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## If Our Gatekeepers Can't Function Properly, We Are Doomed

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## If Our Gatekeepers Can't Function Properly, We Are Doomed

By **Barry Jason Mauer**  
UCF Forum columnist  
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Andrew Wakefield, a British doctor who lost his medical license in 2010, falsely claimed in a 1998 scientific paper published in *The Lancet* that measles, mumps and rubella vaccines cause autism and Crohn's disease. His claims, though bogus, were widely reported and led to a decline in vaccination rates and new outbreaks of measles and mumps.

*The Lancet* was right to retract Wakefield's article after the UK's General Medical Council tribunal proved it was fraudulent. The council was right to take Wakefield off the medical registry.

Though they didn't catch the fraud before it was published, *The Lancet* and the council are gatekeepers and it is their job to restrict what counts as knowledge, what counts as acceptable behavior, and who counts as an expert.

Gatekeepers are vital to a healthy society, but in order to function properly, gatekeepers must be committed to the public interest rather than to private interests, and they must have the power to intervene decisively to prevent the misuse of information. Our gatekeepers must credit good ideas and discredit bad ones.

So when journalists—themselves gatekeepers—report on Wakefield, they must tell the story as a story of fraud. To do otherwise is malpractice. Yet many journalists still report the story as being about conflicting viewpoints or about uncertainty in regards to the safety of vaccines. They quote some people who believe Wakefield and others who don't.

These journalists justify their work as "balanced" and "objective." But journalists are wrong to follow this logic. Balance and objectivity are phantoms. Journalists should uphold truth and the public interest. Anything less poisons our civic discourse.

We have gatekeepers in many areas of society.

In my field, English literature, gatekeepers such as scholars, editors and critics, decide what literature enters the canon and gets published in textbooks. Teachers determine what textbooks to assign. We can and should interrogate the methods by which these gatekeepers make their decisions, but it is wrong to argue that gatekeepers are unnecessary.

With far too much writing in the world to teach in a thousand lifetimes, let alone in one semester, we need people to help us filter it according to some set of principles.

The gatekeeper's job is now more difficult than it has been for decades, if not for centuries. The internet and social media allow people to avoid gatekeepers entirely and post any junk they like in any number of forums. There is so much information that it is nearly impossible to determine whether many or even most significant claims being circulated are true. Misinformation, like the claim that vaccines cause autism, spreads like wildfire on the internet and it is almost impossible to stop it.

Furthermore, budget cuts and increasing privatization weaken the power of gatekeepers. Government regulatory agencies and academic departments have been reduced and sometimes captured by private interests. When regulators allied to coal companies refuse to do their jobs properly, miners die and the environment suffers. When economics professors claim that tax cuts for the rich stimulate the economy and produce more revenue for states—the so-called “Laffer curve”—they act like foxes guarding the henhouse of the public's interest. When gatekeepers are incompetent or corrupt, we all lose.

Despite the continued weakening of our gatekeeping institutions, we hear absurd claims from psychologist Jonathan Haidt that academia has become too insular, too liberal, and that its lack of ideological diversity is the problem. But academia is only beneficial if it holds to its gatekeeper function and filters out bad ideas.

Not all diversity is good. Should history departments hire Holocaust deniers and slavery apologists? Should biology departments hire creationists and eugenicists? Should medical schools hire teachers who believe that disease is caused by curses and wicked spells? Should political science departments hire people who claim the president is the Antichrist?

It seems to me that the most damaging corruption about gatekeepers in our nation is occurring within mainstream journalism, some of which has itself been weakened by irresponsible corporate ownership, the rise of politically biased “news,” hate radio and blogs, loss of money for investigative reporting, and the shifts away from traditional news media towards newsfeeds and aggregators.

The dominant narrative in the media, that “both sides” are responsible for the political dysfunction in the country, enables the plutocrats, fundamentalists and racists to wreak havoc on the country while it tarnishes the whistleblowers who, for years, even decades, have correctly identified the sources of the nation’s problems.

The shift from a print-based culture to an electronic culture brings with it many challenges. Perhaps the most serious, more serious even than privacy and surveillance, is the increasingly gloomy fate of our gatekeepers. If they can’t function effectively, we are doomed.

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