



Audience As Journalistic Boundary Worker: The Rhetorical Use Of Comments To Critique Media Practice, Assert Legitimacy And Claim Authority



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ABSTRACT

Through a textual analysis of online comments in response to live broadcast from the San Bernardino shooters' apartment, we explore the rhetorical strategies the audience used to legitimate its participation in boundary work. Our study demonstrates that audience members can operate as resourceful boundary workers with a sophisticated, multifaceted understanding of journalism that echoes scholarly and normative professional discourse. Their critique was not limited to questioning unambiguously pernicious practices, such as glorifying violence, tabloidization, pack journalism, and violating the ethical obligation of minimizing harm. Instead, they went beyond that to problematize the practice of breaking news live as underdelivering on the promise of connecting audiences to newsworthy events of social significance, promoting voyeurism, and overusing the format as an end in itself. We also demonstrate that commenters operate as competent rhetorical agents. Although they did rely on established legitimating strategies (e.g., acting as proto-professionals), they appropriated them at the level of tactical moves in distinctive new ways (e.g., by parodying, rather than authentically emulating, the journalistic style of delivering breaking news live). They also deployed novel ways of establishing their authority as boundary workers, such as rhetorical questions and direct address, often using them in conjunction with other authority-claiming moves.

KEYWORDS

Boundary work; legitimacy; authority; online comments; mass shooting; live coverage

On 4 December 2015, two days after married couple Tashfeen Malik and Syed Riawan Farook went on a shooting rampage that left 14 people dead and more than 20 wounded in San Bernardino, California (Almasy, Lah, and Moya 2015), the landlord of the apartment where they lived invited the media in. Dozens of reporters and cameramen filed through.

As TV cameras were combing through the apartment, no detail seemed too small for the reporters: the pot on the stove, the dirty dishes in the sink, the crib of the shooters' six-month-old child. Watching his colleagues' rummage broadcasted live, CNN's Anderson Cooper described it as "kind of bizarre" (CNN 2015a). Many agreed. The characteristics that were offered by news professionals and media critics ranged from "surreal" and

“baffling” (Graham 2015) to “ludicrous” (Tompkins 2015), to a “why-we-hate-the-media moment” (Zurawik 2015), to “the most extraordinary of television events” (Wemple 2015).

Similarly harsh was the backlash from viewers. As soon as the footage was posted on CNN’s Facebook page (2015b), comments started pouring in. With the number of comments climbing to hundreds within hours, viewers generated a robust debate that engaged with concepts of central, and growing, interest to journalism scholars. By displaying concern and awareness about the core elements of journalistic work, commenters sought to define and contest journalism’s boundaries as well as to expel deviant practices and norms. By doing so, they essentially engaged in boundary work (Carlson 2015; Robinson 2015).

The audience’s attempts to partake in this symbolical contest over journalistic boundaries came not without challenges. Conceptualized as a socially constructed demarcation of an occupational field that can be rightfully operated in by the representatives of the in-group (Gieryn 1983; Shanahan 2010), the boundaries of journalism—just like many other professional domains (Berkowitz and Liu 2016)—are vigorously protected by internal practitioners from outside intrusion (Carlson 2015).

This means that whereas journalists, as legitimate representatives of the in-group, possess the uncontested rights to partake in the boundary negotiation, the audience, as an agent interloper, needs to substantiate its claims for entering this guarded domain. A robust, and growing, scholarship on boundary work acknowledged the challenges the audience faces in legitimizing its contribution (Canter 2013; Duffy, Ling, and Tandoc 2018; Wolfgang 2018a, 2019). However, the audience’s response to these challenges is yet to receive systematic attention from journalism scholars. Our study offers a contribution in this direction.

Through a qualitative textual analysis of comments posted by viewers on CNN’s Facebook page in response to a high-profile media event that has been recognized as such by both media practitioners and audience members, we explore how the latter used a shared online space to define the boundaries of appropriate journalistic practice and to make a case for their participation in boundary work. Our study demonstrates that audience members can operate as resourceful boundary workers with a sophisticated, multifaceted understanding of journalism that echoes scholarly and normative professional discourse and who can deploy a variety of rhetorical strategies to assert themselves as legitimate agents of boundary work.

Theoretical Framework

Boundary Work

Borrowed from the sociology of knowledge production, the concept of boundary work is understood as establishment, negotiation, and maintenance of socially constructed demarcations between various fields of knowledge that can be rightfully performed by internal practitioners (Gieryn 1983). Originally used to denote the activity undertaken by scientists to establish their legitimacy as knowledge producers and to distinguish it from religion, pseudoscience, and technical pursuits (Shanahan 2010), the concept was adopted by journalism scholars to understand strategies employed by journalists to uphold their authority as societal storytellers.

The notion of social construction in boundary work underscores the idea that the authority of knowledge producers, journalists included, is not granted to them automatically but must be continuously reiterated, negotiated, and upheld. However, the “uninsulated” (Schudson 1978, 9) and “weakly autonomous” (Bourdieu 2005, 33) nature of journalism as a profession makes it particularly vulnerable to contestation (Perreault and Vos 2018, 2020), which increases the importance of boundary work.

In the absence of institutional means of boundary marking such as accreditation or a standard pre-professional track, the primary way journalists can establish and maintain their cultural authority is through rhetorical means (Carlson 2015, 2017; Coddington 2015; Winch 1997; Zelizer 1990). The sites where these “discursive battles” (Carlson 2015, 7) unfold are not confined to news stories but extend to sites specifically suited for metajournalistic discourse, such as editorials, opinion pieces, trade press, and journalism reviews (Berkowitz and Liu 2016; Carlson 2016; Frank 2003; Singer 2007).

The development of digital technologies has led to expanding public space where journalists can engage in discursive justification of their authority (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). It also has expanded opportunities for audience participation. With commenting on news stories being one of the most popular forms of user-generated content within the mainstream news media (Graham, Jackson, and Wright 2019), the audiences can now contribute their own newsworthy content, as well as question journalists’ interpretations and debate news-making practices and norms (Jenkins and Tandoc 2017; Robinson 2015; Wolfgang 2018a). In terms of boundary work, the audiences thus challenge the monopoly of journalists as “the primary definers of journalism” (Carlson 2016, 7).

Boundary work occurs around three core elements of journalism: participants, practices, and professional norms (Carlson 2015). The first one, participants, involves demarcating actors who can be legitimately considered journalists—and thus exercise the cultural authority this label comes with—from other communicators, most notably, public relations practitioners (White and Hobsbawm 2007), “fake news” makers (Berkowitz and Gutsche 2012), bloggers (Reese et al. 2007), and citizen journalists (Robinson and DeShano 2011), as well as policing deviant journalism actors (Carlson 2014; Carlson and Berkowitz 2014; Eason 1986).

The second area of boundary work has to do with setting the limits of acceptable news-gathering and disseminating practices—critiquing practices both typical and atypical with the field (Perreault, Stanfield, and Luttmann 2019). Previous research has identified some practices that journalists strived to place outside the boundaries of the permissible, such as pack journalism (Frank 2003) or paparazzi and tabloid-style reporting (Berkowitz 2000; Bishop 1999). Finally, the third area of boundary work concerns using as boundary markers specialized knowledge and normative standards—most notably, verification, independence, and accountability (Singer 2015)—to distinguish insiders and outsiders to the journalistic field.

A large, and growing, body of scholarship has revealed a variety of rhetorical means that can be employed to demarcate and police journalism’s boundaries. It has also made clear that any boundary-work project, be it an attempt to contest or to uphold journalistic boundaries, cannot be pigeonholed into any of the three areas—participants, practices, norms—without running the risk of oversimplifying the nature of journalistic boundary work (Carlson 2015). Rather than operating in a static, predictable, neatly organized, unidimensional space, journalists navigate a constantly evolving terrain that stretches across the

three areas and presents them with challenges coming from multiple directions. Journalists respond to these challenges differently. However, regardless of the particularities of each specific contestation, their response can be categorized as either expansion (i.e., extending the boundaries of the acceptable beyond the previously demarcated borders), expulsion (i.e., repositioning a problematic element outside of the boundaries) or protection of autonomy (i.e., defending journalists' authority as a distinct, self-sufficient, culturally significant field; Gieryn 1983). Approached this way, any boundary-work effort can be mapped on a two-dimensional matrix, making it possible to categorize it from two perspectives: the area(s) it involves (i.e., participants, practices, and norms) and the type of strategy it pursues, which offers the benefits of analytical flexibility (by accepting the permeability of boundaries between the areas) and cohesive structure (Carlson 2015).

Live Coverage as Journalistic Practice

A staple of the 24-hour news culture, live coverage emerged as a way to capitalize on the expanding technical capabilities of television and soon became a signature tool for delivering breaking news (Henderson and Cremedas 2017; Tuggle and Huffman 1999). However, as technological innovations expanded their reach, the live broadcast—which was initially reserved for covering exceptional “what-a-stories” (Berkowitz 1992)—transformed into a ubiquitous, increasingly routinized practice (Cushion 2015).

The journalistic community disagrees on what this development has meant for the profession. Although some news workers consider live coverage “the height of value for news viewers” (Henderson and Cremedas 2017, 259) and “accepted journalistic wisdom” (Cushion 2015, 18), others lament its overuse as emblematic of the “broadcasting fetish for live news” (Cottle and Rai 2008, 163; see also MacGregor 1997; Seib 2016; Tuggle and Huffman 1999).

Going live, media theorists argue, comes with a promise of “connectibility to events of central social significance” (Couldry 2003, 98) that extend beyond the mundane. However, with live breaking news becoming a typical journalistic intervention in television broadcasts, journalists have been finding themselves unable to deliver on this promise. Rather than reporting live because a situation warrants it, newsrooms have been increasingly deploying the logic of “going live for the sake of live” (Casella 2013, 364; see also Tuggle and Huffman 1999) in an effort to “inject visual excitement” into an otherwise non-newsworthy coverage (Cushion 2015, 44; see also Seib 2016), with follow-ups on live broadcasts similarly lacking in newsworthiness by recapping information rather than providing new facts (Lewis and Cushion 2009).

Breaking news live, researchers argue, exemplifies an ethos that favors “spectatorship over investigation,” “feeling of discovery” over “enhance[d] understanding” (Lewis, Cushion, and Thomas 2005, 468), “victory of style over substance” (Lewis and Cushion 2009, 317; see also Seib 2016)—an ethos that is found problematic by news workers and media scholars alike.

Rhetorical Challenges to Contributory Expertise

The expansion of opportunities for the audience to debate journalism online opens up a question of how meaningful and valuable those contributions could be in redrafting

journalistic boundaries. While the very insider status of journalists establishes their authority as boundary workers, outsiders need to first substantiate their claims for engaging in boundary work. This is where the concept of contributory expertise can provide a useful theoretical lens.

Borrowed, similarly to the concept of boundary work, from sociology of science, contributory expertise denotes “experience and knowledge that would allow an individual to contribute to the construction of knowledge in a particular field” (Shanahan 2010, 2). The introduction of this concept into science studies has signaled recognition that relevant expertise can exist not only inside but also outside of the boundaries drawn by scientists (Evans and Plows 2007). In other words, although internal professionals, as possessors of specialist knowledge, retain the indisputable claims to contributory expertise, the category remains open to outsiders. If applied to journalistic boundary work, this suggests that the audience’s contribution to the debate about the limits of the permissible in journalism—for example, in the form of comments—can still be recognized by journalists as valuable in boundary work (Duffy, Ling, and Tandoc 2018).

Indeed, news workers acknowledge the potential of comments for improving journalism practice by providing an opportunity to critically reflect on their writing and encourage more rigorous working practices (Graham and Wright 2015). At the same time, journalists perceive comments as often failing to meet the criteria of a useful contribution (Bergström and Wadbring 2015; Canter 2013; Wolfgang 2018a, 2018b). This criticism highlights the fact that in order to be considered possessing contributory expertise, the audience should first justify its claims for having it. To our knowledge, the question of how contributory expertise can be most effectively utilized by outsiders to gain access and authoritative status in the journalistic field has not been systematically addressed in past research. Yet a growing body of literature on the sociology of knowledge suggests that, in order to be recognized as a meaningful contributor to a specialized field, an outsider should not only possess contributory expertise but be able to effectively communicate with insiders, thus allowing for meaningful interactions between the two (Carolan 2006; Collins and Evans 2002, 2015).

Previous scholarship has identified two major rhetorical challenges that need to be taken on by outsiders to demonstrate they are entitled to making expertise claims: creating legitimacy and conveying authority (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998; see also Carlson 2017). The very first challenge, establishing legitimacy, implies demonstrating that one’s comments are worthy of attention and justified. Virtually anyone can enter an online commenting space, but no one—neither other commenters nor journalists—is obligated to acknowledge this person’s rhetorical presence. Striving to be heard when “contribut[ing] to conversations in which they have not been specifically invited to participate” (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998, 510), commenters have been found to employ a variety of legitimizing rhetorical strategies. These include revealing personal connection to the topic or relationship to the group whose attention is being sought, demonstrating commitment, referencing shared experience, acknowledging common bond, and demonstrating belonging (Burke et al. 2007; Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998).

Establishing legitimacy is, however, not enough to be considered a meaningful contributor to the debate. In other words, it presents a necessary, but not sufficient condition for successfully communicating one’s contributory expertise. Even if a comment is

considered to be worthy of attention (i.e., legitimate), it still can be dismissed as unauthoritative. To ensure that this does not happen, a commenter should demonstrate that her comment is valid and counts (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998)—that is, to establish authority. In the absence of journalistic professional credentials that could function as external authority cues, online commenters rely on three main rhetorical strategies.

First, commenters report the expertise of others and thus demonstrate their knowledge of the field (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998). Second, they connect their own experience with the problem discussed (Oliphant 2010)—this strategy is weak epistemologically but can be seen in some cases as appropriate and relevant if it provides unique, first-hand perspectives on a topic for which such personal experience is crucial (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998). Thirdly, commenters portray themselves as “proto-professionals” (Oliphant 2010, 39). Defined as “the internal process of professionalization [among] laymen, who adopt the basic stances and fundamental concepts of the professions as a means of orientation in their everyday life” (De Swaan 1990, 14), proto-professionalism can be signaled by approximating a professional style of writing and recycling professional language (Shaw 2002)—in other words, by “speaking as an insider” (Hyland 2001, 209).

Research Questions

This theoretical discussion leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: What themes did the online audience convey in its comments regarding journalistic practices in response to CNN’s San Bernardino broadcast?

RQ2: What rhetorical strategies did commenters employ to establish their contributory expertise, i.e., to assert legitimacy and to claim authority as boundary workers?

Method

Data for this study come from the comments on CNN’s Facebook page posted in response to the videos titled “Inside San Bernardino shooters’ living room” (2015a) and “Inside the San Bernardino shooters’ home” (2015b) within two weeks after the videos were published online (4–18 December 2015), with the majority of comments posted in the first two days. This sampling frame yielded 2636 comments. The focus on analyzing the comments left on one news organization’s page, despite admittedly limiting the generalizability of our findings in the positivistic sense, made it possible for us to undertake the kind of close reading of the data that is imperative to unpacking the rhetorical workings of the commenters’ critique. In addition, as we discuss further, the commenters went beyond questioning the actions of CNN to criticize other news organizations and journalists in general, which strengthens our confidence in the transferability, if not generalizability, of our findings (Brown 2004).

To answer RQ1, the comments were analyzed in two stages. At the initial stage, we identified emerging categories using unrestricted coding, during which we read the comments line by line, marking sections of text that suggested a category pertaining to particular journalistic practices and norms that commenters found problematic (e.g., sensationalism, poor news judgement, failure to inform the public). We analyzed the

comments until theoretical saturation, which we identified, following previous research, as a point of thematic exhaustion where the categories emerging from data were not novel in substance but were variations of already identified categories (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). This way, 2521 comments were analyzed. To ensure that we give proper attention to comments that particularly resonated with other commenters, we sorted comments by popularity using an embedded feature in Facebook that ranks comments based on the number of likes or replies they received, and read them in this order. The categories were then distilled during axial coding, during which we grouped codes into aggregate categories, or themes. (For example, the categories of sensationalism, poor news judgement, and failure to inform the public were grouped into the theme of underdelivering on the promise of news as a socially meaningful product.) We made detailed notes on copies of the comments and revisited them as the analysis was written.¹

To answer RQ2, we re-read comments line by line, with an eye on rhetorical strategies established in the literature on contributory expertise that informed this study (e.g., we coded for revealing a personal connection to the topic, referencing shared experience as legitimacy-establishing moves; demonstrating the knowledge of the field, approximating a professional style of writing, recycling professional language as authority-claiming moves). We were also taking notes of other displays of rhetorical devices the commenters used to anchor their critique in a patterned way (e.g., rhetorical questions or direct address to journalists). These emerged from our repeated, independently done reading of the comments, which was followed by a discussion of our observations during in-person and shared-writing sessions.

Results

Concerning Media Practices

In regard to RQ1, the online audience articulated a number of concerns regarding the coverage of the event, which can be organized into four themes: emphasis on the perpetrator, legality and ethics, underdelivering on the promise of news as a socially meaningful product, and breaking-news media practices.

Misplaced Emphasis on the Perpetrator: From Glorifying to Ostracizing

One of the commenters' most prominent criticisms concerned reporting on the suspects in the first place. The commenters viewed the broadcast from the suspects' apartment as a misplaced emphasis on the perpetrators' side of the story, with numerous commenters interpreting the move as a "despicable," "ridiculous," "insensitive"—yet typical—example of the media being "once again" and "always about the murderers, never the victims and families," instead of offering a "real tribute" or at least "some news" about the victims and "what their families have lost." Notably, when considering the victims, commenters blamed the reporters not only for mistreating the immediate victims but for creating the victims with their own actions, including the suspects' baby and other family members, who may have been traumatized by such invasive reporting.

In their discussion of the misplaced focus on the perpetrators, the commenters agreed that this decision has broader cultural implications but disagreed on what exactly made it problematic. Some found the emphasis on the suspects concerning because of the

detailed, celebrity-like nature of the coverage, with commenters describing it as a “grand tour” one could see on “MTV Cribs,” a documentary TV program featuring tours of famous people’s houses, or TMZ, a celebrity gossip website. Such treatment, they argued, “basically glorif[ies]” the shooters and grants them “martyrdom” and “perpetual glamour,” by contributing to a culture in which such works of violence seem to be lauded in news media.

Others disagreed, arguing that such coverage does not lead to glorifying religiously motivated crimes but, rather, ostracizes the Muslim population by reinforcing the existing stereotype of the violent “Other.” One commenter noted, “There were Colorado shooting, Sandy Hook, and many more places, I do not recall media rushing into the suspects home right away to make them or their religions look bad.” Another agreed, saying, “[T]his one is special [.]cause the shooters have brown skin.”

Journalists, commenters argued, showed their hand in their “fear-mongering” angle through “zooming in on Arabic writing on various objects in the apartment” and leaving these visuals uncontextualized and unaddressed: “[F]aith, passport, driver license, pray book, social security. What is your point??” Another commenter argued the emphasis on religious paraphernalia as something worthy of the audience’s attention was misplaced because such items could be found in households of other denominations: “[C]atholics have the rosary and the cross in their bedrooms. Why would [M]uslims not have the prayer beads there[?]” Finally, whereas some placed the blame squarely on the media, others offered a more sophisticated view, referring to the consumer-oriented nature of cable news programing and insisting the blame should be shared with the audience, who generates the demand for this kind of portrayals and thus make “stereotyping all Muslims as terrorists ... a sure way to get the ratings up.”

Entering the Apartment: Legally Dubious and Ethically Wrong

Moving beyond the reporters’ choice of whom and how to cover, commenters took issue with the very decision to enter the apartment. Commenters questioned what—exactly—journalists thought they would find of interest there.

If the Federal Bureau of Investigation had done their job, commenters argued, there should be nothing for journalists to report other than: “BREAKING NEWS ... terrorist had a bedroom. Breaking News ... terrorist had sheets. Breaking News ... terrorist had a window.” Similarly, another commenter wondered, “what the F*** are these reporters expecting to see?” arguing that the rationale for their reporting in the apartment made little sense.

If the FBI had *not* finished their investigation of the apartment, then the entry was even more concerning. Commenters argued that it appeared as though the apartment remained a crime scene and voiced concern that the broadcast amounted to a whole range of legal charges, from trespassing and “tampering with the crime scene” to “interfering with an investigation” and “obstruction of justice.”

Yet others noted that the legal status of the apartment was not relevant at all, and that the media behavior revealed a bigger issue: the reporters’ profound misunderstanding of their job responsibilities and duties. As one commenter stated, “Regardless if the FBI was done or not, [the media] can’t rummage through the apartment. That’s not what their job is.” Others agreed, specifying, “Just because you can doesn’t mean you should,” and described the decision as both “legally dubious” and “ethically wrong.”

Notably, when couching their critique in ethics and journalistic values, commenters tended to be less detailed in justifying their charges of the media wrongdoings. They did not go much beyond naming the values that they considered to have been violated—be it credibility, integrity, or what they referred to as “good taste,” or “class”—even when making sweeping, categorical claims, such as “This goes against all journalistic credibility,” “[T]he media in America has lost all dignity,” or “CNN has no morals.” In other words, the commenters seemed to recognize quality journalism when they see it and to compare the reporters’ actions against that model behavior. This indicates also that the commenters assumed their imagined audience has a shared understanding of what these boundary markers, and overstepping them, entail.

It’s legal but is it news?

In criticizing the live broadcast, some commenters grounded their critique in what they perceived as CNN’s failure to fulfill its role in delivering news as a distinct, socially meaningful product. Elaborating on what this role means, one commenter referred to the purpose of news and the role of journalism as a cultural storyteller: “How is this educating or informing your audience? In case CNN forgot[,] news is supposed to have purpose[,] not [be] a tabloid circus show[. S]top hiding behind the guise of telling historical events.”

Others evoked the concept of newsworthiness and the language of news values, by describing the broadcast “as not even near to news value,” chastising the reporters for “call[ing] this news,” asking them to justify the purpose of going through the suspects’ belongings when “the facts [we]re already there” or labeling the coverage as “not even newsworthy” and “worthless.”

A sizeable number of commenters went beyond questioning the immediate value of the broadcast to argue that the reporters’ poor news judgement had disqualified them from being considered a valuable member of the profession. The ways the commenters demarcated these boundaries differed. Some pitted the reporters against the high standards in the field, by describing their work as “ha[ving] nothing to do with good journalism” or “real investigative journalism,” describing their work as “tabloid reporting” and “ambulance chasing journalism,” and calling them a “disgrace to respectable journalists.” Yet others put the reporters outside the journalistic professional boundaries altogether, by referring to them as “the so-called journalists,” “the wannabee journalists” or by describing the broadcast as “not even journalism” and evidence that “journalism is truly dead.”

Media Practices: Breaking-News Vernacular, Pack Journalism and a Desire for Voyeurism

Another theme that emerged across numerous comments had to do with criticizing the conventions that have come to be associated with breaking news coverage on 24/7 cable news channels but, in the commenters’ eyes, offered no value to viewers: the desire to be first, the overdramatized style of delivery, and filling the air time with no substantive information.

The journalists’ desire to be first was among such questionable priorities. In the words of one commenter, “The reporter kept saying ‘I was the FIRST one in’ ... Wow, good for you ... Unbelievable.” Another commenter echoed this sentiment, describing the reporter’s behavior as “bizarre.” Others took issue with the “media [being] way to obsessed

about every little detail,” with one commenter sarcastically noting, “Everything on CNN is considered ‘Breaking News,’” and another wondering what makes the reporter so “freaked out” given “all the things she mentioned in her report [could be seen in] anyone’s house.” This sentiment was echoed in another commenter’s posting, who blamed the crew for what they described as “throwing out commons sense and justice for the ‘Scoop.’” Predicting how the story was going to unfold, another commenter argued, “CNN will now spend all day with experts talking about nothing and rehashing the same old content.”

Even though commenters were aware of—and at times explicitly acknowledged—the fact that they were posting their critique on CNN’s page, they emphasized their criticism stretched beyond the actions of one organization, to include “every news outlet [that] was in there” and “all the press,” whom they viewed as displaying this “greedy” behavior. In the words of one commenter, “CNN has crossed the line on news reporting. That being said, I suspect Fox News is peeking in through the bedroom window.” Others echoed this point, by describing journalists as “vultures” and “jackals”—that is, animals that have come to signify not only those who prey on others in a way that appeals to basic instincts (Knowles 2005), but who engage in this behavior cooperatively, as a group.

Finally, commenters argued that the media not only encouraged the “shameful exploitation of a tragedy” among themselves, but invited others to do the same. The journalists’ entry into the apartment, commenters noted, had granted allowance for the local community to engage in a sort of public rubber-necking, feeding the worst impulses of a desire for voyeurism. One commenter pointed out that since the reporters’ entry viewers were seeing “local citizens and neighbors going in there with dogs on leashes & with babes in arms, not just media,” while others blamed the reporters for turning the place into “a madhouse,” a “zoo” and “a tourist attraction.”

Commenter Rhetoric: Establishing Contributory Expertise

Asserting Legitimacy

In offering their critique of the coverage, commenters relied on several rhetorical strategies to establish their legitimacy—that is, to demonstrate that their comments are worthy of attention and to persuade others to acknowledge their presence. These included referencing shared experience and the use of collective pronouns to position themselves as members of the ingroup.

As one of the most salient rhetorical moves that employed these two strategies simultaneously, commenters evoked the plural first-person pronoun, “we,” to purport they spoke on behalf of a broader community of CNN viewers, as well as referenced their viewing experience as a collective act. In a pattern that emerged across numerous comments, commenters insisted, “We don’t want to see their room”; wondered, “What makes the media think we want to see inside their home”; and argued, “This is why we need a ‘dislike’ button.”

In addition to legitimating the commenters’ demands by presenting them as advancing collective interests, the usage of “we” put audience members in opposition to the outgroup of media practitioners, collectively referred to as “they.” Notably, this was true even in occasional instances when a commenter disagreed with what appeared to be an established consensus in the group:

The media is there because of ratings. Who gives them the ratings[?] [W]e do. We have become a society that has to know every single detail every minute of every day[;] Facebook and Twitter prov[e] this. They wouldn't be there if they didn't think we'd watch.

To answer RQ 2, we also asked what rhetorical strategies commenters used to claim authority—in other words, to signal they deserve to not only be heard but listened to. Our analysis has revealed that commenters relied on strategies that had been established in previous research on boundary work, but with some meaningful differences.

Claiming authority as (in)experienced observers of the field

In a pattern that emerged across multiple comments, commenters presented themselves as experienced observers of the field by describing the coverage as the most extreme manifestation of various journalistic ills that they “have ever seen.” By doing so, they implied their personal experience serves a valid yardstick for measuring journalistic performance and vests them with contributory expertise. Some went as far as to present themselves as chroniclers of the profession, as captured in comments that referred to the coverage as “the worst possible case of journalism ever,” “one of the most careless displays the media has ever shown,” “a new low,” or “the weirdest, most questionable sequence of events ... without any shadow of a doubt.”

At the same time, a sizable number of commenters challenged the idea they needed to establish authority before being allowed to contribute to boundary work. In a consistent fashion, such commenters either didn't precede their critique with any qualifiers or explicitly acknowledged they didn't know why exactly they found the coverage problematic.

In a way that highlighted this contrast in approaches to crafting authority claims, some commenters signaled their extensive knowledge of the San Bernardino case by bringing in additional sources to support their claims and by saturating their posts with detailed references to the objects they noticed in CNN's footage. Yet others posited they didn't have to watch the video to say that it was unethical or otherwise problematic. In other words, such commenters rejected the idea that the viewers' authority as boundary workers should be premised on familiarity with the specifics of the journalistic acts they criticize.

Acting as Proto-Professionals

Our analysis has revealed a similar contrast in how commenters employed another rhetorical strategy established in previous research: acting as proto-professionals. To reiterate, this strategy serves to demonstrate that an outsider is entitled to engage into boundary work by speaking as an insider. At the level of tactics, this strategy may be implemented by recycling professional language, adopting the basic stances of the profession, and approximating a professional style of writing.

In terms of appropriating this strategy at the tactical level, two distinctive, and contrasting, patterns emerged. On the one hand, commenters signaled their grasp of professional vocabulary and basic journalistic tenets by weaving into their reasoning terms such as “scoop,” “news values,” and evoking the language of journalistic professional obligations, such as verifying information, upholding the “code of ethics to minimize harm,” and “report[ing] on the news[,] not becom[ing] the news.” Notably, this kind of professional knowledge was less prominent than the specialized knowledge the commenters

brought in from other fields, such as law enforcement, rental law, and gun policy, which they deployed to explain why entering the apartment was legally problematic.² Still, this reliance on journalistic vernacular signaled the recognition of professional terminology as a valid boundary marker that distinguishes insiders from outsiders and an earnest attempt to employ it in justifying the commenters' claims for contributory expertise.

This stood in contrast to how commenters employed the tactic of approximating the professional style of speaking. Rather than authentically emulating journalistic style, they parodied it, as exemplified in the following post: "Alright[,] so this is where the suspect slept ... This is where he made breakfast, lunch, dinner ... Maybe even a little midnight snack. And most disturbingly, this is where he watched television and relaxed." Another commenter echoed: "Over here is the last roll of toilet paper! Here is a half-full wastebasket, and look, the bed's not made!" Taking on the role of an anchor, another one inquired: "Did she have the laundry done? Were dishes left in the kitchen sink[?] Was the diaper pail emptied?"

Engaging in this kind of playful critique served two purposes. First, by juxtaposing the dramatic form of delivery with the mundanity of the "news," commenters underscored the problematic nature of such sensationalistic coverage. Second, by employing the journalistic style in a playful manner, commenters showed their ability to speak as an insider, and to do so easily, which justified their entitlement to expertise claims.

In approximating the professional style of writing, some commenters went further, taking on the copy-editor role to fix what they considered to be inaccurate descriptions of CNN's actions. In one illustrative post, a commenter suggested, "The real title for this story should be 'landlord lets in reporters who have no respect for police and the investigation process.'" In another post that employed the same tactic, a commenter wrote, "CNN means 'we stormed the property like vultures, so desperate to get some viewers b[e]c[ause] the media in America has lost all dignity.'" Yet another revised the original titles by keeping the formatting conventions of breaking-news titles—capitalization, present tense, omission of articles—to come up with, "BREAKING NEWS. CNN RANSACS CRIME SCENE." By literally giving themselves the last word, the viewers positioned themselves as the ultimate judges of the adequacy of reporters' actions, penalizing those who overstepped the boundaries of appropriate journalistic practice with condescension and ridicule.

Finally, our analysis revealed two additional patterns that have not been reported in previous scholarship on either online negotiation of contributory expertise or boundary work: rhetorical questions and direct address.

Rhetorical Questions

In a pattern that emerged across dozens of comments, commenters used rhetorical questions to raise a variety of concerns about journalistic practice. Some used them to single out ethical failures, with one commenter writing, "Do we really need to paw through this stuff to gratify base curiosity?" Others used them to chastise the reporters for irresponsibility in interfering with what could still be an active investigation: "Isn't that a crime scene [that] should be loaded with investigators rather than news media?" Some criticized the reporters for the misplaced emphasis on the perpetrators' side of the story: "Haven't they [the suspects] had enough press time?!?" Yet others used rhetorical questions to question the reporters' professionalism: "Did any of these people go to journalism school?"

Framing their criticism as rhetorical questions—that is, statements that by definition expect no verbalized answer—served two purposes. First, it allowed commenters to claim contributory expertise by asserting themselves as self-sufficient subjects who do not depend on the journalists' input to make sense of the journalistic professional practice. Second, it portrayed the reporters as having made blatant—literally unquestionable—mistakes and thus allowed commenters to challenge the reporters' authority as exclusively legitimate boundary workers.

Direct Address

Direct address emerged as another consistent pattern in which commenters appealed to media workers. This strategy was typically deployed along with other authority-claiming strategies, as demonstrated in the following post:

This is a crime scene not an amusement park. MEDIA / CNN[,] you are keepers of historical events not on a scavenger hunt. Disgusting & shameful to see the flux of reporters foaming at the mouth to be the first ones in the home.

In this comment, the commenter qualified her criticism of paparazzi-style journalism with her knowledge of the basic stances of the profession, by reminding journalists of their role as societal chroniclers. Addressing the reporters directly amplified the commenter's authority by asserting her as someone who doesn't need to be called upon to share her judgement but who can join the boundary-work discussion whenever she herself chooses.

This amplification of authority-establishing claims is similarly visible in the post of another commenter, who signaled her expertise by referencing CNN's slogan and purported to speak on behalf of a broader community of viewers by deploying the pronoun "we": "CNN, you really stooped to an all[-]time low, entering the home and showing us stuff we don't need to see. You turned a news story into a sideshow, making you ... no longer ... the trusted name in news."

Finally, some commenters used direct address to go beyond voicing their criticism to issue commands to media workers, which concerned nearly every journalistic decision they found problematic and ranged from ordering reporters to "allow law enforcement to do their job," to asking them to "stop sensationalizing tragedy" and "glorifying" the perpetrators, to requesting that journalists "place their focus on the lives lost" and "take some responsibility" for their actions. By framing their criticism in imperative mood, commenters asserted their authority to prescribe the appropriate course of journalistic action and thus positioned themselves as equal, if not privileged, agents of boundary work.

Discussion

Our study contributes to research on journalistic boundary work by exploring the strategies used by online commenters to map the boundaries of appropriate journalistic practice and to assert themselves as legitimate and authoritative agents of boundary work.

Journalists have traditionally presented themselves as rigorous guardians of journalistic boundaries, capable of penalizing those who failed to honor professional obligations and norms. Yet in the audience critique examined here, commenters discursively presented a journalism that had scuttled its social responsibility and attached itself to the values of spectacle over substance, ratings over the presentation of fact, the desire to

be the first over editorial discretion. In this perceived social reality, online commenters took on the role of boundary workers themselves—holding the journalists in check, reminding them of the central tenets of the profession and castigating those who undermine professional values.

If analyzed in terms of the typology of boundary-work strategies (i.e., expansion, expulsion, protection of autonomy), the commenters thus effectively challenged the key premise of the strategy of the protection of autonomy, which draws its persuasive power on the idea of journalism as a self-regulating, self-sufficient field (Carlson 2015). Without necessarily attempting to position themselves within the profession, the commenters sought to define themselves as legitimate critics of the profession, taking up the mission to articulate and guard the boundaries that journalists should be upholding but are themselves breaching.

Some of the commenters' criticisms echoed the findings of scholarly research on audience criticism of journalistic work. These include the misplaced emphasis on the perpetrator—with its contrasting, but equally problematic, outcomes of glorifying violence (Jenkins and Tandoc 2017) and "othering" the Muslim population (Harb and Bessaiso 2006); sensationalism and the pursuit of a "scoop" (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016), as well as ethical concerns, such as inflicting harm and invading privacy (Karlsson and Clerwall 2019; Lind and Rarick 1991). Some of the practices identified by the commenters as problematic, such as pack journalism and tabloid-style reporting, have been routinely placed outside the boundaries of the permissible by journalists themselves (Bishop 1999; Frank 2003; Winch 1997).

In engaging in this kind of critique, commenters effectively adopted the strategy of *expulsion* (Carlson 2015; Gieryn 1983) and by doing so, emulated the insiders' boundary-work efforts not only in terms of the practices they found problematic, but also in terms of the type of the intervention they executed. Taken together, this suggests that audience members and the journalistic community do have a shared understanding of journalistic boundaries and see themselves invested in their enforcement in face of perceived violations.

As for the triad of boundary-work elements (i.e., participants, practices, and norms), the commenters' critique primarily revolved around *practices* and *norms*. However, they occasionally couched their criticism of inappropriate media practices in terms of *participants*, by referring to reporters with epithets that discursively positioned them as outsiders to the journalistic field (e.g., "the so-called journalists," "the wannabee journalists"). This finding resonates with the conclusion from previous research that has argued the elements of boundary work are not mutually exclusive and may spill over into each other (Carlson 2015).

Markedly, the audience's criticism extended beyond unambiguously problematic practices to question the appropriateness of the journalistic routines that have become the staple of the 24-hour news culture: breaking news and live coverage. The playfulness of some of the comments aside, they echoed the key themes that run through the professional and scholarly discourse on live breaking-news delivery as a distinct journalistic practice (Casella 2013; Cottle and Rai 2008; Cushion 2015; MacGregor 1997; Seib 2016; Tuggle and Huffman 1999), criticizing the San Bernardino broadcast as underdelivering on the promise of connecting audiences to newsworthy events of utmost social significance and overusing the format as an end in itself.

The stylistic playfulness that commenters showed in approximating the journalistic style—which they achieved by pairing up the dramatic manner of news delivery with the mundaneness of the “discoveries” they “made” on their imagined tour of the suspects’ apartment—offers another theoretically useful insight. By rewriting the reporters’ scripts in a way that preserves the form but hollows out the substance, the commenters problematized this overused journalistic practice by capturing the very “victory of style over substance” that has been conceived as emblemizing the ethos of breaking news live in scholarly discourse (Lewis and Cushion 2009, 317; see also Lewis, Cushion, and Thomas 2005; Seib 2016).

The analysis of boundary work surrounding live coverage in terms of the typology (i.e., expansion, expulsion, protection of autonomy) has revealed a meaningful distinction between the boundary-work efforts of the journalistic community and those of audience members. Journalists, despite some of them expressing dissatisfaction with the pervasiveness of live-coverage, have come to increasingly rely on this media practice, thus effectively engaging in the strategy of *expansion* as a field (Carlson 2015). In contrast, the commenters in our analysis have taken a more critical—and more consistent—approach, by adopting the opposite strategy, *expulsion*, placing what they saw as an unjustified use of the live-coverage format outside of the boundaries of permissible media practice.

Concluding their landmark study of the perceived purpose and value of reporting live among news workers, Tuggle and Huffman (1999) called for studies that would explore “if viewers, like some in the news business, differentiate between legitimate and gratuitous uses of live technology” (504). The results of our analysis suggest they do. Taken together, they invite a deeper critical reflection about the meanings assigned to live breaking-news coverage by audience members and the boundaries they impose on this journalistic practice.

Our findings also probe a new line of research in boundary work: exploring the audience’s rhetorical strategies to validate themselves as boundary workers. This topic presents a promising direction in journalism studies, as indicated by a growing scholarly interest in audience’s struggles, and efforts, to legitimate their participation in boundary work (Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016; Duffy, Ling, and Tandoc 2018; Wolfgang 2018c, 2019).

Our analysis has revealed a number of noteworthy patterns in this direction. First, seeking to establish themselves as legitimate agents of boundary work, commenters explicitly positioned themselves as outsiders to the journalistic field. Even when they were acting as proto-professionals—by evoking journalistic vernacular and referencing the basic stances of the profession—they anchored their critique in their position as observers of journalistic acts. Out of the legitimating strategies established by previous research (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998), they heavily drew on their shared experience as viewers and relied on a mixture of first-person (“we,” “our”) and third-person (“they,” “their”) collective pronouns, which simultaneously “locked” other commenters “in tacit agreement” (Rowland 1999, 20) and established them as a community of outsiders positioned against journalism’s insiders. Even though some commenters did signal their knowledge of journalistic vernacular, their strategy contrasted with the approach by numerous others, who explicitly acknowledged their lack of knowledge—or, at times, efforts to even familiarize themselves with the footage they criticized—thus challenging the notion that the commenters’ participation in boundary work should be conditioned on the effectiveness of their authority-establishing moves. This, along with heavy

reliance on information coming from other occupations—such as law enforcement, gun policy, law—in substantiating the commenters' claims, could be taken as signaling their dismissal of specialized field knowledge, a key element of boundary work (Carlson 2015), as a valid boundary marker in the journalism field.

This finding stands in contrast to research on contributory expertise in fields with more formalized professional boundaries, such as medicine, where commenters have been found to carefully substantiate their authority claims (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998).

Second, although commenters did rely on established authority-claiming strategies, they appropriated them at the level of tactical moves in distinctive new ways. For example, when applying the strategy of acting as proto-professionals, instead of authentically emulating the journalistic style of reporting, they subjected it to sarcasm and ridicule—a move, which despite not having been reported in the literature on contributory expertise, is interpreted in sociology of laughter as a way to reclaim authority in asymmetrical social relations (Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Sørensen 2017; Speier 1998) and deserves further study in the context of journalism.

Finally, our findings bear further reflection in regard to two additional rhetorical devices that have not been reported in the scholarship on contributory expertise: rhetorical questions and direct address.

Taken at face value, the commenters' reliance on rhetorical questions could be viewed as an obvious choice for online commenters. After all, they were posting their critique on the organization's social media page with no history, and expectation, of responding to viewers' comments. Yet we consider rhetorical questions to be a strategic, authority-claiming move. In doing so, we draw on the literature in pragmatics, which has long assumed that rhetorical questions function as commands and directions (Ilie 2015). An analysis of encounters between patients and doctors—that is, actors in asymmetrical relations in a field with strictly formalized professional boundaries—has shown that patients deploy rhetorical questions strategically, as a way to assert themselves and to question the doctor's ability to fulfill her role (Ainsworth-Vaughn 1994). Fundamentally, rhetorical questions “amount[] to proposals to redefine the social identities of physician and patient” (199)—the dynamics that, albeit embedded in an industry with much more formalized occupational boundaries, echoes the asymmetrical journalist–audience relationship in boundary work and merits additional study.

We argue that direct address in the commenters' discourse serves a similarly strategic purpose. Initiating a conversation is interpreted in social semiotics as a marker of power (Hodge and Kress 1988). Research on impersonal communication in education, a field with firmly demarcated professional boundaries and social positions, has found teachers to frequently address students by using the pronoun “you” in instructional discourse. The opposite is “relatively rare” (Rowland 1999, 22) and indicates the students' acknowledgment of the asymmetry in the relationship between instructors as holders of expert knowledge, on the one hand, and students as recipients of it, on the other. Following this logic, the online commenters' deployment of direct address to criticize journalistic practice can be seen as a maneuver to reverse the existing asymmetry in the journalists–audience positioning in boundary work. The fact that audience members came to share their critique—which they had not been explicitly invited to do—in the news organization's own hosted web space, can be viewed as another move that serves to wrestle some power away from journalists as the only rightful agents of boundary work.

Past research has consistently shown that journalists tend to dismiss commenters as illegitimate infringers on their field who are unqualified to participate in upholding journalism's professional boundaries (Bergström and Wadbring 2015; Canter 2013; Duffy, Ling, and Tandoc 2018; Robinson 2015; Wolfgang 2018a, 2018b). Our study demonstrates that audience members can operate as resourceful boundary workers who possess a sophisticated, multifaceted understanding of journalistic practices and can deploy a variety of rhetorical means to legitimate their participation in boundary work.

Notes

1. Given space constraints, we do not provide full citations to the comments we quote, but they are available by request. We also don't consider whether any of the commenters might have a news-making professional background, because, albeit relevant, this may not be reliably established based on data we had at our disposal. It deserves to be mentioned, however, that none of the commenters whose posts we analyzed based their claims for contributory expertise on professional journalistic experience or education.
2. In total, 271 comments, or 10.7% of the comments analyzed, included references to terminology drawn from the domains of law enforcement, rental law, or gun policy.

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