The Rise of Brand Journalism: Understanding the Discursive Dimensions of Collectivity in the Age of Convergence

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Abstract
How does today’s convergence culture affect the communities that evolve in its wake when the hybridization of formerly distinct cultural forms, practices and professions is not only possible but actively promoted by various individuals, organizations and institutions? This dissertation answers this question through a study of one particular form of emergent collectivity – that uniting journalism and public relations under the label of “brand journalism.” It examines how this hybridization practice occurs, what it suggests about the existing communities of cultural producers, and how it changes the established power relations between different groups. It explains the processes through which a hybrid “interpretive community”--brand journalism--comes into existence, establishes its identity and authority as a collective, challenging the boundaries between existing communities.

In particular, this dissertation studies the tensions over cultural authority, identity and discursive power that play into the rise of hybrid cultural practices by examining three sets of discursive qualities of the brand journalism community: 1) articulated vs. unarticulated; 2) intrinsic vs. extrinsic; and 3) indicative vs. subjunctive. The tension between articulated and unarticulated voices suggests that there exist unequal power relations within and among interpretive communities. The tension between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses illustrates how the boundaries of a community are permeable, sometimes offering membership to “others.” The tension between subjunctive and indicative discourses in the community shows how the boundaries of interpretive communities are discursively imagined and maintained to decrease the gap between collective vision and practice. Contrary to Fish (1980)’s theory on interpretive communities, this dissertation suggests that collectivity in a community is not merely about consensus or agreement. Instead, it is an ongoing process that often creates discord and mobility. In addition, the discursive shape of interpretive communities is more dynamic, unstable and complex than existing theories on interpretive communities suggest. The dichotomies between us and them, inclusion and exclusion, permissible and impermissible, and central and marginal are neither stark nor clear-cut as scholars have argued.

Borrowing, tweaking and reinterpreting journalistic discourse, brand journalism also poses a critical question to journalism scholars: What is journalism when “the classical modes of journalism production and dissemination” are radically changing and corporate brands are increasingly becoming a part of the news ecosystem? This dissertation suggests that brand journalism emblematized one response to the challenges, confrontations and tensions that journalism has to face in the changing information environment.

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THE RISE OF BRAND JOURNALISM: UNDERSTANDING THE DISCURSIVE DIMENSIONS OF COLLECTIVITY IN THE AGE OF CONVERGENCE

Kyung Lee
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Joseph Turow, Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Communication
To my mother
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This dissertation has started with my interests in the intersection between old and new forms of journalism. I wanted to explore the changing boundaries of journalism and the meaning of journalistic authority in today’s media environment. However, I did not know how the project would evolve along the way. The rather vague ideas I initially had were elaborated, expanded and turned into an exploratory project.

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ABSTRACT

THE RISE OF BRAND JOURNALISM: UNDERSTANDING THE DISCURSIVE DIMENSIONS OF COLLECTIVITY IN THE AGE OF CONVERGENCE

Kyung Lee

Barbie Zelizer

How does today’s convergence culture affect the communities that evolve in its wake when the hybridization of formerly distinct cultural forms, practices and professions is not only possible but actively promoted by various individuals, organizations and institutions? This dissertation answers this question through a study of one particular form of emergent collectivity – that uniting journalism and public relations under the label of “brand journalism.” It examines how this hybridization practice occurs, what it suggests about the existing communities of cultural producers, and how it changes the established power relations between different groups. It explains the processes through which a hybrid “interpretive community”—brand journalism—comes into existence, establishes its identity and authority as a collective, challenging the boundaries between existing communities.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have displayed a series of changes in the structure of information and the communication environment. The paradigm of ‘mass’ communication that was dominant for much of the 20th century has been challenged and transformed with the rise of newer forms of media and information technologies. In this rapidly changing communication environment, the once-rigid boundaries between different cultural practices and forms and between cultural producers and consumers are increasingly blurring. Aptly named “convergence culture,” today’s communication environment is characterized by “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experience they want” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2). As “a cultural logic of its own” (Deuze, 2007a, p. 103), convergence has been understood “as a description of new synergy…among media companies and industries, as the multiplication of ‘platforms’ for news and information, as a technological hybridity that has folded the uses of separate media into one another…and as a new media aesthetic involving the mixing of documentary and non-documentary forms” (Hay & Couldry, 2011, p. 473).

What role does convergence play on the communities that evolve in its wake? This dissertation examines the effect of convergence culture on one particular form of emergent collectivity – that uniting journalism and public relations under the label of “brand journalism.” As scholars (Jenkins, 2006, Hay & Couldry, 2011, Lewis, 2012) argue, convergence is not just about a technological shift. Rather, it changes “the
relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 15). Because it constitutes a structural shift in the cultural landscape, changing the way culture is produced, disseminated and consumed, it is important to understand how it alters the ways in which different groups on its landscape operate and interact with one other. Under the logic of convergence culture, the hybridization of formerly distinct cultural forms, practices and professions is not only possible but actively promoted and appropriated by various individuals, organizations and institutions with different communication agendas and purposes (Erjavec, 2004; Chadwick, 2013), reconfiguring cross-media production, hybrid forms of communication and audience engagement in cultural production, and the conventional boundaries of professional, quasi-professional and newly emerging professional communities within the creative industries (Deuze, 2007a, 2007b, Garcia-Aviles, Kaltenbrunner, & Meier, 2014).

The convergence of formerly distinct groups and practices does not occur without tensions, contests and conflicts. For example, the increasing participation of audiences in the production of culture on new media platforms is forcing traditional cultural producers like journalists to both embrace these changes (Deuze, 2006; Singer, 2004; Wallace, 2013) and distinguish their practices from nontraditional players so as to reestablish their own cultural authority and standards (Carlson, 2007; Singer, 2006; Singer & Ashman, 2009). Consequently, the competing conventions, norms and beliefs of various groups need to be continually renegotiated, not always easily (Deuze, 2007b; Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Thus, the economic, technological and cultural shifts of today’s information environment provide a fertile setting in which to learn about the tensions and contests over cultural authority, identity and discursive power that play into the rise of hybrid
cultural practices between traditionally distinct cultural producers. The two entities at the heart of brand journalism -- journalism and public relations-- constitute two rich examples in this regard. Both journalists and PR practitioners have developed their own professional status, knowledge and conventions. In this sense, they can be understood what Howard Becker (1982) called “integrated professionals.”

According to Becker (1982), integrated professionals collectively develop shared sets of conventions, form and contest collective identities, and continuously shape and reshape the boundaries of legitimate practice. In his discussion of artists as integrated professionals, Becker argues, “Whenever an art world exists, it defines the boundaries of acceptable art, recognizing those who produce the work it can assimilate as artists entitled to full membership, and denying membership and its benefits to those whose work it cannot assimilate” (p. 226). Becker also suggests that all organized art worlds produce mavericks, “artists who have been part of the conventional art world of their time, place, and medium but found it unacceptably constraining” (p. 233). In this sense, integrated professionals can be understood as “a community without physical locus” based on shared beliefs about what is acceptable within the community (Goode, 1957, p. 194). Thus, the demarcation of acceptable members and practices from “mavericks,” or what Gieryn (1983) called “boundary work,” is critical to the identity and cultural authority of integrated professionals. As Becker (1982) suggests, artists as a group collectively decide “what is and isn’t art, what is and isn’t their kind of art, and who is and isn’t an artist” (p. 36). Despite this deliberate boundary work, however, “art worlds typically have intimate and extensive relations with the worlds from which they try to distinguish themselves” (Becker, 1982, p. 36). Thus, the line between what is legitimate and what is not is often
ambiguous and boundary work always involves power struggles and tensions between varying groups.

Groups that are bounded by shared norms and practices have been variantly conceptualized in the academy as “interpretive communities,” (Fish, 1980) “speech communities,” (Hymes, 1967) “discourse communities” (Bizell, 1992) and “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998). Although the focus of each approach differs, the common argument is that members of such communities share “rules for the conduct” (Hymes, 1967, p. 54) or what literary critic Stanley Fish (1980) called “interpretive strategies” (p. 171). To put it simply, an interpretive community “is a collectivity of people who share strategies for interpreting, using, and engaging in communication” (Lindlof, 2002, p. 64). Members of an interpretive community establish tacit conventions and common frames “of reference for interpreting their social settings” (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999), or “shared paradigms that name and characterize problems and procedures in ways that are recognized by the collective” (Zelizer, 2009, p. 30). These shared paradigms serve as a source of collective identity, values and discursive authority of community members to determine and maintain the boundaries of their community, often marginalizing conventions and practices at the periphery (Gallagher, 1982; Kent, 1982; Meese, 1986; Pratt, 1987).

This dissertation addresses how the increasing convergence of cultural practices is affecting the emergence of new interpretive communities and strategies – seen here in the melding of journalism and public relations -- and the way in which new communities challenge the power relations of existing communities and conventions. As the hybridization of different cultural practices and producers is increasingly prevalent, it is
important to understand how this practice occurs, what it suggests about the existing communities of cultural producers, and how it changes the established power relations between different groups. Thus, this dissertation explains the processes through which a hybrid interpretive community – brand journalism -- comes into existence and establishes its identity and authority as a collective.

**Interpretive communities, tensions over power and discourse**

The concept of the interpretive community has long presupposed a communal consensus and collectivity among those who inhabit it. Because interpretive communities are formed and maintained via an agreement about what is normative -- that “would be seen as strange (if it could be seen at all) by the members of another” (Fish, 1980, p. 15-6) -- they always involve the work of boundary-making/maintenance and inclusion/exclusion that settles and resettles questions of value within each community. Fish argues that this boundary work keeps interpretive communities relatively stable and that no hierarchy exists among communities with different conventions. In his view, “there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only ‘ways of reading’ that are extensions of community perspectives” (p. 16). Thus, in his conceptualization of interpretive communities, Fish proffers equality: “literature is an open system, admitting any text (within reason); variations in interpretation are permitted (within reason); and persuasion is the means by which critics establish consensus” (Meese, 1986, p. 16).

However, as feminist literary critic Mary Louise Pratt (1987) argues, the presumed consensus on who the members of an interpretive community are and what constitutes interpretive strategies is often made in contradiction with and tension between
those who have central access and those on its margins. In this sense, the issue of power is key to the discussion of how communities work, change and evolve. In line with this argument, many feminist literary scholars criticize the concept of the interpretive community for insufficiently addressing the question of (asymmetrical) power relations within and among communities (see Gallagher, 1982; Kent, 1992; Meese, 1986; Mortensen & Kirsch, 1993; Pratt, 1982). According to these critics, the “interpretive community is often the site of repression, subversion, marginalization and suicide” (Bauer, 1988, p. xiv), as much as--or even more than-- it is the terrain of communal discourse and agreement. Within interpretive communities, as Dale Bauer (1988) argues, there always exists “the tension between the marginal and the central, the eccentric and the phallocentric” (p. xiii). Because the concept of communities depends on consensus to establish legitimacy and identity, strategically overlooking internal tensions and contradictions, it fails to “recognize the existence of multiple, overlapping groups” in the community (Rendali, 1982, p. 54; see also Bartholomae, 1985; Harindranath, 2009; Showalter, 1981). As Elizabeth Meese (1986) suggests in her provocative Crossing the Double-Cross:

Interpretive communities, like tribal communities, possess the power to ostracize or to embrace, to restrict or to extend membership and participation and to impose norms-- hence their authority. The system is mutually reinforcing, designed and chosen to mirror a structure of power relationships inextricably bounded up with knowledge (p. 9).

Scholars also critique Fish’s conceptualization of separate but equal communities with their own conventions and well-kept boundaries. Arguing that power hierarchies exist among different groups, they maintain that they are often in conflict over discursive power and authority. In his “Conventional conflicts,” Hayden White (1981) argues,
Any appeal to the ‘interpretive community’ must fail for the most fundamental reason that there is no such thing as the interpretive community but rather a hierarchy of such communities, each with its own conventions and all more or less antagonistic to the rest (p. 155, my emphasis).

In other words, several different codes and conventions are involved in the act of interpretation and they often generate “disputes over the proper hierarchy of codes” (Scholes, 1984, p. 178). Unlike Fish’s “monolithic” conceptualization of interpretive communities (Bauer, 1988; Chase, 1988; Graff, 1985), a community is thus seen as a site of multiple conventions, rules and what James Porter (1986) called, drawing on Foucault, “community epistemes,” struggling with each other for cultural authority and legitimacy.

One might argue that the very naming of an interpretive community itself stakes a claim to power. Because interpretive communities are in flux over competing codes, mores and voices, claiming a community is a strategic act that imposes a sense of consensus regardless of whether or not it actually exists. This supposed consensus over what constitutes the community and who its members are tends to normalize the “conceptual scheme” (Davidson, 1973) of those who are central to the system of power or cultural elites, marginalizing softer voices (Meese, 1986; White, 1981). This suggests that the concept of community may impose and reinforce communal conventions that organize experience, categorize practices, and constitute meaning and knowledge, stabilizing asymmetrical power relations between the central and the marginal (Kent, 1991). Establishing and maintaining “the legitimacy of a particular exercise of interpretive power” (White, 1981, p. 156, my emphasis) is essential to the interpretive community and community building. The interpretive community is thus a site of tension and struggle in which different groups vie for interpretive power and dominant groups articulate interpretations “intended to exclude, defuse, and/or co-opt counter
interpretations” (Fraser, 1989, p. 166). Thus, the naming of the interpretive community and its emphasis on consensus is fundamentally an articulation of power.

Another related criticism of Fish’s theorization of interpretive communities is that the concept legitimizes the status quo because it does not account for “how, when, why, [and] with what costs change occurs” (Reising, 1991, p. 71). While Fish admits that “the boundaries of the acceptable” within the community are “continually being redrawn” (Fish, 1980, p. 343), he has “a difficult time explaining how changes come about” (Gallagher, 1982, p. 43, my emphasis). As Pratt (1982) aptly points out in her series of questions:

If everyone experiences their worldview as satisfying and complete, what motivation would members of one community have for adopting the norms of another? And what motivation would members of another to change their mind? What would be at stake? Within a given interpretive community, what would produce change in the strategies at work, and how could such change take place without producing simply a split into two communities? And how could the common experience of simply not understanding something or not feeling qualified to judge be accounted for? (p. 226).

Thus, assuming a community based on established conventions and shared identities often fails to explain how different groups within and outside of a community struggle over authority and how, when and why changes in interpretive strategies take place. These questions are particularly relevant in today’s communication environment, where convergent boundaries of professional groups and hybrid forms of cultural practices are coming into existence (Erdal, 2011). The technological, economic and cultural transformations of today thus provide a new opportunity to think about the ways in which interpretive communities work and evolve.
As Gieryn (1983, 1999) notes in the context of scientific knowledge, an interpretive community and its dynamics with others are neither static nor unidimensional:

[T]he contents of these map of science become sociologically interesting precisely by their variability, changeability, inconsistency, and volatility-- from episode to episode of cultural cartography, few enduring or transcendent properties of science necessarily appear on any map (or in the same place). The contours of science are shaped instead by the local contingencies of the moment: the adversaries then and there, the stakes, the geographically challenged audiences (1999, p. 5, my emphasis).

In other words, an interpretive community is internally complicated. The cultural authority of a group is perpetually contested and thus only transitory. Unlike Fish’s claim, then, an interpretive community is permanently unsettled and invokes ongoing “boundary-work(s)” among different interpretive communities. While the multivocality is central to the inner workings of interpretive communities, not enough attention has been paid to the various discursive dimensions of interpretive communities. This is relevant, because they might provide a more productive glimpse of the often-overlooked dynamics between different and often competing voices within an interpretive community.

Many scholars (Becker, 1982; Gieryn, 1999; Lindlof, 2002; Zelizer, 1992) have argued that an interpretive community and its boundaries are discursively imagined. That is, the locus of cultural authority of an interpretive community is in the rhetorical construction and discursive control of the community as much as--or even more than-- in practices and organizations. As Lindlof (2002) notes, “[a]t its core, an interpretive community is comprised of sets of discursive strategies…that find their expression in tactical ‘readings’ (or rewritings of text) by socially situated individuals or groups” (p. 64). The tensions and struggles over power within the interpretive community are, thus,
also discursive in nature, helping to establish what are normative discursive practices of the community and what are not. In this sense, it is important to understand what constitutes the multiplicity of discourses in an interpretive community. Examining how the discourses interplay with each other can help capture the complex dynamics of power relations within the community.

Three sets of discursive attributes of an interpretive community appear to be relevant in this regard: 1) articulated vs. unarticulated; 2) intrinsic vs. extrinsic; and 3) indicative vs. subjunctive. Each offers a way to focus more productively on the discursive interplay relevant to community emergence and legitimation. Each also deepens the engagement with the concept of the interpretive community, by drawing upon its recent critiques and the underexamined traits they foreground: how the central and marginal discourses are (un)articulated; how internal and external voices interact to construct the discursive authority and boundaries of a community; and how changes take place in an interpretive community. These traits capture the internal tensions and struggles over discursive power and cultural authority within and among interpretive communities.

First, in an interpretive community, some voices are easily heard while others are muted or repressed. As the feminist critics of interpretive communities argue, readily articulated voices are often based on consensus of the group and thus have more discursive power. They often play by established norms, conventions and rules of the community. For this reason, they are central to the production of the community’s identity. On the other hand, what gets unarticulated is often the voices that go against or undermine the norms and codes of the community. It is often the language of the marginal and of the less powerful: “it refers to dissensus, to marginalized voices, the
resistance and contestation both within and outside the conversation, what Roland Barthes calls acratic discourse- the discourse out of power” (Trimbur, 1989, p. 608).

A second relevant discursive dimension of interpretive communities is its intrinsic/extrinsic quality. In an interpretive community, extrinsic voices sometimes can be co-opted as a way to build the cultural authority of the inside. That is, interpretive communities sometimes create an ambiguous space in which the discourse of outsiders (or others) becomes that of insiders. Voices that are extrinsic to the voices of the members can be invited to be inside, and this strategic partnership allows the boundaries between the inside and the outside of an interpretive community to be temporarily redrawn. According to Gieryn (1999), boundary work is a “strategic practical action” and the borders and territories of a community are discursively mapped out to “pursue immediate goals and interests of cultural cartographers, and to appeal to the goals and interests of audiences and stakeholders” (p. 23, my emphasis). Extrinsic discourses are also strategically borrowed to construct the narrative authority and legitimacy of the community. Because they are not spoken with the same norms, codes and conventions, extrinsic discourses sometimes open the door for intrinsic discourses to be rearticulated, revised and negotiated. However, they are not always threatening to intrinsic voices as feminist critics argue. Intrinsic and extrinsic discourses thus sometimes create a partnership and a hybrid space in which others’ voices become internal discourses of the community.

Finally, some discourses in interpretive communities are indicative while others subjunctive. Originally derived from linguistics, indicative discourses are based on facts, reality and “as is.” On the other hand, subjunctivity is defined “as the mood or voice of a
verb used to express condition, desire, opinion, hypothesis, or statement that are contrary to facts” and it “grammatically couches what is depicted in an interpretive scheme of ‘what could be’ rather than ‘what is’” (Zelizer, 2010, p. 14). Anthropologist Victor Turner (1980) explains the differences between the indicative and the subjunctive in the following statement:

The subjunctive, according to Webster's Dictionary, is always concerned with “wish, desire, possibility, or hypothesis”; it is a world of "as if," ranging from scientific hypothesis to festive fantasy. It is “if it were so,” not “it is so.” The indicative prevails in the world of what in the West we call "actual fact," though this definition can range from a close scientific inquiry into how a situation, event, or agent produces an effect or result to a layperson's description of the characteristics of ordinary good sense or sound practical judgment (p. 163).

In the context of the interpretive community, subjunctive discourses represent what the community aspires and envisions itself to be as opposed to what is there (the indicative).

These discursive qualities of an interpretive community can help demonstrate how the different practices, identities and voices that exist in a community are imagined in conjunction with each other. Thus, through discourse it is possible to explain the complex and somewhat unstable dynamics of power relations in the interpretive community to a greater degree than has been accomplished thus far.

**Brand journalism, or the strategic blending of journalism and public relations**

It is within this context that I turn to the convergence between journalism and public relations (henceforth, PR)\(^1\) in corporate and organizational communications. This

\(^1\) Although brand journalism has roots in other arenas of corporate communications like marketing, custom publishing and advertising (especially advertorials), in principle, the practice is more closely tied to public relations because its core activity involves the management of information and images of corporate organizations in relations to the public. In addition, brand journalism practitioners often cooperate with news
dissertation examines the rise of a hybrid community and the processes through which its emerging group of cultural producers has co-opted convergence logic by blurring boundaries, conventions and sources of authority. By taking the hybrid community of brand journalism as a strategic entry point, I scrutinize both the inner workings of interpretive communities and the changing cultural landscape in the new information environment, as seen in their discursive responses to change.

Brand journalism is well placed to facilitate an investigation of what makes a new interpretive community emerge, how the new community positions itself in and alongside existing communities, and how these changes reconfigure the boundaries of varying conventions, norms, identities and power relations of different communities. Labeled “brand journalism” by the corporate context, it rests on strategic communication practitioners—especially public relations practitioners (PRPs)—who produce and disseminate news-like messages, information and stories for various media outlets. Used by PRPs to increase visibility of their organizational presence and activities in response to the new communication opportunities in the online sphere, the organizational websites organizations and journalists, taking the traditional role of public relations professionals. While I note that marketing and advertising also claim their territories and legacies in brand journalism, I focus on PR for its historically close relationship with journalism and to investigate the changing dynamics between the two communities as the hybrid practices evolve.

2 Brand journalism sometimes overlaps with what marketers call “content marketing” in the corporate context. Although content marketing is used to refer to a broader phenomenon than brand journalism in the industry, I choose to use the term “brand journalism” because my dissertation deals with the organizational adoption of journalism for their content creation and curation activities and how it changes our understanding of journalism and the boundary between journalism and strategic communication in the contemporary information environment. Other terms that overlap with brand journalism are “branded content,” “sponsored content” and “native advertising,” which were included in the analysis. My use of the term “brand journalism” in this dissertation includes these relevant terms and categories of practices.
and blogs that they produce have become common ways to communicate with audiences and to engage the press. In recent years social media have gained importance as a means for organizations to communicate with stakeholders and the public. In addition, increasingly more news organizations, including traditional news publishers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as well as digital publishers, are adopting various forms of sponsored content, or what they call “native advertising.” As Pew’s Study on the State of News Media in 2014 notes, the partnership between public relations and news is becoming more pronounced now than ever before. As an illustration, in 2013, $1.5 billion was spent on branded content, increased by 39% compared to the previous year (Bradley, February 1, 2014).

In this light, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the largest community of PRPs in the nation, predicted that brand journalism would be one of the key trends in PR (PRSA, 2012). Widespread activities are reflecting this assumption: Global PR Summit in 2012 hosted a session on brand journalism entitled “Are PR people ready to become brand journalists?” and explored the possibility of brands thinking and acting like publishers. *PR Daily* plans a workshop for 2015 called “Brand journalism is the new PR,” urging PRPs to get ready for brand journalism that “combines real reporting and lively storytelling (that’s the journalism), with [their] organization’s experts and experiences (that’s the branding)”. And large-scale global PR firms like Edelman and JWT have started to offer brand journalism services to their corporate clients. All of this suggests that brand journalism--even when it is not labeled as such-- is becoming increasingly prevalent and popular in the landscape of corporate communications. And in so doing, it is increasingly blurring the boundaries with journalism.
Despite such claims and circulated discussions on brand journalism in the corporate communications industry, academics have not paid extensive attention to the actual prevalence of the practice, except for some recent publications on native advertising (Carlson, 2014; Couldry & Turow, 2014). Little attention has also been paid to the processes through which co-optation occurs and its possible effects on journalism and PR. In addition, while the group of corporate communication professionals is establishing the conventions of brand journalism, little research has been conducted to understand how they operate as producers of public discourse in the new media landscape. As a case study of hybrid cultural practices, brand journalism can thus serve not only to examine the emergence and development of a new interpretive community but also to clarify the processes by which a new community builds shared conventions, identities and cultural authority alongside the existing communities from which it borrows and how discursive tensions and power relations develop therein. While I focus on the discursive qualities of the brand journalism community, this research allows us to rethink how interpretive communities— including journalism broadly defined— operate via imagined and malleable boundaries between communities.

In this project, I define “brand journalism” as a broad set of practices and conventions that draw both from PR and journalism. It draws from PR in creating and managing desirable organizational identities and images for a strategic aim; it draws from journalism in the reporting, distribution, management and curation of information, news and stories about an organization and the relevant industry across various digital media formats and platforms. From the point of traditional journalism, as Bob Garfield of NPR suggests, the term “brand journalism” is simply an oxymoron: “Obviously, the nouns are
incompatible. Journalism is conducted at arm's length, and brands have grasping hands…

‘Brand Journalism’ is such an awful misnomer” (Garfield, March 21, 2011). Despite such criticism, journalistic skills and norms are becoming increasingly important to the generation and management of online contents for an organization as the importance of branded content on the internet is growing. As former technology journalist Kyle Monson notes in his interview with Advertising Week (Cosco, September 21, 2011), while brand journalism has been accused of being “the dark side” of journalism, it can be “a powerful combination of honesty, narrative, and audience participation.” Like traditional journalists, he continues, brand journalists “can create compelling content under extremely tight deadlines, and engage with communities in meaningful ways.”

The term “brand journalism” thus captures the tension regarding what constitutes journalism/PR, who journalists/PRPs are, and what distinguishes journalism from other forms of public communication like traditional PR in today’s converging information environment. As a practice that draws both from PR and journalism, brand journalism challenges the boundary between the two worlds. Brand journalism highlights that while the boundary and the discursive hierarchy between PR and journalism have long been deliberately placed and kept, professional identities, norms and cultural authority of each community are constructed often in conjunction and competition with each other. As the following chapters will demonstrate, brand journalism highlights the fluidity, ambiguity and changeability of the boundary of interpretive communities.

Brand journalism is exercised in various institutional and organizational contexts. First, brand journalism practitioners have already formed a group or a “community” on professional networking sites. For example, LinkedIn hosts a group called “brand
journalism” with more than 3,000 members as of 2015. By exchanging thoughts, opinions and experiences, the communities of brand journalism practitioners are collectively developing shared norms and conventions of the hybrid practices. As brand journalism includes wide-ranging activities, it can be practiced in various organizational contexts including brand journalism/content agencies, PR or marketing agencies, corporate brands’ in-house PR/marketing departments and news organizations. In some cases, brand journalism creates “walled-off” spaces. For instance, a corporate company’s in-house brand journalism team often works separately from the company’s PR or marketing department for its editorial freedom (e.g. Intel’s Free Press). In addition, when brand journalism content is produced in news organizations, the (physical) separation between the branded content and editorial staff is apparent. In fact, branded content teams in news publishers are often located on different floors (e.g. The New York Time’s T Brand Studio).

While the line between journalism and PR has never been clear at the level of practice (Ewen, 1998; Llyod & Toogood, 2015; Salter, 2005), the two communities have been traditionally imagined by practitioners (especially by journalists) as distinctive from each other (Moloney, 2006; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). In particular, the boundary maintenance by which journalists keep themselves distinct from commercially oriented public communication, such as PR, has been central to the professional identity of journalists in Western society (Bourdieu, 2005; Schudson, 2005). It is a common sentiment among journalists that PRPs are “advocates, having hidden agendas, withholding information and compromising ethics” (Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 152), while journalists are committed to “undertake accuracy and fairness” and distinguish
between “conjecture and fact” (Salter, 2005, p. 98). Throughout the history of modern Western journalism, the professional identity of journalists and journalism’s longstanding commitment to “facts, truths, and reality” (Zelizer, 2004b) have been defined and maintained by journalistic communities which distinguish themselves from practitioners of other types of public communication (Berkowitz, 2000; Bishop, 1999; Winch, 1997).

Journalists have considered PR not only as distinct from journalism but as a somewhat inferior form of public communication (DeLorm & Fedler, 2003). According to Stegall and Sanders (1986), “journalists relegate [PR] practitioners to a lower status not only because of perceived poorer job performance and lower ethical conduct, but also because they perceive practitioners to have less honorable intentions” (p. 347). In a similar vein, Moloney (2006) argues, “Journalists professionally do not like PR people because they see them as a block, a barrier to facts, figures and people to which the media want access for a ‘good’ story” (p. 24). For this reason, journalism scholars and practitioners boldly argue that “public relations may benefit from journalism but journalism does not benefit from public relations” (Salter, 2005, p. 105). In this sense, journalism’s commitment to democracy and public affairs and the cultural elitism invoked by journalists has put journalism on a higher moral ground by which they boast a different cultural status than that associated with PR and other forms of public communication (Salter, 2005).

On the other side of the divide, PR practitioners contend that “journalists continuously bad mouth them out of spite, fear or envy, and that they are the prime builders of their low reputation” (Moloney, 2006, p. 25). For instance, in her textual analysis of news articles about public relations, Julie Henderson (1998) found that a
The majority of the articles discussing public relations were in negative contexts such as a corrupter of the channels of communication and the democratic process. Thus, although PRPs are found to be less antagonistic toward journalists than journalists are toward PRPs (Neijens & Smit, 2006), they share the sentiment that journalists tend to seek negative information about organizations from them and pay little attention to the constructive information that PRPs offer (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994). Unlike journalists’ claim about PR’s alleged ethical compromise, withholding information and hidden agendas, PR professionals have understood their social role as similar to that of journalists in that they provide useful information to the public (Belz, Talbott, & Stark, 1984). PR scholars and practitioners have also developed normative models of PR, establishing what PR should be about, who PR professionals are and where the discursive authority of PR comes from (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992). Despite the criticism that these normative models of PR have been used “as an apologia or legitimation for the (mal)practice of public relations” (Dinan & Miller, 2009, p. 258), they suggest that PRPs as a community have continuously attempted to develop a consensual understanding of what PR is and should be.

The supposed demarcation between journalism and PR in terms of discursive authority and societal role resembles the longstanding debate between high and low culture in cultural studies. Like “high” culture, (good) journalism in a traditional sense is often regarded as a narrow set of practices performed by a small group of knowledgeable cultural elites to produce and contribute to social/public goods (Dahlgren, 1992; Spark & Tulloch, 1999). On the other hand, PR, positioned at a lower cultural ground than journalism, has often been debased by journalists as producing, to extend Dwight
MacDonald’s famous phrase, “a culture fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen” (Macdonald, 1957, p. 60) to promote organizational interests. Regardless of the validity of this claim, this deliberate separation between journalism and PR and other types of commercial communication activities has been crucial to the normative conceptualization of what journalism should (not) be and who journalists are (not). In other words, a cultural hierarchy between journalism and PR has been constructed and maintained by journalists as their source of collective identity and authority, which reflects the criticisms of interpretive communities on the presumed equality of different sub-communities.

Brand journalism is a strategic attempt to break down the collectively constructed and energetically maintained boundary between journalism and PR. Brand journalism represents the claimed ideals of PR that its practitioners as a community have promoted: providing information to the public to facilitate an understanding about an organization and creating meaningful interactions between organizations and their stakeholders in an “invisible” fashion (Ewen, 1998; Pieczka, 2002).

On the other hand, the hybridization of journalism and PR is often considered as anti-journalism in the sense that it abuses the conventions of journalism for particular interests instead of public ones. It highlights the rather uncomfortable fact for journalists that there can exist gradations of differences and a gray area of hybrids between the two communities. To borrow from Macdonald again (1960/2011), brand journalism in the eyes of journalists constitutes a hybrid of journalism (high) and PR (low), and it could thus be understood as what he disparagingly calls “midcult,” which “pretends to respect the standards of high culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them” (p.
An examination of brand journalism raises issues regarding how this emerging community on the edges of journalism may challenge and appropriate the presumed authority of journalists as cultural elites and legitimate storytellers of public events that have been core to the identity of journalistic community (Zelizer, 1992). As a “midcult” phenomenon, brand journalism thus provides a useful case study to examine how the journalistic community discursively operates, changes and evolves in the flux of hybrid cultural forms that pose questions about who has the power to determine what can be said in what ways and who should be in/excluded in the community (Kolodny, 1980). Brand journalism serves as an ideal site to empirically examine whether the criticisms of the interpretive community, regarding its presumed univocality, asymmetrical power relations and cultural elitism, hold up and to investigate the discursive process through which a new community is constructed, breaking from existing conventions.

More broadly, by closely examining the phenomenon of brand journalism, this dissertation navigates and identifies the underlying logic of convergence and the hybridization of various cultural forms, practices and communities, which have become governing principles of cultural production in the contemporary information environment. As a hybrid form of communication, brand journalism can point to the way in which this convergence logic blurs the “line between public and private, or inside and outside” (Chouliaraki & Morsing, 2010, p. 14) and how the logic can serve “as a mechanism to increase revenue and further the agenda of industry” (Deuze, 2007a, p. 247). In relation to that, the blurring boundaries between traditionally distinct communities as seen in brand journalism may also change public expectations of one or the other. Journalism is often perceived as a public service critical to democracy, citizenship and community
(Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991; Hartley, 1996; McNair, 2000). As Schudson (1982) argues, news is *public* knowledge and “constructs a symbolic world that has a kind of priority, a certification of legitimate importance” (p. 33). Similarly, Deuze (2007b) argues that modern journalism “has constantly defined and legitimized itself as such [as a public service agent], claiming to adhere to a social responsibility of public service regarding the democratic state” (p.142).

The increasing appropriation of journalism by strategic communication practitioners and the prevalence of covert promotional messages in the form of news, however, may change public expectation about what defines journalism and PR and how they are different, especially when (traditional) news is becoming more commercialized (Cranberg, Bezanson, & Soloski, 2001; McChesney, 1999; Hamilton, 2004) and PR is strategically adopting conventions of journalism and working with news publishers (Bull, 2013; DVorkin, 2012; Llyod & Toogood, 2015). In this sense, brand journalism can potentially alter the ways in which audiences perceive and consume ‘public’ knowledge and how they distinguish the boundaries between public and private interests in information.

**The evolution of brand journalism**

While “brand journalism” is a recently coined term, journalism has long served as a model for corporate communications. Corporate companies have long published newsletters, corporate magazines and public reports for their employees, stakeholders and customers, situating brand journalism’s precursors among the practices associated through employee publications, custom publishing and advertorials.
One of the oldest forms of corporate publications is employee publications. Employee publications here are defined as periodicals—such as “house magazines” or “employee newsletters”—produced in-house primarily for employees. Already by the mid 1980s, one survey reported that 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies produced employee publications and their combined circulation far exceeded that of all daily newspapers in the U.S. (Johansen, 1995). As Clampitt et al. argue (1986), corporate magazines “have apparently become a natural part of the modern organizational landscape” (p.5). Older forms of employee publications trace back to “the late 1800s and early 1900s when virtually all of these periodicals were produced in-house” (Riley 1992, p. ix). Some of the oldest examples of such publications include Protection by the Travelers’ Insurance Company which dates back to 1865, The Locomotive by the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company which was first published in 1867 and The Furrow by Deere & Co which was founded in 1895 (Riley, 1992).

While these magazines started out as employee or “house” magazines, some of them increased their circulations to attract external audiences, including stakeholders, industry leaders, schools and members of Congress. For this reason, employee publications have provided not only “a way to communicate management’s philosophy to its growing workforce” but also “a means for management to defend corporate philosophies and labor practices to both employees and the general public” (Patmore & Rees, 2008). One example is Colorado Fuel and Iron (CFI) company’s magazines, Industrial bulletin and the Blast, between 1915 and 1942. These periodicals served as “a vehicle for advertising the company’s liberal welfare capitalist policies, especially its world-famous Employee Representation Plan (ERP) that came to be named after primary
stockholder John D. Rockefeller, Jr.” (Patmore & Rees, 2008, p. 257). Another example is the Ford automobile company’s The Ford Times (1908-1917 & 1943-1993). According to Swenson (2012), the corporate magazine “constructed community, reinforced certain ways of thinking, worked as a branding tool, and offered content that far surpasses product features” (p. 4). As Johansen (2001) argues, with employee publications, companies attempt to secure “substantial unity of ideals and agreement on basic policies and plans of actions’ among an ‘army of employees’” (102). In the sense that corporate brands manage their public images and reinforce particular point of views via content, employee publications share similarities with brand journalism.

Another precursor of brand journalism is custom publishing. These publications are “produced by a contract publisher for a third party, such as corporate clients or other organizations who have a core customer base” (Dyson, 2007, p. 636). Usually created by agencies and professionals outside the company who have expertise in creating content, custom publishing is a “form of media production that explicitly use the power of editorial to achieve the brand management objectives of clients” (Dyson, 2007, p. 635). In 1999, The Content Council (formerly The Custom Publishing Council) was launched as a subdivision of the Magazine Publishing Association (MPA), and it defined custom publishing as that which “marries the marketing ambitions of a company with the information needs of its target audience... through the delivery of editorial content” (Pulizzi, December 20, 2010). As agencies expanded their realms from print magazines to online content, many of them rebranded and redefined their work as content marketing or brand journalism. That is, corporate companies have published corporate magazines and newsletters for employees and the general public either through in-house
professionals or through third-party agencies before “brand journalism.” Though these publications are produced extensively in corporate organizations and have historical and social significance, as Clampitt and his colleagues (1986) suggest, little research has been conducted on them. Most research have briefly examined them as “part of corporate welfare strategies” (Patmore & Rees, 2008) and others have been exploratory and descriptive, focusing on identifying general trends of corporate publications and how to improve their quality. While corporate publication producers have long existed in the information environment and created and managed public discourse about corporate practices, our understanding of their strategies and practices—let alone those of brand journalism practitioners—has been limited.

Finally, advertorials share some similarities with brand journalism. According to Cameron et al. (1996), advertorials are “blocks of paid-for, commercial message, featuring any object or objects (such as products, services, organizations, individuals, ideas, issues etc.) that stimulates the editorial content for a publication in terms of design/structure, visual/verbal content, and/or context in which it appears” (p. 722). As scholars argue, advertorials mimic journalistic conventions, styles and standards in order to achieve credibility by using third party endorsement: “With the appearance of ‘news,’ an advocacy message is legitimized by third-party credibility-the implicit approval of the media in which the information is presented” (Salmon, Reid, Pokrywczynsk, & Wilett, 1985, p. 553). That is, advertorials are “designed to blend with the newspapers’ overall content to increase their effectiveness as marketing vehicles” (Eckman & Lindlof, 2003, p 66). In this sense, the co-optation of editorial styles and journalistic conventions is not new to brand journalism.
The brand journalism of today shares many features with these precursors. However, brand journalism is notable for its scope, scale and context. Before the internet, corporate companies’ publishing activities focused mainly on print magazines which were published periodically for (potential) customers. In addition, while the increasingly blurred boundary between editorials and advertising in advertorials had been a concern for journalists and scholars, news publishers and journalists mostly stayed out of the production process of advertorials. But with the rise of the internet, social media and mobile media, corporate communication professionals now have far more platforms and outlets to create and distribute branded content than before. They can reach broader audiences and increasingly more companies are incorporating various forms of content strategies. For example, Austrian energy drink company Red Bull produces TV shows, magazines, books, music and movies and distribute their content not only on the Web but also in newsstands, theaters and TV (Benkoil, November 10, 2014). Felix Bumgartner’s record-breaking jump from outer space to Earth produced by the company’s Media House (RBMH) in 2012 attracted more than 9 million concurrent views on YouTube, which topped Obama’s inauguration in the same year in terms of traffic. RBMH explicitly labels itself as “a multi-platform media company with a focus on sports, culture, and lifestyle” (RBMH, n.d., my emphasis). Just like in Red Bull’s case, increasingly more companies are integrating features of media companies. According to Michael Brito, Director of Media and Engagement at W2O Group and the author of Your Brand: The Next Media Company, “[b]rands need to start thinking, acting and operating like a media company” to break through semiotic clutter (July 18, 2013). In this sense, the scope, scale and potential influence of branded content are expanding in today’s information
environment, posing questions about who has the authority to speak to the public, what constitutes news and how it is or should be different from other forms of discourses.

In addition, corporate companies are creating a partnership with news publishers. In brand journalism, news organizations and “serious” publishers are not bystanders anymore. They are often active participants in the process of creating and distributing branded content. (Former) journalists hired by news publishers as in-house writers help corporate brands produce stories that read and look like regular news articles. This can potentially challenge the traditional discursive structure between journalism and PR and the notion of journalistic autonomy. As Baker (2002) argues, “The boundary between acceptable advertising and corruption is subject to constant negotiation, with commercial pressures obviously pushing to expand the realm of the acceptable” (p. 54). Brand journalism is gradually expanding the acceptable realm of branded content alongside journalism and further challenges “core assumptions delimiting [journalism’s] scholarly terrain” and the idea of “news as distinct from other types of cultural outputs”(Carlson, 2014, p. 14). For this reason, the corporate brands-news publishers partnership serves as a site to reflect on the changing landscape of journalism, the meaning of news in conjunction with other forms of public discourses, and the relationship between journalism and corporate forces.

Brand journalism was developed within a specific set of cultural, institutional and technological contexts in which both journalism and commercial communication fields were undergoing changes in their forms and governing logic. In journalism, the structural changes in the production and consumption of news furthered by new technologies facilitated an appreciation for diverse forms of journalism that would have not been
considered as journalism in the past. A convergence between news producers and consumers and the rise of non-traditional models of news based on opinions and ideological biases prepared the way for hybrid forms of journalism or what Bob Garfield disparagingly called “semi-journalism.” In addition, the decline of financial resources in traditional journalism is offering a greater chance for PRPs to participate in and potentially influence the news making process (Cottle, 2003; Davis, 2000, 2002; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008).

On the other hand, in commercial communication, paradigmatic shifts in the logic of producing and disseminating promotional messages, characterized as the “fall of [mass] advertising” (Ries & Ries, 2002) and the growing interest in covert or stealth marketing (Ashley & Leonard, 2009; Goodman, 2006; Petty & Andrews, 2008; Serazio, 2013), contributed to the widespread adoption of brand journalism by various forms of organizations. In addition, the internet today provides organizations with a space to create their own media outlets and channels to directly communicate with their intended audiences. To sum up, brand journalism is a consequence of and response to two basic changes in the communication environment – changes in the field of journalism, which is embracing more diverse and hybrid forms of news than ever before, and changes in the field of commercial communications, where technological developments are allowing organizations more communication channels, spaces and means than ever before.

**Changes in the field of journalism**

I am concerned that if the direction of the news is all blogosphere, all opinions with no serious fact-checking, no serious attempts to put stories in context, that what you will end up getting is people shouting at each other across the void but
not a lot of mutual understanding (Barack Obama in 2009 as cited in McChesney & Nichols, 2010, p. ix).

Journalism in the U.S. has long been considered as a “sense-making practice of modernity” (Hartley, 1996, p. 31), committed to Enlightenment thinking and the ideals of liberal democracy (Dahlgren, 2009). Journalism’s commitment to truth-telling presupposes not only professional journalists as cultural elites to represent reality as it is but also the relative autonomy of journalism from other forces, including the state and commercial influences (Bourdieu, 2005; Schudson, 2005). According to this notion, journalism is a set of practices conducted by a closed group of professionals who share “key journalistic standards” associated with accuracy, balance and democratic accountability (Entman, 2005, p. 54). Even though in reality journalism has never fully performed this way, the normative model of how journalism should operate has shaped our understanding of it (Dahlgren, 1992, 2009).

This “professional and high modern journalism” (Deuze, 2006) based on the liberal democracy ideals, however, was a product of a particular historical context of the early twentieth century in the United States (Schudson, 1978). For more than two decades, scholars have claimed the decline of this model and the diversification of what we consider as journalism and news (Dahlgren, 2009; McNair, 2009). This phenomenon was impelled by the arrival of the internet and online news which challenged the conventions of traditional journalism and its business model (for example, see Allan, 2006; Deuze, 2003; Fenton, 2009; Philips & Witschge, 2011; Singer, 2007). In this changing environment, the boundaries of journalism become contested by various forces, including popular culture, citizen journalism, user-generated content and corporate communications, which leads to the rise of new (hybrid) genres that in many respects compete with
traditional journalism (Dahlgren, 2009). As a consequence, the very essence of journalism—the value, meaning and function of news—has been put into question (Lasica, 1997 O’Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008; Philips & Witschge, 2011).

While the traditional model of journalism has struggled for its viability in this tumultuous period, new models of news production and dissemination have emerged in the online environment. One such trend is participatory journalism, which incorporates citizen interactions, user-generated content and crowd-sourcing in the production of news (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Bardoel & Deuze, 2001; Gillmor, 2006). As an illustration, bloggers, freelance journalists and non-profit online journalism organizations are playing an increasingly important role in the creation and dissemination of information on the web and many of these “emerging journalism no longer strive to emulate traditional journalism as a way to validate their work” (Brennen, 2009, p. 301). In other words, as Hartley (2000) aptly points out, we have entered a “redactional society” where “everyone tells stories, where many if not most of these stories get distributed via the one billion or so users of internet, and thus where the storytelling of journalists is to a large extent limited to editing, annotating and packaging, rather than original writing” (Deuze, 2009, p. 86). In this environment where both individuals and organizations participate in the production of ‘news’ stories:

Who is and who is not a journalist in this context become increasingly fuzzy as a variety of information functions arise to sort, sift, and funnel data electronically in differing organizational and societal contexts. The boundaries between journalism and nonjournalism in cyberspace are become [sic] even more blurry than in the mass media (p. 173)… There is a massive civic information sharing going on in cyberspace that increasingly tends to bypass the classical modes of journalism production and dissemination. The hierarchical, top-down mass communication model of journalism is being challenged in this new media environment (p. 175).
The appropriation of journalism by corporate communication professionals for organized interests can be also understood as a tactic developed within this influx of the participatory journalism model. This is because this model has opened the door for the involvement of non-professional and non-traditional journalists in the practice of journalism, with new hybrid forms and genres of journalism coming into existence. This expansion of journalism, has not only attracted citizen participation in journalism but has allowed an integration of journalism with other practices, including PR, corporate planning and communications, activism and governmental practices (Hartley, 2000). In this environment, “an emerging stratum of professional communication mediators is altering the way journalism gets done…, further blurring the distinctions between journalism and nonjournalism,” opening up journalism for more varied forms of information producers and channels (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 49). In this sense, brand journalism can be contextualized in this emergence of more open, participatory models of journalism on the internet.

The hybridization of journalism does not entirely coincide with the development of the internet and emergence of citizen journalism. The authority of journalists as cultural elites and the conventional boundary of journalism were put into question long before the rise of participatory journalism. For example, the blending between “journalism” and “entertainment,” tabloidization of news, and their influence on public information, democracy and citizenship have been the interest of many scholars (Bird, 2009; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Langer, 1997; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011; Winch, 1997). As seen in these discussions, the presumed hierarchy of information and the arbitrary demarcation between news and entertainment
have been challenged with the rise of broadcast news and tabloid journalism, remapping the boundaries and social roles of journalism. That is, before brand journalism, an array of alternative and expanded forms of journalism had proliferated and competed with “traditional” journalism, changing “the conventional world of journalism in form and content” (Zelizer, 2000, p. x). In this sense, the phenomenon of brand journalism—which both co-opts and challenges the boundaries of journalism--can be understood in close relation to the increasing presence of such hybrid journalism practices.

The rise of a journalism of bias, opinion and affirmation has also led to the development of brand journalism and PRPs’ strategic redefinition of their work as “journalism.” While the history of a journalism of bias in the U.S. goes back to the partisan press of the 1800s (Schudson, 1978) and broadcast journalism with ideological biases (e.g. Fox News and MSNBC) has existed for more than two decades now, the internet has led to another historical peak in the growth of partisan news. This is partly because the internet has provided a space for many “news political interest groups,” including political think tanks, interest groups and activists to voice their perspectives and opinions (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). In addition, political blogs that are ideologically biased and opinionated are taking an increasingly important role in shaping and amplifying public opinion (Park, 2009; Wallsten, 2007). As Turner (2010) observes:

(T)he political blog is probably the pre-eminent location where opinion offers itself as information, where consumers’ comments constitute a substantial component of the format’s content and attraction, and where news is exploited as a means of generating the engagement that is fundamental to the format (p. 73, my emphasis).

Brand journalism is also in line with the rise of the journalism of bias and opinion, in that brand journalism uses news as a format for communicating organizational agendas
and identities, creating publicity for an organization, and attracting audience engagement. As the boundary of news expands to include opinion and bias as legitimate constituents of journalism, organizations have an increased opportunity to better position their PR activities, marketing strategies and commercial biases under the rubric of journalism.

Another critical factor contributing to the rise of brand journalism is the shaky economic status of traditional journalism in the changing information environment (Singer, 2010). In the abundance of news and information outlets on the internet, many traditional news outlets are now facing “the huge increase in competition, from other platforms…, rival organizations and an increasing number of new entrants attracted by low start-up costs” (Phillips & Witschge, 2011, p. 8). With this multiplication of news outlets, there may be a decreased chance for one news media outlet to attract mass viewers and amass advertising revenue (Hamilton, 2005). The readership of traditional newspapers has been declining over the past decade and much of the advertising revenue for the print news has migrated to the web (Curran, 2010; Dahlgren, 2009; Pew, 2014). For example, according to the recent Pew study, advertising revenue for newspapers declined by more than half in a decade (Pew, 2014). In this circumstance, it can be argued that there is no one news media outlet for advertisers and PRPs to target to reach the mass audience. As a consequence, marketers and PRPs started looking beyond advertising via the mainstream media and traditional PR activities targeting journalists. The phenomenon of brand journalism reflects this changing journalistic environment, in which audiences are fragmented due to an increase in the amount and diversity of content available on the internet and the traditional news media are increasingly losing old sources of advertising revenue.
Related to that, an increasing number of trained journalists are losing their job and at the same time, “the skills of remaining journalists have been stretched in unfamiliar directions to meet the expanding content requirements” (Singer, 2010, p. 92). With the emergence of multiple communication channels and media, newsrooms are increasingly experiencing technological, professional and cultural convergence (Bardoe & Deuze, 2001) and journalists are pressured to create quality news stories not only for the print edition but for various other online formats, such as news texts for the online edition, stream news in audio visual formats and journalist blogs (Franklin, 2010). Along with the 24/7 news cycle on the web, the increasing integration of multiple media formats by news organizations demands journalists to constantly create and curate stories in multiple modalities and to understand and to develop “a different, diverging journalistic news culture” (Deuze, 2003, p. 213).

As such, more pressure is placed upon journalists to adjust to the new information environment and to increase productivity, which in turn “have promoted desk-bound journalists to develop an increasing reliance on pre-packaged sources of news deriving from PR industry and news agencies” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 1). As Tilley and Hollings (2008) point out, journalists have long been concerned about the influence of PR as “information subsidy” (Gandy, 1982), or “the ways in which public relations material can shape the news agenda by providing easier access to content from particular sources” (p. 2; see also Davis, 2000; Lewis et al., 2008; Turow, 1989). However, because of the changing economic circumstances of traditional journalism and shifts in the information environment, the interplay between journalism and the PR industry is also changing in a way that potentially increases the influence of PR and pre-packaged information during
the production of news. According to Sallot and Johnson’s study (2006) with 418 journalists, journalists believe that about a half of all news stories in the U.S. are influenced by information provided by PRPs. Much further, as Waters and his colleagues argue (2010), journalists started to throw “their own needs at [PR] practitioners through social media outlets” instead of “passively receiving news releases and media kits from practitioners” (p. 260), which suggests potential changes in the traditional source-reporter relationship and the interplay between journalism and PR. The phenomenon of brand journalism can be also viewed in line with the increasing influence of the PR industry on news production and the changing roles and relationships of PRPs and journalists in the new media environment.

With such trends, the landscape of journalism is changing in a way that embraces a close partnership with corporate brands. The recent emergence of so-called “entrepreneurial journalism” is one such example. In this model, journalists work for less institutional start-up digital news publishers rather than more traditional, institutionalized news organizations and build their own readership. BuzzFeed, Gawker Media and Mashable are some of the successful online publishers based on this model. As an illustration, BuzzFeed brought in 170 staff in 2014, including top-notch journalists like the Pulitzer Prize winner Mark Schoofs. Likewise, Gawker hired 132 new staff in the same year, doubling its staff number from 2012 (Pew, 2014).

As the New York Times’ contributing writer Andrew Rice (May 12, 2010) notes, “[o]ne thing many of these new strategies have in common is a willingness to transgress time-honored barriers-- for instance, by blurring the division between reporting and advertising.” For instance, True/Slant, a digital start up launched in 2009 and then sold to
Forbes Media later, took “a novel approach to journalistic entrepreneurship, new forms of advertising, and an effort to blend journalism and social networking” (Mossberg, April 8, 2009). It allowed so-called experts to publish on the site and build their own brand. Then it evolved into a platform open to corporate contributors, which led to Forbes’ current brand journalism publishing model, “BrandVoice.” Lewis DVorkin, founder of True/Slant and chief product officer at Forbes, explains this process in the following statement:

Reporters and writers would build individual brands around their expertise — and they’d use our publishing tools to do it. The bigger their audience, the more they’d get paid. From inside that room came an equally disruptive idea. Marketers could pay to use our tools to create stories of their own. In a digital world, we said, “content is content.” It just had to be transparent and clearly labeled for all to understand. Our company was True/Slant. We called the ad product Ad/Slant (DVorkin, February 4, 2013).

That is, within the journalism community, there have been “disruptive” changes and transformations, which have paved a way for the increased partnership between news publishers and brands. As Edmond and Mitchell at Pew note, these collaborations are driven primarily by economics: “Precipitous advertising losses at newspapers and the deep newsroom cuts that followed kicked the partnership movement into gear” (December 4, 2014). With tumultuous financial conditions of the journalism industry, news providers are teaming up with corporate brands and blurring the boundary between journalism and public relations.

To sum up, brand journalism was developed in a particular social, historical, cultural, economic and technological context surrounding journalism. The phenomenon can thus be understood as a corporate co-optation of converging models of journalism in the changing media environment. At the same time, brand journalism may be interpreted
as an adaptive organizational strategy for generating publicity and effectively communicating with interested audiences beyond the traditional PR model that heavily depended on mainstream news coverage.

**Shifts in the paradigm of commercial communication strategies**

Brand journalism can likewise be understood in line with a series of changes in the strategic communication field, including the fall of traditional advertising, the rise of empowered consumers and the emergence of various non-traditional forms of commercial communication to target those consumers. While PR had existed long before these changes, its principle of indirectness, invisibility and covertness served as a cue for the recent development of brand journalism. Thus, how brand journalism emerged--or was rebranded--as a new PR technique drew from particular developments in this rapidly changing environment of commercial communication.

It has been almost two decades since scholars and marketing practitioners argued that the traditional model of “mass” advertising is no longer as effective as it once was (Rust & Oliver, 1994; Rust & Varki, 1996; Turow, 2006, 2011a). Raymond Williams (1980) already claimed in the beginning of the 1980s that “advertisements you booked and paid for were really old stuff” (p. 183). The decline of the mass advertising paradigm was accelerated by the arrival of new media in the 90s. According to Rust and Oliver (1994), the traditional mass advertising market is “in a state of siege, as billings shrink, layoffs abound, and accounts are lost to nontraditional players” (p. 71). This concern about the advertising industry is still ongoing as newer forms of information and
communication technologies are coming into existence and rapidly changing the

landscape of the industry. Turow (2009) describes this change in the following terms:

During the past decade or so, though, advertisers have become increasingly concerned that consumers are using new technologies to help them avoid commercial messages so they don’t even have to decide whether they want to attend to them. Marketers know that Americans are using digital video recorders (DVRs) to rush through broadcast, cable and satellite television shows. Online, they are using email filters and pop-up killers to get rid of unwanted ads. Advertisers fear that these technologies are only the beginning of a raft of approaches that allow audiences to enjoy ad-sponsored materials with hardly any confronting of the ads (p. 546).

Along with the development of new media, the fall of traditional advertising, as Serazio (2013) argues, was accompanied by several interconnected conditions, including empowered audiences, market fragmentation, semiotic clutter and consumer cynicism. In a similar vein, marketing strategists Al and Laura Ries (2004) pronounce that “advertising lost its power” because it “has no credibility with consumers, who are increasingly skeptical of its claims and whenever possible are inclined to reject its messages” (p. xvi). With the transformation of “the magic system of (conventional) advertising” (Williams, 1980), marketing and commercial communication practitioners have been trying to find new tactics to tackle the increasing population of skeptical and empowered consumers.

As a less overt technique of promotional communication, PR has long been practiced in conjunction with advertising and direct marketing strategies. Unlike marketing and advertising that often focus on customer needs and the delivery of products and services to meet the needs, public relations centers on the creation and management of a relationship between an organization and its publics (Cutlip et al., 1994; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) For example, long-time public relations scholar and practitioner
Rex Harlow (1976) provided an extensive definition of public relations based on an analysis of 472 definitions of public relations written between the early 1900s and 1976. According to him,

Public relations is the distinctive management of function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between and organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends (p. 36).

While PR may facilitate the relationship between organizations and their publics and serve interests of both parties, it is also “communication for a purpose,” developed and practiced primarily for organizations (Miller & Dinan, 2008, p. 5). In fact, as Turow (2009) indicates, PR often involves “information, activities, and policies by which corporations and other organizations seek to create attitudes favorable to themselves and their work, and to counter adverse attitudes” (p. 626). As a technique of creating and maintaining favorable public attitudes, PR is often considered “to be most effective when acting invisibly” (Davis, 2002, p. 13). The practices of PR have “been built on the premise that the best way to influence people through media is not to pay for space and not to announce your presence,” which makes it distinct from other forms of commercial communication (Turow, 2009, p. 625, my emphasis). Instead of appealing to consumers with overt promotional messages, PRPs have depended on “the eyes and ears of third party sources,” especially mass media (Ries & Ries, 2002, p. 89-90). According to Ries and Ries (2002), “compared to the power of the press, advertising has almost zero credibility” (p. 90).
As Edward Bernays (1928) argued long ago, the power and credibility of PR stems from its invisibility. Unlike advertising which is an overt display of promotional messages, PR “often seeks to ‘whisper’ from the deep background” (Moloney, 2006, p. 23). Due to this invisible and subtle nature, public relations has been considered as “the science of ‘creating circumstances, mounting events that are calculated to stand out as ‘newsworthy’’” but at the same time perceived “to look and sound like impromptu truths” rather than like overt promotional messages with commercial bias (Ewen, 1996, p. 28).

While modern corporate PR has a long history in the U.S. since the time of Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee in the 1920s and exerted influence in corporate, non-corporate and political contexts, the importance of PR and its principle of invisibility is growing as the power of brand image and reputation management, stealth and word-of-mouth marketing on the internet is being increasingly recognized.

With the rise of the internet as a critical space for commercial communication and the subsequent transformation in the logic and the system of information production and distribution, the strategies and conventions of PR have also been changing to adapt the environment. Traditionally, PRPs’ work primarily focused on mainstream media coverage. In hoping for their client organizations to be covered (positively) on the news media, PRPs produced press releases, executive bios and background pieces for journalists to use. As Gary Stockman, CEO of Porter Novelli, suggests, under this model, the job of a PR firm was to get a story in the newspaper. If we got a piece in The Wall Street Journal, we’d give ourselves high fives. Now, if you get a piece in the Journal, you have produced a valuable piece of content and you begin asking, “What more am I going to do with this?” We need to be thinking more broadly than we used to. We are thinking about content as an asset that needs to be managed (Advertising Age, 2011, p. C4).
That is, the paradigm of PR that has centered on the mainstream media coverage is changing and becoming diversified. As the marketing space of companies and organizations has expanded on the internet to “owned media” --media channels controlled by brands such as company websites, blogs and Twitter accounts-- PRPs and marketers now have communication channels to directly communicate with their intended audiences and they are developing multiple new strategies to make use of these spaces (Corcoran, 2010). In addition, with the boom of social media, managing a brand image and engaging with (potential) customers on those spaces has become central to the work of PRPs. As such, increasingly more PR agencies “pay firms to track the discussions--the buzz-- about their clients on chat rooms, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere and they respond by paying people to go online and insert comments that reflect the positive spin that fits the aim of the PR campaign” (Turow, 2009, p. 579). As Advertising Age’s annual report on PR in 2013 notes, public relations plays a critical role in this content-rich, multimedia world: “For public relations firms, the world of content plays to their core capabilities-- storytelling and audience engagement--in traditional (earned) and paid media” (Advertising Age, 2013, p. C6).

Another important change in the information environment that has influenced corporate communication is the visibility of organizations’ presence in search engines results. Since more people are searching for information on the web through search engines like Google and Yahoo, the presence of an organization, a brand, a message and a person on those spaces is becoming important. Thus, many corporate organizations are adopting search engine optimization (SEO) techniques to increase the visibility of their products, campaigns and brands. As the importance of the presence on search engines is
growing, marketers and PRPs are turning to various tactics to create content that would be more visible (i.e. circulate widely on various venues) on the internet. As one of Google’s information pages indicates, one of the most effective strategies for SEO is “content development.” Taken together, on the internet, the traditional PR model centering on press management and coverage is transforming to respond to these new content opportunities and “a confluence of a complete destruction of business models” (Advertising Age, 2013, p. C6).

Brand journalism relates to this content creation, curation and management for a brand in various communication channels on the internet. While the management of branded content is critical to the practice of brand journalism, PRPs claim that brand journalism is not just about the production and dissemination of brand-related information to audiences but more about building a favorable brand image by engaging with audiences. In this light, self-identified brand journalist David Henderson (2009) claimed that organizations “should stop marketing and promoting [and] start listening” (p.9) in order to “successfully achieve meaningful results through effectively and credibly connecting with audiences” (p. 3). Thus, practices of brand journalism not only include the generation of content but also reflect an online environment in which intended audiences can engage with corporate brands. According to Marc Pritchard, Global Marketing & Brand Building Officer from Procter & Gamble, now is “PR’s time to shine… PR is the key for all marketers looking to build meaningful relationship with customers. When integrated effectively, those relationships turn consumers into customers and customers into brand ambassadors” (Advertising Age, 2010, p. S12). To this end, in spite of the claim that brand journalism centers around credible, transparent
and timely information, the practice of brand journalism is ultimately considered as a “modern marketing imperative” -- even by Larry Light who first coined the term “brand journalism” and urges corporate communication professionals to “think like journalists” (Light, July 21, 2014). At the same time, however, brand journalism is beyond traditional PR in the sense that corporate brands act as media and audiences are often an important part of brand storytelling process itself. Thus, while brand journalism incorporates core principles of public relations, it is also a step forward from traditional PR and reflects changes in the commercial communication environment.

**Types of brand journalism**

In order to understand brand journalism as an emerging community and a cultural practice borrowing from existing communities of journalism and PR, it is important to delineate what types of brand journalism--even when the exact term “brand journalism” is not used--are practiced, who practices it and how brand journalism works in different organizational contexts. Because brand journalism is applied in multiple formats, it spans across a wide variety of platforms. Though they are not mutually exclusive, three types of practices tend to surface most prominently. Differing according to the direction of interaction they employ, creators and publishers of the content, and organizational settings of the practices, they include 1) corporate news; 2) expert and user endorsements; 3) native advertising.

The practices aligned with *corporate news* signal situations in which companies and organizations incorporate “news” or “online newsroom” sections on their websites or organizational news sites/blogs. Many companies and organizations have a “news,” “pressroom” or “newsroom” section/page, providing information on their organizations,
products and/or services they provide and their industry, often targeting both the public and journalists. As an illustration, according to Park and Reber (2008) who examined the dialogic features of 100 Fortune 500 companies’ websites, 97% of the companies studied had “online newsrooms” on their websites and regularly updated recent news stories. In addition to conventional newsrooms, some companies launch their own news websites, either with in-house journalists and editors or with brand journalism/content agencies. For example, Cisco Systems launched its own technology news site called The Network in 2011, which was nominated as the finalist for PR News’s Annual Digital PR awards in the same year (PR News, August 22, 2011). According to Karen Snell, digital content lead at Cisco, The Network is the company’s effort to “lead the conversation, to spark engagement, to identify trends relevant to [their] business and the industry” (April 23, 2012), In order to “create, share and curate content” for the news site, the company also hired “world-class reporters who have worked at Fortune, Forbes, BusinessWeek, Wall Street Journal, AP and more.” Thus, the news site is made up of both Cisco in-house staff as well as contributing writers like Kerry Doyle (former senior editor at ZDnet), Scott Gurvey (PBS) and Steve Wildstrom (Business Week). With these in-house staff and contributing writers from established business media, John Earnhardt, director of corporate communications at Cisco, argues that the purpose of the stories on The Network:

isn’t to showcase Cisco, but to create compelling content in the topical areas that we care about. We are supporting the generation of this content in the hopes that our audience shares it and becomes more educated on the topics that are important to Cisco and to our customers.
In a similar vein, Intel launched its own technology news site called Free Press in the fall of 2010. They have in-house staff, including editors (executive and managing) and two staff writers who have professional experience in traditional journalism. In its “about us” page, it indicates:

Our goal is not to duplicate the news and cover every major milestone or event from Intel. Nor do we want this to be the kind of news you may find in a press release. We aim to capture and share interesting behind-the-scenes stories that provide insight into what’s going on inside Intel and indirectly, the tech industry. We are Intel geeks at heart, taking an editorial approach to producing stories with journalistic style and integrity, and doing it as objectively as possible while being transparent about who we work for. We hope our stories are compelling to anyone who interested in technology, and the people and innovations that are changing our world (About us, Free Press, n.d.)

Thus, both The Network and Free Press emphasize that the news contents on their news sites are produced with “journalistic style and integrity,” not promotional materials that sell their companies or their products. Similarly, companies like Red Bull, Best Buy, Boeing, General Motors, Coca-Cola, American Express and Chevron are some of the examples that take the corporate news approach. In this form of brand journalism, “news” stories produced by either in-house staff writers, outside contributing writers or freelance writers hired by agencies often mimic the form and editorial style of traditional journalism. Just like traditional journalism, this model of brand journalism usually has a separate “newsroom” or content/story site with writers and editors and the journalistic norms of transparency and public interests are emphasized while the purpose of publicity is often strategically hidden or underemphasized.

An alternative type of brand journalism centers on expert and user endorsements. Experts are often invited to write brand journalism stories. Often participating as contributing writers and guest bloggers in brand journalism campaigns, experts provide
information, opinions and interpretations of trends and issues in the field based on their expertise. Who are qualified as experts varies in different situations but in many cases, they are considered to have the authority to speak about the industry from their educational and/or professional backgrounds and social influence. They already have established a reputation in the industry and often “have their own set of dedicated followers” (Abramovich, August 30, 2012). As an illustration, Johnson & Johnsons’ BabyCenter has more than 200 experts with a wide range of backgrounds including physicians, psychologists, professors and educational consultants. The website displays the credentials of all BabyCenter’s experts and emphasizes that its contents are created and endorsed by the experts, not by PRPs, advertisers or marketers. According to the site, these experts also “have been featured on many national news outlets, including NBC’s Today, The Dr. Oz Show, CNN, Fox News Channel, CBS This Morning, The View and ABC’s Good Morning America,” which stresses the qualifications of the experts and their discursive authority (BabyCenter, n.d.).

Another form of endorsement often comes from audiences. In this practice, consumers help build the brand’s presence in the public sphere (especially social media spaces) and talk about the brand in ways that seems more organic, natural and authentic than advertising. Audiences are encouraged to share their stories and opinions and create conversations among them. Ordinary people’s stories and their personal experiences are often co-opted to create the sense of authenticity of the messages that brands convey. As an illustration, McDonald’s brand journalism project called Moms Quality Correspondents appointed “real moms” from different local regions as their “correspondents” to report on the quality of food and experience at the fast food
restaurant chain. McDonald’s allowed the group behind-the-scene access to inside the kitchens, farms, processing plants and suppliers so that the moms could not only report on the quality of the company’s food but also helped them communicate the company’s efforts to provide children with healthier dietary options to their fellow moms. As seen in this example, in this model of brand journalism, corporate brands borrow the authenticity of ordinary citizens to communicate desired ideas and messages to the public.

A third category of brand journalism is what practitioners call *native advertising*. As Couldry and Turow (2014) argue, a “native ad is textual, pictorial, and/or audiovisual material that supports the aims of an advertiser (and is paid for by the advertiser) while it mimics the format and editorial style of the publisher that carries it” (p.1716). In addition to brands’ own information sites, blogs and social media, corporate organizations increasingly cooperate with existing news publishers and online media channels to publish their content in forms of promoted postings, sponsored content or “in-feed ads.” In this mode of brand journalism, some news publishers create in-house native advertising teams and departments to facilitate corporate brands’ publishing their content. In recent years, this native advertising format is becoming increasingly popular. By 2012, only a handful of news organizations had adopted the “native advertising” platform. By 2014, however, major newspapers and news media in the U.S., including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *NBC*, *CNN* and even *NPR*, began collaborating with corporate brands for the production and circulation of sponsored or branded content. Likewise, renowned magazines like *Forbes*, the *Time* and the *Atlantic*, among others, now share their online publishing spaces with brand-created articles. In 2014, *Hearst Newspapers*, one of the largest newspaper publishers in the U.S., began
preparing to implement native advertising across its 1,700 newspaper websites in partnership with a native advertising agency Nativo and that initiative is being adopted by McClatchy, Lee Enterprises, Gatehouse Media and USA Today Sports Media Group. (Sass, February 7, 2014). In this mode of brand journalism, the cultural authority of established news publishers is appropriated as a way of building the credibility of branded content. By borrowing the space of traditional news outlets and mimicking the editorial content, brand journalism practitioners strategically position their practices in the existing news ecosystem.

Regardless of the specific kind of practices employed, brand journalism can also be found in various types of agency and personnel. At stake here is the fact that brand journalism is widely practiced by different types of organizations, agencies and persons in different positions. Relevant because practitioners in different forms of agencies and positions may have different ideas and understandings of their practices, its broad usage can provide important information about how brand journalism is taking shape as an emerging community. In particular, it is regularly practiced by 1) corporate brands’ in-house or outside contributing writers, 2) practitioners at brand journalism-specific agencies, 3) practitioners in the brand journalism or online newsroom department at PR or marketing firms, and 4) in-house writers at news organizations in case of native advertising. These four types of practitioners can also coexist within one brand journalism project. For example, companies or organizations can have a team of in-house staff members and outside contributing writers, as seen in the example of Cisco’s news site The Network. Conversely, in the case of McDonald’s Moms’ Quality Correspondent,
the project was designed and deployed in coordination between McDonald’s internal PR team and the company’s PR agency, Golinharris, a member of Interpublic Group.

In-house or outside contributing writers often have a background in traditional journalism, as illustrated in both The Network and Free Press. Former journalists are often invited to write for an organization, as when marketing and PR practitioners suggest bringing ‘journalists’ onto an organization. For example, marketing strategist David Meerman Scott (2011) recommends that organizations should consider hiring (former) journalists to create stories for them. He argues:

This isn’t about hiring a journalist to write press releases and try to get his or her former colleagues to write or broadcast about you. Instead, I am talking about having journalists create stories just as they are doing now--but for a corporation, a government agency, a nonprofit, or an educational institution instead of a media outlet… What better background than journalism could there be for the person running your online news media efforts? Is running the Cisco newsroom really that much different than running a newspaper site? (p.313).

In addition to the journalists hired or invited to write by companies and organizations, brand journalism contents can also be produced, curated and circulated by brand journalism-specific agencies or content marketing/strategy agencies for their client organizations. For example, Kyle Monson, a former editor and content strategy director at JWT, started a content strategy agency called Knock Twice. While Monson argues that their work is not “journalism, but it’s a publisher mindset that [they] try to stick to” (Hoven, August 25, 2014). In the introduction page, the agency also notes that they are different from PRPs and other strategic communication professionals and their focus is on creating branded content “using tools typically reserved for reporters” (Hoven, August 25, 2014):

The last thing the world needs is more PR people and advertisers. That’s why we’ve assemble a team of non-agency types who solve problems, make things,
and outwork everyone… The most important work we do is help our clients build real, credible narratives that drive genuine enthusiasm.

In recent years, agencies like Contently and NewsCred launched a matching service between corporate brands and former journalists/freelance writers, creating a “marketplace” for writers. For example, Contently, founded by Shane Snow in 2011, is quickly expanding its revenue, hiring thousands of writers and even establishing its own codes of ethics. According to Eric Paley, the first seed investor in the company, the founder is “really a journalist…; [and] he’s applying journalistic storytelling to this [branded content] market” (Sebastian, October 14, 2014). This suggests that these agencies often distance themselves from traditional PR and marketing agencies and identify with journalistic ideals. Examining professionals at these agencies will provide an understanding of how they negotiate ideals of journalism and their client organizations’ interests.

Additionally, brand journalism contents can be produced and/or curated by professionals at a brand journalism/online newsroom department of PR firms. For example, Microsoft’s Microsoft News Center is run under the management of “New Stream” department at Waggener Edstrom, a worldwide PR agency. On the company’s fact sheet that introduces “News Stream,” it says that the department features “editorial and content management strategy” and “detailed reporting and analysis” that “support business goals” (News Stream, Waggener Edstrom, n.d.). Professionals who work in this setting may share similar ideas about the importance of accurate, transparent and detailed reporting in their practices. However, because they work for a PR agency, they may have a different professional identity from in-house brand journalists or practitioners at brand journalism-specific agencies that often strategically differentiate themselves from PRPs.
Finally, as seen in the case of native advertising, branded content can be produced by in-house writers at news organizations. Directly hired by publishers, these writers often have backgrounds both in journalism and corporate communications. For instance, Josh Sternberg was named as a content strategist at the Washington Post’s Brand Studio based on his experience both on the editorial and the business side at Digiday. These in-house branded content teams are often operated under advertising departments of news organizations. In the case of the New York Times, the lead of the native advertising team is Meredith Levien, executive vice president of advertising and former chief revenue officer at Forbes Media. While in-house writers work closely with the business side, they may be more strictly bounded by journalistic principles than brand journalism practitioners in other settings because they work under the roof of news organizations. At the same time, many journalists concern that native advertising may affect the editorial side of journalism. Thus, understanding the dynamics within in-house native advertising teams and departments can illustrate how corporate forces are potentially reshaping the landscape of journalism itself. The practices of brand journalism—especially the ones with dedicated online news sites—thus consist of people who occupy different positions and professional roles, such as in-house staff writers, (occasional) contributing writers, editors (managing, topic-specific), digital media or social media strategists and executives.

All of this suggests that the practice of brand journalism is both wide-ranging and varied. Taking into account both the different practices central to its emergence and the different kinds of practitioners in different positions who use it, this dissertation critically examines 1) how brand journalism has come into existence within the changing
information environment, 2) what claims its practitioners use to stake out the parameters of that existence, 3) what forms of knowledge, beliefs and norms are followed by the community, 4) what kinds of discursive tensions exist in the community and 5) how the community challenges and appropriates the boundaries and cultural authority of adjacent, more traditional communities on the way to establishing its own authority.

This project addresses an array of interlocking research questions:

• What economic, cultural and technological changes in journalism and PR contribute to the emergence of brand journalism? How and why has brand journalism risen as a technique for creating news-like content for organizations?

• To what extent, how and why do practitioners of brand journalism identify with or distinguish themselves from journalists and PR practitioners? In their collective imagination, how much is brand journalism different from traditional journalism? How much does it differ from PR? In what ways do these perceived differences or similarities play a role in facilitating or discouraging the establishment of a shared group identity among brand journalism practitioners?

• What are the discursive dimensions that constitute the brand journalism community? Whose voices are (un)articulated? How is the community discursively envisioned and constructed by practitioners from different backgrounds? What does it imply about the nature of interpretive communities?

• What is the process through which practitioners of brand journalism reimagine their work along the dimensions of journalism and PR? How does the boundary line between journalism and PR get renegotiated in the practice of brand journalism? What does this process suggest about the dynamics within an
interpretive community and between an emerging interpretive community and existing communities? Do the critiques of interpretive communities regarding the presumed equal power relations and stability hold up in this process?

The examination of discursive attributes of the brand journalism community will provide an answer to these questions. The tension between articulated and unarticulated voices will help understand the unequal power relations within and among interpretive communities. The tension between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses will illustrate how the boundaries of a community are permeable, sometimes offering membership to “others.” Finally, the tension between subjunctive and indicative discourses in the community will provide an insight about how the boundaries of interpretive communities are discursively imagined and maintained to decrease the gap between collective vision and practice. These multiple discursive interplays in the brand journalism community will thus further our understanding of the complex, dynamic and unstable nature of interpretive communities.

In this dissertation, the discursive qualities of brand journalism were examined through the analysis of multiple textual data and personal interviews with brand journalism practitioners. The textual analysis was conducted to identify discursive themes of brand journalism practitioners and includes the analyses of popular media, industry trade publications, business magazines on brand journalism and related communication strategies. I also monitored the daily discussions of brand journalism practitioners in the “brand journalism” group in LinkedIn, which enabled me to understand “insider” discourses of the practitioners. In addition to the textual analysis, I conducted in-depth
interviews over the phone with brand journalism practitioners. The participants were selected to reflect the various organizational and institutional settings in which brand journalism is practiced. A majority of them were practitioners in brand journalism or content agencies (approximately 50%) but others worked at large PR companies and news organizations. Some of them were industry experts. The discussions with brand journalism practitioners in various organizational settings helped me understand the comprehensive picture of the practices and brand journalism as an interpretive community.

To conclude, brand journalism is already a multi-variegated phenomenon, involving varying practices, types, models, agencies, personnel and organizations. Yet it does not have a clear shape as a bona-fide content-producing community. This dissertation, then, will examine the discursive responses to this emergent community. Taking the large universe of brand journalism as an emerging community from different vantage points and in varying settings, the dissertation addresses the following issues: Whether we can think of a community of brand journalists across different contexts, and, if so, how brand journalism is imagined; how the norms, conventions and ideals of journalism and PR are differently or similarly articulated (or unarticulated) and appropriated by practitioners in different organizational contexts; and how this emerging community of brand journalists is changing and challenging the traditional boundary between PR and journalism.

The following chapters will provide a new understanding of interpretive communities by examining discursive dimensions of the brand journalism community. In the next chapter, I explore the articulated and unarticulated dimensions of the brand
journalism industry. In chapter 3, I identify intrinsic vs. extrinsic qualities of brand journalism discourses in the community. Finally, chapter 4 discusses the subjunctive and indicative dimensions of the discourses within the community. Each chapter tackles larger problematics of this dissertation: what this case study of brand journalism informs about the nature of interpretive communities and how it offers an entry point to rethink and re-envision the journalism community.
In an interpretive community, a multiplicity of discourses proliferates. Different voices in a community constantly compete and contest for authority. In this process, some discourses are more visible and articulated than others. Others are suppressed and even silenced. That is, as feminist critiques of interpretive communities argue, there exists “the hierarchy of social speech types--indeed, of social stratification--within the communities” (Bauer, 1988, p. 7). In the case of an emerging interpretive community in which shared norms and conventions are not yet established, the discursive process to create an identity of the members and to claim the interpretive authority of the community can be even more complex. Taking the example of brand journalism, this chapter examines the complex inner workings of the (un)articulation process within the interpretive community.

As a way to define and position themselves, brand journalism practitioners co-opt different aspects and elements of traditional journalism, keeping a strategic distance from other corporate communication activities, including traditional advertising, marketing and PR. In other words, the discourse of journalistic professionalism is strategically rearticulated by brand journalism practitioners in order to establish their discursive authority. The language of journalism provides brand journalism practitioners with terms to collectively delineate their practices. At the same time, the discourse of traditional PR and marketing is often articulated as outmoded and thus marginalized in practitioners’ identity work. As this chapter demonstrates, brand journalism practitioners aim to
establish their identity and boundaries of their hybrid community by co-opting, reinterpreting and strategically excluding the conventions and norms of existing communities. In this chapter, I examine subtle discursive tensions between journalistic professionalism and promotional impulses prevalent in the identity discourse of brand journalism practitioners: how journalism and promotional impulses are (un)articulated and rearitculated; how the discursive power relations between journalism and corporate communications--especially PR--are strategically reconstructed in the brand journalism community; and what the discursive parameters are of a collective identity whose strategies emblematize an emerging, hybrid community.

**The politics of articulation in an interpretive community**

Before examining the discursive strategies of brand journalism practitioners, I briefly scrutinize the politics of articulation in the context of interpretive communities. While it is beyond the realm of this dissertation to unravel the complex semantic field of articulation, the concept is important to understand how meaning and identity are constructed within an interpretive community.

As Stuart Hall (1996) argues, the process of constructing an identity and creating meaning involves discursive practices:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the making of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity (p. 4).

The concept of articulation is critical to understand this discursive production of identities, the process of making “difference and exclusion.”
As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggest, articulation is “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice…” (p. 105). An articulation is not just about speaking forth but also about constructing “nodal points which partially fix meaning and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity” (p. 113). In this sense, as Hall (1996) argues, the idea of articulation presupposes the concept of polysemy and meaning is always constructed in the process of articulation: “Meaning is a social production, a practice” (2006, p. 134). The process of articulation is an attempt to fix meaning that “is not necessarily given in all cases, by law or a fact of life” (Hall, 1985, p. 113). Articulations thus always include political--as well as semantic--struggles about who can exercise power to claim the meaning of social reality, repressing or silencing alternative articulations. At the same time, as scholars argue, the articulating power is always partial and temporary. Because meaning can never be permanently and completely fixed, it is open to changes, “leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections--re-articulations--being forged” (Hall, 1985, p. 113).

Applied to interpretive communities, the theory of articulation posits that there exist multiple meanings, discourses (or discursive practices) and “accents” within a community. Defining an identity and the meaning of a community involves constant discursive struggles and negotiations. It also suggests that an interpretive community includes conflicts and the discourses repressed, silenced or unheard. The concept implies that interpretive communities often reflect, recreate and restructure relations of discursive power among different members of a group and among different communities.
What is articulated in an interpretive community is thus not necessarily a product of consensus or communal interpretations among members of the community. It rather represents voices of those who have more discursive authority and power, or what Roland Barthes (1989) calls “[t]he encratic discourse” -- the discourse within power (p. 121). On the other hand, what is left out in the articulation process “represents the result at any given time of the set of power relations that organizes normal discourse: the acts of permission and prohibition, of incorporation and exclusion that institute the structure and practices” of interpretive communities (Trimbur, 1989, p. 608). For this reason, the examination of what is (un)articulated in an interpretive community allows us to understand “the strategic moves by which [interpretive] communities legitimize their own conversation by marginalizing others” (Trimbur, 1989, p. 609, my emphasis).

Brand journalism covers a wide range and scope of practices and includes a spectrum of different content. Some argue that brand journalism is a part of marketing or PR while others claim that brand journalism is not much different from professional journalism. For example, explaining why he prefers the term “content marketing” over brand journalism, Joe Pulizzi, founder of Content Marketing Institute, argues that brand journalism is essentially a marketing practice: “I choose the term content marketing because the people that are making decisions for this are in the marketing department and brand journalism does not resonate with that” (personal communication, July 23, 2012).

On the other hand, Michael Brenner, head of strategy at NewsCred (former senior director in integrated marketing and content strategy at SAP), claims that brand journalism emerges as an alternative to marketing and hence is different from conventional corporate communication practices:
Most marketing stinks… so what this has forced marketers is to act like publishers. So the definition for me of brand journalism is.. to think about and identify what information your audience’s looking for and deliver the information in all places they are looking for (personal communication, August 23, 2012).

In other words, it is difficult to define the shared features of brand journalism because competing ideas coexist among practitioners. As Matthew Van Dusen, editor in chief at General Electric’s brand journalism project Txchnologist, argues, brand journalism is still “an open question” (personal communication, August 17, 2012).

While there is no unified idea of what brand journalism is and who brand journalists are, practitioners define the practice and their profession by assimilating or comparing them to the practices of existing communities. To specify, in defining brand journalism, practitioners often discuss how brand journalism is (dis)similar to traditional journalism and how they incorporate features and conventions of professional journalism in their practices:

It [brand journalism] is brands’ behaving like publishers and brands’ adopting the best practices of journalism: timeliness, credibility and relevance” (Kyle Monson, personal communication, July 18, 2012).

What we are attempting to do at Intel Free Press is really to try to go behind the scenes and tell stories and write from, certainly from the perspective of a journalist but also being transparent about who we are and what we are doing. We are not paying to place these stories anywhere. We are not advertising with this content. We are all journalists here in previous lives in some form or another (Bill Calder, personal communication, June 27, 2012).

The primary goal [of brand journalism] is to build the editorial relationship like a magazine, like a newspaper, like a TV show, to build their editorial relationship with their audience through information (David Spark, personal communication, August 9, 2012).
While brand journalism practitioners acknowledge the distance between brand journalism and traditional journalism, most of them agree that their practices are, at least to some extent, based on the elements and principles of journalism.

As the following discussion shows, brand journalism often borrows the rhetoric and practices of journalistic professionalism that “allowed journalism to assert it was protecting its legitimacy against the post-war rise of domestic propaganda proffered by the emerging public relations industry” (St. John III, 2009, p. 354). In this sense, the mimicking or rearticulation of journalistic professionalism in the practices and the rhetoric of brand journalism can be viewed as an attempt to borrow the cultural authority and legitimacy of journalism by appropriating its discursive mechanisms of control and boundary work. The discourse of journalistic professionalism is thus deployed, articulated and contested in brand journalism as “a boundary-spanning agent, expanding its influence within journalism and beyond” (Lewis, 2012a, p. 315).

The articulation of journalistic professionalism in brand journalism also means that the discourses that do not fit the brand “journalism” model are often silenced or marginalized. In particular, while brand journalism borrows both from journalism and PR, discourses on public relations--despite their relevance and importance--are often marginalized, restricted and depreciated as mere media or press relations, overlooking other aspects of the practices. These marginalized--sometimes silenced--discourses of public relations reveal how differences and distinctions of brand journalism from traditional PR are discursively imagined among practitioners. This also suggests that there exist unequal power relations and a discursive hierarchy between journalism and corporate communications (PR) within brand journalism. For this reason, brand
journalism can be viewed as a rearticulation project that attempts to create a new chain of meaning and semantic field around corporate communication practices, breaking from old linkages.

In the following discussion, I examine this rearticulation process of brand journalism practitioners. In particular, I illustrate how brand journalism practitioners recreate journalistic professionalism to define the identity of their profession and the boundaries of their practices. I also discuss how the discourse of public relations is restricted, marginalized and silenced in brand journalism. The following discussions explain how both articulated and unarticulated discourses are strategically constructed in the brand journalism practitioners’ identity work and how they construct complex power relations and tensions over authority in the interpretive community. In the brand journalism community, three ways of co-opting and rearticulating the discourse of journalistic professionalism are apparent: hiring former journalists, mimicking journalistic routines and recreating journalistic norms.

**Hiring former journalists and freelance writers**

One way of creating a discursive link between brand journalism and professional ideals of traditional journalism is by hiring former and freelance journalists as brand journalism practitioners. In fact, many brand journalism projects hire former journalists who worked in traditional news organizations, and a majority of brand journalism practitioners whom I interviewed had experience in newspapers or TV news.

In the narratives of brand journalism practitioners, their experience in traditional journalism is articulated as not only helpful but central to the practices of brand
journalism. It is the experience in the traditional journalism world that makes a qualified brand journalist who knows how to find and write a story. Matthew Van Dusen, editor at GE’s Tchnologist notes this in the following terms:

That [experience as a journalist] is a whole key. I mean, that’s my whole qualification for this job. I have a lot of experience as a reporter finding story angles, writing compelling stuff, and also rewriting press releases, getting to identify where the heart of the story is, what the most interesting part of it is, etc. So I think the job descriptions are entirely compatible. If there is anything that is lacking is that journalists do not tend to have clients. I think this is challenging for journalists coming in [to brand journalism] but it is certainly not insurmountable (personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Brand journalism practitioners’ prior experience in professional journalism is often central to defining their current identity as brand journalists. For them, the experience and knowledge as journalists can be applied to the practices of brand journalism and many of them still consider themselves as “journalists” only in different contexts and settings:

I am a journalist at heart. I live and breathe in news everyday. I am a news junky and I get my news from a variety of sources but there are many different channels today from which people get their news online and this [brand journalism] is becoming one of them. You may not establish the same credibility that you do to the front of the New York Times everyday but these stories are out there and there are getting into the online news ecosystem (Bill Calder, personal communication, June 27, 2012).

I’ve been a tech journalist for now seventeen years and I feel what I am doing is the same thing as I did for media outlets and I am just doing it for brands. And I still maintain my journalistic hat through my work. I mean I haven’t stopped doing that (David Spark, personal communication, August 9, 2012).

Thus, in the discourse of brand journalism practitioners, while “brand” is only a setting, “journalism” is the core activity that defines their identity and practices: “I was a fairly serious journalist and nominated for Pulitzer twice. I believe what we do is a form of journalism…There are travel journalists, there are trade journalists, and people who do
all kinds of different versions of journalism” (Thomas Scott, personal communication, October 31, 2014). Similarly, Michael Brown also argues that professional journalists’ ability to create stories and narratives can be transferred from the traditional journalism world to brand journalism:

It [Brand journalism]’s done in a traditional journalism way. Whether it’s the print or web, video, it’s produced and developed just like in traditional media. In fact, my cameraman, he was actually Peter Jenning’s cameraman. And his wife was the ABC network bureau chief in Miami and I hired her to do a lot of these stories so they were done exactly like they would be done by traditional media only it’s about organization, their products and their services and their customers. To give you an example, I actually had classes from 60 Minutes producers and learned how to produce packages just like 60 Minutes (personal communication, July 20, 2012).

As these comments suggest, brand journalism is articulated as a practice that resides within the gradation of journalism. Brand journalism practitioners’ identity as journalists bridges the communities of journalism and corporate communications in their conceptualization of the practices and helps define the core of brand journalism essentially as journalism, only in different settings and contexts.³

Former journalists are hired as brand journalists for their storytelling skills and professional ethics in the journalism world. For instance, Todd Blecher explains former journalists’ fit to brand journalism, arguing that journalists are “able to put together a piece that is informative, engaging, and entertaining with a purpose” and “that skill set rests…more with journalists than it does with somebody who came up through PR

³ One important note here is that while brand journalism practitioners attempt to create the link between brand journalism and professionalism journalism, they do not usually argue that brand journalism is journalism in the traditional sense: “I don’t want to cast it [brand journalism] as completely pure, independent journalism” (Terence Sweeney, personal communication, August 16, 2012). Brand journalism may instead reside within the expanded spectrum or continuum of journalism. The strategic distance between journalism and brand journalism is an important theme in the discourse of brand journalism practitioners and will be discussed in detail in chapter 4.
without having much or any exposure to journalism, the nuts and bolts of doing a story” (personal communication, July 30, 2012). He himself was a reporter at the Pentagon for Bloomberg News. According to him, he has “carried with [him] that sort of content creator mindset at heart throughout [his] career at Boeing” (personal communication, July 30, 2012). In addition to the storytelling skills and techniques, (former) journalists are also expected to bring their professional ethics to corporate communication practices. Ed Lallo, CEO of a small brand journalism agency Newsroom, Inc., argues that journalists find their places in brand journalism for their ethics and professional disciplines that marketing and PR practitioners supposedly lack:

They [marketing and PR people] have never worked in a newsroom…One thing that is important is to reinstill those ethics and work disciplines of journalists in newspapers and broadcast… [Journalists] have the ethics, the drive, and the ability to look at a situation and find a real story. Sometimes it’s buried and journalists have the ability to dig out (personal communication, July 3, 2012).

It is the storytelling ability and ethics of journalists that give brand journalists a sense of professionalism and distinction from PR pitches and marketing collaterals. While the actual work of brand journalism may be conducted under the auspice of PR, advertising and marketing, bringing in former journalists and their skills and experience into the corporate newsroom and content business is represented as a strategy to distinguish brand journalism from traditional corporate communication activities. Unlike conventional corporate messaging, brand journalism based on the principles of journalism and skill sets of professional journalists is articulated as creating news, stories and narratives that audiences want to read rather than pushing brand messages to the audiences:
It’s cool…to hire people who understand what people want to read, which I clearly did from having worked as a journalist for three years. Hiring people who really understand what people want to read and make brands sound human rather than just a PR robot (Lydia Leavitt, personal communication, July 19, 2012)

Hiring former journalists who worked at prestigious news organizations can be interpreted as a symbolic and strategic act of borrowing the cultural authority of journalists and the traditional news business that also dispels the prevalent distrust of corporate messages among the public. Most corporate news/content sites openly publish who their writers are and where they have worked. For instance, as Cisco’s director of corporate communications John Earnhardt claims, the company commissions “world-class reporters who have worked at Fortune, Forbes, Business Week, Wall Street Journal, AP and more” to create content on their core technology news topics. The act of publicizing writers’ and editors’ credentials and profiles as (former) journalists is worth noting considering that in traditional PR, marketing and advertising, individual creators are usually invisible in the public scene. Who creates campaigns and messages in these forms of communication is hardly important to communicate the value and quality of their projects to the public. In the case of brand journalism, however, making the presence of qualified journalists visible to the public and publicizing journalistic resources that brands have may work as an effective strategy to convey the idea that their content can be trusted just like journalism. That is, the act of hiring journalists and publicizing their credentials provides brand journalism campaigns with terms to situate their work along the line of the cultural authority of journalism.

Thus, as Matthew Van Dusen claims, brand journalism “starts with the people that you hire” (personal communication, August 17, 2012). Journalistic skills and professionalism are understood and presented as a discursive strategy to make a
distinction between brand journalism and conventional forms of corporate messaging and to tackle the increasingly skeptical audiences. By embracing and “feeding displaced journalists” (Snow, September, 28, 2012) and publicizing the act, brand journalism attempts to create a new, hybrid territory for corporate communications. In this way, brand journalism’s bold claim for its connection with professional journalism and for its discursive authority is legitimized. While hiring journalists does not instantly solve any credibility issues, the act of hiring former journalists and publicizing their profiles can serve as a powerful discursive tool for companies and organizations to identify their communication efforts as brand journalism.

Hiring journalists as brand journalists requires corporate brands’ rethinking of the nature of their campaigns and restructuring the logic of corporate communications. According to Nathan Lump, director of branded content at Conde Nast and former director of content strategy at JWT, corporate brands are not always open to hire journalists or professional writers and sometimes they do not know where to find them:

They [corporate companies] are not used to hiring often the kind of people they would need to hire to execute this sort of programs. So some brands won’t attempt that. They always want to outsource it and work with a partner. But some brands, especially if they are really making an investment in it, may want to build their core capabilities in house. And that requires bringing in people who might not always be a natural cultural fit for them and they might not often even know how to find those people or recruit them (personal communication, July 12, 2012).

As implied in Lump’s comments, journalists who transition to the corporate world may experience the “cultural fit” issue, which can potentially cause tensions and even conflicts in practicing brand journalism in the corporate context. That is, while the experience and skills as professional journalists is critical to the identity of brand journalists, their roles and practices are often negotiated and readjusted in the corporate
environment. The cultural (mis)fits or the “inter-role conflicts” (Obermair and Koch, 2014) are prevalent among former journalists-brand journalists who have internalized normative ideals of journalism and its presumed distance from corporate communication activities. For this reason, many brand journalism practitioners argue that despite similarities, the mindset of brand journalists should be different from that of traditional journalists:

Even though they [journalists who are transitioning to brand journalism] think that they are fair-minded, everybody approaches to a story with what they want to accomplish whether you work for a new publisher or you work for a brand. They have to realize that it’s not about them, it’s about their client. They have to get on the same page. They have to be in their client’s shoes and have to think about stories from that angle (Ed Lallo, personal communication, November 21, 2014).

This suggests that the principles or conventions of journalism that former journalists are accustomed to might have to be revised in the corporate setting:

If you are going to go a brand journalism endeavor, you should start by trying to identify whether there are journalists or former journalists out there who can come on board and help you. You find those people and make sure that they are good fit for the PR world since it is different than the news journalism world” (Todd Blecher, personal communication, July 30, 2012).

In this sense, the hiring of former journalists and the access to editorial services by professional reporters is often merely represented as the assurance of quality and credibility for brand journalism campaigns, marginalizing the important contextual difference between brand journalism and traditional journalism. The tensions and struggles over journalistic integrity that former journalists may experience in the corporate settings are not usually present in the discourse of brand journalism.

In addition, while brand journalism does provide career opportunities for former journalists and freelance writers, some suggest that journalists are also co-opted and even manipulated in the practice. While the practices of brand journalism, content marketing
and native advertising are benefiting publishers, creative agencies and corporate companies, “one group that doesn’t always share equally in the booty is journalists” (Moses, January 14, 2014). According to a report by Advertising Week, corporate organizations and agencies are often “skimping on fees or avoiding hiring journalists altogether” (Moses, January 14, 2014). In addition, as Lucia Moses (August 25, 2014) reports, some former journalists who moved to the business side are not “proud” of their work because of the lack of editorial control and integrity. As illustrated in these examples, journalists are sometime not properly rewarded and not hired in the brand journalism market.

There also exists a hierarchy of discursive power between professional journalists and brand journalists. As an illustration, while professional journalists can migrate to the brand journalism world, it is reportedly very difficult for them to reenter to the journalism community once they cross the line (Moses, August 25, 2014). Such discourses are silenced because they are against the claim of brand journalism practitioners that their practices are rooted in journalism and against the implied logic of the community that the discursive authority of journalism can be simply transferred to the corporate setting.

In a similar vein, there is also a divide between brand journalism practitioners with journalism experience and practitioners from the corporate communications background. For instance, self-identified brand journalist Ed Lallo argues that the newsroom experience is critical for brand journalists and practitioners who are directly from PR and marketing without the experience should learn the principles of journalism first:

[For those who do not have the newsroom experience] Go back to school and learn journalism. Really, really. That’s a good point. Let me give you a history.
Historically, PR people came out of journalism. But during the last 15-20 years, this is no longer the trend. There are people doing PR and never even stepped a foot in a newsroom. They don’t know what it is like. I think there should be some kind of training for PR people to experience what journalists actually have to put up with… They need to learn journalism from journalists’ perspective (personal communication, November 21, 2014).

In this sense, while brand journalism borrows both from journalism and PR (corporate communications), there exists a hierarchy between them. Brand journalism practitioners recreate and co-opt the existing discursive hierarchy between journalism and PR. While it is argued that journalists are hired for their storytelling skills, hiring journalists also works as the legitimation rhetoric of brand journalism. Journalists’ experiences are strategically rearticulated in the brand journalism community to position corporate companies as legitimate producers of information and to delineate the practices of brand journalism along with journalism, overlooking brand journalism’s close link to PR.

Recreating editorial routines and settings

Another way of articulating journalistic professionalism in brand journalism is by adopting journalistic editorial processes, routines and newsroom dynamics in the corporate context. Journalism, as scholars argue (Bantz, 1985; Soloski, 1989), is not only a product of individual journalists’ professional work but also a product of a workplace that is ruled by organizational structures, cultures and constraints. Each news organization has the work logic and news routines that determine the selection, production and distribution of news stories. Such routines sometimes create tensions and conflicts among individual journalists, editors and news organizations. News, thus, is the product of constant interactions and negotiations between the journalistic ideals and the
business goals that coexist in the organization. Likewise, editorial routines and newsroom interactions are critical not only to the production of branded content and to the formation of brand journalism practitioners’ identity, but the routines reflect the logic of how practitioners negotiate journalistic professionalism and brands’ interest in their practices.

According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996), news routines are “those patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs” (p. 105). These routines include “editorial meetings, the allotment of resources, [and] the daily expectations placed on news workers” (Kurpius, 2000, p.349). More broadly, journalistic routines refer to all procedures in the newsroom that guide how news stories are chosen and crafted, how sources are selected and used, and how journalistic values and norms are determined and maintained (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Hollifield, Kosicki, & Becker, 2001). In short, they “channel the way news work is done” (Kurpius, 2000, p. 349). Singer (2007) also argues that “members of a profession define, shape and control their own work processes” through routines (p.81). These routines, as Karlsson (2010) suggests, serve a crucial role in “journalism’s needs to distinguish itself from other sources of media work, since it builds legitimacy around the notion that journalism is the only form of media work with a commitment to the truth” (p. 536). Therefore, journalistic routines are an important part of journalists’ establishing authority and professionalism, distinguishing journalism from other forms of communicative practices. As Robinson (2007) notes, agreed-upon routines among journalists “form the basis of the longevity inherent in press’s [sic] institutional power” and contribute to constructing the status of journalism as an institution that operates with authority (p. 307).
Brand journalism often adopts the structure, system and setting of a traditional newsroom or a publishing department. Both corporate in-house and agency-based brand journalism projects have reporters and editors: “We have a small team of editors and content producers in house who produce content” (Karen Snell, personal communication, August 20, 2012). Some organizations and agencies have multiple editors, including chief editors, managing editors and subject-matter editors, with an editorial board that involves not only writers and editors but also key stakeholders on the client [brand] side (Nathan Lump, personal communication, July 12, 2012). This process of organizing internal teams and personnel is understood as critical to the success of brand journalism projects: “If they [corporate brands] begin to organize their teams in ways that allow them to create content in real time and all the time, then they are set up for success” (Michael Brito, personal communication, November 17, 2015). The quality of branded content and the qualification of a brand as a “media company,” according to Brito, depend heavily on this process of establishing organizational settings and dynamics. The organizational set up of a brand journalism department or a team serves as a strategy to articulate journalistic professionalism of practitioners and corporate brands’ commitment to “journalism.”

In addition, brand journalism practitioners emphasize that they establish editorial routines and processes about identifying, deciding and gathering brand journalism stories, such as editorial calendars and meetings. According to Ed Lallo, like traditional reporters, brand journalism practitioners find stories by talking to people and investigating issues. Speaking from his experience with Louisiana Sea Food company, he argues that the processes and routines of identifying stories are the same as in professional journalism.
According to him, the editorial processes include the identification of sources, collection of data and evidence, and the investigation of stories. According to him, individual brand journalism practitioners set rules and routines to find a story:

How do we find stories? Like any good reporter, you have to go around and talk to people. So we talk to executives and to advertising executives, and to the lawyers, etc. But then, we also get ideas from people that are on the plant line or the fishermen. All you have to do is listen to their stories and then you can find a way to apply it to what the brand needs to convey. There are so many stories out there companies are not telling because they do not know they exist (personal communication, July 3, 2012).

While editorial routines often involve different people in different positions, what is articulated by brand journalism practitioners is individual writers’ autonomy and editorial integrity over content. In particular, brand journalism practitioners emphasize that managerial staff or clients do not have editorial control: “The beauty and perhaps the unique aspect of this particular project at Intel is that I do not have executives and senior managers on a day-to-day basis who are telling us what to write or reviewing everything that we do when the fine tunes come (Bill Calder, personal communication, June 27, 2012). In many cases, however, the story decision is not simply a work of individual writers. Rather, it is a collaborative process between writers, editors, managerial staff and in some cases clients. That is, the decision is not made by individual practitioners in isolation “but according to conventions and procedures agreed upon” among different personnel involved in brand journalism practices (Coles & Wall, 1987, p. 312). In this sense, the discourse of journalistic routines, editorial processes and the organization of corporate newsroom settings prevalent in brand journalism works as a strategic articulation of journalistic autonomy and professionalism in brand journalism. Using the discourse of editorial routines, practitioners argue that brand journalism is “a form of
journalism” where journalism is defined as “practicing the craft of journalism, assembling stories, and broadcasting it to an audience who is interested in the specific type of information” (Thomas Scott, personal communication, October 31, 2014, my emphasis).

By recreating journalistic routines and editorial filters, brand journalism practitioners attempt to rhetorically position themselves as legitimate commentators who produce stories with similar editorial processes as in professional journalism. In this discursive process, it is often strategically un(der)articulated that brand journalism is practiced within the parameters set by corporate brands. It is also silenced that editorial procedures and settings work as a mechanism that translates and routinizes corporate interests in journalistic terms without violating brand journalism practitioners’ identity as corporate “journalists.” In addition, by rearticulating journalistic editorial processes, the routines of PR are replaced by journalistic routines in brand journalism.

In brand journalism, it is often unarticulated that brands might involve in the editorial process and practitioners often have to negotiate between journalistic principles and brands’ strategic objectives. As some practitioners note, brands do participate in the editorial process from the beginning of a brand journalism project: “We sit down with brands and first try to understand who our audiences are and what topics they are interested in… and our newsroom essentially is there to fill the gaps that brand can’t produce for the content itself” (Michael Brenner, personal communication, November 21, 2014). The corporate objectives of the brand play an important role in brand journalism practitioners’ editorial process, including the decision of what kinds of topics to cover in what ways and in which channels and formats. For example, one of Cisco’s contributing
writers Steve Wildstrom states that although he is interested in technology policy issues, because the company is not comfortable with the topic, he does not get to cover policy-oriented stories. While he argues that his “experience with corporate journalism has been somewhat less constrained than writing for Business Week,” there exist tensions between his journalistic professionalism and the brand’s promotional impulses. Because he has to consider the interest of the client (Cisco), certain topics and issues can be tricky to write about and thus may need a negotiation with the sponsor:

I have worked for several corporate clients and they are not all the same. I have the things that I will do and I won’t do and that are my own choice. When I work for corporate brands, what I won’t do is write materials basically promoting the corporation that’s sponsoring it because as far as I am concerned, that’s not journalism. That’s advertising. For example, I have an ongoing relationship with Cisco. I’ve been writing regularly for Cisco’s newsroom blog, and the understanding there is that I don’t write about Cisco products. In fact, everybody who writes for Cisco, they have a number of journalists and writing for them and we don’t write about Cisco products. Now, what gets tricky is writing about competitors. That can cause them some heartburn. It depends on the nature [of the content]. It’s not an absolute prohibition but you have to be more careful. That sort of thing was not an issue when writing for magazines (personal communication, August 8, 2012).

Similarly, Mitch Wagner, editor in chief at IBM’s Internet Evolution, claims that based on his experience in both worlds, brand journalism is different from traditional journalism primarily because of restrictions regarding what to cover: “I have to be very careful about what I write about the sponsor… The other thing is I can’t write about IBM’s competitors” (personal communication, August, 23, 2012). Lydia Leavitt also argues that brand journalism differs from traditional journalism because of different parameters and constraints:

I think it [brand journalism] is very similar to traditional journalism which I think a lot of journalists practicing in journalism would disagree with. As a former journalist, the whole point of journalism is to write stories that you think you audience wants to read whether it’s news or features, whereas brand journalism is
the exact same thing it just has a few different features. For example, if you are working for a brand, you are not going to write about a competitor brand in the blog. You can tweet about competitors and share ideas that they came up with but you cannot write a glowing feature story on your competitors. So, there are, of course, some parameters exist in brand journalism whereas in traditional journalism, you can just write whatever you want and that’s just totally accepted (personal communication, July 19, 2012).

Such parameters and constraints are often decided and negotiated among editors, other corporate communications personnel and sometimes executives. According to Todd Blecher, in the practice of brand journalism, the selection and the production of brand journalism stories are a collective editorial effort between brand journalists (writers) and the corporate brand (whose interest is represented by executives, managers and other corporate communication professionals):

Well, in some ways, the process is not all that different than a newsroom. And in some ways, it’s tremendously different. We look out several months at the opportunities, issues, and news and events that the company will be involved with. We select from a number of those as good candidates for a brand journalism effort, and then from there, we go for writing the script or doing the interviews and putting pieces together much in the same way you would if you were in a newsroom. Brand journalism is not what’s the news or what you are trying to uncover as a traditional journalists. It is what’s coming down the pipe of the company in the next few months and the one that would best benefit the company if we communicate them through a brand journalism effort. Once you identify a story, then you are in a situation that is very similar to what the journalist does when they are working for a newspaper or a magazine or a TV station (personal communication, July 30, 2012).

While brand journalism mimics the editorial processes and routines of traditional journalism, the business logic of the brand governs the identification and the selection of brand journalism stories and brand journalists write stories within the parameters that corporate companies determine. For this reason, the process of deciding what to cover and how to cover involves negotiations and tensions between writers and corporate companies:
Journalism and publishing, when properly practiced, is a much more nimble process than most corporations are used to. So getting them comfortable with a faster pace and additional flexibility about how changes get made and when they get made in the process are very much something that the clients we work with have to learn. And oftentimes there’s a lot of discomfort around that. So for me, one of the things that I always try to stress to clients before we begin a project or even start talking about doing one is making sure that they are on board about the kind of organizational changes and the challenges that they will have to face in order to execute the programs properly (Nathan Lump, personal communication, July 12, 2012).

As Lump notes, brand journalism often brings changes and challenges to the corporate organization because the work logic and routines of the practices--at least some of them--are different from those of conventional corporate communications. This process, of course, is not always easy. According to Steve Wildstrom, this can be “a big leap for a lot of companies to take” (personal communication, August, 8, 2012).

However, the discourses of negotiations, compromises and tensions are often trivialized among brand journalism practitioners. This negotiation or compromise process is articulated as not unique to brand journalism: “Before writing for them [Cisco], it [the negotiation process] was pretty much the same… working with an editor, I basically write a paragraph describing what it is I am going to do and they say yes or no” (Steve Wildstrom, personal communication, August, 8, 2012). The restrictions that practitioners experience in corporate settings are articulated as a minor contextual difference that does not affect the editorial quality of the content and integrity of the practitioners.

It is worth noting that editors often negotiate editorial freedom of writers and the brand’s interests in the editorial procedures. As Soloski (1997) notes in the journalism context, the editor “functions both as a professional and as a member of the news organization’s management” (p. 148) and “buffers between journalists and management”
In a similar vein, in brand journalism, editors communicate with the management, decide the routines and rules within the parameters of the corporate brand, and work with writers. In this sense, editors are the mediators, negotiators and translators of the language of corporate interests into journalistic routines, and vice versa. The editor’s mediation is usually done by the process of story pitching as well as reviewing and copyediting. Through story pitching, writers get to discuss and adjust what to cover with editors. Editors also sometimes provide writers with general directions and story ideas. In this sense, story pitching is an editorial routine that ensures writers’ pieces are in line with the goal and the parameter of brand journalism set by the organization from the stage of story ideation:

What we ask of them [writers] is that they pitch to us a story that focus on trends, focus on areas of business that Cisco is interested in but they don’t necessarily have to talk about Cisco specifically (Karen Snell, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

I ask writers to send me pitches along sort of broad themes. I come up with stories on my own, too. So I think in that sense the editorial process is almost identical to any other publications. In areas where the brand is more heavily involved and the publication itself is more heavily branded, it tends to be a mix. We find that there are some stories that are sort of dictated or governed by the brand, and others that tend to flow more freely (Matthew van Dusen, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

I pitch stories to clients and give them a line-up just like journalists pitching stories at an editorial meeting at a media outlet. So every week, we have a traditional line up like you would have at a television station or a news outlet. We describe it to the president of the organization, CEO, or whoever needs to be involved in this. We have hundred twenty or so directors here on the board of directors and sometimes they will be involved or interviewed so we will discuss with them and then go from there (Michael Brown, personal communication, July 20, 2012).

In this context, the primary role of the editor is to help writers pick and do stories within the comfort zone of the brand. Explaining his brand journalism efforts with
Microsoft in his prior position, Kyle Monson emphasizes his role as an editor, a negotiator and a mediator between writers and clients (corporate brands):

I helped them [writers], me as an editor, not as Microsoft, me as an editor, helped them pick topics that were interesting and I thought Microsoft would be ok with. The journalists wrote whatever they wanted, and I did all the editing and then I sent this to the client and they would either run it or kill it but they could not make changes in the content. And so, by setting up that relationship, I am protecting the journalists from the client, and I am also protecting the client (personal communication, July 18, 2012).

Thus, editors are the ones who balance the interest of the brand and writers’ editorial freedom. They set editorial guidelines and work both with ‘journalists’ and the brand. They make sure that the content is not explicitly promotional but is aligned with the perspectives of the brand. While editorial cycles and daily routines may vary in different organizational settings, editors, in collaboration with both writers and the brand, decide and negotiate news stories.

The emphasis on journalistic routines in brand journalism also separates the practices from PR. For example, a lot of agencies that claim to be “brand journalism” or “content marketing” agencies emphasize how they are different from PR. According to brand journalist Ed Lallo, traditional PR is “basically company’s agenda pushed forward” unlike brand journalism which “allows [the company’s] various audiences, [its] stock holders, [its] employees, [its] managers and [its] customers to tell [its] story” (personal communication, July 3, 2012). PR is often seen as merely press releases or pushing messages even though the definition of PR covers a wider range of activities and it does overlap with principles of brand journalism: “Traditional PR is really a media relations… The difference between brand journalism is that a brand steps out of the advertising shell and begins to tell stories in a way that resonate with audiences” (Michael Brito, personal
communication, November 17, 2014). Even practitioners who argue for the close link between brand journalism and traditional PR and marketing see that brand journalism is different from conventional corporate messaging:

In my case, we are working for Boeing. At the end of the day, we are going to have some elements of Boeing in the brand journalism story that we put out there. Now the difference is taking a journalistic mindset that requires you to, you as a content creator, to write and organize your thoughts in a particular way and also recognize what shouldn’t be in the piece of content you are putting out there and so while a news release might have one or two or three quotes that all basically say “we all love our customers and we are all thrilled we got this order or this contract.” I as an editor, within under the rubric of brand journalism, would eliminate those quotes (Todd Blecher, personal communication, July 30, 2012).

As noted in Blecher’s comment, editorial processes and journalistic routines are emphasized as a tool and mechanism to filter out promotional objectives of corporate communications. According to practitioners, just as in the traditional newsroom, the production of brand journalism content involves a “process of successive selections, according to a number of news values or criteria” (McQuail & Windahl, 1982, p. 105). As an example of such selection processes, Bill Calder argues for the importance of the invisibility of the brand’s presence and perspectives in brand journalism stories. He takes an example of how he did not cover the company’s most important product (a new Intel Core processor) launch in 2011 because it would merely duplicate press releases of the company rather than add value to the event. Calder emphasizes that the stories covered in their news site have to be more news-like than press releases and marketing pitches:

Now, if you tell me there happens to be a female engineer in California who led a team of graphic professionals to focus on the graphic part of that chip that nobody knows about, that’s the story I might want to cover. Or if you tell me about how one of our engineers who is not one of our senior executives but is a very senior guy in Israel led the team and designed the chip and there’s an interesting cross collaboration between the U.S. and Israel design teams…. now, that’s an interesting story. And that’s exactly what we did… and that’s no different than some of my good friends at Business Week or Associated Press or Reuters or Fast
Company might do. They might not cover that launch either but if I tell them about this woman at the graphics team, that might be a nice profile for them to do (personal communication, June 27, 2012).

In this sense, brand journalism practitioners borrow editorial processes, filters and routines of traditional journalism as a tactic to differentiate their practices and messages from PR. While brand journalism borrows the conventions of public relations, the discourse of PR and corporate objectives is often silenced or articulated as something that should be filtered out in the editorial process.

Moreover, PR routines are often considered as outmoded among practitioners. For example, the process of building and managing relationships with journalists-- which is one of the critical aspects of PR-- is sometimes undermined. It is understood as an ineffective, unnecessary process that can be replaced by brand journalism: “You can grow your own audience [with brand journalism]. You don't have to rely on the third party to grow your audience like you would with going through press releases, hoping to cover your story” (Brooks Thomas, personal communication, August 7, 2012). That is, PR is defined in a limited, narrow fashion that emphasizes its misfit and its failure in today’s information environment, which rhetorically opens a space for brand journalism, a newer, subtler and better tactic. In this sense, while there is a partnership going on between journalism and PR in brand journalism, this partnership, in terms of discursive recognizability, is not equal.

Recreating journalistic norms

Another way of rearticulating journalistic professionalism in brand journalism and the making of brand journalists’ identity is by recreating journalistic norms. Journalistic
norms such as objectivity, public service ideals, autonomy and immediacy (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001) have served as powerful components of journalism’s ideology and authority (Deuze, 2005a). In the sense that brand journalism ultimately serves the interest of corporate companies and potential customers rather than the public, brand journalism can potentially pose ethical threats to the established norms and principles of professional journalism. In fact, journalism’s criticisms against brand journalism also center on the ethical aspect of the practice. For example, Tom Foremski, former Financial Times journalist and founder of Silicon Valley Watcher, argues that brand journalism cannot be journalism because it is ultimately concerned with corporate interests:

Will the Hugo Boss journalist announce a new line with a fair and balanced perspective, with comments from Zegna, Ralph Lauren, etc? Or will the result of brand journalism read like a press release or an advertorial.... If Hugo Boss journalists or Versace hacks, produce an investigative series into child labor in the clothing industry, or something like that, I'll eat a Hugo Boss pocket square. And the Pulitzer committee will give them a prize (October 30, 2012).

Against such criticisms, brand journalism practitioners claim that “news organizations” also “bend their standards to fit their corporate brand and narrative just like other ‘non-news’ companies do” (Michael Brown, October 31, 2012, personal communication). While they acknowledge that brand journalism takes a perspective of the brand, they also argue that there are ethical standards and norms in brand journalism that can match up to those of professional journalism: “We want to be honest and truthful…It’s definitely in favor of brands but a lot of times, newspapers are biased in the same way” (Thomas Scott, personal communication, October 31, 2014). Brand journalists take and tweak journalistic norms, values and ethics as a collective interpretive strategy to position their practice alongside professional journalism. Just like journalists, brand journalists also “share notions of ethical sensibilities, serving the public,
editorial autonomy and public credibility in order to position themselves as a distinctive genre” (Deuze, 2005b, p. 878). The difference between brand journalism’s and professional journalism’s applications of journalistic “values are embedded in the respective meanings these concepts have in” the two practices (p. 878).

Brand journalism practitioners attempt to reinterpret and recreate journalistic norms like autonomy, public service ideals and transparency in their discourse and practices. They use the discourse of journalistic norms and ethics—which is the basis of journalists’ criticisms against brand journalism-- as a discursive strategy to defend the legitimacy of their practices. At the same time, journalistic norms are differently articulated, prioritized and manifested in the practices of brand journalism.

In particular, the norm of transparency takes a unique place in the legitimacy discourse of brand journalism. According to practitioners, transparency is the most important and in some cases the only norm in their practices: Transparency about who pays for what, who writes what and how their content is produced:

I think transparency is the most important one [norm] that I would identify. The proposition of brand journalism itself is only legitimate if people understand, of course, and can judge for themselves whether there are any biases inherent in what is written and I think trust follows from that if people are above the fact that who’s paying for something and when and where they are involved, then they are more likely to engage with it than they are if the sponsorship isn’t transparent in which case, you will find extremely negative reactions. So, transparency is the biggest and most important thing (Matthew van Dusen, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

It’s just transparency. That’s it. That’s the only thing. As long as you are transparent about a) who’s paying you and b) how something came about, everything’s a fair game” (David Spark, personal communication, August 9, 2012).

Even if the brand is owning the fact that this is furthering our cause or we are trying to get people to like X concept, as long as they are transparent about what
they are doing, then I think it’s legitimate and honest (Shane Snow, personal communication, July 2, 2012).

In other words, in the discourse of brand journalism practitioners, transparency is articulated as a norm that overrides other journalistic norms like public service ideals, objectivity, balance and autonomy. Even if the branded content promotes the perspectives of the brand and corporate interests, the practice is legitimate as long as the content includes proper identification and labeling.

One of the reasons why transparency is the most articulated norm in brand journalism is that unlike other journalistic norms, it is relatively easy to communicate to the audience (by simply revealing the identity of the sponsor and the author) without compromising either journalistic integrity or brands’ strategic objectives. For this reason, brand journalism practitioners use the concept of transparency as a discursive strategy to defend the legitimacy and integrity of their practices from criticisms. Transparency in brand journalism, in Allen (2008)’s words, “rather than serving as a normative standard, has become an instrumental value enlisted to protect institutional legitimacy and stave off criticism” (p.324). As Kyle Monson (Knock Twice) argues, transparency is used as a discursive tool to advocate their practices and even for promoting the image of the brand: “We try to use honesty to our advantage, surprise the audience with how honest we can be” (personal communication, July 18, 2012, my emphasis). Practitioners hope that honest disclosure of information regarding sponsors [brands] not only gives a legitimate status to brand journalism in both legal and rhetorical terms but also conveys to the audience positive impressions on the practice and on the brand.

In addition to the disclosure of sponsor identity, transparency in brand journalism is articulated as specific rituals, principles and narrative techniques that “can be
communicated to, understood and accepted as journalistic routines by the audience and peers” (Karlsson, 2010, p. 536). First, the norm of transparency is translated into behind-the-scene stories that “provide insight into what’s going on” inside the company and the industry (Intel, Free Press, n.d.). In the case of Free Press, they do behind-the-scene stories of various sorts from Intel’s new food manager to its engineer’s artwork. Another oft-cited example among brand journalism practitioners is Ford’s Bold Moves campaigns (2006-2007). Created to allow “the world to witness the inner workings of the automaker as it rebuilds its business in North America,” the online documentary series features “inside places the public has never seen before, including Ford executive offices, design studios and assembly plants” (Ford Media, n.d., my emphasis). Brian Clark, founder and CEO of GMD studios that participated in the design and execution of the project with JWT, explains that the company used the transparent conveyance of the company’ inside stories as a strategy to overcome difficult circumstances⁴ that it faced at that time:

Ford at that time was losing about 3 billion dollars a quarter. The headline on the cover of Time magazine on the picture of Bill Ford said, “would you buy a car from this man?” America thought that Ford might go out of business. And at the agency working for them at that time was JWT. They realized that no brand campaign was going to fix this, right? So they would need something different. So we convinced them [Ford] to utilize the techniques from what I consider a subset of journalism which is documentary filmmaking. In that project, we went inside of the company with documentary cameras and showed people what they were doing…and what was like them inside and let the audience witness what was going on inside the company... People who were skeptics at the beginning of the promise, like, “hey, we won’t really let you go inside of the things,” eventually went, “wow, I really feel like we got a glimpse of some of the unvarnished truth” and in process, people started rooting for Ford because they were sharing internal struggles with the audience and you were doing it not in a corporate voice but you

⁴ Ford had a stock market trouble and management problems and the financial struggles of the company were covered widely in newspapers. Ford’s “Bold Moves” was designed to “interrupt the negativity and change the momentum in another direction” (http://www.jwt.com/content/234403/jwt-jwt-brand-journalism/index/asset/1330)
were doing it in the voice of real people (personal communication, July 10, 2012, my emphasis).

In explanation of the campaign, JWT’s executive creative director Toby Barlow also notes, “you can’t sugarcoat what Ford is going through.” In order to engage with the public “in a meaningful and honest way” and address issues of the company, Ford decided to allow cameras inside the organization “to document the turn around in real time” (Montague, JWT). JWT’s chairman Bob Jeffrey explicates how the documentary presentation of inside stories can give a sense of transparency to the audience: “Consumers are so much more involved in what’s going on with their business and they feel like they need to be transparent. The notion of documentary really sits well with that.” By featuring “real people,” opening up places like board meetings, and telling inside stories in an “informal tone of voice,” Ford's Bold Moves thus attempts to convey the idea of transparency and authenticity of not only their campaigns but also of their intention to make a difference in the product and inside their company.

Second, the proper identification of the writer is regarded as an important element of transparency in brand journalism. For example, Kyle Monson (Knock Twice) claims that ghostwriting is prohibited in their practices although it is not always easy to convince clients:

We really resist ghostwriting which is difficult for a lot of clients to deal with but our policy is that I will write your blog post for you if I can make up stories about your childhood (laugh). That’s actually one of the big ones that we always have to fight about because ghostwriters can’t write as smart as the person unless he’s as smart as the person. One of our real beliefs is that readers don’t really care about the title of the person writing the post. If you are going to get a vice president of blah blah blah writing the post but it’s ghostwritten, we would rather have someone who’s farther down the chain who’s going to write something himself or herself and be genuine and personal and engaging. That’s one of our editorial policies (personal communication, July 18, 2012).
Nathan Lump also argues that their editorial policies keep the content transparent about where it comes from and who produces it: “I think it’s really important to be transparent about the process where the content is coming from, who is producing it. So we don’t do ghostwriting” (personal communication, July 12, 2012). For this reason, Lump claims, when they work with clients who are not comfortable with writing, they employ narrative techniques like interviews to convey a sense of transparency of the content:

[Let’s say if we are working with individuals at a company who don’t consider themselves to be writers and they don’t feel comfortable writing. Then, if we need a piece of content with that person, we will do an interview with him or her and we will build an ‘as told’ piece. So they don’t have to actually sit down and write it but it is nonetheless an authentic reflection of their ideas. So rather than having a writer ghostwrite a piece for them, which I think would not be authentic, not credible, we would just change the format to accommodate with what their skill set is. So they can do an interview and we can turn that into essentially a transcript of the interview... We try to be really transparent about how the content is produced by whom and you know it’s again utilizing all the best practices of journalism (personal communication, July 12, 2012).]

From these examples, it can be argued that transparency is translated into formal attributes of a story like interviews, bylines and behind-the-scene narratives in brand journalism. Transparency is stressed as a normative principle that gives legitimacy to brand journalism and is often articulated and practiced as specific narrative techniques. The interpretation of transparency as disclosure of sponsor information and as narrative techniques can be problematic because the intent of branded content may not be transparent to the audience. According to Matthew Van Dusen, what differentiates branded content from news stories is the intent:

Whereas traditional journalism is concerned itself with informing the public and the truth, branded content is ultimately concerned with bringing reputation management and bringing glory to the brand that’s behind it. So I think the exact same piece could appear in a branded publication and in a non-branded publication and the intent would be the important part, not necessarily the content (personal communication, August, 17, 2012).
Because branded content is increasingly taking the form and style of traditional journalism, this intent may not be clear in the content itself. The norm of transparency, in the ways brand journalism practitioners interpret it, does not articulate the intent of the sponsoring brand behind the content. The mere disclosure of the name of the sponsor and the identity of the writer may not offer a meaningful context to the audience to understand the branded content. The norm of transparency, thus, serves as a legitimating discourse, a narrative device to build credibility and trust with readers for brand journalism practitioners and even as a representational strategy to “frame their approach than to offer a specific set of rules” (Todd Blecher, personal communication, July 30, 2012, original emphasis). It also simplifies complex and multifaceted attributes of transparency to the mere disclosure of sponsorship. As Singer (2015) notes in the journalism context, transparency does involve “a more proactive stance: a before-the-fact profession of goals or interests that supplement but also goes beyond an after-the-fact admission of responsibility” (p. 32).

One important note is that the concept of transparency is not exclusive to brand journalism. For instance, in 2014, the Society of Professional Journalists added “transparency” to their Code of Ethics. While the notion of transparency “may have only recently become part of journalists’ vernacular” (Craft & Heim, 2009, p. 219), the idea has drawn noticeable attention in journalism “as a method by which journalists can reestablish trust with the public” (p. 217). Transparency can take various forms but the core idea is that journalist should disclose information about their newsgathering so that the reliability of their work can be openly evaluated (Singer, 2007; Allen, 2008). With the rise of newer forms of journalism, including online journalism and blogging, the notion
of transparency has become central to the “jurisdictional battle” around the boundary of journalism (Allen, 2008). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) suggest that the practice of transparency will help the public to “see the difference between journalism of principles and careless or self-interested imitation” (p. 83). David Allen (2008) claims that the recent embracement of transparency in journalism is closely related to the changes in the landscape of journalism and this embracement is a strategic one to defend journalists’ professional status: “As traditional news media face challenges from newer media forms, they [journalists] enlist transparency to respond to those challenges and reinforce their standings [and power] in society” (p. 326). In other words, transparency, rather than operating as a normative standard, has become “a tool in the establishment of jurisdiction, a way of winning public legitimacy” (p. 328).

Similarly, in brand journalism, transparency is used as a strategic ritual for brand journalism practitioners to protect themselves from criticism, to establish the legitimacy of their practices and to negotiate corporate interests with journalistic ideals. Conflicts of interests, intentions of the brand and editorial processes through which content is crafted are often unarticulated. While “transparency has become a way for journalists to disclose the constructed nature of their work without stepping outside the boundaries of objective reporting” (Allen, 2008, p. 324), the concept has become a discursive tool for brand journalism practitioners to increase public legitimacy of their practices.

While recreating and co-opting journalistic norms, brand journalism practitioners position corporate objectives on the opposite end of the norms. The emphasis on journalistic norms is accompanied by playing down the corporate objectives or the PR side of brand journalism. According to practitioners, corporate objectives--how much
they are (in)visible and how they are represented—determine the ethics of brand journalism practices. For instance, as Ed Lallo suggests, “[o]ne of the biggest problems [brand journalism] is facing is that there are ethical problems” which involve the issue of how much brand journalism should be about corporate objectives as opposed to journalism:

“Are we journalists? Or are we just PR? How far do you go pushing your messages? Do you have to give both sides of story or just your side? This is a growing pain of brand journalism. One of the biggest problems actually just happened in the election in California where Chevron set up a quasi-journalism site to promote their slate of candidate” (personal communication, November 21, 2014).

Similarly, responding to the question regarding whether there are norms that brand journalists need to follow, Bill Calder argues that one of the most important norm in brand journalism—other than transparency—is not to “fall into traps” of corporate objectives:

There are no real hard and fast guidelines. What I am worried about though is the almost shameless rush to storytelling across all the marketing disciplines… If storytelling is the new hot thing in PR and marketing, do it right and apply true journalistic principles to it. Don’t just do the shameless promotion of the Intel product or the Intel solution or the Intel technology but try to put a little edge to it. Try to cover it as if you are covering it or as if you want it to be picked up by a legitimate news site. In order to do that, you might have to actually filter out some of the traditional marketing language that you might use in other collateral or a press release. I do this everyday. We look at some of the things that we do and sometimes even our own reporters fall into traps occasionally and we will have to edit out what I might refer to as corporate drivel (personal communication, June 27, 2012).

This suggests that PR and corporate objectives are often understood and positioned as antithetical to the journalistic integrity of brand journalism. Brand journalists share the notions of serving the audience, public credibility and ethical sensibilities with traditional journalists. However, they have different emphases, intents
and applications of professional journalism’s ideological values. The articulated discourse of journalistic norm in brand journalism is ultimately for the strategic aims of corporate organizations. The discourse is borrowed to link the corporate communication activity with the ideals and norms of journalism.

Brand journalism practitioners create a collective sense of difference from PR by rearticulating journalistic norms in the corporate context. In other words, the principles of journalism define the difference between brand journalism and more conventional forms of corporate communications even when the difference is viewed minor. The conventions and norms of journalism provide practitioners with terms to conceptualize their practices, to communicate their differences from other promotional activities, and to weave shared discourses about the practices. The discourses enable practitioners to articulate what brand journalism is, how it should be conducted, through what mechanism it works and why it is important, all of which are important to their cultural authority. By mimicking and recreating journalistic norms, brand journalism practitioners do not necessarily argue that their practice is a part of journalism. Rather, they use the journalism discourse and practice as a basis for their differences from other corporate communication practitioners in terms of skill sets, storytelling abilities and ethics. As Bourdieu (2005) argues, in his discussion of journalism in the context of the field theory, differentiation is the key to the survival of a practice: “To exist in a field… is to differentiate oneself… Falling into undifferentiatedness… means losing existence” (p. 39-40). In this sense, brand journalism’s strategic differentiation from PR ironically suggests that the practice resides in the field of public relations, and journalistic professionalism works as a differentiating rhetoric for the existence of the practice in the PR field.
While understanding the principles and conventions of journalism is important for the identity of brand journalism practitioners, their practices in reality may not be radically different from traditional PR. As Kyle Monson suggests, what makes brand journalists different are little “tweaks” that they make:

There’s a lot of overlap with traditional PR, for sure. In terms of marketing, you know, they go through the same processes as advertisers and PR people. I think we try with a kind of our own tweaks, you know. We will take a PR campaign and use this. We make things a little different. And that’s really true for everything. When I work on a brand journalism campaign, I have trained PR people to do things a little bit differently. And I have to ask creative and art directors to do things a little bit differently because we don't want to make things look like ads and we don't want them to look like press releases. That’s actually what we are trying to fix and so, while there’s a lot of overlap, a lot of the techniques are the same and a lot of the purposes are the same, but the way we go about it is essentially different (personal communication, July 18, 2012).

By invoking the norms, conventions and language of traditional journalism, brand journalism practitioners articulate these slight differences as a distinction strategy. As David Park (2009)’s study on the strategic positioning of political blogs shows, (rhetorical) differentiation can play an important role in the politics of discursive authority. He demonstrates that the differentiation discourse of political bloggers enables them to situate their practices and construct discursive authority, distinct from traditional journalism. Similarly, such discourse may also help brand journalism practitioners articulate their professional identity and position their practices within the existing landscape of corporate communications. Journalistic norms and the idea of journalistic professionalism not only operate as a practical strategy to produce the content, but work as a discursive strategy among practitioners to define their work, establish a cultural and ethical space for their profession and to distinguish their practice from PR.
Journalism has established its discursive authority from the shared idea that journalists give “the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, set, or interests involved,” to borrow from Adolph Ochs who purchased The New York Times in 1896. On the other hand, from the beginning, PR has been conceived as the “conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses” (Bernays, 1928, p. 37). Thus, journalism has been associated with the idea of serving the public with impartiality while public relations with corporate power and spin, “manipulative or deceptive communications” (Miller & Dinan, 2008, p. 2). In this sense, the two worlds operate with contradictory discourses, and in brand journalism where elements of both PR and journalism are borrowed, the discourse of journalistic professionalism and ideals takes the central place. The place of PR, in a traditional sense, is pushed into the background and the voice of practitioners that emphasize the legacy and the role of PR in brand journalism is often un(der)articulated.

**Conclusion**

As the above discussions suggest, journalistic professionalism is co-opted to discursively shape the brand journalism community and the identity of brand journalists. The discourse of journalism--its human resources, editorial routines and norms--is articulated as a representational strategy, legitimating rhetoric and differentiating discourse. In brand journalism, only certain aspects of journalism are strategically articulated and journalistic professionalism is often translated as several editorial routines, organizational settings and narrative features that can be relatively easily mimicked. The discourse of journalistic professionalism gets articulated primarily because it offers ways
for practitioners to imagine how this hybrid mode can establish legitimacy and public recognition. Journalistic professionalism, which has been central to the boundary work of journalism, is now explicitly invoked and appropriated as a boundary spanning mechanism by brand journalism practitioners.

On the other hand, the PR dimension of brand journalism is often considered as the opposite of the principles of journalism and thus not as visible as the journalistic discourse in the hybrid practice. In this unequal partnership between journalism and PR in terms of discursive authority, it is important to note that while journalism is articulated as dominant, authoritative and central voices of the brand journalism community, it is also the journalism discourse that is appropriated. As Astrof and Nyberg (1992) suggest, discursive hierarchies can be analyzed by focusing on two processes. The first is to examine “the way in which elements of one discourse are appropriated by others” and the other is to investigate “the contradictions within and among the discourses [and] the direction in which contradictions get resolved or the way they are denied or ignored” (p. 8). According to them, the discourse that reinterprets the discursive material of others is a dominant discourse. That is, appropriation—the power to reinterpret other discourses—is central to determine the authority of a discourse. It is the discourse of journalistic professionalism and procedures that is readily articulated in brand journalism. At the same time, however, the discursive material of journalism is appropriated and recreated within the discursive parameters and restrictions of corporate communications.

In this sense, the unequal partnership between journalism and PR/corporate communications discourses in brand journalism suggests the complex power relations that exist in an interpretive community. Although the PR aspect of brand journalism is
silenced, what gets unarticulated in the brand journalism community is not necessarily powerless or marginal. It works as a powerful voice and context that opens a backdoor entry into restructuring and reshaping the brand journalism community. The conventions of PR and other corporate communications—even when not articulated—revise, restructure and shape the borrowed conventions of journalism and (former) journalists’ professional identity. What constitutes the central and powerful discourse and what makes the marginal voice in an interpretive community can thus be permeable, changeable and contingent. The power relations between articulated and unarticulated voices are unsettled and multidimensional. The tensions between different discourses over voice, visibility and authority involve constant negotiations. It is through these negotiations, or the process of making “the connections or articulations between the fragments and differences” that a community articulates its meaning and identity.
3. Borrowing the voice of others: Intrinsic and extrinsic discourses
of the brand journalism community

Through the discourse of journalistic professionalism, brand journalism practitioners attempt to establish the authority of their practices and stories. Because the claims of journalistic professionalism often invite criticism, brand journalism practitioners tend to incorporate additional sources and methods of relaying their cultural authority. The construction of brand journalism practitioners’ narrative authority and legitimacy relies not only on internal voices of the community but on the voices of others. These extrinsic voices reside outside of the brand journalism community and do not necessarily share the collective codes and conventions of the community. As the following discussion shows, the norms, conventions and languages of “others” can override those of internal discourses. This chapter will demonstrate that who is in and out of the community is neither permanent nor impassable. Extrinsic voices help reinforce the intrinsic discourses of an interpretive community and individuals outside of the community are sometimes invited to be inside and create a strategic partnership between the inside and outside of an interpretive community. Thus, contrary to the claims of feminist critiques of interpretive communities, the extrinsic voices and their “otherness” are not necessarily disruptive or subversive to internal voices of the community.

In brand journalism, three extrinsic voices stand out: experts, employees and audiences. In a strategic partnership, they are often offered temporary membership to the brand journalism community and help establish the discursive authority of the hybrid practice. These temporary members produce different kinds of discursive authority in
branded content. By examining the complex relationship and interdependence between intrinsic and extrinsic voices, the following discussions suggest that the discursive boundary between the inside and outside of the community is permeable and flexible.

**Beyond inclusion and exclusion**

As Stanley Fish (1980) argues, the membership of an interpretive community is based on “a repertoire of [interpretive] strategies” (p. 171) and this repertoire is not shared outside of the community:

members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see...everything in relation to that community’s assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities disagree because from each of their respective positions the other ‘simply’ cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there (p. 15).

Fish’s theory of interpretive community suggests that voices of others are thus excluded or marginalized. In a community, according to Fish and other scholars, only acceptable stories that “correspond to the beliefs held by” the community can be told (Kent, 1992, p. 131). Because different communities share different repertoires, voices of other communities’ members are not heard. This also supposes “the stability of interpretation among different readers” (Fish, 1980, p. 15). For this reason, Dale Sullivan (1999) argues that Fish’s theory of interpretive communities and the division between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses have created “the impression that the rhetoric of different communities is incommensurable” (p. 149).

The question of whose voices or which discourses are intrinsic or extrinsic to the community has been central to the question of who can claim “for the legitimate control of a particular kind of work” and “rights to exclude” others (Abbott, 1988, p. 60). The
distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses plays a critical role in shaping collectivity and membership of a community. The division always involves the struggle and contest over power—“the right to declare a certain rendition of nature as ‘true’ and ‘reliable’” (Gieryn, 1999, p.15). For instance, as Zelizer (1992) explicates, journalists have constructed their interpretive authority as legitimate spokespersons of public events by demarcating themselves from “other communities of potential retellers” such as “historians, politicians, and ordinary private citizens” (p. 200). The discourse of others or extrinsic voices are important to delineate what constitutes intrinsic discourses in a community. As Chase (1988) argues, interpretive communities “are organized around the production and legitimation of particular forms of knowledge and social practices at the expense of others, and they are not ideologically innocent” (p. 13, my emphasis).

The act of interpretation, in this sense, always entails “other critical discourses and other ideologies” (Bauer, 1988, p. 15, original emphasis). The voices of others or outsiders have often been conceived as a subversive, resisting or oppositional power that can potentially alter the dominant conventions and codes of the community. As feminist critics of interpretive communities suggest, discourses of others create tensions, conflicts and “a winner and a loser” in a community and hence, the act of interpretation is always political (Meese, 1986, p. 78). According to feminist critiques of interpretive communities, extrinsic and intrinsic discourses may create dialogic polemics and the clash of competing voices, which can open up the community to changes: “To open up another’s discourse is to make it vulnerable to change, to exposure, to the carnival” (Bauer, 1988, p. 4).
In the brand journalism community, individuals outside the community often participate in creating stories. They are extrinsic voices to the community in the sense that they do not necessarily share the interpretive strategies of brand journalism practitioners and they are only occasional participants in the practices. If brand journalism practitioners establish the legitimacy of their practices and content by showing how closely they can mimic journalistic professionalism, these participants outside of the community operate with different sources of discursive authority and strategies. According to most scholarship in interpretive communities, such discrepancies can lead to disagreements, misunderstandings or oppositions because as Fish (1980) himself notes, “[t]he assumption in each community will be that the other is not correctly perceiving the ‘true text’” (p. 171). For this reason, the voices of others would be considered as a threat to the internally solidified discourses. Little research has been done on the possibility that there might exist relationships—or even partnerships—other than tensions, conflicts and struggles over power between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses in an interpretive community.

In the following discussion, I explore brand journalism practitioners’ strategic incorporation of extrinsic voices in brand journalism stories. Brand journalism stories provide an entry point to examine the intersection between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses because it is through stories that outside partners participate in the meaning-making of the practice. By looking at three extrinsic voices working in the brand journalism community—experts, corporate employees and audiences— I illustrate how discourses in an interpretive community can be both internally and externally imposed and how intrinsically shared discourses can be sometimes reinforced by the extrinsic
voices of others. I also show that brand journalism practitioners expand their role to mediators, facilitators and curators of brand journalism stories by offering membership to outsiders. In what follows, I explain how the boundaries between inside (us) and outside (them) and between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses, which has been critical to the understanding of an interpretive community, are more flexible than theories of interpretive communities suggest.

The strategic partnership between intrinsic and extrinsic discourses

Before discussing the strategic incorporation of extrinsic discourses in brand journalism, I first examine what constitutes an intrinsic discourse about brand journalism stories and narratives among practitioners. Brand journalism is a particular kind of story that conveys and constructs a particular (corporate) vision of the world through familiar narrative structures, themes and frames. While the specific objectives, topics and narrative strategies differ from projects to projects, all brand journalism stories serve the strategic purposes of the brand, however visible they are. As Joe Pulizzie argues (personal communication, November 24, 2014), brand journalism is “about getting a good story, but the story doesn’t matter if it isn’t accomplishing the underlying objectives” of the brand. For this reason, brand journalism stories are understood among practitioners as something that should be strategically crafted and managed in service of the brand’s aims. In particular, the subtlety of the brand’s strategic aims constitutes the central principle of brand journalism stories, where practitioners argue for its necessary presence:

Sometimes, some of our brand journalism projects…, the content, is more closely associated with the brand. Sometimes it is either being produced partially by the client, or the brand, or its employees, or maybe about them but in some cases, it’s not. In some cases, it’s about topics that they want to be aligned with, for instance.
But the brand’s presence in the content or the association with the content is much less close (Nathanial Lump, personal communication, July 12, 2012).

You just have to have an understanding of ways this kind of content system works and understand that you can’t be promotional, you can’t do the same thing with the content that you would with advertising your public relations. You can’t have your brand all over. You have to be a little bit more, I don’t know, universal (Matt Creamer, personal communication, July 13, 2012).

Constructing subtlety in branded content is often accompanied via concrete narrative techniques. According to practitioners, this is not just about merely hiding brands’ names, products and services in content, but requires sets of journalistic skills and senses, including choosing right topics, story angles and narrative strategies. As Michael Brito argues with the example of Red Bull, corporate brands need to identify their unique narratives and “own” the story:

If you think about Red Bull, they don’t talk about their drink. They don’t talk about the ingredients, they don’t talk about how it tastes, they don’t talk about the different flavors that they have. All they talk about is really cool things like snowboarding, jumping out of airplanes, and things like that. That’s their story. They own it. So if you think about a brand, they need to own a story…, the right story that you can own that’s different than your competitors (Michael Brito, November 17, 2014).

As indicated in Brito’s example, the information and the content that the brand provides are often about topics and issues related to the brand, but not directly about the brand. As Advertising Age’s editor at large Matt Creamer notes, brand journalism should be “around the product, around the brand” (personal communication, July 13, 2012, my emphasis). Similarly, Lydia Leavitt (JWT) argues that brand journalism is about “writing ideas central to the brand…, but not about the brand” (personal communication, July 19, 2012). The term “subtlety” summarizes the principles and codified knowledge of brand journalism practitioners that govern what to cover and how it is covered.
Because subtlety and the unobtrusiveness of content constitute a key principle in brand journalism, branded stories are often strategically unbranded. By unbranding, I do not mean that the brand journalism campaign does not have strategic aims for the brand. On the contrary, corporate organizations strategically minimize the brand presence in individual stories they produce in order to increase the credibility of the content and the brand and ultimately to “add value [to the brand] beyond the promises of their products and services” (Wakefield, February 5, 2013). Brand journalism attempts to create such value by strategically hiding brands’ marketing and sales imperatives and associating the brand with information, knowledge and desired lifestyles.

As an illustration, AMEX’s Open Forum deals with issues that small business owners might be interested in, including “money,” “marketing,” “managing” and “innovation,” but it rarely talks about the card or the company. When articles discuss AMEX, they often talk about it as an example of a larger trend in the industry or as a reference. For instance, Barry Moltz’ article (February 4, 2013) about the core values of companies that drive success briefly mentions that American Express’ core value is “[a] will to win” along with other examples including Google, Zappos and Quicken Loans. In other cases, when articles mention AMEX, it is within the context of discussing survey findings or analysis results conducted by the brand. For example, in the January 4th article about small businesses’ 2013 goals, American Express is briefly mentioned as a reference to the survey findings:

Access to qualified talent was a big concern for the small-business owners in all six regions, and yet the polls revealed that most of their businesses weren’t hiring or firing and have remained essentially the same size for the past three years. These findings were underscored by the results of the American Express OPEN Small Business Monitor released last fall. The Monitor indicated small-business owners were sitting tight, not planning to grow, or hire or fire in the next six
months (Lesonsky, January 4, 2013).

Among more than 1,000 articles published on Open Forum in 2012, 56\(^5\) mentioned the brand name, “American Express,” in the content. However, a majority of them discuss the brand as a reference (30.4%) or as an example along with other brands (23.2%). While articles sometimes include information about events for small business owners sponsored by American Express, they rarely mention the card or the membership. Only four out of the 56 articles were promotional, directly stating the benefits of the credit card for small business owners. In one case, an article introduces TSA’s PreCheck program and how American Express can provide financial benefits for people who join the program: “American Express Platinum cardholders can get their $100 reimbursed when they join the program” (Henricks, July 18, 2012). This can be viewed as a promotional message that directly states the benefit of the card membership. However, this information was given in one short sentence and along with other airport security programs and services. That is, the focus of the article was not about the AMEX Platinum card membership but about information about airport security procedures.

As seen in the case of Open Forum, the presence of the brand in brand journalism stories is often subtle even when the article contains direct promotional messages. In many cases, the brand is simply not discussed. When the brand and its products and services are mentioned, it is often in the context of providing examples, references and

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\(^5\) When articles mention “American Express” in the acknowledgement that is not relevant to the content, they were eliminated in the analysis. For example, some articles contain sentences like “Note: The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of FedEx. American Express OPEN and FedEx have teamed up to provide discounts and a comprehensive resource for shipping, business and print services” in the final note, separate from the content, and these mentions were not included.
information about a larger trend in the industry rather than providing information about the brand itself. In this sense, identifying the right context is as important as crafting strategic messages. These stories, while seemingly unrelated to the brand’s immediate interests, may be a part of “ideological movements that are intended to legitimize and consolidate the power of large corporations” (Banerjee, 2008, p. 51). Collectively, they provide a legitimating rhetoric about how the company serves audiences’ informational needs, public goods and social agendas. They work as a narrative to frame business and society relations, strategically defining and locating the role of the company in the larger cultural and social context, which in turn contributes to legitimizing and promoting corporate governance.

Subtlety does not mean the simple invisibility of the brand in the content and the aesthetics of the branded site. Rather, it is the product of careful management of the tensions between the brands’ strategic objectives and the journalistic principles innate in the practice. The content and the atmosphere of the branded site should signal, not scream, the brand. In this sense, the construction of subtlety is an active process of choosing appropriate topics, forms, narratives, contexts and tones that may increase the visibility of the brand in the information ecosystem without being too overt. The principle of subtlety also serves as a narrative cue for practitioners to define professional codes of knowledge and the boundaries of their practices. Brand journalism practitioners often define their work around the process of creating and managing subtlety in their stories, which allegedly differentiates their stories from more overt forms of corporate communications. In this sense, the principle of subtlety summarizes how practitioners...
define brand journalism stories and how they delineate their professional identity around the stories.

As the following discussion suggests, this intrinsically shared principle of subtlety is at times co-constructed by extrinsic voices. Because subtlety is a governing principle of brand journalism stories and the stories do not usually depend on the credibility or reputation of the brand, it is important for brand journalism practitioners to establish the narrative authority of their stories. As discussed in the previous chapter, the adoption of journalistic conventions and professionalism is one of the most important bases for both brand journalism practitioners’ identity and the narrative authority of brand journalism stories. However, the idea of brands serving as “news” or a credible information outlet often invites skepticism. For example, *Advertising Age* editor Matt Creamer acknowledges that there are “a lot of reservations about brand journalism” and “a lot of concerns that it can be abused and it becomes essentially a tool for misinformation”: “It [brand journalism] borrows different pieces from journalism but you are not going to rely on something like American Express’ investigation or reporting” (personal communication, July 13, 2012). For this reason, brand journalism stories often require additional sources of authority. In addition to—and often in conjunction with—journalistic conventions, thus, brand journalism practitioners incorporate the voices of experts and experiences of “real” people to build the subtlety, credibility and authority in the stories they create.

*Experts*
One of the most important extrinsic voices in brand journalism is that of experts. The knowledge, experience and reputation of subject matter experts are incorporated in brand journalism to create the subtlety of the content and the discursive authority of the practice. Experts are often hired as contributing writers or guest bloggers and offer their knowledge in the domain field. For instance, Johnson & Johnson’s Baby Center brands itself as “the world’s partner in parenting, providing moms with trusted advice from experts around the globe” rather than an information site of the Johnson & Johnson brand. The editorial and advertising policies described on the same page also indicate that it maintains a clear distinction between the editorial content created by experts and advertisements sponsored by brands:

BabyCenter is dedicated to providing parents and parents-to-be with high-quality, medically reviewed content. Our editorial team is made up of professional writers and editors, many educated at top journalism schools in the United States. We want to be your most trusted parenting resource. That's why we offer practical advice from expert sources, such as obstetricians, pediatricians, midwives, developmental psychologists, and - equally important - fellow parents.

With only a few exceptions, our content is all originally reported, fact checked, and reviewed by our Medical Advisory Board. Our editors and advisors are constantly updating and reviewing articles, and we make every effort to make corrections in a timely manner. In 2005 we began documenting this process on each story (look near the article title for the last reviewed date and advisor's name).

As part of our mission to provide readers with trustworthy information, we adhere to a strict policy of separation between editorial and advertising content. We believe you should always know the source of the information you're reading. We never allow advertisers to influence editorial content, and all advertising is either clearly separated from editorial content (in standard placements such as banner ads and right-hand units), or clearly labeled "advertisement" or "from our sponsors.” (BabyCenter, “Editorial and advertising policy,” n.d.).

Another example is GE’s Ideas Lab, a “platform to explore how new ideas, innovations and public policies will transform business, industry and the global economy”
The website is running in partnership with Atlantic Media’s creative agency Atlantic Media Strategies and has been edited by professional editors like Brock Mees, former investigative journalist at MSNBC and Jamie Taraby, current senior staff writer at Al Jazzera America and former correspondent at NPR. The Ideas Lab’s staff writers do create articles but a majority of articles are provided by political and policy experts, Fortune-500 executives, and other newsmakers: “More than 170 thought leaders from across industry, government, academia and non-profit communities have contributed to Ideas Lab. We actively seek new contributors to share their own unique perspectives on innovation and policy” (About, Ideas Lab, n.d.). Shannan Bowen, former social media strategist for the campaign at Atlantic Media Strategies, states in an interview that identifying experts and making relationships with them is an important part of her work:

The strategy involves finding out who the key players were, offline and online, in that space… Who were the most active people on Twitter, or on their own blogs? Who were the most active people in these policy discussions? (O’Donovan, September 25, 2013).

For such brand journalism sites, expert writers, often CEOs or leaders of a corporate company, do not write about the brand they are writing for but write about their knowledge, experience and specialty. For example, the first two guest writers at GE’s Ideas Lab were Michael Lind, author and co-founder of the New America Foundation, and James Pethokoukis, Money & Politics columnist-blogger for the American Enterprise Institute. Both wrote on the issue of “U.S. manufacturing” (with different perspectives and interpretations) and the style and tone of the stories closely mimic those of news articles and opinion columns. Both articles are based on the presentation and analysis of concrete data that support the expert’s opinions:
And the future looks promising, too. Certainly for output, but maybe jobs as well. All those years of massive trade deficits with China and the rest of Asia have served as kind of an unintentional Marshall Plan, helping the region develop and eventually “return the favor,” as Glassman puts it, by “creating new markets for American businesses and those in the developed economies more broadly. In other words, the trends that were contributing to the phenomenon many thought of as ‘outsourcing’ are reversing.” Then you have America’s near-miraculous energy boom. While consumers may hate oil prices and the high gasoline prices they bring, they’ve led to a surge in oil and natural gas exploration and production. Citigroup predicts producing these resources will turn what at the moment seems like a $90 a barrel floor for oil into a $90 ceiling. Moreover, U.S. natural gas prices are “likely remain significantly lower than global prices for decades to come” (Pethokoukis, September 25, 2012).

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), every dollar of final demand for a manufactured product represents 55 cents for the manufacturing sector, narrowly defined, and 45 cents for other sectors of the economy. The federal government estimates that every $1.00 for manufacturing generates $1.34 in other economic sectors, a far larger multiplier than those of retail trade and wholesale trade, which generate only 55 cents and 58 cents, respectively, in other sectors (Lind, September 25, 2012).

This suggests that it is not just experts’ credentials that give credibility and authority to the content. It is also the way they write and communicate their thoughts to the audience. Their knowledge and experience are often presented with data and factual evidence in the writing. By inviting experts as writers, corporate organizations thus attempt “to draw on authority of experts, persons who are perceived as having neutral, factual knowledge and as not being part of” corporate interests (Albæk, 2011, p. 338, my emphasis). This is a way of establishing the discursive authority of brand journalism stories and the brand itself as an expert in the field. With experts’ “neutral and factual knowledge,” it is possible for brand journalism practitioners to convey a sense of objectivity, credibility and journalistic integrity to readers.

In addition to having experts write for corporate brands, expert voices are often cited or quoted as sources in brand journalism stories. Experts are called upon for background information, interpretation and opinion on the topics and issues that brand
journalism stories discuss. Their opinions and voices are often incorporated to reinforce the argument and the perspective of the article and possibly of the brand. For instance, brand journalism campaigns like Intel’s Free Press, GE’s Tchnologist and Qualcomm’s Qualcomm Spark often feature articles with experts’ voices in the field. In addition, Q&As with experts or industry leaders or “as told pieces” (Nathan Lump, personal communication, July 12, 2012) are prevalent narrative forms in brand journalism stories. As an illustration, Qualcomm Spark publishes an article on the future of photography with Caterina Fake, co-founder of Flickr, in the form of the interview transcript (Chang, October 28, 2013). In the interview, Fake does not mention Qualcomm, but discusses issues like the future of photography and the internet-- her expertise that is broadly related to the business of the wireless and mobile technology company. Just like expert writers, quoting or interviewing experts can give the impression that the brand journalism site is not about the brand but about the industry issues. In other words, expert comments are important because they are viewed unrelated to brands’ interests.

Because expert voices play a critical role in establishing the authority of branded content, locating and hiring the right expert for the content is also an important part of brand journalism practitioner’s job. For this reason, they actively search, cooperate with and utilize experts “whose reputations and qualifications add weight to the argument being made, influence the way events are interpreted and set the agenda for future debate” (in Rowe et al., 2004, 161):

We try to get influential people or people that you wouldn’t have access to, like someone cool at Google Apps you want to talk to, to write about particular things…We don’t get a PR person to write the content. It’s a bit like letting go, giving control to actual experts that you hire, someone who’s influential amongst the people who will be consuming the content as well as staying targeted to that particular audience (Lydia Leavitte, personal communication, July 19, 2012).
I don’t know how familiar you are with the tech media world but most, not most, a lot of the biggest voices in the tech media world have written in Qualcomm now. We got one of the guys who helped build Angry Bird and we got the founding editor of EnGadget…We got Amber Case who writes for us and a week ago gave a South by South West keynote speech. We got the managing editor of Techcrunch. You know, we’ve been able to get these really great voices for that campaign…We are giving them total editorial freedom, letting them say whatever they want to say, our only request is please make it interesting, please be on topic…That’s a really broad assignment so it’s been really good so far (Kyle Monson, personal communication, July 18, 2012).

As indicated in these comments, in the partnership between brand journalism practitioners and experts, expert-writers’ editorial freedom is considered as key. Many practitioners argue that companies and agencies do minimal, if any, editing of experts’ content. An expert-writer at Qualcomm Spark, Lydia Leavitt emphasizes that the content published in the branded site reflects solely the perspective of the author’s, not the brand’s:

I am very clear with the writers that we are very open to dissenting opinions. This is a branded site but we don’t want you to feel like we are editing news, we will do a very light edit on these pieces... We had one of our influencers, Ryan Block, who worked as a reporter at EnGadget and co-founded GDGT. Somebody twitted about him and said, “Oh Ryan Block is such a sell out he’s publishing on this site Qualcomm Spark,” and he’s like, “actually dude, they didn’t edit me at all. So those are my thoughts. If you think that’s a bad piece, you say that I am a bad writer” (personal communication, July 19, 2012).

The voice of experts is important for brand journalism in which trustworthiness of branded content is critical for the success of the campaign. By hiring experts in the place of advertisers, marketers and PRPs and emphasizing their editorial freedom, corporate organizations rhetorically position their campaigns beneficial to the audience as they provide expert knowledge and insight instead of the brand’s promotional messages. By giving experts a sense of autonomy and editorial freedom, brand journalism practitioners appropriate the discursive authority of experts. This is easier and less risky for brand
journalism practitioners than claiming authority based on journalistic professionalism. The presence of brand journalism practitioners, in this case, is subtler and more invisible in the stories they create. However, while they rely on opinions and interpretations of experts for the credibility of their stories, brand journalism practitioners expand their role and realm of knowledge in the information ecosystem, not only as story creators but as mediators who position, interpret and contextualize expert voices for the public. Their work and expertise involve identifying and reaching out to experts, talking to them and organizing their voices. While practitioners do produce brand journalism stories, their work focuses as much on the aggregation, moderation and curation of expert voices.

To put this another way, utilizing experts’ voices also works as a strategy and a symbolic action for brand journalism practitioners to establish their legitimacy: “Providing targeted content-curation pages signal that you are an expert in a subject. By pointing to an industry niche and evaluating their content, you imply that you are qualified to judge their content” (Bardwell, September 19, 2012). That is, through the aggregation and curation of expert content, it is perceived that corporate brands can be established as legitimate commentators in the field and the practitioners as mediators of expert voices.

The voices of experts have been mediated and communicated to the public primarily through newspapers, broadcast/radio news and magazines. Professional journalists are the ones who have had the authority to mediate, interpret and contextualize their voices. In brand journalism, practitioners take journalists’ role as mediators of expert voices and interpreters of data. While practitioners argue that they give control to experts in terms of creating content, they identify, segment and target selected few
individuals with discursive power who can bridge the relationship between the corporate brand and the public. This suggests that the partnership between corporate brands and experts may not be as equal as it looks. As Joe Pulizzi (personal communication, July 23, 2012) suggests, brand journalism “does not have to reach a million people [or] not even five people.” Instead, it is more important to reach “one right person” who can affect the business. Brand journalism practitioners carefully select, pitch to and manage relationships with individuals who can talk to the public on their behalf. That is, the voices of experts in brand journalism are structured, organized and managed by corporate brands and agencies for marketing purposes.

For brands, the co-optation of discursive authority of experts can help promote brands’ preferred interpretations of given issues and events. Their voices can be strategically co-opted to bolster and legitimize the perspective of the brand. In addition, the voice of experts and influencers can implicitly endorse the brand:

When you interview an influencer and publish their name, image, and/or voice on your blog (make sure you tell them where it’s going to be published), it becomes an implied endorsement of your brand even though the influencer may or may not be saying about your brand (David Spark, June 27, 2011).

Brand journalism practitioners draw on the authority of experts to endorse the position of the brand while being subtle about their intention. They use expert sources not only to provide facts but also “for compensatory legitimacy--to confirm the conclusion that they themselves have already reached” (Albaek, 2011, p. 338). As advertising scholars argue (Biswas, Biswas & Das, Tan, 2006; Hung, 2014; Wang, 2005), the expert or celebrity endorsement of a product or a brand can affect consumer perception, attitude and behavior. This is the case when the endorsement is conducted either in the explicit or implicit mode (McCracken, 1989). For this reason, expert or celebrity endorsement has
long been a part of marketing strategies. In brand journalism, expert endorsement tends to be subtler than in advertising or marketing. Experts do not directly talk about a particular product or a brand. Instead, they are invited to discuss the topics and issues in which they have expertise often without even mentioning the brand or its products. Brands appropriate the reputation and the knowledge of experts by having them write for them, rather than what they say about the brand itself: “I would say the fact that our writers have a reputation in this industry already and have their own set of dedicated followers makes things easier...People trust them and know they would not do anything that puts their journalistic integrity on the line” (Abramovich, August 30, 2012). Drawing upon the discursive authority of experts, a brand can potentially signal to customers that it is a legitimate and respected voice in the field. In this sense, the mechanism of how expert endorsement works in brand journalism is more complex and subtle than in advertising, PR or marketing.

Citing experts’ comments has been an important part of enhancing the credibility of professional journalism stories, especially since the rise of interpretive and investigative reporting (Albæk, 2011). Experts’ opinions and knowledge were often utilized as journalists’ sources to “provide facts, add credibility and present objectivity” (Boyce, 2006, p. 890). As Conrad (1999) claims, “[t]hrough their interaction with journalists, experts become ‘news shapers’ by providing context and comment for a story” (p. 286). In some cases, experts are also invited to write commentary columns and opinion pieces--either regularly or occasionally--for newspapers. As McNair (2008) suggests, these “non-journalist” commentators establish authority in “other, non-journalist spheres” and journalism uses their authority and “reputations outside the media
world” (p.106) to build trust for journalism “not merely as a reliable source of accurate information… but as an insightful analyst and interpreter” (p. 107). While there has been scarce academic attention to the role of non-journalist experts in journalism, they have been a part of professional journalism as sources, “referees and critics” (Albæk, 2011, p. 338), and as commentators to reinforce journalistic authority. As Albæk (2011) summarizes, experts have served as “sparring partner[s] for journalist[s] in the attempts of the latter to interpret a given event or course of events on the public agenda” (p. 335).

Even though experts are “outsiders” of the community, they have been co-producers of journalistic content and authority. Similarly, in brand journalism, practitioners make partnerships with experts to increase the credibility of the branded content and of the brand. Experts are invited to share industry agendas, amplify social and cultural contexts of the brand and to endorse the brand as an expert. In turn, experts are given editorial freedom and a channel to speak to the public. This suggests that unlike the claims of feminist critics of interpretive communities, the voices of others can be cooperative instead of being disruptive, subversive and transformative within an interpretive community. The voices of others can be spoken and amplified--often strategically--to reinforce the voices of the inside. In this strategic partnership, the boundaries between which discourse is internal and external to the community can be fluid. This is the case not just for a hybrid community like brand journalism but for more established communities like traditional journalism where the cultural authority of journalists is crafted through narratives that insiders (journalists) collectively create, excluding and differentiating themselves from other groups of retellers (Zelizer, 1992). The borrowing of experts’ voices in brand journalism suggests that extrinsic discourses
can be systematically and strategically incorporated—rather than filtered out or silenced—in an interpretive community.

Employees

Another way of constructing the subtlety and discursive authority of brand journalism stories is through personal experience stories of employees. Some of these personal accounts are based on eye-witnessed or directly experienced events. Personal accounts, as I show in the following discussion, are a useful narrative technique in brand journalism to invoke the authenticity of the story.

Employees occupy an interesting place in brand journalism. While they are insiders of the brand, they are extrinsic to the brand journalism community in the sense that they only occasionally participate in the creation of stories and do not necessarily share the conventions and norms of brand journalism. Employees of corporate brands are sometimes invited to share their experiences as travelers, volunteers and observers as much as—or rather than--employees of a corporate brand. Even when their stories are primarily about their experience with the brand, the personal aspects of their stories are emphasized. Such stories often draw upon the narrative styles of lifestyle journalism and human interest stories like product reviews, travel essays and how-to pieces. For instance, in a posting called “Enjoying Coffee in Honduras” (April 28, 2013), Whole Foods blogger Jennifer Cheng provides a personal account about her coffee trip to Honduras:

It was the end of the trip, and we were saying our goodbyes. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” I heard myself say. After all, a week-long trip to Honduras to meet coffee farmers isn’t something that’s offered to me very often. As I watched Allegro coffee buyer Christy Thorns swerve calmly and efficiently through the Tegucigalpa airport I realized that, for her, this Honduran adventure was a fairly regular occurrence.
Over the span of a week, I watched a coffee cupping competition, observed Honduran farmers attend a series of talks to help them combat leaf rust, a plant disease that could potentially decimate their crops, visited coffee farms and mills, attended an awards ceremony and happily received a dust bath in the back of a pickup truck. That’s the short of it.

The long-tail effect of this trip, however, is that when I grind and brew my coffee beans each morning, I’ll remember those shade-grown coffee farms. I’ll remember how a juicy coffee cherry was plucked off of a branch and pulled apart to show me the viscous outer covering of the bean that later turns into a parchment (“Nature’s plastic wrap,” we joked.) that protects the bean. I’ll remember the flurry of hands as they sorted beans running by on a conveyor belt. And I’ll never forget the faces of the hardworking farmers that choose to grow organic coffee, despite the extra steps they have to take to do it.

In the first-person accounts of employees, individual experiences of a particular place or an event are articulated in a concrete, personal and testimonial manner. Reflections, insights and expressions of emotions attached to the experience are also an important part of the account. As Wall (2005) argues, the personal narratives of lived experience in the blogosphere can be understood “as a new genre of journalism that emphasizes personalization and audience participation in content creation” (p. 153). It is also a form of what Stuart Allan (2002) calls “personal journalism,” which provides first-hand reporting of eye-witnessed events and personal commentaries and opinions. As scholars argue (Park, 2009; Wall, 2005), this new form of journalism seeks its cultural and discursive authority differently from that of traditional journalism. In particular, anti-professionalism, personalization and its participatory nature provide a basis for its authority. The first-person, personal narrative style represents a different mechanism of establishing the credibility and the cultural authority from traditional news and its narrative styles:
The sharing of personal information and sometimes providing diary-like personal accounts of events emphasizes the non-professional and non-elite status of most of these blogs. The use of personal opinion gives a certain intimacy to the blogs and suggests that the blogger is someone the readers can believe they know, someone who is not manipulated by a corporate boss or a filter of professionalism. The sharing of personal information and details about the sites themselves conveys a sense of transparency, suggesting that visitors are seeing the ‘real’ inner workings of the site (Wall, 2005, p. 165).

This suggests that personal accounts are narrative forms used to cue the transparency and authenticity of the stories and of the site. If some brand journalism stories focus on information and expertise and seek their authority from journalistic professionalism and field experts, others find their discursive authority from ‘authentic,’ ‘real’ and ‘transparent’ personal accounts of lived experience. In such personal experience stories, while narrators are often employees and executives of a corporate organization, their stories are often described in terms of personal, everyday experience as ordinary people in their workplace rather than the brand’s employees or ambassadors. As an illustration, communication specialist at Southwest Airlines Brooks Thomas discusses “Captain Joe’s story” as his “favorite example” of how the airline employees’ experience at work can be crafted as a brand journalism story. In this story, the captain explains how he was able to calm down a five-year old boy who was upset and crying during turbulence by taking him to the flight deck:

Alex absolutely loved the flight deck with all the bells, whistles, lights, and noises. He asked me if we could fly “very low” and as he said this he moved his little hand like an airplane flying over the top of the seat cushion. I assured him we would fly low, assuming that he thought if we flew low it would be a nice ride to San Antonio. By this time Alex and I were buds and after I took his picture sitting in my seat, I carried him back to his folks. He had his arm around my neck and the screaming had stopped, as had his tears (Joe Gaultille, March 24, 2011).
As Thomas argues, this story addresses about the “exceptional, legendary customer service Southwest is known for” (personal communication, August 7, 2012). However, the story emphasizes the captain’s personal experience with the boy rather than the airline’s services. The emphasis on personal experience, interest and ordinariness can be understood as a rhetorical tool that makes the personal account of one’s experience credible, authentic and real, separate from brands’ strategic objectives. Instead of stressing objectivity, these brand journalism stories co-opt personal-ness and ordinariness as a way of establishing the voice of the brand, providing a lifestyle closely attached to the brand, and building the discursive authority of the branded story.

Despite its presumed authenticity and autonomy, employees’ personal experience is sometimes organized and managed by corporate brands and brand journalism practitioners. For instance, Michal Brito argues that brands need to “empower, mobilize and train employees to participate in telling brands’ stories” (personal communication, November 17, 2014). This suggests that while employees’ personal experiences are articulated, the stories are told in the parameters of “brands’ stories.” While employees’ stories may not be heavily edited, they are not free from the brand’s interests and agendas. In this sense, employees’ personal stories are strategically co-constructed and contextualized by the brand to establish the authentic voice of the brand.

Audiences

Another important extrinsic voice to build the authenticity of brand journalism campaigns is that of audiences. As corporate companies realize the power of social, increasingly more brands invite--and empower-- potential consumers to join the process
of producing and circulating information and co-create values and meanings around the branded content, and subsequently, around the brand. Brand journalism, in this sense, is not just about brands’ providing information and stories to the public. As Nathan Lump argues, it is--often strategically--a more open, social and participatory process:

We are always trying to create content that is engaging and that essentially, I think one of the points of journalistic content is that it doesn’t mean to be truly definitive in the sense that news is always changing and developing. You know, journalism is an ongoing endeavor. And I think the nature of creating content like this is almost inherently engaging because in some ways, you never know what the end is. I think we are always trying to create content that people can engage with partially because it invites them to think and therefore potentially share or react (personal communication, July 12, 2012).

According to scholars, co-creation has become a new mode of “marketing governmentality” and consumer “labor” has become an important part of the economic, social and cultural politics of the new management technique (Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody, 2008, Zhang & Fung, 2013). The idea that audiences partake in value creation in the marketplace is not new to brand journalism. As Yochai Benkler (2006) proposes, such social production and co-creative activities of corporate brands and customers are no longer marginal but are moving to the core of contemporary marketing techniques. Arvidsson (2006) also argues that creating brand values is increasingly relying on immaterial labor of consumers. According to him, in this changing information and communication environment, brands are moving from the logic of “Fordist advertising which was primarily directed at imposing a particular structure of needs and tastes on consumers” and focusing on constructing “social relations, shared emotions, personal identity or forms of community” by “enabling consumers, by empowering them in particular directions” (Arvidsson, 2006, p.8, p.18, original emphasis).
Brand journalism practitioners develop strategies to enable consumers to participate in the process of producing branded content and accelerating the flow of the content. The role of audiences in creating and amplifying content is widely recognized by brand journalism practitioners. In particular, with the rise of social media, practitioners acknowledge that “people are finding and consuming the content from their social networks” (Shane Snow, personal communication, July 2, 2012). As Angela Stringfellow (personal communication, September 5, 2012) suggests, brand journalism practitioners work with companies “to help them create compelling, engaging content that is more like to be shared by the audiences.” Thus, consumers often play an important role in the amplification and reproduction of the branded content even when they do not get to create the content. For this reason, co-creation involves audiences’ participation in both the production and reproduction/amplification of the branded content.

According to Zwass (2010), co-creation by corporate brands and audiences can be categorized into two kinds, based on the extent to which corporate brands are involved in the co-creation process: 1) “autonomous co-creation” in which the communities and individuals are relatively independent of corporate companies, “although they may be using platforms provided by such organizations” and; 2) sponsored co-creation” where consumer communities or individuals conduct co-creation activities at the behest of a company (p.11). In autonomous co-creation, audiences are invited to voluntarily participate in creating content and interacting with other audiences. While corporate companies provide platforms and sometimes guidelines for such interactions, the exchange of content and interactions among users seems organic and the presence of the brand in audiences’ content and interactions is often subtle:
To be frank, it was really quite organic in that multiple people or group started doing it in different stages and times. And at this point we still even don’t have unified strategy around blogging that we do. You can’t tell people what to write on their Facebook pages. And in the same way, we don’t really put a lot of effort outside of some training in governance. So what’s happened, I mean in a good way, what’s happened is that people that are most interested in and people that have something interesting to say have voluntarily stepped up doing it on various platforms that we created. So we have the SAP community network which has almost 2 million members now and is one of the best corporate communities in the world. It started as a support forum for our end users having questions like “hey, I just got this error code on my software. I don’t know what it means” and it’s really turned into now a business community with people sharing ideas. Our product people in the community used to be providing some level of support, but now they are finding that it’s a platform for them to talk about issues like, “hey if you are interested in our product strategy for 2015, here it is. And what do you think and what’s missing?” So it’s really become a mechanism for us to engage with our customers and get their feedback from a product strategy standpoint (Michael Brenner, personal communication, August 23, 2012).

In sponsored co-creation, companies are more involved in creating audience actions and reactions. For instance, automobile company Ford recruits 100 “agents” each year since 2009 to “complete missions” assigned by the company and to “share the best of the best content with the rest of the world” in their Fiesta Movement campaign. The company recruits “a small army of music lovers, gearheads, techies and others” and loan each of them Fiesta to drive for 6-8 months and ask them to livestream their experiences. The agents post videos and stories about their experiences based on monthly themed missions including music, travel, social activism, technology and adventure, which are intended to emphasize different features of Fiesta. When Ford selected the 100 agents from more than 4,000 video submissions, the company assigned them two scores: “a ‘social vibrancy’ rating based on how much they were followed online and across how many platforms; and an overall grade based on those factors plus creativity, video skills and their ability to hook a viewer within five to 10 seconds” (Dolan, April 8, 2009). That is, Ford strategically used the already established social network of the agents and
decided who is eligible for (co-)creating the branded stories. As Nathan Lump states, brand journalism practitioners are “increasingly more focused on the spread of content through social media and empowering and encouraging the users to make the dialogue happen organically and authentically within their own networks” (personal communication, July 12, 2012). According to him, the use of audiences’ voices and their social networks is “more authentic and organic than the brand trying to be the arbiter of the dialogue or even participating in it” (personal communication, July 12, 2012).

Just like the voices of employees, audiences’ stories are strategically incorporated to humanize and concretize the brand’s visions, promises and images. For example, Southwest Airlines’ corporate blog “Nuts about Southwest” features personal stories from employees, guest writers and customers and these stories often talk about the brand in terms of their personal experiences. In one instance, a customer was invited as a guest writer to write her story about her deceased son James who had suffered from a brain tumor and her family’s “Make-A-Wish trip” to Las Vegas before her son’s passing (Almeida, September 25, 2013). In this emotional story, she details her family’s experience with the airline and what it means to her family:

The surprise began with Southwest Airlines. When we arrived at Orlando International Airport, we saw that the Employees decorated our gate with balloons, streamers, and pictures of James! After pictures, hugs, and tears, they escorted him onto the plane. When we changed planes in Texas, more Employees met James, and they were so full of joy! They escorted us down the concourse, making a fuss over James every step of the way, and our gate was again covered with posters and decorations. They even graciously offered to send all of the posters from Orlando and Texas to our home so that I could keep them (I still have every single one)… James said that Southwest made him feel like a “rock star,” and that couldn’t have been more true! Even four days later when we passed through McCarran International again to fly home, a Customer Service Agent at the counter asked, “Is this the famous James Green from a few days ago?” (Almeda, September 25, 2013).
In the case of Southwest Airlines, the company’s blog team utilizes everyday--sometimes extraordinary--stories of their customers: “We are an airline where single person that travels has a story, whether it’s going to celebrate somebody’s friend’s wedding or just going on a vacation…Our audience is very conditioned to tell the story, knowing that they will be heard, knowing that we truly care about it” (Brooks Thomas, personal communication, August 7, 2012). These personal, emotional human-interest stories, according to Thomas, are “beneficial not only in [their] storytelling but also in [their] brand identity” (personal communication, August 7, 2012). That is, customers’ personal stories and experience are often used to shape and cultivate the brand’s identity and images.

Audiences are invited to produce stories in their own voices because as Shane Snow argues, “social media is really good at calling BS on stories that are too promotional and self-brandizing” (personal communication, July 2, 2012). This assumption is that doing so empowers them. As Zwick and his colleagues (2008) suggest, consumer agency is “the result of strategic corporate practice of consumer government that now operate ‘in an expanded range of everyday spaces’” (p. 168, my emphasis). In a sense, corporate companies require empowered consumers who fight “for the right to participate more fully in their culture, to control the flow of media in their lives and to talk back to mass market content” for continued corporate governance and control in this changing information economy (Jenkins, 2004, p. 37).

As the role of audiences as co-creators and co-distributors is becoming critical, many corporate brands are actively inviting them to be (the central) part of dialogues around the brand to create awareness of the brand, change attitude toward the brand and
to boost sales. McDonald’s (USA)\(^6\) “Moms Quality Correspondent” campaign is another example of this strategic partnership between corporate brands and consumers. The company recruited six “everyday moms” back in 2007 as “Quality Correspondents” to eyewitness the quality of their food and to share their experience with peer moms. The campaign was initially planned to continue for three months but the company expanded the program the next year and enlisted the second group of moms (five women in the Washington DC/Baltimore region). In order to seek volunteers, McDonald’s ran TV and newspaper ads in addition to the online recruitment effort by Arc Worldwide, a brand activation agency within The Leo Burnett Group. According to a PRSA report, more than 4,000 moms responded to the recruitment effort and six were selected in 2008. They were selected to represent “real families” of America. The selected group of moms had access to the food supply system of the company, including restaurants, processing plants and test kitchens. The “correspondents” kept online journals about their experience, in a company-created website\(^7\) and McDonald’s also posted photos, videos, and information about the moms’ field trips. The program attracted “more than 16,000 moms” to the website and “[n]early 1,400 enrolled in the online community” (PRSA, 2008). In addition, the campaign received media--both print and broadcast--attention across the nation. For instance, NBC Nightly News (TV), Good Morning America (TV), and Washington Post (print) covered stories about the campaign.

\(^6\) McDonald’s Canada also launched “Moms Quality Correspondents” program in 2008. 
\(^7\) [www.McDonaldsmom.com](http://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en/food/food_quality/see_what_we_are_made_of/moms_quality_correspondents.html). The website is currently closed as the company no longer runs the campaign. However, some of the moms’ stories are still shared in their official website.
The campaign started with McDonald’s findings based on a series of surveys that customers, especially moms, view the quality of the restaurant’s food is poor. In order to improve this perception, McDonald’s launched the $600,000 program with three specific marketing goals: 1) to increase “willingness to recommend” McDonald’s by 10% among the target audience; 2) to improve trust in the brand by 10% and; 3) to build a database of at least 1,000 online community members interested in learning about the restaurant’s food quality (PRSA, 2008). In this sense, the brand journalism campaign was executed with carefully devised marketing strategies and detailed objectives. While the campaign borrowed the voice of everyday moms, the company made strategic decisions throughout the planning, selection execution and amplification process.

In addition, while audiences and consumers are invited as co-creators in brand journalism campaigns for the presumed authenticity of their voices, the authenticity is sometimes crafted and manufactured by corporate brands and the partnership between audiences and brands is not equal. Honda’s “Monsters Calling Home” campaign illustrates this point. This documentary style, five-minute branded video depicts a story of a LA-based indie band called “Monsters Calling Home” and its surprising road to ABC’s “Jimmy Kimmel Live.” In the video, the band was asked to perform for a few hundred of Honda executives in appreciation of their recent music video on YouTube recorded in their Honda vehicles. When they got to the place where the concert was supposed to take place, a “corporate representative” (played by Loren Lester, professional actor) told them that the concert was cancelled because of an unexpected problem. The band members’ disappointment was captured on camera. Shortly after this discouraging announcement, the corporate representative reveals a big surprise to the band: “Honda has a better gig for
you guys. You are booked as the musical guest on Jimmy Kimmel Live!” The reaction of the members, not surprisingly, was dramatic. They screamed and cried with joy. The video ends with the band’s performance in the show in front of a large audience. The video became viral, drawing more than one million views on YouTube and *Huffington Post* and *Advertising Week* featured a story about the video.

Honda’s advertising agency, Rubin Postaer and Associates (RPA), decided to do this story after they found the band’s music video on YouTube. J. Barbush, creative social media director at RPA, noted in an interview about how he had seen this as a great branded story material: “It would have been easy for us to click, like, or repost it… But we thought this was a really great [storytelling] opportunity” (Kapko, September 26, 2012). This story, according to him, is in line with his “passion for finding authentic, regular people that can become spokespeople of the brand”:

> It really is about prompting this regular person with a lot of passion… We're not looking at a campaign, but more of this overall thematic thing that we're going to carry on for a while… Once you go in the direction where you fake it, there's no going back. It's like you're done, you lost it…With social media there's an expectation there of truth and giving something that feels real… It's a little too touchy-feely for regular advertising metrics to quantify (Kapko, September 26, 2012, my emphasis).

As Barbush mentions, the band’s story is used in the company’s branded video because of its authenticity and realness. The story carries the sense of “truth.” The story was unscripted, the people featured in the video were real, “regular people” doing what they want, and the reactions of the band were genuine. The introduction of the video in which the band members talk about how they are struggling financially to play music gives an impression that this is a “real” story of “real” people. The band’s special
experience is depicted without narrations, minimal brand logos and messages, which also enhance the sense of authenticity of the story.

However, it is also notable that the story was planned, managed and told in a particular way by the corporate company. Honda dramatizes the story by setting up the gig, deliberately disappointing the band for the bigger surprise, and depicting the band’s performance on the national TV show. The corporate representative and many other people in the video are actors and actresses. The story was the finale of the “Honda Loves you Back” campaign on social media, which celebrates one million Honda fans on Facebook and gives “feel-good surprises [the brand] orchestrated over the past few years to show gratitude to those who have expressed love for the brand” (Honda Automobiles Press Information, October 28, 2013). “Monsters Calling Home” is one of the stories that show how the brand “loves” and cares for its customers. Unlike traditional advertising, the final product of these stories is not perfectly controlled by the brand or the corporate communication agency but the storyline is carefully designed and produced by them. That is, while the story has an authentic feel to it, the authenticity, in many ways, is crafted and contrived by the brand. As Barbush suggests, these authentic stories of real people’s lives and experience are co-opted to create the desirable image and value of the brand.

According to scholars (Peterson, 1997, 2005; Beverland, 2005), authenticity can be deliberately crafted by corporate companies. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, “authenticity is itself a brand” and the “cultural spaces of presumed authenticity…are increasingly only legible in culture through and within the logic and vocabulary of the market” (p.14). Some scholars even argue that authenticity is often fabricated (Peterson
1997). As Brown and his colleagues (2003) suggest, the concept of authenticity “is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing” because “it forms part of a unique brand identity” (Beverland, 2005, p. 1003). In order to construct and cultivate authenticity, corporate companies have often emphasized certain stories of the product while strategically downplaying others. For this reason, as Beverland (2005) notes, authenticity and realness have rhetorical attributes. In his case study with luxury wine brands, he argues that “authenticity is projected via a sincere story” (p. 1025). In this sense, brand journalism stories based on personal experiences of “real” people can be used as rhetorical resources that create and recreate images of authenticity of the brand. The stories of “real” people are (re-) contextualized in the brand’s storytelling and their meaning is negotiated with the brand’s interests.

In addition, while audiences are often invited as co-creators of branded content, not every voice is weighted the same in brand journalism. That is, influencers’ voices are more likely to be mediated and amplified by brand journalism practitioners. In other words, by incorporating influencer-audiences as part of brand journalism, corporate companies not only co-opt but further stratify the power structure of the online and social media sphere. The increasing partnership between corporate brands and influencers suggests that the power structure of social media--despite its seeming authenticity and organicality-- is not only appropriated but also co-produced and reinforced by corporate companies. In this sense, brand journalism campaigns, supposedly driven by “bottom-up” interactions and participations, may also encompass the brand’s strategic collaborations and behind-the-scene negotiations with individuals outside of the brand journalism community to shape and direct the discussions, cultural meanings and values around the
brand. In this process, the hierarchy of discursive structures is reproduced by corporate brands by providing publishing channels to individuals who already have discursive power.

Of course, audiences’ agency and participation is not simply exploited by corporate brands. As Banks and Deuze (2009) argue, such “co-creative relationships… cannot easily be reduced to one simple manipulation at the hands of corporations and firms” (p. 423). Instead, according to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), in what they call “prosumer capitalism,” “control and exploitation take on a different character than the other forms of capitalism, there is a trend toward unpaid rather than paid labor and toward offering products at no cost, and the system is marked by a new abundance where scarcity once predominated” (p. 14). In this sense, brand journalism campaigns that utilize co-creative efforts of audiences reflect a “change that sits uncomfortably with our current understandings and theories of work and labour” (Banks & Deuze, 2009, p. 419). In addition, this active participation of consumers in producing branded content and values “can be credited with transforming basic economic logic, by shifting power from producers to consumers and thereby blurring the boundaries between firms and consumers” (Pongsakornrunslip & Schroeder, 2011, p. 304). In this changing information economy, brand journalism practitioners accept the logic of “sharing stories with consumers” instead of “telling stories to consumers” (Pongsakornrunslip & Schroeder, 2011, p. 305, original emphasis). Thus, the simple manipulation frame may not be sufficient to explain the partnership between corporate brands and audiences in co-creative activities.
In the partnership between corporate brands and audiences, audiences do gain benefits. In some cases, the economic reward for audiences is immediate and audiences are compensated in return for their writing for a brand. Corporate companies pitch bloggers to try their products—which are given to the bloggers as freebies—and write reviews. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* introduces a 32-year-old mommy blogger’s case who has pitched for several brands including Walmart, Ford, and video game maker Electronic Arts and after her favorable review, Ford gave her a Flex crossover vehicle for one year to try (Bustillo & Zimmerman, April 23, 2009). As this paid endorsement by bloggers is getting increasingly popular among marketers, in 2009, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) revised its “Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising” for the first time since 1980. In this announcement, the FTC requires bloggers “who make an endorsement” to “disclose the material connections they share with the seller of the product or service” (Federal Trade Commission, 2009).

In addition, sometimes the stories consumers create indirectly benefit the authors by adding fans, communities and their own audiences. They also sometimes can gain media attention. That is, not only corporate brands but also consumer producers may possibly build and expand a network of audiences by co-creating branded content. Inviting “agents” to their Fiesta Movement campaign, Ford emphasizes that the authors can also benefit themselves with the help of the brand:

> You’ll complete missions, have tons of fun, and share the outcomes with your fans and followers. And here’s the twist. We’re going to share the best of the best content with the rest of the world. So if your stuff rises to the top, it could be your photo in print ads or your face on TV.
Consumers and corporate brands, in this sense, are in complementary and collaborative relationships rather than exploitative. Co-creation requires consumers’ voluntary participation in the process of creating and sharing content. At the same time, it offers participants monetary and/or immaterial rewards. In addition, the process of co-creation is often framed in terms of self-empowerment. In this sense, the partnership between audiences and corporate brands in brand journalism can be understood as a “both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up-consumer-driven process” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 37).

Because it is a bottom-up process as much as a top-down process, co-creation of branded content involves negotiations or sometimes tensions between the two forces. Corporate communication professionals acknowledge that the co-creation process is less controllable: “No matter how well you plan for something like this, something else always comes up” (Tegler, April 20, 2009). Sometimes consumers “highjack” such co-creation efforts and seize the opportunity to ridicule the company. For example, when General Motors asked consumers to tweak its advertisement on the social media, the campaign resulted in “a rash of ads criticizing its SUVs as gas-guzzlers that contribute to global warming” (Verhoef, Doorn, & Beckers, September, 2013). That is, the incorporation of audiences’ voices does not always result in positive words-of-mouth about the brand and often encompasses a mix of competing values and interests.

Even though co-creation is not a simple exploitation and sometimes invites resistance, in many cases, audiences contribute to the creation of cultural meaning and value around the brand. While not all consumer co-creation activities unfold in ways that are intended or foreseen by corporate brands, companies have the capital, organized
expertise and structured human resources—though not always—to redirect and reshape
the resistance. While the brand-audience co-creation process may look organic, it often
entails corporate brand’s strategic act of identifying the “right” personnel to effectively
reach the target audience.

The presumed authenticity of personal experience and emotion in brand
journalism stories are co-opted to tell “stories of success, desire, happiness, and social
fulfillment in the lives of people who consume the right brands” (Goldman & Papson,
1996, p. 2). Through stories of audiences’ personal experience, brand journalism
practitioners amplify and concretize the values and ideas with which the brand wants to
associate and they help define social relations and the cultural voice of the brand in the
increasingly complex new media environment. In this sense, brand journalism
practitioners can be understood as an “increasing important group of workers who play
an active role in promoting consumption through attaching to products and services,
particular meanings and ‘lifestyles’ with which consumers can identify” (Du Gay, 1997,
p. 62). While brand journalism practitioners often rely on sources from outside for the
discursive authority of their stories, as much as (or even rather than) on their credentials
or professional skills, it is they who identify and recruit the sources and organize
individual stories of personal experiences into the meaningful cultural context for the
brand.

**Conclusion: When extrinsic discourses become intrinsic**

As scholars of interpretive communities argue, sharing the common discourse,
language or speech type is critical to the concept of the community and serves as a
fundamental ground for the internal solidarity of an interpretive community. For this reason, discourses are often conceptualized as intrinsic to the community and they separate insiders from outsiders of the community. When extrinsic discourses are articulated, they are often understood as marginal to the intrinsic discourse. However, the case of brand journalism suggests that extrinsic voices can reinforce the discursive authority and legitimacy of intrinsic voices. In the brand journalism community, there exists an ambiguous space in which extrinsic voices become intrinsic. The outsiders’ membership is, of course, temporary and is valid only when their participation helps the brand journalism community to better position themselves. Yet, this temporary partnership between intrinsic and extrinsic voices allows the community to collectively construct and reinforce its cultural authority.

Brand journalism practitioners may borrow expert voices, third party data and audiences’ personal experiences to increase the discursive authority of branded stories. At the same time, they use these voices as a rhetoric of legitimacy to create a place for their work and rhetorically position their expertise as navigators, mediators and aggregators of experts’ and audiences’ voices in a rapidly changing new media environment. The voices of others allow brand journalism practitioners to imagine their work and professional role as facilitators of conversations among different voices and discursive authorities in the new media environment beyond creators of promotional messages. In this sense, the extrinsic voices of the brand journalism community become essential to the identity of its members.

Because brand journalism is a hybrid community that borrows conventions from existing communities, one might argue that even practitioners’ own discourse is not
intrinsic to the community in the first place. For example, Kyle Monson notes that the conventions and techniques of journalism—which constitute the core of brand journalism practitioner’s intrinsic discourse about their practices—are borrowed in brand journalism:

The core philosophy of my career is that there are content creation techniques in the journalism world that can be transferred over and used for brands on campaigns. Brands typically do a really bad job of communicating with the public that they are transparent, timely and relevant to them and these are things that journalists excel at (personal communication, July 18, 2012).

In this sense, brand journalism practitioners’ “intrinsic” discourses—such as journalistic professionalism and subtlety of the content—are in most part borrowed, tweaked and internalized from journalism and traditions of existing corporate communications.

This suggests that the intrinsic discourse of established communities can travel, transform and take on different meanings in another community. While members of an interpretive community tend to believe that their interpretive strategies and discourses are intrinsic and static attributes of their community, the discourses are sometimes transferrable and permeable to other communities. For this reason, in an interpretive community, both intrinsic and extrinsic discourses can co-exist and they sometimes create a strategic partnership instead of competitions. In other words, intrinsic and extrinsic voices of an interpretive community are mutually dependent. This also indicates that contrary to most scholarship on interpretive communities, adjacent communities are interdependent. As I argue in the next chapter, while brand journalism has borrowed conventions from traditional journalism, the rise of brand journalism has also changed the journalism community. The transferability and permeability of shared discourses proposes that interpretive communities involve ongoing interactions with adjacent communities and negotiations between intrinsic and extrinsic voices.
As Zelizer (1992) suggests, the concept of interpretive community stems both from the narrative work of an interpretive community and from social relations and interactions. That is, an interpretive community is not just a static group of people who share strategies, beliefs or authority but a cultural site where meanings are constantly created, negotiated and contested by multiple groups. For this reason, brand journalism involves various social interactions and meaning-making processes to make certain social positions and power dominant.

The construction of authority in brand journalism is a constant process of making relationships and negotiating with voices outside of the community. In this process, brand journalism practitioners are creating a loose collective with multiple participants and sources of discursive authority. The case of brand journalism suggests that the interpretive authority of a community may not always be centralized, hierarchical and unidirectional. Instead, in an interpretive community, a multiplicity of participants and authorities can operate. The boundaries between what is permissible and impermissible, between insiders and outsiders of a community and between one community and another become fluid. The construction of the authority of an interpretive community is not entirely an internal affair, either. Voices of others sometimes become intrinsic to the cultural authority of an interpretive community.
4. Beyond church and state: Subjunctive and indicative discourse of the brand journalism community

In an interpretive community, members create an aspirational discourse about what they want the community to be. In this mode of discourse, the possibility and potentiality of the community is collectively imagined and reproduced. This discourse of possibility and imagination opens the community to multiple meanings, interpretations and implications. The discursive boundaries of an interpretive community, in this sense, are “subjunctive” and are “fluid and indeterminate” (Turner, 1980, p. 157). In this chapter, I explore how brand journalism practitioners discursively envision their practices and social roles alongside those of traditional journalism. Through a discourse of aspiration—or the “subjunctive” discourse about what is possible—brand journalism practitioners both construct shared narratives about how their practices should be and tweak the normative understanding of traditional journalism. This chapter explains how the subjunctive discourse acts as a relay for the cultural authority of the community and facilitates brand journalism’s relationship with the journalism community. It also examines how the increasing partnership between news publishers and corporate brands redefines and expands the notion of what is permissible as journalism.

Rhetoric of reality, rhetoric of possibility

Members of interpretive communities construct interpretive strategies and meanings through discourse. Such discourse, as scholars suggest, enables members to collectively imagine what their community is, how it should be and what they want it to
be. In this sense, the discourse of interpretive communities offers a way of constructing collective visions of the community beyond given action and even “a way of transforming the relationship between the possible, probable, impossible, and certain” (Zelizer, 2010, p. 14). The discourse of interpretive communities, thus, not only reflects the established norms and conventions of the community but actively constructs a territory of imagination, possibility and desire.

Drawing from linguistics, discourse has two dimensions. First is “the indicative” which “presents an event as a fact.” The second is “the subjunctive” which “expresses it, as for example, a possibility or an aim, or calls it into doubt or denies its reality, or expresses a judgment on it” (Byrne & Churchill, 1988, p. 342). In anthropology, the subjunctive mood is used to explain the ritual process and liminality. While the indicative mood represents “normatively structured social reality and is also both a model of and a model for social states and status,” (Turner, 1980, p. 164) the subjunctive mood characterizes “the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire” (Turner, 1986, p. 42). As Barbie Zelizer (2010) notes in her study of “about to die” images in the news, the subjunctive voice “is depicted in an interpretive scheme of ‘what could be’ rather than ‘what is’” and adds “impulses of implication, contingency, conditionality, play, imagination, emotionality, desire, supposal, hypothesis, hope, liminality, and (im)possibility to the supposed certainty of” the indicative (p. 14).

Because the subjunctive voice subsumes meanings and possibilities beyond the indicative discourse-- the discourse of “what is”-- it is indeterminate and open to multiple interpretations. It is “not yet settled, concluded, and known” and is “all that may be, might be, could be, perhaps even should be” (Turner 1980, p. 157). If the indicative mood
is about “the invariant operation of cause and effect, of rationality and commonsense,” the subjunctive discourse can “be described as a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process” (Turner, 1986, p. 42). It is through subjunctive discourse that the “potency and potentiality” of a community is collectively imagined (Turner, 1979, p. 466).

Journalism provides brand journalism with the ideals, norms and values to follow. It is also the case that many news publishers are increasingly cooperating with corporate brands in the forms of “native advertising,” “sponsored content” and “branded content.” This partnership between brands and news publishers is somewhat problematic for journalism because brand journalism directly violates many of journalism’s subjunctive dimensions, including notions like editorial autonomy and journalism’s role as a support for democracy and public discourse. For the coexistence of brand journalism and journalism, it is thus important for brand journalism practitioners to tackle the tension between the subjunctive notions of journalism and the practice of brand journalism.

While journalistic professionalism is one of the most articulated discourses in the brand journalism community (see chapter 2), brand journalism practitioners do not want their practices to be defined as journalism at least in the traditional sense. In fact, while it does challenge the boundaries between journalism and corporate communications, brand journalism also emphasizes the demarcation between them. Rather than claiming their practices as journalism, brand journalism practitioners envision the coexistence and partnership with journalism by collectively defining the right distance between journalism and brand journalism. In this process, brand journalism is imagined as a
hybrid, “a coherent mix of both editorial and advertising content” and “as another mode of content embedded within news, predicted on providing readers a useful array of content choices” (Carlson, 2014, p. 12-3). In the following discussion, I first examine the subjunctive and indicative dimensions of the journalism discourse and how brand journalism is potentially threatening the subjunctive discourse of journalism, which has been critical to journalists’ identity and discursive authority. What follows is a discussion of how brand journalism practitioners collectively construct the visions, possibilities and aspirations of their practices alongside those of the journalism community. I scrutinize how the aspired dimension of brand journalism unsettles, complicates and expands the discursive parameters, meanings and possibilities of the hybrid community.

**Brand journalism: Challenging the subjunctive notions of journalism**

Journalism involves multiple notions about how journalism ought to be and should work, which has been central to journalists’ discursive imagination of their practices and roles in the society. It is through these notions that journalism envisions itself as a particular kind of public discourse distinct from other forms of public communications. With the rise of brand journalism in which corporate brands create “news” content and even make partnerships with established news publishers, the subjunctive notions of “what journalism should/wants to be” are often violated. In the following discussion, I identify two of the most important ideas in the subjunctive discourse of journalism-- publicness and autonomy-- and how they are challenged and sometimes appropriated to create subjunctive visions of brand journalism.
Some of the most important subjunctive discourses in the journalism community are those of democracy, publicness and citizenship. As McChesney and Nicholas (2010) argue, journalism “must be understood as a public good” (xii, my emphasis). In addition, as James Carey (2000) argues, journalism is “a particular kind of democratic practice” (p. 22, my emphasis) and the histories of democracy and journalism are closely linked. It has promoted the ideas and values of modernity including rationality, reasoned actions, objectivity and progresses, all of which created new modes of exercising power and organizing a public life (Thompson, 1995). As the journalism/democracy nexus has long permeated the journalism community, journalism has been often claimed to be a source of information for deliberation, a watchdog or fourth estate and a basis for citizens’ collective actions and participations in politics (Fenton, 2010, McNair 2000, 2009). For this reason, Fenton (2010) argues that the “ethos and vocation of journalism is embedded in a relationship with democracy and its practice” (Fenton, 2010, p. 4).

The journalism/democracy nexus highlights “notions of distance and impartiality—the notion that journalists could be and should be impartial or at the least working for the good of the public—over attachment and opinion” (Zelizer, 2004a, p. 172). But, as Zelizer (2013) notes, while the normative discourse of democracy occupies a central place in the journalism community it has established “a vision smaller than the world that journalism inhabits” (p. 469). According to her, the link between journalism and democracy drew “from the certain versions of modernity” that are “narrow in its applicability” (p. 465). In other words, the nexus does not accurately reflect conditions in practice. In practice, journalism includes wider sets of models and content types than the frame of democracy can explain. Contrary to the journalism model that the notion of democracy assumes,
journalism is often biased, partial and concerned with “private life” rather than political engagement and democratic participation.

Furthermore, as Anderson (2011) illustrates, notions of democracy are not identical in different models of journalism: “The public journalism movement believed in a form of democracy that was conversational and deliberative; in contrast, traditional journalism embraced an aggregative understanding of democracy, while Indymedia’s democratic vision could best be seen as agonistic in nature” (p. 529). In other words, while the idea of democracy is at the heart of journalism’s discussion on what it aspires to be (the subjunctive) and what it is in practice (the indicative), the idea invites multiple—often competing—visions of how journalism should function and what kinds of citizenship it supports. Without a unified idea of what democracy means in journalism and a clear link between the concept and journalism, the notion of democracy has created subjunctive aspirations of journalism that it should serve larger political ends, which are often beyond the realm of journalism in practice.

Another important subjunctive notion in journalistic discourse is that of autonomy. As Michael Schudson (2005) argues, the assumption of autonomy—“the press should be fully autonomous, pursuing truth without constraint”—is strong both inside the journalism community and in academic discussions of journalism (p. 215). In the mind of American journalists, journalism is and should be free both from political and commercial influence. As argued above, journalists assert a critical distance from politics and journalists’ “performance of impartiality” and non-partisanship are often used as a symbolic device to represent their integrity as professional journalists (Revers, 2014, p. 44).
More related to the issue of brand journalism is journalists’ autonomy from commercial influences. The concern about the influence of market forces on journalism has long been a part of routine discussions among journalists, especially since the early 1990s (Schudson, 1978, 2005, McChesney & Nicholas, 2010, McManus, 1994). In this discourse, journalism is understood as a public enterprise that should be protected from private interests of corporate companies. As Coddington (2015) notes, the autonomy from commercial influences and the division between public and private is “only one [that] is so fundamental to the self-understanding of professional journalism, so thoroughly understood as a cultural and occupational assumption” (p. 67). Journalists thus have believed that the principles of journalism could be preserved “by maintaining a barrier between the news and business department of newspaper” (Underwood, 1993, p. 124). For this reason, the separation between editorial and business sides of a news organization has been emphasized and reinforced not only in newsrooms but also in academic discussions of journalism. What this suggests is that at least in theory, news publishers provide “advertisers with access to difficult and costly to reach mass audiences on the condition that no influence over news content could be wielded” (Carlson, 2014, p. 3).

Because autonomy from commercial influences is critical to the idea of journalism, its violation often creates controversy. One anecdotal incident is the Los Angeles Times’s 1999 scandal about its Staples Center special section. The Times published a 168 page special issue of its Sunday magazine which was devoted entirely to the city’s new Staples Center sports arena. When it was revealed to journalists in the news organization and the public that the paper split the advertising profits from the
section with Staples Center, the arrangement created public debates and concerns about editorial independence and integrity of the news organization. After the incident, the publisher of the paper Kathryn Downing made an apology, calling it “a major, major mistake” (Hiltzik & Hofmeister, October 29, 1999). As indicated in this incident, the boundary between journalistic and commercial enterprise within a news organization is well-established--at least in theory--and journalists have developed shared narratives to separate their newsroom practices from advertising and other forms of promotional communications.

The notion of autonomy has played a critical role in drawing the boundaries of journalism. Journalists, according to Glasser and Gunther (2005), claim the autonomy of their practices by collectively constructing boundaries for the practice:

[J]ournalists assert their independence and autonomy by establishing, sometimes literally but usually metaphorically, certain boundaries for the profession. To vivify journalism’s division of authority, which reminds everyone of their proper place in and around the newsroom, journalists build “walls”—walls between news and advertising, between the news pages and the opinion pages, between the business of journalism and the practice of journalism, between publishers and editors. And to establish the credibility of the day’s news, journalists draw “lines”—lines between facts and opinions, between descriptions and promotion, between analysis and advocacy, between news judgments and moral judgments, between a journalist’s private beliefs and the public expression of them (p. 390).

As indicated in these comments, the notion of autonomy serves as a means of control that distinguishes journalism from other forms of public communications. At the same time, journalistic autonomy is often interpreted as codes of ethics at the level of the individual journalist. It is undermined that the limit of journalistic autonomy is often determined by forces beyond the control of individual journalists, newsrooms or even news publishers (Glasser & Gunther, 2005).
This suggests that while the idea of autonomy is a critical tool to forge journalistic jurisdiction, it is often beyond the control of the journalism community and invoking notions of autonomy is subjunctive in nature. In addition, as Carlson (2014) notes, despite “pledges of autonomy, advertising-supported journalism has long remained open to influence” (p. 4). The wall between news and advertising is largely “a fiction, more honored as a principle than as something that [exist] in practice” (Underwood, 1993, p. 124). Pauly (1988) also suggests that “the myth of editorial autonomy not only protected the self-regard of the news worker, but also affirmed the higher social goals claimed on behalf of the daily newspaper as an agent of civilization” (p. 255, my emphasis). For this reason, journalists “certainly want to adhere [autonomy] to professional ideals” and the discourse of autonomy reflects journalistic efforts and aspirations to maintain the boundary between editorial and advertising rather than the degree to which autonomy is actually realized in practice (Revers, 2013, p. 50). In this sense, the idea of autonomy has provided journalists with the language to collectively imagine how journalism should work against corporate forces.

Brand journalism directly challenges and violates these subjunctive aspirations of journalism. First, because brand journalism is not free from corporate objectives, it threatens the normative assumption that journalism is about public interests and democracy. In addition, as more corporate brands make partnerships with news publishers to create branded content, journalism’s subjunctive aspirations about autonomy and the separation between news and business are often challenged.

As the following discussion illustrates, editorial freedom and journalistic autonomy are considered as important in the discourse of brand journalism both among
writers and editors. For instance, Bill Calder claims that Intel’s Free Press has “a fair amount of freedom and independence to do what we [writers and editors] think is right,” not “executives and senior managers” (personal communication, June 27, 2012): Mitch Wagner, former journalist who now works as a corporate journalist, also argues that autonomy from corporate sponsors is an important aspect of brand journalism and his practice is not directly influenced by the brand they work for:

On editorial, IBM has no influence. They hired us to do the [brand journalism] job and we do it without their input… IBM is a big organization. If they want to control everything, believe me, they have the resources to do that (Mitch Wagner, personal communication, August 23, 2012)

Considering that brand journalism--however subtle the practice seems-- is ultimately about “bringing glory to the brand that’s behind it” (Matthew Van Dusen, personal communication, August 17, 2012) and the brand governs the parameter and the boundary of brand journalism, practitioners’ emphasis on editorial autonomy and public service norms may sound ironic. In fact, when asked regarding the desired end results of their brand journalism projects, most practitioners’ answers reflected the brand’s immanent marketing needs: getting awareness, building a subscriber-base and audience engagement with the brand, increasing the brand’s influence in the industry and attracting more buyers. For instance, Michael Brenner identifies specific success matrix and goals of SAP’s brand journalism campaigns:

How do I define the success of our project? We start with a matrix… The matrix we set out or the objectives we set are reach, engagement, and conversion in that order. So the reach is driving exposure of our content to the widest group of people possible… And you have to create an engine. Create an engine that audiences are seeking to touch or to engage with… Number three is then conversion and it’s obviously the main reason that we are doing it [brand journalism] but it’s not the primary metric. Every conversion we get, each additional conversion doesn’t cost us anything. And every conversion we get is
the conversion we would have never gotten before because we are reaching new audiences (personal communication, August, 23, 2012).

In this sense, the argument that branded content is created independently from corporate interests and is dedicated to public’s informational needs is an overstatement. The rhetoric of journalistic autonomy and the separation between church and state is normative and subjunctive rather than indicative of the practice of brand journalism.

At the same time, brand journalism highlights the gap between the indicative and subjunctive notions of journalism. While journalism claims for the clear-cut boundary from other forms of public communications because of its publicness and autonomy, there has always existed a gray area in journalism that allows a mixture of publicness and privateness and the negotiation between editorial autonomy and corporate interests. Brand journalism challenges and sometimes violates the subjunctive notions of journalism but it also highlights the fine line between journalism and corporate communications in practice.

This is more of the case with “native advertising” in which branded content is produced and/or distributed in partnership with (news) publishers. As discussed in chapter 1, I define “native advertising” as a subcategory of brand journalism in which branded content is produced and distributed in partnership with news organizations. Because “native advertising” seeks close partnership from news organizations and often directly challenges the subjunctive ideals of journalism (for example, the separation between church and state), it is useful to examine the phenomenon as a way to think about how the subjunctive visions are revised and reconstructed in this changing dynamic between journalism and corporate brands. For this reason, this chapter’s discussion will
focus on the direct partnership between news organizations and brands in producing branded content (i.e. “native advertising”).

While commercial forces and corporate objectives have been considered as opponents of the subjunctive notions of traditional journalism, with the rise of native advertising, the partnership and symbiotic relationship between news publishers and corporate brands are stressed. Brand journalism—or more narrowly, “native advertising”—is envisioned as a practice that can reconcile the tension between public and private and between news and business in journalism. The possibility of co-existence, symbiosis and partnership between news organizations and corporate brands is collectively imagined by both brand journalism practitioners and news publishers:

The mission of journalism is to inform, and that requires observation, selection and interpretation, with all the biases that entails. The business of journalism is to provide marketing partners with new ways to reach consumers. BrandVoice aims to achieve both. It helps make a wide array of credible information easily accessible and fosters connections between journalists, consumers and marketers. (Lewis DVorkin, October 3, 2012).

The subjunctive discourse of brand journalism attempts to tackle the division between advertising and editorial roles and to establish a coherent mix between them by appropriating and tweaking the subjunctive discourse of journalism. By creating a middle ground between news and advertising and between public and private interests, brand journalism attempts to shift the emphasis from “journalism” to “content” and from “news organizations” to “audiences.” In what follows, I explain how this discursive shift opens up the practice of journalism to corporate agents and interests that have been imagined as the opponents of journalism’s subjunctive ideals.
Redefining the boundaries of journalism: The subjunctive discourse of brand journalism

Brand journalism practitioners envision an ideal hybrid between journalism and corporate communications. While they borrow the format, style and publishing space of traditional journalism, it is also important for them to set a strategic distance from journalism. Ironically, the rhetoric of autonomy and the separation of church and state are also critical in brand journalism practitioners’ visions of their practices. In addition, instead of publicity (PR) and publicness (journalism), brand journalism practitioners emphasize “what audiences want.” Brand journalism practitioners create their subjunctive visions and aspirations of their practices in the middle ground between journalism’s publicness and PR’s corporate (private) interests. By doing this, brand journalism practitioners shift “meanings of journalistic independence away from its traditional workings to redefine the authority relation between journalists and audiences around a broader curational norm of providing a coherent mix of both editorial and advertising content” (Carlson, 2014, p. 13). In this process, brand journalism practitioners redefine the longstanding boundary between editorial and advertising in news organizations by tweaking the subjunctive discourse of journalism.

The consecrated wall between news and advertising: Creating the middle ground, setting the strategic distance from journalism

As Mandese (November 5, 2012) and other practitioners point out, the “concept of feeding professional, third-party content into ads is not entirely new.” However, as corporate organizations develop new routes of distributing branded content, it is predicted
that “the speed, scale and ease of” feeding the content will be accelerated “in a way that will further blur the line between advertising and content” (Mandese, November 5, 2012).

Sharing this view, the Washington Post covers a story on “native ads” and expresses concerns over the blurring line between news and advertising (branded content):

Advertisers have gravitated to native ads — advertisements that “go native” by adopting a site’s aesthetic — on the expectation that they will generate more attention, engagement and interaction than traditional banner, pop-up or page “takeover” messages from sponsors. Web sites that have seen prices for banner ads deflate amid intense competition and consumer indifference are betting on native ads as the surest way to keep ad dollars coming.

The chameleon-like ads have heightened the questions that dogged advertorials for decades. “The obvious issue is whether it’s advertising disguised as editorial content from a journalist,” says Dan Gillmor, who directs the digital media entrepreneur program at Arizona State University. “The more disguised it is, the more problematic that is from a journalist’s perspective” (Farhi, February 1, 2012).

Against the prevalent concern regarding the blurred line between news and advertising, both news organizations and brand journalism practitioners emphasize the importance of a “separation of church and state” in the practice of brand journalism. For example, in his memo to staff members of the Times announcing the launch of the in-house branded content service, Times Publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. argues that while the branded content will meet the high standard of quality at the Times, there will be a clear distinction between advertising and journalism in their practices:

It has developed by our advertising team in close partnership with design and the newsroom, and it will be fully consistent with the values of The Times and the expectations of our readers. We will ensure that there is never a doubt in anyone’s mind about what is Times journalism and what is advertising. Our readers will always know that they are looking at a message from an advertiser. There will be a distinctive color bar, the words "Paid Post," the relevant company logo, a different typeface and other design cues to let readers know exactly what they are looking at. There will be strict separation between the newsroom and the job of creating content for the new native ads. And, we will require advertiser content to
adhere to a very high standard of quality. (Sebastian, December 19, 2013, my emphasis).

In a similar vein, when the Washington Post launched its branded content platform “Brand Connect,” the newspaper’s then chief revenue officer Kevin Gentzel stresses the importance of the separation and distinction between editorial and advertising:

The credibility and trust of the investigative journalism that occurs in our newsroom is holy. We’re just saying, we can create a better, fulsome experience through design and engineering that includes advertising in an innovative and inventive way (Moses, March 3, 2014).

This suggests that the traditional boundary between advertising and editorial is still important for journalists in their partnership with corporate brands. However they incorporate the branded content business, they emphasize that their editorial integrity is intact because they separate regular news articles from sponsored stories. At the same time, both corporate brands and news publishers argue that the quality of branded content is ensured with the assistance of news organizations. That is, through brand journalism, news organizations and corporate brands collectively create a middle ground between news and promotional messages (i.e. separate from news but of the same quality).

Setting the right distance from journalism is critical for the symbiosis of news and branded content. If the distance is too close, branded content may be misled as regular newspaper articles by readers, which is worrisome for news organizations. If they are too distinct in terms of form, tone and style, then branded content may be taken as promotional messages and not be effective, which goes against the brand’s purpose of doing “native” advertising. For this reason, corporate brands and news organizations collectively develop strategies to set the right distance between editorial and branded content that can ensure the quality of the writing in content but keep “church and state”
separate at least in their rhetoric. As Coddington (2015) argues, the metaphor of “church and state” for the separation between news and advertising has been used by journalists “to apply the language of sanctity to their own behavior, allowing them to bathe their professional value in moral purity and ascribe moral deficiency and uncleanness to violators of those values” (p. 73). In this sense, the reemphasis on the separation discourse is a way for news organizations and journalists to understand and justify the emergence of the branded content that closely mimics the style and form of news articles.

The separation discourse is also important for brand journalism practitioners to envision and position their practices and partnership with journalism. Brand journalism’s emphasis on editorial autonomy and the separation between church and state is a way to respond to the prevalent concerns about the influence of corporate forces in newsrooms and to construct the legitimacy of the practice. One of the ways in which news organizations and brands maintain distance is by keeping a physical distance between the editorial staff and writers who create branded content. For example, according to Melanie Deziel, writer at the New York Times’ branded content team “T Brand Studio,” keeping the editorial and branded content teams physically separate is important “both for the newsroom and for [them]:

[T]he newsroom team does not contribute to any of our content. Actually, on every single paid post, there is a line at the bottom of the page that states very clearly that news and editorial staffs at New York Times play no role in creation of this content… We never want to jeopardize what our newsroom is doing or influence them any way and or even create the perception that there’s any sort of influence or anything happening there. We operate completely separately. We are like our own little newsroom. We create our own little newsroom on a separate floor. That’s why we have all different skills and we have designers, developers, tech guys and we have video producers. So we are trying to do everything in house in our little team (personal communication, November 21, 2014, my emphasis).
This suggests that creating a separate in-house team and maintaining both a physical and organizational/structural distance from the newsroom can help brand journalism practitioners and news publishers maintain “the wall” in their partnership. As Deziel notes, the disclaimer and various visual cues including color, font, design of the page and the URL that distinguish sponsored content from regular articles are tools to clearly inform readers that the “the New York Times newsroom did not make the content” (personal communication, November 21, 2014, my emphasis). What is also implied in her comments is that like their editorial newsroom, their branded content team has the ability and talent to create the quality content independently of the editorial staff of the news organization: “For us, in order to make sure that our content is the equal standard, we want to make sure that all those people are sitting in one place and on the same page and really up to speed on our best practices” (personal communication, November 21, 2014). With the talent, what content strategists or brand journalists at the news publisher aspire to do is to “have someone arrive at the page and be pleasantly surprised that brands bringing them something of a value” (Melanie Deziel, personal communication, November 21, 2014). The discourse of independence among brand journalism practitioners is thus to stress both a separation from the editorial staff and the capability of the branded content team to produce content with the “equal standard” as the editorial content.

Joshua Sternberg, content strategist at the Washington Post’s branded content team “Brand Studio,” also argues that the editorial side of the newspaper is separate from its branded content team: “There’s a very strict separation of church and state. The newsroom has nothing to do with the creation of the content” (personal communication,
December 8, 2014). According to him, the nature of producing branded content is
different from that of practicing journalism:

Journalism is speaking truth to the power. We make no mistake that that’s not
what branded journalism is. Of course you can take a very broad argument that in
any advertising based business model, at some level, every piece of content is
technically sponsored. But what we are doing with our branded content is telling
really interested stories that brands can associate themselves with. It’s the piece
that tells a story that’s not about them but instead about an attribute or an idea
they want to be known for (personal communication, December 8, 2014).

As indicated in Sternberg’s comments, the separation of church and state in brand
journalism practitioners’ discourse is used to articulate the differences in the practice
from traditional journalism. While journalists and news publishers use discourse to
articulate how the practice would not change the sacred line between journalism and
advertising, for brand journalism practitioners, the same discourse is used to emphasize
the differences between the two practices.

As Coddington (2015) argues, in the rhetoric of the separation of church and state,
journalists “characterize themselves as the church and the business side as the state” (p.
73). According to him, with this metaphor, “[t]he newsroom’s territory and the separation
itself are often referred to as ‘sacred’ or ‘hallowed,’ and violations are considered ‘heresy’
that is ‘corrupting the body and soul of [the] profession’” (p. 73). Turow (2011b) also
notes that the distinction between “church” and “state” originates from “Henry Luce,
founder and publisher of Time magazine in the 1930s who first used the term ‘church’ to
refer to the editorial process and ‘state’ to indicate the business side of publishing” (p.
105-6). This suggests that there exists a discursive hierarchy between editorial and
advertising in the separation discourse. In this discourse, borrowing from Durkheim
(1976), the editorial side of news organizations is of the “sacred” world while the
business side belongs to the “profane.” For journalists, the separation discourse implies the authority of news over business.

On the other hand, for brand journalism practitioners, the separation discourse is simply to articulate the difference without necessarily presuming the discursive hierarchy between the editorial and branded content. In this discourse, branded content can be as good as editorial content in terms of quality and brand journalism practitioners can be as qualified writers as journalists but brand journalism has different objectives and editorial processes from those of journalism. This sense of difference provides brand journalism practitioners with a safe distance from journalism and the legitimacy of their practices. The rhetoric of separation is intact in brand journalism/native advertising. Both brand journalism practitioners and news publishers strategically claim that the editorial staff will not be involved in producing the branded content and advertisers will not affect their editorial integrity, However, the same discourse has different meanings and implications for the journalism community and the brand journalism community.

Another way of maintaining strategic distance from journalism is by creating a coherent but distinguishable editorial style, format and aesthetics. According to Raju Narisetti, senior vice president and deputy head of strategy for the Wall Street Journal’s parent News Corp., native content should be “clearly labeled, using sophisticated storytelling techniques and as engaging and of the same quality as the journalism that surrounds it” (Moses, March 10, 2014). However, the content should still be distinguishable from editorials in order to gain readers’ credibility: “Don’t fool the reader and don’t try to create native advertising that is trying to convince [the reader] it is editorial content, because it turns the reader off, and doesn’t help your brand or the
marketer’s brand” (Shearman, July 19, 2013). That is, while it is important to create sponsored content that is “relevant to consumers and fits well in the wider editorial experience,” those stories often take more diverse forms and aesthetics than regular journalism stories. For example, while T Brand Studio (NYT)’s stories do adopt tones and narrative structures of journalism, including headlines, subheads and leads, they use different-- but coherent-- fonts and layouts for paid postings and the stories often integrate large graphics, colorful charts, videos and audios to supplement text. In addition, in terms of selecting topics, T-Brand Studio’s co-architect Sebastian Tomich argues that they “collaborate with the brand, find storylines or plotlines that aren’t inherent selling points but that readers will connect with” (Sebastian, June 13, 2014). As an example, when the Studio created its first paid posting in collaboration with Netflix about the online video service’s original series “Orange is the New Black,” the 1500-word post did not explicitly discuss the show but it did delve into the issue of women inmates. That is, the branded content in newspapers closely follows the editorial styles, narrative structures and the looks of the host publication with strategic tweaks to maintain a safe distance from regular journalism.

By integrating into the “native” environment of the publishing site, brand journalism co-opts the discursive authority of the publisher. When there is a noticeable gap between regular stories and branded content, the branded content may not be effective and even draw negative public attention. For this reason, corporate organizations and brand journalism practitioners are developing strategies to effectively mimic the similar editorial style and tone of the publisher site. While genres like advertorials and informercials have existed for a long time, the blending between
advertising and news/editorials in the new media environment is increasingly more refined and sometimes even deceptive.

In this process, brand journalism practitioners tweak journalism’s subjunctive discourse of editorial autonomy and the separation between news and advertising. While native advertising—brand journalism practiced in partnership with news publishers—directly challenges the boundary between editorial and advertising, brand journalism practitioners use the same discourse to articulate their subjunctive visions of brand journalism and its position alongside journalism. Ironically, by affirming the distance from journalism and the distinction from “serious” journalism, brand journalism practitioners envision a content model that resides comfortably with traditional journalism and expands the boundaries of what might be permissible as journalism. This model highlights a gradient of different types of content that exist on margins of the journalism community:

BrandVoice and similar content marketing initiatives can be discomforing for traditional journalists. They needn’t be. Those of us with long careers in journalism have moved in and out of the gray zone between journalism and advertising. Special features, special sections, sponsored content and similar revenue-driving content features involve editorial conflicts that result in professional compromises, some more uncomfortable than others. Products like BrandVoice draw a bright shiny line between journalist and marketer for all to see (DVorkin, October 3, 2012).

By collectively envisioning a middle ground between journalism and corporate communication practices, brand journalism practitioners attempt to redefine “the borders of what may be considered journalism into new domains” (Carlson, 2015, p. 10). Accordingly, the partnership between news publishers and corporate brands will “build a sustainable model for advertising-supported journalism that will benefit all participants---
editors and reporters included,” connecting between audiences, journalists and corporate communication professionals (DVorkin, October 3, 2012).

Just like journalists, brand journalism practitioners agree that the boundary between editorial and advertising in news organizations should indeed exist. However, they disagree with journalists on what it should do. For journalists, it represents that journalism serves public interests, shielded from commercial forces (Coddington, 2015). For them, the boundary is a clear-cut line that does not and should not allow a grey area. On the other hand, for brand journalism practitioners, this boundary has become a discursive tool to reimagine their partnership with journalism and their place around the border. Brand journalism is neither news nor advertising in the traditional sense. It should reside in the boundary and a middle ground between the two. Brand journalism envisions a hybrid territory in which journalistic principles are recontextualized in commercial contexts and/or the principles of corporate communications are reinterpreted in journalistic context without violating core values of journalism. As I argue in the following, creating this middle ground is not always easy in practice.

Expanding the content spectrum of news: From publicness to what the audience wants

Journalism has been considered as a public institution that deals with issues related to public interests. The sense of publicness has been an important part of journalistic authority that distinguishes itself from other communication practices. Here, journalists have the authority to select and deliver what is important to the public, with the public interest defined and mediated by professional journalists. As “gatekeepers,” journalists have been involved in “the process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news”
In this sense, journalists decide what the public needs to know. As Bourdieu (1996) argues, with this authority, journalists “exercise a very particular form of domination, since they control the means of public expression” (p. 46).

This notion of publicness directly conflicts with the goals of corporate communications. Corporate communications are often associated with private interests of brands. For this reason, the discourse of publicness is also tweaked in brand journalism. Instead of focusing on publicness and journalists’ authority to construct the sense of publicness through editorial processes, brand journalism practitioners stress what the audience wants to know and the audience’s authority--instead of journalists’--to determine what is valuable and informational for them. Brand journalism, according to practitioners, serves the informational and entertainment needs and wants of the audience as well as, or even instead of, corporate interests. For instance, Michael Brenner, head of strategy at NewsCred, argues that “customer centricity” is critical in brand journalism (personal communication, November 21, 2014). According to him, brand journalism has to take “an audience first approach with the intention of being truly helpful almost to the point of altruism” and brand journalism practitioners “have to put [their] audiences’ needs ahead of [their] own” (personal communication, August 23, 2012). Similarly, Melanie Deziel at the New York Times argues that the purpose of creating branded content is to provide readers “something [that] is a value to them, something that will entertain them, inform them” (personal communication, November 21, 2014). In addition, practitioners also argue that when brand journalism or native advertising is not done right, consumers and audiences would notice it: “Some brands call it brand journalism, they
call it native advertising but it’s just a clever way of advertising products. Consumers see right through that” (Michael Brito, personal communication, November 17, 2014). According to practitioners, audiences judge the quality and value of the content. As Michael Brenner argues, brand journalism, in this sense, “a fair system because the reader of the content ultimately decides whether it gets any exposure whatsoever” (personal communication, August 23, 2012).

This suggests that brand journalism inverts the focus and power from journalists and news organizations to news audience (Carlson, 2014). It also shifts the focus from private and corporate interests to the needs and wants of the audience. By doing this, brand journalism can achieve dual goals. First, by emphasizing what audiences want in their discourse, brand journalism practitioners can distance and distinguish themselves from traditional forms of corporate communications, which are characterized by push messages, promotional impulses and corporate objectives. Second, it can open a legitimate place for brand journalism in the editorial space of journalism. In this discursive frame, brand journalism is understood as a practice that provides another mode of content that news audiences may find useful. For instance, according to Thomas Scott, while brand journalism “is definitely in favor of brands,” it fills the informational needs of the audience and “helps them make important decisions that affect the lives of the people” (personal communication, October 31, 2014).

In this discourse, the value of content as “news” and “journalism” is determined only by the needs of the audience, not by who writes the story: “A lot of people who do not like the idea of branded journalism, also don’t like businesses and think it is some kind of sell out but the truth is that we just have different audiences” (Thomas Scott,
personal communication, October 31, 2014). Brand journalism or native advertising is, in the end, a form of content. As Joshua Sternberg at the *Washington Post* notes, native advertising “is content” and the practitioners “are telling stories” that audiences want (personal communication, December 8, 2014).

By emphasizing what the audience wants, brand journalism practitioners aspire to incorporate branded content within the content continuum of journalism. As Carlson (2014) suggests, practitioners’ view on “native advertising as content assume[s] a holistic approach” that builds bridges and cohesiveness between editorial and branded content. This suggests that while brand journalism practitioners do not argue that their content is “news” per se and the editorial side of news organizations does not usually participate in creating branded content, practitioners hope that branded content can also provide information that audiences want to read and complement journalism. In the discourse of brand journalism practitioners, the content they create does incorporate the corporate objectives of the brand, but at the same time it also serves the informational needs of the public in certain content areas that journalism fails to fill.

What constitutes “public” and “private” in journalism has been under critical discussion. For example, against the prevalent criticism on so-called tabloid journalism and popular journalism, journalism scholars have suggested that journalism can incorporate the “private life” as well as “public life” and the journalism of private life is also on the continuum of journalism rather than an entirely different species (Bird, 1990; Deuze, 2005; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). The “private” here concerns the personal and often concentrates on scandal, sports and entertainment (Sparks, 2000). In brand journalism, “private” is corporate and of brands’ interests. By constructing the discursive
vision of brand journalism as an information service that the public wants alongside traditional journalism, brand journalism practitioners wish to expand the continuum of news and journalism to the corporate domain. Sponsored, native or branded content, in the discourse of brand journalism practitioners, “offers a continuum of practices that exist in degrees which must be judged against their immediate context” (Zelizer, 2000, p. x).

What can be problematic is that as Joshua Sternberg at the Washington Post notes, news publishers readily provide this “context” for the branded content to be judged against.

Brands are not built for contents. That’s not their value proposition… Publishers, on the other end of the spectrum are designed to create contents. So the market has created an opportunity for brands to rely on publishers who create content for living to create content for them to be distributed across the publishers’ audience. Someone goes to a media company’s website, they are making an explicit agreement that I enjoy and I trust the content that is coming from this media company. If I see a content that’s sponsored by an advertiser, it has to be as good and in some cases better than the content that we are seeing on editorials because of that trust (personal communication, December 8, 2014).

In addition, considering the strategic purposes of brand journalism, the audience of brand journalism often refers to potential customers, stakeholders and decision makers in the industry who can directly or indirectly influence the brand. While many brand journalism projects do not explicitly state this, brand journalism often targets specific kinds of audiences. Instead of professional journalism’s grand aim of creating the reading public and contributing to democracy, brand journalism attempts to cultivate the relationship between brands and potential customers or consumers. In this sense, in brand journalism, the public is often narrowly interpreted as potential consumers and stakeholders of the brand.
The encroachment of corporate forces in journalism is hardly new. However, the incorporation of branded content in the content continuum of journalism offers a way to legitimize a practice that has been considered as oppositional to journalism. In notions of audience centricity, journalism’s increasing reliance on the business side of the news becomes acceptable, legitimate and even necessary. Brand journalism practitioners’ rhetoric of what audiences want and their authority to determine the value of content thus facilitates the ready existence of corporate brands as partners of news publishers.

The discourse of what audiences want works as the rhetoric to expand what is permissible as journalism. While journalists often frame the increasing influence of corporate brands on news publishers as a “crisis” of journalism, the rhetoric of audience centricity and content spectrum of news often “invites coherency, a clear and often subjunctive vision of a hypothetical aspirational landscape that is better than what is presently available” (Zelizer, 2015, p. 6): A model of journalism that provides audiences with a more complete, diverse and coherent spectrum of information in which news publishers and corporate brands cooperate as content producers and information providers. As Seth Lewis (2012) argues with the case of the Knight Foundation, the shift from “journalism” to “content” and “information” can “expand [journalism’s] capital and influence as an agent of change among a broader set of fields, foundations, and funders” (p. 329). In this sense, the subjunctive vision of brand journalism is also altering the subjunctive vision of journalism. The established power dynamics and the hierarchy of discursive authority among journalism and corporate brands/corporate communication professionals are being reshaped in the borders of journalism. In this process, what is
legitimate and what is not within the community of journalism is constantly challenged, redefined and renegotiated by corporate forces.

**When the gap between indicative and subjunctive discourse is articulated**

While brand journalism practitioners collectively construct the subjunctive discourse of what brand journalism should be in relation to journalism, a gap between discourse and practice does exist. For instance, while many publishers claim a distinct line between branded content and editorial content and the separation between advertising and editorial staff, the relationship between publishers and corporate brands is more intertwined than it looks in the practice of brand journalism. As Michael Brenner admittedly argues, while “media companies, publishers and journalists play an important role in our society..., the separation of church and state, the pay wall or the Chinese wall [are] terms for what is really a myth” (personal communication, November 21, 2014). According to him, in news organizations, “there has always been influence from advertisers” and branded content is not an exception.

In addition, Mashable’s Adam Ostrow discloses in an interview that the branded content team connects advertisers with the newsroom by giving “potential clients a menu of stories and topics that its newsroom wants to cover, before the editorial staff pursues them” (Sebastian, December 23, 2013, my emphasis). Another recent example of the gap between the subjunctive and the indicative is the oust of the New York Times’ executive editor Jill Abramson in May 2014. This was after the news publisher’s launch of the branded content service earlier in the year. According to the report by the New Yorker,
one of the contributing factors to her short tenure as the newspaper’s first female editor was her clash with the senior management over the new practice:

Sulzberger [the paper’s publisher]’s frustration with Abramson was growing. She had already clashed with the company’s C.E.O., Mark Thompson, over native advertising and the perceived intrusion of the business side into the newsroom. Publicly, Thompson and Abramson denied that there was any tension between them, as Sulzberger today declared that there was no church-state—that is, business-editorial—conflict at the Times. A politician who made such implausible claims might merit a front-page story in the Times. The two men and Abramson clearly did not get along (Auletta, May 14, 2014).

This incident indicates that the discourse of “separation of church and state” which is critical not only to the idea of journalistic autonomy but to the partnership between corporate brands and news publishers often fails in practice. The New York Times makes claims on the separation between editorial and branded content. In the backstage of this rhetoric, however, the editor was fired partly because of her opposition to native advertising for its potential influence on the newsroom. In reality, the discourse of the separation can silence the voice of concerned journalists. In this sense, the subjunctive discourse of the “separation of church and state” now works for the comfortable coexistence of branded and editorial content in news publishers.

As noted in the example, brand journalism’s subjunctive aspirations that branded content can complement journalism without interrupting the traditional separation between editorial and advertising are difficult to achieve in practice. Finding the ideal middle ground between traditional journalism and corporate communications is not always easy and the editorial side of news is sometimes influenced by the business side, especially with the rise of native advertising. In addition, corporate objectives of brands sometimes override “what audiences want” that brand journalism practitioners emphasize. In the following discussion, with two recent case studies, I address how the gap between
the indicative and subjunctive discourse of brand journalism is articulated and how practitioners and news publishers use this crisis to reconstruct and reimagine the subjunctive visions of their practice.

**The BuzzFeed controversy: When the separation of church and state fails**

One of the most recent cases of the breach between news and business in the context of brand journalism is BuzzFeed’s deletion of editorials arguably because of advertising pressure. In April 2015, Gawker broke the news that BuzzFeed’s staff writer and beauty editor Arabelle Sicardi has resigned from the publisher shortly after she openly criticized an advertising campaign by Dove in her post. Within 24 hours, the website deleted the entire post, saying, “We pulled this post because it is not consistent with the tone of BuzzFeed Life.” The article was later republished at the direction of Ben Smith, editor in chief at the site. This report invited a flurry of criticism because Unilever, which owns Dove, had been one of the site’s biggest advertisers. In addition, Gawker’s subsequent report reveals that BuzzFeed also removed a post about the board game Monopoly in March 2015. It was after BuzzFeed and Hasbro, manufacturer of Monopoly, announced in February a joint marketing campaign (“Global MONOPOLY Here and Now”) in celebration of the game’s 80th anniversary. The post, written by BuzzFeed UK editor Tom Chivers, titled “Why Monopoly Is The Worst Game In The World, And What You Should Play Instead.” These two posts were not only removed from the site but “added to a robotx.txt directly, meaning that it wouldn’t be preserved in a Google cache or the Internet Archive’s ‘Wayback Machine’” (Kaplan, April 20, 2015).
BuzzFeed argued that the deletion of the two posts was not directly due to the pressure from advertisers. For example, in his memo to the editorial staff, Ben Smith admitted he “blew it,” but he argued that both incidents “involved the same thing: his overreaction to questions [they] have been wrestling about the place of personal opinion pieces on [their] site” (Ben Smith’s Twitter, April 10, 2015, my emphasis). Although the editor attempted to frame this issue as the controversy over “personal opinion[s]” in the editorial content, media critics and journalists concerned about the possible censorship of brands (and journalists’ self-censorship), especially in today’s journalism landscape that is increasingly tied to the business side. For instance, Mark Duffy, former staff writer at BuzzFeed, in his provocative posting on Digiday further reveals and criticizes the fuzzy line between news and business on the site:

I have experience with BuzzFeed--I worked there, have deleted Unilever posts under advertiser pressure, and was fired-- so I know how it works. Everybody in the industry knows that BuzzFeed’s native ads are better intermingled than at most, if not all, other social media news sites. The ads sit very pretty--and deviously--among the real news post, the main reason advertisers love the site. Brands love to buy native advertising on popular news websites because it makes them look like not advertisers but part of the website, “part of the conversation”… I know that some employees at BuzzFeed have “crossed the aisle” in recent years between the editorial and ad creative departments, in both directions, with very little internal fanfare, sometimes twice. I was asked to work on both at the same time while I was there, which I did a couple of times--no biggie these days. More and more, news sites are asking their journalists to also write native ads. This is not a new thing, but it’s ubiquity (Duffy, April 17, 2015).

In the midst of criticism, the site’s editor in chief Ben Smith published another memo to his editorial staff regarding the results of their internal review about why and how posts were deleted from January 2012 to January 2015 when they reestablished their editorial guideline. According to the memo, more than 1,000 posts were pulled out for a variety of reasons including quality concerns, plagiarism and technical errors (accidental
deletion). Of those posts, 3 posts were deleted “after an editor fielded [sic] a complaint from a business-side BuzzFeed staff member who worked with a brand in the piece” (Smith, April 18, 2015). The memo explains how each post was removed after complaints from advertisers:

1) Mark Duffy, who wrote under the byline copyranter, was a blogger and ad critic at BuzzFeed in 2014. An ad agency complained, via our chief revenue officer at the time, that he was accusing them of advocating “worldwide mass rape” in an ad for Axe body spray, and that the tone of his item was over the top. I agreed that this was way outside even our very loose standard of the time. He complained on Gawker in 2013 that we deleted this post unfairly, and my correspondence with him at the time is in that post as well.

2) Tanner Ringerud led BuzzFeed’s Creative department in its early days; he moved over to editorial on January 25, 2013. On March 5, he published a post making fun of a Microsoft product, Internet Explorer. He had worked on a Microsoft ad campaign, and BuzzFeed’s chief revenue officer complained about the post to me. We agreed that it was inappropriate for Tanner to write about brands whose ad campaigns he’d worked on. We set up a “cooling off period” in which he wasn’t allowed to write about any brands he’d worked with for six months. We’ve made that a policy in the two other cases in which a staffer moved from the business side to editorial— one BuzzFeed News writer and BuzzFeedTeam illustrator.

3) On January 27, 2014, the head of BuzzFeed’s creative division complained that Samir Mezrahi had taken a gif from a Pepsi advertisement created by BuzzFeed’s creative team and turned into a Vine without indicating where it had come from. I asked Samir not to use advertising our business side had created in an editorial content. Four days later, he published a post titled “These Brands Are Going to Bombard Your Twitter Feed on Super bowl Sunday,” which was a mix of criticism and praise for a long list of brands on Twitter. I again heard a complaint from our business side about Pepsi, which was the first item in the list, and whose Twitter feed they were making content for during the Super Bowl.

We’d never previously considered the case of an editor would be writing about an ad that was produced by our creative team, but we decided it was inappropriate and deleted the post. I wrote Samir that night “there just has to be pretty high bar around writing about advertising that is going on in the building. It creates an appearance of conflict I’m really uncomfortable with” (Ben Smith, April 18, 2015).
This memo reveals how the sacred line between news and business and the brand journalism’s discourse of setting a middle ground between the two without violating editorial integrity can be tricky. The conflict of interests between the editorial and the business side of the news organization sometimes creates active censorship of editorial content. According to the memo, the editorial content can be censored “for reasons of tone” and “of taste” (Ben Smith, interview with NPR, April 20, 2015). In addition, editorial staff could switch to the native content side and vice versa within the organization. As indicated in the last example, editorial staff sometimes borrows content from branded stories. They all suggest the crossed line between editorial and branded content and how corporate partners can have power—whether it’s self-censorship of journalists or not—to edit or even delete editorial content in the newsroom.

After the internal review in January, BuzzFeed did tighten its editorial and ethics guideline. In this guideline, a section on “[t]he editorial and business relationship” states that the site “maintain[s] a strict and traditional separation between advertising and editorial content” for the purpose of conducting “accurate reporting.” According to the guideline, branded content should be “genuinely newsworthy” to be published on the site. In addition, the site separates the editorial staff from branded content team and emphasizes that no advertising pressure should influence the direction of the editorial content:

Editorial staffers have the final word when it comes to reviewing an item or product — whether or not the company is an advertiser. Editorial staffers should never discuss a story about a company with a business-side staffer who works with that company; staffers on the business side who have questions or concerns about editorial content may communicate them only to the editor-in-chief...
Our investors have no influence on our reporting, and reporters should not take any special note of investors’ views or interests. When we cover people who are investors in BuzzFeed, typically it is because of their other business interests…

We encourage staffers in editorial to collaborate with staffers in video or tech or data. But edit staffers must never collaborate or contribute to content that is part of an ad campaign — whether it’s video or text. Creative/ad sales staffers are not permitted to contribute to editorial-driven content. Creative staffers may create community posts under clear bylines that state they are not on the editorial team (Hilton, January 30, 2015).

This suggests that BuzzFeed has made efforts to reinstate the wall between editorial and advertising. When the gap between the subjunctive (the separation between news and business) and the indicative (the failure of the idea in practice) is articulated, both news organizations and brand journalism practitioners restore and reaffirm the subjunctive values in their discourse. In this process, the gap is viewed as an exception or a simple mistake: “We won’t always perfectly meet these [editorial] expectations, we (and I) will undoubtedly make mistakes again, but I know we will keep getting better” (Smith, April 18, 2015, my emphasis). Because it is a “mistake,” not representative of more serious violations of journalistic integrity in the brand journalism practice, the crisis becomes a learning experience: “We’ve asked to be held in public, and by all of you, to the highest standards. It makes us better as a [sic] editorial operation and ultimately strengthen our culture” (Smith, April 18, 2015).

By reinstating the subjunctive aspirations of the practice from their “mistakes,” brand journalism practitioners and participants—including editors, publishers and sometimes journalists—attempt to create the discourse that the ideals are intact and the practice will be improved to match up with the collective aspirations. The publication of Ben Smith’s internal report on deletions to the public and the tightening of editorial
policies themselves can be viewed as a strategy to articulate their commitment for the subjunctive ideals and how the ideals would be protected from then on in spite of the few editorial mishaps in the past.

The reinstatement of the subjunctive, however, did not prevent the site from deleting two more posts even after it tightened the editorial guideline. In addition, the ethical issue did not stop Andreessen Horowitz from investing $50 million in the publisher in August, 2014 (Dixon, August 10, 2014). BuzzFeed’s model that heavily relies on branded content is still thriving and the site is recently valued at $850 million (Issac, August 10, 2014). This suggests that while the partnership between corporate brands and news publishers can threaten the health of traditional journalism and its ideals, branded content will be more blended and incorporated in news sites: “News and ads, living and sleeping together, perfectly mimicking each other-- it’s a beautiful and seamless relationship, ain’t it” (Duffy, April 17, 2015).

The rearticulation of the subjunctive does silence concerned voices about editorial independence. In addition, editorial decisions, in many cases, are made beyond the public eye in that editorial judgments about advertising pressure and brand-directed censorship may not be always visible to the public. The discourse of the separation of church and state as a core value of brand journalism is also problematic because even if the line is consecrated in practice, it is not always clear to readers. As an illustration, at the 2013 Social Media Week in New York, the Atlantic’s senior editor Derek Thompson suggested that such confusion is fairly common: “I consider myself a decently savvy consumer of Internet and I’ve mistaken a BuzzFeed ad for an article before” (as cited in Warzel, February 22, 2013). More importantly, through constructing and reinstating the
subjunctive discourse of the separation between news and business, the partnership between news publishers and corporate brands is legitimated. The idea of separation is still intact in the discourse. However, as indicated in the case of BuzzFeed, the business of journalism is increasingly built into the journalism enterprise and can routinely impact the craft of journalism.

*The Atlantic’s Church of Scientology controversy: When setting the middle ground between public and corporate interests fails*

If the case of “BuzzFeed” illustrates the failure--and the reinstatement--of the separation between news and business in brand journalism/native advertising, the *Atlantic* Magazine’s “sponsored content on the Church of Scientology” delineates the failure of brand journalism’s claim about audience’ interests. Contrary to the BuzzFeed case--where branded content can be potentially too similar to that of regular journalism content--the *Atlantic* controversy took place because the content was celebratory of the religious organization and was too different from the regular magazine articles. While the corporate interests were negotiated in the newsroom behind the scene in the BuzzFeed incident, in the *Atlantic’s* case, corporate interests were overt in content, violating brand journalism’s subjunctive notion of audience’s interest.

Titled as “David Miscavige Leads Scientology to Milestone Year” (January 14, 2013), the story featured the growth of the controversial Church and the role of the Church’s “ecclesiastical leader”: “2012 was a milestone year for Scientology, with the religion expanding to more than 10,000 Churches, Missions and affiliated groups, spanning 167 nations--figures that represent a growth rate 20 times that of a decade ago”
In addition to the article’s evidently favorable tone for the Church, the magazine’s marketing team kept negative reactions off the content’s comment stream to make it predominantly positive (Wemple, January 15, 2013). Shortly after the magazine posted the promotional piece, readers were blasting the magazine on social media spaces. In response, the magazine pulled the content in less than a day and made a public apology:

We screwed up. It shouldn't have taken a wave of constructive criticism — but it has — to alert us that we’ve made a mistake, possibly several mistakes. We now realize that as we explored new forms of digital advertising, we failed to update the policies that must govern the decisions we make along the way. It's safe to say that we are thinking a lot more about these policies after running this ad than we did beforehand. In the meantime, we have decided to withdraw the ad until we figure all of this out. We remain committed to and enthusiastic about innovation in digital advertising, but acknowledge—sheepishly—that we got ahead of ourselves. We are sorry, and we're working very hard to put things right (Statement from the Atlantic, as cited in Fallows, January 15, 2013).

Just as in the case of BuzzFeed, the incident was viewed as a “mistake” and a learning experience for them. The Atlantic’s president Scott Haven sent a memo to his staff and noted that the ad had been a mistake of execution and the publisher and its staff would improve the brand journalism practice from this experience:

It seems fitting to quote one of our founders, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who once said “Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail.” This isn’t the first, nor the last time that WE will make mistakes, but what is important is how we handle them and what we learn from these moments. In this particular case, we’ve learned a number of important lessons. I am confident we’re going to walk away from this with a stronger team, a smarter business, and, ultimately, in a better position to continue producing the best journalism in the industry (Moos, January 19, 2013).

The magazine also quickly updated its editorial guideline on sponsored content, which emphasizes transparency, in order to “put things right.”
The Atlantic will prominently display the following disclaimer on all Sponsor Content: ‘SPONSOR CONTENT.’ The Atlantic will additionally include the following disclaimer on all Sponsor Content: ‘This article is written by or on behalf of our Sponsor and not by The Atlantic’s editorial staff.’ The Atlantic may additionally include, in certain areas and platforms, further explanation defining Sponsor Content to Atlantic readers. In addition, The Atlantic will ensure the treatment and design of Advertising and Sponsor Content is clearly differentiated from its editorial content (The Atlantic Advertising Guidelines, n.d.).

From this, it may sound like the Scientology article caused the controversy because the magazine was not transparent about the identity of the sponsor. However, when the article was published, it did display the disclaimer that the content was written on behalf of the religious organization. That is, transparency was not the only issue. When examined closely, the problem involves more complex issues than the violation of journalism ethics.

The controversy, of course, started from the fact that the magazine accepted the problematic religious group as its digital advertising partner and allowed it to publish a favorable article to the group. After the incident, some news publishers and journalists noted that the Church of Scientology is not a suitable client for the magazine: “The Atlantic--the one time publisher of Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edith Wharton--is now publishing Scientology propaganda” (Berman, January 14, 2013).

In addition, the problem highlighted the issue of strategic distance from journalism. That is, there was a noticeable gap between the Scientology article and the kinds of articles that the magazine would cover based on its editorial policies and reputations. The tone of the article was overtly celebratory of the Church, noticeably different from regular articles in the magazine: “This new breed of Church is ideal in location, design, quality of religious services and social betterment programs” (The Atlantic, January 14, 2013, original emphasis). As Scott Havens notes, the story was
“largely a press release” rather than a native content (Moses, January 30, 2013, my emphasis). Furthermore, the Atlantic’s activity of screening out negative comments was a violation of subtlety and unobtrusiveness. In order to be effective, branded content should match the topics and issues of the original publisher site and should blend to the wider editorial style, tone and the voice of the site. That is, the invisibility of the brand presence and corporate objectives is essential to the success of such content even though the publisher labels the article as “sponsored content” “advertorial” or “brand(ed) content.” Corporate organizations have to create content that the site would publish and decrease the perceived gap between the original content of the publisher and the branded content in terms of quality. If this gap is too overtly visible to the audience, the content will be taken as promotional messages instead of information.

While brand journalism practitioners stress the importance of what audiences want, often instead of what corporate brands want, the example indicates that the practice is not necessarily about the needs and wants of audiences. It indicates that branded content always involves the agenda and interests of corporate clients, which should be subtle enough not to be noticed by audiences. While the branded content is clearly labeled as “native content,” or “sponsored content,” this form of content “appeals to advertisers because it feels more like news and less like advertising” (Reider, January 16, 2013). The discourse of serving what audiences want instead of corporate objectives and completing traditional news content may be then legitimizing terms for refining the advertising practice to look and feel more like news. In this sense, Carlson (2014) notes that “[t]rickery becomes the goal” of brand journalism/native advertising (p. 8). When the content is subtle about its strategic aims and immerses into the tones and styles of the
publishing sites, it is even more problematic than cases like the Scientology article in which the strategic distance from journalism is overtly violated.

Not surprisingly, the incident was quickly circulated as a cautionary tale to the journalism community about its editorial independence, credibility as a public institution and increasing influence of corporate brands prevalent in today’s media environment. For instance, Advertising Age noted that the incident recapitulates the risks around native advertising:

The ads try to engage readers by aping the style of the site they’re on, sometimes lending an aura of editorial authority to paid, promotional content in the process. That, of course, if part of the appeal to marketers, but The Atlantic may have calculated that its post promoting Scientology was damaging its reputation” (Ive, January 15, 2013).

Dan Gillmor also concerned that the practice of native advertising may “[jettison] the traditional tactics [of journalism],” breaching “traditional boundaries-- which were always less rigid or tall than journalists pretended” (January 16, 2013). As these comments show, the practice of native advertising was framed as a threat to the old guard of journalism and its ideals.

At the same time, however, just as in the case of BuzzFeed, the Atlantic incident was also used among practitioners and participants to reinforce the subjunctive discourse that native advertising/brand journalism [should] provide content that audiences want. For instance, Shane Snow identifies this incident as “part of new revenue stream’s growing pains” and emphasizes the importance of reinstating what audiences want:

A BuzzFeed story about expansive suits (one of today’s sponsored posts) that reveals that TV show “Suits” is sponsor elicits at worst a groan, but more likely an “Oh, cool--that was a good one.” But that’s because such posts focus on a subject the brand and readers both care about, not the brand itself. Sure, “The 8 Most Expensive Suits In The World” is about men’s jackets, but it’s not about the
show itself. Readers in this case care about being entertained, and they got what they wanted (January 17, 2013).

In addition, Gigagom’s Matthew Ingram argues that the incorporation of branded content in news organizations will be evident and in order to avoid a “disaster” like the *Atlantic’s* case, practitioners should “keep [their] readers in mind”: “Sponsored content has to be as useful as the kind you produce, if not more so, and its has to be aligned with your brand, or it will fail—sometimes spectacularly” (January 16, 2013, my emphasis). This suggests that the case of Scientology served as an opportunity for brand journalism practitioners to reinforce the normative values and ideals of their practices. The discourse of what the audience wants is used to determine “good” and “bad” and the “success” and “failure” of branded content. In this sense, the incident provided an opportunity to practitioners to collectively (re)envision and (re)articulate what their practice should be, which reinforced the comfortable boundary of the already existing subjunctive discourse of the community.

As both examples of BuzzFeed and the *Atlantic* show, when the gap between the subjunctive and indicative is articulated, brand journalism practitioners and participants collectively reinstate what *should* be accepted as the proper conduct of brand journalism. In this process, the balancing act between corporate and public interests in branded content is becoming a part of routine editorial processes in newsrooms. The discourse of separation between church and state is becoming the legitimating rhetoric for the increasing partnership between news organizations and corporate brands. Brand journalism practitioners not only craft a new form of promotional content in the journalism environment but create collective discourses that legitimize the practice and
redefine what is acceptable as journalism. What is left yet unarticulated are the shifting meanings of editorial integrity, journalistic autonomy and publicness, all of which have been critical for the conceptualization of journalism as a distinct form of public communication, in the midst of these changes.

**Conclusion**

This chapter suggests that in an interpretive community, some discourses are indicative while others are subjunctive. For a new hybrid community like brand journalism, subjunctive notions of what practices aspire to be are critical to the construction of collective visions and ideas of the community. In the brand journalism community, the subjunctive discourse popular among traditional journalists-- which is often oppositional to the objectives of corporate communications-- is tweaked and appropriated to articulate different subjunctive visions for brand journalism. While brand journalism does not claim to be traditional journalism per se, its subjunctive discourse centers upon setting the right distance from journalism. This is particularly important for establishing an increasing partnership and symbiosis between news publishers and corporate brands. By incorporating branded content in the content spectrum of journalism, brand journalism practitioners create a gradation of form, style and tone of what is accepted as journalism in the new media environment. When the subjunctive discourse fails and the gap between the indicative and subjunctive is articulated, brand journalism practitioners use the opportunity to rearticulate and reinstate the collective visions and aspirations of their practices. In this process, the increasing partnership between corporate brands and news organizations is justified and legitimized.
It is worth noting that brand journalism/native advertising is not a simple manipulation or exploitation of established publishers. Instead, it operates with the voluntary participation and mutual consent of news organizations. This suggests that the boundary crossing between news and promotional messages and between private and public in brand journalism is not one-way. It involves knowledge and resource sharing and close interactions and negotiations between publishers and corporate brands. Both news organizations and audiences sometimes check and balance the discursive power of corporate brands. For news publishers cooperating with corporate brands, they provide editorial guidelines and limitations for the journalistic integrity of the sponsored content published under their roof. Audiences sometimes create negative or critical responses to the branded content. Brand journalism thus reflects and shapes a changing dynamics between corporate brands, journalism and the public in today’s information environment.

This chapter suggests that brand journalism encourages dialogue between the competing values and possibilities involved in journalism and promotional communications. It sometimes creates conflicts but it also creates negotiated hybrids. Through the exchange of resources, publishing spaces and narrative forms, brand journalism challenges the boundary between journalism and corporate communications. This in part changes the power relations and structure of authority that typically exists in the relationship between news organizations/journalists and corporate companies/corporate communication professionals. In this sense, brand journalism, as a convergent practice, revises and rearticulates collective ideas about what constitutes journalism, what role journalism plays in society and how it differs from corporate communication practices. Brand journalism incorporates competing discourses and codes,
challenges the power of interpretation of journalists, and appropriates and recontextualizes the interpretive authority of journalism.

Journalism indeed includes multiple voices and “interpractices,” or hybrid practices “consisting of journalistic/editorial and advertising practice” (Erjavec, 2004, p. 557). Within the journalism community, there also exists a hierarchy of cultural authority among different types and practices of journalism (Meltzer, 2009). That is, journalism is not free from power relations and struggles because multiple claims for legitimacy co-exist often in discord. As a hybrid practice, brand journalism further complicates the structure of discursive power, cultural authority and legitimacy in the journalism community.
5. Conclusion: Rethinking journalism through brand journalism

This dissertation has demonstrated that the discursive shape of an interpretive community is multifaceted. In particular, three discursive tensions have emerged as relevant to the construction of cultural authority in hybrid communities.

First, not all voices have the same weight and visibility. Some are more articulated than others, and the process of articulation involves constant discursive struggles and negotiations of a strategic nature. This creates a discursive hierarchy or power structure that makes some discourses more (in)visible and central/marginal to the community than others. Contrary to Stanley Fish’s assumption about the equality across different adjacent interpretive strategies, the articulating power of different voices is necessarily unequal. We saw this in brand journalism, where the principles and conventions of professional journalism are strategically appropriated and rearticulated in an attempt to create new chains of meaning around corporate communication practices. This involved journalistic resources, editorial processes and norms, which were all tweaked in the process of renegotiating boundaries. We also saw that the ideals of journalistic professionalism were conveniently reinterpreted, as selected routines, procedures, organizational setups and narrative formulae were adopted to corporate settings in which the historical, social and cultural contexts of journalism had been overlooked. Because journalism constitutes the most articulated discourse among brand journalism practitioners, alternative discourses that suggest discrepancies between journalism and brand journalism have thus been silenced or trivialized. In this process,
the discursive power relations between journalism and public relations have been reset and rearticulated as a way to legitimize the emergent hybrid practice.

Second, the boundary between inside (us) and outside (them) of an interpretive community is permeable. In some cases, extrinsic voices can reinforce rather than challenge or change an intrinsically shared discourse. Voices of outsiders are not always excluded and marginalized in the community. In fact, the making of an interpretive community necessarily involves a constant process of co-opting and negotiating with voices outside of the community. Because the interpretive authority of a community is neither central nor unidirectional, the construction of relevant authority sometimes involves collaborations and partnerships, rather than oppositions and conflicts, between the intrinsic and extrinsic voices of the community. In brand journalism, the voices of outside experts, corporate employees and audiences are thus often strategically incorporated as brand journalism practitioners offer them (temporary) membership in order to establish subtlety, credibility and discursive authority in the stories they create. Brand journalism practitioners and the temporary members of the community thereby collectively co-create branded content. Their efforts—a collaborative work of intrinsic and extrinsic voices—delineate what brand journalism is, how it operates and where its boundaries lie.

Finally, the subjunctive visions of an interpretive community shape its discursive boundaries. Discussions about what should be the proper conduct of a community constitute the heart of the identity discourse by which a community engages its members. When the gap between subjunctive vision and actual practice is recognized and articulated, it can pose a threat to the collective identity and ideas of the community. For
this reason, members of a community try to reinstate the subjunctive aspirations associated with their practices. We saw with brand journalism how discussions centered upon setting the right distance from journalism because it is important for the co-existence, partnership and symbiosis that exists between news organizations and corporate brands. While brand journalism often directly challenges the subjunctive notions of journalism, including its autonomy, publicness and transparency, brand journalism tweaks these notions to establish its own subjunctive visions. In a discursive attempt to create a middle ground between journalism and corporate communications and between public and private interests, brand journalism shifts the emphasis from journalism to content. In this process, journalism is increasingly open to corporate agents and interests that have been imagined as opponents of journalism’s subjunctive ideals.

Based on these arguments, this dissertation has shown that in an interpretive community, tensions, divisions and negotiations over meaning exist as much as or even instead of consensus. In fact, consensus is often an elusive goal. Interpretive communities are also contingent to external forces and other communities and are thus open to constant change. The discursive shape of interpretive communities is more dynamic, unstable and complex than most scholarship suggests. The dichotomies between us and them, inclusion and exclusion, permissible and impermissible, and central and marginal are useful frames to understand the tensions within interpretive communities but they may not be as stark or clear-cut as scholars have argued. That is, boundaries of interpretive communities are temporal and the discursive authorities of the communities are often transitory. There is no stability at any one point in time. In this sense, an interpretive community is a loose collective bounded by norms, ideals and values that are
only partially and temporarily shared. Interpretive communities are internally complicated, accompanied by multiple layers of discursive tensions.

While this dissertation focused on the discursive qualities of the brand journalism community, there is one caveat: interpretive communities are not entirely rhetorical in nature. The discourse of brand journalism practitioners is reflective of their practices, too. Brand journalism relies on established norms of journalism to claim its discursive authority and such normative discourses are often reflected in editorial processes, narrative techniques and organizational settings. However, as argued in Chapter 4, there exists a gap between discourse and practice. What is claimed in the brand journalism community does not always capture what is practiced in reality. For instance, while brand journalism practitioners emphasize the clear distinction between editorial and branded content, in practice, the line is often blurred and sometimes deliberately crossed. This suggests that while brand journalism is not merely empty rhetoric, it often fails to recreate journalistic norms in practice. The gap between practice and discourse will be likely to remain as long as corporate objectives of brand journalism--which govern practices of brand journalism--are strategically unarticulated.

**A model of brand journalism**

The discussion thus far suggests a model that explains the different forms and shapes of brand journalism [Table 1]. This model includes all three types of brand journalism analyzed in the preceding chapters: corporate news, expert and user endorsements and native advertising.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferences (Participants)</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Products (Content)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Journalistic professionalism</strong></td>
<td>Former journalists (both in-house and agency-based), news publishers</td>
<td>Brand journalists as news/information producers</td>
<td>Editorial meetings, calendars, separation between news and branded content, narrative techniques such as behind-the-scenes stories and interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expertise</strong></td>
<td>Subject matter experts</td>
<td>Brand journalists as mediators, curators and facilitators of expert voices</td>
<td>Editorial freedom of expert writers, narrative techniques such as interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authenticity</strong></td>
<td>Audiences, brands’ employees</td>
<td>Brand journalists as co-creators and mediators of personal stories around the brands</td>
<td>Editorial freedom of audiences and employees, Narrative techniques such as human interest stories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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[Table 1] Brand journalism model (x-axis: The ways in which discursive authorities are claimed, y-axis: Basis of discursive authority)
The discursive authority of brand journalism is claimed via multiple venues. In particular, it is reflected in “preferences,” “principles,” “practices” and “products,” which mirror Skovsgaard and Bro (2011)’s categories of journalistic legitimacy. The claims for legitimacy based on “preferences” posit that the legitimacy of a community rests on the qualifications, credentials or perceived desirability of the individuals who constitute the community. As Skovsgaard and Bro (2011) notes, in the journalism context, “preferences” are “directed towards the persons, organizations and institutions that journalists and journalism at various times have word for.” (p. 322). In other words, “preferences” suggest that the legitimacy of an interpretive community relies on “who” the members or participants are and “whom” they work for. For instance, in brand journalism, corporate brands hire former journalists as brand journalism practitioners to establish the legitimacy of the brand journalism practice. The credentials of journalists are often strategically publicized as a way to establish the rhetorical legitimacy of brand journalism.

Legitimacy and discursive authority can be also claimed via “principles.” Principles are normative beliefs and shared expectations about why an interpretive community exists, what role it plays and how it should operate in society. As Skovsgaard and Bro (2011) argue, principles are often translated into “particular role perceptions” (p. 324). For example, brand journalism practitioners share the idea that they serve the interests of customers, audiences and the public by either providing information and news or mediating experts'/employees'/audiences’ voices. This notion of serving the audience is also present “in the form of various news values… including codes of conduct” (Skovsgaard & Bro, 2011, p. 324). The subtlety--or invisibility--of corporate interests in
branded content has become a fundamental principle of brand journalism and provides practitioners with a way of serving the audience’s interests instead of corporate interests.

The claims for legitimacy through practices involve instances in which members of an interpretive community translate principles into their daily routines and rituals. Shared conventions and procedures in everyday work constitute “practices” as a claim for legitimacy. As Mark Suchman (1995) argues, communities garner legitimacy “by embracing socially accepted techniques and procedures” (p. 580). For instance, in the case of brand journalism, the principle of serving the audience/public is translated into editorial routines, narrative techniques and “newsroom” set-ups that mimic the conventions of journalism.

Finally, legitimacy can be reflected in products. Products represent what interpretive communities accomplish, perform or produce as a collective. These claims of legitimacy are closely related to what Suchman (1995) calls “consequential legitimacy.” In a managerial context, he notes that legitimacy can be claimed through “quality and value--two obvious but important outcomes of production activity” (p. 580). Following Skovsgaard and Bro (2011), I define “products” in brand journalism as particular types of branded content. The “quality and value” of different types of branded content provide practitioners with claims for the legitimacy of their practices.

Based on this model, I suggest that in brand journalism, there exist three sources of discursive authority --journalistic professionalism, expertise and authenticity--and each of them is reflected by its constituting people (“preferences” or participants), perceived ideal roles of brand journalists (“principles”), editorial routines, narrative techniques and organizational set ups (“practices”) and content (“product”).
The dissertation has shown that one the most important sources of discursive authority in brand journalism is professional journalism. The discourse of journalistic professionalism is often invoked as a way to cue the normative ideals and credibility of journalism in the emerging hybrid practice. This model of brand journalism posits that brand journalism practitioners are ideally producers of news and information for the public. Journalistic professionalism is claimed by hiring former journalists as writers and cooperating with news publishers. In addition, it is also translated into practice via several editorial routines and narrative techniques like behind-the-scenes stories and interviews. This model of brand journalism aims to produce branded content that closely mimics the form and style of news. Corporate objectives and promotional impulses--which are articulated as the opposite of the idea of brand “journalism”--are subtle in content.

Another source of discursive authority in brand journalism is expertise. This type of brand journalism suggests that brand journalism is a process of mediating expert’s knowledge to the public. While the “product” based on expertise might be similar to that of journalistic professionalism, the “preferences” are different. That is, in this type of brand journalism, authority resides in experts’ knowledge rather than brand journalism practitioners’ journalistic skills and routines. Unlike brand journalists, experts are only occasional participants in brand journalism and are “outsiders” of the brand journalism community who do not necessarily share the conventions of brand journalism practitioners. Because the legitimacy of the practice is established by experts’ voices, it is important for brand journalism practitioners to give expert-writers editorial freedom. As Lydia Leavitt argues, this is the process of “letting go” of control (personal
communication, July 19, 2012). In fact, as I argue in the preceding chapters, the voices of experts are co-opted *because* of their presumed distance from the brand. While brand journalism practitioners give control to experts in terms of creating content, the role of practitioners involves identifying and reaching out to experts, organizing, interpreting and contextualizing expert voices for readers. That is, brand journalism practitioners in this model position themselves as facilitators, mediators and curators of expert voices. This model of brand journalism includes experts’ columns, guest-writing pieces and branded content (written by practitioners) that uses third party data and expert sources.

Finally, some brand journalism stories invoke authenticity as their source of discursive authority. In these stories, audiences and employees are often invited to write stories about their personal experiences broadly related to the brand. These personal experience stories-- where narrators are sometimes employees of a corporate brand--are often depicted in terms of the everyday experience of ordinary people. These stories capture a “soft storytelling moment” (Ed Lallo, personal communication, July 3, 2012) emphasize emotions and depend “heavily on language to create meaning and authenticity” (Berning, 2011). Because audiences’ and employee’s voices are important to give the sense of authenticity to the stories, brand journalism practitioners are minimally involved in the editorial process of creating content. Like expert stories, brand journalism practitioners’ role is conceptualized as the co-creators and mediators of audiences’/employees’ voices.

This model suggests that multiple sources of legitimacy co-exist in brand journalism. Journalistic professionalism, expertise and authenticity provide different claims for discursive authority of the hybrid practice, and they are reflected in decisions
that brand journalism practitioners take regarding participants, principles, practices and products. This model notes that brand journalism includes multiple groups of people. Brand journalism invites not only “brand journalists” but also experts, audiences, employees and news organizations to be a part of the community. Without a collective body of brand journalists, the community’s membership is often extended to “outsiders.” Brand journalism is also practiced in multiple contexts. Branded content is produced in corporate companies, agencies (brand journalism, content or PR agencies) and even news organizations.

The discursive tensions of the brand journalism community---between articulated and unarticulated; intrinsic and extrinsic; and indicative and subjunctive---are closely related to (negotiating) multiple claims of legitimacy. The tension between articulated and unarticulated discourses arises from the fact that the three sources of discursive authority exclude, marginalize and silence discourses about the corporate objectives of brand journalism. Rather, legitimacy of practice is constructed by invoking journalistic professionalism, expertise and authenticity. This means that discursive authority is established through strategic articulations, and legitimacy claims always imply silenced voices. In addition, the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic voices involves tensions among different participants of the community who produce different kinds of discursive authority. While brand journalism practitioners construct authority by recreating journalistic professionalism, non-member participants--subject matter experts, employees and audiences--help create the sense of expertise and authenticity in branded content.

Finally, the tension between indicative and subjunctive discourses can be conceptualized as potential discrepancies between what is claimed as the participants,
practices, principles and products of brand journalism and what they are in reality. It is claimed that brand journalism is a practice that serves the interest of audiences by providing information and conveying their voices, maintaining a “right” distance from both corporate communications and journalism. In reality, however, setting this distance is often difficult and the line between branded content and promotional messages is not clear-cut. Moreover, while journalists are hired as brand journalists as a way to create a link between professional journalism and the corporate communication practice, their journalistic experience, skill and knowledge are often readjusted in the corporate context:

When you are a reporter, you answer to your editor, and you answer to your readers. When you create branded content, you certainly have editors and readers but you also have your brand. You have the brand’s agency and you have sales people who have their interest as well (Melanie Deziel, personal communication, November 21, 2014).

The discursive authority of brand journalism is thus established by accommodating the ongoing discursive tensions that arise across different contexts and relationships within the community. In these tensions, multiple—sometimes competing—claims of legitimacy need to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated.

**Journalism in an age of brand journalism**

As a hybrid practice, brand journalism helps rethink journalism’s relationship with corporate communications. While journalists have strategically distanced their practice from the economic field and protected boundaries of the profession, journalism is neither entirely independent nor different from corporate communications. In fact, journalism is often a (silent) partner of corporate brands and brand journalism. While brand journalism is often framed as a threat, invasion or risk to journalism, journalism
and brand journalism not only compete but cooperate with each other in reshaping the role of corporate brands as producers of public discourse. For instance, news publishers sometimes republish branded content: “Even yesterday, I got a call from a newspaper in Louisiana that wants to rewrite one of our articles. I think journalists are more open to the fact that oh listen, these are good ideas” (Ed Lallo, personal communication, November 21, 2014). That is, branded content sometimes travels up to traditional news publishers and journalists are part of the process:

Keep in mind, part of my other job at Intel is actually talking to reporters and communicating with them and connecting them with the stories at Intel that they might want to do. So if we have something that we don’t cover at Intel Free Press, that might make a really good story for say, Business Week. I might actually even give that story to Business Week before we do it. The flip side of that is we might publish that story on Intel Free Press and our Business Week reporter may see that and go, well, and I’ve actually had this happen before where a reporter would call me and say “hey Bill, I saw your story on Free Press. That’s interesting, of course, we could never run that story verbatim, but I am interested in talking to that person in that story and I may do my own version of the story.” That’s ok too (Bill Calder, personal communication, June 27, 2012).

In addition, news publishers offer spaces and editorial services for corporate brands to publish branded content under their roof. Brands are increasingly understood as equal partners of news publishers in the new media and information environment. With the help of news publishers, brands are participating in the public discourse and creating a hybrid model of journalism that incorporates both news organizations and corporate brands. In this sense, brand journalism is conducted based on the mutual consent between corporate brands and news organizations. While brand journalism is often conceptualized as the external forces and threats that contest the ideals and norms of journalism, the partnership between corporate brands and journalism is becoming increasingly porous, acceptable and legitimate.
The interdependence between journalism and brand journalism also suggests that changes in brand journalism may affect the structures, ideas and conventions of journalism. For instance, branded content is becoming integrated into news organizations’ business model and the meaning of journalism is increasingly expanding to include branded content in its content continuum. In addition, the rise of brand journalism also challenges the traditional power relations between journalism and corporate communications. By borrowing the language and format of journalism, corporate brands may now have an ability to contradict what journalists write about their brands. As an illustration, Michael Brito, head of social strategy at WCG, notes that brands now have the power to talk back to journalists. Using the example of the feud between electric vehicle company Tesla and the *New York Times* in 2013, he suggests that the landscape of discursive power between journalism and corporate communications is rapidly changing:

It used to be if the *New York Times* writes a negative article about you, there is absolutely nothing you can do about it whether it’s a political campaign or a brand… The *New York Times* wrote a negative article about Tesla. One of their writers or journalists took a Tesla on a test drive and wrote a negative article about it. Two days later, the CEO of Tesla, he wrote a response and his response generated a ton more engagement, and more reach. Now all of a sudden brands today are on equal ground as media companies and as news. That forces the news to be more subjective when they report to make sure that they are checking facts before they publish a story (personal communication, November 17, 2014).

After the news article was rebutted by Tesla’s CEO Elon Musk on the company’s blog who boldly labeled the newspaper’s review “fake,” the *New York Times*’ public editor Margaret Sullivan responded to the criticism and admitted that the review had “problems with precision and judgment, but not integrity” (February 18, 2013). As indicated in this case, both journalism and brand journalism are open to be tested for
veracity and the textual privilege of journalism over brands' communication efforts is no longer guaranteed.

Moreover, traditional journalism lacks the language to differentiate itself from brand journalism. Journalism’s criticism of brand journalism often involves terms like factuality, truth and objectivity. For example, when energy company Chevron started a brand journalism project in Richmond, California and claimed it a “community newspaper,” the *Los Angeles Times* criticizes this action, arguing that “[a] Chevron PR website pretends to be an *objective* news source” (Hiltzik, September 22, 2014, my emphasis). That is, in order to distinguish itself from brand journalism, journalists tend to narrow what journalism is and how it should work, regardless of how (a wide variety of) journalism actually works. Without the limited language of objectivity, truth and facticity, journalists have not yet found definitive terms to draw the boundary between their practices and those of brand journalists and to claim their textual privilege. While journalists are struggling to find new languages and discourses to articulate their practices, brand journalism co-opts journalists’ established discursive strategies to legitimize themselves as an “authoritative interpretive community” (Zelizer, 1992, p.197). Brand journalism not only appropriates but also challenges and restructures the existing discursive hierarchy between journalism and corporate communications.

This suggests that the discursive authority of interpretive communities is constructed not only through internal consensus but through interactions with adjacent communities. While brand journalism borrows the discursive authority from journalism, the rise of brand journalism has also changed some conventions of journalism. In this sense, boundaries between interpretive communities are contingent. The discursive tools
of control and authority of one community can be borrowed, appropriated and tweaked by another community. At the same time, changes in one community can challenge the presumed internal solidarity and collectivity of another community. Interpretive communities are often connected and sometimes collaborative. Boundary work—the discursive work of constructing and maintaining boundaries between adjacent communities—sometimes involves boundary crossing. In the following discussions, I examine how the boundaries of journalism and the discursive hierarchy between journalism and corporate communications are changing with the rise of brand journalism.

_Journalism and PR_

Historically, journalists and PR professionals have developed interdependent relationships that exhibit both similarities and dissimilarities. Public relations has provided journalism with sources of information, and journalism has provided public relations with channels and voices to speak to the public. But with the rise of brand journalism in which many corporate brands have an option to directly communicate to the public or simply buy a space for branded content in online publishers, the traditional relationship between PR professionals and journalists may change even further. PRPs now tend to bypass the media filter more than ever before. According to _Columbia Journalism Review_, most brand journalism “bypasses traditional media entirely, and as such it threatens to further erode journalism’s dwindling advertising revenue” (Meyer, November/December, 2014).

In addition, as public relations integrates brand journalism, more self-identified journalists and freelance journalists are becoming “brand journalists.” For example, one
of 2015’s Pulitzer Prize winners (The Daily Breeze) left journalism for PR because of financial reasons:

We should note that Kuznia left the Breeze and journalism last year and is currently a publicist in the communications department of USC Shoah Foundation. I spoke with him this afternoon and he admitted to a twinge of regret at no longer being a journalist, but he said it was too difficult to make ends meet at the newspaper while renting in the LA area (Roderick, April 20, 2015).

According to Lucia Moses’ reports, “many journalists are heeding the call of [brand journalism or] native advertising, where the pay is decent and work is steady” (August 25, 2014). This may exacerbate the already unequal ratio and the pay gap between journalists and PRPs. PR professionals outnumber journalists by the ratio of 4.6 to 1 in 2013. Moreover, according to the Pew Research Center (2014), the salary gap between journalism and public relations is also widening in recent years to almost $20,000 a year, a greater income gap than a decade ago. As Obermaier and Koch (2014) show with German freelance journalists who are also occupied in public relations, these “moonlighters” often experience inter-role conflicts because of the presumed discrepancies in principles between journalism and PR. “They feel tense and uncertain whether they see themselves as journalists or as public relations practitioners” (p. 1). As more journalists choose to moonlight as PRPs or to move over to the corporate side, this inter-role conflict may prevail.

As many practitioners that I interviewed note, the practice of public relations and the discursive hierarchy between journalism and PR, of course, will not completely change with the rise of brand journalism. However, the way journalists and PRPs have interacted may change, decreasing the gap between the authority of journalism and that of PR/brand journalism as corporate communications increasingly adopt the form, shape
and editorial process of journalism and hire journalists as corporate writers. While human resources of journalism, editorial routines and settings, journalistic norms, skills and narratives constitute the core of journalistic authority in brand journalism, they are understood to be transferrable to the corporate context. This suggests that the authority of journalism—which is often perceived to supersede that of PR—is open to multiple practices and contexts, even those that are often considered to be the opposite of journalism. Brand journalism offers a way to think about a possible hybrid and continuum between journalism and PR where journalistic authority is being reconstructed and rearticulated in the corporate context.

*Journalism and advertising*

Similarly, brand journalism is also reshaping the relationship between journalism and advertising. As discussed in chapter 4, journalists have constructed a “wall” between the journalistic and business-oriented functions of news organizations, which has been critical to the identity and socialization of journalists. With the rise of brand journalism, the viability of this presumed wall between news and business is being increasingly challenged.

First, as the pay model of journalism is changing, corporate brands are increasingly becoming the direct source of revenue for news publishers. According to Michael Brenner, the “reasons that content marketing exists for brands are the same reasons publishers struggle with and that reason is that advertising doesn’t work” (personal communication, November 21, 2014). With the revenue from traditional forms
of advertising and banner ads decreasing, publishers rethink how to get paid. Brand journalism is an answer:

From a capitalist standpoint, publishers need to figure out how to get paid, and I think what we are going to see more is brands are going to be the revenue sources for publishers directly. And you are seeing that in the form of “studios” where publishers are essentially creating the content for brands for their own sites (Michael Brenner, personal communication, November 21, 2014).

As discussed in the previous chapter, this partnership may disrupt the longstanding wall between journalism and advertising that has been passionately constructed and maintained—at least in rhetoric—by journalists. While the collaboration and symbiotic relationship between corporate brands and news publishers have existed in many forms since the beginning of journalism, with brand journalism the partnership is becoming more systematically and structurally embraced by news organizations.

In addition, as the direct partnership between brands and news organizations is increasing, the role of media buying and planning agencies is also changing. In traditional advertising, media agencies plan and buy ad spaces in newspapers for brands. They serve as intermediaries between brands and newspapers. According to Josh Sternberg, in brand journalism and native advertising, brands are bypassing media agencies and directly negotiating with news publishers:

Media agencies are the ones that are going to be affected the most by this because media agencies’ purposes are to become intermediaries between brands and the publishers. Media agencies go out and spend money to buy space on a publisher website. When you are not doing a traditional banner or display ad, and you are dealing with content, a publisher and brand client can talk directly and negotiate the deal, cutting out the media agency (personal communication, December 8, 2014).

For this reason, Advertising Week also predicted that as the partnership grows, media agencies and “creative shops lose control and become less relevant to the clients”
(Moses, January 8, 2013). In this sense, brand journalism is not only challenging the wall between news and advertising within news organizations but also reshaping the ways in which advertising is practiced in journalism.

While news publishers are increasingly integrating branded content as part of their content continuum, it is predicted that branded content would “occupy the hierarchical bottom” of the continuum (Sjovaag, 2015, p. 113). By rhetorically emphasizing the separation between church and state in the process of integrating branded content in news organizations, the dichotomy between news and advertising would still be upheld and may even enable journalism to rhetorically “maintain its distance from the economic field, thus protecting the boundaries of the profession” (Slovaag, 2015, p. 113).

In this sense, while brand journalism does challenge the boundary between news and advertising, it can be used as a rhetorical tool for journalists to articulate the difference between the two practices and to police and reinstate discursive boundaries. In other words, ironically, brand journalism rhetorically supports journalism’s independence from the economic field. As British journalist Francis Williams once said, “only through the growth of advertising [does] the press achieve independence.” By maintaining an ongoing distinction between journalism and brand journalism, journalists attempt to maintain boundaries by which the difference between news and branded content is not as clear-cut as journalism has argued. Both instead inhabit a shared content continuum of journalism professes to offer.

_Journalism and the public_
Journalism and the public have developed relationships based on certain assumptions and promises about the role of journalism. The relationship is first based on journalism’s assumption that readers of news are the “public,” a collective body of citizens. It is also built upon the promise that journalism should provide issues and ponderable questions for the public without being influenced by political or commercial forces. As argued in the previous chapter, this model of journalism and its relationship with the public is often a subjunctive aspiration rather than an indicative description of reality, and it remains insufficient to explain the different shapes, forms and contexts of journalism in practice.

Brand journalism highlights those differentiations and is increasingly changing the relationship between journalism and the public [Figure 1]. It suggests that journalism can incorporate private (corporate) interests and that journalism’s idea of the public as a unitary and collective body is being increasingly replaced by the notion of fragmented audiences. Contrary to traditional journalism, brand journalism does not assume “the public” but often provides content for only certain targeted audiences. In this process, the audience of brand journalism is narrowly defined as “consumers” or “customers”: “[We create] effective content to better meet the needs of our customers for the purpose of essentially attracting new customers and converting them into paying customers” (Michael Brenner, personal communication, August 23, 2012).
Figure 1. The dynamics among corporate brands, news publishers and the public in brand journalism

As news readers are increasingly conceptualized as audiences, consumers or even customers, the definitions and boundaries of journalism are being renegotiated. In particular, journalism is increasingly expanding to include “information” and “content” rather than just “news.” This means that the traditional journalism model based on journalistic professionalism and ideals is changing to incorporate more open, participatory and deinstitutional forms of expression. As Seth Lewis (2012) argues, the rearticulation of journalism as information and content downplays “the ideologically laden ‘journalism’ in favor of the more neutral ‘information,’ a term that more easily invites participation and open interpretation and is associated with trusting distributed publics” (p. 315). This model of journalism connects a wide range of fields, organizations
and corporations. Who creates content is becoming less relevant to the value of journalism.

According to the model, journalism can be journalism as long as it is informational and useful to (some) readers, opening a possibility for integration of branded content in the spectrum of journalism. As discussed in previous chapters, the discourse of what audiences/consumers/potential customers want in content is central to the legitimation rhetoric of brand journalism. In that rhetoric, the authority to determine what is useful as information shifts from journalists to audiences. Because audiences/readers have the power to choose what they want, corporate brands as well as news organizations can produce and distribute content. In this information environment, publishers are increasingly integrating branded content as part of their content continuum, making journalism’s role one of accommodating the contextualization and curation of information produced by others.

With the proliferation of information and a growing partnership between news publishers and corporate brands, it is more difficult for readers to distinguish news from other forms of information. While readers often feel “deceived upon realizing that an article or video [is] sponsored by a brand” and believe that a news site may lose credibility if it incorporates branded content, they often do not have the agreed notion of what “sponsored” or “branded” content means (Lazauskas, July 9, 2014). According to a recent study conducted by David Franklyn, professor of the University of San Francisco School of Law, “50 percent [of the readers] don’t even know what the word ‘sponsor’ means” (Bachman, December 4, 2013). In addition, when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) organized a workshop on native advertising and branded content in 2013, it “left
regulators with no clear direction about how to police” the content (Bachman, December 4, 2013). As Mary Engle, the FTC’s associate director for the Division of Advertising Practices, notes, the complexity of brand journalism and native advertising “has raised more questions than it’s answered” thus far, which makes policy decisions difficult (Federal Trade Commission, December 4, 2013).

With brand journalism, the line between news and branded content becomes blurrier. While companies and news publishers disclose the information that the content is produced or sponsored by corporate brands, there is no consensus about what it means, how it works and how it is (or should be) different from news created by journalists. The traditional model of journalism, its norms and its relationship with the public thus appear to be losing ground to more open and participatory models of journalism that may embrace branded content in their content continuum. The distinction between journalism, information and content is becoming increasingly elusive and the dynamics between them are rapidly changing.

Brand journalism practitioners mediate this complex relationship. As Ed Lallo (personal communication, July 3, 2012) argues, brand journalism practitioners create a bridge to “bring together a better working relationship between the real journalists who daily provide news to the world and the corporate side.” In addition, they help corporate brands build audiences and reconfigure their relationship with them. Brand journalism practitioners negotiate the interest of the brand with news publishers and organize individual voices of audiences into a meaningful context. Their identity and work is defined not only by their professional skills or established codes of knowledge within the community but also in relationships that require constant mediations, facilitations and
negotiations. The cultural authority of their practices is legitimized and endorsed by news publishers and by the public, often by giving them control and co-creating discursive power. In this sense, the collective effort of brand journalism practitioners, news organizations and the public creates a legitimate ground for brand journalism.

**Collectivity in a world of flux**

This study has suggested that interpretive communities have multiple layers of discursive tensions over meaning, boundary and authority. The establishment of interpretive communities’ authority always involves discursive work that entails contest, dissent and negotiation between articulated and unarticulated, intrinsic and extrinsic and indicative and subjunctive voices. While the idea of collective consensus has been critical to an understanding of interpretive communities and their cultural authority, this study proposes that collective consensus is neither as static nor one-dimensional as it has often been conceptualized. Instead of solidarity, there exist dynamic phases of unstable conditions. Interpretive communities are often interdependent where changes in one community lead to changes in another. This was the case for brand journalism and its relationship with traditional journalism. While journalists often lament brand journalism and use it to safeguard their professional values, norms and ideals, this study has shown that journalism is often a partner of corporate brands. Brand journalism also highlights the hybrids, gray areas and internal boundaries that exist within the journalism community. Without fully articulating the actual hierarchy, distinction and inequality that prevail in journalism, journalists have imagined themselves as a community based on presumed collective notions and ideas of journalism.
As Foucault (1980) argues in *Power/Knowledge*, “the essential political problem for the intellectual is not...to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth” (p. 133). This means that the current regime of truth is reflected in prevailing paradigms (Meese, 1986). It has been a dominant idea that journalism is a practice by professional journalists dedicated to public service and democracy, autonomous from corporate and political forces. This idea, according to Foucault, is closely linked to “a regime of truth,” and to “systems of power” (p. 133). Professional journalism indeed has developed within a historically and culturally specific set of rules for producing and organizing “legitimate” forms of knowledge.

The recent technological developments and corporate brands’ tactics pose critical challenges to the “regime of truth” that has governed professional journalism. The business model of journalism is rapidly changing amidst news publishers’ declining advertising revenue. In addition, the professional norms of objectivity, publicness and accountability in journalism are increasingly translated as “transparency” and “authenticity” (Singer, 2015). In addition, a wide range of individuals, organizations and even corporate companies that have traditionally not been a part of the journalism community are participating in the production and distribution of “news.” To borrow from Foucault (1980) again, the technological, cultural and economic shifts surrounding journalism make the community and its “regime [undergo] a global modification” (p. 113).

This study suggests that the modification in journalism is systematically facilitating the ready infiltration of corporate forces into news organizations and
ecosystem. The line between public/private, journalism/content and journalists/corporate professionals has become blurrier. Journalism is increasingly articulated and defined primarily in financial terms. With the rise of brand journalism, the boundaries of journalism call for renegotiation. While brand journalism may be a threat to the traditional models and values of journalism, it also opens the possibility to rethink, renew and transform journalism. This analysis illustrates that journalism is morphing into information that includes a spectrum of different contents, models and participants.

Aristotle once argued that the ideas of unity, consensus and one truth in a community are an illusion.

There is a point at which a polis, by advancing in unity, will cease to be a polis; but will none the less come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse polis. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the polis is an aggregate of many members (as cited in Bauman, 2000, p. 177).

The interpretive community is a place of plural interests and strategies. Negotiation and conciliation of these interests do not take place without tensions, conflicts and struggles. In fact, it is only through these tensions, conflicts and struggles that it is possible to achieve commonality to some degree. As Bauman (2000) suggests, “the most promising kind of unity is one which is achieved and achieved daily anew, by confrontation, debate, negotiation and compromise between values, preferences and chosen ways of life and self-identifications of many and different… members of the” community (p. 178, original emphasis). In other words, the construction and maintenance of interpretive communities is a process that requires constant negotiations and regenerations as circumstances change.
Collectivity in a community is neither given nor unchangeable. It is not merely about consensus or agreement. It is an ongoing process that often creates discord and mobility. Brand journalism summarizes the challenges, confrontations and tensions that journalism has to face to achieve the unity “daily anew” in the changing information environment. These tensions make the community of journalism viable, healthy and fertile, opening it to new possibilities and meanings in the midst of change. The bigger risk for journalism than brand journalism and the corporate infiltration into the news ecosystem is silencing or overlooking the different interests, practices and participants that are already intrinsic to the journalism community.

This dissertation suggests changes and challenges to traditional journalism and its cultural authority. Whether these changes are good or bad to journalism remains an open question. One way of imagining the future of journalism in this changing landscape is to think about journalism in relation to other interpretive communities. Brand journalism practitioners, corporate brands and PR agencies are not the only groups that attempt to reshape the boundary of journalism. Multiple interpretive communities--including NGOs, citizens, activists and entrepreneurial journalists--have increasingly become regular participants and/or competitors of journalism. It is in the relationships with multiple interpretive communities that journalism evolves. As some critics have concerned, these interpretive communities may hint the end of traditional journalism. However, they also suggest a new beginning of journalism in which the communities potentially create partnerships and complement each other. Journalism will continue, though maybe in different shapes, forms and contexts. It is time for journalism scholars and practitioners to
rethink journalism in and through the relationships with the communities around journalism.
Appendices

Appendix A

Methods

In order to address the questions of this dissertation, I employed a multidimensional approach that utilized various methods, data and sources, which enabled me to “gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues” being investigated (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93-4). Often called triangulation (Fielding & Fielding, 1986), this multi-methods, multi-source approach adds “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth” to the understanding of brand journalism as an emerging community and of the changing information environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. 6; Nightingale, 1989; Flick, 2004). In particular, I combined the textual analysis of various forms of documents with in-depth interviews of people who practice brand journalism in the kinds of different agencies and organizational contexts.

Data obtained from different sources and methods serve what Geertz (1973) called “complex specifics” that contribute to “draw large conclusions” about the shifting information environment and changing cultural logic and power relations among communities of cultural producers (p. 28). Following Glaser and Strauss (1967/2008), I studied brand journalism in an inductive, exploratory fashion: collecting bits of information about brand journalism, building up “conceptual categories (or a conceptual properties of the category)” from them, and generating a “grounded theory” on new forms of collectivity in the changing information environment (p. 23). Based on this, data
obtained from various sources in this study were compared, analyzed and synthesized to identify as many conceptual categories and properties as possible, which helped better explain the phenomenon at hand while addressing the research questions.

Each source was selected to reflect the large universe of brand journalism. In particular, brand journalism practiced by different types of agencies-- those working as in-house/contributing writers at corporate brands, those who work for brand journalism-specific agencies, and those who work for brand journalism/online newsroom departments at PR firms, and those working as in-house writers at news organizations-- was examined through the textual analyses of various documents and in-depth interviews with practitioners. In addition, I also studied brand journalism practitioners in various positions, including writers, editors and executives, to explore the possibility that people in different positions may have different ideas about brand journalism and if so, to examine how these differences are negotiated in the production and circulation of brand journalism.

Textual analysis

My purposes in conducting textual analysis were manifold: 1) To identify case study examples to be examined; 2) to get a sense of the prevalent social and business discourse about brand journalism and the identity of brand journalists; and 3) to discover what kinds of conventions and norms are borrowed from journalism and PR in the production and circulation of brand journalism. The textual analysis aimed to identify more detailed discourses, themes and information about brand journalism practices and the identity (discourse) of brand journalists. In order to do so, I conducted textual
analyses of 1) popular media, industry trade publications and business magazines
documents that cover brand journalism and related communication strategies; and 2)
open-to-public documents and presentations of companies, organizations and agencies
that produce and curate brand journalism content (e.g. mission statements, about us pages,
case reports, blog postings, etc); and 3) brand journalism professionals’ discussions and
reflections on their practices represented in the “brand journalism” group in the online
professional network LinkedIn.

I used the LexisNexis online database to locate the public and business discourse
on brand journalism and related organizational communication strategies in the popular
and industry trade publications and business magazines (both weekly or monthly
publications and online-only). I have chosen to limit my search to the last ten years (Jan,
2004- Dec, 2014) because it was in 2004 that the term “brand journalism” was first
coined and used in the marketing and PR industry (Chura, 2004). For industry trade
publications, I included six media outlets in advertising, branding, marketing and PR
published in the U.S.: Advertising Age (Adage), Advertising Week (Adweek), Brandweek,
Promo, Marketing News and PR Week (US). The chosen sources are considered to be the
lead and or/most influential choices in their respective category. For example, PR week is
considered “to be the nation’s most dominant public relations trade publication” in 2009
(Wright & Hinson, 2009, p. 4). Adage, Adweek, Promo, Marketing News and Brandweek
are also recognized as “industry leader(s)” by the Standard Periodicals Directory, the
largest directory of the U.S. and Canadian periodicals with information on more than
60,000 magazines, journals, newsletters and newspapers (Advertising Age, September 15,
2003). I also included five popular media based on circulation (The Wall Street Journal,
The New York Times, USA Today, The Washington Post, New York Post) and one business magazine (Forbes). The search I conducted across these sources was for articles with key terms related to brand journalism: “brand journalism (91)” “branded content (870),” “sponsored content (271),” and “native advertising (371).” My search along these terms yielded a collection of more than 1,400 articles to analyze between 2004 and 2014 after overlapped articles were removed.

In addition, from the list of organizations, agencies and brand journalism practitioners that I explored, I collected and examined available public documents about them and their projects on their websites, including ‘about us’ information, mission statements and strategy and case reports. Since these documents are prepared and packaged for the public and potential clients, they may contain marketing pitches of brand journalism. For this reason, these documents were not read “at face value, as accurate representations of social reality” but were interpreted as texts that could “suggest themes, images, or metaphors” about the phenomenon (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 125).

Finally, I joined and followed the conversations among practitioners in the “Brand Journalism” group in LinkedIn from August, 2012 to December, 2014. The group had about 2,800 members by 2014 and on average one to four postings are created by members everyday. In each posting, members share either their opinions on some topics relevant to brand journalism or hypertext links to articles, stories and videos published outside of the group, both of which often open discussions among them. By following practitioners’ informal conversations, I aimed to include “insider” discourses that are not as much refined as news articles or public documents. With these three types of textual
data, I was able to identify discursive themes, categories and strategies of brand journalism.

In-depth interviews

In addition to the textual data, one-on-one, semi-structured in-depth interviews over the phone were conducted with brand journalism practitioners in different positions at various types of organizations and of agencies. I used a combination of cold calling and snowball sampling to build informants. I sent out emails to selected practitioners based on preliminary analysis of textual data to solicit their participation (Appendix C). and I accumulated a list of participants for interviews by asking each to recommend people they know in the industry.

I conducted two sets of interviews in the summer of 2012 and in the fall of 2014. In the first round, I interviewed 22 practitioners. In the second, I carried out 9 interviews --3 new and 6 follow up (see Appendix B for interview participants). While I collected enough data and information about brand journalism practices in the first set of interviews, I conduct the second round in order to capture more recent trends and changes in the industry. While most of the participants were either writers or editors in the brand journalism industry, two of them were industry “experts”-- industry critics and observers who are familiar with the practices. The format of the questions was similar for all participants but each questionnaire was individualized according to the organizational settings in which they work and the characteristics of the project(s) they were participating in. (See Appendix D for sample questions). Some of the questions were also revised as interviews progressed, reflecting what I learned from previous interviews. The
average duration of each set of interviews was about 41 minutes (ranging from 25 minutes to 52 minutes) and about 42 minutes (ranging from 30 minutes to 49 minutes), respectively. Each interview was recorded and transcribed except for one email interview in the second round.

By talking to brand journalism practitioners in various organizational settings, I captured a more detailed picture of the practices, including brand journalists’ articulation of identity, their differentiation from and identification with journalists and PR professionals, the negotiation of different norms and interests in their practices, decision-making processes, and the business and cultural logic behind the phenomenon, each of which helped delineate brand journalism as an interpretive community.
Appendix B
Dissertation Interviews


Brito, Michael. Head of strategy, WCG. Phone interview, November 17, 2014.


Clark, Brian. Founder and CEO, GMD Studios. Phone interview, July 10, 2012.


Leavitt, Lydia. Editor & creative content strategist, JWT. Phone interview, July 19, 2012.

Lump, Nathan. Director of content strategy, JWT. Phone interview, July 12, 2012.


Spark, David. Founder and VP of marketing, Spark Media Solutions, LLC. Phone interview, August 9, 2012, November 7, 2014.


Stringfellow, Angela. Chief ideation officer, CODA Concepts, LLC. Phone interview, September 5, 2012.

Sweeny, Terry. Editorial director, UBM DeusM. Phone interview, August 16, 2012.


Wildstrom, Steve. Contributing writer, Cisco’s the Network. Phone interview, August 8, 2012.
Dear Mr./Ms. [name],

My name is Kyung Lee and I am a doctoral candidate of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication. I am currently working on a research project for my doctoral dissertation on the rise of brand journalism and content marketing. I am interviewing folks at various agencies and companies that have done pioneering work with these techniques. I recently interviewed Mr./Ms. [name] at [company’s name] and s/he suggested me to talk with you to learn more about brand journalism. Please let me know if there would be any interest in chatting. This will be a half an hour phone interview.

Thank you very much!

Best wishes,

Kyung
Dear Mr./Ms. [name],

I am Kyung Lee and a doctoral candidate of the University of Pennsylvania. We talked about brand journalism over the phone for my doctoral dissertation back in 2012. Before I conclude the project, I would like to conduct a follow up interview with you and learn more about the recent trends and the future of brand journalism. Your input will help my dissertation in this rapidly changing field. This phone interview will take less than half an hour. Please let me know if there would be any interest in chatting.

Thank you very much!

Best,

Kyung
Appendix D

Interview Sample Questions

Can you explain what [company name] does and what your role is there?

Can you define what brand journalism is?

How do you think the brand journalism approach is different from or similar to traditional PR or marketing?

How do you define the success of your brand journalism campaigns? What do you want to see as an end result of your projects?

What do you think are the “norms” or “rules” that brand journalists need to follow?

Can you explain your editorial policies?

Based on your experience, can you tell me about the differences between working in the branded content industry and working as a journalist?

Some critics say that brand journalism is not really journalism but it just takes advantage of it. What would be your response to this kind of criticism?

When a client organization asks you to create content for them, what questions do you usually ask to identify their needs?

Who usually decides what to cover and circulate? How much say does a client have in what goes out?

What are the major challenges when you work with your clients and how do you negotiate them?

What are your suggestions or recommendations to journalists who are considering transitioning to the branded content industry?
How do you think the rise of brand journalism or content marketing will change the future of corporate communications like PR and marketing?

How do you think brand journalism will change the boundary between news and branded content?
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