

## Stamping Out Automatons ; Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and Selection of Stories

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## Stamping Out Automatons ; Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and Selection of Stories

### Abstract

Review of " Stamping Out Automatons," by Maria Raden ; "Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and Selection of Stories," by Guido H. Stempel III.

Paulsell and Carlson: Stamping Out Automatons ; Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and Selections of superiors' openness except on one type of decision (extension programs). There was evidence that bosses who were considered open to non-technical information were also seen as open in more formal situations. The author discusses some of the potential differences between previous findings in United States organizations and his study population.

The study is a good example of a short-form communication audit which can be used for identifying selected internal communication problems and providing information to help analyze them.

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## Reviews

**"Stamping Out Automatons." Maria Braden in *Quill*, May 1986, pp. 26-27.**

We can teach journalism students how to report. But can we teach them how to be skeptical? We must, says Maria Braden, a former reporter for the Associated Press and now assistant professor of journalism at the University of Kentucky.

Journalists should be skeptical; they must be the ones pursuing the point or asking the questions. Otherwise, journalists become part of the pack being manipulated by well-honed public relations folks. They are the ones allowing viewers and readers to be "conned."

Braden refers to the results of a national study published as *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People*. Results showed only 20 percent of the 1,001 news people randomly surveyed said it was "extremely important" that news media assume a skeptical role toward government; 15 percent agreed that journalists should be similarly skeptical toward business.

Passed on to students that lack of skepticism turns them into repeaters of information rather than reporters.

The survey results also revealed a shift toward middle-of-the-road political views among news people, which Braden fears is a lack of commitment, “a lack of passion.”

If that is so, we won’t teach students to care about issues and become involved in the story while still telling both sides. “How do you teach curiosity?” Braden asks.

Journalism education, however, is not solely to blame. It shares blame with the news industry, which may not pay enough to attract the brightest minds. More journalists are leaving the business at mid-career, so the average age of news people has dropped sharply. The implication—younger journalists may want to be liked by their sources so they might not ask the probing questions.

“Somehow, we’ve got to find a way to attract and keep the bright ones, the feisty ones, the ones who ask their sources ‘How do you know that?’ Then maybe journalists will get back on the right track,” Braden concludes.

Although she offers no solution for the problem she describes, it appears that Braden herself is committed to teaching more than the inverted pyramid. It’s the why and the how that rate in her book.

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**“Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and Selection of Stories.”** Guido H. Stempel III in *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 62, No. 4, Winter 1985, pp. 791–796+.

Media critics and researchers have been concerned for many years about what they perceive as a standardization of news. Since the late 1940s, studies have found that the mix of stories in newspapers was closely related to the mix of stories sent by the wire services. Another critical concern is that all the media tend to use the same stories, although research does not support this contention.

Stempel’s gatekeeping study was designed to examine the extent nine national media agreed on both the selection of individual stories and the mix of various story types. Media selected for the research consisted of the three early evening network newscasts and six morning newspapers: three

Paulsell and Carlson: Stamping Out Automatons: Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and Selection of  
prestige newspapers, the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*  
and *Los Angeles Times*; two state newspapers, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Columbus Citizen-Journal*; and the national newspaper *USA Today*.

Only national or international stories of more than 100 words, or more than 30 seconds on television, were analyzed. The stories were classified into 14 subject matter categories.

The amount of space or time was compiled for each medium in the 14 categories and ranked from most space or time to the least. Item-by-item comparisons of the news stories used by the nine media were made.

Subject matter categories of politics and government, war and defense, crime, and accidents and disasters ranked in the upper half for nearly all the media. Conversely, ranking near the bottom for nearly all the media were such categories as transportation, science and invention, education and classic arts, and popular amusements.

Rank correlations showed a substantial agreement between the media studied as to the mix that went into a daily news package. However, an analysis of story selection by the nine media indicated a substantial disagreement regarding which stories were used.

A factor analysis of the correlation matrix yielded two factors accounting for 80 percent of the variance. Factor I emphasized crime, accidents, and disasters while the second factor emphasized public health and welfare and agriculture. Factor II consisted of the two Ohio newspapers and NBC-TV.

Stempel concludes that worries about standardization are overstated and that the mix of wire copy, which creates a similarity between media in their mix of topics, may actually be attributed to news judgment.

In short, news judgement may be determined by the wire mix rather than the wire's selection of specific stories.

So as journalists, we tend to think of specific stories, when we should be thinking in terms of plugging our information into the mix editors use. Rather than submitting stories that are not currently on topic, ACE members might hold strong articles until the editorial mix changes and the story fits the mix again.

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