

## **Boundary-Drawing Power and the Renewal of Professional News Organizations: The Case of the *Guardian* and the Edward Snowden NSA Leak**

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We argue that the Edward Snowden NSA leak of 2013 was an important punctuating phase in the evolution of political journalism and political communication, as media systems continue to adapt to the incursion of digital media logics. We show how the leak's mediation reveals professional news organizations' evolving power in an increasingly congested, complex, and polycentric hybrid media system where the number of news actors has radically increased. We identify the practices through which the *Guardian* reconfigured and renewed its power and which enabled it to lay bare highly significant aspects of state power and surveillance. This involved exercising a form of strategic, if still contingent, control over the information and communication environments within which the Snowden story developed. This was based upon a range of practices encapsulated by a concept we introduce: *boundary-drawing power*.

*Keywords:* News, journalism, boundary-drawing power, adaptation, social media, internet, hybrid media system, privacy, security, surveillance, NSA, Prism

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During 2013 and early 2014 a 192-year old British newspaper, one of the grand old players of the British journalism establishment, published an ambitious and highly controversial series of investigative articles about the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) and Britain's equivalent, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). The most significant of these articles revealed the growth of Prism, a sweeping and, it would emerge, only weakly accountable NSA internet and phone surveillance program that had developed inside this notoriously secretive U.S. government organization since the early 2000s. The newspaper alleged that GCHQ had colluded with the Prism project to enable U.S. surveillance of British citizens. It also alleged that the NSA had been intercepting the communications of foreign citizens and allied foreign heads of state, including most spectacularly the cellphone of German chancellor Angela Merkel. The 192-year old newspaper in question was the *Guardian* and the source of these articles was a reported trove of tens of thousands of classified documents leaked by a former NSA insider named Edward Snowden.

The political impact of the *Guardian's* articles was almost immediate. Seven weeks after the publication of their opening piece—an exposé of the NSA's collection on an “ongoing, daily basis” of metadata on all phone calls made on America's Verizon network (Greenwald, 2013b)—and after a series of public and private Congressional briefings, the U.S. House of Representatives voted on a strategic amendment to the 2014 U.S. Defense Appropriations Bill. Tabled by Justin Amash, a Republican Representative for Michigan, the measure was designed to withdraw funding from the NSA's cellphone surveillance program, but only as a preliminary to building a new structure of accountability for the agency. The Amash amendment was voted down by 217 votes to 205, but the narrowness of its defeat and the very fact that Congress was publicly discussing such activities enabled the event to be framed as a symbolic blow to the credibility of the NSA and President Obama's administration more generally (Fung, 2013).

During the summer of 2013 the *Guardian's* campaign quickly spread across the landscape of U.S. elite journalism, as the *Washington Post* began adding to what would become a barrage of new Snowden revelations. During the autumn of 2013 President Obama came under pressure to announce a full-scale review of the NSA's activities. This he did in December 2013, and, for those concerned about digital surveillance, the outcome was quite extraordinary. The proposed reforms were important, though conservative. But most remarkable was the public acknowledgement of so much of what the *Guardian's* and the *Post's* investigations had revealed. While Obama's review committee's report fell far short of privacy campaigners' demands, it freely admitted that the NSA had engaged in the “bulk collection” and mass storage of large quantities of metadata from the phone communications of millions of Americans and that such mass storage should come to an end. Obama himself then announced that the NSA must apply to the secret FISA court (the body that exercises judicial oversight of requests by intelligence agencies

for surveillance warrants) for the approval of all phone monitoring programs and that the court would now include independent advocates to oversee difficult cases. It was also announced that the U.S. intelligence agencies would cease spying on the heads of state of allied countries and that new safeguards would be introduced to protect the rights of foreign citizens whose communications were being hoovered up into the NSA's vast "collect it all" digital databases (Ackerman & Roberts, 2014).

Organized under the filmic banners of *The NSA Files* and *The Snowden Files*, the most important of the *Guardian's* articles were written by two reporters who symbolize the creative tension between older and newer media logics in contemporary political journalism: Glenn Greenwald, a former *Salon.com* blogger and then a recently-hired *Guardian USA* journalist, and Ewen MacAskill, a highly experienced, inky-fingered *Guardian* veteran of Washington reporting.

Crafted from documents stamped "Top Secret" and many peculiarly tasteless internal Microsoft PowerPoint slides, the Snowden articles are some of the most significant publications in the modern history of the American security state. The campaign had an explosive impact on the political agenda in the United States, Europe, and around the world, as the leaks reverberated through the period of over a year. On April 14, 2014 the *Guardian* and the *Post* were both awarded the Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism.<sup>2</sup>

During 2013 digital surveillance featured more prominently in mainstream news reports in the United States and Britain than at any time since internet communication was invented. An immense outpouring of commentary was generated by the

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of this writing (July 2014), the nature of the *Washington Post's* contribution to the Snowden leaks seemingly remains the subject of some friendly rivalry between *Post* reporter Barton Gellman and staff at the *Guardian*, but source protection is also a factor. We know from the public record that Snowden shared documents with Gellman and it was Gellman's article, co-authored with documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras, that beat by just a few minutes the *Guardian's* publication of the initial June 2013 Prism article. But following that it seems difficult to deny that the *Guardian* played a larger role in publishing articles derived from the Snowden files. The news organization was willing and able to publish almost 300 articles within three months of the first Prism piece. Unfortunately, the *Guardian's* own highly detailed book is not much use to researchers in this regard. It describes the *Post* as having "been sitting on some similar material" for the Prism story and Barton Gellman's involvement as having derived from Laura Poitras's attempt to gain advice from him about the authenticity of Snowden's initial messages to her (Harding, 2014, p. 138). Matters are further complicated by the fact that by the time the *Post* (and the *New York Times*) were publishing their articles the *Guardian* was already collaborating with these and other U.S. news organizations in response to attempts by the British government to prevent it from publishing further material. In sum, in this article we focus on the *Guardian* primarily because it most clearly exhibits the strategies for exercising oppositional media power that we seek to explore. However, we also argue that the sheer volume and importance of the articles published by the *Guardian* render it the most important news organization in this complex drama. By February 1, 2014 there were 680 articles on the news organization's website. We refer readers to our detailed chronicle of key events below.

*Guardian*'s campaign, as governments, elected representatives, privacy activists, internet libertarians, technology companies, and publics around the world reacted to the news that the NSA had been intercepting and storing digital data gathered on a massive scale from technology companies as large as Apple, Google, Facebook, and Microsoft.

This same period also saw several class action lawsuits against the NSA, the Obama administration, and the twelve technology companies alleged to be involved in Prism, in a struggle involving the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and a broad and diverse network of advocacy groups, think tanks, and citizen groups such as the Electronic Privacy Information Center and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2013). The ACLU suit challenged Prism on the grounds that the NSA's enabling legislation (in this case the post-9/11 Patriot Act) was a violation of the U.S. Constitution's First and Fourth Amendments (Savage, 2013).

For those interested in the relationship between digital communication technologies, politics, and society, the Snowden NSA leak was a highly significant event. Much research is needed to try to make sense of the myriad political, social, and technological impacts of this new era of ubiquitous mass surveillance. This present article concerns how journalists mediated the leak. Our project is driven by the following questions: What constellation of forces enabled such an extraordinarily powerful intervention by a news organization in national and global public debates over security, privacy, and individual freedom? How did the *Guardian* operate throughout the development of the story? How was it able to command such obvious authority in a journalistic field that is notoriously secretive and hemmed in by legal restrictions, and where, in recent years, the growth of transnational online activism and WikiLeaks has generated a highly unpredictable environment for news organizations' treatment of leaks from the military and security services? How did the *Guardian* position itself at the center of the story? How were journalists able to balance centrality, legitimacy, and authority against the benefits of the relatively chaotic network affordances of digital media and distributed online activism?

We see the Snowden leak as an important punctuating phase in the evolution of political journalism, and political communication more generally, as media systems continue to adapt to the incursion of digital media logics. Our aim in this article, therefore, is to analyze the Snowden leak in the context of a growing body of ideas about the future of journalism and political news. We argue that the leak's mediation reveals professional journalists' evolving power in an increasingly congested, complex, and polycentric hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) in which the number of powerful news actors has radically increased but older practices remain important. We identify the practices through which the Snowden leak project allowed the *Guardian* to reconfigure and renew its power as a news organization, enabling it

to lay bare highly significant aspects of state power and surveillance. This involved exercising a certain form of strategic, if still contingent, control over the information and communication environments within which the story developed. This control was based upon an exploratory concept we introduce: *boundary-drawing power*. By boundary-drawing power we mean the capacity of an organizational actor to reconfigure the context of its own actions by using resources and strategies that are both intrinsic to itself but which also involve interfacing with other actors in a hyper-networked environment. However we caution against the view that the Snowden leak was a traditional and straightforward scoop by heroic professional investigative journalists.

### **Mediating the Snowden Leak: A Chronicle of the Key Events, 2012–2014**

[Click here for the chronicle, hosted online at the New Political Communication Unit website.](#)

### **Digital Media, Journalism, and Power**

Understanding the Snowden leak as a key moment in the renewal of older media requires attention to the complex ideological, institutional, and technological changes reshaping news and journalism. Recently C. W. Anderson, Emily Bell, and Clay Shirky have usefully distilled the organizing narratives in this field of practice (2012, p. 45). We borrow from this approach as a means of contextualizing the significance of the Snowden leak.

#### *Institutional Decline?*

Those charting professional journalism's supposed institutional decline tend to blame digital media's disruption of complacent and sclerotic organizational structures (Benkler, 2011). Much of this narrative will be familiar to readers of this journal but key points bear repeating. As Seth C. Lewis (2012: 838) has helpfully noted:

[F]or much of the twentieth century, both the business model and the professional routines of journalism in developed nations were highly stable and successful enterprises because they took advantage of scarcity, exclusivity, and control. In the local information market, news media dominated the means of media production, access to expert source material, and distribution to wide audiences—which translated into tremendous capital both in gatekeeping authority... and economic power.

But the rise of digitally-networked individuals with cheap and relatively easy access

to media production and distribution technologies has greatly decentralized the production of socially-useful information. The net result for professional journalism has been hypercompetition among media institutions, audience fragmentation, and the *partial* erosion of older business models. Telling statistics abound (Edmonds et al., 2013; Fleming, 2013; Freedman, 2010; Rosenstiel, et al., 2012; Smith, 2012).

In some interpretations, these fundamental structural changes have had a negative impact on journalism's traditional civic role. Some argue that increased competition between traditional news producers and internet-enabled start-ups, bloggers, and networked communities is catalyzing a transition from a once-dominant "trustee" model, in which journalists "decide what news citizens should know to act as informed participants in democracy" (Paulussen, et al., 2007 134), to a "market" model in which "[c]onsumer demand is the ultimate arbiter of the news product" (Schudson, 1998 135). Pablo Boczkowski's (2010) study of news production reinforces this narrative by detailing how the growth of real-time content monitoring among competing news outlets results in news "homogenization." Other scholars have argued that the bulk of online news is produced for increasingly fragmented niche audiences and is aligned with lifestyle and entertainment values rather than the promotion of a broader civic orientation (Curran & Witschge, 2010). Compressed news cycles combine with newsrooms' supposedly reduced capacities for quality investigative reporting (Currah, 2009; Davies, 2009) to further limit journalists' sources and the range of content for audiences (Phillips, 2010; Redden & Witschge, 2010). Thus, critics argue, despite the apparent informational exuberance of the new, digitally networked media environment, the range of civically-useful news output may in fact be narrower than it was during the pre-digital era.

News produced within digital network environments is also said to present a challenge to journalists' social, economic, cultural, and political power because digital media potentially erode what used to be much simpler, more coherent professional identities and gatekeeping practices. As more information becomes digitally native it increasingly travels through digital flows before being aggregated and temporarily stabilized in databases (Manovich, 1999, 2012). As Alfred Hermida argues, source materials increasingly enter news gathering and production processes in the form of "unstructured data, coming in fragments of raw, unprocessed journalism from both professionals and the public." This requires that journalistic practice shifts towards "a more iterative and collaborative approach in reporting and verifying the news" (2012, p. 665). These increasingly embedded practices of collaboration are said to undermine journalists' roles as the arbiters of news values (Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

Such operational transformations rightly require a revision of core concepts such as gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and framing, but there seems to be little space for adaptation and renewal of professional media in these narratives. For example, Axel Bruns's concept of "gatewatching" risks downgrading the journalist from being a

powerful, purposive actor to being a mere facilitator of networked information flows derived from a range of formal, informal, verified, and even unverifiable sources. Blogs, argues Sharon Meraz, are “redistributing power between traditional media and citizen media” (Meraz, 2009, p. 701).

The ongoing integration of digital technologies with everyday journalistic practice creates further challenges to normative democratic models of serious and investigative news, due to the role of emergent technological affordances in shaping news production. As C. W. Anderson (2012) has argued, new “computational” forms of journalism reveal how the potential for pluralistic and richly discursive news is often downplayed in favor of technologies geared to delivering quickly produced, superficial, and increasingly semi-automated content based on predicted consumer behavior—what Daniel Roth has termed the “algorithmic audience” (Roth, 2009). In this perspective, the threat to journalists’ civic agency is the increasing use of database-driven algorithms whose provenance is often opaque and outside the traditional craft practices of professional journalism (Anderson, 2011). In short, this is a new type of “journalism,” carried out on the cheap, and without the civic ambition that has historically been a significant driver of muckraking and investigative scoops.

### *Institutional Adaptation and Renewal*

On the other hand, the spread of digital technology in news making creates an opportunity for journalism’s rebirth through the rejection of a previous era of relative insularity. Early in the internet’s diffusion a wave of media scholars and practitioners identified its potential to fundamentally transform institutionalized journalism and reconnect it with its civic mission. Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis (2003) and Dan Gillmor (2004) were quick to articulate the ideas of the “former audience” and “citizen journalism,” and they explained how these forces would strengthen journalism’s watchdog role. Jay Rosen (2006) pithily described the rise of a new, technologically-equipped citizenry increasingly able to challenge twentieth century corporate models of advertising-driven content creation.

As the complexities of digitally mediated news gathering have become better understood, the idea of “citizen journalism,” which, after all, is still predicated upon the idea of a professional/amateur divide, has steadily evolved into concepts that problematize the separation. These include “networked journalism” (Beckett & Mansell, 2008; Jarvis, 2006), “news-making assemblages” and “hybrid systems” (Anderson, 2013; Chadwick, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2013), “social discovery” (Newman, 2011), and even the “fifth estate” (Newman, et al., 2012) These concepts try to address the integration of the new digital-era online activist networks that possess strong normative values of transparency and openness, as well as the roles broader publics now often play, both in publishing their own stories and in contributing to the development of news as it develops in integrated networks that

include powerful professional journalists. Charlie Beckett (2008) argues that this new context enhances the journalism profession's oldest virtues by making it more likely that marginalized groups will find an outlet for their perspectives as media organizations are compelled to become more responsive. Yochai Benkler situates such normative ideals within the historical context of the Habermasian tradition by defining a new "networked public sphere" based on greater horizontal communication away from the corporate media structures that dominated twentieth century media systems (2006, p. 32).

It seems inescapable to us that digital media logics are creating many civically-beneficial changes in journalists' daily practice. The adoption of "live blogs" by elite media shows how they are adapting to news-cycle compression and the spread of swathes of unverified online content. By refocusing their efforts on "being the best at verifying and curating" (Newman, 2009, p. 2), rather than obsessing about breaking exclusive stories, some news organizations are steadily reconfiguring their authority. As journalists participate in these new networked spaces they begin to establish identities for themselves as "network nodes" (Newman, 2011, p. 6) that build audience loyalty and exert influence on public policy. This enables networked journalists to quickly and easily identify news, distribute fresh information, source public feedback, and build trust among citizens who value the interaction with previously inaccessible elite media workers. But social media, particularly Twitter, enable citizens to work together and with journalists to frame and counter-frame stories, create alternative discourses, and challenge or bolster the authority of rival journalists and political actors (Chadwick, 2011a, 2011c). Meanwhile, the emergence of new professional roles such as the data journalist and the "programmer-journalist" (Lewis, 2012, p. 614) is enabling newsrooms to rapidly analyze the vast, potentially news-rich volumes of publicly available information to break exclusives or identify hitherto unknown aspects of existing news. From different starting points, Sarah Cohen and colleagues (2011), Michael Schudson (2010), and David Ryfe (2012) all argue that such developments will renew journalism's civic role, albeit within media systems very different from those dominant during the twentieth century.

It is often forgotten that, in the space of just a few years, social media networks have become essential for producing and distributing news. Since the late 2000s, all large media organizations have reported significant growth in the numbers of readers visiting their sites from links spread through Facebook and Twitter networks (Dutton & Blank, 2011; Newman, et al., 2012, pp. 6, 10–13). The internet's global reach is also helping news institutions build new international audiences. U.K. media organizations, particularly the *Mail* and the *Guardian*, have succeeded in broadening their market to include U.S. readers, in part due to their use of digital marketing specialists but also as a result of their successfully tapping into a much wider network of sources, many of them bloggers and activists (Newman, 2011, p. 11). The commercial logic underlying the Snowden project is obvious, but the launch of the



web-only *Guardian USA* would not have been possible without generally placing digital media at the center of the approach.

We therefore argue that the most convincing stories about contemporary journalism are about institutional adaptation, even if they are the least told. Emerging news start-ups and established institutions alike are forging and adapting to the new digital news environment. As Anderson et al state: we need to explore how, why, and with what consequences “new institutions become old and stable” while “old institutions become new and flexible” (Anderson, et al., 2012, pp. 47–48).

The *Guardian*, we suggest, is one example of a broader trend (though we caution that the intensity of change will of course vary across organizations). It is an “old” institution learning from the dynamic, open, and flexible ethos of the newly-networked media system and applying such knowledge to its news making. This approach is partly though not wholly the evolution of a dedicated and strategic attempt dating from the late 2000s to reconfigure itself as a “digital first” organization (Guardian, 2011). Such an approach has been described by the newspaper’s editor, Alan Rusbridger, as “mutual journalism” (Greenslade, 2011) and often—but certainly not always—involves journalists and digitally networked groups and individuals working together to co-create content. These changes are visible, for example, in the now-routine use of live-blogging to curate and aggregate breaking news stories (Wells, 2011); in actively involving audiences in shaping the newspaper’s editorial agenda (Roberts, et al., 2011); in hosting open online Q&A sessions with key journalists and key figures from news stories (Guardian, 2014); and in encouraging journalists to participate with audiences and sources continuously via social media to “weave content into the fabric of the web,” as one *Guardian* journalist vividly described it to us.<sup>3</sup> It is this strategy of institutional adaptation that has enabled the *Guardian* to purposively manage its own interventions in the fluid contexts of contemporary news making.

### **Adaptation, Renewal, and the Practices of Boundary-Drawing Power**

The Snowden leak project is therefore best seen as a reassertion of the power of an elite news organization, but this has taken place in a radically different context from that which shaped earlier historic scoops. This comes at a time when such power is said to be dissolving away into online networks. To restate our concept of boundary-drawing power, we mean the capacity of an organizational actor to reconfigure the context of its own actions by using resources and strategies that are intrinsic to itself but which also involve interfacing with other actors in a hyper-networked environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Personal information.

In introducing the concept of boundary-drawing power we contribute to emerging debates surrounding “boundary work” in journalism (Lewis, 2012, forthcoming, 2015; Carlson, forthcoming, 2015). Older boundary work scholarship (Gieryn, 1983; Abbott, 1988) was primarily concerned with the symbolic discourses and material practices deployed by professional communities to establish, enlarge, and maintain their institutional authority. Recently, scholars have started to explore how digital media logics of openness and participation are resulting in the contested negotiation of the producer-user distinction in news making (Lewis, 2012).

As Chadwick’s ethnographic work based in London revealed, processes of boundary-drawing, boundary-blurring, and boundary-crossing now animate the norms of bloggers, online activists, and professional journalists—and often in surprising ways (2013, pp. 159–186). Bloggers and activists often display norms of professional journalism as a way of asserting their identity and power. Professional journalists, meanwhile, often adopt the norms of the new-style “amateur” online news making domain, albeit with reservations about standards and accountability, as well as fears about ceding power to new competitors. Some news producers occupy hybrid liminal spaces as semi-professional journalist-activist-experts who interact with politicians and professional journalists in sometimes decisive ways. Hybrid news spaces, both institutionally-anchored and free-floating, can provide an organizational focus for what is mostly networked action. Here we argue that the Snowden leak calls for an extension of these ideas to incorporate the practice of boundary-drawing power that occurs in interactions across and between these institutional and networked settings.

Here we identify the range of formal and informal media actors present in the Snowden story’s development; the heterogeneous fields across which the story unfolds; and the dynamic and strategic processes adopted in negotiating and contesting ownership of the story. Our interpretation extends analyses of journalism and boundary work that suggest a “professional-participatory tension” (Lewis 2012: 838) within the contemporary industry. Such a tension is usually conceived as the rise of digitally networked, informal media actors encroaching on the normative space of news production and formalized roles played by traditional media actors and values (Carlson, 2007; Robinson, 2010; Lewis, 2012; Örnebring, 2013). However, in going beyond “expulsion” or “protection of autonomy” strategies that police the exclusivity of professional journalism (Carlson, 2015: pp. 9–10), we suggest that the *Guardian* displays an approach to boundary work that *expands and extends* the conventional limits of contemporary news-making into the complex, heterogeneous, and hybrid spaces of the networked media environment. We argue that in ceding professional journalistic ground in some areas, while renegotiating and extending it in others, the *Guardian* is able to exert boundary-drawing power to strengthen its position and retain control of its own destiny. We spend the remainder of our article analyzing how this works in practice.

### *From WikiLeaks to the Snowden Leak*

Key to understanding the *Guardian*'s approach to the Snowden leak is what came before it: the WikiLeaks-fueled war logs and U.S. embassy cables leaks of 2010. Of course, interpretations of WikiLeaks' significance vary. Some point to the undoubted impact of the big leaks of 2010 but question the long-term importance of WikiLeaks (Beckett & Ball, 2012) and its always precarious status as an entity that many journalists were keen to construct as beyond the bounds of their profession (Coddington, 2012). Others argue that WikiLeaks is an essential part of a new networked fourth estate that pits itself against elite news organizations (Benkler, 2013). Another perspective suggests that the professional journalists, WikiLeaks, and networks of online activists organized around the online collective Anonymous should be understood as part of a new, hybrid media system based on cooperation, coevolution, and interdependence among older and newer media (Chadwick, 2013). In this perspective, power resources are relational and derive from discrete moments of interdependent interaction among key actors—journalists, activists, hacktivists, policy elites—and the technological affordances that are articulated across hybrid networks. WikiLeaks is thus understood as the outcome of a digitally-networked mode of investigative *journalism-like* practice that rose to prominence during the late 2000s and which eventually became embedded within professional media organizations as they adapted to information abundance.

WikiLeaks was and remains an assemblage of professional journalists, Julian Assange and his team of WikiLeaks activists, and a diffuse collective of hacktivists and activists who periodically intervene using online civil disobedience aimed at the government and commercial organizations that seek to restrict the disclosure of leaks. By pooling their logics—their journalistic and activist capital, personal expertise, technologies, genres, norms, and organizational forms—the collaborators have been able to create a fragile but remarkably successful sociotechnical system for leaking secrets on an unprecedented scale, but also, more importantly, for publishing the outcomes of these leaks as packaged artifacts of both professional journalism *and* do-it-yourself online genres such as the searchable online database and the YouTube documentary video.

Yet despite the evolution of co-operation, co-creation, and interdependence among the “amateurs” and the “professionals” during this period, the relationship between WikiLeaks and professional journalists was always fragile and potentially vulnerable to collapse. After a protracted period of uncertainty, it and the original partners in the 2010 leaks projects retreated back into their respective domains. During 2011 and 2012, professional news organizations involved in the original partnership (most notably the *Guardian*) intensified their framing of stories around the Assange personality cult and the sexual assault allegations against him. Meanwhile in 2011

WikiLeaks published all of the embassy cables database in unredacted form—a move that angered the *Guardian*'s investigations team, which had always argued that to publish the entire set of documents might put individual informants at risk.

The Snowden leak is arguably more politically significant than any of the WikiLeaks stories to date, but it also runs counter to many of the evidential bases of recent arguments about the rise of a so-called “networked fourth estate” (Benkler, 2011). The Snowden leak shows that while hybridity among older and newer media logics in political reporting is now entrenched, there is still plenty of room in the media system for professional journalists in suitably adaptive traditional news organizations to assert their craft and expertise. This can be seen at work both in the immediate context of an individual story and in the longer-term process of system building during which journalists are able to embed norms and practices that they can subsequently augment and exploit. This process of embedding norms is particularly important during protracted periods of network-driven chaos in the reporting of news.

Boundary-drawing power emerges because news organizations like the *Guardian* are quickly discovering new ways to translate older media logics as they embed norms over which they, as unified actors, have a good deal of control. In the case of the Snowden leak, this involved the following mechanisms: the exploitation of reserves of professional investigative experience held among senior journalists; the legal expertise that derives from hiring professional lawyers to advise individual sources on the consequences of their actions, not to mention international border and asylum law; the crafting of individual stories for maximum clarity and news value, including the careful use of personalized narratives and human interest angles; meticulous attention to detail in timing the release of new stories and angles for maximum impact on political actors and competitor media outlets; the exploitation of connections with political and bureaucratic insiders and other professional journalists, which enables the secret cultivation of a source in trusted environments away from the glare of publicity; and the strategic use of still-prestigious publishing mechanisms (principally the medium of the printed newspaper) and historically-significant journalistic genres of investigative prowess. These strategies position a news organization visibly at the center of events, driving the news agenda forward with fresh revelations, angles, and connections, even if those new pieces of information do not always derive from the news organization itself but are aggregated and remediated from the distributive connective tissue of online networks.

This is not, however, a case of the uncomplicated revival of older newspaper media logics. Rather, it is a process of strategic and considered renewal—of sense making, learning, and system building. It is about the construction of systemic resources—social relations and technologies—by groups of actors who are then able to capitalize on that system's capacities and affordances.

The successful construction of these systemic resources for exercising power is also dependent upon newer media logics and practices that have emerged as a result of the many effects of digital media upon news making since the late 2000s. All of these were on display during the mediation of the Snowden leak: the use of social media by journalists, particularly Twitter, to curate source materials, promote stories, and intervene in a timely fashion in hypercompetitive news cycles; the use of the new and still evolving genre of the “live blog” to position the news organization’s web page in a hybrid curatorial-yet-agenda-setting role at the center of a story as it unfolds across dispersed but increasingly integrated online networked environments; and, as we saw with WikiLeaks, the strategic management of interdependent relationships with distributed networks of globally nomadic online activists and advocacy groups who are willing and able to work with professional journalists to promote their own causes, indirectly by ensuring the success of an investigative story, and directly by using their own networked activists to literally create and spread news.

### *Strategic Action*

We are keen to stress the word “strategic” when discussing boundary-drawing processes, because however rooted the Snowden leak stories were in the networks of affinity established by the WikiLeaks disruption of 2010, it is abundantly clear that by 2013 the *Guardian* wanted to avoid a repeat performance of its fraught period of collaboration with Assange and his supporters. We can see how this played out across several layers of activity.

First, there was the decision to bring former constitutional lawyer and *Salon.com* blogger Glenn Greenwald on board as a full-time, by-lined *Guardian* journalist. In the years prior to Greenwald’s and Laura Poitras’s discovery of Snowden, Greenwald had established a reputation for his blogging about WikiLeaks and the arrest and trial of Bradley Manning—Assange’s source for the war logs and the embassy cables leaks of 2010. But now here stood Greenwald, occupying an unusual boundary space as a blogger-yet-insider at a professional news organization, managing an almost “deep throat” style source with the oversight of the *Guardian*’s senior editorial team. Even when, in mid-June 2013, WikiLeaks staffer Sarah Harrison accompanied Snowden as he fled Hong Kong for Russia in a bid to secure political asylum; and even when Assange claimed publicly (on Twitter, aptly) that he had been aware of Snowden as a potential whistleblower (Ball, 2011), Greenwald and his colleague Ewen MacAskill were careful to draw boundaries between what they and the *Guardian* were doing with *their* source and the emerging chaos surrounding Snowden’s increasingly desperate attempts to find a country that would grant him asylum.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the *Guardian* ignored WikiLeaks’ contributions to Snowden’s personal safety and his understandable eagerness to avoid being extradited back to the United States to face trial. Treating Snowden as a source

involved a responsibility to protect him. But it is also the case that WikiLeaks' interventions were simply not treated by journalists as central contributions to the evolution of the story. The human interest reporting of the personal blog and Twitter account of Snowden's girlfriend, professional dancer Lindsay Mills; the unfolding drama of Snowden on the run from the CIA, supposedly "sleeping rough" somewhere inside the Moscow airport; the inevitable comparisons with Julian Assange's imprisonment and subsequent enforced residency at the tiny Ecuadorian embassy in London—all of these were essential devices for piquing public interest in the more worthy aspects of the leak.

There is a related question here about the value of this kind of reporting. While the personalization around Snowden and his girlfriend's personal predicaments meant that some mainstream media outlets became distracted away from the substance of the leaks, as "click-bait" grainy photographs of Snowden on board aircraft went viral, we take the more pragmatic view that it has long been an essential device used by investigative reporters to attract broader attention to an important "hard" news story. And this is all the more important now that there is so much competition in the news environment.

### *Managing Our Source*

The *Guardian* was also able to project its power by drawing a boundary around Snowden "the source." The idea of "source" has, in recent years, become something of a contested concept among journalists and political activists following *New York Times* editor Bill Keller's controversial attempt to downgrade Julian Assange as "just a source" when the newspaper split with WikiLeaks in the autumn of 2010 (Keller, 2011).

Greenwald and Poitras had been cultivating Edward Snowden directly for several months before the first leak story was published. Snowden was a genuine insider in the U.S. security state and completely unknown to news organizations and the public. His skills and experience as an analyst at the NSA meant that direct and ongoing communication between he and the *Guardian* could be safeguarded using strong encryption tools of his choosing. He was in a position of some privilege and had access to highly classified information. He was free from dependence on WikiLeaks because journalism at the *Guardian* had, by 2013, evolved to the point where the practices of WikiLeaks were partly embedded in the newsroom after the rise of data journalism. The *Guardian* was willing and able to engage with Snowden directly and it was determined to retain control over his public presentation as "a source," treat him ethically and responsibly, and ensure that information journalists considered to be damaging to the national security of nation-states and the safety of individuals would not be published.

This is clearly evident from *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger's public statements about how things worked with the Snowden leak: "Lacking confidence in the courts or Congress," Rusbridger says, "Snowden approached the other people who, in any modern democracy, are there to uncover truth, host debates, and hold people to account—journalists" (Rusbridger, 2013). While Snowden remained anonymous for the first few days of reports, the disclosure of his identity came very early in the releases, in June 2013. And, while Rusbridger stressed that it was Snowden's personal decision to go public, his unveiling was timed for maximum impact, just as the excitement of the initial round of stories threatened to fade and the news became contested once the major U.S. technology companies at the center of the allegations started to issue statements officially denying any involvement in the NSA Prism and Boundless Informant programs over the weekend beginning June 7.

### *Occupying the Center: Tweeting, Live Blogging, and Live Chat*

The Snowden leak stories were well-crafted and written for print as much as they were for online consumption, but there was also a growing sense of mastery over digital network affordances. The new forms of news making unleashed in the late 2000s could not simply be ignored. While the professional journalists displayed a shrewd and strategic approach to controlling their source and their scoop, the *Guardian* self-consciously sought to use social media and other forms of online engagement in its publishing strategy.

Key to this were three practices. First, the use of Twitter, the self-described "real-time information network," which played an important role in enabling the journalists writing the Snowden stories to constantly interact with wider online networks, distribute story content and, perhaps most crucially, involve a broad range of informal and formal actors in helping to develop adaptive information networks using the #NSAFiles and #AskSnowden hashtags. Second, the use of the still-evolving journalism genre of the live blog. And third, the use of the *Guardian*'s own website to host an extraordinarily dramatic live web chat with Snowden while he was at a secret location on the run from the U.S. intelligence services.

The *Guardian* was one of the first news organizations to use the live-blogging format for breaking news (Greenslade, 2013). First developed in sports reporting, live blogging of political news first emerged during the late 2000s but it has quickly become the most important genre for breaking news online (Thurman & Walters, 2013). It is a hybrid practice integrating the reporting of new self-generated news with the curation and presentation of information from other sources.

Live-blogging's real-time flow, assembled from reportage, official statements, and interventions on YouTube and Twitter is important in aligning news production with the "symbolic form" of networked media: the "flow" or "data stream" (Manovich,

2012). There is an important cultural shift underway here, as the underlying design patterns and architecture used to display information in social media is partly displacing earlier narrative forms. Those who read news online increasingly do not expect cohesive, tightly packaged narratives; nor do they even feel the need to click through the densely hyperlinked hierarchical and category-driven structures of the news websites of the 2000s. Users' expectations are realigning around the relatively chaotic but often thrilling experience of being caught up in the flow of real-time news. This is not simply a case of the speeding up of journalistic practice, rather it is that the mechanisms through which journalism are produced are themselves laid bare in real time and become part of the communal experience of reading and, in some cases, co-creating news.

Live blogs organized decisive moments in the evolution of the Snowden story, including the naming of the whistleblower himself, the appearance of NSA Director Keith Alexander before Congress to discuss Snowden's allegations and their impact on U.S. intelligence operations, and Snowden's asylum status as he sought to evade extradition.

Live blogs allowed the *Guardian's* journalists to report stories iteratively and thus more accurately reflect the complex reality of unfolding news. By openly acknowledging the limits of news-gathering and highlighting the importance of wider sources and contextual material, live blogs render the reporting process more evidence-based, transparent, and open to scrutiny. This enhances audience perceptions of objectivity, trust, and balance among traditional news audiences (Thurman, 2013; Thurman & Walters, 2013). The approach generates benefits for the *Guardian* among online, networked actors because live blogging's adoption of linking and embedding third-party materials emerges primarily from the normative logics of bloggers and those online communities who celebrate the use of hyperlinking as a way to provide material evidence in support of information posted and to credit other networked actors.

By extensively linking to and embedding third-party content—a practice running counter to conventional commercial strategies for online news which advise against linking to “external” sources because it directs users to competing sites—the *Guardian* portrays itself as digitally native actor earning credibility among broader networks of informal online media actors. This credibility establishes a reserve of distributed trust and social capital, enabling it to build relationships with and leverage the influence of networked actors in fulfilling a range of tasks outside of the scope of traditional news organizations, such as distributing content, fact-checking information, and sending in new angles or leads for the story.

However, while the *Guardian's* use of live blogs taps into and exploits these normative sociotechnical practices, it also maximizes its own organizational power.



With the Snowden leak the *Guardian* could be both investigator *and* curator. It live-blogged the leaks, but due to its ability to secure what was effectively exclusive access to the source and his material it held a doubly powerful position, at once controlling the dominant narratives of the story, while exploiting the networks it generated.

In a similar move the *Guardian* also hosted a live online Q&A session with Snowden. Using both an iteration of its own comment-enabled news platform as well as integrating real-time conversations emerging on Twitter it sourced questions to put to Snowden from the vast range of online networks following and involved in the story.

Organized by the Twitter hashtag, #AskSnowden, the *Guardian* Q&A went beyond enabling the online community following the story to have the opportunity to engage with Snowden. As well as asking questions, readers were actively encouraged to play a part in shaping the outcome of the Q&A through “recommending” (i.e. voting for) the best questions, reinforcing participation among digital networks that were deliberately engendered by the *Guardian* itself. The Q&As further supported the organization’s digital commercial strategy. All of Snowden’s answers were subsequently fed into the accompanying Edward Snowden live blog which becomes an advertiser and Google search index magnet due to the archival richness of the content.

Although the *Guardian* urged readers to “Ask him anything” and rather optimistically promised that Snowden would “take your questions today on why he revealed the NSA's top-secret surveillance of U.S. citizens” (Guardian, 2013), it reinforced its boundary-drawing role by very selectively filtering the questions that were asked and even removing additional comments or replies to questions which it believed breached its own community moderation policy (See for example Greenwald, 2013a).

Nevertheless, the resilient, generative, and oppositional nature of online communities was also on display. Boundary drawing was questioned when the comment thread—initially created as a space to reactively post questions for Snowden—morphed into its own online Snowden discussion forum. Within a few hours it had taken on a dynamic of its own as readers provided complex and detailed answers to the many questions left unanswered by the *Guardian*’s more formal and controlled Q&A (TiredofGames, 2013). Users created an ad hoc, transnational, semi-professional epistemic community (Haas, 1992) of sorts, as they used the platform to comment on a wide range of aspects of the Snowden story so far. Some migrated their campaign for greater political scrutiny of the NSA to online petition websites (AhBrightWings, 2013). In short, the *Guardian*’s “owned” web platform was quickly populated by the networks of actors following the story across the globe.

The #AskSnowden Q&A enabled the *Guardian* to maximize its organizational

advantage while appearing as a digitally-native actor within a networked online environment. The organization's strategic use of the Twitter hashtag enabled it to engage and co-opt the vast debate taking place across the global internet and enclose it within the news organization's website where it can "own" (if only contingently) the discussion. Despite the perceived autonomy of the reader community which emerged around #AskSnowden, the *Guardian* remained able to promote itself as offering readers "exclusive" access to "the interview the world's media organizations have been chasing for more than a week" (Guardian, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Taken together we believe these practices reveal how professional news organizations have now developed strategies for augmenting the traditional strengths of commercial media outlets with those of emerging networked media logics and technologies. They are increasingly integrating the challenges presented by networked media while exploiting their benefits. This is revitalizing and reinventing professional investigative journalism and the traditional ideas of "the source" and "the scoop."

Our analysis has been driven by the concepts of strategic renewal, adaptation, and boundary-drawing power. The Snowden leak provides further evidence that contemporary media systems are best understood as hybrid. They exhibit a complex and precarious balance of power between the older logics of broadcast and print media dominance and the newer logics of digital media.

The Snowden leak also reveals that despite predictions about the collapse of "quality" investigative journalism, or the rise of a new networked fourth estate, adaptive professional news organizations can successfully translate their power to shape politics and challenge state power. That they must do so in contexts radically different from those which governed journalism and news during the twentieth century is undeniable, and there are vast swathes of the media system that are genuinely and profoundly novel. But, as we have shown, adaptive professional news organizations will not be hollowed out, not least because they themselves are playing such significant roles in the ongoing construction of a system that provides resources essential for the exercise of their own power.

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