Gawker, BuzzFeed, and Journalism: Case Studies in Boundaries, News Aggregation, and Journalistic Authority

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Dedication

To all the men and women of journalism who pursue the truth on a daily basis—no matter who they work for.

Abstract

The study of boundary work in journalism generally has involved examining legacy news organizations and their efforts to expel deviant actors and otherwise patrol the boundaries around appropriate professional practice. This thesis extends this body of research by analyzing the interrelationships among newer, digitally centric actors: namely, Gawker and BuzzFeed. Using textual analysis, this research examines two case studies: a feud between BuzzFeed and Gawker over journalistic norms, and Gawker's outing of a Condé Nast executive. By blending the existing frameworks of boundary work with concepts such as authority, as well as findings from research on blogging and news aggregation, this study offers a comprehensive examination of these emerging journalistic actors. In the first case, Gawker engaged BuzzFeed over what it believed to be failures of journalistic norms in deleting articles at the behest of advertisers. In the second, Gawker wrestled with the consequences of its own failure to exercise acceptable editorial judgment in the outing of a gay magazine executive. The resulting findings suggest that, as these cases unfolded, BuzzFeed and Gawker both readily adopted some of the traditional values of journalism in an effort to be accepted by the professional community. However, in other ways, these actors continued to distance themselves from legacy news media and refused to conform to certain journalistic norms, instead remaining more closely aligned with the values they brought from their own histories as digital upstarts. These findings suggest a need for further research into the boundary behaviors of born-digital actors and a deeper examination of the discourse between new and old media entities.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2002, Gawker.com was founded by Nick Denton, a man fascinated with the growing potential of technology for journalism (Mahler, 2015). The site, which began as a blog aimed at publishing gossip about New York City's media elite, grew into a small media empire over the next several years. By 2006, the blog's parent company, Gawker Media,[1] had begun posting a healthy profit (Carr, 2006). By 2008, flexing its financial success, it was selling some of its blog properties to other sites (Calderone, 2008). In its rise to the top, Gawker became critical of the journalistic establishment, frequently pointing out errors, violations of established journalistic norms, and even sloppy or careless reporting. Knowingly or not, it had become an important voice in the maintenance of journalistic boundaries.

Around the same time, in 2006, a popular Internet entertainment site, BuzzFeed, rose to prominence by peddling amusing cat videos, trending Internet memes, and hard-to-resist lists of minutiae. By 2009, however, BuzzFeed decided that it would diversify and become a news organization as well. Since that time, the site has been plagued by controversy and criticism for quietly removing articles that offended advertisers or featured heavy plagiarism. Several online news sites criticized the multiple instances of this practice, but none more prominently than Gawker. These online posts quickly developed into a feud between the two digital actors, consisting of Gawker publishing increasingly critical posts of BuzzFeed's practices. Ultimately, the feud came to a head

[1] Although they bear very similar names, Gawker Media and Gawker.com do not refer to the same entity. Gawker.com is a news website and the most prominent member of an ever-changing family of sites owned by the parent company, Gawker Media. This research focuses on the website and as such, all mentions of "Gawker" are referring to the website, unless otherwise stated.

with an interview between Gawker investigative reporter J. K. Trotter and BuzzFeed Editor in Chief Ben Smith, as well as BuzzFeed CEO Jonah Peretti in the latter company's New York offices in 2015. This feud serves as one of two cases that will be examined in this thesis to consider Gawker's role as an emerging actor in the digital journalism space.

The second case occurs months after the first and at the zenith of Gawker's influence. In July 2015, Gawker posted a story exposing a planned rendezvous between a gay porn star and the chief financial officer of Condé Nast, a major media company. The outing of a relatively unknown individual caused public and professional outrage, and led to the removal of the post the next day (Denton, 2015a). It was the first time that Gawker had been forced to remove a post for reasons other than error or litigation, and, for the first time, put the site's own actions under the microscope of public scrutiny (Kludt, 2015).

Together, these two cases represent rare events in journalism. Based on previous literature, these deviant actions on the part of BuzzFeed should have been met with industry-wide condemnation (Bennett, Gressett, & Haltom, 1985), a discussion of deeper social issues (Eason, 1986), or at least a look at larger tensions within journalism (Carlson, 2012). In fact, the "public shaming" of deviant actors has a long tradition in the media generally (Carey, 1998), and the practice of highlighting and exorcising deviant behavior has been well documented within journalism (Carlson, 2014). However, with BuzzFeed, none of this occurred, and Gawker stepped in to fill that void. Conversely, in the case of Gawker's outing of a magazine executive, the boundary-patrolling response from established actors within the journalistic space was swift and effective.

Given the tumultuous history of online blogging and its fierce rivalry with traditional journalism in the 2000s, it is easy to look upon the actions of these two media companies and attribute the behavior to business competition or simply another example in a long line of journalistic boundary struggles that have involved other non-traditional actors such as tabloids, WikiLeaks, or citizen journalists. However, I contend that these case studies exemplify the tension that emerges as digital media upstarts compete among themselves while occupying the same boundary space as legacy news organizations. These are not classic examples of old media and new, the old guard fighting the entry of a young upstart or a deviant actor. Nor is it a matter of infighting between mainstream media organizations and the paparazzi (e.g., Berkowitz [2000] or Bishop [1999]). This research will examine the tension between two newer, less-established actors—upstarts seeking to appropriate journalistic authority in an effort to build capital and be recognized as news providers. Furthermore, if industry experts and company spreadsheets are any indication, these news sites, through their growing financial success, audience reach, and prominence in the media environment, may well be indicators of future business models for journalism (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2015). For these reasons, it matters how BuzzFeed and Gawker interact not only with one another, but with established journalistic actors as well.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Boundaries

Boundary work, in the context of journalism, is the attribution and application of selected characteristics to the practice of journalism with the goal of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes the practice from other professions and pursuits. Although journalism's constantly shifting nature makes it a ripe case for studying boundary struggles, "Boundary work does not have a strong foothold in studies of journalism" (Carlson, 2015b). Richer conceptualizations of boundaries lie within the broader corpus of social science research.

Early ethnographic work laid the foundation for the contemporary discourse on boundaries within the field of journalism by exploring topics such as the "gatekeeping" role of editors (White, 1950) and the effects of professional expectations on the behavior of reporters (Lang & Lang, 1953). This research noted that by acting as arbiters of standards, editors could define and control what journalism looked like. This early research also established the modern understanding of professional news production and manufacture (Bantz, McCorkle, & Baade, 1980; R. Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1988; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). These studies began to articulate and define the professional norms that would become the focal points of boundary disputes in later decades. Many of these studies noted and emphasized a pursuit of news values, a journalistic culture, and professional norms as a unifying force, a creator of a shared identity and purpose, within the industry. These professional traits and how they are used to claim status and authority serve as the foundation of journalism's professionalization (Lewis, 2012). However, little of this early research dealt with challenges to these norms from actors outside the field of journalism and little

was done to create a methodological framework to effectively examine such challenges, either.

The exploration of the concepts of professionalization and the struggles for authority have a much stronger tradition within sociology. Studies going as far back as the early 1960's show sociologists beginning to address the struggles of professional limits and authority (Wilensky, 1964). One of the first scholars to examine the idea of professional boundaries was Paul Starr (1982), who investigated the medical field. Starr's work established the idea that professions gain power and authority as they become more essential to those outside of them. Furthermore, Starr's work introduced concepts like cultural authority to the study of professionalization. Starr defined cultural authority as "the probability that particular definitions of reality and judgments of meaning and value will prevail as valid and true" (Starr, 1982, p. 13). Unlike the more traditional authority that allows for the control of action through command, cultural authority's power rests in the construction of reality. For journalism, this definition places great value not only on producing accurate statements, but on correct practices for acquiring and crafting those statements as well. By producing valid and true news, journalists can, according to Starr, acquire more cultural authority, which in turn would allow them to better dictate the reach and authority of their profession.

Sociologist Thomas Gieryn, in his study of the demarcations between science and non-science fields, examined contests among groups seeking social recognition. Specifically, his work focused on the examination of conflict and struggle among professions seeking social recognition to rightfully perform an action or occupy a social space. The goal of these public contests was to acquire "the legitimate power to define,

describe, and explain bounded domains of reality" (Gieryn, 1999, p. 1). As a result, this quest for "epistemic authority" is the foundation of boundary work. These struggles over authority, or credibility contests, involve three basic actions: expansion, contests to expand the professional domain into new fields; expulsion, contests over which actor is more authoritative within a domain; and protection of autonomy, struggles that seek to prevent others from co-opting an actor's epistemic authority (Gieryn, 1999). Though Gieryn's research addressed the scientific community, its codifying of basic boundary actions was then taken up by media scholars such as Winch (1997), who utilized Gieryn's framework to examine the sharp contrasts that journalists draw between tabloids and themselves.

As a result of boundary work's long history in the social sciences, the framework has a wide, multi-disciplinary reach. Sociologists, particularly Abbott (1988), used it to note that social context and professionalism play significant roles in the contests for authority and jurisdiction that occur in all professions. Abbott's conceptualization does not treat professions as independent fields, but instead places them in a shared social space where many contests for jurisdiction can occur at once (Abbott, 1988). These struggles for exclusive rights over a profession's field differ from the concepts of boundary work as articulated by Gieryn, however, as they focus on establishing epistemic authority rather than defining the parameters of a profession. Bourdieu (2005) also invoked the language of boundaries as he articulated field theory's approach to society. The framework of field theory posits that modernity represents a process of differentiation into specialized fields that operate according to implicit rules and strive to create an internal homogeneity (Benson, 2006). The resulting relationships within the

field are shaped by two forms of power: economic capital, or money and assets, as well as cultural capital, or general knowledge and education (Benson & Neveu, 2005). Actors who successfully accumulate sufficient capital are in turn able to dictate the *doxa*, or the rules that dominate and organize the field (Benson, 2006).

Given this broad field of research and journalism studies' recent entry into it, only recently have boundary frameworks specific to newswork been developed. In the introduction to the book *Boundaries of Journalism*, Carlson has taken many of these disparate boundary concepts and fused them into a unified framework that is tailored for journalistic analysis. The results of this unification can be seen in Table 1 (Carlson, 2015b, p. 10). On the vertical lie Geiryn's general actions of boundary work: "expansion, expulsion, and protection of autonomy" (Gieryn, 1999). On the horizontal, Carlson places three journalistic domains: participants; actions taken to separate journalists from non-journalists, practices; actions that seek to define what is acceptable in the field, and professionalism; efforts to define journalism as a distinct, separate community of work. The resulting intersections of these actions and domains produce a matrix that "provides a model sensitive to the many directions from which journalism comes to be constructed or contested" (Carlson, 2015b, p. 12).

Carlson's approach not only allows for greater precision and clarity in studying boundaries within journalism, but also focuses the boundary argument specifically on new media and technologies as major catalysts in boundary shifts. Furthermore, this table effectively highlights the professional tensions that allow behaviors and practices to either be accepted or rejected. Carlson's work also highlights the ways in which the professional claims of journalists become a means to claim authority. Finally, this

framework also enables a clearer analysis of the shifting of journalistic boundaries during times of tension and questioning of practices and professionalism.

In the case of WikiLeaks, for example, the boundary-drawing process that Table 1 illustrates became quite visible and public. The controversial website was initially treated as a source by the major papers of the world. However, the relationship between Wikileaks and its journalistic partners soured shortly after publication of the Iraq War cables in October 2010. *The New York Times* even actively sought to distance itself from the organization (Coddington, 2012; B. Keller, 2011). WikiLeaks' practices were just too far afield of traditional journalistic norms. WikiLeaks had great value to *The New York Times* as a source and journalistic partner. However, the site's founder and public face, Julian Assange, had explicit political goals as well as serious legal troubles in Sweden. None of these traits endeared him to the senior leadership at the papers he was working with and, ultimately, he found himself shut out of the journalistic process (Cohen & Stelter, 2010). By pushing WikiLeaks "outside journalism's professional boundaries while reaffirming its own place inside those boundaries," *The New York Times* not only expelled the deviant actor but also expanded its own authority in making such determinations (Coddington, 2012b, p. 389).

Blogging

As a whole, the introduction of technology—and specifically the Internet's answer to journalism in blogging—has been met with a range of reactions from skepticism to optimism to alarm. When blogging first rose to prominence in the early 2000s, the relationship with traditional journalism was a contentious one. Bloggers were

seen as exposing the weaknesses of traditional journalism (Regan, 2003) and ending journalism's reign of sovereignty (Rosen, 2005). These assessments were backed by stories of bloggers forcing the resignations of Dan Rather from CBS and Eason Jordan from CNN over reporting errors (Niles, 2004; Seelye, Steinberg, & Gallagher, 2005) as well as playing an active role in reporting stories like the Monica Lewinsky scandal (BBC, 1998). Further deepening this contentious relationship were the plentiful references to "big journalism" and "watchdogs" that dominated these early sites in an effort to compel change from the more established organizations (M. Glaser, 2004; Matheson, 2004a). This contentious relationship was partly the result of journalism's more flexible, ever-evolving professional nature (Lowrey, 2006), as well as boundary-drawing actions on the part of legacy outlets. Boundary-drawing actions refer to an organization's ability to reconfigure the context of its actions by utilizing its own resources as well as those of actors to which it is related (Chadwick & Collister, 2014). As blogs became increasingly influential, a boundary debate about narrative techniques and professional logics emerged within the field (Carlson, 2007; Lewis, 2012). As blogs grappled with legacy media outlets, they took on some of the characteristics of their journalistic elders. Studies have shown that over time, blogs tended to grow more conservative and less experimental (Lowrey, 2012). In many ways, this more conservative shift is the result of the realization of the key role that public legitimacy played in their growth, as well the influence of being accepted by the broader journalistic field (Lowrey, 2012).

This rise of digital actors within the journalistic space has had a disruptive effect on newsrooms across the country. Ryfe (2013, p. 140), in his ethnographic work, argues

that the growing influence of blogs-turned-news sites has caused journalism to begin "unraveling," or blurring its boundaries. This rise to prominence has also given new purpose to boundary actions that were previously reserved for members of the established journalistic community. With the introduction of a myriad of online-based actors, traditional media forms have been steadily pushing back against less recognizable or traditionally minded intruders with the same expulsion measures that were previously reserved for paparazzi (Berkowitz, 2000; Bishop, 1999). However, these efforts to excise bloggers from the journalistic space were not entirely successful.

Bloggers actively pursued the trappings of status and authority by organizing conferences (Kramer, 2004), developing their own codes of ethics (Boyd, King, & Hoffman, 2005), and even fighting for legal protections (Kirtley, 2003). As the first wave of blogs grew in prominence, a core of established online actors like The Huffington Post, Gawker, and the Daily Kos, began to not only receive praise from the journalistic establishment (Time, 2009), but to also establish precedents for future entrants (Lowrey, 2012). One of the first analyses of this later generation of online journalistic actors focused solely on BuzzFeed, one of the newest, yet most prominent entrants. In one of the few studies on BuzzFeed, Tandoc and Jenkins (2015) noted that, despite initial resistance to its entry into the journalistic space, the website was ultimately accepted by legacy news organizations. Using the framework of field theory, Tandoc and Jenkins (2015) conclude that it was BuzzFeed's acquisition of economic and cultural capital that ultimately helped it gain acceptance in the field.

Building on the work that has examined acceptance of blogs into the journalistic field (Carlson, 2007; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2015), this research will focus on examining the

interactions between comparable online actors instead of the well-studied discourses between bloggers and journalists (Carlson, 2007; Lowrey, 2006; Matheson, 2004a). This approach will yield a better understanding of how these sites draw distinctions between upstarts like themselves and legacy media with whom they have spent many years sparring. Many of the actions being examined by this work involve the application and interpretation of journalistic norms and traditions rather than the broader interactions with economic or cultural fields. As a result, boundary work, rather than field theory, is the more appropriate conceptual framework to interpret and analyze these cases (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Carlson & Lewis, 2015). The interactions of Gawker and BuzzFeed are more about recognizing deviant behavior and building journalistic authority that the accumulation of economic or cultural capital that field theory addresses (Bourdieu, 2005). Furthermore, field theory has less sensitivity to the micro-interactions that occur among non-traditional actors. Its strength lies in addressing broader ramifications of more established organizations.

Although both of the major participants in these cases are established actors within the journalistic field, both Gawker and BuzzFeed have close ties to the practice of news aggregation. As a result, any discussion of them needs to acknowledge the precarious place that aggregation holds as a form of newswork.

Online Aggregation

Both of the major actors in the cases presented here, Gawker and BuzzFeed, belong to a group of sites called news aggregators. At its most basic, a news aggregator "takes information from multiple sources and displays it in a single place" (Isbell, 2010,

p. 2). However, more elaborate definitions also contrast the practice against sites that produce original reporting (Chowdhury & Landoni, 2006; Stanyer, 2008). The contrast with original reporting has been espoused particularly passionately by journalists, who, in an effort to valorize their own work, tend to misrepresent the technology, often conflating it with search engines (Anderson, 2013b). In reality, many news aggregators fall between automated aggregators and sites run by journalists by using previously published material and some form of summation or abbreviation (Coddington, 2015).

Unlike the basic, automated aggregators that simply present a feed of news stories from other sites (e.g., Yahoo! News or Google News), sites like Gawker and BuzzFeed produce content by drawing on the content of others and adding commentary and even analysis to the source material. This more manual process, which involves rewriting and organizing information through hyperlinks, is better known as curation (Anderson, 2013b; Coddington, 2015). However, despite the addition of these human-driven and more journalistic processes to aggregation, the decreased significance that is placed on truly original reporting continues to be the most significant distinction between online sites and legacy press organizations.

One of the key requirements of a journalistic organization has traditionally been the production of "original" reporting content. In his study of newswork, Coddington (2014) explains the reason for this: "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." Contained within the notion of original reporting is also the concept of observation. Eyewitness observation has been a key concept for journalists because of the authority and credibility it allows

them to establish with their audiences (Zelizer, 2007). However, this valorization of original reporting may be superficial or misguided. Journalists have failed to analyze what the concept means or how changes in technology have shifted the definition of the term (Anderson, 2013b). This oversight is particularly significant because the rise of aggregation-based reporting is widely regarded as a phenomenon born of technology rather than a change in practice (Bakker, 2012).

Technological agents like feeds, search engines, and algorithms have largely facilitated an exponential rise in available digital content (Bakker, 2012). And so, online aggregation, the antithesis of original content production, came to be seen by legacy press organizations as one of its greatest threats (Keller, 2011). Newspapers, in covering aggregators, frequently spoke of the technology in negative terms and framed the practice as parasitism or thievery (Chyi, Lewis, & Zheng, 2016). However, this confrontational attitude between those that generate original content and those that aggregate is not entirely warranted.

In his ethnographic work on news aggregators, Anderson (2013b) notes that many skills like writing, editorial judgment, and incorporating good visuals are key in both aggregation and journalism. Furthermore, the real conflict seems to be "over which 'objects of evidence' ought to be considered valid pieces of the news network" (Anderson, 2013b, p. 1020). In their zeal to confront aggregation, news organizations missed an opportunity to integrate and benefit from this emerging practice (Chyi et al., 2016).

So, while the aggregation-style reporting that is practiced by BuzzFeed and Gawker is regarded by journalists as a lower form of the craft, this distinction may

largely be an artificial one—a result of aggregators departing from the ideals of original reporting in favor of a greater reliance on the benefits and convenience of a less traditional technological approach. This shift has not only resulted in boundary disputes among journalists and aggregators, but has led to questions about the level of journalistic authority that Gawker and BuzzFeed truly wield.

Authority

The authority and legitimacy of journalism have been examined from a variety of angles. Given that the journalistic profession has been described as "uninsulated" (Schudson, 1982, p. 9) and as having no licensing practices to aid in boundary-keeping, journalists have had to resort to more subtle measures of defining the parameters of their profession (Schudson & Anderson, 2008). Given these factors, journalists developed a strong adherence to a common ideology (Deuze, 2005b) and a common narrative style (Schudson, 1982) to enhance claims of authority. Thus, at its core, authority within journalism can be attributed to any number of "factors and relations that work together to that create arguments for why journalists deserve the public's attention" (Carlson, Forthcoming, p. 6). What constitutes those factors and relations, however, is open to interpretation. There is a consensus among scholars that journalism's legitimacy stems from the act of knowledge production (Park, 1940) coupled with a strong belief in specific rituals, routines, and practices (Matheson, 2004b; Tuchman, 1978). However, attempts at further clarification yield some differences of opinion. For example, Zelizer, in her examination of the coverage of the JFK assassination, noted the use of narrative to gain authority: "[the press] promote themselves as authoritative and credible

spokespersons of 'real-life' events" (1992, p. 8). Conversely, Eason, in writing on the coverage of the Janet Cooke scandal, places authority in a journalist's ability to produce facts (1986). Others, like van Dijk, argue that authority stems from the simple act of assertion (2013).

However, perhaps the most visible and universally acknowledged source of authority is journalism's emphasis on professionalism. The term resides in not only the title of one of the oldest professional organizations for the craft, the Society for Professional Journalists, but was, until recently, prominently highlighted in its Code of Ethics. "Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility," was a sentiment that not only served as part of the preamble to the code but as a strong argument for the authority of the press ("SPJ Code of Ethics," 1996). This emphasis on the professionalization of standards and practices has not only been used to effectively legitimize the work of journalists, but also to establish boundaries between those inside the industry and outside of it (Lewis, 2012).

Recognizing the authority contained within professionalism, newer entrants to the journalistic field have made their adoption of the trappings and practices of traditional journalism very public in their rise to prominence. Both Gawker and BuzzFeed, for example, have loudly touted their hiring of more traditional journalists (Sterne, 2013), as well as their creation of standards and ethics guides (Hilton, 2015). Thus, despite the disruptive influence of these newer digital actors in the media landscape, appeals to traditional norms and practices of journalism are still able to generate authority, or at least the perception of it, within the journalistic field.

Tabloids

Finally, it is important to consider that Gawker, one of the organizations at the heart of this work, openly promotes itself as "the source for daily Manhattan media news and gossip." The inclusion of the word "gossip," as well as statements made by its own reporters (Trotter, 2014c) and founder (Denton, 2015a), clearly define Gawker as a tabloid. Given this self-positioning within an often maligned subset of journalistic work, it is worth exploring the literature and discussion surrounding this type of reporting.

At is most basic, the distinction between traditional journalism and tabloids has defined the latter as outlets giving little attention to matters like politics, economics, or society while simultaneously overemphasizing the prurient details of celebrities' private lives, scandals, and popular entertainment (Sparks, 2000). Delving further, there is a difference in language that exists within the tabloid press as well. Aside from focusing on entertainment rather than content, tabloids are more likely to employ a "language of outrage and pathos" (Hallin, 1992, p. 22). All of these characteristics result in a popular medium that blurs the distinction between entertainment and information (Deuze, 2005a; Zoonen, 1998).

Given these differing priorities between the two genres of reporting, the status of tabloids within the greater journalistic field is clear. Spark's (2000) typology suggests that tabloids are at the distant end of the journalistic spectrum; they represent the most distant boundary of journalistic work before crossing over to entertainment. This positioning is further reinforced by ethnographic work revealing the low position that Dutch tabloids hold in the "shared perception of professional hierarchy in journalism"

(Deuze, 2005a). This low status is echoed by work that notes a similar phenomenon among American (Bird, 1990) and British (Rhoufari, 2000) tabloid reporters as well.

The low position of tabloids within the journalistic space has also resulted in several cases where more established journalists have denounced practices synonymous with the news form. There have been attempts to expel the growing reliance on entertainment values (Winch, 1997), as well as to distance the profession from the paparazzi following the death of Princess Diana (Berkowitz, 2000; Bishop, 1999). However, despite these cases, by and large, tabloid journalism has not been completely expelled from the journalistic space. Instead, discussions continue about the virtues and pitfalls of tabloidization and the use of "soft news" in reporting (Esser, 1999; Sjøvaag, 2015). Thus, the actions of Gawker, a self-avowed tabloid that is intent on further blurring these boundaries, are of interest. The site possesses an ability to not only grasp and leverage the relationship that tabloids have with the larger profession of journalism, but to blend tabloid and hard news practices into a distinctive journalistic product. While this hybrid approach has benefits for sites like Gawker, examining the blurring of boundaries between tabloid and serious press can also shed light on how newer, digital actors confront boundary challenges while operating in an ever developing journalistic environment.

Guiding Questions

The examination of Gawker's interaction with BuzzFeed, as well as the handling of its own journalistic crisis, offers a unique opportunity. The two cases not only represent a boundary contest and journalistically deviant behavior, but they are also a

chance to examine what contests between newer, online actors reveal about the rise of news aggregation as a journalistic practice. Given the growing role and importance of aggregation in the media ecology and journalism specifically, analyzing these newer types of players in the journalistic field is crucial to understanding the future of the profession. Specifically, this study will seek to analyze the news content produced by Gawker and BuzzFeed, as well as other members of the journalistic field. These self-critical, public discourses around news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception are more broadly referred to as "metajournalistic discourse" (Carlson, 2015a). Given the high level of interaction between the various actors, the lens of metajournalistic discourse is well suited to addressing the questions that arise from these case studies.

In what ways do these newer actors appear to seek authority, legitimacy, and boundary maintenance? What are the discourses that play out between themselves as upstarts and in relation to legacy media organizations? How do the concepts of authority, aggregation, and boundary work interact in these cases?

This discourse not only offers a glimpse into how the profession defines and understands its own standards; it also offers a way for journalists to address external threats to the profession (Haas, 2006). As a result, scholars have made the case for the value of examining and understanding this "perpetual stream of interpretive activity intent on defining the shifting amalgam known as journalism" (Carlson 2014, p. 34). In many ways, the study of this internal discussion, this metajournalistic discourse, is a way of studying boundary actions. Metajournalistic discourse offers a glimpse into the deliberations of journalistic actors as they articulate and deliberate the facts of these cases

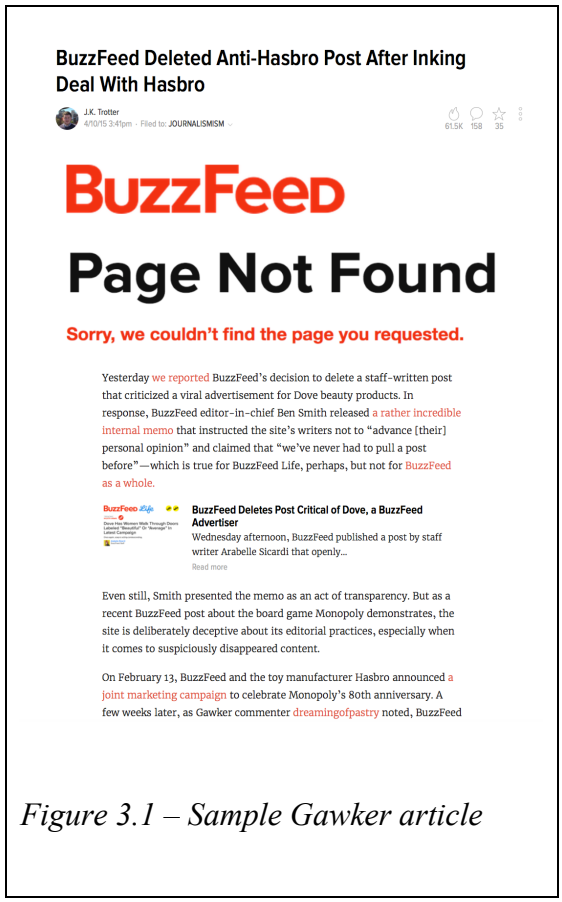
before they become codified as one of the actions described in Table 1. Thus, it is important to place the two cases of this study within the context of metajournalistic discourse and consider why they are engaging in this discourse and how it relates to the greater discipline of boundary work.

Chapter 3

Methods

The goal of this study is to consider the boundary-drawing actions contained within the two cases: first, the feud between two prominent online news outlets—Gawker and BuzzFeed – and, second, Gawker's outing of the CFO of Condé Nast. These cases were selected for their prominence and their timing. Since the cases were very visible and widely discussed, there was a correspondingly significant amount of discourse for analysis. Also, unlike other controversies, both cases were sufficiently concluded at the time of data collection to allow for a complete capture of the discourse. To that end, the samples of data for both cases were designed to be broad with the goal of collecting as many articles as possible. Data collection was also kept broad in order to capture the broadest possible metajournalistic discourse—journalists talking about journalism in and through these particular cases.

Data for both cases was gathered by first collecting all of Gawker's coverage regarding the individual events. For the first case, this involved a cluster of articles that explained and catalogued what was perceived to be BuzzFeed's deviant actions. For the second case, the nucleus was centered around the removed article and Gawker's posted explanations of its removal. Because internet journalism relies heavily on the practice of linking (including links to prior material within the body of the article — see Figure 3.1), a snowball method was then used to assemble the vast majority of the datasets. Additional articles would be found and included by following links within Gawker coverage, which would, in turn, lead to other stories. For example, Figure 3.1 shows a typical Gawker article referencing BuzzFeed's practices. The first paragraph has three links — two are for related Gawker stories, while the third is to Ben Smith's Twitter account, which has a document being referenced in the story. Thus, by following the embedded links, this one article yielded three others.


BuzzFeed Deleted Anti-Hasbro Post After Inking Deal With Hasbro

J.K. Trotter
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BuzzFeed

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Sorry, we couldn't find the page you requested.

Yesterday we reported BuzzFeed's decision to delete a staff-written post that criticized a viral advertisement for Dove beauty products. In response, BuzzFeed editor-in-chief Ben Smith released a rather incredible internal memo that instructed the site's writers not to "advance [their] personal opinion" and claimed that "we've never had to pull a post before"—which is true for BuzzFeed Life, perhaps, but not for BuzzFeed as a whole.

BuzzFeed Deletes Post Critical of Dove, a BuzzFeed Advertiser
Wednesday afternoon, BuzzFeed published a post by staff writer Arabelle Sicardi that openly...
Read more

Even still, Smith presented the memo as an act of transparency. But as a recent BuzzFeed post about the board game Monopoly demonstrates, the site is deliberately deceptive about its editorial practices, especially when it comes to suspiciously disappeared content.

On February 13, BuzzFeed and the toy manufacturer Hasbro announced a joint marketing campaign to celebrate Monopoly's 80th anniversary. A few weeks later, as Gawker commenter dreamingofpastry noted, BuzzFeed

Figure 3.1 – Sample Gawker article

Given the central role that online outlets played in the discourse around both events, there was a focus on collecting as much online material as possible from the sites that were engaging in discussions about these events. The search functions of both

Gawker and BuzzFeed were used for this role. However, media-focused aggregators (e.g., MediaGazer.com, Mediate.com) were also utilized to collect articles that were not directly referenced by the key actors in each case. An effort was also made to collect coverage from sites specifically devoted to discourse on journalism, such as *Columbia Journalism Review*, Poynter, and Neiman Journalism Lab. Once the snowball method was exhausted, the data sets were further augmented with coverage from major legacy news organizations (e.g., *The New York Times*) through the use of the Lexis-Nexis database using search terms: "Gawker," "BuzzFeed," and "feud" for the first case and "Condé Nast," "CFO," and "Gawker" for the second case.

Case 1

The start date for the coverage of the first case study was December 1, 2011, the approximate date when BuzzFeed hired Ben Smith as editor in chief, marking the start of their efforts to become a journalistic entity. The end of the data set is less defined, but it terminates before Gawker's outing of a Condé Nast executive in July 2015, as that event falls outside the scope of the feud. Ultimately, the search resulted in the first dataset containing 60 articles, mostly from BuzzFeed and Gawker themselves, but also including news organizations such as Politico, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*. The full dataset for Case 1 contained more than 50,000 words and comprised roughly 166 pages of content, with the average article containing approximately 947 words.

Case 2

The start date for the second case study was July 16, 2015, the date Gawker published the article on the CFO of Condé Nast. The vast majority of the collected articles were clustered at the outset of the incident with a fairly sharp drop in numbers after July 2015. However, no restriction was placed on collecting more recent articles to allow for the inclusion of later, more reflective analysis of the event. The most recent article collected for the dataset was from October 20, 2015.

Ultimately, the search resulted in the first dataset containing 61 articles, mostly from BuzzFeed and Gawker themselves, but also including outlets such as *Politico*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*. Meanwhile, the second dataset was made up 50 articles that contained a similar spread of legacy and online-only outlets, though there was a much more significant presence of legacy outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in this case study. The full dataset for Case 2 contained more than 60,000 words and comprised roughly 220 pages of content, with the average article approximately 1,275 words in length.

Analysis

The analysis of the gathered material utilized a constant comparative approach that drew upon grounded theory (B. G. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following a period of familiarization with the collected material, articles were sorted into categories based on the event being discussed for organizational purposes. Then, primary coding commenced with an open, line-by-line analysis of each article for codes and concepts (S. J. Tracy, 2013). To guide this analysis, the following general questions were posed at the outset:

- How do Gawker and BuzzFeed view themselves in relation to legacy media?
- What traits or actions of these sites are labeled as transgressions against journalism, and by whom are such labels developed?
- How are the events in these cases perceived by different traditional journalists, other online actors, academics or commentators, and the public?

Next, the codes were analyzed and interpreted using an axial approach and guided by the concepts of aggregation, boundaries, authority, and metajournalistic discourse (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The final analysis was then built around the interaction of the codes discovered in the collected material with the outlined concepts. Attention was given to the chronology and overall progression of the case, as well as outside events that may have influenced the actors.

Case History

Neither Gawker nor BuzzFeed was founded with particularly journalistic goals in mind.

Gawker was a blog that was founded with the goal of being "the source for daily Manhattan media news and gossip," and was the brainchild of Nick Denton and Elizabeth Spiers (Mahler, 2015). As the site grew, it became no stranger to controversy. The site drew the ire of the Church of Scientology for posting a video of Tom Cruise (Denton, 2008), was investigated for posting screenshots of then Governor Sarah Palin's hacked email account (Pareene, 2008a, 2008b), and, perhaps most famously, it was sued for

posting a video of professional wrestler Hulk Hogan having sex with the wife of his best friend (Daulerio, 2012). However, despite the scandals, as the site grew, it matured and began to have reportorial successes that were more traditional as well. Its sports-oriented site Deadspin broke the story of Manti T'eo's fake girlfriend (Burke & Dickey, 2013). The gadget site, Gizmodo, was the first to show the world the iPhone 4 after an Apple engineer accidentally left the prototype at a bar (J. Chen, 2010). Gawker itself broke the story of Toronto Mayor Rob Ford smoking crack cocaine (Cook, 2013). Ultimately, both the scandals and successes transformed its parent company, Gawker Media, into an online institution that now boasts eight blogs and more than 240 employees on two continents (Mahler, 2015). Gawker Media took in $45 million in revenue during 2014 and is believed to be worth at least $250 million (Shontell, 2015; Yarow, 2015). Alexa.com, a website that tracks and ranks online traffic, reported Gawker.com's highest site ranking in the last six months to be 682 among all websites. For contrast, the top U.S. news sites are CNN.com and NYTimes.com, which were ranked 76 and 100, respectively (see Figure 3.2).

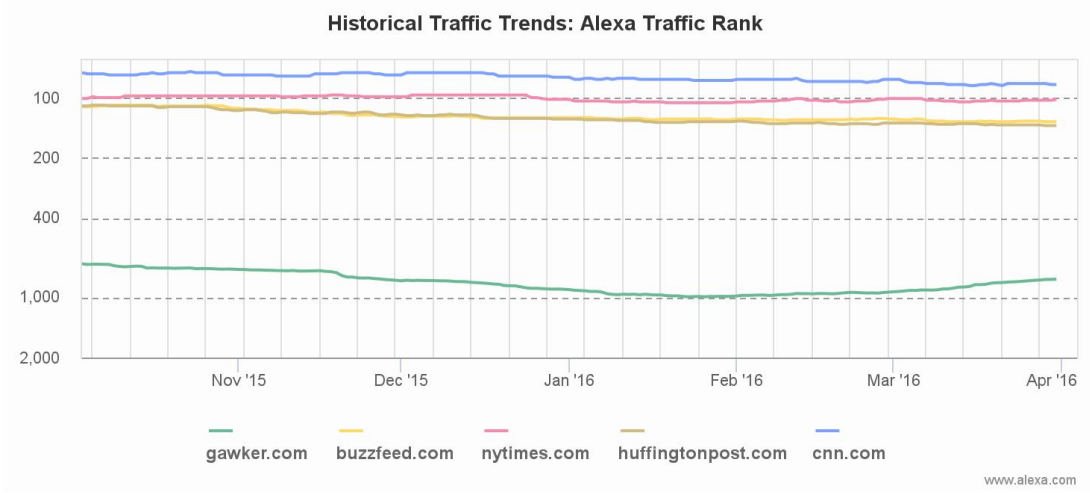

Figure 3.2 - Alexa Site Ranking Graph

BuzzFeed.com was created in 2006 by Jonah Peretti as a viral content lab that focused on sharable content, but the site quickly became known for the production of lists of random and trivial facts ("The BuzzFeed Team," n.d.). Peretti was no stranger to blogging, having co-founded The Huffington Post, along with Kenneth Lerer and Arianna Huffington in 2005. However, in 2011, BuzzFeed announced the hiring of Ben Smith, a writer from Politico, as its editor in chief (Stelter, 2011). This move is now regarded as the moment when BuzzFeed began operating as a journalistic enterprise (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2015). To help cement its status as a news organization, BuzzFeed broke the news of John McCain's endorsement of Mitt Romney later that month (Carr, 2012). However, almost immediately following its arrival on the journalistic stage, BuzzFeed was met with skepticism and challenge, which is where the first case study begins.

Despite its controversies, BuzzFeed has grown tremendously. In August 2014, the site received $50 million in venture capital, more than doubling its previous investments (Isaac, 2014; O'Donovan, 2014) and valuing the company at approximately $850 million (Stelter, 2014). Today, BuzzFeed employs more than 650 people, including some 225 editorial employees (Smith, 2014b). BuzzFeed's Alexa rank hit a peak of 109 at around the same time as Gawker's peak of 682 (see Figure 3.2). This ranking placed it almost even with the flagship blog-turned-news organization The Huffington Post and very close to the legacy standard *The New York Times*.

Chapter 4

The Feud

By most accounts, the feud between Gawker and BuzzFeed began when Gawker posted a critical take on BuzzFeed's practice of aggregation—specifically, its well-known "listicles" (e.g., 12 Extremely Disappointing Facts About Music [see Figure 4.1], 50 People You Wish You Knew in Real Life). The article, written by Adrian Chen, a journalist specializing in Internet culture and virtual communities, criticized BuzzFeed's practice of using images without appropriate citation or reference. Although Chen was not the first person to make this critique of BuzzFeed, he was the first to link the practice to journalistic ethics, noting BuzzFeed's "awkward position in relation to internet etiquette and journalistic ethics" (A. Chen, 2012).

Figure 4.1 – Typical BuzzFeed Listicle

Failing to cite sources is forgivable for the writers of Reddit or any other online content aggregator. However, for BuzzFeed, who has by now claimed to be a site for journalism, the standard is a higher one.

The next major criticism came several years later when Gawker's journalists discovered the quiet removal of more than 4,000 old posts from BuzzFeed's servers. Although many of the articles were removed because of quality concerns and a shift in editorial standards, a small number also happened to document BuzzFeed's history of plagiarism (Trotter, 2014b). Further Gawker investigations into BuzzFeed's writing practices also led to the firing of one of their reporters, Benny Johnson, for plagiarism. This string of criticism directed at BuzzFeed, largely coming from Gawker, led many media observers to categorize the interactions of the two sites as a feud by the end of the summer of 2014 (Byers, 2014).

The final events of this case came in the spring of 2015, when Gawker began writing about the removal of BuzzFeed posts that conflicted with advertiser interests. BuzzFeed had a history of removing posts at the request of advertisers that goes back to 2013. In April 2013, BuzzFeed removed a post titled "The Objectification of Women by Axe…" after Unilever, the owner of the Axe brand and a major advertiser, complained. However, the removal of two posts, one criticizing the board game Monopoly and the other a new Dove advertising campaign, drew renewed and increased attention to BuzzFeed's practices from Gawker and, subsequently, other media outlets (Colhoun, 2015). This second confrontation over the removal of content at the request of advertisers prompted an internal BuzzFeed investigation, a new editorial standards guide, and the restoration of both posts. Following a public apology regarding the lapse in editorial judgment, BuzzFeed's editor in chief, Ben Smith, and founder, Jonah Peretti, granted an interview to Gawker's J.K. Trotter in an effort to address issues between the two organizations (Trotter, 2015c). The interview was the last major interaction regarding journalistic

standards between the two sites, and Gawker later became embroiled its own scandal—the outing of a Condé Nast CFO—only several months later (see Table 2).

Analysis

The first confrontation between Gawker and BuzzFeed, perhaps unsurprisingly, began over the practice of aggregation. The incident that sparked this initial bout of discourse was the discovery that BuzzFeed was using images in its famous lists without appropriate attribution. The reuse of content without attribution on BuzzFeed's lists was first noted by Slate (Manjoo, 2012; Stahl, 2012) and *The Atlantic* (Madrigal, 2012), which categorized the practice not as a failure of journalistic norms but rather a result of arcane copyright laws that have not caught up to the new realities of Internet content. Defending the practice, Peretti said, "[T]he practical reality is that [giving attribution] is pretty challenging, particularly in the web culture of animals and the images that spread on Pinterest and Tumblr" (quoted in Madrigal, 2012). Gawker, however, quickly established the behavior as a potential violation of established journalistic practice by noting that "the site's approach to all content as building blocks for viral lists puts it in an awkward position in relation to internet etiquette and journalistic ethics" (A. Chen, 2012).

By framing the discourse around aggregation practices rather than fair-use considerations, Gawker shifted the conversation away from legal issues to ones of professional deviance. This shift in conversation toward journalistic norms forced Smith to admit that his site initially had "a heavy aggregation focus," but was quick to note that BuzzFeed was "moving toward more traditional standards of sourcing" and that he "[had] made those traditional reportorial standards a lot clearer" (quoted in A. Chen, 2012).

Smith not only acknowledges that aggregation is a practice he wishes to abandon but he also recognizes it as deviant by expressing a desire for more "traditional" or widely accepted journalistic sourcing standards. In addition to reifying professional norms, Smith assuages Gawker and its readers that it intends to behave as a traditional journalistic actor. Thus, after this initial confrontation over aggregation practices, it seemed that BuzzFeed was no longer willing to use this element of its past to defend its present actions. However, its history proved too difficult to escape and, when confronted with another scandal, the practice of aggregation would again be used as an explanation for professional deviance.

Two years after BuzzFeed's first plagiarism scandal, a new accusation arose. With the help of two Twitter users, Gawker accused BuzzFeed's Viral Politics editor, Benny Johnson, of plagiarizing content from Yahoo! Answers (Trotter, 2014a). The most clearly compromised article was on the London Blitz and had passages copied verbatim from a Yahoo! Answers post from four years prior. This was a more egregious violation than the copying of lists. Johnson's plagiarism, while initially defended by Smith, eventually led to Johnson being fired after 41 articles were found to have issues (Smith, 2014a). This incident also drew mainstream coverage from newspapers like *The New York Times* (Somaiya, 2014) and *The Washington Post* (Terris, 2015), as well as established online actors like Politico (Gold & Shutt, 2014).

However, unlike previous coverage of journalistic scandals, there was a notable difference in coverage between the older and the new, online outlets. The old guard did not bother to engage in any of the handwringing or professional discourse that was noted in previous cases of deviance (Carlson, 2014). Many outlets instead took the opportunity

to make snarky references to BuzzFeed's famed headlines: "Here's an inventory of all the outlets from which Johnson purloined material […] Or, in the BuzzFeed world, '41 Scandalous Editor's Notes'" (Wemple, 2014). However, Gawker's coverage, though just as snarky, placed the transgression in the context of larger implications for the practice of aggregation among online journalists. "One BuzzFeed editor, however, has streamlined this aggregation process to its vanishing point: Simply copying text from Yahoo! Answers and pasting it, without attribution, into his own work" (Trotter, 2014a).

Gawker once again invoked the practice of aggregation as the core issue behind this latest deviant behavior. Given that aggregation practices have been so closely tied to online journalism, indicting the former was tantamount to criticizing the latter. This close relationship was apparent to Smith as well. In speaking to a reporter for *The Washington Post*, he was quick to note: "Improper usage by Johnson, noted Smith, popped up not only in largely aggregational posts, but also in 'extremely original work, like that Fort Hood piece'" (Wemple, 2014).

According to Smith, the deviance of this situation did not lie with aggregation. He was quick to note that Johnson's even more traditional, "extremely original work" was corrupted with plagiarism. Thus, the blame was not with BuzzFeed and its reliance on aggregation, but rather the individual, Johnson, who had failed to adhere to accepted attribution practices. In his public apology, Smith further distances the new BuzzFeed from its aggregation past. "BuzzFeed started seven years ago as a laboratory for content. Our writers didn't have journalistic backgrounds and weren't held to traditional journalistic standards, because we weren't doing journalism" (Smith, 2014a). The invocation of journalistic standards clearly indicates that BuzzFeed sees itself as

belonging inside the boundaries of traditional journalism and that its behavior was a deviation from those accepted norms. Yet the mention of BuzzFeed's past helps to differentiate it from the more traditional journalistic actors and, within metajournalistic discourse, serves to distinguish it from the old guard of media outlets that it is trying to emulate. In effect, BuzzFeed is making the argument that, while it strives to fit within the boundaries of journalism, it deserves an exception for its unique upbringing and company history.

This double standard is further reinforced by the coverage of the scandal by prominent outlets. By chronicling the expulsion of a deviant journalist, BuzzFeed becomes more like *The New York Times* and the *New Republic*, who had to similarly exorcise plagiarists like Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass. In fact, Smith's post announcing the incident follows a similar format to *The New York Times* apology following Blair's resignation (Barry, Barstow, Glater, Liptak, & Steinberg, 2003), with Smith taking responsibility for not providing proper oversight, making appeals to a greater responsibility, and offering a formal accounting of the damage (Smith, 2014a). Additionally, there is a focus on individual transgression and a reassurance of the soundness of institutional structures that has been observed in legacy news organizations by other researchers (Carlson, 2014). Yet for all these similarities, it is important to note that the discourse regarding this transgression occurred on sites like Gawker and BuzzFeed rather than the pages of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post.* This cold shoulder of the major players has not escaped the notice of either Gawker or BuzzFeed. As Gawker reporter J. K. Trotter noted in his interview with Smith and

Peretti: “Part of the reason Gawker has to report fairly aggressively on BuzzFeed is that all of the other, sort of, traditional media outlets do not” (Smith & Peretti, 2015).

As a result of this lack of engagement from the major journalistic players, it seems that these accepted, but not fully integrated, actors have turned to each other to engage in metajournalistic discourse. As Smith notes: “…what you do when you publish standards, is that you make Gawker your public editor. Sure, we’ll be looking for [violations of standards internally]—[but] you’ve got all of Twitter, and you’ve got Gawker” (Smith & Peretti, 2015). Given the lack of corrective action on the part of traditional industry leaders and maintainers of professional standards, BuzzFeed, in hopes of validating the practice through metajournalistic discourse, welcomed Gawker’s engagement over their professional practices. Although this engagement stems from actions that are deemed deviant and a departure from accepted journalistic norms, they are nevertheless helping to further establish it as a journalistic actor, if not in relation to a publication like *The New York Times*, then certainly within a subset of the journalistic field that sites like Gawker and BuzzFeed now occupy. In the data-driven world of online journalism, BuzzFeed’s metrics suggest that it is one of the most-visited news sites in the U.S. (see Figure 3.2). In fact, BuzzFeed’s popularity has even led to speculation that it has beat *The New York Times* for page views (Ingram, 2015). A leaked *New York Times* innovation report also shows that the newspaper was looking to BuzzFeed as an example of how to build reader engagement and traffic (Benton, 2014).

For all the attempts of online news sites to conform and emulate the standards of the older organizations, there is also an element of rebellion or culture difference that emerges in this case. Much of the discussion around article removal on the part of

BuzzFeed has focused on the case of advertiser pressure and control of editorial content. In studying the discourse between these two sites, instances of articles critical of Axe body spray (Duffy, 2013), Internet Explorer, Pepsi (Trotter, 2015c), Monopoly (Trotter, 2015b), and Dove soap (Trotter, 2015a) have all been deleted in silence and with no formal justification or notification on the part of BuzzFeed. The articles likely would have remained forgotten if not for Gawker's reporting.

These deletions are particularly alarming to critics because they suggest that BuzzFeed lacks a distinction between the business and editorial components of the organization (Byers, 2014; Trotter, 2014b). Such editorial independence has long been a key component of the journalist's professional identity (Deuze, 2005c) and one that is fiercely defended (Revers, 2014). The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics notes that journalists should "distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two," and, more broadly, extolls the need to act independently ("SPJ Code of Ethics," 1996). More colloquially, however, this distinction is known as the "firewall" or the "separation of church and state" (Knight, 2012). The apparent lack of this separation at BuzzFeed has caused great concern because of the appearance that the website "[blew] up its own editorial guide in order to delete a post about a soap ad" (Hannon, 2015). Sacrificing posted content in favor of an advertiser in a traditional newsroom is unheard of—if for no other reason than many standards and ethics guides do not permit it. BuzzFeed's own guide plainly notes that: "Editorial posts should *never* be deleted for reasons related to their content, or because a subject or stakeholder has asked you to do so" (Hilton, 2015, emphasis original). Yet, as some in the journalism profession

have already noted: "BuzzFeed's advantage lies in its youth—in its plea that it's learning as it grows" (Colhoun, 2015).

Furthermore, Smith believes that BuzzFeed's own lack of authority compared to more traditional newspapers makes his organization less influential in creating news content: "If there's an ad on BuzzFeed, if there's an ad—you know, if *The New York Times* carries an open letter, and it's news, *New York Times* reporters will write about it as news" (Smith & Peretti, 2015). As a result, BuzzFeed's own perception of itself as not being on par with *The New York Times* enables it to have more flexibility in establishing its own definitions for the journalistic norms to which it subscribes. This fluidity in definition is underscored by Peretti:

> …when you look on the business side, people want to know, when I go and meet with people on our business team, can you trust that they'll keep your secrets confidential, and that they won't pass things over to the editorial side? (Smith & Peretti, 2015).

Peretti has taken the norm of separating advertising and editorial content and re-interpreted it as a protection for both parties, rather than its original intention of a protection of editorial integrity.

The rejection of traditional journalistic separations between advertising and editorial content may seem deleterious for BuzzFeed's efforts to be seen as a legitimate journalistic actor. However, this loose relationship does offer the company far more financial capital and stability than the elite papers whose standards they are flaunting. So, BuzzFeed seems to be earning legitimacy in the news industry not through adherence to traditional norms, but rather through financial success –

> BuzzFeed's financial success makes it seem like one of the great white hopes for journalism […] ethical missteps didn't stop Andreessen Horowitz from investing $50 million in the company last summer, and site reporters have gone on to do good, hard-hitting reporting just as The New York Times, The Washington Post, 60 Minutes, The New Republic, and many other media outlets besieged by scandal have done (Colhoun, 2015).

Conversely, Gawker, which is almost entirely privately owned, cannot lay claim to financial success as a metric of authority (Mahler, 2015). Gawker has no venture capital and it recently lost a $140 million privacy lawsuit to Hulk Hogan over the publication of a sex tape (Denton, 2016).[2] Instead, by performing more traditional boundary patrolling actions, it has become recognized by others who engage in metajournalistic discourse as performing "an internet watchdog role, an upstart taking on the bigger guys" (Greico, 2014) or "a part-time *BuzzFeed* watchdog" (Hannon, 2015). However, in performing this watchdog role, Gawker has also remained faithful to its own roots as an Internet tabloid. "Ultimately, Gawker benefits by making other writers look stupid. BuzzFeed is desperately trying to become viewed as a credible news source, and Gawker is happy to depict its staffers as a listicle-making trove of idiots." (Greico, 2014).

Even as Gawker embraces this traditional, watchdog role, as in the case of BuzzFeed and the advertiser firewall, it cannot, or will not, completely reject its formative roots for the sake of journalistic authority and acceptance. However, Gawker seems to be more self-aware of its own shortcomings and, on occasion, has argued for the journalistic value of tabloid reporting and its inclusion within the boundaries of

[2] The case of the Hulk Hogan sex tape and the ensuing lawsuit is a major episode in Gawker's history. However, it was not included in this research due to the fact that the case has yet to be fully adjudicated.

journalism (Trotter, 2014c). All of this defense of journalistic values and integrity would be put to the test in the summer of 2015 when Gawker would become embroiled in its own scandal.

Chapter 5

GawkerGate

On July 4, 2015, David Geithner, CFO of Condé Nast and brother of former Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, contacted a male escort in Chicago and arranged for a meeting of "2-3 hours" on July 11 at a cost of $2,500 (Sargent, 2015). However, the male escort, despite Geithner's use of a false name, managed to put together his client's identity and realize the depth of his political connections. Sensing an opportunity, the escort, who was identified as Leif Derek Truitt in later reports (Ross, 2015), decided to see if Geithner would use his connections to help him in a housing dispute with his landlord (Sargent, 2015). This request made Geithner nervous and he cancelled the rendezvous which, in turn, prompted Truitt to take his story to Gawker. The entire saga, complete with screenshots of the conversations between the two men, was posted on Gawker on July 16, 2015.

The reaction to the post was swift. Outrage quickly grew on Gawker's message boards as well as on other journalistic outlets. By the next morning, July 17, outlets like The Huffington Post (Arana, 2015), The Daily Beast (Grove, 2015a), and *The Washington Post* (Wemple, 2015), as well as notable journalists including Glenn Greenwald (Greenwald, 2015), all condemned the post. Responding to the criticism, Gawker Media's managing partnership met on July 17 and voted 4-2 in favor of

removing the article (Trotter, 2015d). The two votes against removal were from Tommy Craggs, Gawker Media's executive editor, and Heather Dietrick, President and chief legal counsel of Gawker Media, while the votes in favor of removal included Nick Denton, the operations and strategy officers, as well as the top advertising manager at the company. This vote was immediately unpopular with the editorial staff, who saw the act as a breach of the journalistic firewall and a triumph of business concerns over editorial independence (Gawker Media Editorial Staff, 2015). As a result, two days later, both Craggs and Max Read, the editor in chief of Gawker.com, resigned, citing the decision to remove the post as the cause (Trotter, 2015e). This internal discourse was made available to the public via several posts from both Gawker reporters (Gawker Media Editorial Staff, 2015; Trotter, 2015d, 2015e) and Denton (Denton, 2015a)

Analysis

This case, despite occurring in a much shorter time span than the first, is much denser and more complex. There are several layers of journalistic decision-making and discourse that must be separated and analyzed individually.

The first and most immediate point of discourse came over the decision to publish the story in the first place. On its face, the story is a fairly naked attempt to publish the salacious and private details of a private individual's life. As one former Gawker writer noted, the story, unlike Gawker's previous revelations of infidelity, was not redeemed by prior moralizing or hypocrisy on the part of the subject (Kasperkevic, 2015; Lach, 2014; Weinstein, 2014a) or the subject having to live up to higher standards as a result of the position he held (Weinstein, 2014b). Thus, from a professional news value perspective, it

lacked genuine public interest—a matter that many journalists were quick to note in their condemnations (Greenwald, 2015; McBride, 2015).

Yet, as criticism of the decision to publish what many considered to be an inappropriate story grew, several Gawker writers noted that the Geithner story conformed to the site's editorial guidelines over the years: "Jordan's post was solidly in line with what Gawker has asked its writers and editors to do for years" (Cook, 2015a). "Given the chance gawker will always report on married c-suite executives of major media companies fucking around on their wives" (Read, 2015). These statements are not only to be expected from the editors of a site that has made headlines time and again for publicizing the private details of celebrities (Daulerio, 2012; Pareene, 2008a, 2008b), but they also comport well with the typologies and definitions that scholars have laid out for tabloid media (Sparks, 2000). It would seem, then, that the initial reaction of the online and legacy press was to begin to publicly expel Gawker's deviant behavior from the journalistic realm in the same manner that it had done with previous tabloids (Berkowitz, 2000; Winch, 1997). The journalist Greenwald (2015) encapsulated these initial expulsion sentiments most succinctly: "There has to be some public interest to the disclosure, otherwise it's just sleazy tabloid gossip for prurient enjoyment, not adversarial journalism." This discourse, left unchecked, would have most likely resulted in some degree of expulsion of Gawker from the journalistic space. Yet, the website's subsequent actions changed the direction of the discourse in this case entirely.

The subsequent removal of the article from Gawker over the objections of the editorial staff changed the boundary discourse from one of removing deviant values to a discussion of the autonomy and professionalism of a journalistic organization. The shift

occurred in part due to the very public acknowledgment of failure by Denton. In his public explanation of the removal of the story, Denton recognized Gawker's substandard values in choosing to run the story. "The story involves extortion, illegality and reckless behavior, sufficient justification at least in tabloid news terms. […] In the early days of the internet, that would have been enough" (Denton, 2015a). Denton's reference to the early days of the internet alludes to the early, formative days of blogging that were characterized by an absence of standards (Andrews, 2003; Matheson, 2004a) and an oppositional and confrontational attitude toward legacy outlets (Rosen, 2005). However, in this instance, Denton appears to acknowledge that the online medium has matured and that he wishes to see Gawker position itself within the bounds of more traditional journalism. "…Gawker has an influence and audience that demands greater editorial restraint. Gawker is no longer the insolent blog that began in 2003. It does important and interesting journalism…" (Denton, 2015a).

The other cause of the shift in the discourse was the resignation of Gawker's two top editors. In a meeting with the editorial staff, "Craggs and Read explained that they were quitting to defend a sacred principle"—the principle of editorial independence (Sherman, 2015). The principle in question – the separation of Church and State, the Firewall, or simply journalistic autonomy – is the widely held convention of separating editorial from business and advertising interests to avoid the latter being able to dictate the decisions of the former. By invoking one of journalism's greatest norms, Gawker had become a discussion on professional practices. Headlines shifted from distancing language—e.g., "Conde Nast exec story: Gawker is keeping its sleaze game in shape" from *The Washington Post* media commentator Eric Wemple (2015)—to ones

highlighting a discord within the company, exemplified by The Daily Beast's "The Day Gawker Tore Itself Apart" and New York Magazine's "Gawker's Existential Crisis" (Grove, 2015b; Sherman, 2015). Phrases like "standing on principle," "dying on a hill," and "blaze of glory" were all used to describe the resignations. These phrases not only evoke powerful imagery of a noble struggle but also lionize the defense of accepted journalistic norms and practices. This noble sacrifice for the sake of traditional norms was most evident in the internal memos and emails, written by the two departing editors, that explained and defended their decisions.

"The undoing of [Gawker's brand] began the moment Nick himself put the once inviolable sanctity of Gawker Media's editorial to a vote," wrote Craggs to the editorial staff (Trotter, 2015e). "[…That] non-editorial business executives were given a vote in the decision to remove it is an unacceptable and unprecedented breach of the editorial firewall, and turns Gawker's claim to be the world's largest independent media company into, essentially, a joke," wrote Read to the managing partnership (Trotter, 2015e). The sharp contrast drawn between editorial and business staff not only invokes a key tenet of journalistic identity (Deuze, 2005b), but use of phrases like "noble struggle" emphasize and elevate the infraction to the level of occupation-defining boundary maintenance. By framing his disagreement in terms of professional norms, Craggs' resignation becomes not only an end to a workplace dispute, but an act of autonomy protection as well (see Table 2).

Denton, in explaining his decision to his editorial staff as well as his readership, invoked some of these same values. "The company promotes truth and understanding through the pursuit of the real story — and supports, finances and defends such

independent journalism." "We need a codification of editorial standards beyond *putting truths on the internet*. Stories need to be true *and* interesting" (Denton, 2015b, emphasis original). Denton's call for the codification of editorial standards while emphasizing a need for stories to be relevant mirrors Starr's argument for truth and validity in journalism. Like Starr (1982), Denton acknowledges that, in order to gain the cultural capital necessary to remain a viable actor in the journalistic profession, his content needs not only be factually correct, but obtained in a way that comports to established norms.

Thus, the coverage of the resignation of Gawker's two chief editors became a collective recognition and reaffirmation of traditional journalistic values, though admittedly for different reasons. Gawker's editorial staff saw the need to maintain a division between themselves and the business interests of the company as a mark of professional autonomy and identity. Read, in his parting message, noted that editorial independence was something that belonged to the members of the editorial staff: "you have the ability to demand from management the editorial protections you deserve" (Trotter, 2015e). For Denton and the company mangers, the standards were necessary for authority, boundary inclusion, and ultimately financial success: "Were there also business concerns? Absolutely. The company's ability to finance independent journalism is critical" (Denton, 2015b). Meanwhile, the legacy press simply saw this as yet another incident that necessitated a reaffirmation of journalistic boundaries and norms. *The New York Times*, for example, was quick to note the deviant nature of Gawker's editorial judgment: "…[Gawker] became a symbol of the unfettered nature of Internet journalism by publishing stories that pushed the limits of privacy and media ethics, the kind that most other publications think twice about" (Somaiya, 2015a).

Unlike most journalistic scandals, Gawker's transgressions did not involve an obvious transgressor or fault. This was not a scandal like the ones involving Jayson Blair or Janet Cooke, where there was a clear "bad actor" and a desire to subvert professional norms. Many saw the story's publication as a failure in judgment, but even the staunchest critics hesitated to accuse the website of journalistic malpractice. Nor was this a situation akin to the vilifying of the paparazzi who chased Princess Diana—a small group of tabloid journalists that could be easily excised from the professional community. In this case, journalists could not "masterfully co-opt the criticism […] to make public proclamations of their earnestness," as they had done with the paparazzi (Bishop, 1999, p. 110). So, instead of focusing on attempting to publicly shame Gawker for its error, some used the case as a way to address broader issues within the journalistic profession. Gawker's motivations for publication of the story were not unique. In many ways, the site's reasons for running the story represented the motivations of many smaller journalistic outlets – a drive for readership and relevance in an increasingly cacophonous and jaded media environment. As a result, once the coverage moved past the initial condemnation of the decision to run the story, journalists did not call for Gawker to be excised from the community. Instead, stories framed the scandal as a cautionary tale in the outing of closeted homosexuals.

- "Gawker's Outing Of Condé Nast's CFO Is Gay-Shaming, Not Journalism" (Arana, 2015)
- "The dangerous message media outlets like Gawker send when they out people" (Lopez, 2015)

- "Gawker, Grantland and when our personal lives go public" (Rosenberg, 2015)[3]

Headlines like these suggest that this failure of judgment is a result of a lack of professional standards and norms regarding the reporting and covering of homosexuals rather than a form of deviance on the part of Gawker. "The task for reporters and editors is to suss out when someone's sexual identity or gender identity is a headline, and when it's simply a fact," notes Rosenberg (2015) in writing for *The Washington Post*. Lopez (2015), in writing for Vox, went one step further and implored journalists "to consider the journalistic ethics of covering LGBTQ people." These articles further suggest that one of the boundary actions occurring in this case is not one of expulsion of deviant professional values, but rather a call for expansion and review of how journalists cover the private lives of homosexuals in a society coming to terms with their ever-growing public presence.

In the months following this scandal, Gawker announced that it would become "20 percent nicer" (Sterne, 2015). The figure came from Denton during a meeting with employees following the scandal. The sentiment was the first of several concessions that Denton would make to better align Gawker's editorial mission with that of mainstream journalism. The sentiment was subject to some internal ridicule, however, resulting in the article announcing the change bearing the headline: "Gawker Is Changing Its Name To The Ultimate Nice Website" (Leon, 2015). Then, in November 2015, it was announced that Gawker would shift its focus to political news (Farhi, 2015). This change was widely reported as a result of the scandal earlier that summer, though the internal memos made

[3] Grantland was a sports and pop-culture website owned by ESPN. The story referred to in this headline is known as the "Dr. V controversy." In a story for Grantland, Caleb Hannan featured a golf putter and its creator, Essay Anne Vanderbilt, referred to as Dr. V in the article. In revealing the fraudulent nature of a number of scientific qualifications that Vanderbilt claimed to hold, Hannan also included her gender identity. Vanderbilt, who was transgender, committed suicide before the article was published.

little direct mention of it (Calderone, 2015; Farhi, 2015; Somaiya, 2015b). Regardless of the publicly stated motivations for such change, this latest shift is a final and dramatic departure from the tabloid values that caused the scandal in the first place, as well as public affirmation and agreement to abide by more accepted journalistic norms. This change also served as a chance for Denton to highlight Gawker's more traditional bona fides: "Politics, writ large, has provided the scene for some of Gawker's most recognized editorial scoops" (Calderone, 2015). Ultimately, this transition signaled to the maintainers of journalism's boundaries that Gawker intended to play by journalism's more-established rules, rather than its own. By adopting the most sacred and important of journalistic topics as its new editorial mission, the one-time gossip blog signaled that it was no longer interested in operating solely on the boundary's edge.

Chapter 6

Discussion

When both of these cases are considered together, some interesting parallels begin to emerge. Both actors examined in this research seem to be searching for a journalistic identity that acknowledges their less normative origins. In the case of BuzzFeed, its struggle focused on their relationship with advertisers and social media, while Gawker wrestled with its tabloid origins. In some ways, these cases highlight the concessions that both companies have made to traditionally accepted norms and values. For example, both companies have made political coverage a mainstay of their editorial agenda. Peretti, BuzzFeed's founder, "understood that political news could lend the whole operation the sort of credibility that entices advertisers otherwise skittish about appearing next to lowbrow content" (M. Tracy, 2012). Meanwhile, Gawker's newest executive editor, John

Cook, remarked that "Gawker's biggest stories have always had a political component, from Toronto's crack-smoking mayor to Roger Ailes' paranoia and power to Josh Duggar's rank hypocrisy" (Cook, 2015b). This not only helps to justify the site's shift to the political arena, but also puts emphasis on the same kinds of scoops that a more traditional outlet would also trumpet (Calderone, 2015).

However, despite these prominent and significant turns toward traditionalism, these newer online actors are not ready to completely mimic newspapers or cable news channels. Denton, for example, has very openly sneered at legacy institutions, noting that Gawker's qualities include "the desire of the outsider to be feared if you're not to be respected, nip the ankles till they notice you; contempt for newspaper pieties; and a fanatical belief in the truth no matter the cost" (Denton, 2015b). Later in the same memo, Denton again communicated a desire for only partial conformity to tradition by reassuring his staff: "If you're wondering whether a more explicit editorial policy will turn us into some generic internet media company, I'd say no…" (Denton, 2015b). The same importance and value of maintaining a unique voice can be seen in BuzzFeed's growth as a journalistic outfit as well. The site's unique approach to news has brought it distinction: "BuzzFeed—lightning-quick, light-hearted, addictive, and a little dumb—is the defining media outlet of 2012" (M. Tracy, 2012). The rationale for Gawker and BuzzFeed's hesitation to fully integrate into the journalistic space may appear puzzling at first glance, yet in the meta-journalistic discourse, elements of authority-seeking and identity emerge to offer explanations for this behavior. Both of these outlets seem to be responsive to the pressures of more-established actors within their field, but they are not

willing to sacrifice their unique voice and status that brought them so much of their success in the first place.

Gawker came to prominence at a time when online journalism was not a serious endeavor. Bloggers had scored their first major journalistic scoop in 1998 with the Monica Lewinsky scandal (Glass, 2013). This development led a bewildered press to refer to blogs as existing "in the wilds of cyberspace" (BBC, 1998). Even Denton acknowledges faults during this early period: "In the early days of the internet, that would have been enough. 'We put truths on the internet.' […] Gawker is no longer the insolent blog that began in 2003" (Denton, 2015a). During the past decade, the need for news organizations to have a more robust online presence has become increasingly apparent, but the transition to becoming digital-centric has been slow for many (Ryfe, 2013). The differences in style between blogs and legacy news organizations as well the reluctant acceptance of online-oriented newswork as being fully legitimate (Anderson, 2013) has resulted in the journalistic space remaining somewhat divided, with legacy and born-digital actors occupying increasingly similar and yet simultaneously different places in the media ecosystem. This distinction, if not disdain in some instances, between the two sides is evident in the cases examined here.

Gawker has never shied away from displaying its contempt for the authority espoused by the journalistic establishment. As Gawker's John Cook notes, "[W]e need to work on how to package and present our reporting in a way that launches these conversations and investigations outright, instead of serving them up to our purported editorial betters to amplify and extend them" (Cook, 2015b). Cook is also quick to point

out the virtues of Gawker's position when compared to the more traditional *New York Times*:

> And the impact of the Times' story is in fact a testament to our own power here at Gawker Media—our ability to sniff out the stories that other less agile outlets are ignoring (for now) and read them into the record without navigating the hurdles and barriers to fast, honest publication that exist for our competitors (Cook, 2015b).

Gawker also has openly picked fights with prominent newspapers such as *The Washington Post*, once claiming to have "Put the Washington Post Out of Business" in a headline to a story about a dispute regarding news aggregation practices (Shapira, 2009; Snyder, 2009). When Gawker announced its shift to political coverage and a turning away from its tabloid past, it didn't chose to name an established legacy or even online journalistic actor as its role model; it went with John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* and Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* as sources of inspiration (Somaiya, 2015b). Though research has shown *The Daily Show* to have strong journalistic bona fides (Feldman, 2007; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007), both Stewart and Oliver have long proclaimed themselves and their shows to be comedy, not journalism (J. Robinson, 2015). Thus, Gawker appears to be staking out a precarious position along what they believe to be a journalistic spectrum, rejecting the idea of distinct boundaries that have been articulated in scholarship (Coddington, 2012c; Lowrey, 2006). While openly disdainful of their "editorial betters," they are more than willing to accept some of the traditional symbols of newswork—editorial standards, sourcing and attribution, and even a shift in favor of politics and not gossip.

Many of the posts written by Gawker staff that explain or defend the site reference journalistic scoops and stories that have grown to national prominence or somehow triggered further attention (Cook, 2015b; Denton, 2015a, 2015b). Gawker's adherence to these "professional logics" (Lewis, 2012) resulted in a victory—and, in turn, greater authority—in its boundary contest with the better-funded and more popular BuzzFeed. Thus, in adopting these logics and by choosing to focus on politics while abandoning the "tabloid trash," Gawker believes it is making a shift towards more traditional coverage rather than crossing a distinct boundary between legitimate and not. This finer distinction will allow it to not only maintain its "sharp Gawker wit," but also to balance between being an outside and inside member of a profession that Denton argues is less trusted by the millennial generation (Calderone, 2015).

Furthermore, this balancing act appears to reflect Gawker's growing awareness of the boundaries that exist for online actors within the journalistic space. Gawker has noted that it is aware of the boundary-including role that established actors posses: "journalists and opinion-makers decide whether we deserve the great privilege of the profession" (Trotter, 2015e). The site has also openly stated its desire to operate "close to the edge, but not over it" (Trotter, 2015e), and has recognized that its successes stem, at least in part, from these boundary-flauting actions. "It's because Gawker pushes the boundaries that they've made such a mark; and sometimes the site oversteps the line" (Denton, 2015c). Given this awareness and subtlety of purpose, Denton (2015b) is able to "see Gawker Media occupying a space on the online media spectrum between a stolid Vox Media and a more anarchic Ratter." In positioning the organization between two online actors, Gawker's founder once again illustrates his acknowledgement of and, in some

cases, even adherence to the professional logics of the more established journalistic actors—but also his total lack of interest in being compared to them.

In many ways, the conflict and dichotomies exposed by these cases are representative of discussions that are occurring in newsrooms as well as in the academy. Scholarship seems split on the consequences of the growth of entertainment coverage and other click-driven reporting popularized by prominent online actors and increasingly mimicked by legacy news organizations (Sobel, 2015). Some scholars have noted distinct benefits to softer, more tabloid-like news. Although problematic from a professional boundary perspective, the popularity of more entertaining news forms is able to finance more traditional investigations, especially as economic challenges add to the pressure on newsrooms to deliver revenue-generating content (Sjøvaag, 2015). Conversely, other scholars, such as Gans (2009), argue that, given a finite number of news consumers, the tabloidization of content leads to ever growing numbers of citizens receiving sub-standard news about national and international events. Both scholars and content producers, however, acknowledge the strong role that financial concerns play in the journalistic space. "Because newspapers are also commercial products, they need content that will attract advertising, not least to fund its more serious forms of journalism" (Sjøvaag, 2015).

These cases also illustrate the diminishing prominence of aggregation as an obvious and stated form of newswork. The feud prominently featured a discussion of the practice at its outset. However, as time passed, aggregation featured less and less in the discourse. When BuzzFeed's editor in chief, Ben Smith, was asked to provide Poynter with a list of his site's best stories of 2012, he offered examples of original reporting, not

aggregation (McBride, 2013). The stories, with topics ranging from sleeping disorders to Mitt Romney's faith, were hardly the listicles for which the site has been known. That Smith would choose to highlight works of more traditional reporting rather than the most-viewed or most-shared articles suggests that BuzzFeed seeks to decrease the emphasis it places on the practice of aggregation, at least when engaging in metajournalistic discourse. This trend persists today, with BuzzFeed proclaiming that two of the 28 most important things that the site achieved in 2015 were: "26. Dedicated an entire week to Mental Health," and "27. Investigative reporting got INTENSE in the U.S. [and] …the UK" (BuzzFeed Marketing, 2016). Meanwhile, Gawker has continued to publish articles that cast aggregation practices as deviant journalistic behavior. Gawker's most recent target was an exposé of dishonest reporting and theft of copyrighted material at the U.K.'s *The Daily Mail* (King, 2015). Within the data sets of this research, further evidence of the lionization of original reporting is evident. Both Denton and Gawker's latest executive editor, John Cook, have referenced Gawker's journalistic scoops and journalistic victories in their lists of the site's greatest achievements (Cook, 2015b; Denton, 2015b). This shift keeps both BuzzFeed and Gawker on a trajectory toward conformity with the broader journalistic identity that lionizes original or "shoe-leather" reporting. As Rosen (2015) characterizes the professional stance: "There can never be enough of [shoe-leather reporting]. Only good derives from it. Anything that eclipses it is bad. Anything that eludes it is suspect. Anything that permits more of it is holy." This sentiment has been echoed by journalists directly (Keller, 2011) as well as to scholars (Anderson, 2013a; Coddington, 2012a; R. V. Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987; Krause, 2011). Thus, the turn away from openly engaging in aggregation can be viewed as yet

another concession that has been made by these online news organizations in an effort to not only comport with pre-existing norms and accepted practices, but to garner greater authority from their professional peers and from audiences who may regard them as legitimate journalists.

Ultimately, these cases highlight a growing need for studies of boundaries that further examine and address the positioning of newer entrants in the journalistic space. Gawker and BuzzFeed have shown that they are quite willing to straddle the boundaries of traditional journalistic practices. Indeed, they appear to be far more aware of boundary-management behaviors and utilize them to their advantage. This need to better understand newer entrants comports with calls from other scholars like Deuze (2009) to incorporate new trends, developments, and future perspectives brought on by technological changes into existing theoretical frameworks. Thus, by broadening the research scope to include and examine the actions of these newer digital actors in relation to each other as well as in relation to legacy news organizations, this research demonstrates how studies of boundary work may explain the rise of online journalistic actors in the future.

Alternative Perspectives

This research has applied the lens of boundary work to analyze and interpret the discourse found within these case studies. However, other scholars have drawn upon field theory in similar analyses (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2015). As noted earlier in this work, field theory focuses on the development of cultural and economic capital as well as its transfer among actors within a given field of practice (Benson & Neveu, 2005). Scholars have applied field theory to examine the whole of the journalistic field (Craft, Vos, &

Wolfgang, 2015; Craig, 2015; Neveu, 2016), subsets of journalistic practice (English, 2015; Vandevoordt, 2015), and competing paradigms (Wang, 2015). In these and other instances, field theory is better suited to studying macro-level changes as opposed to micro-interactions and discourses—such as the distinct cases examined here. Nevertheless, to be theoretically comprehensive, we might imagine at least how field theory could be used to shed additional light on the events studied here.

Both Gawker and BuzzFeed are new entrants to the journalistic field, and as such they must make their difference from existing agents known if they are to play a transformative role in the field (Bourdieu, 1998). This premise could be used to explain Gawker's firm desire to maintain its unique, albeit "bitchy," voice as it shifted its focus from tabloid to politics (Denton, 2015b). In fact, by utilizing field theory, Gawker's shift in editorial mission would be seen as the site's willingness to submit itself to the journalistic *doxa* that governs the field (Benson, 2006). Gawker, after violating the established rules of the field, retreated to a much safer and more accepted editorial mission to avoid further loss of cultural and economic capital. Furthermore, by critiquing BuzzFeed, a non-traditional actor, through the use of traditional journalistic standards, Gawker was acting to preserve the journalistic *doxa* as well (Vos, 2011). Finally, in the meta-journalistic discourse, there are many references to attaining financial and cultural capital, key forms of power in the field theory framework (Benson & Neveu, 2005). For example, in the feud between Gawker and BuzzFeed, the latter's financial successes and ability to attract investment were widely interpreted by both media and scholars as a mark of success and authority (Isaac, 2014; O'Donovan, 2014; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2015). Conversely, Gawker's appeals to prior journalistic triumphs can easily be interpreted as

public displays of accumulated cultural capital. In fact, Gawker's current editor in chief, Jon Cook, in writing on a recovering, post-scandal Gawker, clearly attempts to highlight their accumulated capital: "*The New York Times*' Sunday investigation into Amazon's corporate culture and management practices was magisterial, clear-eyed—and very familiar to Gawker Media readers. […] This is not to denigrate the Times story, which involved more than 100 interviews and placed the conversation about Silicon Valley's demented work ethos front-and-center as only the Times' front page can do. But goddammit, we were first. Hamilton [Nolan][4] was first" (Cook, 2015b). The site's leaders do not shy away from displaying their economic capital either: "…scoops on Josh Duggar, the family-values hypocrite, and Dr Dre, the inspiration for Straight Outta Compton, took the site to a new weekly traffic record" (Denton, 2015c).

Another consideration that should be made in examining the results of this research is that there is a lack of data about or consideration of audience opinion. There is a growing body of research that has illustrated the potential power of audiences in shaping journalistic work, especially in the online space (Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014; S. Robinson, 2010; Ziegele, Breiner, & Quiring, 2014). Furthermore, Gawker itself has placed more emphasis on the power of audience metrics than most legacy media organizations (Sobel, 2015). As a result, it becomes difficult to deny that the way these actors perceive their audiences shapes their actions. For example, when Denton wrote about Gawker's resurgence following the Condé Nast scandal, the evidence he provided to readers was nothing more than a new weekly traffic record for the site (Denton, 2015c). Meanwhile, BuzzFeed is on a quest to find better, more precise measures of

[4] Hamilton Nolan is a Gawker reporter who, among his other work, published many articles describing an abusive and high-pressure work environment at Amazon.com. The series was comprised 13 posts over two years and was based on Amazon employee emails to Noland (Nolan, 2015).

audience attention (Greenberg, 2016). However, despite the influence of audiences on digital news organizations, discussions about which news sites are journalistic and which are not seem to leave audience perception out of the equation. Though some scholars have begun to tackle the influence of audiences through field theory and gatekeeping (Tandoc, 2014, 2015), no such efforts have been made in regard to boundary work. While research makes great effort at ascertaining whether legacy actors will accept a new entrant as legitimate, audience opinions on new actors are typically left out. This oversight seems particularly problematic for online actors who have popularized and championed the use of comment sections and social media to interact with their audiences. Furthermore, some research even suggests that audiences are not as accepting of these newer entrants as previously thought and are actually nostalgic for the values that are embodied by the older, more-established journalistic actors (Craft et al., 2015). Recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center corroborate these findings by indicating that BuzzFeed is "more distrusted than trusted" by all three of the most recent generations (Millennial, Gen X, and Baby Boomer) (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015). This Pew data, though only one point of measure, and far from conclusive, raises some interesting questions regarding the validity and impact of not only the acceptance of newer actors like Gawker or BuzzFeed by journalists, but also the methodological frameworks built by scholars. This contradictory data suggests a need to investigate whether audiences are as aware of boundary disputes as journalists and whether these disputes matter to them. Furthermore, by considering audiences, in addition to established actors, when conducting boundary research, we can make our conclusions more meaningful and relevant in an ever-shifting journalistic space.

Conclusion

Almost as soon as BuzzFeed declared itself a journalistic organization, questions about how it handled attribution and sourcing began to emerge. Traditionally, the media elite would have addressed this sort of deviant behavior (Carlson, 2014; Eason, 1986), and yet the condemnations never came. Instead, another online news site, Gawker, took it upon itself to engage with BuzzFeed and attempt to correct what it believed to be inappropriate behavior for a journalistic entity. The resulting discourse between these two actors is a fresh case in the study of journalistic boundaries. The analysis shows that the actions of the first case in this study are an attempt by two actors to create a niche or bubble within the traditional journalistic realm—one that incorporates the strengths of the legacy news organizations while accounting for the new realities of the online experience. This desire is further reinforced by Gawker, which, in the midst of its own scandal, refuses to completely surrender to traditional norms and practices. Gawker and BuzzFeed both draw on the tools of legitimacy and authority that traditional news media enjoy. They adopt standards guides and employ terms of authority such as "church and state." When they engage in metajournalistic discourse, terminology such as ethics, plagiarism, and transparency are used as bywords and unquestionable standards. Yet, while they attempt to model themselves after elite players, there is a limit to how far they will go. Gawker wants to enjoy the status of being a reader's "trusted guide" to the world of new media and online news, but it claims to have no interest in "respectability" (Read, 2014). It sees itself along a spectrum of other online actors rather than legacy organizations, and hopes to model itself on *The Daily Show* rather than *60 Minutes*. Meanwhile, BuzzFeed struggles to maintain a precarious balance between being a go-to

destination for viral advertising content and a reputable news outlet (Smith & Peretti, 2015). None of these ambitions fits neatly into the currently understood business models or traditional newsroom cultures that have been the subject of much journalism scholarship over several decades. Both of these organizations are creating something new, something born out of their unique histories, while simultaneously struggling for influence and inclusion in the greater field of professional journalism (Wagner, 2013).

Moreover, there is good evidence to suggest that the influence of Gawker and BuzzFeed is growing. At a time when most journalistic organizations are struggling for financial resources, BuzzFeed is raising capital in large sums (Isaac, 2014). This infusion of cash has not only brought increased opportunities for expansion, but also has given rise to discussions about its role in the future of journalism (O'Donovan, 2014). Even the acclaimed investigative reporter Seymour Hersh has said that "some of the younger stuff, once they get their feet on the ground and get a little more money, a little more success, a little more security, and a little more confidence, they'll fill the gap… I'm talking about the BuzzFeeds [and] Gawker" (Malsin, 2015).

So, while this case study affirms that the concepts of boundary work may be applied to study newer journalistic actors (see Table 1), it also illustrates that there is a growing need to further investigate how these actors see themselves, behave in relation to other organizations, and ultimately define their boundaries and authority in complicated ways. While studies of daily newspapers and evening news broadcasts suggest that a confrontation of deviant behavior is occurring in this case, it is unclear if these actions are part of a greater effort to bring online actors further into alignment with accepted norms. It is possible that, instead, we are seeing the development of new boundaries for online

news sites that not only address different forms of newswork such as aggregation, but also take a strong line against fully integrating with legacy actors. By selectively adopting and rejecting accepted elements of journalistic logics, it is possible that cases like the ones examined here are the beginning formations of new types of journalism, ones with boundaries and logics all their own.

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Appendix

Table 1 Forms of Boundary Work in Journalism

	Participants	Practices	Professionalism
Expansion	Incorporating non-traditional journalists	Taking over new media practices as acceptable	Absorbing new media as acceptable journalism
Expulsion	Expelling deviant actors	Expelling deviant practices	Expelling deviant forms and values
Protection of Autonomy	Keeping out non-journalistic informational actors	Defense of ability to define correct practices	Defense from non-professional outsiders

Note: Table adapted from Carlson, M. (2015). The many boundaries of journalism. In M. Carlson & S. C. Lewis (Eds.), *Boundaries of journalism: professionalism, practices and participation*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Table 2 Timeline of Significant Events

Date	Event	
Dec. 2011	BuzzFeed hires Ben Smith as editor in chief	Case 1
8 Jun 2012	Gawker writes first article criticizing BuzzFeed	
Apr 2014	Gawker discovers BuzzFeed removed over 4,000 old posts	
26 Jul 2014	BuzzFeed fires Benny Johnson for plagiarism	
8 Apr 2015	BuzzFeed removes post criticizing Dove ad campaign	
10 Apr 2015	After heavy criticism from Gawker, Ben Smith apologizes for deleting the Dove post. The Dove, and a previously deleted Monopoly post, are reinstated.	
22 Apr 2015	Ben Smith and Jonah Peretti are interviewed by Gawker's J.K. Trotter	
16 July 2015	Gawker publishes article outing Condé Nast CFO	Case 2
17 July 2015	Gawker retracts the article	
19 July 2015	Max Read and Tommy Craggs resign	
24 July 2015	Nick Denton holds a staff meeting where he announces Gawker will be "20% nicer"	
17 Nov 2015	Gawker announces a shift from gossip to politics	