



## Article

# Gatekeepers as Safekeepers—Mapping Audiences' Attitudes towards News Media's Editorial Oversight Functions during the COVID-19 Crisis

Ragnhild Kristine Olsen <sup>1,\*</sup>, Mona Kristin Solvoll <sup>1</sup> and Knut-Arne Futsæter <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication and Culture, BI Norwegian Business School, 0484 Oslo, Norway; mona.k.solvoll@bi.no

<sup>2</sup> Kantar, 0187 Oslo, Norway; knut.arne.futsaeter@kantar.com

\* Correspondence: ragnhild.k.olsen@bi.no

**Abstract:** This study investigates people's attitudes towards news media's role as gatekeepers during the coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, this concerns news media's quality control and the selection of the most important news about the pandemic, as well as the provision of useful information and knowledge about the virus and its implications. Challenging research that has questioned the very idea of journalistic gatekeeping in hybrid media systems, we set out to explore people's attitudes towards news media's gatekeeper functions during a crisis, when the need for reliable and relevant information is extraordinarily high and the information environment is flooded with disinformation. In this situation, news media gatekeepers could serve as safekeepers that protect the population. Based on a national survey in Norway ( $N = 1024$ ), a country characterized by high levels of trust in social institutions, including the national press, the study finds that people were generally supportive of news media's gatekeeper functions amid the pandemic. However, there were noteworthy demographic differences. Older people, women, and those who were more highly educated showed more positive attitudes towards news media's gatekeeping. Moreover, we found lower support for news media's gatekeeping in the group who trusted alternative, right-wing news media.

**Keywords:** audiences; journalism; gatekeeper; news media; infodemic; COVID-19 pandemic; coronavirus; crisis; alternative media



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## 1. Introduction

Around the world, the coronavirus pandemic has forcefully reminded us of the value of trustworthy news and information providers. An overload of information has been shared online, including rumors and misinformation regarding COVID-19. The dissemination of false and misleading information has had fatal consequences as people have been unable to understand and implement scientifically grounded preventive measures to keep themselves and their communities safe (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020). Adding insult to injury, the pandemic has served as an opportunity to spread fear and conspiracy theories online with the aim of destabilizing social and political order (e.g., Boberg et al. 2020). This information crisis, labelled an infodemic by the World Health Organization (Zarocostas 2020), has arguably renewed the legitimacy of legacy news media's gatekeeping role, i.e., the editorial process that determines which news is selected for publication. Gatekeeping, specifically in the form of editorial oversight by professional journalists, could serve as a necessary vetting of information in a situation when such quality control and information guidance is particularly important. As such, the journalist gatekeeper could be seen as a safekeeper in the information environment and the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to prove the worth of the gatekeeper as a safekeeper.

A substantial body of research has aimed to understand gatekeeping and how news media allocate attention. However, little is known about how citizens perceive news media's gatekeeping (Perryman 2019), let alone in times of heightened insecurity. The present study contributes theoretically and empirically to the research literature on journalism and gatekeeping by applying an audience perspective on news media gatekeeping during a crisis. Our research maps the population's attitudes to legacy news media as gatekeepers in Norway, a country that has managed to avoid the worst of the pandemic without the most stringent restrictions on public life (Christensen and Læg Reid 2020). By means of a national survey ( $N = 1024$ ) conducted during the second wave of the pandemic in the autumn of 2020, we explore people's attitudes to different aspects of gatekeeping. The study finds that people were generally supportive of news media's quality control and selection of news and information as well as the provision of useful information and knowledge. However, this was more salient among older people, women, and people with higher education and among those who trusted legacy media. People who trusted alternative news media were less supportive of the gatekeeper functions under study.

In the next sections, we present relevant literature and develop our research questions. Following this, we detail our survey method and present findings before turning to the final discussion and conclusion section.

## 2. Literature Review

The idea that journalists select, package, and distribute news to their audiences lies at the heart of one of the dominating theories about the profession of journalism: gatekeeping (Pearson and Kosicki 2017). In the next sections, we will focus on two overarching topics from the extensive research literature on gatekeeping that have guided our own research. These are the role of legacy news media as gatekeepers in the digital environment and gatekeeping as editorial oversight in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2.1. *The Role of Legacy News Media as Gatekeepers in the Digital Environment*

In essence, gatekeeping theory concerns how information circulates or does not circulate, and the factors that inhibit or advance the flow of information (Heinderyckx and Vos 2016). It is understood as the process of items passing through a channel, whose entrance and section gates are guarded by gatekeepers (Wallace 2018). While the first study of gatekeeping in journalism was concerned with the processes and judgments a journalist uses to piece together the news (White 1950), later research has moved beyond individual decision-making by journalists to structural conditions inside or outside the news organization that play a role in the gatekeeping process (e.g., Shoemaker and Vos 2009). This has resulted in a multi-faceted research field covering a multitude of different perspectives and forces that shape news (e.g., Bro and Wallberg 2015; Wallace 2018). Being a gatekeeper who makes a qualified selection of news on behalf of the public has been deeply rooted in journalists' professional identity (Janowitz 1975). As such, gatekeeping also describes a journalistic role with an explicitly normative dimension (Vos and Thomas 2019) closely linked to journalistic ethics and the democratic ideals of journalism (Singer 2006a, 2008). According to pro-social ideals of the press, journalists have an obligation to pass along information that is important and beneficial to the public and filter out that which is perceived as the opposite (Heinderyckx and Vos 2016). Although there has been substantial criticism of this rather idealistic view of journalistic gatekeeping (e.g., Singer 2008), and other factors such as business interests also influencing news media's gatekeeping practices (see, for example, Heinderyckx and Vos 2016), this responsibility is well-established inside as well as outside the journalistic profession. Indeed, assembling and verifying facts and presenting significant information based on public interest ideals have been defined as core elements of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021).

The idea of journalists as gatekeepers came about at a time when news products were few and hard to access, and news media commanded considerable control over the flow of information in society. However, with the advent of the internet and social

media platforms, the tools for content production as well as the space for news content have grown massively. The digital transformation of the information environment into hybrid media systems, where legacy media coexist with newer media such as social media sites and user-generated content platforms (Chadwick 2017), has disrupted the once asymmetric, hierarchical relationship between journalist and audiences, challenging the authority of news media as gatekeepers (e.g., Singer 2006b). Indeed, the very idea of news media as gatekeepers has been characterized as a concept and practice from another time (Vos and Thomas 2019) that has virtually been eliminated in the contemporary media environment (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004). Legacy media no longer has a monopoly when it comes to determining the scope and content of the news environment for audiences. Instead, this space is increasingly shaped by technology, which allows everybody to produce and distribute news. The digital transformation has dramatically altered news flow patterns (Wallace 2018) and changed the purpose, nature, temporality, agents, and context of gatekeeping (Heinderyckx and Vos 2016). For news media, gatekeeping has shifted from shaping the news environment to contributing to it (Ibid.) and ensuring the most efficient journey for the news user to the information they will most want to read (Pearson and Kosicki 2017). Rather than controlling the news environment, journalists are often cast in the role of gatewatchers and news curators, operating within social media and other digital spaces (Bruns 2018) alongside non-journalist agents who are also selecting, packaging, and distributing information. In this environment, not only people but also technology exercises gatekeeping functions, for example, by means of algorithms that determine how content is distributed (Napoli 2015; Bastian et al. 2021). Audience metrics and analytics are also increasingly guiding the newsroom gatekeeping process (for an overview, see Blanchett 2021). Moreover, an emerging network of fact-checking sites specializing in debunking misinformation *post*-publication has taken on verification responsibilities previously reserved for journalists *pre*-publication (e.g., Graves and Cherubini 2016).

While audiences have gained power in the information environment to produce content themselves and to serve as secondary gatekeepers who pass on information they decide to share (Singer 2014), they are also faced with the challenge of navigating the information-abundant digital information environment, where the quality and factuality of information can be difficult to discern. In this situation, legacy news media may serve as way-finders that guide users to valuable content and help people make sense of the information clutter online (Pearson and Kosicki 2017). Although gatekeeping studies with a specific audience outlook are limited (Perryman 2019), some research concludes that journalistic gatekeeping is still largely appreciated by audiences and that user-generated news content is regarded with skepticism (Karlsson et al. 2018). We can summarize this as two distinct positions regarding the relevance of news media's gatekeeper role in the digital media sphere. One which holds that the journalist gatekeeper is obsolete and one which holds that the journalist gatekeeper is still needed and appreciated by the audience.

## 2.2. Gatekeeping as Editorial Oversight in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although there has been a substantial weakening of legacy news media's power to select and control what information audiences receive, the editorial oversight that journalistic gatekeeping entails may have gained significance. According to Vos and Thomas (2019) study of how journalists have defined and (re)constructed their gatekeeping role amid the seismic changes confronting their field, editorial oversight refers to how news organizations go about vetting information with the aim of providing truthful and meaningful depictions of the world in the public interest. Being able to do so better than anyone else lies at the heart of journalistic authority (Usher 2018). There are reasons to expect that journalistic authority and reputation become more important in times of crisis as the demand for more accurate information usually increases (Van Aelst et al. 2021). This has become acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, with waves of unreliable information spreading online (Gallotti et al. 2020), making it challenging for people to know who and what to trust. As described by Nielsen (2021), the coronavirus pandemic has reminded "at

least parts of the public of the importance and value of trustworthy news from independent news organizations” (p. 4/5).

The public’s information needs during crises vary according to the cause and type of crisis (Westlund and Ghersetti 2015). The characteristics of the COVID-19 epidemic have created complex information needs—from trustworthy news about the immediate dangers of the virus, and guidelines regarding protective behaviors, to in-depth information on underlying causes and long-term consequences that provide a deeper understanding of the virus and its impact on society (Van Aelst et al. 2021). In response to such information needs, we can identify four key journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight: quality control, selectivity, provision of useful information, and provision of knowledge to the public. While not mutually exclusive, these are still distinct dimensions of journalistic gatekeeping.

**Quality control** of information, performed by trained journalists, serves as a counterweight to misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 (López-García et al. 2021). News media can contribute directly to citizens’ potential for self-protection and safety by debunking fake news, and by providing trustworthy information and data about the virus. Moreover, they can improve the efficiency of the authorities’ pandemic response efforts (Bridgman et al. 2020). The fact-checking and verification of information constitute a central part of the journalistic process (Blöbaum 2014) and are vital to journalism’s core function of sensemaking (Fink 2019). Trust in the verification of facts offers compensation for the audiences’ own lack of knowledge. This trust entails the belief that internal and external control mechanisms of the media organizations are working well, i.e., that news media operates according to norms and values of journalism when they select, assess, and present news (Blöbaum 2014). Research on how journalists perceived their own role during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that trying to reverse the flow of misinformation by sifting through and proving the validity of information was considered a key obligation to society (Perreault and Perreault 2021; Canavilhas and Jorge 2022).

**Selectivity** entails the news media’s role in bringing the most significant news to the attention of the public. According to Kohring and Matthes (2007), selectivity plays a key part in people’s trust in the news media, and this involves both the editorial selectivity of topics and facts. People with low trust in news organizations, and in the political independence of the news media, are less likely to agree that selection by editors and journalists is a good way to obtain news (Thurman et al. 2019). Trust in the selectivity of professional news workers relates to news media’s agenda setting capacity, i.e., the influence that the news media exert on the public’s agenda by drawing attention to certain issues and topics (for an overview, see Matthes 2006). In the context of the coronavirus crisis, trust in selectivity means that audiences are confident that the news media will bring to their attention those topics and events regarding the pandemic that are important to them. Exposure to the most important news is of particular importance in the context of information overload (Zarcadoolas et al. 2009), which is one of the characteristics of the COVID-19 infodemic. Empirical research has found that as many as 60% of the population felt overloaded with information at the beginning of the coronavirus crisis (de Bruin et al. 2021).

**Usefulness:** In general, people value journalism that helps them solve a problem or understand a phenomenon better (Meijer 2013). For example, relevant news, which is somehow useful in people’s everyday lives, is among the key desired news services among younger audiences (Berthelsen and Hameleers 2021). The provision of useful information by news media has been particularly relevant during the COVID-19 crisis when people needed instructions, advice, guidelines, and explanations to understand the prevention and treatment of the disease. News media could select and pass on reliable guidance and practical intervention to help people “protect themselves, those they care about, and their wider communities” (Nielsen et al. 2020, p. 5). While some studies have stressed the shortcoming of journalism’s usefulness in previous crises, for example, by demonstrating high sensationalism and a lack of information promoting self-efficacy, others emphasize

journalism's utility in addressing public health crises (Ibid.). According to Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 60% of the respondents agreed that the media had helped them understand the coronavirus crisis and explained what they can do (Newman et al. 2021). Moreover, Bridgman et al. (2020) found that advice on hygiene and social distancing appeared much more frequently in news media than in social media, and that news media tend to reinforce governmental recommendations for safe practices during the pandemic.

**Knowledge:** According to Schudson and Anderson (2009, p. 89), journalism is a specific form of knowledge production that has a "truthful account" of the world as its endpoint. This knowledge production lies at the heart of editorial oversight ideals of gatekeeping. Journalists assert dominance over other potential providers of information, and act as brokers between experts and the public, providing expert knowledge for their audiences while not necessarily having that expertise themselves (Usher 2018). Such brokerage does not only involve passing on knowledge but also the production of a new kind of knowledge through a de- and reassembling process, which takes place as the brokers move back and forth between different social worlds, e.g., the world of scientist and that of the audience (Meyer 2010, p. 123). Knowledge brokers are influential because they perform crucial knowledge functions such as aggregating and translating information into accessible forms and building actors' capacity to mobilize knowledge into action (Yanovitzky and Weber 2019). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, health journalism, and science journalism have emerged as particularly valuable types of journalism for educating the public (López-García et al. 2021; Zhao et al. 2020) to avoid panic and fear and to influence health literacy (Tejedor et al. 2020). However, given the complexity of the coronavirus crisis and its implications for so many aspects of human life, not only science and health journalists but reporters from any beat could serve a vital function by relaying information to the public in an understandable and clear manner.

### 3. Research Questions

In sum, the literature review suggests that there is considerable overlap between the public's information needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and key gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight by professional journalists. However, we do not know if and to what extent audiences appreciate these aspects of news media's gatekeeping in the context of the pandemic. Previous studies of people's assessment of the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic (Casero-Ripollés 2020), audience trust in news media (Newman et al. 2021), and news consumption patterns (Van Aelst et al. 2021) suggest that the pandemic has increased people's reliance on news media and the editorial oversight they offer. However, people's use of social media for news and information has also increased (Ibid.), which may, although social media platforms are frequently used by legacy news media to disseminate news on COVID-19 (Mellado et al. 2021), indicate a certain type of relativism in how people relate to pandemic news. In other words, all news becomes important during times of crisis, regardless of the source. Based on this ambiguity, the present study asks the following question:

RQ1: During the COVID-19 pandemic, what attitudes did audiences have towards journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight?

The research literature also demonstrates that the assessment of how well the media have covered the COVID-19 outbreak could vary depending on demographic characteristics such as age and education (Casero-Ripollés 2020), and that in general, young people have less of a need and less time for journalistic gatekeepers (Vos and Thomas 2019). Research on young news audiences has identified a disconnect between what traditional news media perceive as important for people to know and what younger audiences see as useful, relevant, interesting, and fun to know (Galan et al. 2019). Typically, these younger audiences rely on social media for news (Berthelsen and Hameleers 2021) and do not perceive traditional news media as relevant or dominant when it comes to news content (Galan et al. 2019). This ties in with a large body of research on the public's trust and use of different news media in different national contexts, demonstrating how

factors such as age (e.g., [Elvestad et al. 2018](#); [Sakariassen et al. 2017](#); [Schranz et al. 2018](#); [Westlund and Ghersetti 2015](#); [Van Aelst et al. 2021](#)), gender (e.g., [Livio and Cohen 2018](#); [Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019](#)), and educational level ([Gronke and Cook 2007](#); [Ali et al. 2020](#); [Van Aelst et al. 2021](#)) affect differences in people's relationships to news media. In line with this, the present study asks the following question:

RQ2: What role do gender, age, and education play in people's attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight?

While there is reason to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the relevance of journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight, over the last decade there has also been a growth in alternative and partisan news media, which explicitly challenge the authority of established, legacy news providers in their capacity as gatekeepers. These alternative media, which are typically right-wing leaning ([Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019](#)), cater for media-sceptic audiences, i.e., people who feel that journalists in the mainstream media are "not fair and objective in their reports about society and that they do not always tell the whole story" ([Tsfati 2003](#), p. 67). People's orientation towards these alternative media is related to decreasing trust in mainstream media and vice versa (e.g., [Andersen et al. 2021](#)). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we might expect people with high trust in mainstream media to be more supportive of journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight compared to people with high trust in alternative media. However, this has—to the best of our knowledge—not been empirically explored. Based on this, we ask the following question:

RQ3: What role does trust in mainstream media play compared with trust in alternative media in attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight?

#### 4. Materials and Methods

To address our RQs, we designed a survey-based study. In the following sections, we present the national context of this study, as well as our research methods and materials.

##### 4.1. The Norwegian Case

Norway is a well-developed welfare state and a high-trust society ([OECD 2022](#)) with a diverse and digitally advanced media landscape ([Østbye 2020](#)). News media have played an important role in establishing and maintaining the country's welfare systems ([Syvertsen et al. 2014](#)). The welfare model means that the news media align with egalitarian ideals in terms of content and audiences, with less of an elite vs. mass distinction, and small class and gender differences. The Norwegian media system is characterized by high degrees of media diversity, journalistic professionalism and press subsidies, strong public broadcasting, and low levels of political parallelism. Comparing how people assess the perceived trustworthiness of news media in the Nordic region, [Newman et al. \(2021\)](#) find that the share of people who trust the news is lower in Norway (57%) than in neighboring Finland (65%) and Denmark (59%), but higher than in Sweden (50%). News consumption in Norway is high. Media consumption increased further during the COVID-19 pandemic. The all-time high digital news consumption observed in March 2020 ([Futsæter 2020](#)) suggests that Norwegians have been highly engaged in the news about the coronavirus. According to the [Norwegian Media Authority \(2021\)](#), the public service broadcaster NRK and the biggest online news site VG were the most frequently used news source during the coronavirus crisis. These were also the most used news sources prior to the pandemic (VG: 43% daily reach, NRK 44% daily reach across all platforms). In addition, there is a wide variety of other news media in Norway, including national players, such as the second-largest circulating newspaper *Aftenposten* (17% daily reach across platforms), as well as local and niche media (*Ibid.*). The alternative media *Resett.no* and *Document.no*, which are both far-right-leaning online news outlets, belong to the latter category. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, they have a modest reach of 5% on a weekly basis ([Newman et al. 2021](#)).

#### 4.2. Data

The present study uses survey data ( $N = 1024$ ) from an online questionnaire distributed to a representative, national web panel (The Gallup Panel) consisting of 40,000 panelists aged 15+. Data collection was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) as part of the ongoing Media Innovation Through the Corona Crisis Project (MICC) at BI Norwegian Business School (reference number 227818). Like many national surveys of this kind, there was an underrepresentation of certain demographic groups in our sample. Results were, therefore, weighted for gender, age, and education to make them representative of the Norwegian population. Weights were based on census data from Statistics Norway ([ssb.no/en](http://ssb.no/en)). Recruiting respondents from the internet universe could potentially restrict the generalization of findings as certain population segments, such as the elderly, may be underrepresented. However, with 99.6% internet penetration ([Østbye 2020](#)), the Norwegian internet universe is more representative of the general population than in many other countries. The survey covered a wide range of topics regarding media use. Questions related to the news media's gatekeeper role, specifically their editorial oversight functions, were included in this study. These questions were developed by the researchers, and data collection was conducted by Norway's leading market research company, Kantar, in 3Q 2020.

To measure people's attitudes towards news media's editorial oversight functions, i.e., our dependent variables, we asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements related to each of the four editorial oversight functions: (1) quality control: "It is important that news about the coronavirus pandemic is quality controlled by Norwegian journalists"; (2) selectivity: "Norwegian media provide the most important news about the coronavirus pandemic"; (3) usefulness: "Norwegian media provide practical useful information about the coronavirus pandemic"; (4) knowledge: "Norwegian media provide knowledge about the coronavirus pandemic". It should be noted that the term "Norwegian media" is strongly associated with domestic legacy news media in Norway, whereas global social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, are unlikely to be associated with this term. Legacy news media have a much more prominent position among audiences in Norway compared to other European countries, and when asked about news consumption, people clearly distinguish between legacy news media and social media ([Sakariassen et al. 2017](#)). Based on this, and our survey design, which connected questions regarding specific news media brands with the more generic term "Norwegian media", we are confident that the latter serves our purpose of capturing people's attitudes towards journalistic news media.

Agreement or disagreement with the statements was indicated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree) so that high scores express respondents' appreciation of the journalistic gatekeeper functions under study. "Do not know"—responses were coded as 3 to reflect a categorical equivalent of a "neutral level of trust". As per [Denman et al. \(2018\)](#), recoding "do not know" responses to a mid-point produces higher data quality in comparison to where these data are excluded.

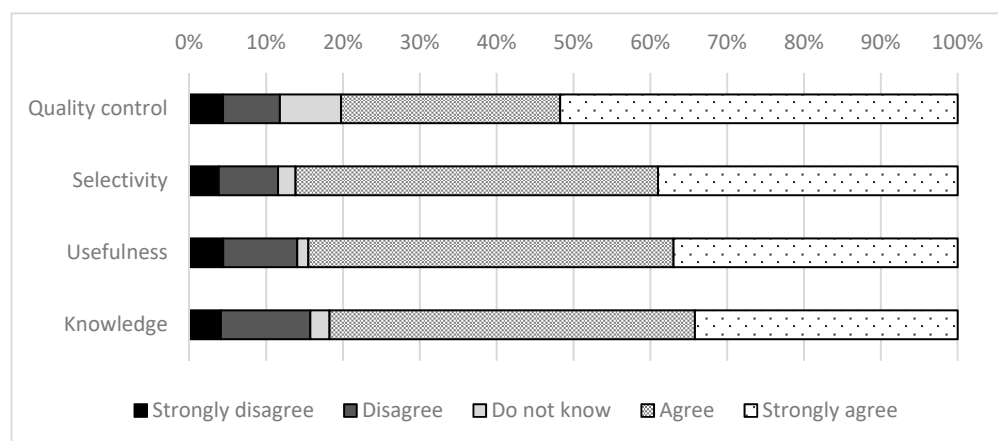
The independent variables in our study were age; gender; education; and trust in three leading mainstream media brands and two alternative media brands: the public service broadcaster NRK, the largest online news site VG, the largest printed newspaper Aftenposten, and alternative media brands Document.no and Resett.no. Trust was measured by asking to what extent the respondent trusted each news brand's coverage of the COVID-19 crisis. This use of single-item measurements of trust is a valid and common procedure also applied in other studies on trust (see, for example, [Livio and Cohen 2018](#); [Elvestad et al. 2018](#); [Newman et al. 2020](#)). In the analysis, trust in the two alternative news brands was recoded into one variable, "trust in alternative news brands". As previously noted, the audience reach of the media brands under study varied considerably. For alternative news media Resett.no and Document.no, audience reach was particularly low. If low reach equals little or no knowledge about a specific media source, it would be difficult for respondents to assess its trustworthiness. However, in the case of Resett.no and Docu-

ment.no, there has been a considerable public debate about their coverage of controversial stories and topics, including the coronavirus pandemic. They are also “viral winners”, i.e., specialists in reaching and engaging large audiences on social media platforms (Langfeldt Dahlback 2021). Consequently, these media are better known in the general population than their limited readership suggests. Still, one should not ignore how lower knowledge may impact the trust score, specifically, the share of “do not know” responses, when interpreting results.

In line with the explorative research design in this study, our analyses were mainly descriptive–comparative based on mean scores.

## 5. Findings

First, in response to RQ1, we examined attitudes towards the four journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight in our survey data. As shown in Figure 1, attitudes towards these functions were generally positive, signaling high levels of appreciation in the population. The share of respondents who agreed to the statements regarding news media’s quality control, selectivity, and provision of useful information and knowledge amid the COVID-19 pandemic varied between 80% (quality control) and 86% (selectivity). The quality control aspect had the strongest support ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). More than half of the respondents (51.73%) strongly agreed that it is important that news about the coronavirus pandemic is quality controlled by Norwegian journalists. Interestingly, there was also a larger share of people who were unsure about the importance of this function (7.97%) than for the other gatekeeper functions. The support for media’s provision of knowledge and useful information about the coronavirus pandemic was somewhat lower, with mean scores 3.96 ( $SD = 1.10$ ) and 4.03 ( $SD = 1.08$ ), respectively, suggesting that overall, the appreciation of these gatekeeper functions was somewhat weaker in the population. Those who disagreed that news media had provided knowledge about the pandemic accounted for 15.75% of the respondents, compared to 14.04% who disagreed that news media had provided useful information about COVID-19. Positive attitudes towards the selectivity function were more salient ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) with 86.18% of the respondents agreeing that Norwegian media provide the most important news about the coronavirus pandemic.



**Figure 1.** Audience attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight.

Turning next to RQ2, we conducted a one-way ANOVA with the Tukey post hoc test to explore differences in attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeper functions among different age groups. Participants were divided into five age groups (15–29 ( $n = 258$ ), 30–39 ( $n = 179$ ), 40–49 ( $n = 192$ ), 50–59 ( $n = 165$ ), 60+ ( $n = 229$ )). We found no mean scores below 3.5 in any of these age groups, confirming that attitudes towards the journalistic gatekeeper functions under study were generally positive in the population. There were, however, significant differences between the groups. As shown in Table 1, we found significantly



higher mean scores for the selectivity aspect of news media's gatekeeping among those who had turned 50 ( $M \geq 4.26$ ), suggesting that those who came of age in an information environment where news media held a stronger position to set the public agenda than today, were most appreciative of legacy news media's selection and prioritization of news during the pandemic. Younger people were somewhat less supportive of the idea that Norwegian news media provided the most important news about coronavirus ( $M \leq 3.97$ ), as well as the practical usefulness of the news provided ( $M \leq 3.96$ ). However, for the youngest age group (15–29), the mean score for usefulness was not significantly different from the score in the 50–59 group. Regarding news media's knowledge provision, the mean score for the group of 30–39 year olds ( $M = 3.50$ ) was significantly lower than for all the other age segments. Indeed, this group—often referred to as millennials—scored consistently lower than the two oldest age groups on this, as well as the selectivity and usefulness functions. As such, the 30–39 year olds represent the opposite of those over 50 in terms of the appreciation of these three editorial oversight functions. Interestingly, we did not find any significant differences in the mean scores for the quality control function. Mean scores above 4 across the board demonstrate positive attitudes towards this gatekeeper function among all the age groups.

**Table 1.** Attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeper functions by age.

	Age				
	15–29 ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	30–39 ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	40–49 ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	50–59 ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	60+ ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )
Quality control	(4.14, 1.09) <sup>a</sup>	(4.08, 1.19) <sup>a</sup>	(4.17, 1.16) <sup>a</sup>	(4.11, 1.19) <sup>a</sup>	(4.26, 1.02) <sup>a</sup>
Selectivity	(3.97, 1.03) <sup>a</sup>	(3.81, 1.26) <sup>a</sup>	(3.94, 1.11) <sup>a</sup>	(4.26, 0.86) <sup>b</sup>	(4.5, 0.67) <sup>b</sup>
Usefulness	(3.96, 1.03) <sup>ac</sup>	(3.67, 1.30) <sup>b</sup>	(3.88, 1.18) <sup>ab</sup>	(4.19, 0.89) <sup>cd</sup>	(4.40, 0.83) <sup>d</sup>
Knowledge	(3.92, 1.03) <sup>a</sup>	(3.50, 1.34)	(3.85, 1.17) <sup>a</sup>	(4.09, 0.92) <sup>ab</sup>	(4.36, 0.82) <sup>b</sup>

Note: Means are compared by one-way ANOVA. Means that have no superscript in common are significantly different from each other (Tukey's HSD,  $p < 0.05$ ).

In terms of gender, the Welch *t*-Test was used to assess the mean difference and its statistical significance. We found that women were consistently more supportive of the quality control, usefulness, and knowledge gatekeeper functions as compared with men. As shown in Table 2, there were significant differences in mean scores between men and women for all the editorial oversight functions except selectivity ( $MD = -0.13$ ,  $p = 0.052$ ). This was most salient for the quality control function ( $MD = -0.25$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ), followed by the usefulness ( $MD = -0.19$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) and knowledge ( $MD = -0.17$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) aspects of news media's gatekeeping during the pandemic. For women and men alike, quality control and selectivity were the editorial oversight aspects with the highest mean scores.

**Table 2.** Attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeper functions by gender and education.

	Gender					Education				
	Male		Female		<i>t</i> -Test	Low		High		<i>t</i> -Test
	<i>n</i>	( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	<i>n</i>	( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> ( <i>MD</i> , <i>SD</i> )	<i>n</i>	( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	<i>n</i>	( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> ( <i>MD</i> , <i>SD</i> )
Quality control	508	(4.03, 1.20)	511	(4.28, 1.02)	989 (−0.25, 0.07) ***	709	(4.10, 1.14)	310	(4.27, 1.07)	1017 (−0.17, 0.08) *
Selectivity	506	(4.03, 1.10)	504	(4.16, 0.94)	981 (−0.13, 0.06)	703	(4.06, 1.05)	307	(4.19, 0.97)	1008 (−0.13, 0.07)
Usefulness	513	(3.93, 1.18)	511	(4.12, 0.97)	985 (−0.19, 0.07) **	713	(3.96, 1.13)	311	(4.19, 0.93)	1021 (−0.23, 0.07) **
Knowledge	513	(3.88, 1.18)	511	(4.05, 1.00)	1021 (−0.17, 0.07) *	713	(3.90, 1.12)	311	(4.10, 1.03)	1021 (−0.20, 0.07) **

Note. Mean difference and statistical significance assessed with Welch's *t*-Test for gender and Standard Independent-Sample *t*-Test for education. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *MD* = mean difference; *t* = degrees of freedom. \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

For education, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was given ( $p = > 0.05$ ) for all editorial oversight functions; thus, the Standard Independent-Samples *t*-Test was used to interpret the results. The higher education group consisted of people with a university education or similar, while those in the lower education group had primary or high school education. Those who were more highly educated were generally more supportive of all the editorial oversight functions, except selectivity, for which no significant difference in mean scores was detected ( $MD = -0.13$ ,  $p = 0.053$ ). The difference between the high- and low-education groups was most salient for the useful information function ( $MD = -0.23$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), followed by knowledge ( $MD = -0.20$ ,  $p = -0.006$ ) and quality control ( $MD = -0.17$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ). This indicates that people with higher education perceived the information that news media select and pass on as more relevant for dealing with the coronavirus situation than the lower education group.

Finally, in response to RQ3, we found lower mean scores for all the editorial oversight functions in the group who trusted the two alternative media brands Resett.no and Document.no as compared with the groups who trusted the three leading mainstream media brands under study (Table 3). In other words, we identify more negative attitudes towards news media as gatekeepers during the pandemic among people who trusted alternative news media. It should, however, be noted that, with a mean score of no less than 3.62 (95% CI [3.38, 3.86]) on a five-point scale, even those who trusted alternative media were relatively supportive of news media's gatekeeper functions during the COVID-19 crisis.

**Table 3.** Attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeper functions among people who trust mainstream news media compared with people who trust alternative news media.

	Trust in Mainstream Media										Trust in Alternative Media					
	NRK				Aftenposten				VG		Resett.no and Document.no					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CI for Mean (95%)		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CI for Mean (95%)		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CI for Mean (95%)		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CI for Mean (95%)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	LB	UB	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	LB	UB	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	LB	UB	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	LB	UB
Quality control	4.29	1.01	4.22	4.36	4.35	0.98	4.27	4.42	4.38	0.91	4.30	4.45	3.80	1.42	3.55	4.04
Selectivity	4.26	0.87	4.20	4.32	4.26	0.90	4.19	4.33	4.41	0.73	4.35	4.47	3.79	1.27	3.57	4.01
Usefulness	4.21	0.91	4.15	4.28	4.24	0.87	4.17	4.31	4.30	0.84	4.23	4.36	3.76	1.33	3.53	3.99
Knowledge	4.11	0.97	4.05	4.18	4.16	0.93	4.08	4.23	4.18	0.97	4.10	4.26	3.62	1.37	3.38	3.86

Note: LB = lower bound confidence level for mean. UB = upper bound confidence level for mean.

For one of the oversight functions, selectivity, we also found significant differences in mean scores among those who trusted the mainstream media brands under study. Specifically, the mean score was higher in the group who trusted Norway's leading online newspaper brand VG (4.41, 95% CI [4.35, 4.47]) as compared with those who trusted the public service broadcaster NRK (4.26, 95% CI [4.20, 4.32]) and those who trusted Aftenposten (4.26, 95% CI [4.19, 4.33]).

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic has been described as a critical moment for journalism—a moment of significant importance and reconsideration of the past, present, and future (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen 2021). This study has addressed journalism's role during this critical moment by exploring people's attitudes towards news media as gatekeepers—a role that has often been written off as something from the past with little relevance in the digital age (Vos and Thomas 2019). By exploring how people assessed journalistic gatekeeper functions related to editorial oversight, our research offers news insight into the audience's view on journalistic gatekeeping in times of crisis. Challeng-

ing accounts of the fading relevance and legitimacy of journalists as gatekeepers described by scholars such as [Vos and Thomas \(2019\)](#), [Williams and Delli Carpini \(2004\)](#) and [Singer \(2006b\)](#), our findings provide evidence of substantial popular support for key aspects of the journalist gatekeeper role. Extending previous research by [Casero-Ripollés \(2020\)](#), [Newman et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Van Aelst et al. \(2021\)](#), which has demonstrated how the pandemic has increased people's reliance on legacy news media, our research shows that audiences appreciate the editorial oversight functions of these media. Based on this, we posit that in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the role of news media as gatekeepers is far from obsolete. Instead, it appears to have been revitalized by the information needs brought about by the pandemic. As such, our research provides support for an earlier point made by [Heinderyckx and Vos \(2016\)](#) regarding the maintained relevance of the gatekeeper theory. Indeed, we argue that not only the theory, but news media's gatekeeping practice itself, deeply embedded in journalists' professional identity and ethical guidelines, is still relevant.

This is not to say that news media are back in control of the information flow. The gates to information—good, bad, true, and false—are indeed open in the hybrid media system as the infodemic has forcefully demonstrated. Still, news media arguably has a role to play as a gate to trustworthy and relevant news about the pandemic and as a safe space where people can find reliable information, as well as useful information and knowledge that can help them understand the many facets of the crisis. As such, news media gatekeepers also serve as safekeepers. While news media may not always fulfil these functions and live up to audiences' expectations, our findings provide strong evidence of popular appreciation for such ideals of gatekeeping. In other words, these ideals exist not only as nostalgic notions among journalists about their maintained importance for people in the era of social media and user-generated content. They are also central to what people value about journalism. In a complex information environment, flooded with bits and pieces of COVID-19 information distributed on a multitude of platforms by an overwhelming number of players, we find overall support for classic journalistic gatekeeper functions that have traditionally played a key role in building journalistic authority and trust, as described by [Usher \(2018\)](#) and [Blöbaum \(2014\)](#).

These are encouraging findings for journalists, their professional identity, and their sense of worth in the pandemic information environment, as well as important for news media as businesses that constantly compete for audiences' time and attention in the digital sphere ([Myllylahti 2020](#)). At its core, news media's business model is based on the attractiveness of their gatekeeping, specifically their ability to provide news and information better and more efficiently than their competitors. The pandemic may have provided a window of opportunity for news media to prove their worth as information quality controllers who select trustworthy and relevant news for their audiences, who extend the knowledge of the audience and provide the individual with information for further action and communication. Taken together with the aforementioned research showing increased use and trust for legacy news media during the pandemic, our findings suggest that the journalist gatekeeper as a safekeeper is in high demand, which in turn may prove beneficial for news media's increasing reliance on audiences who are willing to pay for the gatekeeper service ([Olsen et al. 2021](#)). From this perspective, the less positive attitudes towards the gatekeeper functions among the younger audiences in our study give some cause for concern. Our finding that younger people are somewhat less convinced about the benefits of news media's selection of coronavirus news, as well as new media's provision of useful information and knowledge about the pandemic, indicates that news media must work harder to prove the worth of their editorial oversight to younger people. Arguably, people who have grown up with the internet are likely to feel more confident navigating this information environment and less dependent on legacy news media to "do the job for them". Conversely, those over 50, who, as previously noted, came of age during the golden age of journalistic news media, were more supportive of journalistic gatekeeping. These observations suggest that there may be a generational effect at play (e.g., [Bolin 2017](#)). According to media generation theory, generations develop based on common experiences

connected to specific media technologies or media content (Gumpert and Cathcart 1985). Specifically, media technologies and content one encounters during the formative years of youth can be expected to be the media that will also form subsequent media experiences and attitudes towards media, and this is the reason that most people as adults develop a certain skepticism towards novelties (Bolin and Skogerbø 2013). Consequently, older people would be more supportive of the gatekeeper logic which dominated their formative years when journalists were in charge of news production and distribution, while younger people's attitudes would be shaped by an information environment where everyone can create and distribute content and individuals must take on more responsibility for the quality control of their media and information diet. The media generational perspective can thus help us explain age differences in our material. It should, however, be noted that even in the age group that expressed the lowest level of support for news media's different editorial oversight functions in our study, i.e., the 30–39 year olds, scores were relatively high, demonstrating considerable appreciation for the journalist as a gatekeeper even in this section of the population. As such, our study nuances the point made in previous studies by Galan et al. (2019) and Vos and Thomas (2019) regarding the perceived lack of relevance of traditional gatekeeping media among younger people.

Regarding our findings on media trust and attitudes towards gatekeeping, alternative news media Resett.no and Document.no are part of a network of right-wing-leaning media that explicitly challenge the authority of traditional journalism, offering alternative interpretations of news events. This study exposes how audiences who trusted the alternative news sources' coverage of COVID-19 differed from those who trusted in leading mainstream media's COVID-19 coverage. This could be interpreted as an expression of what Tsfati (2003) describes as media skepticism, albeit relatively modest, given that even among the small audiences who trusted the alternative media, scores for all the gatekeeper functions were relatively high. However, the difference is notable, suggesting that these alternative sources cater for a certain segment that questions the way mainstream media select and fact check information about the pandemic, as well as the usefulness of this information and the knowledge it provides. This could, of course, be an expression of healthy critical thinking about the authority of mainstream media journalists and their filtering of facts. In a media environment where established news media are frequently accused of becoming more superficial and sensationalist, less informative and investigative and more prone to taking journalistic newsgathering short-cuts in its practice (see, for example, Van Aelst et al. 2017), such a critical stance among the audience could indeed be legitimate. However, if this skepticism results in people becoming more susceptible to misinformation and propaganda about the pandemic, these findings are more worrying from a normative point of view. In any case, the results of this study invite further investigation into the role of these alternative news media in times of crisis.

A limitation of this study is its distinct national outlook. We encourage future research to extend our focus to countries with lower trust in mainstream media and higher levels of social and political polarization than in Norway. We also welcome studies which further explore the age and gender differences found in our material, for example, by mapping attitudes towards journalistic gatekeeping among younger and older women compared to younger and older men.

Our study suggests that the pandemic has proven the worth of journalistic gatekeeping functions related to editorial oversight. In their capacity as providers of trustworthy news, legacy news media have served as a defense structure—as safekeepers—against deliberate and damaging disinformation and the dissemination of fake news. Although the long-term effect of the pandemic on journalism's gatekeeper function is uncertain, this study offers some cause for optimism regarding the maintained relevance of journalism in a digitally advanced, information-abundant mediascape. We urge future research to explore this further and assess the maintained relevance of the gatekeeper as a safekeeper post the coronavirus crisis because the problem of mis- and disinformation pollution of the information environment will persist even as the pandemic comes to an end.

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