

Press Credentials, Boundary Work, and Hybrid Boundary Zones: The Case of WorldNetDaily and the Standing Committee of Correspondents

ABSTRACT: Press credentialing practices are an understudied, yet vitally important site of scholarly research on journalistic norms and practices. Credentials not only structure internal professional hierarchies, but also signify the boundaries of the journalistic field itself. This paper explores the legal and theoretical implications of press credentialing to cover Congress, drawing on field theory and boundary work to demonstrate the material impact of the space between fields on professional legitimation in journalism. Using WorldNetDaily (WND) as a case study, I argue that the Standing Committee of Correspondents (SCC) occupies a hybrid boundary zone between the journalistic and political fields, generating a unique tension in First Amendment jurisprudence that places journalists in a paradoxical role as both the professional figureheads for the exercise of free speech as well as the constitutional stewards charged with enforcing its limitations. The resulting jurisdictional conflict between the SCC and WND demonstrates the consequences of professional journalists misidentifying their position within the field and how outsiders opportunistically raid the cultural toolbox of professional journalism at its fuzzy boundaries. The relevance and implications for press credentialing practices in the digital age are discussed.

Keywords: Press credentials, field theory, boundary work, Standing Committee of Correspondents, First Amendment, journalism (profession), online/digital journalism

The rise of alternative media and more recently the “fake news” moniker, have brought renewed attention on the distribution of press credentials to online news outlets. As the physical manifestation of the professional norms that structure journalistic work, press credentialing practices are vital sites of study to understand the distribution and accumulation of cultural capital in the field of journalism. While the sociology of professional credentialing has a long academic history (Brown and Bills, 2011), the academic literature on press credentialing reveals little in the way of systematic analyses of this process (Bock et al., 2016; Hermes et al., 2014). This dearth of research on press credentialing practices is curious given the increasing prominence of field theory and boundary work in journalism studies, as their theoretical strengths lie in identifying structural and discursive conditions for the accumulation and exercise of cultural capital among organizational actors that determine the boundaries of a field, precisely the function of a press credential. These credentialing issues have come into sharper focus in recent public discourse as ideologically polarizing outlets like Breitbart, Gateway Pundit, Infowars, and other right-wing, conspiratorial platforms vie for hard passes to cover Congress and the White House.

While private entities have wide-ranging latitude when crafting their press credentialing criteria, permanent passes to cover public institutions like Congress reveal unique overlaps between juridical and journalistic fields. The delegation of congressional authority to the Standing Committee of Correspondents (SCC) to administer press credentials to journalists creates a paradoxical relationship between these two fields. This interstitial arrangement simultaneously elevates the position of journalists by delegating formal legal authority to the SCC while at the same time constraining their evaluation criteria due to content-neutral First Amendment protections hoisted upon the SCC as agents acting on behalf of Congress.

In this role, journalists, elected by their professional peers to serve on the SCC, act in a dual capacity reminiscent of Gil Eyal’s (2013) notion of hybrid boundary zones, the institutional manifestations of the space between fields. It is within this liminal boundary space that external actors can establish a beachhead on the shores of a professional field, opportunistically raiding their cultural toolbox to acquire power within a field in ways that would not have been possible absent this hybridity.

To unpack these theoretical dynamics more concretely, I return to the genesis of paradigmatic conflicts over press credentialing between right-wing, anti-establishment online news outlets and traditional legacy media, using WorldNetDaily’s (WND) 19-month battle for press credentials from 2001 to 2002 as a case study. As a quintessential early example of what Berry and Sobieraj (2014) term the “outrage industry,” WND’s fringe, conspiratorial bent enabled it to employ a unique synthesis of metajournalistic discourse and legal maneuvering that resulted in the SCC’s “first major revision of the rules in half a century.” (Ritchie, 2005: 289) Using a thematic historical and legal analysis of primary documents and metajournalistic news coverage over the course of this jurisdictional conflict, I explore the theoretical implications of the hybrid institutional arrangement of the SCC through the lens of boundary work and field theory.

I argue that the unique position occupied by the SCC in the liminal space between the juridical and journalistic fields creates a First Amendment paradox that underscores the importance of

studying hybrid boundary zones in press credentialing practices at public institutions. In this space, WND was able to attain material and symbolic legitimacy within the journalistic field by challenging definitions of objectivity, independence, and original reporting, opening up the credentialing process and redrawing the boundaries of journalistic practice. Moreover, their ability to shrewdly leverage metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) during a period of high professional anxiety provides a useful theoretical inflection point for scholars of journalism.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, I briefly review the literature on field theory and boundary work in journalism with an eye toward situating press credentialing practices within extant theoretical frameworks. Next, I unpack the juridical and professional history of Washington press galleries, laying the groundwork for my core theoretical claim and setting the stage for WND's jurisdictional conflict. Third, I introduce WND and its organizational history, followed by a thematic, discursive, and legal analysis of key documents and news reports from their initial press credential application in 2001 to their eventual acceptance in September 2002. I conclude by synthesizing these findings and discussing their practical and theoretical implications

Field Theory and Journalistic Boundary Work

Definitional struggles over who is and is not a journalist are, at base, conflicts over the jurisdiction, the link between knowledge and work (Abbott, 1988; Schudson and Anderson, 2009). Field theory (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993) and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) have historically provided fruitful theoretical frameworks to analyze and interpret these jurisdictional battles in journalism. As a field, journalism occupies a tentative relationship within the professionalization literature compared to more established fields like medicine or law. With few legal resources to exert independent social and political influence, journalists rely on cultivating material and discursive resources within the profession to demarcate areas of expertise that fall within their interpretive field. Scholars focus on many different measures of power within the journalistic field, including but not limited to: ownership structure, financial links to other companies, audience composition, ad revenue, size of the reporting beat, and proportion of journalists who graduated from prestigious journalism schools (Benson, 2006; Duval, 2005).

Following the sociological tradition of Durkheim and Weber, field theory and boundary work build upon scholar's attempts to understand and analyze the societal process of functional differentiation. That is, as professions evolve over time, they specialize, attaining relative autonomy through the construction of, and claim to, expertise that manifests itself in sets of norms and symbolic codes that structures the day-to-day work of professionals. As actors from other fields attempt draw from the professional and cultural influence from the journalistic field for their own purposes or seek to establish themselves within the journalistic profession, jurisdictional disputes are sure to follow. Shifting attention from the structure of professionalization to jurisdictional disputes allows scholars to analyze how these communities understand and interpret their professional identities relative to outsiders vying for influence within their field of expertise (Abbott, 1988). In other words, it is important to focus on the process of constructing the boundary of professions rather than becoming preoccupied with the precise location or definition of the field.

Gieryn's (1983) notion of boundary work within science, and Zelizer (1992, 2004) subsequent application in the field of journalism, are instructive. Both Zelizer and Gieryn conceive of boundary work as a primarily rhetorical strategy, mobilizing discourse within and around interpretive communities that cultivate expertise used to shape public opinion and collective memory. Most often, the unit of analysis in these studies are published stories (Berkowitz, 1993; 2000; Bishop, 1999; Bratich, 2004; 2008; Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014) and interviews with journalists (Coddington, 2012; 2014; Revers, 2014), with a primary focus on the normative implications of their discourse. These studies of soft boundary work often focus on how journalists attempt to distinguish their profession and organizational role from a perceived outsider attempting to accrue cultural capital within the field. More broadly, researchers have also deviated from primarily discursive accounts, incorporating analyses of hard boundary work through formal, structural, organizational, and legal constraints on agents operating in the journalistic field (Lewis, 2015: p. 221-3). These studies typically incorporate a blend of structural and discursive analyses about both internal and external journalistic practices. Within the field, for example, the hard/soft news distinction is used by news organizations to preserve internal status hierarchies and distance their particular brand of reporting from reliance on the economic field and lowest common denominators in the cultural field, rather than more high-brow, political topics (Sjøvaag, 2015). Analyzing how journalists carve boundaries between the journalistic and political fields, Revers (2014) analyzed how journalists cultivated professional legitimacy and ethos by actively and ritualistically constructing a "wall" between their professional journalistic conduct and their interactions with sources in the state capitol. Sometimes, these "walls" operate discursively, such as self-censorship or forming questions using a variety of rhetorical strategies to maintain objectivity (p. 47-8). Other times, it involves questions of material access to sources of information or refraining from registering for a political party, and perhaps not even voting at all (p. 44).

In cases like these, Eyal (2013) questions the centrality of rhetoric in these boundary construction processes, pointing to more material constraints such as "social mechanisms that limit the number of authoritative speakers, that assign their statements with different values, that close off certain topics and devices from non-expert inspection," that undermine the power of rhetoric to, on its own, "produce a relational reality," of fields like journalism (p. 175). In the context of bloggers and online news outlets, Eyal suggests that it may be less useful to think of boundary work as creating a fine-grained dichotomy than to imagine it as a "border zone" of competing hybrid actors straddling a number of different networks, professional and otherwise. Through this lens, a strictly Bourdieusian approach that applies field theory to journalism is less helpful in digital media environments because of the difficulty of accounting for oppositional identities within alternative media arrangements (Atton, 2002). For Atton, strict applications of field theory are "too undifferentiated," and "too monolithic," to provide an account of the heterogeneity of alternative media (p. 30). For example, oppositional identity statuses afford niche news outlets a certain epistemic claim to independence, borrowing from, or, in Eyal's terms, opportunistically raiding, the objectivity norm as a means of carving out a niche and cultivating cultural capital within the field of journalism.

Here, theories of metajournalistic discourse are still vital even as we train our attention on structural constraints (Carlson, 2016). In approaching journalism as variable, contextual, and relational, Carlson identifies definition making, boundary setting, and legitimation as core interpretive processes at work in metajournalistic discourse. Both WND and the SCC engage in these three interpretive processes during this press credentialing conflict, but the unique structural position of each institution both limited the effectiveness of the SCC's discursive containment strategies while simultaneously amplifying WND's claims to legitimation by supplanting journalistic interpretive processes of definition making with juridical ones.

Actors attempting to gain influence within the field of journalism not only claim access to journalistic norms, but also seek out areas where the overlap between fields alters the dynamics of legitimation. First Amendment jurisprudence, for example, provides a legal container for, and structural constraint on, journalistic activity and, thus, the process of legitimation (Martinez, 2012). In some senses, journalists are perpetually operating within the legal field in that they are subject to legal constraints on their capacity to engage in professional work. For example, privacy laws can form hard boundaries for newsgathering and reporting practices, overriding First Amendment protections for newsworthy conduct, occasionally exacting fatal economic costs on media outlets that violate them (i.e. Gawker). Within this legal container is a space where the journalistic field interacts with other social, cultural, and economic fields to form professional norms, routines, and expectations that structure the distribution of symbolic and material resources among journalists. These professional norms often restrict journalistic conduct above and beyond the legal floor, leaving a gap that becomes the battleground of media ethics. Martinez identifies two paradoxes present in this gap: negative legitimation and displacing legitimation.

Negative legitimation refers to the conversion of merely lawful speech into newsworthy speech. This occurs when news organizations justify violations of media ethics by pointing to the juridical field, defending reporting decisions based on the mere lawfulness of their reporting practices. Displacing legitimation refers to the tendency for legal rights of publicity to trump other rights like privacy on the basis that more publicity is a remedy for the initial intrusion. Here, rather than simply pointing to the lawfulness of speech as a justification for its ostensible newsworthiness, the marketplace of ideas logic of First Amendment jurisprudence is used by even elite news organizations to justify reporting practices. That is, more speech is presumed to be the best solution to the bad or unethical speech of others. In this way, negative legitimation typically precedes displacing legitimation even as they often occur in tandem.

The constitutional logic that puts a thumb on the scale for free speech provides structural incentives for fringe or startup news organizations to distinguish themselves from their mainstream competitors and gain an advantage over more elite news organizations. For example, differing decisions to release the names of Involuntary Public Figures (IPF) like sexual assault victims may converge as online news outlets exploit the gap between legality and professional ethics. By releasing names of IPF's, marginal journalistic actors may acquire a form of cultural capital (newsworthy scoops) through negative legitimation that is often forgone by journalists taking the high-road of professional ethics, yet another form of cultural capital. When the online

circulation of an IPF's name spurs harassment, it can result in legal statements from the victim or their lawyers which often form the basis for decisions by previously uninterested news organizations to jump into the fray via displacing legitimation.

These two paradoxes demonstrate the power of both online news and First Amendment jurisprudence in influencing the legitimation of newsgathering and reporting practices in metajournalistic discourse. Deviant journalistic actors can create situations where these paradoxical logics of legitimation shift the boundaries of journalistic work as reporting on an event unfolds. Press credentialing then becomes a cultural technology among journalists to distinguish between high- and low-brow reporting practices through a form of boundary maintenance that regulates access to the physical sites of news work.

To the author's knowledge, only one published, peer-reviewed article centers on, and systematically analyzes, press credentialing practices of a governmental institution from a field theory perspective, focusing on police departments (Bock et al., 2016). The prominence of crime news in American media makes the symbolic capital and geophysical access provided by a press credential a vital journalistic technology of legitimation. Their survey of 100 police departments in the United States reveals important theoretical parallels to press credentialing practices that govern political reporting in Congress. Namely, their results show (1) disruptive freelance and citizen journalism has been to governmental press credentialing protocols, (2) a number of localities opted to end formal press credentialing altogether due to the their uncomfortability acting as arbiters of legitimate professional journalism, and (3) demonstrate an increasing willingness to delegate press credentialing authority to private actors with credibility in the area that are willing to enforce professional boundaries. These findings not only reinforce the focus on emergent tensions between professional control and open participation in journalism (Lewis, 2012), but also highlight the tepid approach governmental institutions have taken to arbitrating credentialing decisions themselves.

While Bock et al.'s approach to field theory emphasized the reproduction of hierarchical power relations by police departments, the current project explores a niche corner of federal law, analyzing the intersection of boundary work and First Amendment jurisprudence as a tool of legitimation in the journalistic field at the organizational level, tugging at similar paradoxical threads to Martinez and Lewis. These factors make the study of WND's acquisition of press credentials an ideal case study. WND adopted an openly ideological and oppositional identity from the outset by playing up their outsider status as being independent from "biased" mainstream sources of news and boasting a surprisingly large and durable following that distinguished it as a major early player in the online news marketplace. To properly situate these theoretical insights with WND's fight for press credentials, a juridical history of congressional press credentialing practices is in order.

Juridical and Professional History of Press Credentialing

The House of Representatives first debated press access to their chambers less than 24 hours after approving the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Congressional press galleries opened in the mid-1800s, made up almost exclusively by stenographers charged with creating verbatim transcripts of congressional proceedings and speeches as well as letter-writers who

were responsible for sending congressional news to out-of-town papers. Predictably, these letters often contained errors, imprecise paraphrased accounts, and commentary critical of politicians. This frustration resulted in an 1839 push for the creation of a formal press gallery in both chambers and their formal opening in 1841 by Henry Clay. The rise of the penny press and concerns about executive office clerks and other lobbyists moonlighting as reporters put stress on a largely ad hoc credentialing system (Ritchie, 1991: p. 1-26). Partisanship and a series of lobbying-related scandals culminated in the 1877, when press corps leaders met in a *New York Times* office to outline a set of standards that could properly regulate press access within given budgetary and physical space constraints. The House formally adopted these guidelines in 1879, with the Senate following along in 1884, and they remain largely the same to this day (Collins, 2013; Eckman, 2017).

Since then, the gallery rules regulating the press credentialing process have structured the day-to-day work of the Washington press corps. Each press gallery is not only responsible for credentialing, but is also responsible for maintaining workspaces for reporters, coordinating coverage of news conferences, distributing press releases, and disseminating updates about floor proceedings, pending legislation, amendments, markups and committee hearings (Eckman, 2017: 1-2). Permanently credentialed members gain unfettered access to these information subsidies and are supported by full-time House and Senate staffers. In addition, credentialed reporters gain access to the House Speaker's Lobby and the Senate President's Room, where reporters often seek out politicians for comments and interviews. A congressional press credential is also a legal prerequisite to becoming eligible for permanent White House press credentials (Ritchie, 1991, 2005). Without a congressional press pass, journalists are often locked out of the highest echelons of hard news reporting in politics. The press galleries also parlay their formal congressional power into more informal forms of professional influence. At both Democratic and Republican party conventions, for example, media outlets that do not receive credentials from the parties often look to the press galleries to issue credentials to authenticate journalistic access (Collins, 2013: 325-6). In this way, congressional press galleries often exceed their delegated legal authority, drawing from both the political field and journalistic field to forge an institutional expertise that can exceed the sum of its individual parts.

In terms of a formal legal mandate, the press galleries are governed by House Rule VI and Senate Rules VI, XXV, and XXXIII. These rules task the Speaker of the House and the Senate Committee of Rules and Administration with overseeing the galleries, and formally delegates that power to four correspondent committees, divided by technological medium. While the emergence of radio, photography, and television spurred the creation of their own galleries, online news publishers were left to adapt their organizations to the legal and journalistic interpretation of congressional rules by legacy media galleries. In fact, the press galleries did not even formally acknowledge the legitimacy of credentialing online news organization until 1996 (Heaney, 2008).

Despite the growing professionalization of journalism in the early 20th century, the Supreme Court has been reluctant to recognize constitutional privileges to journalists based on their status as news gatherers. In fact, many press pass cases are decided on procedural questions of

justiciability and the political question doctrine rather than the constitutional merits themselves. In any case, there are a few controlling precedents in this area that shed light on key constitutional questions related to access for journalists: *Sherrill v. Knight* and *Consumer's Union v. Periodical Correspondents' Association*.

In *Sherrill*, a reporter was able to reverse a Secret Service decision to deny press credentials due to a lack of clear and documented rules and criteria justifying their decision. In this case, a national security justification for denying credentials was overridden by First Amendment principles protecting press activities (Collins, 2013). *Consumer's Union* concerned the Washington editor of Consumer Reports, who was denied credentials because the magazine was too closely connected to Consumer's Union, an advocacy and lobbying group committed to furthering the interests of consumers (Collins, 2013). These decisions highlight how the SCC's position as a legal arm of Congress caused many on the SCC to struggle threading the needle, balancing their constitutional requirements and their professional journalistic norms. The *Consumer's Union* decision points to the crucial importance of making determinations about conflicts of interest and advocacy behavior. While the original intent of the press gallery rules was to prevent internal corruption, the appearance of news reporting being biased by external special interests resulted in the infusion of the objectivity norm into press credentialing decisions.

Although the SCC acts as a formal congressional agent with delegated constitutional authority, there is ample evidence that journalists have not acted with both roles in mind, and, in some cases, are completely ignorant of their legal status (Collins, 2013). This legal and professional confusion contributes to the liminality and 'fuzzification' between the journalistic and juridical fields (Eyal, 2013). Thus, the congressional press credentialing process represents a hybrid boundary zone where constitutional conflicts overlap with the enforcement of professional norms in journalistic practice. Members of the SCC act both as agents within the journalistic field, reinforcing cultural practices associated with professional news work, as well as congressional law enforcers charged with faithfully executing the law in accordance with constitutional mandates. In effect, journalists whose professional legacies depend upon expansive First Amendment protections from government interference are paradoxically constrained by the very same constitutional principles that govern their power to issue press credentials. This paradox forms the backdrop to conflict between WND and the SCC, where I now turn.

WND Case Study

WorldNetDaily was founded by Joseph Farah in 1997. After serving as the executive news editor of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* for six years, Farah became the editor of the *Sacramento Union* after the *Herald Examiner* folded in 1989. Prior to Farah's arrival, conservative banking, oil, and aluminum magnate Richard Mellon Scaife owned the *Union*, who branded the paper as an ideologically conservative counterweight to the *Sacramento Bee*, just as the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* had to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* during the early 1990's (Tascarella, 1997). Scaife sold his stake in the *Union* to local real estate developers who hire Farah as the *Union's* editor-in-chief. Under Farah's leadership, the *Union* accelerated their

“unabashedly conservative,” bent (Kurtz and Trueheart, 1990), featuring weekly syndicated columns from the infamous right-wing provocateur, Rush Limbaugh. As circulation continued to plummet Farah left the *Union* in 1991, cofounding a nonprofit organization called the Western Journalism Center (WJC). The WJC functioned as a “hybrid of activist organization, news agency, and publisher,” and “was an almost perfect forerunner for the structures that would soon prosper on the nascent Internet.” (Aaronovitch, 2010: 268). WND was created as a project under the WJC in 1997 but was spun-off as an independent for-profit organization in 1999.

Both WJC and WND were more widely known for their relentless pursuit of right-wing conspiracy theories surrounding the Clinton family, most notably the death of Vincent Foster (Lieberman, 1996). More broadly, WND is well-known for its right-wing, evangelical, and often conspiratorial bent, and has been described as a cross between supermarket tabloids and the John Birch Society (Nelson, 2012). Not only has the website been a central disseminator of Obama birther conspiracy theories, they often offer meta-conspiratorial narratives across their web pages involving the New World Order and the North American Union. In addition, WND’s publishing arm, WND Books, has been described Paul Harris at *The Guardian* as “a niche producer of rightwing conspiracy theories,” (Harris, 2011) including the publication of prominent birther Jerome Corsi’s *Where’s the Birth Certificate?*

WND’s petition for permanent congressional press credentials between 2001 and 2002 was a perfect storm of institutional, legal, and situational factors, producing a rich case study in boundary work and press credentialing practices. At the turn of the century, WND was among the most successful publishing outlets on the Internet, boasting stunning web traffic numbers. Between 1999 and 2000, WND ranked as the #1 most popular website for 52 straight weeks. This was buttressed by an impressive “stickiness” rating, that is, the amount of time people spent on the website when they visit. In terms of total hours spent on news websites, WND outpaced ABC News, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* (*PR Newswire*, 2000). As one of the most successful online publications of its time, and at the cusp of the digital media age, WND’s press credential fight came at the height of professional angst over online news at the turn of the century (Bratich, 2004; 2008).

On February 8, 2001, WND submitted a request for permanent Senate press credentials for their Washington correspondents. At this point, several exclusively online publications had been granted congressional press credentials without much fuss, such as Washington reporters from Salon.com and Slate.com. In addition, Paul Sperry, the Washington correspondent for WND, had received temporary press credentials to cover Congress before applying a permanent credentials. Although WND was not denied complete access to the Congressional chambers, permanent press credentials offer an elevated tier institutional benefits and are a symbolic cleavage point for journalistic boundary setting.

[Fig. 1 about here]

Shown in Fig. 1, the SCC delivered its initial reply to WND’s credential request on the one-year anniversary their application filing. The result of their deliberation was a unanimous 5-0 decision to deny WND credentials. In their formal rejection letter, the SCC confined their reasoning

strictly to the letter of the law governing press galleries, leaning heavily on two justifications: (1) a lack of organizational independence from advocacy groups and special interests and (2) an inability to meet the threshold of disseminating “significant original reporting content.” (Roberts, 2002)

Broadly, these justifications reflect the core tenets of the SCC to uphold independent, objective reporting, and limit access to organizations that simply aggregate information from other sources. Two elements of boundary work are present. First, objectivity is raised via the special interest provisions of the rules. Second, the distinction between hard news and news aggregation is raised as a barrier to entry based on differing interpretations about what constituted “original reporting” (Coddington, 2014).

In addition to formally appealing the SCC ruling, WND responded to the rejection letter by engaging in a scorched-earth public response, publishing no less than six scathing articles indicting of the SCC decision within a week of receiving the rejection. On February 13, 2002, WND published its first two response articles. The first, penned by WND reporter David Kupelian, stylistically resembled a straight news report of the rejection on its face. While sticking to mostly factual content in his own words, Kupelian extensively quoted two sources, Rebecca Hagelin, WND’s vice president of communications, and Farah, the founder and CEO. Engaging in an aggressive metajournalistic PR campaign, Hagelin suggested that the “decision smacks of insecurity and bias on the part of the standing committee,” adding that “WorldNetDaily is different from the establishment press in this way: We’re one of the few media outlets that has dared to criticize and point out how the media, in general, have failed to carry out the original mission of the press envisioned by our Founding Fathers – to serve as a watchdog on government.” Farah’s quotes went even further, stating that WND had been “systematically discriminated against by this group because it doesn’t like our reporting style – which is aggressive, fiercely independent and focuses on investigative digging into government fraud, waste, corruption and abuse.” (Kupelian, 2002a)

The second opening salvo of self-coverage was an editorial by Farah himself entitled “The Government-Media Cabal,” highlighting the fact that several foreign, government-controlled media outlets like the Egyptian Al-Ahram and China’s Xinhua News Agency had received press credentials from the SCC. In addition, Farah encouraged readers to send their complaints to Joe Keenan, the deputy director of the Senate Press Gallery, and other members of the SCC.

As they pursued an appeal, WND continued to churn out stories covering its own conflict with the SCC. Aside from a few stories published by Roll Call, an inside-the-beltway trade publication, this story was not picked up by other news media outlets. The result was a veritable echo chamber of internal quotes from WND leadership spun together through in a web of self-citation and hyperlinks back to their own content. For example, the day after Farah called on the WND readership to email the press gallery to complain, Kupelian published a piece titled “Readers Flood Senate Gallery with Emails,” (2002b) documenting several of the thousands of emails that were sent to the gallery based on their story the day before.

On February 19, 2002, WND published another self-coverage story reporting that WND sought outside legal assistance in the matter from the United States Justice Foundation (USJF), an active and well-known conservative legal advocate, and that their USJF attorney Robert Ackerman sent a four-page letter to the SCC demanding a public hearing to appeal the decision, stating that the press pass denial was “the most unconstitutional thing I’ve seen in a long, long time,” adding that “nothing could be more damaging to the First Amendment.” (Kupelian, 2002c)

An appeals hearing was subsequently scheduled for on April 15. As a part of the pursuing the appeal process, WND also requested additional materials from the SCC that were used during deliberations about their application, even filing several FOIA requests. The SCC initially denied access to the documents in the lead up to the appeals hearing, as FOIA only applied to executive agencies, not Congress. The resulting accusations by WND that the press gallery was withholding evidence were compounded by several other combative interaction between WND and the SCC over who should provide additional documentation as well as other transparency issues. The result of the April 15th appeals hearing was an additional round of information gathering and document requests from the SCC. For example, the SCC requested additional financial documents to substantiate WND’s claims to organizational independence and suggesting that WND’s accusations of foot-dragging were simply a result of their unfamiliarity with the site, which required additional time to research its operations. WND’s attacks also took advantage of the seeming irregularity of SCC member meetings to consider their application, their inconsistency in publishing full meeting minutes detailing their deliberation, and other record-keeping practices of the committee.

At some point during the summer of 2002, the SCC eventually delivered a two-page document (Figs. 2 and 3) containing written notes and article citations used by SCC members during their deliberations on WND’s application, which presented the most legally damaging pieces of information from a First Amendment standpoint. The documents show committee members marking up the list of citations with words like “conservative,” which was circled and highlighted in three separate places, along with the phrase “too aggressive,” and a series of articles by WND reporter Paul Sperry labelled “content/viewpoint.” In August, WND seized upon these documents, ramping up its self-coverage once more, publishing sixteen articles that month, followed by another eight in September, with colorful headlines like “Press Police Accredited Left-Wing S.F. Hippies,” “Stalinists in the Press Gallery,” and “The Political Lynching of WND.”

[Figures 2 and 3 about here]

WND further appealed its application to the Senate Rules and Administration Committee (Sperry, 2002), the congressional body that formally oversees the press gallery and acts as the source of the SCC’s constitutionally delegated authority, and threatened a lawsuit against the Senate Press Gallery for their content-based viewpoint discrimination against them (WND, 2002). Under the threat of litigation after a combative 19-month back-and-forth, a 3-2 majority in the SCC voted in favor of granting WND permanent press credentials on September 10, 2002.

This extended credentialing conflict is worth unpacking in a number of respects. First, beyond the hyperbolic victimization narrative reinforced ad nauseum on its webpage, WND had a strong legal basis for challenging the SCC's initial ruling. The SCC had trouble crafting a workable legal threshold for what constituted significant original content without resorting to content-based evaluations of WND's reporting. WND was able to successfully engage in the metajournalistic process of definition making only because of the SCC's proximity to the juridical field. While WND sacrificed cultural capital with self-coverage rife with conflicts of interest, reinforcing its fringe status on the edge of the journalistic field, it could simultaneously claim that, in a legal sense, even its self-coverage constituted original reporting of interest to a wide public audience because (a) they are the only one's reporting on it, and (b) WND can point to the millions of unique visitors amongst their online readership. WND pointed to a host of its news reports that were not reported on by other outlets, buttressing its legal claim to originality. Thus, the structural position of the SCC in this hybrid boundary zone significantly augmented the rules of the game in the interpretive process of definition making and, subsequently, boundary setting.

A second, related point about WND's ability to galvanize its readership into action is that it offers a novel contribution in response to Carlson's (2016) call for scholars to ask how metajournalistic discourse positions news audiences in the model. WND's non-stop coverage encouraging readers to flood SCC inboxes with complaints demonstrates a core feature of the outrage industry, that is, a reliance on affective, polarizing language aimed at laying the groundwork for mobilizing action among like-minded supporters (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). In addition, WND's ability to parlay its aggregate online viewership numbers to supplement their legal case also positioned the audience as an active participant in the legitimation of organization itself by leveraging their impressive, and relatively new, measures of their online readership.

In terms of the SCC's challenges to its organizational independence, WND largely had its legal house in order, formally separating itself from WJC and other potential legal conflicts relative to the anti-advocacy language of the press gallery rules. The normative battle over what defines independent reporting in the journalistic field, much like the definition of original reporting, differs substantially in the juridical field. While the SCC accurately identifies how embedded WND within an ideologically conservative network of financial backers, newspapers, and legal advocacy groups, legal definitions of organizational independence preclude content-based judgement on such criteria.

More than simply reflecting traditional norms of journalistic evaluation, the SCC also highlighted what Collins (2013) referred to as a general ignorance on the part of journalists of their dual role as both professional newsgatherers and guarantors of constitutional rights. While the SCC's initial February rejection letter, ostensibly reviewed by a lawyer beforehand, stuck to the letter of the law, the materials used in their deliberation displayed a rather blatant disregard for their formal legal position, which functioned to constrain the reach of professional norms sanctioning overly aggressive, biased reporting. This issue was accentuated by the SCC's lack of familiarity with WND's online business model, transparency hiccups, and inconsistencies in applied standards of evaluation that played right into the hands of WND's self-styled

oppositional identity as an independent government watchdog. The status of the SCC as a hybrid institution allowed WND to play up both its separation from the ostensibly corrupt mainstream media as well as its libertarian disdain for government bureaucracy, providing more than enough feedstock for generating outrage and applying pressure on SCC leadership from the Senate committee overseeing their work.

It is also important to remember that WND's fight over press credentials was the crescendo in a much larger process of journalistic legitimation that began at their founding. When WND first broke off from WJC, Joseph Farah moved the headquarters of their operation to rural Oregon, stating that it was "a place with few distractions," adding that "WND was not going to become contaminated, seduced, or distracted – at least not right away! We wanted a chance to establish our own unique identity far from the not-so-bright lights and conventional wisdom of the big media centers. In south Oregon, we could hear ourselves think. We could see the world more clearly" (Farah, 2007: 202). This geographic separation held symbolic significance in their construction of independence and cultivation of expertise in the lead up to the legal conflict. In order to grant legitimacy to WND's truth-making enterprise, it required the same type of geographic separation described by Medvetz (2012) analysis of think tanks. Positioning themselves at the fringe granted WND a reservoir of oppositional credibility distancing itself from many of the norms of journalistic practice, while at the same time leveraging this deviant behavior to successfully acquire press credentials in a hybrid boundary zone that legally shielded it from traditional cultural sanctions in the journalistic field.

Conclusion/Implications

Metajournalistic discourse is a powerful force shaping the contours of the journalistic field, and yet the structural constraints imposed by institutionalized hybrid boundary zones like the SCC make clear the importance of attending to the overlap between fields that do not cleanly separate from one another. Boundary work in this context is not simply a product of discursive representation, but also a material consequence of the structural features of governing institutions. Press credentials may be imbued with the representational force of habituated professional norms of the journalistic field, but the distribution of their material and symbolic benefits can often be mediated through institutional channels that differentially weight journalistic and juridical logics.

WND took advantage of a poorly defined online media environment and leveraged its broad reach, oppositional branding, and the threat of a lawsuit to challenge the professional norms of journalists, applying multidimensional pressure in one of the only contexts where the legal definition of who is a bona fide journalist carries material consequences. The conspiratorial elements of WND's news operation and reporting style allowed it to launch an aggressive attack from the fringe while credibly amassing sufficient journalistic qualities from a juridical perspective to claim material legitimacy within the journalistic field. More importantly, however, this case teases out the implications of Collins' (2013) observation that established journalists must be more cognizant of their dual role as journalist acting as congressional agents. The failure

to fully reckon with the interstitial nature of their credentialing work on the SCC is a recipe for opportunistic field-raiding behavior described by Eyal.

For scholars and journalists alike, this case study reinforces the importance of both reflecting upon press credentialing practices and the overlapping fields of cultural logic that structure news work. Moreover, it extends work on metajournalistic discourse by documenting conditions under which the interpretive processes of definition making, boundary setting, and legitimation are augmented as one approaches the fuzzy, distal boundaries of the journalistic field. Both scholars and journalists alike must also seriously examine how the profession handles mimetic institutions like WND, who often engage morally inexcusable practices such as pushing conspiracy theories about Vincent Foster and Obama's birth certificate.

While the WND case is certainly not dispositive, it does productively illustrate dynamics that can be directly traced to contemporary controversies over press credentialing practices. Jerome Corsi, the Infowars correspondent who causes a media uproar after receiving temporary press credentials to cover the White House (Tani, 2017), was a WND reporter throughout the Obama presidency. Corsi published a book propagating conspiracy theories about Barack Obama citizenship through WND's publishing imprint, WND Books, in May 2011, shortly after Donald Trump brought the issue out of internet forums and into the media mainstream (Stelter, 2011). In fact, Trump consulted directly with Farah and Corsi over the birther theory as the issue percolated into public discourse (Parker and Eder, 2016). Other prominent connections include Christopher Ruddy, and his media company, Newsmax. Ruddy was not only a central piece of WJC and WND's promotion of Vincent Foster conspiracy theories in the 1990's, he is the CEO of Newsmax, a site similar to WND, that close Trump advisors credit with being one of the earliest supporters of Trump's candidacy and, importantly, helped "refine his political image as an outsider, entrepreneur, and independent Republican," (Gray, 2017) even more so than Breitbart.

If journalism and mass communication scholars are to more comprehensively understand the growing influence of that conservative media ecologies on political life and public opinion (Faris et al., 2017), it is important to develop a more comprehensive account of the distribution of institutionalized technologies of professional journalism, like press credentials, that present fruitful sites for analyzing how actors navigate the distal boundaries of their field. This paper contributes to this effort by exploring an instance of failed journalistic boundary work near the height of the professional clashes over online and legacy journalists and assessing the theoretical implications of unique arrangement of the SCC and the press credentialing practices of public institutions subject to First Amendment restrictions.

Future research might build upon this work by identifying case studies involving different organizations seeking press credentials from the SCC that follow WND's model of reporting like Infowars, Breitbart and Gateway Pundit or, alternatively, outlets with very different organizational structures and reporting norms, like SCOTUSBlog or other citizen journalist groups. The timeless conflict between open participation of professional expertise in journalism provides a wealth of potential case studies to broaden the scholarly conversation around press credentialing practices at public institutions in the 21st century.

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