

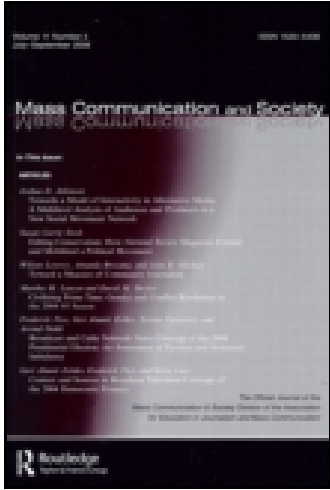
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### When the Gates Swing Open: Examining Network Gatekeeping in a Social Media Setting

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# When the Gates Swing Open: Examining Network Gatekeeping in a Social Media Setting

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This study draws on the concept of network gatekeeping to examine the ways in which organizations have adapted the processes of gatekeeping to respond to the collaborative, communicative power of users upon which they are exercising their gatekeeping authority. Through a case study of the unprecedented “Social Suite” provided for social media-using fans of Major League Baseball’s Cleveland Indians, this article explores the methods the gatekeeper has used to both subvert and reinforce its traditional role. Gatekeepers are found to extend their authority into networked realms by allowing for greater access, freedom, and relationship while applying more subtle gatekeeping filters, and the Social Suite’s users play a role as active, though gated, participants in the gatekeeping process. The findings of this article expand on current gatekeeping

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research to address the fluid, emerging roles of gatekeepers and gated communities within networked environments.

## INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of the Internet and other digital technologies in recent years, modern institutions have been forced to reconsider their communication approaches. Across the fields of media (Gillmor, 2004), business (Ferguson, 2006), and government (Bennett, 2003), the digital platforms that allow users to connect, collaborate, and distribute information have also caused traditional institutions to rethink the way collective narratives and flows of information are shaped. Many of those institutions have responded to these new challenges by making efforts to employ digital media platforms such as blogs and social media. But those organizations have frequently found it difficult to fully incorporate newer media formats, often co-opting those technologies entirely or creating a tension between decentralized media forms and processes and a hierarchical organizational structure (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; O'Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008; Singer, 2010). How, then, do organizations harness the collaborative power of interactive digital media without limiting their democratizing potential or dictating their use?

One such organization to try a particularly innovative digital media initiative was Major League Baseball's Cleveland Indians, which in 2010 and 2011 set aside a small section in their stadium for fans who conversed about the team on blogs and social media. The section, called the "Social Suite," is the first of its kind in professional baseball. The area was launched in 2010 as the "Tribe Social Deck," an invitation-only section in the left-field bleachers that gave digital media users access to team employees, a reserved seating area, a closed-circuit television feed, and the same pregame information given to the professional media. The following year, the section was moved to a more prestigious club-level suite, renamed the Social Suite, and announced via a press release. During the 2011 season, the suite drew about 700 applications, with more than 500 people gaining access. Team executives made a well-received presentation about the initiative at industry meetings following the 2010 season, and by the end of the 2011 season, other professional sports teams had begun offering similar features on a limited basis.

In implementing the Social Suite, the Cleveland Indians played a gatekeeping role, though it is unlike the editorial gatekeeping role historically conceived by media scholars. The team initiated relationships with fans

outside traditional media channels, and it allowed fans to play an active part in shaping their own role in the gatekeeping process. This study uses this case to address an oversight in the long history of gatekeeping research, examining the hybrid role of a business and media producer, as well as the role of those upon whom the gatekeeping process is being exercised. Through participant observation and interviews with both team decision makers and social media users, this study examines the ways in which an organization both subverts and maintains traditional gatekeeping roles, as well as the attitudes, behavior, and self-perception of digital media users who are the object of that gatekeeping. Although this case centers on a sports team, it has broad implications for businesses, media organizations, and digital media users negotiating similar roles in a changing media environment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Network Gatekeeping

In media research, gatekeeping has been defined as the process by which mass media control the flow of information, determining what is withheld, what is presented, and how those messages are shaped in reaching their intended audiences (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). The idea has been broadened to apply to gatekeepers not only as individuals and groups but also as routines (Shoemaker et al., 2001), codes of conduct, and algorithms (Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). In the field of management, the study of gatekeeping has centered on the technological gatekeeper, an agent within an organization who monitors the flow of technical information into and out of the organization (Tushman & Katz, 1980). Information science, meanwhile, has drawn on the ideas of both the media gatekeeper and technological gatekeeper to develop a concept of gatekeeping that is based on meeting the informational needs of communities and individuals (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009; Sturges, 2001).

Despite the breadth of applications for gatekeeping, the concept must be updated to account for the rise of distributed communication technologies that have challenged one-way models of communication and influence. In mass communication in particular, the gatekeeping model has assumed a media environment characterized by scarcity and unidirectional communication in which gatekeepers' role was necessitated by the sheer difference between the massive amount of possible information to communicate and the sharply limited space in which it could be transmitted. As that environment has been transformed by the many-to-many communication model of

the Internet and other digital technologies, communication scholars have grappled with the shift in gatekeeping in various ways.

Some researchers have maintained that gatekeeping remains a powerful influence on the production of online media, as the structures through which gatekeeping has traditionally been conducted remain largely intact online (Boczkowski, 2004; Goode, 2009; Livingston & Bennett, 2003). Others have argued that the ease of publishing allows the public to play an active role in creating the news, threatening the media's authority to play a gatekeeping role (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). Through an abundance of information and this challenge to institutional publishing authority, the digital media environment "undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: if there are no gates, there can be no gatekeeper" (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000, p. 62). In response to these threats to gatekeeping, Singer (1998, 2010) proposed a new model of gatekeeping in an online context, recasting it as an interpretive role that uses verification, analysis, and context to regulate information, as gatekeeping's main concern shifts from the quantity of information to its quality.

Barzilai-Nahon (2008, 2009) took a more integrative approach, synthesizing these varying conceptions of gatekeeping and uniting them under the broad definition of "a type of control exercised on information as it moves in and out of gates" (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1496). She identified five basic rationales for gatekeeping: provision and prevention of *access*, *editorial* selection of information to be disseminated, regulation of information coming into a group for the *protection* of its members, *preservation of culture* and values of a community or network, and acting as a social or behavioral *change agent* (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009, p. 17). In reviewing the various strains of gatekeeping research, she concluded that in its focus on the roles and actions of gatekeepers, it has severely neglected to consider the gated—those affected by gatekeepers' decisions. Mass communication studies, in particular, have approached gatekeeping as a one-way, top-down process, she argued.

To correct this flaw, Barzilai-Nahon proposed *network gatekeeping*, centering largely on the relationship between the gatekeeper and the gated. Network gatekeeping measures that relationship by gauging the political power, information production, and alternatives available to the gated, as well as the presence of a relationship with the gatekeeper. In network gatekeeping, a gate is an entrance to or exit from a network or its sections, and the gatekeeping process is a dialogical one that has forms and meanings shaped by both gatekeeper and gated. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2011) initially questioned whether gatekeeping can appropriately be applied to a network context but found that diffused, collaborative gatekeeping does indeed arise from communicative networks. Some of the gatekeeping within

this networked model is performed through the structure of the network itself, which is influenced by issues of access (e.g., Granka, 2010) and evidenced by networks' asymmetrical power-law structure (e.g., Meraz, 2009).

The concept of network gatekeeping is an important one for several reasons: First, it presents a model that is applicable beyond the relatively narrow editorial gatekeeping concept of mass communication research. As this study shows, even in mediated environments contemporary gatekeeping is often being exercised by actors outside of media, through processes other than the editorial one. Second, it acknowledges the significance of those on whom gatekeeping is being exercised, recognizing that it is not necessarily enacted by force but often through consent, in a continually negotiated relationship. Third, it is structured to incorporate the distinct nature of power in a networked context, which is highly asymmetrical but produces more fluid shifts in power than in traditional models (Castells, 2011; Nahon, 2011). Fourth, it begins to consider the implications of a networked society on gatekeeping processes, accounting for the connectedness, fluidity, and collaborative potential of both gatekeepers and the gated. This concept has only begun to be tested and applied to cases within a networked, digitally mediated environment (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2011; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). This case study attempts to add to that nascent body of research using an innovative program from the field of sports media to draw out implications for a variety of gatekeeping contexts and relationships.

### Fandom, Relationship Management, and Sports Media Gatekeeping

To fully understand the context of the particular case this study examines, it is helpful to consider three additional strands within communication literature: fandom, customer relationship management, and the role of gatekeeping in sports media. Drawing on Jenkins (1992, p. 86), fandom is defined here as a space where competing interpretations and evaluations of cultural phenomena are proposed and negotiated, and where communities develop identities around those mediated phenomena. In fandom, meaning is created not only through interaction with those phenomena but also in interaction with others in the community (Baym, 2000). Although fandom and sports fandom were initially conceptualized as an oppositional form situated at the social margins, more recent research has reconceptualized them as part of mainstream culture—a taken-for-granted part of modern media consumption (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). This move into the mainstream has brought fan communities increased social influence and the attention of marketers, though corporate efforts to co-opt fandom can fail to create true agency or community (McCourt & Burkart, 2007; Pearson, 2010).

Fans' growing cultural influence has been aided by the the increased participatory and creative capacities of digital technologies, which enhance fan communities' essential productive capacity (Fiske, 1989) by giving them more power to spread ideas in a bottom-up flow (Jenkins, 2006). These technologies have also blurred the behavioral distinctions between fans and nonfans (Cooper & Tang, 2012), allowing a broader range of people to become involved in fan behavior. Likewise, the networked capabilities of these technologies have allowed for more intense interpersonal interaction and greater community formation and enhancement potential, both in mass media-oriented and sports fandom (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Crawford, 2004).

Strategic communication scholars have explored how companies seek to maximize this interaction and community formation through customer relationship management (CRM). In broad terms, CRM is the development, execution, and reflection on connections made between companies and targeted markets. Ryals and Payne (2001) placed CRM in the context of companies' attempts to harness the communication technologies that have made the accessibility to and interaction with multiple media forms (e.g., blogs, SNSs, mobile apps) more open to the public, defining it as a marketing effort that is "information enabled." Payne and Frow (2005) also emphasized the role of using data and information to "cocreate value" with customers, using "information, technology, and applications" (p. 168) to integrate people, processes, and marketing capabilities.

The growth of social media, which are traditionally free and open to people with access to the Internet, has made the seemingly intricate dynamics of CRM more approachable for large-scale and niche operations alike. Indeed, spaces such as Facebook and Twitter may ultimately help companies develop innovative marketing campaigns at a fraction of traditional costs, all while scaling their potential reach to millions. These spaces allow consumers to seek out the brands they are most interested in or most loyal to while being exposed to others and to interact in those spaces when they arrive. Social media also allow companies to brand themselves without necessarily pushing a constant stream of advertising through a blended approach to branding. That is, there may be spaces where expected content can be delivered alongside engagement and subtle forms of promotion. Greer and Ferguson (2011) found evidence of this strategy among local U.S. television stations on Twitter, which mixed contests and promotions in with predominantly news content.

In addition to the dynamic of relationship management, the intersection between sports, media, and the public has long been a rich site for gatekeeping processes implemented by both news media and the organizations they cover. Sports teams have traditionally exercised their gatekeeping authority



by issuing press credentials to media outlets, thereby strictly controlling access to information they produce. Those media sources then play their own gatekeeping role, selecting and shaping the information passed on to the public. That dual-gatekeeping process, which has served to keep fans at two removes from the teams they follow, has been challenged by a digitally mediated environment that allows the gates to be bypassed in two directions.

First, athletes have used technologies to communicate directly with fans, bypassing media sources and often teams as gatekeepers. The interactivity and accessibility of fan message boards (Poor, 2006) and social network sites such as Twitter have given sports figures direct access to their fans, allowing them to communicate outside of channels controlled by the traditional media (Hutchins, 2011; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Some sports teams and leagues have attempted to reassert their gatekeeping authority in this area, setting policies and fining players for Twitter usage deemed inappropriate (Gardner, 2009; Klemko, 2011).

Second, fans have used the ease of publishing on the web and the networked organizing power it provides to subvert the authority of sports institutions. This can occur in overt ways, such as the counterdiscourse used by activists to subvert Olympic authorities' colonialist and capitalist narratives (Perry & Kang, 2012) and in more covert ways, as fans disseminate news and analysis about teams and athletes via blogs and social media, circumventing the traditional media's gatekeeping role (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009). Teams have responded to the latter by using their main gatekeeping tool—issuing and withholding credentials—largely to reinforce traditional norms, in several cases refusing to give access to independent bloggers (Wyshynski, 2010a, 2010b), though some teams have credentialed bloggers (Dreier, 2011; Fry, 2010). A previous study (Holton, 2012) found professional baseball teams place much less trust in independent bloggers than their traditional-media counterparts and are much more likely to turn down independent bloggers' credential requests as well.

But even as they have exercised gatekeeping power over them, sports teams have also recognized the value of interactive digital media formats, beginning to incorporate them into their own communications, though often cautiously (Dittmore, Stoldt, & Greenwell, 2008). The Cleveland Indians' Social Suite has been one of the more ambitious of those initiatives, giving digital media users direct online and face-to-face interaction with team officials as well as information typically given only to members of the professional media. This case study seeks to determine the ways in which a more open, networked gatekeeping process is exercised and negotiated within such a distinctive environment in which both fan dynamics and a relationship management effort are at work. Through an examination of

the gated as well as the gatekeeper, it is intended to illuminate similarities and differences between traditional and networked gatekeeping roles among both groups through the following research questions:

- RQ1: In what ways are the Cleveland Indians subverting or reshaping the traditional gatekeeping role through the Social Suite?
- RQ2: In what ways are the Cleveland Indians reinforcing or maintaining the traditional gatekeeping role through the Social Suite?
- RQ3: What role are the Social Suite's users playing in the gatekeeping process, and how are they responding to the Indians' gatekeeping actions?

## METHODS

To answer these questions, which require responses from the gatekeepers and the gated as well as observations, the researchers selected multiple methods for a triangulated qualitative approach. To improve the validity of qualitative research, multiple perspectives must be employed and checked (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011; Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2009). The researchers made two 3-day trips to Cleveland in July and August 2011 to conduct participant observation and in-depth interviews with key informants at the Social Suite. By selecting to interview Social Suite developers (i.e., gatekeepers) and Social Suite users (i.e., gated), the researchers employed data triangulation (Guion et al., 2011) that allowed multiple sources and actors to enhance their understanding of the Social Suite and introduce multiple perspectives. Researchers conducted five in-person interviews with two Indians executives—chosen because they were the only ones with direct involvement in the program—in addition to several follow-ups via e-mail and phone calls. The researchers also interviewed 29 Social Suite users—most within the suite itself, as well as several via e-mail and phone calls. The 17 male and 12 female interviewees were selected from among adults who were invited by the team, as opposed to attendees' own guests. Beyond this distinction, in-suite interview sampling was limited only by time; the researchers simply interviewed as many guests as possible during each game, and in some cases all team-invited guests were interviewed. To ensure interpretational agreement, the researchers compared notes, shared findings, and developed themes after each trip, discussing at length the text of the interviews as well as their observations. These conversations helped the researchers reach agreement on the findings from their interviews and observations.

Interviews with Cleveland Indians executives were semistructured and included questions about the history, goals, and implementation behind

the Social Suite. These questions targeted the development of the Social Suite and its guiding policies as well as the executives' interactions with Social Suite users. In particular, the executives were asked to describe their relationship with users, how they thought users perceived them, what changes they had made to the structure of the Social Suite based on user recommendations, and how they hoped the suite developed in the future. As often occurs with semistructured interviews, these questions served to guide conversation and often resulted in insightful and unexpected avenues of discourse. Interviews with Social Suite users, which typically lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, were also semistructured and included questions about their motivations for using the suite, their behaviors in the suite, their attitudes toward the team, and whether they viewed themselves as members of the media. These questions were employed to uncover why users opted into the Social Suite, if they saw themselves as gated, how they interacted with one another as well as their gatekeepers, and what information they felt they contributed. Each of the interviewees gave permission for their names to be used in conjunction with their comments.

Interviews with Social Suite users took place in the suite itself, where researchers also observed the Social Suite as participants on 6 different days, totaling approximately 35 hours of observation. The suite is a permanently reserved luxury box at the Indians' ballpark, which holds about 10 to 15 people during most home games. It has both indoor and outdoor seating, with two televisions displaying a closed-circuit game broadcast and the radio broadcast piped in overhead, as well as copies of the detailed game information given to professional media members. After being collected at the site, interview and observation data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with statements sorted by both researchers into themes such as access, benefits, risks, self-perception as media, attitude toward the team, and behavior in the suite. Data were then synthesized and examined according to the specific RQs posed in the study.

## RESULTS

The participants in this study typically arrived at the suite shortly before the game, many of them with only their smartphones, though some also carried laptops. The demographics of the suite's visitors varied from game to game, though they generally tended toward young, White, professional individuals (usually male) and couples. The suite's participants consisted largely of adults, with the exception of Sundays, when the Indians invited families with children. Participants primarily used their phones in the suite to send numerous short messages on social network sites like Facebook and Twitter and to

take and send pictures of the game and crowd via image-sharing platforms like Flickr and Twitpic. When they sent tweets, they often used the hashtag “#socialsuite” as a way to group their messages and make them easily searchable. Few of the suite’s participants used their messages to analyze the action on the baseball field. Instead, they largely focused on other aspects of the game experience, such as the crowd and in-game entertainment via the video board or mascot, with occasional comments about the game itself.

Many of the suite’s users also interacted heavily with each other face-to-face; several of them named the opportunity to meet and talk with other local social media users as the suite’s primary benefit. Most users never met each other before entering the suite, though the team did send out an e-mail to users before the game with a partial list of the Twitter handles of others who would be in attendance. Rob Campbell, the Indians’ coordinator of digital media,<sup>1</sup> visited the suite during each game, stopping in several times for about a half hour each time and talking informally with suite users. Occasionally, other team representatives and VIPs, such as the team mascot or pregame entertainers, would also visit the suite. Users left the suite shortly after the game ended, and the composition of the group of users changed entirely from game to game: Very few users attended the suite more than three or four times over the course of the season.

### Subverting the Traditional Gatekeeping Role

The Social Suite provides a significant departure from the traditional two-step gatekeeping process within sports media and culture, in which teams typically provide a limited amount of access and information to professional journalists, who in turn perform their own gatekeeping role in selecting, filtering, and presenting that information to the team’s fans and the public. In contrast, the Social Suite bypasses the professional media to provide face-to-face, relational access to one key team official, as well as some game information otherwise limited to the professional media. Teams have historically allowed a select few fans to circumvent this gatekeeping process and gain access to team officials and information, though that privilege has typically been granted on the basis of wealth, status, or previously existing social connections, in the cases of fans who are celebrities, business executives, or friends of team officials. Access to the Social Suite, on the

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<sup>1</sup>Campbell no longer holds this job, but instead had a position with MLB Advanced Media running the Indians’ website as of February 2013.

other hand, is ostensibly open—and free—to any Indians fan with a Twitter or Facebook account, regardless of their financial or social status.

The direct access allowed through the Social Suite not only bypasses a central part of the traditional sports gatekeeping process but also marks a shift from a model of gatekeeping in which access is based on institutional affiliation and authority toward a more networked approach. For the first time, access to the team is determined not by individuals' affiliation with a traditional news organization but by their locations and discourse within particular online social networks (in this case, Facebook, Twitter, and the Cleveland Indians blogosphere). This shift from an institutionally oriented to a network-oriented gatekeeping model is only partial, as the gatekeeper itself remains highly institutional. But this decision to move the gatekeeping process beyond a strictly institutional context creates a space for the roles of both the gatekeepers and the gated to be reconceptualized through the loosening of the team's gatekeeping control and the users' broader information production abilities.

Beyond moving from an institutional toward a networked framework, the Indians also challenged the traditional gatekeeping role by using the Social Suite as a way to establish and maintain long-term relationships with those who are being gated. Many repeat Social Suite users reported communicating somewhat regularly with Campbell, often through back channels such as Twitter private messages or e-mail. These relationships carried symbiotic characteristics: Some users landed a return trip to the suite by asking Campbell via those back channels, and one user related a story of requesting and receiving a free ticket and tour of the ballpark from Campbell for a colleague who was visiting the city. Likewise, Cleveland Indians executives said they valued the relationships they developed as a way to develop a network through which to pass on information to the public about upcoming events and promotions—in effect, to enable suite users to act as gatekeepers themselves, just as they traditionally do with professional media members.

In some cases, that sustained gatekeeper-initiated interaction has also opened up alternative channels for a fan–team relationship to take on aspects of a more journalistic reporter–source relationship. Rick Grayshock, a coeditor of the Cleveland sports fan blog *Waiting for Next Year*, said that although his blog had already gained media credentials before he visited the Social Suite, the suite and the relationships that developed from it have given him the ability to glean valuable information from team sources about injuries and personnel decisions before writing about them on his blog. Because of the relationships stemming from his time in the suite, Grayshock said, “I think that [team officials] are probably more apt to answer questions for us. I know I can shoot an email to one of a few people within the

organization, and I'll get an honest response back." Although the Indians were still acting as gatekeeper in these cases, they were using the Social Suite to build relationships that empower gated individuals, something quite rare in gatekeeping processes, even within a network framework (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009).

A final way in which the Indians are challenging traditional gatekeeping roles through the Social Suite is in the lack of overt regulation of users' behavior in and communication from the suite. There were no spoken or written rules or expectations for Social Suite users; according to Campbell, the lack of guidelines was the cause of confusion for some early participants who wondered if they were required to produce certain amounts and types of content, such as positive blog posts or tweets about the team. But instead of regulating the production of such information, the team has attempted to put like-minded users together in an exclusive, pampered environment so that favorable information is generated organically, rather than being regulated and filtered.

Through the Social Suite, the Indians have positioned themselves as a less authoritative gatekeeper, one that recognizes the newfound communicative power of the gated community with whom they are interacting. As such, they have reconceptualized the traditional gatekeeping process in a way that situates it amid networks rather than institutions and aims to establish symbiotic relationships rather than systematizing filters. Although this subverts the gatekeeper's traditional one-way, regulatory role, the Indians have still exercised their gatekeeping authority over Social Suite users, though in less overt ways. These processes of gatekeeping maintenance will be examined next.

### Reinforcing the Traditional Gatekeeping Role

Although the Indians have used the Social Suite as a means of building a networked approach into the gatekeeping process and acknowledging the efficacy of their gated fans, they have retained much of the traditional gatekeeper's authority. Through the Social Suite, they used that authority in both overt and more subtle ways to guide positive messages about the team through suite users to the public and filter negative ones out.

The team exercised its gatekeeping authority most clearly in determining who would gain access to the suite. Participants were selected through one of two primary processes, both of which allowed the team to shape the suite's makeup and, thus, the type of information that would result: through participant-initiated applications and through personal invitations, often initiated by the team. Most suite users were chosen by the former method, in which a prospective user fills out an online application that included basic

personal information, along with links to social networking site accounts, psychographic questions, and 140-character answers to questions such as, “Why are you a good fit for the Social Suite?” The second means of granting access to the suite—through team-initiated personal invitations—was often used to target influential bloggers or social media users who were invested in the civic improvement of Cleveland. The team combined the two methods by evaluating applicants’ information to determine their influence (at times using online influence-measuring tools such as Klout) and supplementing those applicants with invitees to draw in influential, well-connected suite users who would be more inclined to communicate positive information about the team to larger networks of people. The team also used the gatekeeping process to put together groups with similar interests to foster more social cohesion in the suite and thus more positive messages about their experiences in the suite.

The suite’s users were quite cognizant of the gatekeeping function at work in determining access, even if they were not aware of the specific motivations behind them. Several users spoke sarcastically of being judged good enough to be in the suite, and others surmised that they had been given access because they had a broad social media network or because they often spoke positively online about the city. Yet none of them criticized the process directly, and several saw the winnowing as an asset for the suite, giving it a feeling of exclusivity. The users knew that their very presence in the suite was the result of a purposive gatekeeping process, yet they did not object precisely because they had been the beneficiaries of that process.

Although the suite allowed these users access that other fans did not have, the type of access it did not allow is also a notable function of gatekeeping processes. Specifically, the suite did not include access to players, coaches, or anyone else directly involved with the Indians’ product on the field. That access, according to Indians director of communications Curtis Danburg, is the critical factor that distinguishes professional media access from fan access and is therefore something that the team guards closely. In fact, the team has used the suite as a test site for bloggers who have applied for media credentials but whom the team does not fully trust, allowing the team to use the suite itself as a gate to filter potential credentialed media members from Indians fans. To the gated user, as indicated earlier by the blogger Grayshock’s comments, this manifested itself as an empowering alternative to traditional media credentialing. Yet, for the team, it was a way to exert particular gatekeeping authority over nontraditional media members.

Once users were in the suite, the Indians also reinforced their gatekeeping authority by exerting pressure on users in both subtle and more forceful ways to ensure their communication put the team in a positive light. This

pressure was rare and often unnecessary, as the team's previous gatekeeping measures and the suite's luxurious environment yielded groups of suite participants who were largely inclined to communicate about the Indians in positive tones. The team also quietly monitored the behavior and communication of suite users through Campbell's regular presence there, and by closely watching the messages they produced when team officials were not in the suite. As discussed further next, most of the users interviewed said Campbell's presence did not affect their communication from the suite, though a few acknowledged that they were less likely to be negative toward the team with him there.

In most cases involving users' negative communication, the team has taken no corrective action, operating under the more passive gatekeeping philosophy discussed earlier. Occasionally, Campbell has taken extremely negative suite users aside to ask if they have specific concerns he can address, or to counter their bitterness toward the organization as a whole. Such tactics are a rare but particularly strong means of reinforcing the Indians' gatekeeping role, using social control and institutional authority to discourage messages that run counter to the team's intent for the suite. Campbell, in fact, said he saw the reshaping of users' negative views about the team into positive ones as a process that fits with the suite's overall aims: "It's really a welcome challenge to sort of re-establish that communication, find out what the root of their conflict with the team is, and then try and remedy that as best we can."

Through these gatekeeping practices, the Cleveland Indians have used the Social Suite to direct and mold well-connected fans into networked assets serving their institutional aims. In this way, the suite can be seen as a tool with which the team concedes some of the traditional authoritative aspects of its gatekeeping role in order to expand the realm in which it can exert gatekeeping authority to include noninstitutional social networks. Indians executives referred to this molding process—their primary goal through the suite—as creating "brand ambassadors," drawing from a concept within marketing literature in which individuals provide influential testimony about a brand which then spreads through their social networks (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). Through the Social Suite, the team facilitates the process of brand ambassador creation by maintaining gates at several stages in the process, including who receives access, the type of access they receive, and what type of communication they produce.

### Users' Response to the Gatekeeping Process

Despite the Cleveland Indians' use of the Social Suite to maintain their status as a gatekeeper, the suite's users were willing, and often enthusiastic,



participants in the gatekeeping process. This was not because they did not understand the Indians' goals in that process or their own role in it: Many of them were acutely aware that they were being enlisted as part of the team's social marketing strategy. One user glowingly described being in the Social Suite as being "an unpaid employee of the Indians," and another, local social media marketer and sports blogger, Mike Scherf, identified his fellow suite users as being part of what he considered a clever marketing campaign: "All these people have voices, and getting them in a room, you're giving them a free game to talk about. I mean, that's a really great way to get people to talk about your product." Many of the users saw themselves exactly as the team saw them—as brand ambassadors, fans of the Indians who were devoted to sharing their passion for the team and their experience at the Social Suite with their social networks.

There are several reasons suite users were so eager to take on a gated role. First, they were overwhelmingly ardent fans of Indians, many of them since childhood. With sports fandom comes a devotion to the organization far beyond what is typical elsewhere in business or media, and these fans were elated to have any sort of relationship with the team they had identified with for years, regardless of whether it was an unbalanced, gatekeeping-based one. Second, the suite provided users with a number of substantial benefits, both tangible (a free luxury-suite ticket to their favorite team's baseball game, a chance to connect with other people with similar interests) and intangible (a feeling of connection with and validation by an organization about which they cared deeply). The Social Suite empowered them with at least some aspect of three of Barzilai-Nahon's (2008) four attributes of network gatekeeping afforded to gated populations: political power, information production, and a relationship with the gatekeeper. In exchange for those benefits, users were glad to fill their expected role as propagators of the Cleveland team's desired messages, especially because it was a role they were already inclined to take on as fans. Jeff Nomina, a local Twitter user, summarized this attitude among suite users aptly: "I feel like I'm part of the team when I do something like this. . . . This kind of builds some goodwill. It brings people together, it makes them talk about [the team] and in more of a positive sense."

This attitude was clearly reflected in the users' social media content, as was the lack of any substantive gatekeeping role on their own part. They rarely approached the team with a critical eye, and their communication from the suite contained almost nothing that challenged the Indians' authority, according to both their own descriptions and the researchers' informal analysis of their social media messages. Despite this acquiescence to the Indians' gatekeeping power, the gated suite users were quick to assert their willingness to speak negatively about the team if the situation called for it.

Nearly every user insisted that the Indians' luxurious treatment and presence in the suite did not affect their messages about the team. "If they don't score any runs again today, I'll be on [Twitter] destroying them. I don't care who's standing here looking at me," said the marketer and blogger Scherf, in a sentiment echoed by numerous other users. The users' steadfast assertion of their independence illustrated an important tension between their self-conceived freedom as users and the underlying structural gatekeeping measures that constrained this freedom. The suite users had been empowered to distribute either beneficial or damaging information about their gatekeeper, and that empowerment was a central part of how they viewed themselves. Yet they used that power to communicate in almost precisely the ways the gatekeeper desired them to, and they did so both knowingly and eagerly.

## DISCUSSION

Through the Social Suite, the Cleveland Indians took on a hybrid gatekeeping role: They embraced a softer, more open gatekeeping approach grounded in a multilateral relationship with gated users, but also retained their traditional gatekeeping authority to shape and filter the messages those users were producing. The team empowered its gated population to a far greater degree than previous gatekeepers have, even within networked contexts, encouraging them to act as leaders of their own marketing efforts and trusting them to disseminate information that would aid the team's public image. But in the same process, the team also used its authority as an institution to co-opt the users' communicative reach and to ensure that the freedom they had been given would only be used to further the team's own ends.

The means by which the Indians exercised this hybrid role may be instructive as researchers begin to reconceptualize the gatekeeping process for a networked environment in which communicative authority no longer belongs predominantly to the gatekeeper. In this case, the Indians maintained their gatekeeping authority precisely by loosening their grip on it. Where the team had previously held sway over the realm of institutions through the process of professional media credentialing, the Social Suite now allowed it to expand that gatekeeping influence to the realm of informal online social networks by allowing members of those networks access to and relationship with the team, something unprecedented within its industry. Without a point of contact with the users within decentralized online social networks, the team had had no ability to shape their communication. The Social Suite, then, served as a valuable point of entry into those communities, allowing the team to exert its influence there.

The team also accounted for the networked power of the suite's gated users by employing its most effective gatekeeping tactics early in the process, before the relevant communication had even been initiated. Because of the speed and decentralization of online networked communication, team officials recognized that they had little ability to direct conversation about their organization once it had already begun. Consequently, they used gatekeeping to direct that conversation preemptively, by filtering the users who could gain access to the suite and shaping the composition of the groups there. Only when those efforts failed to produce their desired communication did they employ more direct gatekeeping methods to halt the flow of negative messages. This process may provide a useful model for institutions' use of gatekeeping to shape discussion in an online environment in which communication can be very difficult to control.

The suite's users themselves constituted a highly mobilized, motivated group that was given the opportunity to practice gatekeeping of its own, by using highly coveted access to dispense key information about an institution of great public interest. Yet they largely chose not to act on that opportunity, partly because of the effective gatekeeping strategies employed by the team, and partly because they were content to be the beneficiaries of a symbiotic relationship with an organization to which they attached great importance. A team about which they cared deeply had validated and affirmed their identity as fans, creating a privileged space in which they could build relationships with other fans, and they responded with reciprocity, rather than with critical examination. By acknowledging the power of its networked publics and showing a willingness to enter into a substantial, long-term relationship with them, the Indians were able to extend their gatekeeping authority over them without inciting the type of significant narrative resistance documented by Perry and Kang (2012) during the Vancouver Olympics. In doing so, the team demonstrated a model by which customer relationship management might evolve not only to incorporate new digital technologies but also to work within the expectations of a consuming and digitally mobilized public (Greenberg, 2010).

This more relational, less overtly authoritative form of gatekeeping is a savvy response to a networked environment, potentially marking a step in the evolution of existing concepts of gatekeeping within online contexts (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2011; Singer, 2006). As Internet platforms continue to expand, inviting users to generate content and reshape traditional communication processes, organizations across many disciplines should work to adapt to these new environments. Sports teams, media organizations, and other business organizations have wrestled with issues of access, struggling to identify whom to invite in and whom to leave out (Holton, 2012). Such staid gatekeeping approaches do little to advance communication,

particularly at a point where social network sites like Twitter and Facebook have become crucial in everyday communication. Building from Barzilai-Nahon's (2008) interdisciplinary framework, this study drew from several fields to identify and analyze a new and possibly emerging form of gatekeeping that may be addressing critical issues facing today's gatekeepers.

It is perhaps not surprising that this initiative took place in the realm of sports, which may be an important initial site for digital innovation that eventually spreads elsewhere in media organizations as well (Brown-Smith & Groves, 2010). In that vein, this study's findings may demonstrate to sports teams and media organizations a model for opening access and interaction to their audiences, not simply in symbolic ways that reinforce existing closed structures, but in tangible, meaningful ways that seek to expand their agency rather than simply appearing to make efforts to do so. When such efforts were employed thoughtfully rather than superficially in the case of the Social Suite, fans responded with gratitude and redoubled enthusiasm. This case is not a perfect example of such efforts; the team did much to subtly entrench its own gatekeeping power even in the process of providing increased access. Still, the aspects in which the team worked to expand the social and communicative power of those outside the organization, rather than constrain it, may prove especially instructive within an increasingly distributed media environment.

This study has several constraints that may limit its ability to produce firm conclusions about the nature of gatekeeping in a networked environment. First, it covers only a single case, making it difficult to generalize to other networked contexts or generate a solid model for gatekeeping processes in those situations. Future research could apply the concept of network gatekeeping to a variety of actors, including media organizations, governments, businesses, and online communities and social network sites. Second, the relationship examined in this case—that between a sports team and its fans—is marked by an ardor and commitment not typically seen in other social relationships, particularly those involving institutions. The devotion of sports fandom skews the normal dynamics of the gatekeeper/gated relationship, allowing the gatekeeper more freedom to practice gatekeeping without retribution or critical examination from the gated. However, this effect may be muted somewhat because of a history of negativity from Indians fans toward the team: The Indians have hardly received unconditional devotion from local fans, and the Social Suite was launched against this background of apathy and skepticism.

Despite these limitations, this study advances the literature on gatekeeping by applying network gatekeeping to a particular context, examining the ways in which a gatekeeper adjusted its practices in response to the connectivity and communicative power of the gated. By examining the perceptions

and behaviors of both parties, this study revealed the nature of network gatekeeping that is being applied by the Cleveland Indians and interpreted by the users of the Social Suite. Future research might use similar methods to explore each party separately, exploring the specific policy developments of the Social Suite or the content produced by suite users. The present research might also be advanced by considering how fandom affects individual users within the gated network.

The findings of this article suggest that business organizations not only recognize the importance of social media as a media tool but also are embracing social media as a means to select voices to represent their image. The observations here suggest that evolving practices serve to both subvert and reinforce the traditional gatekeeping role, but they do so by making it more relational, reflexive, permissive, and expansive. Through these shifts, gatekeeping continues to evolve in concert with its communicative environment, developing new processes, relationships, and social dynamics to continue to shape the messages that reach the public.

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