Gatekeeper or Peacekeeper: The Decision-Making Authority of Public Relations Practitioners

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The significant role of gatekeepers within organizations has been the subject of investigation for many years. In fact, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest that there is no other person more crucial to the communication processes of organizations than the formal gatekeeper; in a sense, gatekeeping provides key people within organizations the ability to permit or forbid access to organizational information. In addition, 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). Often situated between those internal and external publics, the public relations practitioner serves as the gatekeeper of organizational information in communicating with various publics, including the mass media. 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.

Reber and Berger (2006) propose that "public relations scholarship is rife with calls to find a way for practitioners to ascend to organizational decision making circles (i.e., the dominant coalition)" (pg. 1). Additionally, although existing literature in public relations has investigated the organizational roles of public relations practitioners relative to decision making (i.e. Broom & Smith, 1978; Ferguson, 1979; Broom, 1982; Johnson & Acharya, 1982; Dozier, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1986), there is limited research on the decision-making authority of public relations practitioners in communicating with the media, specifically. Based on the supporting literature, the present study intended to explore Reber and Berger's call by investigating the role of the public relations practitioner through the following research question: How much of a gatekeeping role do public relations practitioners play in their organizations' communication with the news media?

Two qualitative data collection methods were used to achieve the purpose of the present study: interviews and online focus groups using a snowball sample of public relations practitioners. Twelve semi-structured interviews, varying in length from 30 to 55 minutes, were conducted over the telephone and tape-recorded. Following the interviews, three online focus groups were conducted, thus providing the researcher with the ability to extract information that could not be obtained through the one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1997).

Results suggested that two primary themes were present in the data collected. The first theme identified different roles of public relations professionals related to issues of

decision-making power and authority. The second theme suggested that regardless of the degree of decision-making power that the public relations practitioner possessed in the gatekeeping process, they remain a contributor or at least an influence on the decision-making process; however, that influences varied greatly depending on the type of organization in which the PR professional works. The most significant finding, that revealed this significant dichotomy between the gatekeeping roles of public relations professionals based on the type of organization they represented, creates various implications for future research and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The significant role of the organizational gatekeeper has been the subject of investigation for many years. In fact, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest that there is no other person more crucial to the communication processes of an organization than the formal gatekeeper; in a sense, gatekeeping provides key people within the organization, the ability to permit or forbid access to organizational information. For most organizations, communication beyond the organizational walls is equally as important as the communication that takes place throughout the organization yet there is very little research that provides insight into the external communication processes of organizations, and more specifically the role of organizational gatekeepers in that process. Therefore, the present study focuses on the external communication function of the organizational gatekeeper, specifically in their communication with the mass media.

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). "One traditional explanation is that gatekeepers are a primary linking mechanism to external sources of information and technology; information flows through these key individuals" (Tushman & Katz, 1980, p. 262). Allen (1977) conceptually defined organizational gatekeepers as those internal communicators who also maintain a high degree of external communication. From this perspective, relevant organizational information is transferred effectively into the public sphere because of the capable boundary spanning and communication activities of the organization's gatekeepers.

Identifying the gatekeepers of an organization can be difficult; in some organizations the gatekeepers reside at the top of the organization and in others, they could be located in specific departments or designated positions (Morrill, Buller, Buller & Larkey, 1999). But regardless of location/position within the organization, Stringer (1999) explains that "the gatekeeper possesses the authority to choose what information is conveyed to the audience and how that information will be framed" (p. 15); it is this authority that characterizes an ideal model of public relations (Grunig, 1992).

Grunig (1992) suggests that amount of gatekeeping control a public relations professional can exercise differs from organization to organization depending on the

amount of autonomy and decision-making power given to the public relations function. Ideally, the top public relations professional will be part of the "dominant coalition" of the organization, helping to communication decisions in order to advance the organization's goals. However, there are many organizational situations where the public relations professional is seen as an advisor or consultant rather than a member of the "dominant coalition" (Grunig, 1992). Describing these different public relations situations, Wilcox and Cameron (2006) suggested that there are four different levels of authority that the public relations professional may have in regard to their influence on organizational decision making, which include advisory authority, compulsory advisory authority, concurring authority, and command authority. These levels progress from the public relations department having an advisory role lacking decision making authority to having full autonomy in making communication decisions on behalf of the organization. It is important to note, that the ideal organizational situation for public relations professionals is to have at least a concurring authority position where public relations has significant influence over organizational decisions. Nonetheless, concurring authority is fairly uncommon and public relations is overwhelmingly nonexistent in the dominant coalition. In fact, Reber and Berger (2006) propose that "public relations scholarship is rife with calls to find a way for practitioners to ascend to organizational decision making circles (i.e., the dominant coalition)" (pg. 1). Therefore, the present study explores their call by investigating the role of the public relations practitioner in regard to the organizational gatekeeping process and the decision making power involved.

Gatekeeping Process

Gatekeeping is "the process by which selections are made in media work, especially decisions whether or not to admit a particular news story to pass through the "gates" of a news medium into the news channels" (McQuail, 1994, p. 213). Researchers have used gatekeeping to investigate and explain the steps involved in the filtering of information that originates with a source and ends with a public (Dimmick, 1974; Gans, 1979; White, 1950).

Dimmick (1974) defined gatekeeper as an occupant of one of four organizational roles – reporter, editor, news executive, and news source. Basically, by choosing the most important information for the organization to communicate to the news media, the public relations professional often occupies the role of the news source. In support of this notion, Turk (1985) refers to the PR professional of an organization as the primary information gatekeepers. Gandy (1982) described the journalist-practitioner relationship as a dependence that is conditional on the extent to which the source controls the content, implying that the gatekeeping process is heavily contingent on the source, and starts at the organizational level. In agreement, Shoemaker (1991) posits that sources have the ability to either "facilitate or constrain the movement of information through channels they control, thus affecting the information of an item into the media channel" (p. 61). Therefore, it is valuable to determine the extent to which public relations professionals "serve a filtering function and exercise considerable control over the information flow to all subsequent receivers," (Krone, Jablin, & Putnam, 1987, p. 23).

The literature that suggests that the first gatekeeper in the media's gatekeeping process is the source from which the story originates is extensive (Bailey & Lichty, 1972; Donohew, 1967; Gieber, 1960; Schramm, 1949); however, as previously mentioned there is limited understanding on the gatekeeping role of the source, specifically in selecting and communicating organizational information; therefore, based on the literature presented, the following was the primary research question under investigation: How much of a gatekeeping role do public relations professionals play in their organizations' communication with the news media?

METHOD

Approached from a qualitative research design, this study attempts to describe the gatekeeping roles and decision making abilities of public relations professionals in working with the news media. Qualitative research has been cited as being useful for studying phenomena on which little previous research is available and when the purpose of the research is exploratory and descriptive (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Lindlof, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; McCraken, 1988). The qualitative approach to data collection enabled the researcher to gain insight into and rich description into the gatekeeping role of public relations professionals, a topic in which existing literature is limited. Therefore, through triangulation of in-depth interviews and online asynchronous focus groups, public relations professionals from varying organizations provided insight into their decision-making power and resulting gatekeeping capabilities.

A purposive sampling technique, specifically chain referral, was employed to identify and select participants who met the participant criteria for both interview and focus group data collection. Interview participants were selected based on:
1) Their familiarity to the researcher,
2) Their level of public relations/media relations experience, and
3) The type of organization in which they worked.

The researcher believed it was particularly important to choose participants who had extensive experience in public relations/media relations in order to gather information-rich data from professionals with extensive experience and established careers. Furthermore, because the researcher was interested in exploring all facets of the public relations field, it was important that the participants represent institutional, corporate, and government organizations. Twelve interview participants were selected and at the completion of each interview, participants were asked to refer two to three professional colleagues that they viewed as adept in media relations and that could make significant contribution to the study. From these referrals, a list of potential participants was compiled, reviewed for overlap, and revised. The referral list, which included 43 professionals, was used to recruit online focus group participants.

As mentioned, two data collection methods were used to achieve the purpose of the present study: interviews and online focus groups. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted over the telephone and tape-recorded for transcription. The length of the interviews varied from 30 to 55 minutes. The researcher opened and guided the

discussion through a semi-structured process hoping to achieve a balance between formality and informality (McCraken, 1988). Prior to the interviews, a panel of experts from academic and industry organizations reviewed the interview guide. In addition, the interview guide was pilot-tested with a representative similar to the study's participant sample. The interview guide was revised according to expert suggestions and observations made from the pilot interview.

Following the interviews, three online focus groups were conducted utilizing asynchronous discussion group software to create meaningful interactions between participants. By conducting online focus groups, the researcher had the ability to extract information that could not be obtained through the one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1997). In addition, the use of online focus groups allowed the researcher to overcome the time, financial, and geographic constraints present with traditional focus group methods. Finally, it is important to note that the focus groups were considered a follow-up method, providing elaboration and clarification for the interview data collected.

The three online focus groups each ranged in size between three and ten homogenous participants. The number and size of focus groups falls within Mann and Stewart's (2000) suggestions for online focus groups. Prior to the online focus group discussion, participants were separated into categories by the type of organization in which they represented. Separating the participants based on the industry in which they work was believed to create and sustain a healthy conversation as well a comfortable and cooperative virtual environment (Morgan, 1997). Each online focus group was designed to serve as a discussion forum for the three different communities of public relations professionals.

Focus groups were conducted sequentially, each lasting 14 days. According to Mann and Stewart (2000), there is a range of ways that a question schedule can be transmitted to participants. The present study combined two suggested approaches by posting all questions at the outset of the study but allowing participants to access the questions over a two-week period in which reminder emails were sent to participants on three-day intervals. Throughout the structured discussion, the moderator responded to messages, probed when necessary, and posed new questions based on the discussion.

To initiate the analysis process, interview data was transcribed and focus group data was formatted so the researcher was able to analyze full transcripts of all data collected. After the transcripts were compared with field notes and informal analysis techniques were completed, the data was analyzed using the inductive data analysis method outlined by Hatch (2002). Following analysis methods similar to other important inductive models (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1979), the model of analysis used in this study searches for "patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (Hatch, 2002, p. 161).

RESULTS

The demographic characteristics of the interview participants are as follows: five participants were male and seven were female; four represented institutional organizations, two represented government organizations, and six represented corporate communications. The media relations responsibilities of the participants varied from 10 percent to 85 percent of the participants' job responsibilities, with the average being 44 percent. The number of years in working with the media ranged from four to 36 years, with the average being 20 years in the field. Job titles held by participants varied from public affairs specialist, press secretary, and director of public opinion management to marketing director and public relations coordinator.

From the three focus groups conducted, little demographic information was obtained from the 22 focus participants, 10 males and 12 females, aside from the indication that 10 participants represented corporate positions, nine worked in an institutional setting and only three held positions in government agencies. Several of the government participants recruited to participate replied to correspondence and indicated that they were concerned with the confidentiality and online nature of data collection.

Who controls the gate?

Following the concepts presented in the framework of gatekeeping, the decision making strategies of gatekeepers affect communication choices, in turn allowing the gatekeeper to influence the selection and shaping of communication messages. The present investigation into the gatekeeping and decision making roles of public relations professionals followed Shoemaker's (1991) conjecture that these sources of organizational information significantly influence the gatekeeping process.

Interestingly, GJ explained her influence on the gatekeeping process that supports the aforementioned assumptions that the organizational source is one of the four roles involved in the filtering of media information, "Something we sometimes fail to notice is the secondary value of media relations – the fact that we are influencing the influencers." However, the extent to which participants had the ability to "influence the influencers" varied drastically; the most significant finding that emerged from the investigation was the dichotomy between public relations professionals working for institution and government settings and the public relations professionals working in corporate settings and their decision making abilities.

Although each and every participant clearly contributed to the gatekeeping process, the extent of their decision-making power at the "gate" varied tremendously. Seemingly the decision-making power of the source diminishes in institutions and government agencies, whereas public relations professionals working for corporate organizations appeared to have command authority in making communication decisions on behalf of the organization, giving them full responsibility as the organizational gatekeeper.

Again, for most participants representing institutions or government agencies, the term "gatekeeper" did not accurately describe their role in their organization; however, "facilitator" or even "peacekeeper" appeared to be a better descriptor of their organizational responsibility. Although some participants initially indicated that they were gatekeepers for their organizations, further investigation into their role revealed that in actuality they were facilitators to the organizational gatekeeper. In suggesting that he only "assists" or "advises" in his organization's communication decisions, FD explained the following,

> I would say I play somewhat of a gatekeeping role but it is almost more of being an advisory to our administration on what is good timing for making announcements or sometimes they want to go out for publicity and it is reminding them internally that there may be some negative aspects to a given story. Administration almost always makes the final decision, however.

In describing her role in the organizations decision-making process, LD similarly professed that she has "significant input on these decisions…usually we are consulted and our opinions are valued."

Several participants not only shared that they are a facilitator or advisor in the gatekeeping process but that there is a negative implication associated with the lack of decision-making power they possess. SS expressed the consequence of having administrators that make the ultimate information dissemination decisions, "There are times when you have to send some things that you are not sure are the best for the news media. So you just try to minimize the negative impact that those might have, if you can."

DT confirmed this negative implication, "Incessant pressure to write 'atta-boy, atta-girl' self-promoting stories for internal university audiences seriously impinge on communicating educational messages to external audiences." However, he followed up by saying that despite the decision power that administrators have on the gatekeeping process, "Communicators can influence these decisions more than they often do if they are willing to face-off over important issues."

PK provided an example of this willingness to "face off" with administrators in order to gain more influence on the information dissemination decisions:

> We don't want to be seen as a supplier of a non-news and wholly features. We don't want to be seen as a supplier of a constant stream of faculty awards/faculty promotion type stories. We need to be seen as a supplier of good, useful information/news they [the media] can depend on. We have to be merciless in that regard, and that's a new thing for us, so it's taking some getting used to…for us and administrators.

Communication professionals working for academic institutions and government agencies seem to recognize the limitations that accompany their lack of authority on the gatekeeping process for their organization; nonetheless, they continue to accept this role and try to "minimize the negative impact" that results from their lack of decision-making power. MV candidly voiced,

> OK, let's be honest, we all have to put out information that we know just isn't newsworthy. But we try to keep that to a minimum…and we do damage control by limiting distribution. In these cases, my motto: 'Minimize failure.'

RD suggested that even though administrators sometimes "insist" that irrelevant information be communicated, he tries "to surround those stories with the good stuff that the media folks who know us understand why we just had to send out the other and trust us not to waste their time any more than we absolutely have to." Although this assumption of RD's is hopeful, literature would support that the media does not appreciate receiving information that is promotional or irrelevant to their audience. Herein lies a serious implication for public relations professionals working at academic institutions and government agencies; the technician mentality could severely affect the reputation and ultimately success of the organization's communication efforts.

Several participants indicated that they play the true role of a gatekeeper for their organization by possessing authority over external communication decisions. The majority of these participants held positions in various corporate organizations. Describing the decision-making power she can have on the gatekeeping process, FK shared, "I want to be the decision-maker on whether it is something that we want to deal with or not. So yes, I do act as a gatekeeper because I select if it is something we should be doing or communicating." DM also confirmed that he is the gatekeeper for his organization because he "makes all determinations on [his organizations] PR efforts." Though DM serves as the gatekeeper for his organization by making "all determinations," it is important to note that command authority was not the case for all corporate participants.

In most situations, corporate participants revealed that they commonly made the final decision regarding the information to communicate to the media; however, the information went through a "joint process" of decisions before making it to the final gate, meaning there was concurring authority over the communications function. GJ explained this concept: "Messages must be pre-approved at about three levels. We have a really good team of communicators, a strategic consult, and a management team." When talking about their decisions, most participants implied this collective decision-making in referring to "our" decisions. For example, NJ shared that "before we'll pitch it to the media, we would have a team conversation, come up with creative ideas, get consensus, and then I would go pitch it." RP echoed, "As with most companies and associations, this is a team effort, so there are many gatekeepers, including committees, other departments, boards, and opinionated individuals." Furthermore, BB confirmed,

> I usually make the final decision but when it gets to be something of affecting the image of the organization or of major importance to the future of the organization, then yes, I would typically work with supervision to help provide quotes for reporters, provide interviews with key people from the organization, and receive overall support for the decision.

Some participants, who indicated that they were a gatekeeper for the organization because they made final decisions on information dissemination for the organization, also suggested that they feel pressure from organizational hierarchy in making those decisions. A prime example of being a gatekeeper but also still experiencing the influence of organizational leadership was explained by FK:

> If information is not newsworthy it will not make the cut no matter who wants it communicated, and I decide what is newsworthy. I am overruled occasionally but at least I have made my suggestion - ultimately the people that pay my bills are going to tell me what to do . . . so sometimes you are between a rock and a hard place.

Clearly true command authority by the public relations professional is rare in organizations; the decisions that are made in regard to the external communication of an organization appear to be characterized by one of the following two situations:
1) The public relations professional has concurring authority, meaning that they are part of the dominant coalition of the organization and helping to make strategic gatekeeping decisions, or
2) The public relations professional has advisory authority in that they serve as a technician in the gatekeeping process by carrying out the decisions that are made by management.

Although the aforementioned characterizations of the data are not novel in regard to the influence of public relations on organizational decisions, the intensity of the influence that appears to vary according to organizational type does merit scholarly attention.

CONCLUSIONS

The significant finding from this study includes the various levels of decision-making authority that public relations professionals possessed throughout the organizational gatekeeping process, which appeared to be related to the type of organization in which participants worked. Professionals representing corporate organizations insinuated that they have a greater amount of control or influence over the information dissemination process by directly making decisions on the information to communicate to the news media. Previous research in public relations would suggest that this is an ideal situation for the public relations function in that the public relations department is part of the "dominant coalition" of the organization (Grunig, 1992). In contrast, public relations professionals representing government and institutional organizations suggested that they have little influence on the gatekeeping process and their role could be best

defined as an advisor to the decision makers - serving more of a technician role – for media communication efforts. Not only does this finding reveal the considerable difference between the roles of these three groups of public relations professionals, but it also suggests the substantial repercussions that could be associated with non-communicators making final communication decisions. Further, "practitioner roles are key to understanding the function of public relations and organizational communication" (Dozier, 1992, p. 327), and even though existing research has investigated practitioner roles (Ferguson, 1979; Broom, 1982) little scholarly attention has been given to the influence of organizational type on practitioner roles relative to decision-making power.

The differences observed in the decision-making power of public relations professionals present various implications for further research and professional practice:

- First and foremost, the qualitative, exploratory nature of the study presents an opportunity for a quantitative follow-up study with a larger sample of public relations professionals in order to provide further insight and evidence into the suggestion that organizational type affects the decision-making power of the public relations professional.

- Additional research should be conducted on the influence of the organizational type on the role of the public relations professional. It would be advantageous to conduct case study research on different types of organizations to see how organizational culture, structure, and even mission can influence decision-making processes. In effect, the present study provides a baseline for additional investigation into why and how organizational type might have a significant impact on the decision-making power of the public relations function.

- Further, conducting a quantitative correlation study on the relationship between the decision-making power of the public relations professional in the gatekeeping process and the amount of media coverage the organization receives from their communication efforts would further reveal the potential repercussions associated with non-communicators making communication decisions. It is assumed the organizations that include public relations as part of the dominant coalition, what appears to be primarily corporate organizations, are more successful in their media relations efforts than those organizations that exclude public relations from strategic decision making table.

- Finally, a significant area for future research should be based on the assumptions of power control theory. Power control theory suggests that "organizational choices and actions grow out of decisions made by those with most power in the organization" (Toth, 2007, p. 222). Research attention should be placed on the "power holders" in various organizations. Since evidence from the present study suggests that in some organizations the public relations professional does not possess decision-making authority, it is important to understand how power is allocated as well as how public relations practitioners can infiltrate decision-making circles.

Scholarship for the past decade has suggested that it is imperative for public relations professionals to be part of an organizations dominant coalition in order to strategically contribute to the organization and achieve excellence in public relations (Grunig, 1992; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). Yet the present study supports Berger's (2007) suggestion that "public relations professionals often remain outside this inner circle, or do not hold seats at the decision-making tables, and thus are not in a position to affect strategic decisions and choices" (p. 223), at the very least, this seems to be true for public relations professionals in government and institutional settings.

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