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Defending judgment and context in 'original reporting': Journalists' construction of newswork in a networked age

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Abstract
With professional journalism facing vigorous competition over its jurisdiction in information production from online aggregators and networked forms of journalism, this article examines how journalists publicly construct their own reporting work in opposition to a networked alternative and argue to the public for its value. It does so through a qualitative analysis of discourse from mainstream journalistic sources regarding the document-leaking group WikiLeaks, identifying distinctions journalists made to differentiate their work and its professional value from that of WikiLeaks. The analysis suggests that journalists assign less importance to the sociocultural conventions and objects of evidence that have traditionally constituted professional newswork – documents, interviews, and eyewitness observation – and more significance instead to the less materially bound practices of providing context, judgment, and narrative power. In doing so, journalists cast themselves fundamentally as sense-makers rather than information-gatherers during an era in which information gathering has been widely networked.

Keywords
Context, narrative, news judgment, newswork, original reporting, WikiLeaks

As traditional journalistic organizations have found themselves assailed by threatening economic forces and competing digital journalistic forms, American and British journalists have often invoked the work of reporting as a rhetorical tool to defend their

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professional and social value. This invocation has been embodied in a variety of phrases, such as ‘original reporting’, ‘shoe-leather reporting’, or ‘boots-on-the-ground journalism’, and has been deployed in response to a great range of threats to professional journalism, including online aggregation (Keller, 2011b), newspaper cuts and closings (Stites, 2011), and the explosion of free content online (Dumenco, 2011). In his defense of the news industry, Alex Jones (2009: 189) defined this practice of original reporting and the body of information it produces, which he called ‘the iron core of reported news’, as the fundamental social and democratic asset of professional journalism. Some research has identified this practice as central to journalism as well, classifying ‘original reporting’ as the basic element distinguishing true news production from simple dissemination (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010).

The concept of ‘original reporting’ valorizes traditional journalism by highlighting not necessarily the content produced, but the difficulty and scarcity of the journalistic work that produced it. In their ethnographic research, Anderson (2013) and Boyer (2010) have both identified this emphasis on original reporting as a central tenet of journalists’ protection of their professional boundaries from digitally based forms of information production and expertise. Original reporting, write Anderson et al. (2012: 23), is ‘at the core of what journalists do that they say cannot be done by others’. However, it remains unclear exactly what journalists are referring to with this concept – what precisely journalists see as distinctive about their own work that gives it value beyond other similar information-producing processes. This question of journalists’ professional self-conception takes on increased importance as emergent journalistic forms including citizen journalism and networked journalism (journalism marked by decentralized and publicly collaborative forms of production [Beckett and Ball, 2012; Benkler, 2011]) continue to encroach on professional journalism’s once clearly defined professional boundaries. Amid this competitive intensification, journalists are struggling to make a case for their own value to an increasingly skeptical public. Through a qualitative discourse analysis, this study examines the professional boundary work performed by journalists, which serves to define and protect jurisdiction over the work of reporting and thus defend the social value and authority of their profession. The study explores that boundary work particularly in response to the networked document-leaking group WikiLeaks, and in doing so seeks to determine how journalists are characterizing the value of their own work, and what aspects of newswork they are claiming as most crucial to their continued vitality.

Literature review

Boundary work

This study is rooted in the idea that professional journalism, like other knowledge-producing fields, works to attribute certain characteristics to itself to create a social boundary between itself and adjacent fields in an attempt to assert its autonomy and enlarge its resources (Gieryn, 1983: 782). The boundaries created through this process, termed ‘boundary-work’ by Gieryn (1983), give journalists the authority to define journalism’s cultural space (Dahlgren, 1992) and help accelerate their own professionalization

(Bishop, 1999; Winch, 1997). These boundaries are fundamentally a rhetorical and performative process, created to be seen by the public and by those in neighboring fields (Bishop, 1999), but they are also far from fixed. Boundaries between adjacent fields are frequently in dispute, necessitating continued boundary work as each field works to expand its authority and protect its autonomy (Gieryn, 1983).

For journalists, these boundary disputes put their field at risk of having its cultural authority undermined by other mass communicators who perform similar activities. They have typically responded by performing their boundary work through public self-criticism, often by defining what is and isn't journalism (Winch, 1997). Though this process is performed for audiences, it is also a deeply embedded part of journalistic routines and the work itself that is being defended (Anderson, 2013; Bishop, 1999). Boundary-work discourse thus makes a fruitful area for academic analysis, revealing both patterned, intended messages and latent cultural values.

Reporting practices

The boundary work in this case was grounded in a particular cultural and professional conception of the elements that make up journalistic work, particularly reporting. Sociologists of journalism have historically viewed newswork through the lens of the everyday routines that journalists use to gather information and classify stories (e.g. Schudson, 1982; Tuchman, 1978). But newswork also goes deeper than routines into more specific epistemological practices that constitute those routines and form the core of how journalists determine and present evidence for the facticity and legitimacy of their reports. Anderson (2010) conceives of journalistic practices being built on a 'holy trinity' of news objects to which journalists ascribe the most evidentiary validity: observation, documents, and interviews. In the journalistic mind, then, the fundamental practices of reporting correspond with these objects – they involve eyewitnessing events directly, obtaining and examining documents, and interviewing key sources (Anderson et al., 2012).

Observation is often identified as the fundamental practice of reporting, not only in the educational literature examined by Anderson (2010), but also in popular defenses of the craft. Jones (2009: 4–5) describes observation as 'the most straightforward form of journalism' and lists it as the foundational tier of his 'iron core' of news, while Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010: 77) characterize it as 'the height of reliable news' and a 'gold standard'. As Zelizer (2007) explains, eyewitness observation has a special resonance for journalists, who use it to establish their authority and credibility to audiences through their on-site presence. Digital technologies have both limited journalists' physical proximity to news events and expanded non-professionals' ability to record and transmit their observations, making it more difficult to challenge their observational credibility and narrowing professional journalism's jurisdiction over the practice (Mortensen, 2011; Zelizer, 2007).

Documents retain particular significance in investigative journalism, where they are often seen as the most valuable form of journalistic evidence – even more valuable than the eyewitness testimony of sources, which can be tainted by faulty motives and memory (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). Gathering and publishing documents was the central practice of early American journalism, and though it has been surpassed in the past century by the more interpretive work of interviewing (Schudson, 1982), it has enjoyed a resurgence within journalistic culture with the emergence of computer-assisted reporting (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). More recently, much of the weight of materiality accorded by journalists to paper documents (Anderson, 2010) has also been attributed to their online counterparts in the form of online document repositories and databases, as computer-assisted reporting has expanded and matured into data journalism (Parasie and Dagiral, 2012).

Interviewing is the central reporting practice of contemporary American professional journalism, one that has developed into a marker to demonstrate professional practices to audiences (Schudson, 1995, 2001). Unlike ordinary information gathering, interviews demonstrate a professionalized information-gathering style that is specialized, systematic, and one-sided, allowing journalists to display both their autonomy from and intimacy with powerful officials (Schudson, 1995). Though reporters conduct interviews entirely within the shared culture and shifting tensions of the reporter-source relationship (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1981), they tend to give it a particular authenticating authority in their news accounts (Zelizer, 1989). This is partly because, when applied to news stories themselves, interviews play a crucial role in supplying quotes, which give reporters a way to validate the facticity of their assertions while distancing themselves from the story to preserve their objectivity (Tuchman, 1978; Zelizer, 1989).

These evidentiary practices are the building blocks of journalists' professional reporting practices, but they do not entirely constitute reporting by themselves. The 'facts' accumulated through these reporting practices do not accrue their full cultural authority unless they are subjected to *narrative* form. Narrative's primary role is to give meaning to journalistic facts; journalists comprehend sets of facts through narrative, so those facts do not have meaning to journalists until they are part of narrative (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). This meaning has a moral dimension as well – narratives imbue facts with a 'moral vision' (1998: 112), giving cultural authority to the journalist's account (Schudson, 1982). For journalists, the narrative form is a way to impose order on a disparate set of events and pieces of evidence, identifying them and placing them in a social context familiar to both the journalist and the reader (Hall et al., 1978).

The construction and communication of narrative relies on a shared, taken-for-granted ideological map of world (Hall, 1973). For journalists, this set of consensus knowledge is what constitutes *news judgment*. This judgment often takes the form of knowledge that is understood to be common sense, but it is not. Instead, it is deeply grounded in cultural values and assumptions about social reality (Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 1972). In practice, it is fundamentally the ability to choose between competing facts and determine which are the most important and interesting (1972). News judgment goes beyond simple newsworthiness, or what are sometimes called news values; it does not comprise the attributes of a story itself that make it newsworthy, but instead comprises the journalistic cultural values and beliefs that determine journalists' judgments about those stories. Those beliefs are built on particular views of nation and society, which, according to Gans (1979), revolve around such values as responsible capitalism, altruistic democracy, individualism, moderatism, and social order. News judgment is a particularly opaque journalistic practice (Hall, 1973), but this opacity allows journalists the autonomy of operating outside of codified professional rules while still maintaining a professional presentation to the public (Schiller, 1979).

Reporting practices, WikiLeaks, and the web

At the same time that journalists are increasingly valorizing original reporting and claiming it as a source of professional authority (Anderson, 2013), these practices are becoming increasingly problematic as professional markers in a digital and networked information environment. First, because of the increased role of public relations in the news production process and the decreased resources among news organizations, much less of the newswork actually being practiced consists of these methods that constitute 'original reporting' (Anderson et al., 2012; Franklin, 2011; Lewis et al., 2008). Much more of contemporary newswork is characterized by monitoring, imitation, and gathering readily available information (Boczkowski, 2010), which is quite similar to the networked, aggregative forms of information production from which they seek to distance themselves. In addition, professional journalists at times are also allowing their own news judgment to be superseded by the perceived collective judgment of their audiences through online metrics (Anderson, 2011).

Meanwhile, as journalists move away from what they consider the core of 'reporting', non-professionals in digital journalism are moving toward it. As has been evidenced in virtually every recent major public news event, mobile technologies have made it extremely easy for citizens to record and distribute their own eyewitness observations. Likewise, open data and open government efforts have given non-professionals more opportunity to examine many of the same document and data sources as professional journalists (Sifry, 2011). Meanwhile, the presence of many newsmakers in networked environments such as Twitter, where the process of obtaining and verifying information has become democratized (Hermida, 2012), has helped demystify interviews and source relationships for the public. In addition, the process of filtering pieces of factual information by applying news judgment to order them into narratives has become a central skill in aggregative digital journalism (Anderson, 2013; Boyer, 2010). This non-professional exercise of journalistic skills may not be able to replace professional journalism in the way it has been practiced, but it is certainly encroaching on journalists' professional territory from several angles, creating blurred boundaries around reporting work.

WikiLeaks has been one of the most visible groups encroaching on this professional territory of reporting. Formed in 2006 as a loose collective of hackers and transparency activists by Australian former hacker Julian Assange, WikiLeaks' primary goal has been to expose government and corporate wrongdoing and bring about radical transparency by leaking secret documents (Beckett and Ball, 2012). WikiLeaks rose to international prominence in 2010 with four major leaks: one, a video of an American airstrike that killed Iraqi civilians; two others that consisted of 92,000 and 391,000 pages of documents about the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, respectively; and one of 251,000 US diplomatic cables, though only 220 were initially released (Leigh and Harding, 2011). WikiLeaks has slowed its publishing of documents since 2011, citing a lack of funds because of blocked donations by major corporations (Whalen, 2012). Assange has also been fighting Swedish accusations of rape and molestation since he was arrested in December 2010, shortly after the diplomatic cable release (Leigh and Harding, 2011).

WikiLeaks has collaborated with numerous news organizations to release and report on its leaks, most prominently the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*, both of whom it has split with quite publicly (Keller, 2011a; Leigh and Harding, 2011). The group began describing itself as a journalistic one particularly after its rise to prominence and collaboration with traditional media outlets (Penenberg, 2011). As for the practices of reporting, WikiLeaks places a heavy faith in the role of one particular form – documents – to establish journalistic evidence, though it conducted few interviews and did not witness the events about which it released documents (Leigh and Harding, 2011). Further, with the exception of occasional analyses of the documents it released, it did little work to put those documents within any sort of narrative – the news organizations they worked with did that instead. It also applied little news judgment, as professionally defined, to filter and order its pieces of evidence, relying on a more ad hoc verification process that often resulted in large quantities of documents being released online (Beckett and Ball, 2012). Through its unorthodox process of producing information, WikiLeaks embodied two normative concerns among journalists that these reporting practices typically work to alleviate: the overwhelming amount of information available online that defies efforts at contextualization or organization (e.g. Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2010), and the lack of accountability to social and political institutions in a web-based environment marked by decentralization and anonymity (Coddington, 2012).

WikiLeaks thus presents an instructive case through which to view this boundary dispute regarding the professional work of reporting. It is an exemplar of a particular networked journalistic form that replaces the professionally guarded reporting practices of interviews, observation, and news judgment-based analysis of documents and evidence with a more open, collaborative form that relies on a massively connected global public to complete its documentary evidence with their own observation, interviews, narratives, and judgment (Beckett and Ball, 2012). Yet it also intimately interacted with traditional journalistic organizations and performed several functions that significantly overlapped with their work, including breaking several major international news stories. This tension between collaboration with and challenge to professional journalism makes journalistic discourse surrounding WikiLeaks a fruitful set of texts to examine journalists' definition of their reporting practices and their juxtaposition to digital and networked journalistic forms. Through a qualitative analysis of this journalistic discourse, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

> RQ1: How do journalists invoke reporting practices to define the boundary between professional journalism and WikiLeaks?

> RQ2: How do professional journalists characterize their own reporting work as distinct from the work of WikiLeaks?

Method

This study employed a qualitative form of textual analysis known as ethnographic content analysis, which aims to achieve validity and rigor in textual analysis by examining key texts multiple times and by inductively generating and categorizing themes that emerge (Altheide, 1996). In ethnographic content analysis, themes and categories guide the initial examination of the data, but additional themes are expected to emerge throughout the process of analysis.

As part of this analysis, theoretical sampling (Altheide, 1996) was employed, with sample selection conceptualized as a series of concentric circles: at the center was the *New York Times* because of its working relationship with WikiLeaks and uniquely influential place in American journalism (Golan, 2006). Next, a set of influential American news organizations was chosen from a variety of media forms: newspapers (*Washington Post, Wall Street Journal*), TV (CNN), and radio (NPR). The final group contained organizations involved in professional media criticism, such as the *Columbia Journalism Review* and *American Journalism Review*. While the study is predominantly focused on determining the self-conception of American journalism, the British newspaper *The Guardian* also was chosen as a non-American news organization to provide a point of comparison that would aid in triangulating that self-conception.[1]

Next, a sample of texts about WikiLeaks was chosen from members of each of those organizations. The time frame used went from WikiLeaks' origin in October 2006 through 30 April 2011, just after the release of the Guantánamo Files, the last major WikiLeaks release at the time the sample was drawn (October through December 2011). From that frame, most of the discourse centered on the period after the release of the 'Collateral Murder' video (5 April 2010). Relevant discourse was found by using site archives, the Google News archive, and the Factiva database with the search terms 'WikiLeaks' and 'Assange'. After removing articles that only tangentially referred to WikiLeaks itself, 1753 pieces of content remained. While each of these texts was initially reviewed, approximately 215 were singled out for more extensive ethnographic content analysis.

Potential themes, such as context, responsibility/irresponsibility, and expertise, were identified through a review of relevant literature. Discourse was classified according to these themes, then combined and compared across organizations once initial analysis was complete, consistent with the thematic analysis techniques prescribed by Altheide (1996).

Results

Moving WikiLeaks outside journalism's boundaries

In the discourse analyzed, journalists were often quite explicit in defining the boundaries of professional journalism and in declaring WikiLeaks to be outside of those boundaries. Professional journalists largely sought to portray WikiLeaks as non-journalists who simply dumped documents on the public without context, while describing their own work in contrast as providing context and filtering through news judgment and exclusive expertise gained through previous experience with on-the-scene reporting. Journalists engaged in a considerable amount of discussion over whether WikiLeaks could be considered a journalistic organization, and, in their attempts to explicitly or implicitly define what journalism was, they most often relied on terms that described work, rather than ideological values such as objectivity or structural attributes such as institutional orientations.

This sort of journalistic definition and exclusion regarding WikiLeaks did not begin in earnest until mid 2010, when it broke into public prominence and emerged as a serious challenge to traditional journalistic forms through its large, news-making leaks. Up until then, news organizations generally treated WikiLeaks as one of their own, if a bit unorthodox in its constitution, describing its members as journalists and their work as reporting or newsgathering (Jones, 2010a; *New York Times*, 2008). That changed after WikiLeaks began making its major releases, when the two news organizations that worked most closely with WikiLeaks stated emphatically that the group was not a journalistic one – *The Guardian* did so immediately after the Afghanistan release in July 2010, though the *Times* did not explicitly say so until the autumn (*New York Times*, 2010b; Wells, 2010) – and writers from other news organizations followed with similar statements (Crovitz, 2010; Thiessen, 2010). However, in a column at the *Washington Post* in which journalism professor Adam Penenberg (2011: para. 4) argued in favor of WikiLeaks' status as a journalistic organization, he asserted that the news discourse arguing the opposite included 'no clear definition of the terms "journalist" or "journalism"'.

While journalists rarely explicitly laid out their definition of journalism, their rationale for placing WikiLeaks outside of journalism's professional boundaries offered some strong implications about what they believed its boundary markers to be. Their primary area of boundary work centered on whether the group dumped its documents on the public without any context or filtering. Dozens of articles and broadcast segments described WikiLeaks as indiscriminately flooding the public with thousands of sensitive, difficult-to-understand documents rather than performing the journalistic functions of applying judgment and adding context, a central reason given for the difference between WikiLeaks and professional journalism (e.g. Crovitz, 2010; Kurtz, 2010b).

This characterization sometimes became part of the shorthand for describing WikiLeaks' work, with it often being referred to in passing as having 'dumped mountains of secrets' or released a 'flood' of documents (Erlanger, 2010: para. 1; Levingston, 2010: para. 1). More often, it was part of a concerted argument for WikiLeaks' unreliability or irresponsibility, often in opinion sections or in quotations from commentators in news articles or during broadcast segments. In one video interview posted at the *Wall Street Journal* that was later quoted approvingly in a *Journal* editorial (*Wall Street Journal*, 2010), former *New York Times* attorney Floyd Abrams said his primary concern with WikiLeaks was its lack of news judgment about which documents to release and not release. To him, this was the fundamental difference between WikiLeaks' work and journalism: 'My concern about this is that there are no editors involved here. This is not a journalistic process. This is a dump on the world of 92,000 documents' (Jones, 2010b). CNN host Piers Morgan also put WikiLeaks' lack of news judgment at the center of the responsible/irresponsible dichotomy he set up between the group and traditional news organizations, arguing that the *Times* and *Guardian* 'are being, in my view, quite responsible whereas I think WikiLeaks putting everything out there ought to be more judicious in their editing' (Crowley et al., 2010).

Several writers and commentators complained that the indiscriminate nature of the documents' release left them so incomprehensible and devoid of context to be useless (e.g. Applebaum, 2010a, 2010b; Rieder, 2010). In one typical text, *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum (2010a: para. 6, 11) dismissed the Afghanistan documents as 'nothing more than raw data', concluding that 'without more investigation, more work, more journalism, these documents just don't matter that much'. Obtaining and publishing newsworthy documents did not constitute journalistic work for these journalists; the newswork that gave those documents meaning was elsewhere – in judgment and the editing process.

However, journalists were not unanimous in their discourse about whether WikiLeaks applied substantial filtering or editorial judgment to its document releases. CNN and the *Guardian* were particularly diligent in reporting WikiLeaks' efforts at redaction and filtering, and the *Guardian*'s editor, Alan Rusbridger (2011), actively sought to debunk the notion that WikiLeaks had indiscriminately dumped documents. Yet although journalists differed over whether WikiLeaks employed any significant forms of news judgment, they did not differ in their characterization of news judgment as a crucial marker along the boundary between journalistic and unjournalistic behavior.

The elements of newswork

In placing WikiLeaks outside their professional boundaries, journalists not only attempted to define WikiLeaks' work; they also talked a great deal about their own work as well. In doing so, they laid out three primary markers that distinguish their profession's practices. These markers make up an important part of what journalists consider as 'original reporting': adding *context*, partly through narrative; *filtering* information through news judgment; and providing *expertise*, largely through sustained observation and source relationships.

In professional journalists' minds, the process of adding context – of explaining to the public what the documents were and why they were significant – was the fundamental value they provided to WikiLeaks' document releases. Journalists from the *Times* and *The Guardian* repeatedly touted their own ability to provide this contextualized understanding of the documents, which kept the documents from becoming overwhelming to the public (*The Guardian*, 2010) and brought them attention they would not have otherwise received (Keenan, 2010). Keller (2011a), the *Times*' editor, pointed to his reporters' ability to draw order from chaos as the attribute of their WikiLeaks coverage that made him most proud, and journalists from both papers made similar statements about what their papers brought to the WikiLeaks publication process (e.g. Greenslade, 2010; *New York Times*, 2010b). A *Times* editor's note on the diplomatic cables suggested that this context-adding process went beyond simply adding journalistic value into the realm of moral obligation: 'For The Times to ignore this material would be to deny its own readers the careful reporting and thoughtful analysis they expect when this kind of information becomes public' (*New York Times*, 2010a: para. 9). The implied message put extraordinary value on the process of explaining the news, rather than simply presenting its raw materials as objects of evidence to the public; though the public would be getting the information regardless of the *Times*' actions, the paper was journalistically obligated to give it meaning, rather than letting it stand on its own.

It followed, then, that if the process of explaining the significance of news objects to the public was a journalistic obligation, then to not engage in this process was to not be a journalist. This premise was expressed most directly in an interview about WikiLeaks with *Times* reporter David Sanger on NPR's 'Fresh Air' in which Sanger was asked whether he considered Assange a journalist. He replied:

> I don't, and the reason is that I believe what journalists do is not only dig out information but filter it, explain it, put it in context, do those things that you've come to expect of *The New York Times* and other great American newspapers and other media organizations for many decades. That's a very different thing from simply downloading a computer system and throwing it out onto the World Wide Web. (Gross, 2010)

Sanger later added that for the *Times*, contextualizing information meant that 'We are explaining what's new here and what's not. We're explaining what's important here and what's not' (Gross, 2010). The difference between the *Times*' commendable journalistic behavior and WikiLeaks' technical act of publishing was simply giving explanation and context, which imbued the information with meaning and turned mere publication into journalism.

While the value of providing context was central in this discourse as a quality that must be added to objects of evidence in order to turn them into journalism, the concept was generally vague in its connection to particular practices of newswork. Context was, however, often tied to the application of narrative to provide order and meaning to data and evidence. *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum (2010b: para. 8) made this point most explicitly, arguing that 'enigmatic lumps of information, without a narrative to connect them and without a political system capable of acting upon them, have no meaning. "Leaks" out of context have no significance.' Likewise, a *Columbia Journalism Review* editor stated that the leaked documents needed contextualization and narrative to reach the public consciousness (*Columbia Journalism Review*, 2011). Even Assange himself described the application of narrative as part of the journalist's domain, rather than his own. In an NPR interview, he responded to a question about the value of WikiLeaks' documents as raw data by saying that 'that is a journalist's job, of course, is to take the material and turn it into some story and put their reputation behind it' (Siegel, 2010: para. 14). Both Assange and the journalists with whom he was struggling for professional jurisdiction agreed: journalists' essential work is to take raw data and turn it into digestible narrative. Assange simply believed that his own work of collecting and releasing the raw evidence also provided significant journalistic value in itself, where many of the journalists emphatically did not.

The second paradigmatic aspect of reporting – filtering and editing – is a much simpler process than that of adding context. As professional journalists described it, it involves the application of news judgment as a filter on incoming information, thereby verifying its authenticity and limiting the information provided to the public. By doing this, journalists said, they helped impose order on a massive amount of information and curbed its potential danger to informants and other vulnerable parties. Journalists from the *Times* and *Guardian* often pointed out the role that this process played in their handling of the documents (e.g. Cox, 2010; *New York Times*, 2010b; Tait et al., 2010), though they did not ascribe to it nearly as much value as they did to the process of adding context. One *Times* reporter did, however, hint at the importance of the routinized nature of this process when he explained to CNN that the filtering process was what enabled the paper to feel comfortable publishing sensitive documents: 'We always felt we could publish the documents if they went through the careful process we normally do' (Phillips et al., 2010).

Just as it was in Hall's (1973) conception, news judgment remained opaque in this case. What exactly the filtering process entailed in this case was not entirely clear, though *Times* and *Guardian* journalists emphasized several aspects: it was methodical and selective (*New York Times*, 2010b; Tait et al., 2010); it involved consultation with experts (Cox, 2010; Elliott, 2010); and it also involved assessments of both security and newsworthiness (Gross, 2010; *New York Times*, 2010b). Several professional news media members outside those organizations referred to the process approvingly, citing it as a reason for ascribing credibility to the *Times* and *The Guardian* and urging other news organizations to approach the documents the same way (Crovitz, 2010; Crowley et al., 2010; Jones, 2010b). Only a few professional media commentators contrasted the papers' process with WikiLeaks explicitly in this area. When they did, the message was simple: WikiLeaks would have shown more responsibility and better served the public by adopting a strenuous filtering method like the *Times* and *Guardian*, rather than simply releasing the documents in one big dump (Crovitz, 2010; Crowley et al., 2010).

The third aspect of original reporting that emerged in this boundary-work process was the application of expertise and experience. These terms were used often to disparage WikiLeaks and tout the advantages of the professional news media, as numerous commentators belittled Assange for what they saw as his lack of understanding of the issues on which he was releasing documents (e.g. Kemp, 2010; Kirchick, 2010). Without detailed experience – particularly 'on-the-ground' experience – in the areas of the world about which he was publishing information, they argued, Assange had no expertise from which to draw on in the processes of filtering and contextualizing his documents. In contrast, professional journalists held up their own experience as a critical factor in their ability to perform those same journalistic processes (Applebaum, 2010a; Leigh and Harding, 2011; Tait et al., 2010).

How was one to go about gaining all of this valuable journalistic experience and expertise? The only means described (and prescribed) was through 'on-the-ground reporting', particularly overseas (Kurtz, 2010a; Leigh and Harding, 2011). Just as with the application of narrative, Assange himself cited the authority and expertise derived from their physical presence and experience in global hotspots as one of the primary reasons he chose to collaborate with the *Times* and *Guardian* (King et al., 2010). Others went further, asserting that the WikiLeaks documents meant little without being accompanied and contextualized by the on-the-scene reporting work done by professional journalists (Applebaum, 2010a). The *Columbia Journalism Review*'s Joel Meares (2010: para. 6–7) characterized the WikiLeaks documents as snapshots 'that demand fleshing out by those who are well-versed in the war from which they sprang. Rather than suggest a worrying future for investigative, on-the-ground reporting, WikiLeaks shows that it's as important as ever.' This 'on-the-ground' reporting, and its connection to expertise, provides a clue to the origin of a particular specialized kind of news judgment: It is developed primarily by long-term proximity to certain news events and actors (especially ones unknown to most of the journalist's constituent public), which enables the access required to engage in ongoing observation and source relationships there. This proximity-based expertise was a significant element of newswork to the journalists in this case.

Together, these three aspects formed a picture of professional journalists' conception of original reporting and newswork. It was a process of first filtering and editing and ultimately contextualizing raw objects of evidence (in this case, documents) and forming them into narrative, with the news judgment gleaned from on-the-ground reporting playing a valuable role along the way. Without engaging in this process, WikiLeaks could not be considered journalistic, and its documents alone held negligible value as objects of evidence; the process itself was the means by which publication became journalism and information became news. No statement captured the faith in this process and the synthesis of its component parts as well as that of *American Journalism Review* columnist Rem Rieder (2010: para. 8–9): 'Those nuggets [in WikiLeaks' documents] in and of themselves, however, often don't tell you much. They scream for context and perspective and interpretation, for insightful parsing by expert reporters. For journalism.'

Discussion

The professional journalistic process, as outlined and defended in this case, contains many of the same elements that have historically been identified by scholars as the components of newswork. But the relative emphasis of each of those elements, and the roles journalists believe them to play in forming the process of newswork, suggest some shifts in the way journalists conceive of the value of their profession. The basic building blocks of newswork – observing events, retrieving and examining documents, and interviewing sources – played a relatively small role in the newswork defended by journalists in their discourse about WikiLeaks. This does not mean that journalists are actually doing less of this work; rather, it suggests that they may see this work as less defensible before the public as a unique attribute of their professional value. This shift is related to the increased ability of non-professionals to observe and record news events and access documents and news sources through inexpensive, widely distributed technologies. As they spread more widely beyond the traditional bounds of journalism, the practices become diluted as markers of professional reporting work.

In response, journalists in this case emphasized less materially bound – and less technologically influenced – elements of newswork in the form of providing context, news judgment, and expertise. It is telling that these forms of newswork are both more opaque and less technologically bound than observation and interviewing, as both qualities make them easier to defend professionally. Their opacity allows journalists flexibility in defining and claiming them against amorphous challenges, and the fact that they are not bound to particular technologies insulates them from being contested through technological change. Put in terms of boundary work, the practices of observation, obtaining documents, and interviewing have become more difficult for journalists to maintain as professional boundary markers, so they have sought instead to define their boundaries through more malleable and less technologically based markers instead.

Through that redefinition, journalists have thus cast themselves fundamentally as sense-makers, reflecting a shift in their role that scholars have identified as well (e.g. Singer, 1998). Research on media content has indicated a gradual but substantial move over the latter decades of the 20th century toward longer and more analytical stories (e.g. Barnhurst and Mutz, 1997; Fink and Schudson, 2013), whose primary social value inheres not simply in gathering factual information, but in contextualizing and interpreting it. This study supplements such work by indicating that journalists' rhetorical characterization of their own worth may be shifting in tandem with that change in style. Context, then, is a central concept in this self-conception, and journalists' use of it in connection to narrative in this case indicates that it is closely related to Ettema and Glasser's (1998) narrative moral authority, in which narrative not only attaches meaning to facts, but also lends them the sort of authority that commands the attention of the public. In this case, journalists contended that by not applying context to its documents, WikiLeaks produced meaningless information that could not influence the public without the work of professional journalism.

The work of providing context and making sense of information is certainly a valuable social function, particularly as audiences become increasingly inundated with information, and one worth claiming as one non-exclusive part of journalists' professional identity. Indeed, even Assange attributed the contextual work of professional journalists as their greatest value to him. However, centering a professional self-definition on this type of work – as journalists did in this case – may prove problematic in future encounters with networked, digital journalistic practices. Specifically, journalists have staked their professional turf on practices, such as applying context and news judgment to form narratives, that are also some of the defining skills of online aggregators and bloggers (Anderson, 2013; Boyer, 2010). If indeed these practices are part of the core of a shifting self-conception of professional journalism, they may end up being just as contested as the practices they have displaced. Thus, while the practices of exercising news judgment and providing context may be socially valuable in themselves, the use of those practices as an exclusive boundary marker to reinforce professional authority is potentially detrimental to the profession.

This study is limited, of course, in its power to explain professional journalism's self-conception and public discourse strategies about their own work. While the discourse examined comes from a broad range of news organizations, it all responds to a single challenge – that of WikiLeaks. Boundary work is, at its core, a rhetorical process situated in and constrained by its particular context, and the specific nature of WikiLeaks' challenge necessarily limits the generalizability of the rhetorical work done by shaping it in distinct ways. For example, because WikiLeaks' central practice was in gathering and disseminating documents, journalists did not emphasize their own expertise in that area, since it was not a point of distinction from WikiLeaks. That being so, the boundary work performed in this case should be understood as rhetorically contingent, and further research in other contexts and through other sources could help provide a more vivid picture of the types of practices and values with which journalists create their conception of newswork. Still, this research indicates that as professional journalism has become more interpretive and contextual, journalists' rhetorical conception of the distinctive characteristics of their own work is grounded in vaguely defined notions of professional expertise and judgment, despite the materially oriented connotations of 'original reporting' and 'shoe-leather reporting'. It may be difficult for journalists to defend their exclusive jurisdiction over those practices in a networked information environment, but journalists may be choosing to define themselves by them because, in such an environment, they have little else of their work practices to claim as uniquely theirs.

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1. The full list of media sources considered in this analysis is as follows: professional media: *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal*, CNN, NPR; professional media criticism: *Columbia Journalism Review, American Journalism Review, Online Journalism Review*, PBS *MediaShift*; British media: *The Guardian*.

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