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When It Comes to Publishing, the House Rules

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How gatekeepers shape what we read, and the reality we think we know

A critical analysis of institutional gatekeeping, selective information flows, and the constitutional case for fiduciary-epistemic transparency in public discourse

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Abstract

This essay examines how publishing has historically functioned less as a neutral marketplace of ideas and more as a tightly controlled gatekeeping system. From eighteenth-century Grub Street to contemporary editorial boards and algorithmic filters, publishing houses, journals, and media outlets have determined not only who gets published but which realities are legitimised and which are left invisible. Drawing on *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (ECT), I argue that publication has never been a simple reward for brilliance but rather a negotiation with entrenched power structures — a negotiation governed by what the 'house rules' allow. Through historical examples and contemporary cases such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, the essay reveals how curated narratives shape public perception while sidelining dissenting or disruptive knowledge. It concludes by exploring fiduciary accountability as a framework to ensure that epistemic gatekeepers act in the public's interest, safeguarding democratic legitimacy and epistemic justice.

Keywords

publishing, gatekeeping, epistemic clientelism, epistemic justice, media power, editorial bias, Grub Street, cultural critique, fiduciary accountability, constitutional theory, democratic legitimacy, peer review, algorithmic governance, narrative control, epistemic governance

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The first thing to understand about being published is that it has never been a pure reward for brilliance. That is a polite fiction — useful to the publisher, flattering to the author, reassuring to the reader — but a fiction all the same. From the moment presses began to roll, publishers knew they were in possession of something more valuable than paper and ink: the power to decide what would exist in the public mind {Benkler 2006, pp 176–180}.

Getting into print has always meant playing by house rules. The poet who fit the prevailing taste for pious verse, the historian whose conclusions comforted the victors, the scientist whose findings didn't trouble the benefactor — these were the people who saw their work bound and distributed. The rest might have been equally talented, sometimes more so, but talent has never been the sole currency at the gate {Briggs and Burke 2009, pp 63–70, 93–98}.

In this sense, publishing has always been a negotiation between what the author wants to say and what the publisher is willing to present to the world. The bargain may be explicit — the editor asking for 'a few changes to make it more palatable' — or entirely unspoken, conveyed through the kinds of works that get championed and the silences around those that don't {Thompson 2012, pp 196–205, 312–320}. Either way, the message is clear: step too far outside the frame, and you will be left outside the door.

That frame shifts over time, but its existence is constant. In the nineteenth century, it kept radical political tracts out of polite circulation {Brake 1994, pp 45–52}. In the mid-twentieth, it favoured narratives aligned with national interest or corporate sponsors {McChesney 2008, pp 187–193}. Today, it is reinforced by editorial boards, legal departments, advertisers, algorithms — a web of incentives and constraints ensuring that what makes it to the reader is safe, saleable, and unlikely to destabilise the hand that offers it {Couldry and Mejias 2019, pp 79–84}.

Once you see this pattern, the romance of 'being published' starts to fade. The imprimatur of a prestigious masthead or imprint does not necessarily signal that the work is the most outstanding of its kind. More often, it signals that the work has been successfully harmonised with the priorities, anxieties, and worldview of the gatekeeper {Kahl 2025, 'Against the Peer Review Empire'; Kahl 2025, 'Epistemic Clientelism Theory'}.

And this, in turn, raises a more troubling question: if the public record is largely shaped by those who have passed this test, what picture of reality do we actually have?

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The oldest publishers understood this perfectly. They were not just printers; they were cultural brokers. In London's Grub Street of the eighteenth century, it was common knowledge that to have your pamphlet or play printed, you had to flatter the right patron or avoid offending the wrong one {Rogers 1972, pp 15–22}. A printer with royal connections would not take on a manuscript that risked losing favour at court. A bookseller with strong ties to a political faction would see no value in work that strayed from the party line {Barker 1998, pp 16–22, 41–47}.

In academia, the principle was much the same, though dressed in the more genteel language of 'rigour' and 'peer review' {Guédon 2001, pp 1–3, 33–37}. The referees might genuinely care about quality, but they also cared — consciously or not — about the stability of the frameworks they inhabited. A paper that challenged not just a conclusion but the premises of an entire field had an uphill climb. Journals like to publish research that extends the conversation, not one that redefines the language in which the conversation happens {Biagioli 2002, pp 20–24}.

Journalism, too, has always been about more than reporting. The daily newspaper is not a mirror; it's a stage {Schudson 2003, pp 11–14, 33–39, 140–147}. Editors decide which acts go on and which are cut. The criteria aren't always cynical — they might be driven by a sense of civic duty or an instinct for what will engage readers — but they are never neutral. What appears on the front page is what the editorial team wants the public to think about. What disappears into the spike is what they believe is best left out.

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None of this is new. What has changed is the efficiency of the gate. Digital tools, algorithms, and global media conglomerates have made it possible to shape the public record faster, at greater scale, and with less obvious friction than ever before {Napoli 2019, pp 9–13, 82–89, 174–179}. A headline can be rewritten across dozens of sites in minutes. A trending story can dominate every feed by lunchtime. The mechanisms that decide what you see — whether human editors or automated systems — are mostly invisible, and they answer to commercial and political pressures that are only partly disclosed {Tufekci 2015, pp 206–210, 213–218, 221–223}.

From the outside, it can look like a free marketplace of ideas, buzzing with diverse voices and viewpoints. But when you trace the patterns, a familiar architecture emerges. Certain topics get saturated coverage, others wither in silence. Certain narratives are repeated across outlets, not because they are objectively truer, but because they are safer, more compatible with the interests of advertisers, owners, or political allies {Chomsky & Herman 1988, pp xi–xvii, 18–25, 302–306}.

The result is a version of reality that is curated to fit the priorities of those who control the channels. It's not necessarily a fabrication — the events reported did happen — but it's selective in ways that shape our understanding {Couldry 2003, pp 2–5, 28–31, 67–70}. Omitted facts, underplayed perspectives, and neglected contexts all contribute to a worldview that feels natural and inevitable because it's the only one we're consistently shown.

This is the part that unsettles me most: the quiet normalisation of partial reality. If you ask most people whether they believe the media or the academy shows them the whole truth, they'll laugh. But the more dangerous possibility is that we stop even expecting it. We accept that what we see is what there is. We start to forget that there are other angles, other data points, other voices that never made it past the gate {Kahl 2025, 'Against the Peer Review Empire'; Kahl 2025, 'Epistemic Clientelism Theory'}.

And if we forget that, then the gatekeepers have won a subtler victory than censorship. They don't need to silence dissent outright. They can simply let it exist unseen, unheard, and therefore, for all practical purposes, unfelt.

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Take Brexit. In the months leading up to the referendum, British media coverage seemed, at first glance, to be a cacophony — Remain, Leave, economic doom, sovereign renewal. But if you looked closer, the noise concealed a narrowing of frames {Moore and Ramsay 2017, pp 6, 25–26, 32}. Economic arguments dominated front pages; cultural and historical questions were treated as secondary, if they were addressed at all. Complex discussions about the nature of EU governance were flattened into quick, emotive slogans.

Or take the pandemic. In early 2020, uncertainty was the only honest position. But uncertainty doesn't make for confident headlines {Greenhalgh 2020, pp 1–2}. Coverage quickly polarised: some outlets emphasised worst-case projections, others reassured audiences with optimistic but shaky claims. The choices about which studies to spotlight, which public health officials to elevate, which dissenting voices to sideline, all contributed to a public discourse that was less about mapping reality than managing anxiety.

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In my *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025, 'Epistemic Clientelism Theory'}, I argue that these patterns are not accidental. They reflect an economy of epistemic exchange in which access to the public square is traded for conformity to established narratives. In political journalism, that might mean leaning on 'reliable' government sources in exchange for insider briefings {Davis 2002, pp 45–51, 120–123}. In academic publishing, it might mean aligning your conclusions with the prevailing paradigm so your paper survives peer review {Guédon 2001, pp 33–37}.

Because gatekeeping often happens under the banner of quality control or public interest, it can feel benign. Who could object to editors curating the

news to prevent misinformation, or journals filtering out shoddy research? But the same mechanisms that exclude the false or irrelevant can just as easily exclude the inconvenient or disruptive {Chomsky & Herman 1988, pp xi–xvii, 2–3, 298–306}.

The digital age was supposed to flatten these hierarchies. Social media gave us the illusion of bypassing the gatekeepers, of speaking directly to an audience {Tufekci 2015, pp 205–210, 213–215}. But the platforms themselves became new gatekeepers, their algorithms shaping visibility according to opaque rules {Gillespie 2018, pp 5–8, 197–202}. Virality replaced editorial judgment, and the incentives shifted from informing to engaging — often by amplifying outrage, conflict, or fear {Couldry and Mejias 2019, pp 92–96, 112–117}.

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In both the old and new systems, the principle is the same: what you see is not the sum of what exists, but the subset that has passed through a filter designed to protect the interests of the filter's owner.

What does this mean for us as citizens in a democracy that depends on an informed public? It means recognising that the 'public record' is, and has always been, a partial construction {Kahl 2025, 'Epistemic Clientelism Theory'; Kahl 2025, 'Against the Peer Review Empire'}.

There's a temptation to think the answer lies in abolishing gatekeepers altogether. But without any filter, the flood of information becomes unmanageable, and misinformation thrives {Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, pp 16–19, 44–47}. The problem is not the existence of gates; it's who controls them, and according to what principles.

This is where fiduciary thinking might help us reimagine the role {Kahl 2025, 'Epistemic Gatekeepers as the Fourth Estate'}. A fiduciary is entrusted to act in the best interest of another, bound by duties of loyalty, care, and transparency {Frankel 2011, pp 5–7, 27–33}. If we applied this to epistemic gatekeeping, editors, publishers, and platform curators would be required not just to serve their shareholders, but to act in the public's epistemic interest: to preserve accuracy, foster plurality, and disclose the reasoning behind their choices.

The idea sounds abstract until you remember what's at stake. In an environment where 'truth' is always mediated, the trustworthiness of the mediator becomes the foundation of public life {O'Neill 2002, pp 3–7, 48–53}. Without trust, legitimacy crumbles — and when legitimacy crumbles, so does the capacity for collective decision-making.

We have reached a point where the erosion of trust in media, academia, and politics is not just a symptom of polarisation; it is a structural threat to democracy itself {Kahl 2025, 'Epistemic Gatekeepers as the Fourth Estate'}.

If there is a way forward, it begins with acknowledging the imbalance of power between those who shape the narrative and those who live within it. It continues with demanding — and perhaps legally mandating — that those who hold the keys to public discourse accept the responsibilities that come with that power. And it ends, if we are lucky, with a culture in which publication is not a signal that an idea has passed a loyalty test, but that it has been given a fair hearing in the public square.

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And so we walk through the city of information as though it were a walled town. The gates are open just wide enough for us to pass, and the streets we are allowed to wander are clean, well-lit, and mapped. We can convince ourselves that this is the whole city, that beyond these familiar boulevards there is only wilderness or rubble. But sometimes, through an unguarded archway, we catch a glimpse of what lies beyond: unpaved alleys, markets we've never visited, conversations in languages we do not know. These are not mirages. They are part of the city, too — part of the real place where we live. And if we want to know it, really know it, we will have to step past the gate and lose ourselves, for a while, in the streets the map forgot.

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Revision History

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