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# Guarding the Firewall: How Political Journalists Distance Themselves From the Editorial Endorsement Process

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## Abstract

Through a lens of boundary work and role conception, this study seeks to understand how political journalists discursively construct the role of the newspaper editorial endorsement. Researchers conducted long-form interviews with political journalists in the United States ( $n = 64$ ) to understand how journalists conducted boundary work relative to endorsements. Journalists argued that the 2016 election was a decisive event in which political news endorsements lost their original objective. Political journalists described laboring to discursively distance themselves from the endorsement process and viewed political endorsements not only as ineffective, but also as jeopardizing their news organizations' independence.

## Keywords

editorial endorsements, boundary work, paradigm repair, political journalism, media sociology, interviews

## Introduction

Six days before the 2020 U.S. presidential election, senior media writer Tom Jones (2020) posed the question for Poynter, “Why do newspapers still make political endorsements?” In his column, he noted that, for the 2020 election season, the 30

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newspapers in the McClatchy newspaper chain had decided to refrain from making a presidential endorsement unless they had the opportunity to individually interview both candidates. Jones (2020) noted,

If we don't interview the candidates, we won't make a recommendation for president. Most readers aren't turning to us for national political commentary, and they can choose among dozens of news organizations that deploy journalists to cover the presidential campaign full-time. If we're simply observing the race from afar, our ability to provide unique content and our own reporting is severely limited.

But why do such endorsements even matter? Historically, such endorsements are rooted in the idea that the editorial board—by nature of its walled association with the journalistic public trust—is best positioned to prescribe voting to the public they serve (Meltzer, 2007). Yet, as Sternberg (2020) noted, the 500 editorial endorsements for 2016 U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton represents a stark contrast to the fewer than 30 for the 2016 eventual winner, Donald Trump. Although Hillary Clinton did win the popular vote in 2016, the landslide of editorial endorsements did little to affect a matching landslide in voting. So why do it?

This study undertakes to understand how political journalists conceptualize the role of the editorial endorsements in the context of, and in response to, the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a critical incident within the field (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018; Carlson et al., 2021; Gutsche, 2018; Lewis et al., 2021; Scacco & Coe, 2021). This was done through 64 long-form interviews with U.S.-based political journalists. Through the lenses of boundary work and role conception, this research indicates that the 2016 election caused political journalists to label editorial endorsements as a form of deviancy—by extension, offering a critique of the existing paradigm of journalistic independence.

## **Boundary Work and Paradigm Repair**

Boundary work reflects a standard process that professions engage in to assess where certain work fits in relation to neighboring professions. This occurs through disputes with neighboring fields (e.g., strategic communication) and through tactics aimed to “marginalize nonprofessionals encroaching on their turf” (Lewis, 2012, p. 2). The concept is “critical for understanding how distinctions such as professional/amateur, producer/user, and journalist/non-journalist are forged, maintained, and continuously reconfigured amid changing circumstances” (Lewis, 2012, p. 10). Boundary work delimits the bounds of appropriate journalistic practices and operates as a part of the theoretical tradition of metajournalistic discourse. As a form of “journalism about journalism,” boundary work emphasizes the individuals who “continually make and remake boundaries of acceptable practices through their interpretive labor” (Carlson, 2016, p. 360). Journalists construct these boundaries through discussion among themselves and actors outside the field (Kananovich & Perreault, 2021; Perreault et al., 2019), and metajournalistic discourse further serves to stabilize the journalistic field in

the midst of critical incidents (Perreault et al., 2022). Political journalism, through this theoretical framework, could be considered as one of the “essential democratic activities . . . conceived of as one of the most significant battlegrounds for the discursive struggle over journalistic boundaries” (Johnson & Kelling, 2018, p. 3).

Boundary work considers the boundary itself to be “contextual and variable cultural constructions requiring ongoing attention” as opposed to “stable determining structures” (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014, p. 391). Boundaries are “shared ways of understanding news work, and these mindsets inform how news is produced and consumed” (Carlson, 2016, p. 360) and would naturally be employed by political journalists to ensure that they retain “their position as an essential (and central) player within the journalistic field” (Perreault et al., 2019, p. 1153; see also Perreault & Meltzer, 2022; Wolfgang et al., 2021).

Such discursive battles have stakes in how journalists think about their work and conduct their work. Carlson (2016) partnered boundary work with the theoretical tradition of paradigm repair under the umbrella theory of metajournalistic discourse. Paradigm repair reflects the idea that “when journalists perceive an event or situation as undermining journalists’ or news organizations’ credibility and authority they will go to great efforts to restore their own image and reputation” (Steiner et al., 2013, pp. 705–706). When journalists are being attacked for operating in ways that are deemed to be inappropriate, they engage in *paradigm repair* as a way of normalizing the situation (Bennett et al., 1985; Hindman & Thomas, 2013; Zelizer, 2004). Paradigm repair serves as a way for the journalism field to conduct the double duty of both defending the activity in question and simultaneously making a case for its continued operation (Berkowitz, 2000). Paradigmatic critiques come from at least three different places: from the public, as was the case with the GamerGate controversy (Perreault & Vos, 2018); from within the journalistic field, as was the case in the Jayson Blair scandal at the *New York Times* (Hindman, 2005); and from other social institutions, such as the government in the case of journalist Helen Thomas’ comments about Jews (Hindman & Thomas, 2013).

Carlson (2016) connected the frameworks boundary work and paradigm repair, arguing that, in both cases, the activity occurring is journalists talking about journalism. Typically, discussions of boundary work begin through an instance of deviance. At such a point, journalists “reaffirm a cognitive geography of what is acceptable and what is professionally deviant and out of bounds” (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014, p. 390) through “narratives that expel deviant actors (such as plagiarizers) or unethical practices (such as tabloid journalism) from the field” (Johnson & Kelling, 2018, p. 4). One typical act of deviance would be reflected in a journalist offering a political opinion—given the occupational norm of objectivity (Schudson, 2001)—but the editorial endorsement has an equally long-standing tradition in U.S. journalism, which places it in a position that is bound to cause conflict. The practice of it reflects that, although it is not necessarily an act of deviance, it is also not illustrative of normal journalism practice. It is in such situations that journalists use boundaries as a way to make claims about the jurisdictions of their work; however, to draw these jurisdictions, journalists must argue that a given incident should be considered deviant.

Editorial endorsements through this lens naturally draw conversation and hence force journalists to “jump into the public fray seeking to define . . . and to reaffirm core norms,” and this work helps reaffirm that which is permissible and acceptable within their role (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014, p. 402).

## Role Conception

Journalistic role conception expresses a journalist’s perception of their purpose and responsibility in society (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). It is an essential piece in the realm of journalism culture, and perceptions of these roles are evolving (Perreault & Bell, 2020; Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2013). Journalistic culture and identification are produced at the center of the journalistic role discussion. There is no role that proves more significant or effective than the others because each specific role possesses its own function and purpose. A role that portrays facts as they are does not hold any more correctness than a role that interprets information and provides criticism or explanation. Nor is there a greater importance in journalists advocating for all voices versus acting as a voice for a specific audience or cause (Tandoc et al., 2013).

A journalist’s role conception provides them with “specific cognitive scripts for how they think about their own journalistic role during the course of their day-to-day work” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 151). However, societal expectations and cultural pressures often shape the various roles that journalists tend to step into (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). A political journalist will identify with different roles depending on where they are. Countries all have different governments and varying political structures, making journalists’ enactment of those roles vary (Moon, 2021; Thomson et al., 2018).

In the United States, journalists are expected to investigate political leaders as a result of a societal expectation to hold the government and people in power accountable. This role is called the *watchdog* (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). How journalists comprehend public administration shapes how they perceive their own role (Tandoc et al., 2013). The public expects that it is the job of journalists to hold those in power accountable for what they say and do. Thus, journalists adopt that responsibility (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).

The *educator* role embodies a more didactic function in journalism. Journalists who take on this role act as teachers, ultimately raising “public awareness and knowledge about a perceived problem” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 155). This role forces journalists to step into the circuit of news in a more interactive way rather than detaching from it. It is important for journalists who identify as an educator to engage in current events with the intent to promote reform. Being an educator in journalism is different from other roles by reason of promoting “real-world change” beyond any digressive approaches to journalism (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 155).

A *mirror* role aims to provide information necessary for a functioning society, as well as represent the interests and needs of citizens in a democracy. A journalist who takes a mirror role seeks to reflect information exactly as it happened.

## Presidential Endorsements

Newspaper endorsements represent a salient feature of the American political process, “an integral part of the electoral machinery” (Meltzer, 2007, p. 99).

The process that precedes endorsing a candidate is supposed to include a thorough research of the candidate’s background and issue positions, which makes endorsements an informationally meaningful practice. In local races, in which voters may not have access to robust information about candidates, it also raises a possibility for editorials to sway electoral votes (McCombs, 1967). Research suggests that if a newspaper throws its support behind a candidate whose party it has not traditionally endorsed or if an endorsement stands at odds with the newspaper’s perceived political leaning, it may affect the candidate’s winning chances (Chiang & Knight, 2011; Puglisi & Snyder, 2015). Still, the accumulated body of evidence on whether endorsements affect electoral outcomes remains mixed (Casas et al., 2016; de Leon, 2013; Jamieson, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2012).

Similarly mixed remain the positions on editorial endorsements in the news media industry. Some publications have defended this practice, with The Press Democrat’s (California) publisher Bruce Kyse (2013) calling it “incongruous” that “a newspaper would not offer its opinion . . . when it comes to making the most important decision a community makes together.” Others, including *TIME* magazine’s managing editor Richard Stengel (2008), have urged newspapers to stop “taking sides,” calling the practice of editorial endorsements “counterproductive and an anachronism.”

The 2016 election cycle exacerbated these divisions, leading some newspapers to break from their decades-long traditions and policies either by endorsing a candidate whose party they haven’t historically endorsed (e.g., *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, *The Omaha World-Herald*, and *The Dallas Morning News* endorsed a Democrat for president for the first time since 1916, 1932, and 1944, respectively; *The San Diego Union-Tribune* did so for the first time in its 148-year history; Peters & Woolley, 2016), by not endorsing anyone at all, or by explicitly urging their readers not to vote for Donald Trump, without naming the alternative candidate they support (*USA Today*, 2016). Out of the top U.S. newspapers that chose to endorse presidential candidates in 2016, only two threw their support behind Donald Trump; 57 newspapers supported Hillary Clinton (Peters & Woolley, 2016). The outcome of the elections has reinvigorated the discussion about the meaning of newspaper endorsements and their place in the American political process (Funt, 2017; Sonenshine, 2020).

Format-wise, endorsements represent a distinctive type of editorial content. The professional norms of journalism, guided by the values of objectivity and impartiality (Gans, 2004; Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972), place editorials among the narrowly defined types of opinion-based content. As stated in the American Society of News Editors’ (n.d.) Statement of Principles, “[t]o be impartial does not require the press to be unquestioning or to refrain from editorial expression.” At the same time, performing this practice ethically requires a clear differentiation between opinion and news for the reader, much in line with the

standard practice of publishing opinion content separately from news reports and explicitly labeling it as non-news. What makes endorsements unique is that, although they are crafted by a relatively small group of people tasked with defining the newspaper's editorial stance, and their preparation does not generally involve discussions with the rest of the staff (Firmstone, 2019), endorsements serve to represent the collective views of the newspaper as an organization.

Similar to research on other types of editorial content, which has been described by journalism scholars as underdeveloped despite the significance of this journalistic practice (Firmstone, 2019; Marques & Mont'Alverne, 2021), the literature on editorial endorsements has remained scant. A study by Meltzer (2007) provided a useful contribution to this body of scholarship, by offering a view on editorial endorsements from the perspective of editorial board members. Based on ethnographic observation and interviews, the study showed that the key role the board members believed they performed by endorsing candidates for political offices was that of "civic custodians" (Meltzer, 2007, p. 89). Viewing themselves as equipped with more resources, time, and firsthand access to candidates than the general public, editorial board members considered themselves to be better positioned to both inform and guide their readers. They also viewed this as both a public service and "traditional role of a newspaper" (p. 90). At the same time, they also were sensitive to the ways editorials may be perceived by the public, feeding into the existing atmosphere of cynicism and distrust of the media.

Without necessarily couching her study in terms of boundary work, Meltzer (2007) showed that editorial members, whom she described as positioned in between journalists and commentators, were sensitive to the challenges that come with the need to bridge the two roles, although their responses to those challenges differed "from grave concern to flippant dismissal" (p. 99).

This opens up a question, which until now has remained unaddressed in a systematic fashion, of how these boundaries are navigated not by editorial board members, but by political journalists. This question is particularly intriguing, given the growing public distrust in news media (Brenan, 2020) and the perception—which is shared by some scholars (Fisher, 2019)—that the metaphorical walls that have been considered the staples of journalistic practice (e.g., between opinion and news, editorial and advertising content) are not as impenetrable as they are prescribed by journalistic norms.

This leads us to pose the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do political journalists see the 2016 U.S. presidential election operating as a critical incident in regard to editorial endorsements?

**RQ2:** How do political journalists conduct boundary work in relation to editorial endorsements?

## **Method**

To address these research questions, the research team reached out to 453 journalists from across the United States. Participants were identified through purposive sampling,

designed to identify political journalists as those who primarily cover politics (Wolfgang et al., 2021). Purposive sampling is considered reasonable when a full list of the target population is not available (e.g., political journalists; Rowley, 2014) and, in this case, the research team developed the initial list in attempting to present an array of regions, outlet types, and outlet sizes.

As a result, participants included journalists who worked for outlets such as The Associated Press, *Charlotte Observer*, *The Boston Globe*, Politico, BuzzFeed News, The Daily Beast, and the *Washington Post*. All journalists were recruited through email and then interviewed by phone after institutional review board approval. The number of journalists who responded to the study and who met the qualifications for the study led to a total of 64 journalists interviewed. Participants were identified, interviews were conducted, and transcriptions were recorded by trained U.S. research students. Transcriptions were then checked by the research team for accuracy and then analyzed by the research team. Journalists were initially contacted through email from February 2020 to April 2020, and the time frame of recruitment—during the early months of the coronavirus epidemic and the U.S. presidential primary—likely contributed to a lower response rate (Perreault et al., 2022).

The interviews probed the journalists' experience with political journalism, their journalistic role conception, how they saw political journalism operating within the journalistic field, and, in particular, how journalists viewed the role of political endorsements. The semi-structured interviews followed the open-end interview format used in other studies in which journalists reflect on their coverage of political issues (e.g., Perreault, 2014; Perreault et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Perreault & Montalbano, 2022). Interviews lasted between 30 min and an hour in length. Questions were divided into five areas: (a) questions about political journalists' professional background and current occupation, (b) questions about political journalists' role conception, (c) questions about where political journalism fits within the journalistic field, (d) questions about political journalists' perspectives on political endorsements and news coverage of government spending, and (e) questions about journalists' political affiliation. Questions were posed such as "How is political journalism conducted in your newsroom?" "How much do you think newspaper endorsements affect the public's perceptions of candidates?" and "How much do you think newspaper endorsements affect the public's perceptions of the news media?" Finally, the interview questionnaire asked participants specific questions about how they choose political journalism stories, about their reporting practices for political journalism, and to explain political news stories they produced that they thought made an impact.

All of the participants were located in the United States. The sample of journalists who described their work operated with an emphasis on "print and digital newspaper/local" ( $n = 31$ ), but there remained a mixture of "broadcast/local" ( $n = 7$ ), "newspaper/national" ( $n = 14$ ), "digital only" ( $n = 2$ ), and "magazine" ( $n = 9$ ). After the interviews were conducted, the researchers transcribed the interviews for textual analysis and analyzed the data using a constant comparative approach to arrive at themes that addressed the research questions (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The constant comparative method is often associated with grounded theory and is well suited to both etic



coding, driven by theory and literature, and emic coding, driven by themes that emerge from data analysis (Fram, 2013). During this process, aspects of the responses considered were any allusion to the field theory, role conception, and political endorsements. These emerged from repeated close readings of the journalists' responses, which the research team completed independently and then compared during remote video sessions to establish resonance and to find associations, unities, and differences among them, which were then grouped into aggregate patterns and themes. Given the interpretative nature of this study, we paid particular attention to control for possible bias introduced by our inevitably subjective experiences and backgrounds. The structure of our research team—which included one scholar with academic and journalistic experience primarily in the United States, one scholar with academic and journalistic experience in the international context, and one U.S.-educated undergraduate journalism student—served to mitigate this risk. The variance in the experience and cultural backgrounds we brought into analysis has sensitized us to the importance of approaching the data with qualitative research reflexivity and has allowed us to perform the kind of “investigator triangulation” that has been increasingly recognized as a validation strategy of qualitative research, serving to “balance out the subjective influences of individuals” by “expand[ing], correct[ing] or check[ing] the subjective views of interpreters” of collected data (Flick, 2013, pp. 178–179; see also Denzin, 1978; Fram, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

This study is most interested in understanding political journalists' perspectives on political endorsements; hence, all participants were granted anonymity. Given that this study explores political journalism as a field, individual participants are not assigned particular letters or numbers, but their exact words are quoted.

## Findings

In regard to **RQ1**, political journalists regarded the 2016 election as the critical incident in which the practice of political endorsements ceased to function as intended; a result of changes in the audience. The audience lost goodwill with political journalists—a loss that journalists took a share of the blame for—and the result was, journalists believed, that the editorial endorsement was no longer trusted.

Journalists indicated this change through use of temporal language, indicating that things were not “as they used to” be, and then often pinpointed the Trump election cycle as a relevant time frame. Furthermore, journalists tended to delineate differing circumstances pre- and post-Trump election cycle and to moderate their views by noting differing functions on local and national levels. Journalists described their field as operating among a sea of change, with endorsements representative of practices that no longer functioned after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Journalists used temporal language to indicate that political endorsements had little function currently, using language such as “now not so much,” “I think they used to be much more important,” and saying that they were engaged with less than “what it used to be.” This temporal shift from relevancy to irrelevancy discursively pinpointed the Trump election cycle as the turning point. Journalists argued that “most papers lined up against Trump in

2016, and he still won” and, similarly, that “the vast majority of the newspapers probably endorsed Hillary Clinton, and I don’t really think that made much of a difference.” The Trump election cycle, according to respondents, is not solely due to the actions of a single person, but is rather seen as symbolic of a societal shift—perhaps one exacerbated by Trump—that shifted the landscape in how news organizations are viewed. Although the journalists in our sample repeatedly articulated their pursuit of truth as a profoundly, and purposefully, apolitical exercise, with their personal beliefs being irrelevant to their work as political journalists, they did acknowledge that the public did not see them as impartial chroniclers of political life (i.e., the societal “mirror”), which, by extension, affects their ability to effectively perform their role as societal educators. Journalists acknowledged specifically that news organizations are “seen as left-wing, especially in the Trump era, and fewer readers will base their decisions off a presumptively slanted endorsement.”

Hence, if the news reporting of a news organization is already circumspect, more so then is the editorial endorsement, which would seem to affirm what audiences already suspect: that U.S. journalists lean left. From the perspective of political journalists, the critical incident then was not really former U.S. President Donald Trump as much as it was the change in audience expectations—a change that made the news endorsement as a liability and required them to labor to distance themselves in order to explain their individual distance from the process.

Journalists indicated their frustration with the way they are viewed by the audience and perceived that work done by newsrooms was received by an audience that was distrustful and resentful. Markedly, the journalists have marked the 2016 election as a clear turning point for the worst, in that “you can tell the tension is higher. The way people speak to journalists seems to be worse than ever.” Another journalist shared a particularly memorable encounter with voters, whom she interviewed, during which one of them “yelled” at her and referred to her news organization as “trash.” Yet journalists were willing to rationalize on behalf of the audience, arguing that the aversion they faced and the distrust of their work could be easily attributed to low news literacy—and that low literacy was not solely the fault of the readers themselves. Journalists argued that their audience could scarcely give credence to an individual editorial endorsement, when they could have read years’ worth of similar, under-researched endorsements already: The audience just could not tell the difference (e.g., “You also have so many more outlets out there, and it’s difficult for the reader to know which places are doing real reporting”).

The editorial endorsement assumes a level of goodwill among the audience—an understanding that the editorial board member is much like the audience—and that is hardly possible when Trump, according to journalists, rhetorically turned “media almost into the enemy.”

Overall, the journalists appeared to agree that the 2016 election has put a sharper focus on the values and responsibilities of the profession—values that would seem to remove the rationale for the editorial endorsement. Far more important than granting audience perspective through *endorsements*—a journalistic act that is far more plentiful digitally—would be the need to verify information and to question the reliability of sources in their *news reporting*. In the words of one journalist, “there’s much more

awareness about not wanting to perpetuate misinformation/disinformation or, at a minimum, being extra cautious about where information is originating from.” In the words of another journalist—who, in an already familiar fashion, spoke on behalf of her colleagues—“we are all much timid and more scared about making mistakes and getting things wrong. . . Back in the start of 2016, it kind of started our thoughts, and we were more detail-oriented.”

Journalists also took part of the blame for the irrelevance of the editorial endorsement, arguing—in effect—that the editorial endorsement required goodwill from the audience; goodwill earned in part through excellence in reporting. Yet political journalists did not necessarily believe they had earned such goodwill. Political journalists saw numerous shortcomings in their work that resulted in a loss of goodwill from the audience, in particular, the failure to recognize, and report on, the issues of actual significance to the citizens. In the words of another journalist—in which she notably used the collective pronoun “we,” signaling the recognition of this being a common problem, the blame for which should be shared collectively—was engaging in what she described as “predictive journalism,” musing about the likely outcome of election without trying to connect to citizens and their actual concerns:

The reason we were all so wrong about the 2016 election is that we really weren't listening to the middle of the country and all over the place. There's really a larger conversation, and a positive one, about how to access what is really going on and reach out beyond our own bubbles.

In other words, political journalists believed that their use of “predictive journalism” looked enough like the editorial endorsement that the audience could hardly be blamed for confusion. As one journalist put it, their reporting needed to be “a little bit less about the drama in the campaign staff and the candidates and how the campaign is functioning and their advertising and more about people, voters and what they think.” Yet some journalists were optimistic that they could restore that goodwill, but it would require that they “try to incorporate as many diverse voices as [they] can that may have otherwise been discounted before,” and “discuss a lot more how we cover some of these stories and politicians.” Furthermore, journalists argued that they need to be “probably more thoughtful in discussion coverage of campaigns than the past.” By “discussion coverage,” this journalist is pointing toward the same “predictive journalism” that they perceived as having deteriorated the goodwill of the audience and, hence, weakened their ability to offer an editorial endorsement.

In their responses, journalists reflected on the magnitude of this challenge by describing themselves as trapped in the kind of cognitive dissonance that had them experience a clash between conventional journalism practices and the realization that following the tried-and-true practices were not adequate enough to sustain them in the post-truth era. Journalists acknowledged that they can no longer afford to fall back on the heuristics (Dunwoody & Griffin, 2011) they have traditionally used to navigate their professional lives, such as unreflexive reliance of polls (“I think there is more attention to the limitations of polls”), jumping on the bandwagon (Graf, 2009)

of covering topics that are already on the news (“We have to cover news that is both essential and unique, so it can’t just be whatever everyone else is reporting”), or treating the words of senior government sources as an adequate approximation of the administration’s position, even in case when such sources do tell the truth. In the words of one journalist, “the assumption that the White House and government is a unit which the President is the mouthpiece of” no longer works. “In this government, some people are diametrically opposed, and we could be getting 17 different answers—even right now.”

Finally, as a critical incident, the 2016 presidential election forced journalists to recommit themselves to reconsider their most important roles. The “predictive journalism” that journalists described is still certainly a journalistic role, but—as indicated in regard to **RQ2**—it is perhaps not the role most responsive to their audiences’ needs.

### “Walling Off” the Editorial Endorsement

In regard to **RQ2**, journalists conducted boundary work through a clear delineation of their role as *disseminators*—discursively placing editorial endorsements as a process undertaken by newsrooms, not by journalists. That said, whereas journalists as a whole term the national news endorsement as an outdated practice, journalists were more nuanced in regard to the role of endorsements in local elections, in many cases seeing value in the local political endorsement.

Journalists discursively articulated “a figurative wall between the opinion side of newsrooms and the news side,” one which another journalist referred to as “a pretty strict firewall.” Rhetorically, journalists in newsrooms that *did not* offer endorsements used the term “we”; when journalists were in newsrooms that *did* offer endorsements, they used the term “they” to denote the editorial board—as in “I know they do some endorsements, but I don’t usually pay attention to them.”

This is a rhetorical device designed to create distance. One journalist noted, “We would never do that because that would be doing the public a disservice rather than informing them,” and another journalist similarly said, “We can endorse policies, I think, but not candidates.” The use of “we” when the newsroom operated under the agreement to not offer endorsements indicates a degree of unity in approach to their role. By contrast, when newsrooms did offer endorsements, the “I” and “them” were evoked to render the symbolic “wall” between editorial and news that is often articulated in news (Cornia et al., 2020; Mari, 2014). For example, one journalist argued that “I am not involved in those conversations” regarding endorsements in that “those are done by the editorial board.” Similarly, “the news media does not endorse candidates and the editorial board does not report the news—it is opinion.”

That said, whereas some journalists worked for news organizations that offered endorsements and others did not, they were nearly unanimous in the opinion that they were “outdated” and a “source of confusion.” Journalists argued that they were outdated, given that people were unable to “understand the difference between an editorial board and a reporter.” As a result, journalists argued, endorsements may be more likely to “affect the public’s perception of newspapers more than their perception of

candidates.” This sort of rhetoric reflects a clear identification of a point of deviancy—the editorial endorsement may have once made sense, given the cultural politics of the time; however, in the current context, journalists did not perceive the audience as able to assess the difference between editorial and news. Hence, they were liable to see the news organization as “biased”—a perspective likely to affect the perception of everything the news organization does. Indicative of this deviancy, many journalists operated with the perception of endorsements, as distilled by one journalist, as “very flawed, superficial, and problematic.”

One journalist noted that his newspaper went from not endorsing candidates—a long-standing policy—to endorsing them, in a reversal at odds with the rest of the sample. The journalist found this reversal “troubling”—a sign of the perceived deviance of the endorsement.

The journalists did, however, allow for a more meaningful role for endorsements in local races, pointing out the differences between the kinds of relationships that national and local newspapers cultivate with their readers and cautioning against painting the media landscape with too wide a brush. Asked to reflect on how much endorsements may affect the public’s perceptions of candidates, one journalist said they likely do “more so than we, younger journalists, give credit for. People like my parents live and die by their local papers.” Without being prompted, journalists offered several reasons for the larger role of newspapers in local races. The less extreme political polarization was one. Illustrating the point, one journalist said, “Our mayor’s race is nonpartisan, and our city council’s as well. So we have a lot more sway there than in state or federal elections because there is a party label.”

The second reason is that local newspapers enjoy a higher credit of trust. This reason also emerged across multiple responses and was described by some as amplifying the effect of lower polarization, making it possible for newspapers to weigh in on candidates down the ballot.

The third reason that journalists named is the limited access of the public to robust information about candidates, which is often the case in local contests. It was such “obscure races,” journalists said, that allowed them to more fully realize their potential to play the *disseminator* role, the role they most strongly identified with.<sup>1</sup> One journalist described it this way:

There’s such a glut of candidates on the ballot for [the local community served by the journalist’s newspaper] this year, the only way people can really know about these candidates is for us at the newspaper to tell them. Because otherwise you look at the ballot, see all these names and not know who any of them are.

At the same time, journalists were quick to point out that the effect of endorsements on local contests is far from a given and is just one of the factors that contribute to electoral outcomes. Reflecting on how much their newspaper’s endorsement may have helped the candidate endorsed, one journalist said, “It’s hard to say how much of her success came from us, and how much of it came from her really awesome grassroots network.”

Markedly, it was informing the public that some journalists brought up as the primary purpose of endorsements, even if they opposed the practice. A comment from one journalist is particularly illuminating in this sense. “Here we would never do that because that would be doing the public a disservice rather than informing them,” she said. Notably, this comment came in response to a closed-ended, yes-or-no question of whether the journalist’s outlet endorses the candidates. The elaboration on a question that did not, by design, require a detailed answer, signals the acknowledgment of endorsements as the normalized practice, the departure from which—even though widely viewed in our sample as necessary and justified—requires a more elaborate explanation.

## Discussion

Although the editorial endorsement has enjoyed a long tenure in American journalism, public opinion in recent years has gradually pushed against it. From the perspective of the political journalists interviewed for this study, the editorial endorsement now just offers confusion and the specter of bias. The journalists interviewed at times seemed frustrated—and it’s easy to understand why: Journalism is under significant economic pressure and facing accusations of bias and “fake news” even from the U.S. president; yet nevertheless, news organizations seemed insistent on persisting with a practice that (a) seemed to offer little effect on elections, and (b) seemed to only frustrate and confuse their audience.

In **RQ1**, U.S. journalists argued that the news endorsement ceased to function, as intended, as a result of changes in the audience, changes spurred by a critical incident in the shape of the 2016 election. Journalists used temporal language to denote the differing circumstances that had changed the news environment since the Trump presidency (Gutsche, 2018; Scacco & Coe, 2021). Yet this changed news environment was not solely the result of a single U.S. president, according to respondents. Journalists were more introspective and, hence, reflected that they had failed to recognize and report the issues significant to citizens. Journalists saw the presidential endorsement as illustrative of a larger problem within the field related to “predictive journalism”—journalists musing about the outcome of an election without tying that election to citizens.

In regard to **RQ2**, journalists conducted boundary work through delineating their roles and placing editorial endorsements as an activity outside their purview. Journalists rhetorically used terminology of “I” and “they” to delineate the separation when journalists worked in newsrooms that offered endorsements, whereas journalists in newsrooms that *did not* offer endorsements more commonly used the term “we.” In addition, whereas journalists, overall, believed the process of endorsements was outdated for national political races, they were more nuanced in their perspectives on local political races. Journalists argued that two levels of endorsements ought to be viewed differently, given that local elections had less political partisanship, local news organizations enjoyed a higher level of trust, and local audiences had lesser access to information about the political candidates.

Journalists in this study identified the editorial endorsement as a point of deviancy; a practice in American journalism that seemed blatantly at odds with the normative commitment to journalistic independence. Typically, in boundary work research, deviancy is identified as a result of an action or actor with U.S. journalism (Kananovich & Perreault, 2021), but, in this case, a change was not offered by American journalism but in the culture itself. In a way, the environment changed on political journalists and what had been a respectable, reasonable practice of yesteryear suddenly became suspect in light of new developments.

This study would posit a theoretical connection offered by this case: This case illustrates how the identification of deviancy (a practice within boundary work) operates as the method by which journalists denote the problems in a paradigm (the impetus behind paradigm repair). Paradigm repair of course is responsive to different forms of attack on the paradigm (Kuhn, 2021), and this theoretical connection here occurs in regard to paradigmatic attack from *within* the social institution. It would make sense in that boundary work is similarly a result of activities within the journalistic institution.

Furthermore, it could be that critical incidents such as the 2016 election are electrifying to the journalistic paradigm, demanding immediate paradigm repair. Whereas paradigm repair is often reasoned, discursively considered (Perreault & Vos, 2018), here journalists were more tempted to drop the endorsement despite several generations with which the practice has had a role. In other words, the critical incident triggered a boundary work of *exclusion* as a means of paradigm repair. This would seem to be a reasonable response for journalists in the face of strong response—to drop the element at fault. One could see how this would be similarly consistent with the *exclusion* of the tabloid press following the death of Princess Diana (Hindman & Thomas, 2013).

This study also offers indications of a *less paradigmatically flexible* future for American journalism. In Perreault et al. (2019), political journalists at once recognized the historical importance of the White House Correspondents Dinner while clearly arguing that the dinner was incompatible with the normative values and practices in American journalism. In a similar vein, this study indicates another historic journalistic practice—the editorial endorsement—that journalists saw as having little role in contemporary society. In the case of both of these practices, one could argue that Kuhn's (2021) *paradigmatic exclusion* has reached its limit—these practices were long accommodated within the paradigm despite running counter to it. Yet journalists certainly saw that this was a practice that could no longer be accommodated and created tension with the paradigmatic foundations of American journalism that had to be resolved.

No study comes without limitations. This work features several. First, as with all interview studies, this work reflects the perceptions of our participants. Second, as a work of qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalized. Finally, by sampling only political journalists working full-time, we are potentially misrepresenting a large swath of freelancers and journalists from other beats who could have very different conceptions of the endorsement process. Although we believe political journalists were the correct sample for this study, given their role as knowledge-bearers of the very topic their news organizations may offer judgment on, future research might consider the

perception and perspective of editorial board members and opinion page editors on the editorial endorsement process and compare them with those of political journalists.

From the perspective of political journalists, it may very well be that there is no role for the editorial endorsement in our current news environment. However, unlike many cases of boundary work and paradigm maintenance, there is little blame to be left with news organizations, but rather the environment itself has changed.

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## Note

1. The identification with the journalistic roles was measured on the 5-point Likert-type scale of the Worlds of Journalism items (Hanitzsch et al., 2020), by asking journalists to rate the importance of performing each role (ranging from 1 = *unimportant* to 5 = *extremely important*). Journalists shared a strong commitment to the *disseminator* role, “report things as they are” ( $M = 4.83$ ), more so than their response to the *analytical* role, “provide analysis of current affairs” ( $M = 4.09$ ), or the *watchdog* role questions, “monitor and scrutinize political leaders” ( $M = 4.35$ ) and “monitor and scrutinize business” ( $M = 3.67$ ). For the roles, we provide the mean of the responses, yet it is worth mentioning that journalists were also asked open-end questions and, hence, the mean scores for their responses are supported by the more thorough explication of their roles provided by journalists in their interviews.

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