"GATEKEEPER" AS A METAPHOR AND CONCEPT*

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Abstract

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for the comparative analysis of the role of scholarly editors as gatekeepers of academic knowledge. It points out that the existing literature's almost-exclusive focus on the North American context could hamper a finer-grained analysis of the role of scholarly editors as important cultural intermediaries. For a fuller analysis, one would need to adopt a comparative perspective and must disentangle different and often conflicting meanings included in the gatekeeper concept so as to make a clearer distinction between the social functions and occupational roles of editors.

Key Words: gatekeeper, cultural intermediary, metaphor, scholarly publishing, occupational role-set

I.   *Scholarly Editors in Different Socio-Cultural Contexts*

1.   The Literature

It is widely acknowledged that book editors play a key role as intermediaries between the production and consumption of printed (and now, increasingly, electronic as well) cultural materials. Whether working chiefly in literary, journalistic, or scholarly fields, editors—especially those at prestigious publishing houses—are usually expected to winnow a vast number of potential manuscripts down to only a few so as to bring them and their authors to the attention of the consuming public. By serving as gatekeepers who decide on what and whom should be let in, with the remainder kept out, editors sometimes play a considerable part in shaping not only the content and quality of specific books but also the overall configurations of various cultural fields.

In view of such a crucial role that editors have played as cultural intermediaries, it seems strange that their activities and working contexts have seldom been subject to systematic sociological analysis. This is not to say, of course, that there is dearth of literature on book editors. On the contrary, we can find a voluminous literature on the profiles, life histories, accomplishments, and feats of editors, especially on legendary and charismatic figures (some of

whom served as publishers as well), such as Anthony Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's, Tom Maschler of Jonathan Cape, and Jason Epstein of Random House (e.g., Commins 1978; Berg [1979] 2008; Epstein 2001; Maschler 2005). Yet, most of the corpus is composed of memorir or (auto)biographies of renowned editors, together with a number of relatively short articles in trade (as well as general-interest) magazines and newspapers, treating the works and lives of famous and not-so-famous editors. It is no surprise that such literature consists mainly of exceptional, and thus memorable, events and episodes involving encounters with globally-esteemed authors. What is lacking are thorough and detailed accounts of how editors actually go about their daily activities. Nor do we have detailed information about the institutional and organizational contexts in which their day-to-day activities are embedded. As a consequence, we do not know much about *why* editors conduct their daily works as they do.

A notable exception in this regard is a group of social science studies dealing with the roles of scholarly editors as one of their major research concerns. *Books* (Coser, Kadushin, Powell 1982), a monumental sociological study on the American publishing industry, was based on a large-scale research project led by Lewis Coser, and includes a number of accounts concerning the jobs of scholarly as well as trade editors. *Getting into Print* (Powell 1985) was written by one of the coauthors of *Books,* and is a sort of companion piece to it. While this latter monograph draws, to a certain extent, on the findings of the same research project, it focuses more on the process of editorial decision-making at two scholarly publishers. Both *Books* and *Getting into Print* have now attained the status of classics in the field of research on the publishing industry, and we can find in these two volumes detailed descriptions and in-depth analyses of editorial work and its socio-cultural context. These two volumes also inspired Paul Parson's *Getting Published* (1989) and *Editors as Gatekeepers* (1994), edited by Rita Simon and James Fyfe. While the former title addresses the jobs of acquisitions editors at American university presses, the latter includes accounts of book editors at commercial and university presses, as well as profiles of scholars who serve as scholarly journal editors.

In addition to these book-length works, we can occasionally find articles treating the occupational characteristics of scholarly editors in such special-interest journals as *Publishing Research Quarterly* and the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*. Manuals for academic authors written by seasoned scholarly editors (e.g., Germano 2001, 2005; Luey 2002, 2004) also include a lot of clues and hints about the nature of editorial work and the social role of scholarly editors, especially those editors called "acquisitions editors."

Thanks to this body of literature, we have relatively detailed information as to the occupational characteristics of scholarly editors, especially those working at American publishers. Yet, the existing literature does not necessarily provide us with enough empirical resources to examine the nature of scholarly editors' jobs and their institutional and organizational contexts.

2. The Need for a Comparative Perspective

One of the most important reasons that the existing literature is insufficient for our research purposes is its almost-exclusive focus on the North American context. Studies on the American publishing industry certainly provide important insights into a number of factors (e.g., organizational size, organizational culture and identity, characteristics of industrial subsectors, and specific historical contexts) that are closely related to a number of crucial

characteristics of editorial work and its variations. Yet, the nearly-total focus on the North American context inevitably circumscribes the variations of such factors within a certain range, and thus could hamper a fuller analysis of the bearings of such factors on the editors' work.

In fact, though still few in number and only sporadically published in English, there are a number of studies suggesting that this is indeed the case (e.g., Minowa and Arboleda 1973; Minowa 1990; De Glass 1998; Weber 2000; Griswold 2000; Thompson 2005, 2010; Xia 2008). For example, through in-depth interviews with French and American editors and publishers, Daniel Weber (2000) found that conceptions of the relationships between the cultural merits and the commercial performance of books are quite different in the United States and France. According to Weber, while French interviewees tended to acknowledge an established hierarchy among published books, American informants were more egalitarian about the value of various types of books and thus have a more lenient view on the contradictions between culture and commerce. As the subtitle of *Books—The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*—indicates, the relationship between cultural merit and economic profitability has been one of the most important issues in literature on the publishing industry in general as well as on the scholarly publishing subsector in particular. If the cultural conception on this issue is quite different in different societies, it is quite plausible that we could also find considerable differences between those societies in term of the role of the in scholarly editors as cultural intermediary.

John Thompson's diptych, *Books in the Digital Age* and *Merchants of Culture,* published in 2005 and 2010, respectively, also suggests the great potential that a comparative analysis could have in delving into the cross-national variance in scholarly editors' roles. Thompson adopted a comparative perspective in his analysis of the fields of academic publishing and trade publishing in the US and UK. These two volumes are not only comparable to *Books* in their breadth of coverage and depth of analysis of the publishing industry (Thatcher 2006:149), but also provide us with fresh insights, exactly because they adopt a comparative perspective at the cross-national level. In fact, while Thompson could identify several characteristics held in common by the publishing industries of the two societies, he also discerned a number of important differences between them.

For example, Thompson (2005: Ch. 5, 6) points out that dwindling sales of scholarly monographs and declining institutional support from their host universities since the mid-1970s have forced American university presses to diversify their publication lists. This has led to profound changes in the behavior and mindset of university presses acquisitions editors, who must conduct their daily job activities within the context of the increasingly market-oriented organizational identity and culture of the presses. On the other hand, according to Thompson, the major British university presses (viz. those at Oxford and Cambridge) have been far more immune to such institutional and market pressures, since they have long been more diversified and more internationally-oriented than American university presses (Thompson 2005:109). One could surmise, then, that editors at the Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press have relatively more leeway in their acquisition work than do their counterparts at American university presses.

Such studies by Weber and Thompson suggest that a comparative perspective sometimes makes it possible to find the important "between-class variance" (to use an analogy of the ANOVA [analysis of variance] test) which is otherwise difficult to detect when we are too preoccupied with the "within-class variance" found in a specific society. One of the major aims of the case study of Japanese scholarly editors presented in this paper is to identify and

examine cross-national differences which may provide some important clues for delving into the role of the scholarly editor as an important cultural intermediary between production and consumption of academic knowledge.

II.   *Conceptual Framework*

Whether or not one adopts a comparative perspective, upon undertaking a sociological analysis of scholarly editors' roles, one often confronts problems inherent in the concept of "gatekeeper" and the related term "gatekeeping." We must disentangle a number of different and often mutually conflicting meanings incorporated into the gatekeeper concept in order to finely analyze the various aspects of the role of the scholarly editor. Such conceptual clarification is indispensable particularly in preparation for a comparative analysis.

1.   "Gatekeeper" as a Powerful Metaphor and a Problematic Concept

As stated above, one of the most important tasks of scholarly editors is to sift through a voluminous list of candidates to select out only a few of the best (or comparatively better) quality. Especially in the case of acquisitions editors working at important scholarly publishing houses, the overabundant supply of manuscripts inevitably leads them to assume a filtering role.

"Gatekeeper" is, no doubt, the term most frequently used in characterizing this aspect of scholarly editors' duties. Coser and his collaborators introduced this term to the field of research on the publishing industry: both the grant for their research project and a seminal article written by Coser bore the title, "Publishers as Gatekeeper of Ideas" (Coser 1975; Coser et al. 1982: xiii). In employing the gatekeeper concept, Coser et al. drew on such sources as the original conceptualization by social psychologist Kurt Lewin ([1947]1951), a study of newspaper editors by David White (1950), and Paul Hirsh's (1972) theory of the "cultural industry system."

Since Coser's introduction of the term, it has become quite common to use "gatekeeper" as the key concept or guiding metaphor in characterizing the social functions and occupational roles of scholarly publishers and their editors (e.g., Goellner 1988; Parsons 1989; Simon and Fyfe 1994; Caves 2000). For example, in his essay titled "The Other Side of the Fence: Scholarly Publishing as Gatekeeper," Jack Goellner (1988), the then-director of the Johns Hopkins University Press, declared that gatekeeping is the "single most important function performed by scholarly publishers" (Goellner 1988: 17). Richard Caves, a renowned economist who wrote the influential *Creative Industries*, identified the gatekeeper concept as a very important term introduced by sociologists in characterizing the role of cultural intermediaries working in various artistic fields, including book publishing (Caves, 2000:21).

The gatekeeper metaphor is, in fact, quite effective in conveying the image of a scholarly editor who is guarding the gate of a publishing house and controlling the incoming flow of a vast number of manuscripts. Especially to fledgling scholars applying for their first academic position, or university faculty members whose tenure evaluation hinges on the publication of their research monographs, editors at prestigious publishers (and peer reviewers of manuscripts as well) would appear to be, so to speak, keepers of "heaven's gate."

While the gatekeeper concept is tremendously effective at highlighting the filtering function of an editor's job, it has also been pointed out that the gatekeeping metaphor tends to

mask other important dimensions included among the editor's daily activities. For example, Coser et al. themselves acknowledge at one point that the analogy of gatekeeping is "too passive" in characterizing editorial work; they suggest that "salesman" is a more appropriate term to characterize more aggressive aspects of editorial work (Coser et al. 1982: 97-98). Similarly, Parsons points out that university presses seldom serve as "passive gatekeepers" but instead often act as shapers of cultural agenda through their "aggressive acquisition methods" and list-building activities (Parsons 1989: 175). Thompson's characterization of a connotation implicit in the gatekeeper concept provides an apt summary for this problem as follows: "[editors] could simply stand by the gate and decide which of the queuing projects would be allowed to pass through" (Thompson 2005:4; see also Thompson 2010:17; De Glas 1998:386; Thatcher 1999:65). Thompson goes on to argue that this kind of image of the editor does not apply to what English and American editors do in the increasingly competitive publishing world today (Thompson 2005: 4).

The gatekeeper concept, then, has conflicting connotations. On the one hand, its portrayal of a scholarly editor as the keeper of the publisher's gate is an effective metaphor in highlighting his or her filtering function and the considerable power that he or she is endowed with in fulfilling it. On the other hand, the gatekeeper concept tends to obscure the other, more aggressive sides of an editor's occupational activities. In other words, the gatekeeper concept at once depicts an editor as a character who actively wields considerable power, while it is also of a person who does nothing but passively wait for book manuscripts to arrive.

2.   Two Levels of Analysis

It appears that much of the ambiguity arises from a failure to make a clear distinction between the social functions (or eventual consequences) of a scholarly editor's job and the occupational roles that s/he fulfills within a publishing house. It is clear that many of the criticisms raised against the use of the gatekeeper concept concern its limitations in showing the various aspects comprising an editor's role. Specifically, critics argue that such a characterization is too narrowly focused on the filtering role of the editor to grasp the whole array of tasks that an editor performs from day to day, including searching, commissioning, sponsoring, and directing. Some critics, then, propose the use of alternative terms to refer to the scholarly editor's role.

While these criticisms are reasonable in pointing out the problems of the one-sided view that the gatekeeper concept tends to promote, they may miss the point that the term at the same time serves as a truly powerful metaphor, clearly showing the crucial social functions served by editors (and the publishers for whom they work). In fact, other terms that have been used as alternatives to "gatekeeper" —such as "salesman," "gatemaker," "boundary spanner," or "middleman"—cannot fully capture the most crucial aspect of a scholarly editor's role.

In this paper, we propose retaining the term, "gatekeeper," and using it chiefly to refer to one of the most important social functions of the scholarly editor. Consequently, it would be preferable to use some other term in referring to the function of selectivity role that a scholarly editor performs within a publishing house. Or, one might want to use the term, "gatekeeper," together with some qualifying adjective, such as "in-house," in referring to the selective role.

3.   An Editor's Nine Sub-roles

We also propose constructing a typological scheme in order to distinguish between various occupational sub-roles that an editor fills and to analyze the editor's social role as a cultural intermediary in relation to the characteristics of the whole make-up of his or her occupational role-set. In this regard, a list of the sub-roles of the scholarly editor's proposed by Sanford Thatcher (1994, 1999) serves as a useful starting point for our empirical investigation. Thatcher, a former director of the Pennsylvania Sate University Press who once served as the editor-in-chief at the Princeton University Press, categorizes various dimensions of an editor's work into nine sub-roles: hunter, selector, shaper, linker, stimulator, shepherd, promoter, ally, and reticulator (Thatcher (1999) subsumes the role of shepherd into the promoter role and mentions "listbuilder" as the ninth sub-role of the acquisition editor).

Of the nine terms mentioned by Thatcher, "selector" is, without doubt, one of the most promising candidates for the term referring to the role of an editor as in-house gatekeeper. While this selector sub-role certainly constitutes an important component of an acquisitions editor's daily duties, one does not necessarily wait passively for promising manuscripts and proposals to arrive. The most successful editor often works as a "hunter," aggressively searching for first-rate authors and their manuscripts. Needless to say, the acquired manuscripts must be copyedited and proofread before they proceed further in the production process. The acquiring editor, as a "shaper," may also engage in so-called "developmental editing" refining the manuscript and make it more readable and conceptually clearer for scholars and general readers.

Since an editor is often closer to readers than are academic authors, she may have a broader vision of the academic world and occasionally provides links among scholars working in the same discipline. On some occasions, an editor also serves as a "linker" between specialists in different disciplines so as to turn out a cross-disciplinary volume. She may also propose a certain type of book project, such as a book series, that authors might not otherwise have considered. In order that a book project be materialized, the editor also has to "shepherd" the book along, coordinating elements of the whole production process, including copyediting, designing, and marketing.

Around the point of publication, the editor often serves as a "promoter" collaborating closely with the marketing department and contacting book review editors working for newspapers and magazines. The close contact that an editor maintains during the process of publication often makes the editor a close "ally" of the author. Established editor-author relationships sometimes also work as important social capital asset, for the publisher by keeping promising authors within the publisher's stable. The authors may also bring other promising authors into the house, and thus further expanding and enriching the publisher's intangible assets. Thatcher mentions "reticulator" —one who develops an important network for the publisher—as the name for the ninth sub-role of the acquisition editor. Such a network consists of scholars who are close to the editor and might provide information on scholars who could serve as reviewers or on promising graduate students.

By distinguishing among the various sub-dimensions of an editor's role, as Thatcher does, one is better positioned to conduct a detailed analysis of an editor's activities and their consequences.

4. Variances in the Overall Configuration of the Editor's Occupational Role-Set

To distinguish among an editor's sub-roles would also help in delving into the eventual consequences of an editor's occupational activities in the gatekeeping of scholarly knowledge; one could presume that there is a close relationship between the social consequences of an editor's work and the overall configuration of his or her occupational role-set. For example, the consequences of efforts by an editor who primarily takes on the role of "selector" would likely be quite different from those resulting from an editor who is more of the "hunter."

In fact, by looking at which sub-roles are relatively salient and which are latent, we can investigate the role of specific editors as gatekeeper of academic knowledge. On the other hand, by closely examining the organizational and institutional factors which lead to differences and/or changes in the configuration of the editor's role-set, one may be able to discern the link between societal and organizational factors, the editor's role, and the social consequences of the editor's gatekeeping activities.

For example, it has been frequently pointed out that declining governmental funding for higher education and research in the US has made American university presses more reliant on revenue from the sale of trade titles or titles that have trade potential. This has led to intensified competition, not only among university presses, but also between university presses and trade houses. The increased competition has, in turn, made university editors aggressive commissioners of book projects (Parsons 1989:45; Thatcher 2004:214-215; Thompson 2005: 175). In other words, declining public funding and increasing competitiveness among publishers have made the "hunter" sub-role more salient than the "selector" role. It would be no surprise if this change in the configuration of the editor's role-set eventually led to considerable changes in the landscape of the academic world itself.

In addition to such a longitudinal changes in the whole makeup of the editor's role-set, one should also take note of its cross-sectional variances. In fact, it is frequently pointed out that acquisitions editors at large commercial presses in the US nowadays seldom "edit" but instead tend to specialize in acquiring manuscripts and/or book projects (Powell 1985:11-12; Thatcher 2004: 249-250). Commercial editors, thus, tend more to be specialists than university press editors, who tend to be generalists and take on various editorial roles and tasks such as those described by Thatcher.

While the longitudinal changes and cross-sectional variances found within the same society may provide a number of important insight into the role of editors as cultural intermediaries, one may find some other crucial clues from cross-national comparisons. In fact, if the "between-class variance" detected by cross-national comparison is larger than the "within-class variance" among publishers in the same society, one may discover some important factor via the former that could not be easily teased out through comparative case studies in a single society.

III.   Concluding Remarks

Umberto Eco, the internationally-known Italian semiotician, philosopher, and novelist, once characterized the US as a society "where the division of labor between university professors and militant intellectuals is more strict than in our countries" (Eco 1986: ix-x).

Although many European intellectuals may not be as talented or versatile as Eco, the scope of the activities of American university professors may be more limited than that of scholars in other countries, including Japan. It appears to us that the differences between the editor's purview and role as gatekeeper in various countries reflect not only the institutional characteristics of the publishing industries in respective societies, but also the interrelationship between the publishing industry and the social world of scholars and authors. Any future study of the editor's role as a gatekeeper of scholarly knowledge will have to take account of this inter-field relationship between academia and the publishing world.

It should also be added that any analysis of the role of scholarly editors as an intermediary in the production and consumption of academic knowledge is seriously one-sided without some examination of the make-up of the "consumers" or readers of scholarly books, including genuinely scholarly as well as quasi-academic works. In his essay titled "In Japan, Books are Windows to the World," André Schiffrin, the founding director of the New Press and the author of the *Business of Books*, expresses his genuine astonishment when he found that bookshelves on a floor of a gigantic bookstore at Osaka are filled with translations of serious books by Western philosophers and social scientists. He says that, "[T]he choice available to the serious readers is far greater than what can be found in the United States...[W]hen one reaches the third floor, the display of intellectual fare is a striking one. I looked to see how many books were available from not only the authors we publish but many of the others who are basic to Western intellectual life. Shelf after shelf, containing 20 to 30 titles, could be found entirely devoted to the works of Chomsky, Said, Foucault, Hanna Arendt, at al." (Schiffrin 2004: 40).

As we have discussed elsewhere (Sato, Haga, Yamada 2011: Chs. 9 and 10), the existence of a relatively large population of "serious readers" in Japan is one of the major backgrounds of the fact that such a great variety of difficult philosophical books have been produced by publishers (Washio 2004; Yoshimi 2004). However, the undifferentiated cross-sector division of labor between the trade and scholarly publishing subsectors has also blurred the distinction between purely academic books and quasi-academic books, which are written by scholars who are more oriented to the lay-readers than to professional readers. In fact, the lack of the peer review system in Japan is closely related to this market factor (for a fuller discussion on this issue, see Sato, Haga, Yamada 2011: Ch. 9). We will have to address this issue, that is, the interrelationship among the publishing world, academia, and readers, in order to delve into the role of the scholarly editors as a gatekeeper.

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