways to make the gatekeeping theory more flexible and able to reflect and respond to the new realities of Internet communication.

One of the most notable is Karine Barzilai-Nahon at the University of Washington. In a series of papers (2006; 2008; 2009), Barzilai-Nahon has been expanding and elaborating the concepts of gatekeeping to more accurately reflect the Internet age, calling her adapted vision "network gatekeeping theory" to reflect the shift from a more unidirectional process to a more dynamic one. One of the biggest shifts in Barzilai-Nahon's take on the theory is an explicit focus on how information flows within and between *communities*, with a more dynamic, two-way relationship between the gatekeepers and what she refers to as the "gated": Barzilai-Nahon wants to strengthen researchers' on the "connection between information production and relationship. The given ability of the gated to produce information creates a circulatory effect between

gated-gatekeeper. The gated produce information taking into consideration reactions and feedback from gatekeepers and other stakeholders. At the same time, gatekeepers are affected by the information produced and, in effect, change their stances. This may happen over and over again, creating an interesting circulatory exchange of information between the gated and the gatekeeper" (2008). The example of Karen Klein and the way information flowed, especially during the most intense first 48 hours of the phenomenon, could serve as a good example of this. The gatekeepers of Reddit and 4chan became in turn the consumers of the new information in a fluctuating ebb and flow of data that quickly amplified and spread outward to different venues like Facebook and Twitter as well.

Network gatekeeping theory stresses that "gatekeepers and gated are not monolithic social and political entities nor is their behavior in context of their stakeholders. Accordingly, in a dynamic environment, the interests and goals of the stakeholders constantly change, and so do their gatekeeping and gated roles" (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). The Internet makes it more likely that the roles of gated and gatekeeper will change depending on the situation--and more importantly, that these shifts will be relatively transparent to members of the network. For example, obviously Dan Rather also received news from other gatekeepers, but in his public role as "Dan Rather, anchor for CBS News," that less monolithic side of him was obscured. In an informational network like the Internet, you can watch the consumers and producers of information switch roles at a nearly-dizzying pace.

A researcher used to a fairly top-down dissemination of information could certainly reach the conclusion that there are no gatekeepers on the Internet. Information seems to flow laterally or upward about as well as it flows downward; misinformation, rumor, and heresy often appear to stymie any attempt at rational information-gathering. Virtual echo chambers can distort our ability to see clearly, algorithmic filter bubbles can conceal large parts of the world, and one might be tempted to throw up their hands and write it off as chaos. However, increasing numbers of people--for better or worse--are getting most of their information online, and much of it from sources, be it rumor-squelchers Snopes, geek activists Penny Arcade, or political muckrakers like the Drudge

Report, that are not necessarily classically-trained journalists. Gatekeeping theory--modified and adapted to fit the complexities of many-to-many communication--still can be useful for the researcher attempting to understand how people are informed and inspired to action in the Internet age. The case of Karen Klein shows that there is much to learn about the complexities of gatekeeping in the age of the Internet, as well as how essential it is going to become to understand something powerful enough to raise half a million dollars in 24 hours and change the lives of people forever, just because they were unfortunate enough to get bullied--or unwise enough to record, upload, and expose the bullying to the unblinking scrutiny of the Internet.

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