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Journalism published online 25 June 2013
DOI: 10.1177/1464884913492460

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What is This?
What aggregators do: Towards a networked concept of journalistic expertise in the digital age

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Abstract
This article analyzes expertise in the digital age through an ethnography of an increasingly valorized form of newswork – ‘serious, old fashioned reporting’ – and its purported occupational opposite, news aggregation. The article begins with a content analysis of the 4 March 2010 Federal Communications Commission workshop in which journalists tried to draw a sharp boundary between reporting and aggregation. In the second section the article explores the actual hybridized practices of journalistic aggregation. The empirical investigation serves as a scaffolding on which to build a theory of digital expertise that sees the nature and struggle over that expertise as networked properties. Expertise, according to the argument advanced in the final section, is neither a fixed property that can be ‘claimed’, nor is it simply the inevitable outcome of a clear occupational struggle over a particular jurisdiction. Specifically, the networks examined here coalesce around different conceptions of ‘what counts’ as a valid form of journalistic evidence under conditions of digitization.

Keywords
Actor-Network Theory, aggregation, expertise, reporting, sociology of news

Occupational conflict, professionalism, and networks
Drawing on fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis, this article takes a fresh look at the manner by which occupational expertise has been problematized in the digital age. It does so through a focus on the semi-professional occupation of journalism, a discipline that claims jurisdiction (in the words of sociologist Andrew Abbott) over the
collection and distribution of qualitative information about current, general events (Abbott, 1988; Lewis, 2012). Much ink has been spilled – both digital and otherwise, in both the academy and the journalistic profession itself – about the qualities that make journalism occupationally unique, about what distinguishes ‘journalism’ from ‘blogging’, and ‘reporting’ from ‘aggregation’ (Boczkowski, 2004; Boyer, 2010; Singer, 2003; Singer et. al, 2011). This study, which marks a qualitative extension of a lengthy period of ethnographic newsroom fieldwork, tries to put some empirical flesh on the agenda-setting bones of this earlier research.

Research on occupational authority and the evolution of journalistic work usually examines either a) the content of newsroom expertise or b) battles over journalistic jurisdiction waged by different occupational groups. These approaches are distinct in some important ways. Discussions of the substantive content of journalistic expertise (are journalists experts? in what? To what reference group do they direct their expert claims?) have recently begun to draw on the work of Henry Collins and Robert Evans (Collins and Evans, 2002). Collins and Evans sought to answer a question with important public implications: to what degree can a so-called ‘lay public’ be expected to take part in complex processes of policy making by virtue of their own expertise on a particular topic? And when can ‘non-certified’ groups claim to be experts in particular technological and scientific domains? Studies of this sort undertaken by journalism and media scholars (such as those by Ross, 2010, and Reich, 2012) are primarily endogenous; they attempt to zero in on what exactly it is that journalists or new media workers know that could plausibly make them experts in anything. The primarily focus here is on the actual content of newsroom expertise rather than the manner by which that expertise is deployed and wielded.

A second strand of studies has bracketed questions of substantive content, focusing instead on the manner by which journalists and other groups ‘who control a special skill in the manipulation of symbols’ (Carey, 1997: 132) mobilize particular truth claims in their pursuit of occupational jurisdiction over the exercise of that skill. This research takes a generally agnostic attitude towards questions of the actual content of expertise, preferring to see expert claims as provisional arguments that emerge through rhetoric and practice. For example, drawing on Andrew Abbott’s ecological approach, journalism researcher Wilson Lowrey has argued that journalism should be seen as existing within ‘an interrelated system and as compet[i ng] for jurisdiction over “work tasks”, or “human problems amenable to expert service”’ (2006: 480). The clear focus in these studies is on the battle for jurisdiction rather than, as Reich puts it, identifying the ‘something’ that makes up the essence of journalistic expertise. Reporters and aggregators, under this more agonistic model, can thus be expected to battle over the jurisdiction of journalism (Gieryn, 1983; Zelizer, 1992) by making particular rhetorical claims about what they do and why they do it in public settings or in ‘inter-professional venues such as conventions and trade publications’ (Lowrey, 2006: 482).

It is Lewis (2012), building on the work of Abbott (1988) as well as Schudson and Anderson (2008), who has presented the most comprehensive theoretical synthesis of the manner by which ‘the complexities of professionalism are embedded in and filtered through the ongoing negotiation of open participation on the part of users’. Lewis argues that the struggle of journalism to maintain its professional jurisdiction can be seen in the
boundary work of journalism, the ideology of journalism, and the ‘the formation of … [a] professional logic of control over content’. Lewis contrasts this logic of control with a logic and ideology of ‘open participation’ more common to digital culture, and argues that this tension between participation and control is negotiated through particular discourses and practices, in particular places, and under particular normative conditions (2012: 26).

In this article I want to modify these traditional starting points in a few substantive ways, drawing on concepts embedded in Actor-Network Theory – a methodological and theoretical orientation to qualitative research that has only recently begin to infiltrate the journalism research community (Domingo, 2008; Hemmingway and Van Loon, 2011; Plesner, 2009; Weiss and Domingo, 2010). While I lack the space to fully elaborate these methodological and theoretical commitments, it might be helpful to clarify a few concepts. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a well-known approach within Science and Technology Studies (STS) that makes several important claims about 1) how to properly understand the generation of scientific knowledge, 2) the interaction between the so-called ‘social’ and ‘natural’ worlds, and 3) the role networks play in both ontological interaction and epistemological knowledge production. ANT’s most controversial claim is often summarized as the notion that ‘objects have agency’, but it might be more appropriate to say that the actual ANT claim is that the line between society and the natural order has been overdrawn, and that both domains need to be approached symmetrically when investigating any empirical phenomenon. In this sense, ANT encourages us to focus on the interaction between the material and the social, between ‘words and things’ (Foucault, 1966). A second major focus of Actor-Network Theory is the notion of the network itself. For ANT, networks are neither the technological apparatuses of the internet, nor the personal networks beloved by social network theorists; rather, they are both material objects and social ties and communicative utterances and technological artifacts, all of which do the work that creates the net of society. Thus, we should not say that journalistic expertise is a networked property because its practitioners increasingly operate within digital networks; rather, the traceability of action afforded by digital tools draws our attention to the long-term operation of networks in the sense meant by ANT (Latour et al., 2012).

This article, then, is an attempt to trace the operation of journalistic expertise through an analysis of worlds and things. It concludes that the social and material aspects of journalistic knowledge do not congeal into solid domains of expertise battled over by well-bounded social groups. Rather, it argues that journalistic expertise is a socio-material property of messy networks. To the degree that these structures of expertise momentarily cohere, they do so on the basis of temporary network assemblages that are partly structured by power games, but also structured by different cultural understandings of what constitutes valid digital evidence, and thus what ‘belongs’ in the journalistic network.

**Methodology**

To better understand how conflicts over journalistic expertise play out in practice, I conducted a pair of qualitative analyses between 2008 and 2011, each with a different
empirical object in view and each embracing a cluster of distinct methods. These twin analyses can be seen as the extension and refinement of a lengthy period of ethnographic fieldwork, lasting from 2005 until the present, which is concerned with more general changes in the digital news ecosystem more generally.

My first goal was to get a better sense of the nuances of the rhetoric surrounding reporting and aggregation. I took as my analytical object the 4 March 2010 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) workshop ‘The Future of Media and Information Needs of Communities: Serving the Public Interest in the Digital Era’. This section of the article utilizes qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) to understand the process by which FCC commissioners and witnesses discussed journalistic products (‘news reports’, ‘news stories’) as either original or aggregated. What were the tacit conceptions of original reporting and aggregation that commissioners drew upon during the 4 March hearing? And how did commissioners and witnesses articulate their understanding of the relationship between original and aggregated journalistic content within the larger digital news ecosystem? To answer these questions I coded 63 statements within the 340-page hearing transcript as relevant to debates over original reporting and aggregation in 21st-century journalism. After determining the relevance of these statements to larger jurisdictional arguments about the nature of journalism, I used qualitative content-analytical techniques to tease out particular themes and narrative threads from the larger conversation. After this initial round of analysis, I then used these themes to analyze the entire transcript a second time, looking for other instances of these themes that occurred in the text. I present the general conclusions of this two-step analysis below.

It is important to note that the qualitative nature of the content analysis, the lack of a second coder, and the inclusion of only a single transcript from the entire 2009–2010 corpus of FCC/FTC (Federal Trade Commission) journalism hearings mean that the analysis below should not be taken as a scientific descriptor of public commentary. Rather, it should be used as an initial baseline upon which quantitative content research might wish to build.

The second phase of my research attempted to understand what it was that news aggregators actually did, separate and distinct from what interested parties claimed that they did. Over the course of my research, which took place between 2008 and 2011, I embraced a variety of qualitative tactics- ethnographic fieldwork, short-term site visits, and semi-structured news reconstruction interviews (Reich, 2009) in order to probe the nature of aggregation. Initial fieldwork at the offices of Philly.com (the website aggregating and repackaging the content of both the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Daily News) in 2008 allowed me to formulate a schematic overview of aggregation as its own unique form of newwork. In 2009 and 2010, site visits at the New York City-based media news and opinion blog Mediaite, the offices of the Newark Star-Ledger, and the offices of the Washington Post allowed me to triangulate my initial findings. An important complement to these site visits was a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former and current news aggregators, primarily in Washington DC and New York City. The first half-dozen interviews were then transcribed and coded, following the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which allowed me to formulate specific (though provisional) research questions that were then probed further in a second set of interviews. All in all, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with 12 news
aggregators and engaged in more than 75 hours of aggregation-specific fieldwork (much of it occurring during an extensive period of research in Philadelphia). Two of my subjects – aggregators at the Huffington Post and Mediaite – requested anonymity, and the Huffington Post, for its part, requires its employees to sign a non-disclosure agreement when they leave the company.

Public rhetoric and the contest over journalistic jurisdiction: The 4 March 2010 FCC Workshop

I begin with qualitative content analysis of the 4 March 2010 FCC workshop ‘The Future of Media and Information Needs of Communities: Serving the Public Interest in the Digital Era’. The purpose of this analysis was, as I noted earlier, to probe the rhetorical boundaries by which journalists defended their special status in a public setting. Of course, ‘original reporting’ and ‘aggregation’ were not the only, or even necessarily the primary, topics discussed at the FCC on 4 March 2010. The nuances of broadcast regulation made up a lengthy portion of the hearing, as did more macro-level arguments about the economics of newswork in the digital age. All in all, however, the debate over the nature and meaning of aggregation occupied a central place in the development of the larger public conversation. Discussions about the meaning and importance of ‘original reporting’ clustered around two distinct sections of the hearing, and the differences between them are as illuminating as their overall similarities in style and tone. During the first half of the hearing, academics and journalists valorized original reporting and touted its importance for democracy; their conversations, however, remained largely disconnected from technological changes or from a deeper analysis of what was meant by original reporting. In the final half of the hearing, witnesses and commissioners directly addressed the relationship between original reporting and news aggregation practices afforded by digital technology; they defined aggregation primarily in terms of search engines, however, and did not address aggregation in the form of either blogs or human curated news websites like the Huffington Post.

In the first half of the hearing, witnesses and commissioners argued that original reporting was essential for democracy. They also made a second point: that most reporting originated in newspapers, and occasionally in local TV. ‘It’s newspapers and broadcast media that still originate the overwhelming amount of the news we get,’ noted FCC commissioner Michael Copps, ‘on the order of three-quarters or more, and that number is going to go down only slowly’ (FCC, 2010: 13) In a second representative comment, media historian Paul Starr noted, ‘paid circulation is also in long-term decline, yet newspapers have financed most of the original reporting at the state and local level (2010: 31).

Here and elsewhere, speakers drew a connection between reporting, positive democratic outcomes, and the importance of newspapers to the journalistic process. Newspapers are described as the ‘originators’ of most original content; indeed, hearing chairman Steven Waldman joked that the Project for Excellence in Journalism ‘should get a royalty every time [the committee]’ mentioned the group’s study finding that 95 percent of news stories with new information came from traditional media, primarily print journalism (FCC, 2010: 304). The taken-for-granted importance of original reporting articulated in the first half of the hearing did not include much discussion about the actual meaning of
‘original reporting’. Indeed, much of the discussion in the early part of the hearing could have been presented at any time in the late 20th or early 21st century; the sense of ‘crisis’ within the news industry expressed by participants could have been applied to earlier periods of concern about shrinking news coverage.

Later in the hearing, on the other hand, the tenor and content of the conversation shifted as witnesses directly debated the relationship between digital technology, search engines, and the economic impact of these technologies on original reporting practices. The rhetoric during this final portion of the March 2010 hearing crystallized around a debate between Associated Press General Counsel Srinandan Kasi and CUNY journalism school professor Jeff Jarvis. Kasi threw down the gauntlet, arguing, in his words, that ‘effectively what we see happening [online] … is that those who are in a position to fulfill … the demand online for news are, therefore, controlling monetization [of that demand] – and have literally no cost of news gathering’ (FCC, 2010: 250). In other words, the vast majority of digital revenue on the internet went to online search engines like Google that filtered, sorted, and highlighted digital content. Meanwhile, argued Kasi, the original creators of that content were left out in the cold.

In contrast, Jarvis defended Google and other search engines: ‘Google gives you value,’ he told Kasi and the FCC.

There are two creations of value today – the creation of the content and the creation of the audience for that content. Each bring value … It’s up to [publishers] to decide whether you can create a relationship and value out of that. (FCC, 2010: 282)

But if Jarvis saw Google as an indexer of content and a driver of audiences, the executives working for traditional media companies perceived the search engine as a fragmentizing original content substitute, one which occupied an unfair position in the digital value chain. The name they gave to this process of fragmentation, excerption, and indexing was aggregation. If you analyze web traffic, argued Kasi, ‘what you’ll see is that the aggregation sites actually enjoy the benefit of the traffic flow. Over half the surveyed audience got the news from aggregation sites’ rather than the original content producers, Kasi concluded (2010: 253).

This debate questions the positive democratic outcomes outlined in the first debate and blames news aggregators for new economic injustices in the news business. The assumed public importance of original reporting operates in the background of this conversation, however. Also at work here is a criticism, not of ‘traditional’ news aggregation, but rather the massive algorithmically powered process of indexing and search. The definition of what, exactly, original reporting is, why it is important, and how it compares to the aggregation of information is addressed only obliquely. Also almost entirely ignored in the FCC hearing are the websites many people think of as classic news aggregators – blogs and hybrid blog/news websites like Gawker, Media Gazer and the Huffinton Post. Nevertheless, news executives’ animus towards a variety of technological and digital information processes comes through clearly in these hearings. The enemy is named, and the enemy is aggregation.

Only at the conclusion of the hearing does Chairman Steve Waldman attempt to probe more deeply the question of what original reporting might actually mean, and why it
might be important. Turning to Jarvis, he inquires about whether he is worried by the recent Pew Report on Baltimore, which concludes that the vast majority of original news content comes from traditional print media. ‘I don’t agree with the premise,’ Jarvis responded:

… because I think there’s a definition of news. There’s a top-down definition of news. When I ran community sites and we had a site for ballerinas under the news tab it said the leotards are in. Well, to them that’s news. There’s many different definitions of news. And I think that the flaw in the Pew study was its definition of news and media and distribution were very limited. (FCC, 2010: 305)

We are thus left with tantalizing questions about whether or not certain categories of original reporting are undervalued, along with the even more metaphysical question of what original reporting even is. Although these questions were not addressed in the 4 March hearing, several larger themes are prominent. They include: the assumed connection between original reporting and a healthy democracy, the negative economic consequences of the digital economy for original content producers, and the confusion about what aggregators are and how they are different from search engines. The most important theme, however, is the overwhelmingly negative attitude toward aggregation held by many traditional reporters and news executives, along with the idea that it is radically distinct from original reporting.

This analysis of the FCC hearings on the future of journalism thus serves as a working overview as to the manner by which reporters, journalism entrepreneurs, academics, and policy makers attempt to articulate the boundaries of journalism through rhetoric. And yet, there is obviously more to journalistic boundary-maintenance than rhetoric alone. The next section of this article analyzes aggregation ‘in action’. This analysis of the actual work of aggregation points out the numerous hybrid practices that complicate simple distinctions between reporting and aggregation. This analysis can also help us understand, on a material level, some of the very real cultural differences that lie behind aggregator-journalist boundary disputes.

**Aggregation in action**

Sitting in a darkened midtown bar that has long been one of the favorite haunts of journalists working for the New York City tabloid New York Post, Hasani Gittens was emphatic. ‘There are skills to news aggregation,’ he told me (interview, 10 June 2010). As a self-described former ‘old school rewrite man’ for the New York Post now working as a web editor at the local NBC website, Gittens is the kind of journalist who often gets ignored in the classic studies of both digital and analog journalism, and his choice of the location for our interview was an interesting one. Our bar was what might be described as a ‘New York Post bar’, distinct from the ‘New York Daily News bar’ on the other side of Times Square, and, as we talked, Gittens drew on his journalistic experience, his rewrite experience, and his aggregation experience when outlining the qualities of a good news aggregator. It is to an analysis of ‘aggregation in action’ that we now turn.
For the purposes of this article, I define news aggregators as *hierarchizers, interlinkers, bundlers, rewriters, and illustrators of web content*. News aggregation is particularly common in journalistic networks where journalists produce pieces of content in an uncoordinated or quasi-coordinated fashion. In many cases, these end-network producers are not formal members of the news institution that is doing the news aggregation. A news aggregator coordinates amongst a series of quasi-institutionalized (or entirely independent) content producers. The primary task of this news aggregator is, then, to build links between independently produced news stories, and to rank these bundled news stories according to rapidly shifting criteria of importance, popularity, and newsworthiness.

It is interesting to note that many of the individual news aggregators I interviewed told me that they had no real workflow to speak of. ‘When something comes across the internet, we either grab it or we don’t,’ one of the workers at *Mediaite* told me. ‘There’s not much more to it than that’ (fieldwork and interview, 29 January 2010). Indeed, many of the aggregators I spoke to seemed skeptical that anyone could find anything interesting or meaningful to say about aggregation as a form of newwork. Nevertheless, after talking to a number of individuals engaged in aggregation work at a number of different organizations, larger themes and structures in the routines of aggregators quickly became apparent.

**Daily routines**

For most of the professional content aggregators I spoke to, the news day begins early, and it begins with an immersion in the tsunami of digital content that continually flows across the internet. ‘I subscribe to about 150 RSS feeds on my Google reader,’ a former editor at the Washington DC based website *DCist* told me.

For a while, I just sit at my laptop skimming head[lines], clicking on ones that seemed relevant, and opening browser tabs. My early morning goal was always to put together something called the ‘morning roundup’, which was a long-ish summary of three or four top stories, plus descriptions of and links to five or six minor stories.

The *DCist* editor added ‘the goal was to have the morning roundup up by 9am, but sometimes it wouldn’t get up until 9:30 or 9:45. There are other aggregators out there more hard-core than me’ (16 June 2010).

One of these ‘hard-core aggregators’ was John Winter, who worked for several months as the local politics and entertainment editor for one of the leading online news aggregators in the country, the *Huffington Post*. After a short career in weekly journalism and a stint in graduate school, Winter described joining the *Huffington Post* after school and instantly entering a high pressure work environment where days began and ended with intense media consumption.

My alarm would go off at 6:55, and I’d jump out of bed and immediately turn on [MSNBC]. I’d watch it while I was combing the online newswires. If I thought that nothing was absolutely breaking right away, I would get some granola. While I was eating, I would look through the

From this stream of news Winter would craft his aggregated content. Between 7am and 8am, Winter described what he called a ‘really frenzied process’ of refreshing the local politics page and ‘clearing it out’. ‘Clearing it out’ meant removing an old story and replacing it with a newer one. ‘A good half the page would be cleared out, would be new, by 8am,’ Winter told me. He also noted that he had two content management ‘buckets’ on the backend of the local politics page, one that would manage the content on the news and aggregation portion of the page, and a second that controlled the blog posts submitted by the Huffington Post’s volunteer blogging community. Most of the blog content was simply arranged in chronological order, while the display of the news involved some prioritization. ‘There is one story that runs all the way across the top, in huge blaring letters. Then there was space for three stories below that, and below that, there are secondary and tertiary stories.’ After clearing out as much of the page as he could, Winter would backtrack and check the television news, the internet, and his feeds again, ‘and if it was clear, I’d hop in the shower’. But there was often more news, ‘and there were times when I wouldn’t head for the train until 9 and get into the office until 10 or 10:30. From then on, and for the rest of the day, the goal was is to refresh the page until 6 or 7pm.’

All the aggregators I interviewed described their mornings in similar terms, as the immediate immersion in the flood of daily news and an attempt to pick out those stories that would most directly interest their website’s audience, draw traffic, or both. The remainder of the day usually involved sitting in front of a computer and repeating the same basic tasks, at a less frenzied place. This focus on the early morning was justified in terms of audience metrics and aggregate audience data in the possession of digital news websites, which showed a spike in traffic in the pre- and early-work hours (Anderson, 2011; Boczkowski, 2010). Beyond the overtly stated reasons, however, the importance of an early and intense start to the day can also serve as an important cultural marker of occupational distinction insofar as it contrasts in some significant and symbolic ways with the habits of traditional journalists. During my earlier Philadelphia fieldwork, professional reporters working for newspapers spoke happily about their late-morning starts and their late evenings.

Beyond simply ‘getting up early’ and ‘reading the internet’, is there anything more to say about the work of news aggregation? There is. To understand, on a deeper level, the set of skills that go into aggregation work, we next turn to a discussion of the relationship between aggregation and news judgment.

The skills of journalistic aggregation

In the conversation briefly excerpted above, former New York Post ‘rewrite man’ Hasani Gittens discussed what he saw as the ‘skills’ of the news aggregator. For Gittens, there is indeed a distinct typology of skills needed by reporters, rewriters, and aggregators, one that revolves around news judgment. Gittens’ description of the way these skills emerge materially, through practice, can add nuance to our understanding of the supposed dichotomy between aggregation and reporting:
As an aggregator, you really need to know what’s a good story. It’s heavy on news sense. And you need to know what’s a good story for your audience. But it’s not about reporting skills. To be a reporter, on the other hand, you need to know certain neighborhoods. Most of all, you have to have the guts to ask questions. You need to know how to talk to people to get them to talk to you. You need to know how to take notes. You need to know how to develop and cultivate sources. As an aggregator, you’re, number one, going to need to know how to have a sense of story. (interview, 17 June 2010)

When I pressed him about how aggregation differed from his days as a rewrite man, Gittens had a ready response: even as a rewrite man you do a little journalism, he told me.

There’s a skill involved in crafting a witty turn of phrase out of a boring story, and a lot of the [original] stories you end up rewriting for a tabloid are boring stories. So [within journalism] you really have three kinds of skills. You can have reporting. You can have rewriting. You can have aggregation.

But the dominant quality of a good aggregator was ‘news judgment. Good reporters don’t always have the greatest news judgment in world, but good editors always do, and so do aggregators.’ You have to know how to write a good headline, Gittens went on. You also have to know how to write a good summary of a story, and how to incorporate visual graphics and photos. ‘You need to know how to write a hed that gets you traffic. But most of all you need to know what’s news.’ The former editor of DCist described a similar panoply of skills, emphasizing news judgment above all.

You need to know what stories readers will be interested in. You need to keep track of your sources. You need to be quick. And you need to add value to the story you’ve aggregated. But news judgment is the most important.

The fact that news organizations are themselves now engaged in aggregation work is another example of the hybridized complexity I referred to at the conclusion of the previous section. A further complexity stems from the fact that news organizations often deliberately seek to be aggregated: ‘we are the aggregator and the aggregates,’ Gittens laughed, describing the process of deliberately seeking out links from high-traffic websites like the Drudge Report and Yahoo News. Gittens spoke of spreadsheets kept by the aggregators on staff at NBC News that had contact information for various web editors at major internet sites, as well as potential hooks that might encourage them to link back to a story. It was considered a major success, particularly in financial terms, when other aggregators linked to NBC.

‘Keeping an ear to the internet’

Journalists engaged in the work of news aggregation consume massive amounts of digital content, and also need to have good news judgment. But what is it that they actually produce? The question is complicated by the rhetoric of content ‘theft’ that permeated the FCC hearing analyzed earlier, as well as the hope of many traditional news
organizations to both ‘aggregate’ and ‘be aggregated’. But a common description of what
news aggregators did was summarized by the ex-editor of DCist:

… our job is to make it possible for someone to have a one-stop location for the news they need
about DC … if you only read DCist, we wanted you to know what was going on in town. And
we also want to add value to content as well. As an aggregator, you should always be adding a
little something: a poll, a different take on an issue, our own two cents, bring two related ideas
together in one space, a better photo. That kind of stuff. (interview, 20 June 2010)

This idea of being a ‘one-stop shop’ was expressed by every aggregator I spoke to, in
almost identical language. ‘What did Huffington Post pay me for?’ asked Winter of the
Huffington Post. ‘They paid me to try to be the one stop shop for news about local politi-
cs and entertainment’ (interview, 10 April 2010).

The primary reference point of the one-stop-shop news aggregator was the internet
itself. It was from the digital bounty of the online universe that aggregators drew the
content they would parse, rebuild, and contextualize. ‘What we do as aggregators isn’t
about journalism,’ one high-level news executive told me. ‘It’s about making sense of the
internet.’ Comparing his tenure at a major daily newspaper with his time as the manager
of a prominent and wealthy news aggregator, the executive noted that traditional journal-
ism had:

… always been about making sense of the public, and about your local community, but with the
internet, we aggregators need to make sense of this other world. It’s why the Huffington Post,
for example, has the guts to call an ‘internet newspaper’. It’s about the internet. It isn’t about
journalism, at least the way we’ve always thought of journalism up until now. (interview, 20
July 2010)

This notion of ‘keeping an ear to the internet’ valorized by traditional aggregators can be
further understood by comparing aggregation at Philly.com to aggregation at newer digi-
tal enterprises. At Philly.com the primary role of a web producer was to determine where
a news story (usually written by a reporter at the Inquirer or the Daily News, almost
never by an employee of Philly.com itself) belonged on the Philly.com website. This was
mostly an issue of news judgment: was a piece of news worthy of being a ‘biggie’ (the
name for the top story on the site), should it be downgraded one notch and function as a
‘spotlight’ story, or should it not be promoted at all? Producers at Philly.com rewrote
what they saw as web-unfriendly ledes and headlines, procured art, and decided on ways
to ‘build out’ stories with links to other, related stories on Philly.com. To move into a lead
position at Philly.com, a story needed to contain art, as well as an additional piece of
‘user-generated content’ (often a comment box, or a poll). A story almost certainly
needed a collection of related links if it was going to ascend the ladder of importance at

Because of the combination of Philly.com linking practices and the company’s organi-
zational setup, in other words, the web producers at Philly.com found themselves aggre-
gating content from a very narrow set of sources; almost all the content on Philly.com
comes from one of the two local newspapers. So while there was a constant stream of
digital news being ingested and regurgitated by Philly.com aggregators, the scope from
which that content could be drawn was fairly narrow and presented in a fairly rational fashion. Reporters at the *Daily News* and the *Inquirer* were company employees, subject to the same upper management as workers at *Philly.com* and operating under fairly established deadlines and news routines. Aggregators at *Philly.com* did not, in other words, aggregate the internet, or even the local internet in Philadelphia. True aggregators, in contrast, ‘keep their ear glued to the internet’.

**Creativity and speed**

As part of the discussion of his daily routine at the *Huffington Post*, John Winter made an interesting point about the amount of time and effort he put into his various aggregated pieces of content on a typical day. An outside observer might assume that every aggregated story is more or less the same and requires a more or less identical amount of time and effort. But this is not the case. ‘There’s a degree of whorishness to the fact that we spent so much time at the Huffington Post trying to come up with SEO-optimized headlines,’ Winter told me. ‘But that was the name of the game, and it really got interesting when we tried to figure out these sexy headlines for those really important stories’ (10 April 2010). Winter made the point that, with a goal of refreshing the local politics three or four times a day, producing quality aggregated content – content that, in the words of the editor of *DCist*, always contains added value – was difficult if not impossible. But, he adds, the regularized production of mediocre content could co-exist with the occasional production of higher-quality stories. What does ‘added value’ mean in the contrast of news aggregation practices? The answer was intriguingly nebulous insofar as my respondents offered a number of different definitions of added value. None of them, however, pointed to ‘finding new information’ as a subset of added value. All value was discussed in terms of the contextualization or combination of already existing information.

There is little doubt that the demands on digital journalists are increasing. At the end of our interview, I asked the former editor of *DCist* if she had any thoughts on recent journalistic complaints by journalists that the increasing speed of their work routines was diminishing creativity. Was increased speed or output demand damaging original reporting? ‘I don’t really see the point in putting original reporting on a pedestal,’ she told me. ‘It’s important, sure. But it’s only one thing among many other things. I don’t have a lot of respect for these old-time journalists, to be honest. I think writing four stories a month is lazy. I think it’s lame.’ In discussing a reporter at the *Washington Post* who often spends a great deal of time on long-form stories, a *Post* digital editor complains to me that the reporter spends a lot of:

… time flying down to Florida to talk to fishermen, or to someplace else to stare at horse. During the amount of time he spent doing that he could have written 20 stories. But he has the best journalism job. No journalists have that job any more. (interview, 20 July 2010)

*DCist* publishes between 18 and 20 stories a day, with upper-level company executives hoping for publication metrics on the 3-story per day range. Gittens estimates that the local NBC website asks web producers to compose 10 stories per day, leading to a total
of between 40 and 50 new stories per day for the entire website. Is 10 aggregated stories per day a large number? There are few standards by which to answer this question. While the DCist editor expressed contempt for ‘traditional journalism whiners’, the aggregator at the Huffington Post spoke eloquently about his own burnout and the ‘deep levels of exploitation’ he felt while working at the high-octane company. In the end, even the creative workarounds Winter designed to highlight the stories he really cared about while spending next to no time on the rest were not enough to keep him from going back to traditional journalism. He concludes:

The culture there wasn’t right for me and I did want to have a life. And people there didn’t have a life. Or at least they didn’t want to hang out with me. So maybe it was me. But I didn’t want to work with people who made me feel guilty for having fun. I worked for people who were joyless.

Conclusion: Jurisdictional claims, networked expertise, and objects of evidence in online journalism

As I noted in the literature review, research on occupational authority and the evolution of journalistic work – such as the struggles discussed in this article between reporters and aggregators – usually examines either a) the content of newsroom expertise or b) battles over journalistic jurisdiction waged by different occupational groups. The difficulty with both these strands of analysis, as highly appealing as they might be conceptually, is that the research presented in this study points us toward a far more complex understanding of the ‘struggle for jurisdiction’ than that assumed by most analysts within the sociology of the professions. If we remain on the level of rhetorical conflict, of course, the lines are clear enough, but the minute we descend into the realm of material practice all manner of complications ensue.

First, it is hard to say which ‘occupational group’ engages in which jurisdictional practices, given the evidence that aggregation is a radically hybrid form of newswork that promiscuously crosses occupational boundaries. As one of my informants put it above, laughing, ‘we are the aggregator and the aggregates!’ . Second, the conflict between reporters and news aggregators does not always seem to occur on the level of material practice. The material practices of aggregators and reporters are actually not all that different; rather, disagreements revolve around a conflict over which ‘objects of evidence’ ought to be considered valid pieces of the news network. Finally, from the evidence presented thus far, news aggregators are not only waging a jurisdictional struggle against reporters. Reporters may be speaking to defend their professional boundaries against the encroachment of outsiders, of course, at least rhetorically. But as far as aggregators seem to care, traditional reporters can start aggregating the online websites any time they want. Aggregators are thus both jealous and generous in the deployment of their expertise, rather than possessive of it. The primary discrepancy between the two networks stems, once again, from notions of what ‘original reporting’ is and how it should be carried out. This nicely ties our findings into what is now more than a decade of research into journalistic work, particularly around the self-images of bloggers (Matheson, 2004) and online journalists (Singer, 2003) operating far down the newsroom hierarchy.
These complications should steer us away from simply thinking about journalistic authority and expertise as the outcome of a jurisdictional conflict between two well-defined occupational groups. But neither should we return to the more explicitly normative ground of Collins and Evans, who conceive of expertise as the substantive yet tacit application of general working rules in an effort to solve particular social problems. Instead, following philosophers like Bruno Latour and sociologists such as Gil Eyal, we need to think about networks of journalistic expertise, with both human agents and non-human objects networked together in complex strands of material practice and knowledge production. Expertise, argues Eyal in his studies of autism, emerges out of the ‘full chain of associations that connect [practical work and abstraction] and the full set of actors, tools, machines and transcription devices necessary to convey a statement up or down the chain’ (Eyal and Hart, 2010). Experts, expertise, and occupational groups are networked properties rather than jurisdictional conflicts or substantive possessions. In Eyal’s study, a key moment in the development of an expertise in the understanding of autism emerged when a member of the lay community introduced the ‘E-1 checklist’ into the network of autistic expertise, thus establishing it as both an obligatory passage point and a black-boxed object that provides valid evidence about a particular phenomenon. In my own research into news aggregation, there are potentially many new networked objects in the expertise chain, one of them being the mass profusion of digital information and online websites which serve, for aggregators, as things which must be dealt with.

A focus on strategic jurisdictional conflict within 21st-century journalism runs the risk of conceiving journalists and their spokespersons as purely Machiavellian actors, defending their boundaries from interlopers and strategically deploying rhetoric and work for purely instrumental reasons. Obviously, this is not the case. By looking at ‘newswork as network’, we can better factor in the cultural residue of a particular profession that constrains both its mental worldview and its available repertoire of action. In the case of the research presented here, for instance, take the notion expressed by many aggregators: the idea of aggregation as ‘keeping your ear to the internet’. A digital editor at the Washington Post told me that:

… while the thing about aggregation is that it’s constantly changing as a practice, as new techniques come along, and so on … it’s always the same insofar as what people are trying to do is to tap into the human psyche – and by that I mean the human psyche as it gets put on the internet … so aggregation isn’t about journalism, at least the way we’ve always thought of journalism up until now. It’s about understanding the web. (interview, 19 July 2010)

As defined in terms of practice, the line between aggregation and original reporting is not entirely clear, despite rhetorical attempts at category purification and boundary-drawing. Aggregators and journalists both compile shards of facts, quotes, documents, and links together in order to create narrative-driven news stories. I want to conclude that the real conflict between aggregation and journalism lies not only in the work of either occupation, and not only in the way that each defines the other as a sort of pathological doppelganger, but also in the type of objects of which they build their stories and that they take as their criteria of evidence. The great conflict over journalism may be centered around the things of journalism in addition to the work of journalism or the definition of journalism.
In other words: aggregators have accepted the website and the link, and categories of
digital evidence more broadly, as valid items which can be rationally processed through
the news network. Journalists, on the other hand, remain wedded to analog evidence –
quotes, official government sources, first-person observations, analog documents and
files – as the primary raw material out of which they build their stories. In part this relates
to material practice, but it also relates to journalistic culture. In terms of expertise and
authority, it means that aggregators and reporters have, thus far, built themselves distinct
news networks, with different black-boxed objects of evidence and different claims
about how material interaction with those objects validates their professional authority.
How (and if) these distinct networks will break down more completely than they already
have, and how different expertise networks incorporated various strands of digital evi-
dence into their workflows, are questions that take us beyond the realm of ethnography
and call for research that incorporates cultural history more thoroughly than much news-
room research up until this point.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or
not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1 In this section on the differences between endogenous and exogenous studies of journalistic
expertise and jurisdiction I am grateful to Zvi Reich, who first pointed out that problems
I had formerly approached in unison (the nature of expertise and battles over professional
jurisdiction) were analytically distinct, even though working journalists often mixed them
in practice.

2 A pseudonym. Due to the non-disclosure agreements signed when workers leave the
Huffington Post, this informant requested anonymity when he spoke to this researcher.

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