**The Wall Becomes a Curtain: Revisiting Journalism’s News–Business Boundary**

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Of all the boundaries detailed in this volume and reified within journalistic discourse, only one is so fundamental to the self-understanding of professional journalism, so thoroughly understood as a cultural and occupational assumption, that it is often known simply as “the wall.” That wall, between the journalistic and business-oriented functions of a news organization, is one of the foremost professional markers of journalism, a principle that is reinforced most strongly in the central sites of its socialization -- journalism schools, textbooks, and reviews, not to mention thousands of newsrooms large and small. Along with the principle of independence from political faction, the news–business wall is the cornerstone upholding American journalism’s sense of autonomy, which allows it to function as a profession -- to the extent that it does. The wall is arguably the preeminent boundary in American journalism, the one that helps give it the capacity to maintain its many other boundaries.

Yet journalists’ considerable rhetoric around this boundary, both in actively enforcing it and in treating it as an unexamined and unquestioned presupposition, has been the subject of far less scholarly examination than other, less foundational, boundaries. Consider it in contrast to its parallel fundamental boundary, the division between journalism and political interest or influence: Hundreds of scholarly works have examined the way journalists publicly perform that boundary, mostly through the practice of objectivity. But the strategies by which journalists perform the news–business boundary and the principles behind them have come under far less scrutiny. Many media scholars have, of course, examined the varied ways the news–business wall is breached, continually and systemically.[[1]](#endnote-1) But the discursive work that journalists put into maintaining it before the public has been relatively untouched. There is a fairly simple explanation for much of this scholarly reticence: Unlike many other boundaries, scholars -- at least the more critical ones who might be inclined to study journalistic discourse -- tend to agree with journalists that this boundary should indeed exist. They simply disagree on whether it actually does. The journalistic aims that many scholars have called for -- journalism that serves the public good first and foremost, shielded from commercial influence -- are precisely the ones toward which so many of the journalists they criticize would eagerly say they are striving. Thus, scholars have not targeted journalists’ rhetoric on the issue, which so often overlaps with their own, but instead journalists’ actions.

This chapter is an effort to explicate this rhetoric, exploring the strategies that journalists and media critics have taken to reinforce this boundary. First, I examine the origins and development of the divide. Next, I outline specific discursive strategies that journalists have used to outline the divide, particularly as they emerged in the market-driven journalism heyday of the 1990s. Finally, I highlight two contemporary issues -- native advertising and entrepreneurial journalism -- that might be perceived as a threat to the news–business boundary. The most striking finding of this examination is not that the news–business wall itself is crumbling; numerous scholars have long ago exposed it as a professionally advantageous fiction. Instead, what is crumbling now is journalists’ willingness to continue to uphold that fiction and maintain a boundary that is increasingly seen as a rather anachronistic relic of a time when the news industry’s survival wasn’t threatened.

**Foundations of the boundary**

The news–business boundary is based on a model distinct to the modern news organization, with two sets of goals: financial viability, on the one hand, and public service or public influence on the other. These aims, as Cranberg et al. note, can be traded off to varying degrees, but they cannot fundamentally be made congruent.[[2]](#endnote-2) Overseeing the departments behind both of these goals is the publisher, station manager, or owner. The strange juxtaposition leads to some professional and rhetorical gymnastics on each side to justify such an arrangement. As Cranberg et al. aptly point out, “No self-respecting distributor of a mass-manufactured consumer product would dare to organize itself this way.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

With this irrational arrangement in view, journalists have constructed and enshrined a border between themselves and their organizations’ business operations primarily as a way to safeguard their professional autonomy, or journalists’ ability to exercise judgment and control their work process.[[4]](#endnote-4) Commercial influences, as well as the organizational influences through which they often manifest themselves, are one of the strongest constraints on journalistic autonomy, far stronger than the weak, semi-professional culture of journalism is capable of defending against.[[5]](#endnote-5) That imbalance has two primary consequences: Journalists have worked exceptionally hard to maintain a strong boundary against commercial influence, making it a core element of their professional values. But despite those efforts, the boundary has been extremely susceptible to encroachment by those commercial influences because of their overwhelming advantage in power.

The heavy influence of commercial interests has led many scholars to declare the notion of a separation between news and business “a fiction, more honored as a principle than as something that existed in practice.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Yet the resistance of journalists to commercialization is an important part of the story of modern American journalism as well -- at times because of its small successes in holding off commercial influences, but also because of the important role it has played in shaping and maintaining journalists’ professional identity. To fully understand the news–business wall, we must be able to simultaneously assert both its extreme permeability and its foundational role in undergirding journalistic professionalism. As Cranberg et al. note, the wall “was never impenetrable but was of symbolic importance and yielded practical consequences.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

The news–business divide has its root in the shift from political patronage to an advertising-based financial model in the early to mid-1800s. Until that point, newspapers had typically operated in the service of political parties, relying on a combination of political funding, printing, and subscriptions.[[8]](#endnote-8) By the 1830s and 1840s, however, industrialization created a need for the mass marketing of new, mass-produced goods, giving the press a new social purpose through its distinct ability to serve this growing economic system by connecting producers with a wide range of buyers.[[9]](#endnote-9) The influx of advertising corresponded with the rise of the penny press, as newspaper publishers subsidized cheap subscription costs with growing advertising revenues stemming from ballooning circulations. As the political parties’ power and patronage waned, newspapers moved from primarily political organizations at the outset of the nineteenth century to primarily market-driven organizations by the end, trading dependence on the political system for dependence on the financial one.[[10]](#endnote-10)

**Violations and defenses**

Almost as soon as advertising began to move to the center of the American newspaper’s business model, advertisers began to influence those newspapers’ content. Advertisers began to ask for and receive special treatment -- they directed ad placement, had stories killed, and dictated blatantly promotional stories, called “puffs,” that existed somewhere between news and advertising. Newspapers openly favored advertisers and threatened non-advertisers. Advertising in many cases functioned essentially as a bribe.[[11]](#endnote-11) Puffs, popular in the mid- to late nineteenth century, morphed into “reading notices,” or ads disguised as news items, in the early twentieth century. For many pre-World War I publishers, newspapers were to fundamentally function as a business; any other public-facing purpose was secondary at best.[[12]](#endnote-12)

At the same time, however, journalists decried such devotion to advertiser desires and business concerns as unethical and polluting. As early as 1848, James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald* banned puffs from its pages.[[13]](#endnote-13) In 1869, literary critic Richard Grant White called for the formation of what might be called a prototype of the news–advertising wall: “absolute and without exception, that nothing in the interests of an advertiser, no matter what his importance, shall be admitted into the editorial columns for any consideration.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Journalists continued to decry the commercialization of news and influence of advertisers in the early 1900s.[[15]](#endnote-15)

What followed were several decades of stability in the news–business boundary, corresponding with what Hallin has termed the “high modernism” of American journalism.[[16]](#endnote-16) During the mid-twentieth century, the news industry’s prosperity allowed journalists to believe they had resolved the conflict between their news and business purposes by constructing the boundary between the two as a “wall of separation between church and state.”[[17]](#endnote-17) This equilibrium began to be disrupted during the 1980s and 1990s, in part because of the market-driven journalism era’s challenge to the boundary.[[18]](#endnote-18) The consternation over the appropriateness and fate of that boundary is evident in the spike in discourse on the subject in both academic publishing and the trade press. In market-driven journalism, journalism’s core aspiration shifts from its professional ideal of empowering citizens with information to participate in democratic life to an effort to meet the audience’s expressed desires as a set of consumers, in order to match increasing demands for financial returns.[[19]](#endnote-19) As we have seen, these market-oriented principles have been a fundamental part of American journalism for well more than a century, though they began to intensify in the late twentieth century, partly because of the increase in business rationality and market orientation stemming from public and chain news media ownership.[[20]](#endnote-20) The difference in this incarnation of those market principles was that journalists began to feel this pressure more concretely than they had in previous decades, perceiving a significant shift toward business principles and away from their professional values.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The manifestations of this business-based pressure have been well documented. The most basic is the influence of commercial interests on the size of the newsroom, an inherent crossover between news and business. Financial factors have always -- and in a way necessarily -- determined newsroom size; otherwise, there would be little preventing newsrooms from reaching ever-increasing scales. Because it is so endogenous to the news organization, this is a commercial influence that often operates without being perceived as a breach of the news–business boundary. That changed during the 1990s and 2000s, when the influence became more obtrusive for journalists as the cutbacks and layoffs began appearing in earnest. Weaver et al. found that a shortage of newsgathering resources was the commercial constraint most frequently cited by journalists -- to them, limited newsroom size is often experienced as having too little time to do good work.[[22]](#endnote-22)

A more glaring violation of the boundary is the influence of advertisers on news content and decision-making. Anecdotal examples of such influence piled up in the 1980s and 1990s and survey data confirmed its prevalence: Soley and Craig found that more than 90 percent of newspaper editors reported advertiser attempts to influence their news content, and more than a third of them reported that some of those attempts had been successful.[[23]](#endnote-23) Specifically, the scandal surrounding the *Los Angeles Times*’ 1999 Staples Center special section, in which the paper split the section’s profits from ad revenue with the arena itself, took on a synecdochical characterization of the breaches of the news–business boundary fostered by the market-driven journalism movement. The backlash it prompted was significant enough to lead to a retrenchment of market-driven journalism; the Staples Center incident was effectively the end of an era.[[24]](#endnote-24)

This chapter’s exploratory analysis of boundary work rhetoric centers on that period of market-driven journalism, when discourse around the news–business boundary was at its peak and many of the rhetorical themes that remain in use today were most firmly established. About 140 articles from mainstream news organizations, journalism reviews, trade publications, and journalism blogs between 1989 and 2014 were examined and organized thematically for discursive strategies and themes.

**Boundary work strategies**

Journalists have developed a variety of tools to defend their jurisdiction from commercial interests. Though boundary work is fundamentally a rhetorical process,[[25]](#endnote-25) one key strategy is more organizational than rhetorical -- the distinct bifurcated structure of news organizations described above, with the news and business departments operating independently from each other and often at odds. This structure also includes buffers between journalists and management, most notably in the form of the editor, who serves a boundary-spanning role as both a journalist and a part of management.[[26]](#endnote-26) The effect of this buffering is that the organization absorbs commercial and advertiser pressure so that it appears to journalists as organizational pressure instead.[[27]](#endnote-27) This organizational separation has historically manifested itself most materially in the physical separation between newsroom and advertising departments, an arrangement that reinforces the boundary both physically and symbolically. Longtime *Chicago Tribune* publisher Robert McCormick famously enforced this physical divide with separate elevators for journalists and those in the business operation, the latter of which did not stop on the newsroom floor. When ad executives began appearing on the newsroom floor in the late 1980s, their presence was perceived as a powerful sign of the newspaper’s fall from integrity.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Aside from organizational divides, most of journalists’ work in defining and defending the news–business boundary has been accomplished rhetorically. The professional values regarding independence from business are most formally encoded at the organizational level in news organizations’ written guidelines and at the professional level in codes of ethics. These tools reify a set of professional norms to which journalists can appeal as their basis to a moral claim when their ethical rectitude is challenged.[[29]](#endnote-29) McManus argues that news organizations’ codes of ethics, virtually all of which advocate independence from advertisers and business interests, are based on the fiction of individual journalists’ control, serving to deflect criticism for ethical violations from owners and systemic problems onto employees and individual violators.[[30]](#endnote-30) This function -- isolating blame over professional breaches in deviant individual violators in order to hold intact the public image of trustworthiness and authority in the larger profession -- is precisely the task of boundary work.

*The wall*

The central metaphor used to maintain the news–business boundary is that of the wall -- perhaps the most direct, forceful, and enduring metaphor in modern American journalism. Its origins have not fully been explored; the idea is often thought to have originated with legendary early twentieth-century publishers such as the *Chicago Tribune*’s McCormick or *TIME*’s Henry Luce, but they didn’t actually articulate it.[[31]](#endnote-31) It evokes two distinct ideas: the “Chinese wall” ethical concept of avoiding conflicts of interest that arose in the financial world in the wake of the reforms following the 1929 stock market crash;[[32]](#endnote-32) and the Jeffersonian idea of the “wall of separation between church and state” enshrined in the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment. The latter connotation, as we will see, has been a particularly potent rhetorical weapon for journalists.

The wall is commonly employed in news–business boundary discourse, but it is rarely explained or justified. Instead, it is simply invoked as a pre-existing reality. The primary mention of the wall in many stories on the news–business boundary is simply to refer to its ongoing destruction. In the journalistic imagination, the wall is simultaneously venerable and crumbling, the cornerstone of the profession and something constantly under assault. The wall is being “blasted into history,” with editors and publishers “crashing through,” or “obliterating” it with a “battering ram.”[[33]](#endnote-33) The concrete-ness of the wall metaphor and the language surrounding it allows journalists to emphasize their precarity and characterize encroachment on their occupational territory as not just professional tension, but brutal violence.

Some journalistic discourse has challenged the given-ness of the wall, even within articles voicing concern about breaches of the news–business boundary. One 2002 *American Journalism Review* article on the increasing interaction between editorial and business departments of newspapers began, “Few aspects of journalism are as groundlessly romanticized. The apocryphal ‘wall’ between newsrooms and advertising departments is often referred to without a hint of self-consciousness as the separation between church and state.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Other news executives -- most notoriously *Los Angeles Times* CEO Mark Willes, with his pledge to take down the wall with a bazooka -- openly advocated the demolition of the wall. Willes preferred the more flexible image of a line, but his paper’s media critic, David Shaw, countered with a spirited defense of the wall’s strength as a metaphor: “A wall is impregnable and immovable -- at least in theory; a line can be breached much more easily, moved so gradually that no one knows it’s actually been moved until it’s too late, and principles have been irrevocably compromised.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

The primary asset for journalists in the wall as a metaphor isn’t its strength and apparent impermeability; journalists have actually shown themselves eager to concede the wall’s vulnerability to attack. Instead, the greatest rhetorical potency of the wall lies in its tie to the concept of the “separation of church and state.” As journalists use this metaphor, they characterize themselves as the church and the business side as the state. That classification is rarely made explicit, but it is evident in the unmistakable strain of religious language that runs through their news–business discourse. The newsroom’s territory and the separation itself are often referred to as “sacred” or “hallowed,” and violations are considered “heresy” that is “corrupting the body and soul of our profession.”[[36]](#endnote-36) In a particularly arresting piece of religious imagery, an *American Journalism Review* article on the Staples Center scandal referred to it as Willes’ “assault on the church-state wall -- the shot that would reverberate through the sanctum sanctorum of the newspaper world like abortion in the Vatican.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Journalists have used the church–state connotations of the wall metaphor to apply the language of sanctity to their own behavior, allowing them to bathe their professional values in moral purity and ascribe moral deficiency and uncleanliness to violators of those values.

*Public service and trust*

Journalists have widely employed two other rhetorical themes alongside that of the wall: Public service and trust. Journalists often set their public service and commercial goals in opposition to each other -- and indeed they often conflict.[[38]](#endnote-38) But journalists often portray them as a zero-sum game, setting them up as mutually exclusive and depicting each gain of commercial ends as a necessarily equal loss of journalists’ ability to effectively serve the public. Former *New York Times* executive editor Max Frankel set up this distinction as the fundamental dividing line in the profession: “Serious journalists are not hard to define. Deep down, they think of packaging news not as a business but as a public service.”[[39]](#endnote-39) The public-service argument is more than a way to claim social responsibility as a profession; as Squires notes, it is the basis on which journalists defend their First Amendment rights.[[40]](#endnote-40) If that claim is based on journalism’s effectiveness as a business rather than its aim to serve democratic ends, journalists’ moral case for expansive First Amendment rights -- in essence, its formal autonomy from the state -- crumbles.

While public service as a theme is meant to set up and defend professional journalism’s idealized goals, trust is oriented toward its idealized assets. Like the wall, credibility is characterized both as an immense social asset for journalists -- something they possess in enough quantity to drive virtually their entire social value -- and as something continually in danger of being emptied out because of violations of the news–business boundary. As Cameron and Ju-Pak note, most editors view advertising as borrowing (or stealing) their credibility.[[41]](#endnote-41) The *Los Angeles Times*’ Shaw, in his critique of the Staples Center fiasco, concluded that “The *Times*’ credibility and integrity -- *ultimately the only commodities a newspaper has to offer* -- have been severely compromised at a time when public confidence in the press is already in deep decline.”[[42]](#endnote-42) In this newsroom-centric mindset, the newsroom produces all of the value of the news organization, and it is only borrowed, sapped, or stolen -- never enhanced -- by the intrusion of commercial values into news.

*Violators’ defenses*

Journalists and news organizations accused of violating the news–business boundary engage in their own rhetorical strategies to reposition themselves within the realm of professional propriety. In some cases they do this by restating their commitment to upholding the boundary, and in others by attempting to shift the boundary to include their own behavior. When questioned about potentially problematic practices, journalists often argue that any potential damage is obviated by the standards to which they continue to adhere -- not allowing advertisers to influence news copy in market-oriented special sections, for example, or continuing to keep readers at the forefront in advertiser-suggested product reviews.[[43]](#endnote-43) Sometimes, news organizations attempt to re-establish their professional probity simply by stating their knowledge of the wall, without any further explanation of what that might mean in their case, as with the magazine editor who told *The Wall Street Journal* simply, “I know the difference between church and state.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Such statements serve not only to reaffirm one’s commitment to journalistic principles, but also to buttress the principles themselves, by portraying them as without need of description or elaboration. Holding to their own knowledge of these professional standards allows journalists to police the news–business boundary on the profession’s behalf in public while they simultaneously succumb to the same commercialization within their own organizations.

In some cases, journalists have defended themselves not by reaffirming their commitment to the boundary, but by arguing that the boundary should be reconsidered or shifted to include their own behavior. In the most dominant defensive argument, journalists have made the case that economic hardships in the media industries necessitate increased permeability of the boundary simply to ensure continued survival. The idea that clinging to church–state boundaries will lead to extinction amid the harsh difficulties of competing in modern information and advertising markets picked up steam in the late 1980s and early 1990s, spreading to the point that Underwood called it “gospel” in newspaper conferences.[[45]](#endnote-45) Even those who were defending the boundary felt the need to acknowledge that blurring the boundary could be a crucial element in maintaining news organizations’ financial viability.[[46]](#endnote-46) Survival rhetoric often characterizes boundary maintenance concerns as being academic or theoretical, while financial concerns are placed in the more relevant realm of “the real world,” as in one article regarding the use of web analytics to guide news decisions: “Any performance metric is going to be anathema to the j-school professor crowd, but these publications say they’d prefer to exist rather than debate these kinds of issues.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

**Contemporary challenges to the boundary**

These general rhetorical strategies of boundary work have held relatively steady since they emerged in the debates over market-driven journalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Those attempting to maintain the boundary continue to invoke the metaphor of the wall and lean on arguments about maintaining their credibility and public-service mission, and those defending their own contested practices continue to foreground the industry’s economic hardship and claim they are upholding the boundary. Yet the relative prevalence of each of those arguments point to subtle but significant shifts in the boundary work being performed at the news–business intersection, and perhaps also the location and permeability of the boundary itself. Before briefly examining two particular flashpoints in the struggle over the boundary -- native advertising and entrepreneurial journalism -- it is worth setting the stage with the role that online journalism has played vis-à-vis this boundary more generally.

As we have seen, challenges to the news–business boundary are not new to the Internet era; rather, they are as old as the boundary itself. Still, journalism scholars have been concerned since the early days of online journalism about the increased potential for blurring between news and commercial content there, due to less institutionalized ethical norms, as well as a general prevalence of advertising content online.[[48]](#endnote-48) Empirical data testing these concerns are limited, but those data have found that online journalists reported more influence from advertisers than did print journalists.[[49]](#endnote-49) Several factors coalesce to produce a more commercialized online journalism space: The lowered barriers to entry create more competition, which, when coupled with a weak online advertising market, creates an environment in which news organizations are more directly responsive to market forces in the form of web traffic and what limited ad revenue is available.[[50]](#endnote-50) In short, as McChesney puts it, “[T]he Internet does not alleviate the tensions between commercialism and journalism; it magnifies them.”[[51]](#endnote-51) It is within this environment that we examine the present state of the boundary on two fronts.

*Native advertising*

The most prominent and controversial realm in which the news–business boundary is being contested is the growing practice of native advertising, or sponsored content, a form of online advertising that is built around its resemblance to editorial content. The practice descends from forms of news–advertising fusion such as the nineteenth century’s puffs, early twentieth century’s reading notices, and late twentieth century’s advertorial, with a few key -- and very much contested -- differences. In fact, much of the boundary work surrounding this practice is taking place at the very basic level of how to define it.

Native advertising is one of the fastest-growing forms of advertising expenditure within the news industry, with growth of 56.1 percent in news industry revenue from 2010 to 2011 and another 38.9 percent in 2012.[[52]](#endnote-52) The current iteration of this form of advertising was pioneered in the late 2000s by a handful of media companies such as *Forbes*, which allowed advertisers to pay for their own blogging platform modeled after, and thinly distinguished from, the site’s own editorial platform.[[53]](#endnote-53) Though it became associated with traffic-driven web publishers such as *BuzzFeed*, native advertising quickly spread to more established traditional news organizations including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Associated Press*, and *The New York Times*. The practice has come with its own minor fiascos, such as *The Atlantic*’s publication of a particularly tone-deaf native ad extolling the virtues of Scientology,[[54]](#endnote-54) and has drawn the scrutiny of advertising industry groups and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, which held a conference on the subject in 2013 called “Blurred Lines.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

Much of the boundary work regarding native advertising surrounds its contested definitions. Those who are skeptical of the practice tend to define it in terms of its similarity to editorial content, such as the description by *New York Times* media critic David Carr as “advertising wearing the uniform of journalism, mimicking the storytelling aesthetic of the host site.”[[56]](#endnote-56) This definition mirrors that of advertorial, the news-lookalike advertising that flourished in the market-driven era of the 1990s but has since fallen out of favor.[[57]](#endnote-57) Native advertising critics likewise emphasize its similarity with advertorial, characterizing it as simply a new manifestation of the same practice.[[58]](#endnote-58) On the other hand, those who defend native advertising define it in terms of its attractiveness to readers; if it is not worthwhile to the reader, then by definition, it is not native advertising. In this vein, journalism scholar and pundit Jay Rosen defines the practice as “advertising that is as worth reading as the editorial into which it is mixed, from which it is distinguished.”[[59]](#endnote-59) According to this definition, native advertising is distinguished from advertorial in two respects: It is as valuable to the reader as news content, where advertorial is worthless to the reader, and its primary intent is not to deceive the reader, where advertorial is built solely on deception.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Of course, to those concerned with defending the news–business boundary, the latter assertion is absurd; they describe confusion as the entire goal of the practice.[[61]](#endnote-61) This is the FTC’s primary concern, and indeed, even at the commission’s behest, advertisers have been reluctant to label their advertisements as such.[[62]](#endnote-62) The advertising and publishing industries are quick to declare transparency and separation of news and advertising content as a core value,[[63]](#endnote-63) but that value is in fact quite ambiguous in practice, as evidenced by one exchange between two ad executives at a native advertising panel: “If it’s done well, people don’t know it when they see it,” said one. Replied the other: “No, if it’s done well, they don’t care.”[[64]](#endnote-64) In that exchange lies the core tension in native advertising: It is an enterprise built on blurring the boundary between news and advertising, but also on simply creating more compelling advertising that’s honestly labeled. Both purposes are inherently in conflict, but both are necessary to native advertising’s value to advertisers. If either one is absent, it is no longer native advertising.

Just as with previous challenges to the boundary, journalists on both sides of the native advertising debate struggle to define it in terms of either eroding trust or industry survival. Critics express their concern about native advertising’s confusion hurting news organizations’ credibility, making their brands less valuable for advertisers to associate with.[[65]](#endnote-65) Publishers engaged in the practice go to great lengths to publicly reaffirm their dedication to the news–business boundary, perhaps none as conspicuously as the professional standard-bearer *The New York Times*.[[66]](#endnote-66) But they also employ the rhetoric of survival, describing native advertising as a key to maintaining journalism’s viability and depicting those who object as scolds who, in the words of a News Corp. executive, “would rather hide behind ossified church and state walls with absolute positions than find flexible ways to protect both journalism and the business of journalism.”[[67]](#endnote-67) Despite the boundary work rhetoric in both directions, those advocating a shift to accommodate native advertising clearly have the upper hand, particularly based on its adoption among journalism’s most professionally respected organizations. Those organizations continue to pledge their commitment to maintaining the boundary, but their vision of that boundary is significantly different from that of traditionalists.

*Entrepreneurial journalism*

A second area that has threatened the news–business boundary in recent years is the spread of an entrepreneurial journalism model that orients journalists toward involvement in nascent and less institutional news organizations rather than the larger and more institutional organizations of modern professional journalism. After several decades in which new news organizations were rare, journalism has seen a boom in startup news organizations. Some of them have been successfully founded with the help of significant outside funding, such as *Politico* and *The Huffington Post*; others have been nonprofit organizations leaning heavily on foundations and donations, such as *ProPublica* and *MinnPost*. Many of these online news startups, such as *BuzzFeed* and *Gawker*, have relied heavily on metrics to influence issue coverage, writing style, and writer incentives. This preoccupation with the use of tools to quantify audience interest is widespread within traditional news organizations as well; in both settings, it can serve to replace news judgment with a thin, incomplete view of the audience driven by commercial considerations rather than professional ones.[[68]](#endnote-68)

Journalism schools have become a significant site for entrepreneurial journalism and the professional tension that surrounds it. Entrepreneurial skills and the business of journalism have become increasingly emphasized in American journalism education, with journalism schools launching entrepreneurship courses and programs and attempting to absorb startup culture by using the language of startups and in some cases even acting as incubators for students launching their own media businesses.[[69]](#endnote-69) These developments are driven by the notion that knowledge of the business of journalism is part of the fundamental set of skills required in young journalists,[[70]](#endnote-70) which is necessarily a function of a vision of a more permeable boundary between news and business. As one Newspaper Association of America staffer and journalism master’s student wrote, “The very fact that the Media Entrepreneurship program in which I’m enrolled even exists demonstrates that we’re past a point of editorial-business firewalls.”[[71]](#endnote-71) At the same time, however, the instructors who teach these courses complain that journalism schools remain permeated by the traditional notion of “separation of church and state,” making it difficult to put business elements at the core of students’ journalism education and even breeding resistance on the part of the students themselves.[[72]](#endnote-72)

There is notably little public discourse defending against the advance of entrepreneurial journalism in the name of the news–business boundary. Instead, virtually all of the discourse advocates journalists’ increased understanding of the news business, and most of it foregrounds the rhetoric of survival. According to the common argument, journalists now need to understand the financial aspects of their industry because it is no longer stable enough to afford them the luxury of ignoring it. Journalists have to take responsibility for ensuring their journalistic work continues to reach audiences and remain financially sustainable.[[73]](#endnote-73) A particularly aggressive strain of this argument maintains that journalism’s ignorance of business principles is the reason it’s in a volatile state in the first place: As entrepreneurial journalism professor Jeff Jarvis writes, “by teaching journalists that business itself is corrupting, we became terrible stewards of journalism and that is one of the key reasons journalism is in the fix it’s in.”[[74]](#endnote-74) Arguments such as these leave little room for defense of a strict news–business boundary: The widespread newsroom cuts of the mid- to late 2000s were a concrete indicator of the power of the profession’s business side and the degree to which it must be sated.

**Conclusion**

Though native advertising and entrepreneurial journalism are contested areas, they are notably less contested than the hot spots that emerged along the news–business boundary throughout the late twentieth century. Journalists still apparently feel some need to defend practices that might be perceived to violate the boundary, but the viewpoint against which they are defending is rarely being publicly vocalized. When the boundary appeared to be under siege as the high-modernist age of journalism gave way to the market-driven journalism era,[[75]](#endnote-75) journalists vigorously contested it through their professional discourse. Now, however, they’ve largely ceded the metaphor of the wall to the rhetoric of survival and industry crisis. The wall maintains an iconic place in the American journalistic imagination, but its era as a dominant norm is over. It has been continually contested for at least the last two decades, and now appears to be losing ground to such norms as transparency and integrity -- norms that might guard against commercialization, but do not necessarily come with a boundary to protect.

The erosion of this boundary is not necessarily something to be mourned. For decades, it has provided a means for journalists to avoid knowledge of and moral responsibility for the creeping co-optation of their work by commercial interests. It has also left them ill-prepared for an online-oriented media environment in which their work is increasingly vulnerable to the fluctuations of market forces. But the wall has also carried significant practical consequences in giving journalists a symbolic image to remind them of their own role in maintaining a professional practice that fundamentally serves democratic aims rather than commercial ones. As the wall slowly declines in professional importance, it is imperative that journalists develop and defend a less fraught and more robust set of norms that safeguard the profession’s integrity and autonomy amid powerful commercial forces and an increasingly skeptical public.

**Notes**

1. Ben H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2004); Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect* (New York: The New Press, 2013); John H. McManus, “The Commercialization of News,” in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, ed. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (London: Routledge, 2009), 218-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gilbert Cranberg, Randall Bezanson, and John Soloski, *Taking Stock* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
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