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The Digital Journalist: the journalistic field, boundaries, and disquieting change

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Championing some of the biggest news stories of the early twenty-first century, WikiLeaks' editor-in-chief Julian Assange describes his organization as part of a "healthy, vibrant and inquisitive journalistic media" (WikiLeaks 2015) that embraces the values of the 'fourth estate' (Lynch 2012). Meanwhile, journalists and media critics describe him as a hacker, an activist, and a "provocateur" (Carr 2010, Shafer 2012), who is dismissed by others as a "seething jerk" (Shafer 2010), a "self-publicising prig with messianic tendencies" (Evans 2011), and the leader of the "Wikicult" (Moore 2010). News stories repeatedly characterize WikiLeaks as "a stateless organization that operates in an online world without borders" (Carr 2011), and although Assange sees himself as a member of the journalistic field, he is described as a technological rogue on "the hacktivist fringe of the internet" (*Guardian* 2010).

The subject of both academic and journalistic attention, Assange has emerged as an emblematic but confrontational figure in digital journalism, and as a prominent figure in a group of digital actors who have challenged the status quo of the journalistic field. By positioning their work at the leading edge of innovative journalism, and taking advantage of an expanse of digital approaches to share news and information online, emerging digital actors pursuing journalistic work have irritated and blurred the traditional boundaries of the journalistic field.

By adopting unconventional approaches to achieve journalistic ends, these 'interlopers' (Eldridge 2014) challenge scholars to revisit existing understandings of the nature of both journalism and journalists. For digital journalism studies, these 'would be journalists' highlight a divisive aspect of digital change by drawing attention to the parameters of the journalistic field. This chapter argues such boundary disputes help to make sense of a field that until recently appeared relatively stable, but is currently very much in flux.

Digital interlopers

In previous work I categorized new digital entities that challenge the boundaries of the journalistic field as 'interloper media', drawing attention to the way new actors who self-identify as journalists are portrayed as transgressing journalistic boundaries and misappropriating professional identities (Eldridge 2013, 2014). For digital journalism studies, they represent a competition between an established set of journalists, presenting the journalistic field as a defined space of belonging built on familiar norms and values, and new actors who adopt journalistic identities. This binary view of the field distances new actors who offer alternative views of that space through in-group/out-group discourses (Eldridge 2014: 13). Stoking tensions over what it means to belong to the journalistic field and prompting boundary disputes, discourses marginalizing interlopers play out through explicit discussions of belonging (Coddington 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen 2014), along with more subtle boundary work in everyday news texts (Eldridge 2013, 2014).

Boundary disputes prompted by the emergence of digital journalists build on traditional understandings of journalism and rely heavily on normative understandings of what defines journalism (Steel 2013). Boundaries also depend on a recognition of journalism based on traditional measures of the field that are shared internally, by journalists, and more broadly in society; in this construction of the journalistic field, interlopers and some digital journalists present threats to this existing journalistic order.

Whether discussing journalistic bloggers on 'J-blogs' (Singer 2005), journalists' use of social media (Artwick 2013), interactive live-blogs (Thurman and Schapals, this volume), or the work of more activist-oriented interloper media such as WikiLeaks (Eldridge 2014), the work of new digital journalists is increasingly commonplace. However, despite close proximity between these new actors and the journalistic field – notably when WikiLeaks' work was communicated through the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and other media – the journalistic identity of interloping digital journalists remains marginalized; blogs can now be found across legacy media, yet terms like 'blogger' and 'blogosphere' are still used as derisive labels by some

(Sullivan 2013). This in part reflects the technological newness and independence of interlopers. In the past fifteen years, the emergence of political bloggers has shown others are able to cover elections without the traditional press corps (Eldridge 2013), “accidental journalists” and “citizen witnesses” have emerged to offer new avenues to news and information (Allan 2013), and those like Assange who identify as journalists are finding new ways to release information to the world.

While these dynamics signal that radical approaches to digital journalism from non-characteristic digital journalists can succeed, new actors continue to be treated as outside the journalistic field and simultaneously antagonize journalistic standard bearers. As Karin Wahl-Jorgensen argues, new digital actors demonstrate how “new technologies can be harnessed for the purpose of free expression and circulation of information – core journalistic values in which the profession remains heavily invested, and willing to fight for” (2014: 2588), yet in doing so they provoke contests over legitimacy and authority. These clashes can be understood through the symbolic constructions of the journalistic field (Bourdieu 1994, 2005) and the discursive construction of boundaries to reinforce journalistic belonging (Bishop 1999, among others).

Fields and Boundaries: Symbolic constructions of journalism

Pierre Bourdieu’s work on field theory and on the journalistic field underpins a significant amount of work in journalism studies and digital journalism studies. For exploring the ways emerging approaches to journalism have challenged journalistic ‘belonging’, field theory describes society through differentiated fields which when recognized internally and externally by members of society provide social boundaries around the work of social actors. For those fields where other structural and regulatory definitions may be less applicable, as with journalism, the outward articulation of boundaries to define journalism plays a prominent role in distinguishing the field from other social actors.

Bourdieu describes the journalistic field in part as a space defined by “action and reaction” (2005: 30), by which he means a societal space defined by its constituent

members offering a “dominant vision” of journalism, and an equally dominant contrast of what journalism is not (2005: 42). This dominant vision defining its boundaries rests on shared presuppositions and agreed-upon complicities concerning what it means to be a journalist. These underscore the field’s ability to define its unique space in society. Bourdieu’s work has enabled scholars to advance theoretical work that accounts for new digital actors contending with journalistic concepts. This offers both a theoretical grounding for discussing journalistic identity as well as exposing where traditional definitions of journalism fail to reflect modern realities.

However, since Bourdieu’s work was developed the journalistic field has become an increasingly messy definitional space (it is worth noting that Bourdieu’s development of field theory pre-dates the emergence of digital technologies and online media and his work on the journalistic field was a posthumous publication). Even so, in theorizing the journalistic field he captures its historic struggle with maintaining boundaries against other definers of social reality, including those in the academy and politics who “do battle” in presenting the defining narratives of the social world (Bourdieu 2005: 31). Bourdieu sees journalism as a field in constant engagement to remain relevant; expressed differently, while journalism has long defined its societal role as necessary for the functioning of society, it has never been alone in that role and competes with other fields to present “a legitimate vision of the social world” (ibid.).

As Rodney Benson argues, while external dynamics are key in shaping fields, including the journalistic field, fields do enjoy a strong degree of autonomy to maintain internal order; “a microcosm within a macrocosm” (2006: 188). Fields operate with their own sets of rules, rules that are the result of historic struggles to establish and maintain distinction externally while reinforcing order internally.

These clashes have lead different social actors to visibly reinforce the boundaries of their respective fields. While externally this remained critical for societal recognition, it is the internal order and the “ongoing production of difference” (Benson 2006:

189) that has come to define the journalistic field. In this particular struggle, the “symbolic weight” of traditional members of the field gives them an out-sized advantage in shaping the field’s parameters and elements of inclusion and exclusion (Ibid.: 190). In other words, we all recognize a newspaper as journalism, as we would a prominent broadcaster and even a legacy news media website, in part because of their dominance in *reinforcing* that ‘vision’ of the journalistic field. Interlopers and other digital actors, by contrast, are only able to *challenge* this dominant narrative.

From the vantage point of field theory, traditional journalists find themselves in conflict with new digital actors due in part to the way journalists have defined their societal space around a set of taken-for-granted criteria (for Bourdieu, these would be journalism’s specific doxa). Built on traditional constructs and ideal-typical values associated with the ‘Fourth Estate’, the journalistic field depends on its criteria being recognizable both internally and externally; journalism as something ‘we know when we see it’ (Donsbach 2010: 38). While journalism has, arguably, never been a truly uniform or coherent space, challenged in fact by differences between popular and elite newspapers, broadcast journalists, the periodical press, and myriad other peculiarities, across these nuances there has traditionally been at least a tacit agreement that members of the field were “participating in the same game” (Bourdieu 2005: 36):

The most irreducible adversaries have in common that they accept a certain number of presuppositions that are constitutive of the very functioning of the field. In order to fight one another, people have to agree on the areas of disagreement. There is a kind of fundamental complicity among the members of a field. (Ibid.)

However, tacit unanimity and journalistic identity built on criteria that are often unspoken have left the field open to challenges from new digital actors who see their work as journalism. As Silvio Waisbord notes, until relatively recently, “no other occupation or consolidated profession pretended to be in the same business as journalism. Such absence of competition somewhat protected journalism from potential challenges” (Waisbord 2013: 139-140). Digital actors have challenged that on a protected status.

Consequently, definitions of being a journalist are enforced through hefting traditional journalists' 'social weight' to reject interloper claims. This builds distinctions through public articulations of what journalism is and is not around traditional values, and through in-group/out-group distinctions of belonging. "Though seemingly vague, [these] 'fuzzy' oppositions are very fundamental in that when a whole society has them in its head, they end up defining reality" (Bourdieu 2005: 37). Beyond underscoring "'fuzzy' oppositions", these contests over belonging to the journalistic field also reflect clashes over the legitimacy claims of traditional members of the journalistic field. For interlopers, however, the results of these clashes have wider implications:

Being deemed a "legitimate" journalist accords prestige and credibility, but also access to news sources, audiences, funding, legal rights, and other institutionalized perquisites. Also, struggles over what is appropriate journalism bear on the actual news products as some practices are held to be worthy while others are rejected. (Carlson 2015: 2)

In a struggle over legitimacy and resources, digital interlopers continue to challenge the boundaries of the journalistic field and assert their journalistic identity in ways that compel scholars to make sense of their digital approaches to journalism.

Journalism's Boundaries

Having discussed the contested nature of the journalistic field in the face of interloping digital journalists, this chapter now turns to discuss the nature of journalistic boundaries as discursive performances and the way these have focused on digital, interloping, journalists. By performances, I mean that boundaries exist primarily through the amplification of difference between journalists and digital journalists and gain meaning through contestation. Referred to as boundary disputes or boundary work, these are "symbolic contests in which different actors vie for definitional control to apply or remove the label of journalism" (Carlson 2015: 2). Boundaries and their performances become pronounced at moments of intensity, as with the furor around WikiLeaks, but are also the product of an ongoing need to

define journalism's boundaries (Bourdieu 2005: 33), and maintained through "less intensive peer monitoring" (Benson 2006: 198).

The field's need to promote and maintain distinction drives boundary work that materializes through "claims to authority" (Gieryn 1983: 781) over the right to call oneself a journalist. When the primacy of the journalistic field is challenged, boundaries of inclusion move beyond tacit acknowledgement of belonging and are made prominent in news texts and public discourses. These can emerge in spot-lit and obvious discussion of journalism (Bishop 1999, Cecil 2002, Coddington 2012, Wahl-Jorgensen 2014), while at other times boundaries come through more subtle distinctions of difference.

I argue and evidence in previous work that there are two levels where the 'symbolic contest' of boundaries can be found, describing these levels as 'overt' and 'covert' constructions of journalistic identity (Eldridge 2014: 14). The first of these, overt discourses, draw lines around the journalistic field in order to maintain internal order and reinforce internal rules (Benson 2006). Overt discourses reinforce belonging through a familiar set of sign-posted discussions of norms and criteria of professionalism described as boundary work. These are rooted in the sociological work of Thomas Gieryn (1983, 1999), and developed in journalism studies by Ron Bishop (1999, 2004), Dan Berkowitz (2000) and others.

To tie this discussion of boundaries to Bourdieu's discussion of fields, when boundaries emerge in newspaper texts, media criticism pieces, and other critical outlets such as editorials and columns as sign-posted discussions of journalism they (a) benefit from the social weight traditional journalistic media have in promoting a dominant vision of journalism, (b) rely on ideal-typical definitions of journalism, and (c) present a version of the field that leaves little room for interloping actors who self-identify as journalists?. In this sense, the performance of journalistic boundaries is made clear through the opinionated tone of columns adopting forceful language of belonging and non-belonging and the discussion of journalism and media is drawn

immediately to the readers' attention through headlines or dedicated spaces (Eldridge 2014: 2).

As "the outward-facing expression of journalistic identity" (Eldridge 2014: 3), such overt boundary maintenance is understood from the work of Ron Bishop (1999), who explores boundaries maintained between 'good' and 'bad' journalism and presented in ways "meant to be seen" (ibid. 91). Bishop describes discourses that cordon off the tarnished reputation of tabloid journalists, insulating elite newspapers from the popular press as it struggled to distinguish its work from paparazzi after the death of Princess Diana. This presents "an inwardly focused self-policing of the profession of journalism by associated in-group members" (Eldridge 2014: 2). While this creates difference, it still recognizes that both good and bad journalists are "participating in the same game" (Bourdieu 2005: 36) and shore up the boundaries of journalism by creating a hierarchy of 'good' and 'bad' journalism or ostracizing the 'bad apples' (Cecil 2002) who have failed to live up to journalistic ideals. By and large this 'maintains' standing amongst familiar journalistic forms and actors, even if the 'self-policing' seems overwrought and ineffective (Bishop 2004).

At the second level of distinction, I argue that covert discourses of journalistic belonging and non-belonging perform under-analyzed but critical boundary work in the journalistic field's efforts towards "reinforcing the power and primacy of journalism's self-declared societal role" (Eldridge 2014: 6). Interwoven in news texts that are not otherwise sign-posted as discussions of journalism, such boundaries define legitimacy by describing journalists through a "familiar lexicon of belonging" (ibid: 8), reflective of the field's specific doxa (Bourdieu 2005: 37). Conversely, these discourses project a non-journalistic identity on interlopers. Covert discourses offer more nuanced forms of marginalization, describing emerging media work as emotive, rumor-laden, and approached with an activist's edge to further separate the journalistic field from interlopers.

At both levels, distinction is developed not only through explicitly juxtaposing competing claims of belonging or evaluating interlopers' performance of journalistic

work, but rather through a mixture of discourses that amplify the journalistic work of traditional members of the journalistic field alongside the absence of such descriptors for digital interlopers (Eldridge 2014: 14). Examples of this 'contrast through absence' can be found in descriptions of digital journalists' as engaged in out-group activities, such as hacking. Digital journalists are also framed as less-than-serious in their treatment of information, describing the content of blogs as "cyberwhispers" (Rutenberg 2008), contrasting the paradigm of facticity at the core of journalistic work (Conboy 2013: 2). Emphasizing journalism-as-labor, publications by WikiLeaks are only viewed as journalistic when exposed to journalistic routines by traditional members of the field: "The field reports chime with allegations made by *New York Times* writer Peter Maass, who was in Samarra at the time" (Leigh and O'Kane 2010). This poses a 'normalization problem', where journalistic contributions of these new actors and digital forms are only considered valid when enveloped by traditional members of the field. Providing further narratives of journalism-as-labor (Örnebring 2010), the time-intensive "combing through" (Leigh 2010) and "sifting" (*Guardian* 2010) of digital material distinguishes traditional routines of cultural production by 'legitimate' members of the journalistic field from interlopers like Assange, who "dumps 92,000 new primary source documents into the laps of the world's public with no context" (Exum 210).

Pre-dating WikiLeaks and Assange, similar dynamics could be found in the treatment of independent news bloggers, described as frenzied and reactive: "the blogosphere at full tilt" (Seelye 2008). Operating against the guiding paradigms of the journalistic field of objectivity and veracity, the 'blogosphere' is a place where truth and facticity are less important and often rumor-focused: "whether the story is true is still unknown, but it didn't take long for the right-wing blogosphere to embrace it" (Parker 2008). Such descriptions of what I describe as interlopers in my work, are threaded through news coverage going back to the early twenty-first century, distancing new actors from traditional journalists (Eldridge 2013, Singer 2003). As performances of journalistic identity and as reinforcements of the field's guiding doxa, these reify the field's boundaries along traditional measures that rebuff digital challenges.

Prominent performances of boundary building also emerge when traditional journalists amplify valorized ideals of the journalistic field. Such discourses draw on normative dimensions of the 'Fourth Estate' (Eldridge 2014: 12), even as these are often based more on idealization than realization (Hampton 2010). In these cases, news texts offer a vision of journalism as a force in society imbued with values of social responsibility, public interest, and a commitment to veracity alongside context. This came to the foreground in one of the more contentious aspects of the WikiLeaks collaboration with the *Guardian* and *New York Times*, as each claimed it was their initiative to redact personal identifiers in the published releases, and as such each sought to promote their own social responsibility and public interest ideals as responsible watchdogs (Eldridge 2014: 13). In other narratives, the role of journalists spirited away information on encrypted drives (Leigh and Harding 2011), with the interloper made passive as an intermediary or conduit (Davies et al. 2010); make active journalists seeking truth and information prominent while minimizing the agency of digital actors.

When news texts valorize the journalist in a laudable, almost heroic, manner, the journalistic field is also defined through an ideal-typical portrayal of the journalist. Whether foregrounding institutional expertise and reminders of journalism-as-labor (Conboy and Eldridge 2015, Eldridge 2013, 2014; Örnebring 2010), or emphasizing normative 'fourth estate' ideals (Hampton 2010), these discourses build boundaries by washing over interloper claims that their work is also responsible, publicly-interested, and contextualized (Benkler 2011: 322). These examples and previous work show that when distinguishing between a dominant vision of the journalistic field and interlopers, boundaries are built through one or both of two key dynamics to present a singular perspective of the journalist: the expression of a 'held' identity from the speaking journalists, and a 'projected' identity as non-journalists on interlopers (Eldridge 2014: 12). Unwilling to incorporate new approaches to fulfilling its journalistic roles, this reflects what Bourdieu describes as an inherent conservatism to a field's dominant vision, one that resists change and mutes discord in favor of "agreed upon complicities" (2005: 36).

As a result, journalistic boundaries are presented as an immovable construct. Consequently, for digital actors to challenge these boundaries is to swim against a rather forceful tide.

Digital dissonance

New and emerging digital journalists challenge us to conceptualize the journalistic field as vast, rather than finite, and define journalism beyond familiar and once distinct genres and forms (Eldridge 2015). This approach sees journalism as a diffuse set of media products from a wide range of social agents – including a wider range of journalists – now active in creating news products and journalistic content. Yochai Benkler (2011, 2013a) points to this as the product of a “networked fourth estate”, with myriad actors contributing to journalistic processes. His argument develops first as a defense of WikiLeaks’ work as journalistic and Julian Assange as a journalist, later in support of WikiLeaks’ source Chelsea Manning (Benkler 2013b). Benkler (2011) initially argues that a more networked fourth estate is a place where new actors can contribute to journalistic endeavors. Moreover, he denounces “more established outlets’ efforts to denigrate the journalistic identity of the new kids on the block to preserve their own identity” (2011: 315).

Benkler’s thesis – that the field of journalism is expanding in a digital era – challenges the normative insularity of journalism’s and the field’s self-defined boundaries described above. Through invoking a similarly persistent array of ideals, standards, and criteria of belonging, Benkler argues new actors operating within this digital space make it clear that continuing to view journalism narrowly ignores certain digital realities. He also identifies a key characteristic of these new digital actors, arguing they can simultaneously hold a journalistic identity alongside activist, movement building, or otherwise alternative identities (Benkler 2013b).

However, while Benkler sees these within a networked Fourth Estate, the idea of new actors holding variable identities where only one is ‘journalistic’ rankles traditional journalists. Notably, journalists I have interviewed for previous studies,

when asked about such variable identities, describe this as ‘spear-carrying’ and incompatible with journalistic identities. Journalists expressly differentiate between technical and more ‘everyday’ definitions of journalism, and while praising the activism of interlopers, see digital work as worthy of protection but not of being ordained journalism. Others argue that if Assange (in this case) was a journalist he wouldn’t have fallen out with the rest of the field’s members, describing a sense of belonging to an in-group and playing ‘the same game’ as other journalists (Bourdieu 2005: 44), reinforcing Donsbach’s (2010) reflection that journalism seems to be something we define as such if and when society is broadly familiar with its actors and products.

While Benkler’s argument drives a progressive wedge through narrow definitions of journalism, it risks under-appreciating digital journalists struggling to have their work considered journalism in its own right. The extent to which there is an acceptance of interlopers’ journalistic contribution is often limited to supporting roles. WikiLeaks, for instance, is portrayed as innovative and revolutionary when it provides a new avenue for digital ‘sources’, so long as that information is then legitimated by other journalists with professional expertise (Eldridge 2013: 292; 2014: 11). While normalization of new media forms and journalists is not uncommon (Singer 2003, Lasorsa et al 2012), in terms of power and authority their journalistic contribution is marginalized when emerging from outside the traditional boundaries of the field (Eldridge 2013). Joining blogs as new journalistic possibilities, the normalization of social media has also been widespread (see Paulussen et al, this volume), as has the adoption of PGP keys and ‘secure drop’ software that give news organizations new ways to wrap the previously distinct online whistleblowing offering of WikiLeaks into their routine practices. As one journalist told me in an interview, “the genius of Julian Assange is he’s provided a template that can be imitated by others and that other people can copy, perhaps not with his flair for self publicity.”

It is in this last phrase, where the critical distinction between acceptance of interlopers through normalization and valuing these actors as journalists on their own, where problems emerge. Suggestions that interlopers need first to conform to

recognizable features of the field suggest that new actors and digital functions are still viewed as 'lesser-than', as subaltern voices. Glenn Greenwald was a prominent object of this view, when his reporting on Edward Snowden in *the Guardian* was portrayed as 'lesser-than' when he was dismissed as an activist and potentially criminal by David Gregory, the host of NBC's 'Meet the Press', and as a 'blogger' in the *New York Times* (Sullivan 2013).

To return to Benkler (2011, 2013), while progressive in arguing traditional members of the field are too sensitive concerning their established order, describing interlopers as journalistic rather than journalists presents a twin risk when digital journalists are valued solely in a role of support. This materializes in the difference between labeling something as 'journalism', versus 'journalistic', where the former is a member of the field in its own right, and the latter might be a 'source' or conduit or a technological hub for whistleblowers (all descriptions ascribed to WikiLeaks). In other words, new digital journalists that challenge the ways we approach and understand journalism in a digital age should not only gain credibility when brought into the journalistic fold or placed in service to recognizable members of the journalistic field (Lasorsa et al 2012, Artwick 2013).

Conclusion: Challenging a fragile field

Under duress as new actors claiming journalistic identity, the dimensions of the journalistic field can be challenged in part because they rely on the acceptance of journalism as familiar and distinct (Bourdieu 2005). This distinction has become harder to maintain as barriers to publication, investigation, and reporting have been lowered online, and digital technologies continue to be embraced by even the most traditional of journalistic organizations.

When *New York Times* public editor Margaret Sullivan defends Greenwald as a "proud, rather than apologetic" blogger, she recognizes that even while she adopts the term for her own work from time to time, the use of 'blogger' is often a pejorative. Sullivan nodded to the superior air with which the label is applied to

marginalize new digital journalists, noting, “when the media establishment uses the term, it somehow seems to say, ‘You’re not quite one of us’.” (Sullivan 2013).

There is a great deal of analytical space in the phrase ‘not quite one of us’ and as this chapter has argued, this distinction becomes a de facto definer of the dimensions of the journalistic field. This privileges an ideal-typical understanding of journalists that disadvantages digital actors for their new-ness, dismissing alternative actors as ‘lesser-than’ members of the journalistic field. Increasingly, however, the journalistic field is a difficult space to define. Even for traditional members of the field, digital change has woven into the practices and production of journalism; the field’s cultural products – news – include a wider tapestry of media forms and the field producing this work is equally varied. Bourdieu writes of the journalistic field agreeing to its boundaries in part because of agreed-upon complicities that “smooth over” difference, and yet internally and externally that difference is increasingly difficult to ignore.

As more and more digital journalists take unfamiliar approaches to journalism while aligning their work with the traditional milieus of the journalistic field (Hanitzsch 2011), they continue to introduce diversity into the journalistic field. What remains unclear is whether we will continue to find examples where they are dismissed for being too amateur (Singer 2005), too colloquial (Eldridge 2013), too anti-establishment (Eldridge 2014), or simply too disruptive to be seen as peers; whether the tensions around what defines journalism will remain, or whether interlopers will be seen as journalists and no longer seen as parasitic “fleas on the dog” (Carr 2008) living off traditional media.

Further reading

For more on journalism and its boundaries, Matt Carlson and Seth Lewis’ edited collection *Boundaries of Journalism* (2015) offers a wide-ranging discussion of the lines between and around journalism. For more on the journalistic field, including Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of the journalistic field, see Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu’s *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (2005). Benedetta Brevini, Arne Hintz, and Patrick McCurdy’s edited volume *Beyond WikiLeaks* (2013) offers a comprehensive collection of academic and journalistic views on the WikiLeaks’ challenge to journalism’s status quo.

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