

The Evolving Gatekeepers of Headspace

By Barry Blesser ©2006

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Messages are everywhere, aural and visual, both subtle and in-your-face. As an exercise, catalog the number of political, commercial, and manipulative messages that you encounter in your daily life. Bus surfaces, water coolers, airplane tray tables, gas pumps, school vending machines, and bathroom stalls are all plastered with messages. Notwithstanding governmental regulation, marketing drones still call and fax us at any time of day or night. Retailers like Kmart put advertisements on the floor to catch your eyes, and they “storecast” their own radio stations with embedded loudspeakers. To further fill an empty niche, audio engineers are now working on new loudspeaker technology to allow a vending machines to beam a narrow radiation pattern to everyone who walks across its path: an automated siren song suggesting that you are thirsty and beckoning you to buy a drink.

Two centuries ago, aural and visual communications were limited to a few letters, infrequent human contact, and an occasional local newspaper. During the last century, radio, phonograph and the telephone made aural communications more efficient and readily available; and cinema, television, and inexpensive printing provided the same for visual communications. Now, with the efficiency of email, computers, electronic displays, and computer editing, every nook and cranny of our culture is filled with messages. Compared to the 1930’s, today’s radio broadcasts, and their supporting advertisers, have an audience that experiences message saturation. In contrast, a 19th-century rural farmer actually welcomed messages brought by a traveling peddler; an occasional message provided social contact. Even if broadcast technology had not changed during the last 50 years, listeners exist in a very different social context: sensory overload.

In our culture, messages are mostly commercial manipulations intended to influence purchasing decisions. In the old Soviet Union, messages were political indoctrinations designed to produce emotional allegiance to an inflexible ideology. And in some theological cultures, messages are religious recitation of a single truth. Man’s proclivity to manipulate the thoughts and behaviors of others is not new, but the technical vehicles for doing so have dramatically increased during the last century.

As a reaction to message saturation, we create gatekeepers to decide which messages will be allowed into our consciousness. When you sit in your automobile, your gatekeeper decides if your private space will contain music from your personal library, a radio broadcast produced by a particular personality, or the quiet of an internal dialog.

In a modern 21st century culture, we all need gatekeepers to preserve our sanity. Without gatekeepers to control access to our heads, we would be overwhelmed if everyone was allowed to communicate with us. Back when telephones calls cost \$1 per

minute, there were few such calls. Now with a fixed connection charge and automated dialers, marketing systems can generate millions of calls per hour. Email has no delivery cost once a computer has been provided with an address distribution list. Becoming a Podcaster requires only a minimal investment of time, skill, and technology. Every wall surface can host an electronic display to provide audio and visual messages 24 hours per day.

In an earlier Last Word article ("Technology Scarcity and Surplus," June 15, 2005), we examined technology in terms of scarcity and surplus. This concept also applies to messages and headspace. When technology transformed message density from scarcity to surplus, headspace correspondingly changed from surplus to scarcity. Gatekeepers of scarce headspace now ration this limited resource, providing access only to the highest priority messages. Examples of such technology gatekeepers include spam filters for email, adblock software for WEB pages, caller ID for telephone, TiVo for television, the channel selector on a radio, the view hole in a door, and so on.

With the exception of hearing, other sensory systems have some biological capacity to perform a gatekeeper function. The visual system has a means for controlling access to headspace because the point of gaze is always an active choice: we choose what to look at. Close your eyes, and the visual world is blocked; breath through your mouth, and foul smells disappear. In contrast, the auditory system has a weak gatekeeper function. Hearing evolved to be always active because that property enhanced survival. Our ancient ancestors needed to hear the sounds of breaking twigs that signaled an approaching predator; a mother needs to hear the cry of her baby regardless of what she is doing. There is no aural analog of eyelids. An aural gatekeeper therefore depends on technology.

We now arrive at the battleground between headspace gatekeepers and message senders. When listeners are captive, as in the waiting lounge at an airport gate, they have limited means for suppressing aural advertising radiating from dozens of televisions. In private homes and automobiles, however, listeners have the means to control access to their headspace. From this perspective, broadcasters are part of this combat because they depend on the revenue from advertisers who pay for messages, mostly unwanted, only when they penetrate the gatekeepers of a large number of listeners.

Consider this article as an illustration of gatekeeper combat. If readers think that this article has valuable information, they will open their visual gatekeeper to everything on the page, including the accompanying advertising at the bottom or side. Conversely, without such an inducement, readers might well ignore everything on the page. Like broadcasters, I am also part of gatekeeper combat: advertisers are actually paying me to write something to manipulate your gatekeeper. They do not actually care about the content as long as readers open their gates.

In the same sense, broadcasters must regulate what they transmit such that listeners open their aural gatekeepers for programs, while simultaneously allowing unwanted messages to piggyback through the open channel. This is the proverbial Trojan horse.

What will induce a listener to open his gate? Can advertising messages be designed so that they are experienced as being desirable? These questions have been thrust upon broadcasters simply because the culture has changed. Broadcasters did not create the problem, but neither can they escape it.

The old model of simply selling time to advertisers to use as they see fit may no longer be appropriate. We would never think of renting our house without also monitoring how the renter uses our property. It is more important to preserve the asset value of the house than to acquire quick cash from the renter. We would not rent to someone who has wild alcoholic parties. The same is true for broadcasters. They must preserve the value of their channel, as measured by how gatekeepers make decisions using the composite audio stream, which includes the airtime rented to others for extraneous messages.

Some broadcasters are already viewing themselves as entertainment companies rather than as radio stations renting time to the highest bidder. According to a recent press release, the Creative Services Group at Clear Channel works closely with major advertisers to improve the quality of spots while also reducing their duration and frequency. Similarly, broadcast engineers should monitor the composite program to avoid excessive loudness, poor audio quality, and harsh transitions. Engineers, programmers, and advertisers are stakeholders with a joint responsibility for keeping listeners' irritation at a low level. If the irritation-factor exceeds some threshold, gates close.

Consider that some Superbowl viewers were actually watching for the commercials. Rather than viewing spots as a necessary evil, broadcasters can view them as a secondary form of entertainment, engaging listeners, rather than alienating them. Messages need not put pressure on gates to close.

Just as a reckless renter can destroy the value of your home, irresponsible messages can damage your listener audience. Like a latching door, when a gust of wind blows gates closed, they stay closed indefinitely. Listeners simply have too many other choices. There is only one first priority: *every* aspect of a broadcast should put pressure on gates to remain open.