

Electronic Gatekeeping: How Iowa Extension Home and Family News Releases are Affected by Electronic Distribution

Barbara A. Abbott

Computer technology is rapidly arriving in the offices of institutional news sources, allowing them to transmit their information electronically. Has this new technology changed decision making patterns of news receivers, especially those newspaper gatekeepers who decide if a story gets used? If so, how? Are there different gatekeepers? What do the technological changes mean for institutional news sources such as the Iowa State University (ISU) extension service? More specifically, how are extension home and family news releases affected by electronic delivery?

In the fall and winter of 1985-86, seven of Iowa's major daily newspapers were involved in a multiple-case study designed to help answer these questions. Home and family editors were interviewed first, followed by interviews with editors identified as those responsible for routing electronic releases to the home and family editors. Technical employees were also interviewed.

The Iowa Information Network (IIN) president also was interviewed. Iowa State University pays for the IIN service of distributing to 125 media outlets (as of March 1986.) The IIN is a privately-owned information transfer service that takes news releases from originators and delivers them to media outlets electronically. The IIN does not edit or evaluate copy; the information is "mailed" via telephone lines directly into the media's front-end systems. The two major news wires, Associated Press and United Press International, also receive IIN material and sometimes put out an IIN story on their wires.

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Summary of Case Studies

In this cross-case summary of the seven newspapers, each one is identified by a letter of the alphabet. Although each paper has different titles for various editors, in this summary all feature, lifestyle, and family living editors are referred to as home and family editors. All other editors interviewed, including wire editors, copy editors, managing editors, and metro/Iowa editors, are referred to as general editors. Technical people also have a variety of titles. They are all referred to as technical persons.

Electronic Systems and Electronic Distribution in General

Although two general editors (on newspapers C and G) raised the problem of getting photos and graphics with electronic distribution, most of the 17 editors interviewed agreed that electronic systems for newsrooms and electronic distribution for news releases are the way to go. The home and family editor on newspaper C estimated that 80 percent of the releases she sees now are electronic. The general editor on newspaper F said "Electronically there's less chance something will get overlooked. I sometimes get six to eight inches of mail a day. That's too much mess. I don't always see everything on paper." The home and family editor on newspaper A agreed: "Before, with just hard copy, I wouldn't go through it all, just the top of the pile or what was convenient. But now it's so easy to look at the first paragraph of everything, I do that and choose the best." Comments like "I can't imagine it any other way" and "You can't imagine how much time it saves," were heard frequently.

This opinion was anticipated by university and extension editors. However, the reservation expressed by some about electronic distribution was not expected. Both a general editor and the home and family editor on newspaper E felt copy could get missed if it arrived electronically. According to the general editor: "Mail is better. Then an editor will have hard copy in hand. Electronic may not get looked at one day and automatically die, if the wire editor is sick for example." This was especially the case when extension home and family stories were discussed by some home and family editors. According to the home and family editor on newspaper G, she was not receiving extension stories: "Send me a mail copy. I'll see it directly."

Table 1
IIN Routing of Extension Home and Family Stories

Newspaper	Home and family editor is first gatekeeper	Home and family editor depends on others		
		Knew who	Guessed	Didn't know
A	f			
B				m/m
C		m/f		
D			m/f	
E			f/f	
F		m/f		
G				m/f

f, female gatekeeper; m/f, male gatekeeper/female home and family editor; f/f, female gatekeeper/female home and family editor; m/m, male gatekeeper/male home and family editor.

Familiarity with and Routing of IIN

Such reservations concerning electronic distribution of extension home and family news releases may be due in part to the fact that these news releases are coming into their papers on IIN, not their usual wire service. The IIN is a fairly new service and several home and family editors were not very familiar with IIN or with how it was routed within their newspapers.

Three home and family editors (on newspapers B, C, and G) didn't know extension home and family news releases were on IIN. Two home and family editors (on newspapers E and G) wanted to go back to mailed delivery of extension home and family news releases because they weren't getting them anymore and felt the electronic connection was too chancy.

Only one home and family editor (on newspaper A) accessed IIN herself and was the first and only gatekeeper for extension home and family stories. The university news bureau editor and extension editors had expected this to be the case with most newspapers.

The other six of the seven home and family editors had IIN stories routed to them by other editors. Only two knew for

sure which editor did the routing (on newspapers C and F). Two were not sure who routed, but their guesses turned out to be right (on newspapers D and E). Two thought one editor did it, when actually another did (on newspapers B and G). Several of these home and family editors mentioned that they were not sure if the person routing to them had the same news values they did. Of the six newspapers where other editors routed to home and family editors, four (newspapers C, D, F, and G) had male general editors routing to female home and family editors. On newspaper B both editors are male. On newspaper E both editors are female (see Table 1).

The IIN router for newspaper E did not mention IIN as part of her job when asked an open-ended question about what her job responsibilities were. Only when asked specifically if she monitored IIN did she respond affirmatively. She also said she did not look at it every day.

Table 2
Selected technical features of newspaper computer systems

Newspaper	Finding stories			Storage		
	Key word search	Long directory	Minimum slug line	24-hour kill	2-day kill	No clock
A	x	x				x
B			x			x
C		x			x	
D			x	x		
E			x			x
F		x		x		
G		x				x

Only one newspaper general editor (newspaper F) said he routed everything to the features editor and let her decide what to do with home and family news releases ("I don't feel comfortable judging the home economics stuff myself as to whether they want it or not"). The other five general editors said they might kill a story themselves or route it to other editors, depending on the circumstances. The general editor on newspaper D said he would route a home and family story to news or might kill it if he felt it was not relevant to the

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region. On newspaper G, the technical person was sometimes a gatekeeper ("IIN stuff has been in up to three weeks. I cleaned it out recently").

So it is not only a problem that extension stories are on IIN. It is also a problem that other editors and technical people are now gatekeepers because releases come in electronically. The possibility was raised at several newspapers of sending extension's news releases directly to the home and family editor's file. At two newspapers (newspapers E and G) this was impossible because of computer system limitations. At a third (newspaper C) it was rejected by the general editor because he felt the releases might not get looked at on a timely basis.

Selected Technical Aspects of IIN and Newspaper Computers

This section involves two issues related to IIN and the newspapers' computer systems: transmission dependability and individual computer systems, including ease of use and storage capacity.

The IIN transmissions are rated as dependable by all but one technical person. At newspaper E, the technical person reports that the telephone company in the area is poor. "If there's a hiccup on the line while the header is coming over, the computer won't accept it." This fact is not taken into account when IIN transmits, so some feeds never make it into the newspaper's system. Another technical person (on newspaper B) said, on the whole, transmissions are dependable, but that for a month's time (during the time of this study) someone on IIN's end had failed to reset the system properly and they didn't get any feeds.

Individual computer systems vary tremendously. Several newspapers can do key word searches, but only one editor reports using that function very much. Newspaper A's home and family editor says she uses this feature extensively to search wire files, including IIN, to find stories on a topic she is working on. The key word search available to her will even go into the first several lines of a story to pull out the key word. For newspaper C the key word search is not helpful, according to the home and family editor. She can only search for a slug word (short title), and she says whoever assigns a slug first often picks one that she would not have thought of. She searches by scrolling through directories that are arranged chronologically, as stories come into the system. This

is how the other five newspaper computers are most often used. Four of the systems have good long directories that show the header, the headline, and the first several words of each IIN story. However, three papers (B, D, E) only show, for IIN, a short code line that refers to each story. Each story must be called up to even see what the topic is (see Table 2).

Storage capacity also varies considerably by newspaper. Three newspapers (C, D, and E) report a problem with storage. One of these has a 24-hour kill clock on incoming wire stories (including IIN), one has a two-day kill clock, but the third has no kill clock on IIN even though the system in general is crowded. Four newspapers (A, B, E, and G) essentially have no storage limitation on IIN stories. The stories go into a file and remain until the file is filled. Then, the oldest story is wiped out as new stories enter the file. Newspaper A had more than 160 IIN stories in the IIN directory when the home and family editor was interviewed. Newspaper F does not really have a storage problem, but has assigned all wire copy, including IIN, to a 24-hour kill clock (see Table 2).

Conclusions

Although it is assumed by institutional originators of news releases—such as extension—that electronic delivery of their information will increase media use, this is not necessarily true. This multiple case study indicates that on major daily newspapers new gatekeepers are now in control of certain information and their needs and interests must be considered. Also, computer technology itself can impede rather than facilitate information flow.

If originators are aware of these stumbling blocks, however, there are several measures they can employ to capitalize on the obvious merits of electronic distribution.

New Gatekeepers

When home and family extension news releases were delivered by mail, they were addressed to the home and family editor. In most cases, that meant the home and family editor was certain to see everything that had been sent out.

When these news releases are sent electronically by IIN, they are sent to the newspaper's general electronic address. For six of the seven home and family editors in this study, the

change means they probably do not see everything that has been sent out.

Only one home and family editor looked directly in the IIN directory for stories. Although the other six have the technical capability to do it, their newsroom systems are such that they wait for other editors to put IIN stories into their files.

The new gatekeepers are editors who deal with daily deadlines for hard news. In several cases they commented that when they got busy they did not give IIN a very careful look. Their news judgment may not be the same as the feature editor's, just as several home and family editors indicated and as previous research indicates.

Also, in all cases but one, the gatekeeper is male. According to Zena Beth Guerin (*Journalism Quarterly*, Spring 1975), male editors bring a different socialization to the news judgment process, even if they are home and family editors themselves. This sex difference on top of the hard news/soft news distinction means not every extension home and family story gets to the editor that should be evaluating it.

Another personnel factor that became apparent in this study is that electronic distribution of news releases is much more sensitive to staff changes and staff training than mailed releases are. It is probably only an irritant if a new home and family editor gets mail addressed to his or her predecessor. If releases are only available in the computer system, however, a new staff person may not find out they are even there.

In the six months during which this study was conducted, seven staff changes were made involving the editors and technical people interviewed at the target newspapers. In several of those cases the use of extension releases was affected. For example, on newspaper G, the main IIN router was replaced between the time of the initial interviews and the call backs. The technical person said the new editor probably was not aware of IIN. He checked with the editor while on the telephone with the researcher. "Now he's aware of it," the technical person reported. "We'll have to figure out who monitors it."

A generalization can be made based on this cross-case analysis that most extension home and family stories electronically transmitted to major dailies will be viewed first by an editor other than the home and family editor.

Computer technology

Several aspects of computer technology have the potential for reducing the use of extension releases. The first is a reliance on phone lines to transmit information. Although only one newspaper reported trouble with the local phone company quality, this case points out the potential for different conditions to affect transmissions in various parts of the state.

Computer storage is another issue. In two cases the first gatekeeper has only 24 hours (in a third case 48 hours) to route an IIN story. Then it is automatically killed by the newspaper's computer kill clock. This is a necessary feature for newsrooms that get megabytes of copy every day. It also means some of the feature material on IIN dies before it is judged.

Finding copy is another potential problem. Even if all goes well with the new gatekeepers, even if the extension home and family story ends up in the proper file, there is a problem for three newspapers in this study with identifying the topic of the release or its source. The IIN stories are listed only as a numbered code, or a number and letter code. Each story has to be called up in its entirety. At four newspapers, their computers display a "long directory" that shows the header to the story and a few lines of copy. For one newspaper, an excellent key word search allows the editors to search for words that are buried in the copy.

The only generalizations that can be made across cases regarding the effects of computer technology are that there are many differences among newspapers and some technology effects are negative. An originator cannot assume that because he or she understands how a story travels through one or two newspaper systems that that is how it will be for others. Also, technology can limit use of news releases.

Implications

Coping with new gatekeepers. Since IIN had been transmitting extension home and family stories to most of the papers in this study for approximately a year by the time the interviews took place, extension lost media opportunities. It is suggested that more effort by extension home and family editors go into introducing a newspaper to electronic services. For Iowa, this could be accomplished by asking the university

news bureau editor to inform extension editors when media outlets are added to IIN. Extension editors could then write and follow up with a telephone call to the appropriate home and family editor.

Although each newspaper has its own procedures, a letter and call could suggest to the home and family editors that they may see more extension home and family stories if they access IIN themselves and not wait for other editors. Because extension sends home and family stories one day each week, extension editors would have to specify which day so newspaper editors would know when to look. Judging by the response to this study by home and family editors ("Now that I know you're there I'll use it.") a letter and call should increase use of releases.

Continued contact with newspapers would also seem to be necessary given the observation at at least two newspapers that training is more difficult with computer systems and that information often does not get passed on to new employees. To help with this, Iowa extension should update the mailing list at least twice a year and send the same introductory IIN information in a letter and phone call to new home and family editors. Coping with new electronic gatekeepers ("high tech") appears to mean spending more time ("high touch") making sure the right contacts are made.

Getting around technology barriers. Technology gets the information there more efficiently, but not necessarily more effectively. Generalizations cannot be made regarding specific computer systems. Some are better than others. It is probably best to assume a worst case situation. For example, because some systems only show a slug word, originators need to make sure it is a good one that will describe the story and encourage the editor to want to see it.

Most computer problems can only be lived with. Extension editors cannot do much about storage problems, 24-hour kill clocks, or garbled transmissions. Extension has apparently lost some identity and control with electronic distribution, so, again, extension needs to augment its technological improvements with personal contacts to inform editors of extension's electronic presence.