

Challenging Virtual Rigidity: Gatekeeping and Organizational Communication of a Remote Housewives Editorial Team in Small Publishing

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Communication; gatekeeping; women's empowerment; small publishing; digital literacy

Traditional organizational communication theories often characterize virtual workspaces as rigid and limited in building team chemistry. However, this study challenges that assumption by exploring the organizational communication dynamics of Forsenbooks, a small, independent publisher in Indonesia operated entirely by a remote editorial team consisting of six housewives. This research aims to investigate how these women negotiate their dual roles as domestic caretakers and professional gatekeepers in a virtual environment. Utilizing a qualitative case study method, data were gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews. This paper uses Gatekeeping theory and the Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) perspective as its primary analytical framework. The findings reveal that this team successfully dismantles the limitations of virtual communication. They achieve this by developing an adaptive internal communication strategy, fostering strong chemistry through text-based interactions while maintaining rigorous editorial standards via online platforms. Ultimately, this study concludes that such virtual gatekeeping practices not only ensure business sustainability but also serve as a driving agent for digital literacy and the socio-economic empowerment of housewives in the modern creative industry.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic between late 2019 and 2020 forced a massive transition from offline working and learning habits to an entirely online system. Interestingly, this period of crisis proved that many activities initially considered mandatory for face-to-face interaction could actually run effectively in the virtual space. This condition subsequently triggered the emergence of new, more flexible organizational models, including within the independent publishing creative industry.

A prime example of this adaptation is Forsen books, an independent publisher established in March 2021 through the initiative of two children's story authors. Uniquely, the entire editorial board of this publisher is operated by six women (ranging in age from their 30s to early 50s) whose primary daily role is as housewives. Because they are separated by distance across six different regions (South Tangerang, Sukabumi, Depok, Tasikmalaya, Bandung, and Lumajang) and hold dual roles at home, they rely entirely on video conferencing applications for monthly meetings and WhatsApp groups for daily work coordination.

The establishment of Forsenbooks was driven by the team's concern over the low quality of manuscript editing in many independent publishers, especially for manuscripts originating from

writing competitions or parades. To overcome this, four of the six team members equipped themselves with official editor certificates. Although their work schedules must be adjusted around domestic chores, they have an absolute obligation to produce maximum editing quality. This virtual hard work proved fruitful; their works successfully won the Scarlet Pen Award, were nominated for the IKAPI Award, and most recently, their published ABO novel was nominated as a selected novel by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2025.

To dissect this unique organizational phenomenon, this study utilizes the lens of Gatekeeping theory. Conceptually, this is the process of filtering and determining the feasibility of a manuscript before publication (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). At Forsenbooks, these mothers are the "gatekeepers" of reading feasibility. Their editorial policies and daily conversations become the primary filter for maintaining the quality of publications (West & Turner, 2017; Mulyana, 2007).

Furthermore, to understand how such rigorous manuscript filtering can continue to operate in an online space, this study borrows the perspective of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), specifically the Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory by Joseph Walther (1992). This theory firmly refutes the traditional assumption that online communication is inherently rigid due to the loss of body language cues. On the contrary, SIP Theory asserts that humans are highly adaptive; given sufficient interaction time, text-based communication via smartphones can create chemistry, emotional closeness, and a professional rhythm as strong as face-to-face meetings in an office (Walther, 1992; West & Turner, 2017).

This paper aims to assert its novelty compared to previous research. First, current digital communication studies usually highlight the shift of the filtering role from human hands to algorithmic machines (Sitra, 2022). Second, research on women in the digital space is often centered on issues of equality and resistance against patriarchal culture (Satiti & Triastuti, 2025). This research is present to fill this research gap by proving that human (editor) meticulousness remains irreplaceable in the digital era, while also capturing how this virtual space successfully empowers the digital literacy of housewives in the independent publishing sector.

2. Method

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach through a case study method. Referring to Fathurokhmah (2024), this method guides researchers to delve deeper and more philosophically into communication phenomena. Therefore, this method is highly appropriate because its goal is to capture the dynamics of work and team interactions in the virtual space as a whole, rather than simply seeking data representation in the form of numbers. The Forsenbooks case was chosen due to its highly distinctive characteristics: a publishing operation driven entirely remotely by a community of housewives.

The subjects in this study are six resilient women who hold the dual role of homemakers and manuscript editors. The six of them reside in different locations: South Tangerang, Sukabumi, Depok, Tasikmalaya, Bandung, and Lumajang.

To collect data, this study used two primary techniques. First, through participant observation, where the researcher directly observed the bustling chat history in the editorial WhatsApp group, reviewed the manuscript revision flow on Google Docs, and observed their interactions during Zoom meetings. Second, the researcher conducted informal in-depth interviews with all team members. These interviews aimed to explore their honest experiences regarding manuscript filtering strategies, secrets to building chemistry, and the impact of this job on their digital skills. All these data fragments were then sorted, woven into a narrative, and re-confirmed with Gatekeeping and CMC theories.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Virtual Gatekeeping Practices in the Forsenbooks Kitchen

The idea of a manuscript filtering process is usually synonymous with tense meetings in a formal editorial room. However, Forsenbooks breaks this stereotype by fully delegating gatekeeping practices to the family rooms of each editor. Armed only with gadgets, laptops, and collaborative

work on Google Docs and WhatsApp groups, these six women can edit and give final approval for the publication of a manuscript from their respective homes.

Despite having to multitask with kitchen duties and childcare, their work standards are non-negotiable. They firmly adhere to the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and workflow divisions that have been established since entering their second year of operations. Guided by this SOP, decisions on whether a manuscript is accepted, returned for revision, or rejected are never taken unilaterally, but through mutual agreement in the WhatsApp group.

The rigor of this filtering can be seen in the thoroughness of their daily corrections. They do not hesitate to discuss basic spelling, such as correcting a conjunction, "But should be however" (Researcher Observation, 2025), to firm reprimands requesting the author to overhaul the storyline: "We will ask for permission later that there are quite a lot of revisions, maybe the plot..." (Researcher Observation, 2025). Such routines bring the concept of gatekeeping to life at the level of organizational routines (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Remarkably, this hard work is directly acknowledged by partner authors who feel their manuscripts receive "layered editing" and note that the editorial team is very observant in finding plot holes.

So, when does the editorial team edit manuscripts? The key lies in a smart compromise between professional obligations and domestic responsibilities. They indeed faced no internal adaptation obstacles within the team, but the main hurdles were more about technical signal issues and time conflicts with household chores. Therefore, time for editing is usually allocated when the children are at school or at night when the atmosphere is quiet. "The obstacle is usually the internet connection... Then, activities as a housewife often involve unplanned events that mess up the work schedule," said one member (Team 4, Interview, 2026). Another member chimed in, "Because working hours are uncertain, sometimes work gets pending due to domestic matters" (Team 2, Interview, 2026).

To overcome these obstacles, the work rhythm is made very flexible. Editorial work and household routines run side by side. It is very common to find reports in the group such as, "Wait, I'll reply after this. I'm still hectic with the kids' school earlier," or a request for permission to "pick up my husband first" in the middle of an editing deadline (Researcher Observation, 2025). This flexibility in time management proves that distance barriers and household interruptions do not diminish the gatekeeping function of a publisher.

3.2. Team Communication Style Breaking Communication Rigidity

Remote work is often assumed to be rigid and difficult for building emotional closeness. In reality, this editorial team successfully dismissed that concern; the absence of body language or nonverbal cues was replaced by highly expressive, warm, and supportive text chats. This phenomenon is empirical evidence of Walther's (1992) SIP Theory, which states that virtual spaces can facilitate intimate social exchange given sufficient time intensity.

Interestingly, the compatibility of this team is greatly helped by the fact that they had frequently interacted in various writing communities long before this publisher was established. "Chemistry was built and flowed by itself... Moreover, it turns out we have the same basic personality, which is the introvert team," recalled one editor (Team 5, Interview, 2026). Because of these shared traits, their daily communication flows very fluidly.

Their WhatsApp group does not feel like a rigid office space, but rather functions like a "virtual coffee shop" gathering place. Deadline chats are always balanced with inserted jokes ("be extra patient when editing, hehe..."), casual language styles, and the use of stickers to break the ice. The business of checking manuscripts often merges with personal chats. "Even though it's online, the team already knows what their job is... Then the chat also sometimes sneaks in venting, so we understand each other's characters better as time goes by," said a member (Team 2, Interview, 2026).

The mutual understanding of the vulnerability of each other's roles as homemakers is the main glue. Once, a member was forced to cancel her attendance at a Zoom meeting because she had to calm her husband who was upset about home renovation matters. Without any procedural rigidity, her colleagues empathetically replied, "Okay, no problem, Un" (Researcher Observation, 2025). Even when someone fell asleep due to physical exhaustion ("really exhausted... suddenly fell asleep"), all parties provided full tolerance. This empathetic attitude and the provision of a free space

to express oneself effectively breaks the rigidity of the virtual workspace (virtual rigidity). Thanks to this foundation of mutual trust, publishing operations continue to run solidly.

3.3. Digital Literacy and Women's Empowerment

In fact, this remote working experience provides a transformative effect greater than just publishing books. Secretly, this adaptation process triggered an awakening of digital literacy as well as the economic independence of its members. From previously focusing entirely on traditional realms, these six editors were driven to continuously hone their technological skills to support their work. They are now proficient at operating Zoom, managing documents on cloud storage, collaborating in real-time on Google Docs, and independently understanding digital ethics. This proves that digital literacy can thrive as long as the work ecosystem is inclusive and mutually supportive.

Even more meaningfully, this independent career path becomes a safe space for women to have a real professional identity while simultaneously generating financial impact, without having to leave the house. It felt incredible when they finally received "free facilities (laptops) that we can use... and can buy things without having to ask our husbands, because we get a salary from the office" (Team 1, Interview, 2026). This income gives them a wider space of autonomy. Usually, this financial independence is allocated for "self-reward or treating the kids" (Team 3, Interview, 2026) or simply to "make ends meet at the end of the month" (Team 4, Interview, 2026). In line with Kurniawati and Sudahri's (2025) study, modern women prove their skill in constructing professional identities in cyberspace. Flexible working hours also ensure these mothers can still monitor their children's digital literacy at home (Rahmawati, 2025).

4. Conclusion

This research empirically presents the fact that working in a virtual space does not necessarily limit the effectiveness or decisiveness of an organization. The Forsenbooks editorial kitchen proves that gatekeeping practices can be executed very strictly by an editorial team consisting entirely of housewives. This success is achieved through a commitment to institutionalizing SOPs and the adeptness of aligning working hours on digital devices with domestic affairs.

These findings simultaneously break the obsolete view regarding virtual communication rigidity. Validating SIP Theory, the lack of face-to-face interaction is successfully compensated for by past friendship track records, the warmth of empathetic group chats, and the availability of space to share grievances, which ultimately weaves cross-city solidarity. Ultimately, this kind of flexible ecosystem has transformed into a remarkable empowerment space for women. They can become more technologically literate and financially independent without needing to sacrifice their roles in the family realm. Certainly, a study centered on a single case of a small publisher is not without limitations. Therefore, it is highly recommended for future research to examine comparative dynamics of virtual gatekeeping across other independent publishers to obtain an increasingly comprehensive picture of the literature industry.

5. Acknowledgement

The researcher expresses deepest gratitude to the Postgraduate Program of Communication Science at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta for the academic support provided. Deep appreciation is also directed to the entire Forsenbooks editorial team who willingly took the time to be subjects in this research and shared their inspiring experiences regarding virtual organizational communication.

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