SELECTING SCANDAL

How legacy and social media gatekeep the news

Elizabeth Stoycheff

Scandal is hardwired into the news selection process. It affects decision making across individual, routine, organizational, institutional, and social system levels of news production—often distorting the relationship between the severity of political wrongdoing and media attention to it. Journalists, editors, news organizations, and the political system itself have long favored stories that feature prominent individuals engaged in conflict, struggle, or competition. While this type of reporting is often necessary for the functioning of the Fourth Estate, it also may fuel sensational, event-driven coverage that has the propensity to drown out more important thematic issues. There are many forces that influence legacy gatekeepers’ prioritization of scandalous news, and in this chapter I trace the ways in which they present themselves in new and unexpected ways. In so doing, I identify both the pitfalls and value of scandalous coverage, and emphasize the need to weigh controversial information with a journalistic commitment to the public good.

Gatekeeping theory

Gatekeeping itself is perhaps one of the least controversial communication theories. It is used to explain which news stories are prioritized and covered—a mechanism even more critical in today’s saturated information environment. Stories that make it past the mainstream media’s gates continue to wield tremendous power: they dictate public opinion (McCombs & Shaw 1972), influence legislation and reform (Tan & Weaver 2009), and serve as a public record that stands in perpetuity. This curation of stories is both systematic yet subjective, reliant on journalists’ hunches and proclivities, newsroom cultures, organizational agendas, advertisers, and political actors’ ideologies (Shoemaker & Vos 2009; Entman 2012). Influences at each of these levels overlap and contribute to a news selection process that favors the antagonistic and the scandalous. To understand better how and why political wrongdoing dominates legacy and new media landscapes, this chapter takes a closer look at how gatekeeping decisions are made.

Individual. Journalistic gatekeeping was originally introduced at the individual level, featuring a week-long study of mid-century wire editor Mr. Gates, who relied heavily on his own political preferences in editorial decision making (White 1950). Fast forward to contemporary journalists, where neutrality and fairness still come into conflict with individuals’ predispositions and goals, which, even among the most seasoned professionals, can directly or indirectly affect news judgment (e.g., Craft & Wanta 2004). And it may do so in dramatized ways.
Selecting scandal

Working in the news industry entails its own unique professional hazards, including routine exposure to humanitarian crises, health concerns, and terrorist attacks—all of which have been found to take a significant toll on journalists’ news judgments by increasing implicit bias toward outgroups and prioritizing negative information in their reporting (Cuillier 2012).

As legacy media welcome a new generation of gatekeepers to their ranks, personal characteristics continue to play a determinant role in emergent journalists’ selection processes. Minorities, who are still vastly underrepresented in editorial positions, are more likely to promote news that is “better for the world,” while Caucasian journalists place less value on altruistic stories (Coleman, Lee, Yaschur, Meader & McElroy 2018). In the same study, men, who make well over half of the gatekeeping decisions, highly rank fame-seeking and attaining celebrity status as professional motivations contributing to sensational coverage at the individual level.

Routine. While personal biases show that the selection of news can be susceptible to individual preferences, professional routines institutionalize scandalous reporting through values of novelty and conflict. These routines are particularly important because they create uniformity, such that the same biases are reproduced across gatekeepers. Analysis of media coverage consistently shows that gatekeepers prioritize stories that are timely, feature prominent individuals, and have conflict, novelty, and impact many news consumers. One of the most recent examinations of news values in the media notes that negative news and stories that contain surprises, entertainment, and conflict appear most often, while good news and issues with high impact paled in comparison (Harcup & O’Neill 2017). Journalists note that the media they help produce usually favors the “sensational and unexpected” and the “dramatic and thrilling,” which is intended to lead to “an exclusive news story” (Strömback, Karlsson & Hopmann 2012). There is even evidence that some gatekeepers insist on either being the first to break a story or not cover it at all (Gans 2004).

Journalists are also incentivized for pursuing dramatic stories and are in direct competition with one another to do so. When asked about the nature of one’s professional motivations, one New York Times reporter replied: “the superego, the public service . . . the id and mischief making.” Others’ responses included scoops, landing front-page coverage, and winning awards (Calame 2006). Journalists’ inherent need for validation can lead them to chase high-profile and controversial stories, as does the desire to preserve their own belief systems (Donsbach 2004). At this gate, the most newsworthy stories are those that serve not only the public’s interest but also the journalist’s.

For recent examples of how routines contribute to scandal coverage, one needs to look no further than the 2016 presidential election. Throughout the campaign, Donald Trump received more mainstream media coverage than any other candidate (Patterson 2016). The majority of that content was horserace journalism that emphasized polls, crowd numbers, and—more than anything—a provocative stream of statements made from Trump’s personal Twitter account. Trump’s affinity for social media meant that his thoughts and ideas were more accessible than those of his competitors. News routines that encourage reliance on elite sources, coupled with Trump’s prominence and disregard for politics-as-usual, made his stories front-runners day after day. In a longitudinal study that followed Trump’s media strategy, Wells et al. (2016) argue that this very well won him the nomination and, as we know now, the general election. And unlike previous presidents, his post-election coverage has not abated, as newsworthy details of wrongdoing in the Russia investigation and his penchant for disinformation continue to feed journalists’ routines.

Organization. While there are many gates in the news selection process, the organizational level is particularly important, as it is responsible for hiring the gatekeepers and determining the scope of their roles (Shoemaker & Vos 2009). Despite different variations of organizational ownership (Raviola 2012), nearly all media entities are sensitive to a financial bottom line, and
many journalists within these organizations have faced ownership pressure to report or kill stories (Price 2003).

When news passes through these gates, not all scandal investigations are created equal, and those done well are expensive and time-consuming. ProPublica’s two-year investigation into the dangers of acetaminophen was reported to have cost at least $750,000. This series of stories uncovered the fact that Tylenol sends tens of thousands of Americans to the hospital—or worse—each year, and the company intended to employ political lobbyists to prevent Food and Drug Administration restrictions that would make use of the drug safer. On the opposite end of the ledger are media attempts to employ artificial intelligence to—freely—report the news. The Washington Post’s prolific use of its named bots, Heliograf and Modbot, operate using a template of stock phrases that humans create. The intended purpose: to create site volume that drives advertising traffic. While this cost-cutting technique can contribute to breaking events, election and crime reports, weather and sports updates, it is currently incapable of handling the sophisticated investigative reporting that takes scandal from sensational to socially significant.

Social institution. Outside any individual media organization, external influences, like markets and audiences, also shape the news selection process. In the U.S., media is a commercial enterprise, beholden to the needs of not just citizens, but also consumers. And research indicates that news consumers exhibit a strong preference for negative reporting—preferring cynical or adversely framed stories to those that are more positive and reassuring (Trussler & Soroka 2014). This is a result of humans’ evolutionary response to negative information, which is prioritized because it helps preserve self-interest and protect from threats, making consumer appetite yet another driver of scandalous coverage. Meeting demand is now easier than ever via big data and website/mobile analytics. Such tools are particularly popular among large media entities that perceive high levels of competition in the marketplace (Tandoc 2015) and value economic importance (Vu 2013). The use of audience metrics to identify trends in user behavior transforms gatekeeping from a professional craft into a science. One gatekeeper referred to analytic story selection and de-selection—or removing stories—as an addiction for news organizations (Tandoc 2014) that influences nearly every stage of the gatekeeping process: identifying story ideas, drafting headlines, incorporating multimedia elements, story placement, and content distribution. Nadler (2016, p. 2) argues monitoring consumer data has become so entrenched that “the U.S. news industry has undergone a philosophical paradigm shift, moving away from an ideal of professional autonomy and into a ‘postprofessional’ period characterized by an affirmation that consumers’ preferences should drive news production.” Thus, analytics are facilitating a rapid gatekeeping shift from the newsmakers to the news consumers (Vu 2013).

Social forces. Despite this partial transfer of responsibility, media gatekeepers continue to view their positions as vital to a functioning democracy—serving as a necessary check on political power. While social institutions include extra-media actors, social forces are more abstract and recognize how a country’s unique culture, norms, and ideologies are also deeply embedded in the production of news (Shoemaker & Vos 2009). Influences at this level were first introduced in Siebert et al.’s (1956) seminal *Four Theories of the Press*, which Hallin and Mancini (2011) have since stewarded. In countries like the U.S., with weak political parties, the media play an important role in shaping policy decisions, educating the public, and synthesizing issues into a platform (Shoemaker & Vos 2009). Assuming these positions requires maintaining an adversarial relationship with elites, which instills a propensity for uncovering political wrongdoing and scandal at the highest level of influence. Despite an environment saturated with soft news content, most journalists agree that one of their primary responsibilities is to investigate potential wrongdoing and analyze complex problems (Cassidy 2006).
Social media gatekeepers

For over 200 years, news professionals in the U.S. held almost exclusive control over the flow of information, but the rise of social media giants coupled with financial pressure to appeal to audiences means that their monopoly is slipping. In 2017, over two-thirds of Americans reported accessing news on social media, up 5 percent from the previous year alone (Shearer & Gottfried 2017). Online platforms now also rival broadcast television as citizens’ regular source of news. Social media opinion leaders, algorithms, and critical masses of users have emerged as a new class of gatekeepers that cull and present information for individual consumption. Although the majority of news shared on social media still originates from legacy news organizations (Dimmick, Powers, Mwangi & Stoycheff 2011; Thorson & Wells 2015), it must pass through a new set of gates, or “curated flows,” that also prioritize scandal at each level of the influence hierarchy.

Individual. Facebook and other social media platforms are exclusively focused on the individual consumer, creating a unique opportunity for users to curate information for their friends and followers. While these users may not create news content themselves, they do engage in important gatekeeping functions: seeking out and selecting content from a wider pool of information as well as reframing and synthesizing messages (Thorson & Wells 2015). These individuals are susceptible to the same personal biases in news selection, but they navigate these decisions without a journalist’s professional compass. So how do they determine what’s worthy of dissemination (or “shareworthy”)? Research shows that users have their own value system, which overlaps considerably with traditional news priorities. Like journalists, they do not necessarily select news from sources based on their pre-existing beliefs, suggesting that users do value a diversity of content (Trilling & Schoenbach 2015). However, these emergent gatekeepers overwhelmingly prefer flashy and cultural information, including stories about entertainment, weather, disasters, sports, as well as negative news with a high degree of controversy or conflict (Harcup & O’Neill 2017; Trilling, Tolochko & Burscher 2017). They tend to stop the flow of news about the political system and how it works, as well as economic policies. These two underrepresented genres are particularly important for serving the public interest and contextualizing dramatic events, indicating that social media gatekeepers may spark interesting investigative coverage but are less willing to sustain it.

Routine. In aggregate, users’ news selection on social media is routinized through algorithms and trends. Algorithms are database rules that determine content priorities and, like artificial intelligence, they are the new breed of non-human gatekeepers invading the news landscape. However, they are not autonomous actors; organizations create their own secret recipes and instructions that are used to routinize and control the selection process (Thorson & Wells 2015; Caplan & Boyd 2018). Although communication research on the subject is still in its infancy (e.g., Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015), there is considerable concern that such precise curating may contribute to unintended echo chambers that confine individuals to a universe of sensational news and disinformation. What we do know is that a diet of incidental news exposure can be beneficial to creating a well-rounded citizenry (Kim, Chen & Gil de Zúñiga 2013), and it’s unclear if and how algorithmic gatekeepers would be able to sustain it.

Another feature that routinizes dramatic news selection on social media are “trending” stories. Trends are timely, popular content that appears to users as most-liked or most-read on the platform. This feature prompts the age-old question about whether the judgment of the collective is preferable to that of any one individual. Facebook recently determined that it’s not. Earlier this year, the brand discontinued its trending stories, citing concerns about suppressing political content, spreading disinformation, and even ridicule when “Deez Nuts”—a spoof
presidential candidate—made the list. Other social and legacy media still employ this feature, allowing a critical mass of users to gatekeep their news.

**Organization.** Despite the tremendous amount of information that passes through their gates, most social media platforms refuse to identify as news organizations, avoiding a commitment to the profession’s ethical responsibilities. This is a difficult label to deflect as these companies face mounting pressure about their undeniable influence and obligations to the public interest. Social media gatekeepers reached a tipping point during the 2016 presidential election, when they themselves became the scandal. Facebook and Twitter’s gates malfunctioned—allowing a steady stream of disinformation, foreign propaganda, and antagonistic bots to mislead sections of the American public at an unprecedented rate. Independent research has confirmed that the majority of fake news’s traffic originated from social media (Nelson & Taneja 2018) and disproportionately affected partisan agendas (Vargo, Guo & Amazeen 2017). In short, it was an organizational gatekeeping failure. It represented a conflict of interest between the company’s economic and social responsibilities, in which attempts to expand the user base and solicit advertising revenue promoted bogus controversies that jeopardized information for millions of users (Byers 2017). To control the damage, Facebook has attempted to co-opt some of the same technology that caused the problem—artificial intelligence—to identify and deselect known keywords and sources associated with fictitious accounts. While he may not commit to the business of journalism, CEO Mark Zuckerberg recognizes Facebook’s expansive gatekeeping role: “We don’t write the news that people read on the platform. But at the same time, we also know we do a lot more than just distribute news, and we’re an important part of the public discourse.” Despite this acknowledgment, Facebook has taken a controversial stance in permitting the circulation of knowingly false information on its platform. In a particularly polarizing case, Zuckerberg defended circulating stories that deny the Holocaust, arguing that they do not constitute hate speech and are protected by the site’s terms of use (Hern 2018). This position represents a striking departure from legacy media gatekeepers who, despite their biases toward sensational news, strongly maintain a commitment to distributing accurate information that serves the public interest.

**Social institution.** Because social media are not responsible for creating their own content, news on these platforms is entirely dependent on extra-media institutions, including the production of legacy news and the timing of current events. Nyhan (2015) theorizes that media coverage of scandals is more probable on slow news days, when gatekeepers can devote more resources to them and audience attention is focused. He examined U.S. political scandals across three decades and showed that uncongested news days are a more important determinant in the onset and extent of scandal coverage than the severity of wrongdoing or misconduct.

**Social forces.** Although they are rarely discussed as such, social media are some of the very first cross-national gatekeepers—which must accommodate a vast array of social forces, including cultures and ideologies. The largest platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, operate in countries with a wide range of political, social, and cultural influences, which introduce unique opportunities and challenges for exposing political scandal. The ability to share critical information on social media that was not permitted elsewhere was certainly a contributing factor in the early stages of the Arab Spring (Howard & Hussain 2013). It gave rise to optimism that this new gatekeeping channel would be able to bypass strict political constraints in places where criticism was otherwise forbidden. However, this enthusiasm has tempered in recent years (e.g., Mays & Groshek 2017; Stoycheff, Burgess & Martucci 2018) as governments have become savvy at wooing and coercing these gatekeepers. A few countries, like China, Iran, and North Korea, have implemented outright Twitter and Facebook bans, while the others require any social media organizations to cooperate fully with their national laws. This cooperation regularly
includes requests for user data and the removal of content, with Turkey, Mexico, and India ranking among the top requestors (Facebook Transparency Report 2018). Many users will not feel the effects of these system-level gates, but their influences trickle down to impact the other tiers of social media gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos 2009).

The value of scandal

With so many factors that contribute to story selection above and beyond the actual importance of particular issues, citizens would be naive to trust that the news they encounter is simply a reflection of the nation’s most important problems or a barometer of political wrongdoing (Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev & Dickinson 2013; Stoycheff, Pingree, Peifer & Sui 2017). Instead, it is a result of a carefully curated process that values many of the same characteristics associated with political scandal: controversy, conflict, sensationalism, and high-profile figures. One academic recently quipped that the news we see is more akin to a sports play-by-play than a first draft of history (Pinker 2018).

Individuals who fail to acknowledge or understand these gatekeeping biases are more susceptible to media effects—agenda setting in particular (Stoycheff et al. 2017; Pingree, Stoycheff, Sui & Peifer 2018). High trust in gatekeepers allows news consumers to unload the cognitive burden of making decisions about important issues onto media professionals, heeding others’ judgments rather than forming their own. This is especially problematic because media saturation of scandal rarely corresponds to the severity of political wrongdoing (Entman 2012), which can result in inflated trivial problems and suppressed meaningful ones.

Take, for example, two scandals that were competing for media attention during the second quarter of 2018. The first was the second longest power outage on record, lasting 200 days in Puerto Rico as a result of mismanagement following Hurricane Maria. The outage affected 80 percent of the population, disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities, and resulted in thousands of deaths. The second was the cancelation of popular sitcom, *Roseanne*, after the show’s protagonist and named character, Roseanne Barr, tweeted a racial slur. During the peak of both stories, Roseanne’s comments received over 150 percent more media attention than the Puerto Rico story, and unsurprisingly the public favored this news as well (Vernon 2018). While personal racism is certainly an important problem in the United States, it is difficult to justify such lopsided coverage of one individual’s actions over neglect of a structural problem that exacerbates racial inequality across the country. However, both professional and social media gatekeepers face a variety of pressures from internal and external entities to initiate and sustain scandalous news. Entman (2012) even goes so far as to argue that it would be nearly impossible to continue long-term coverage of political wrongdoing without the help of political actors themselves.

Reporting political scandal seemingly presents one clear advantage: its ability to disrupt. Follow-up and continuing news on political scandal, in theory, can help maintain a check on elites in power and produce reforms to the political system. News coverage that prioritizes conflict, novelty, and sensationalism can contribute to social deviance, which Shoemaker (1985; see also Shoemaker, Chang & Brendlinger 2016) argues is what gives gatekeepers their power: “Deviant people and events bring about the opportunity for change, [and] publicizing deviance is a prerequisite for controlling the direction and extent of social change” (p. 27). And the publication of deviant or scandalous news has fundamentally shaped civic life in the United States. Stories focused on moral or ethical wrongdoing have highlighted racial injustices through the #BlackLivesMatter social media campaign and exposed a pervasive culture of sexual harassment with #MeToo. However, scandal coverage is easiest and most likely when it does not seek to
undermine or change existing power dynamics (Entman 2012), which often leads to scandal stories that focus on the actions of one or more individuals rather than systemic flaws in mechanisms, processes, and organizations (Kepplinger, Geiss & Siebert 2012).

Unearthing individual misdeeds is only a small part of a vibrant media in a democratic society. Gatekeepers are also responsible for providing the public with access to the historical, social, and political contexts necessary for understanding important issues—even if they never appear as trending stories. This requires ensuring that the news that makes it past the gates provides a comprehensive picture of why problems occur and how to resolve them. Gatekeepers should introduce and communicate potential solutions and follow up coverage that explains if and how scandals resolve. Both legacy and emergent gatekeepers are incentivized to report political scandal, but this pressure should be met with a steadfast commitment to thorough investigations that advance the public good.

References


Selecting scandal


