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# Journalistic Judgment in Comparative Perspective: A Weberian Analysis of France and the United States

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**Abstract**

Building on literatures that emphasize (1) the standardizing effects of markets and technology, and (2) the historical patterns and social functions of the press, this article theorizes the simultaneous co-presence of cross-national similarities and differences in journalistic judgment. Drawing from Max Weber's early twentieth century writings on journalism, we argue that similar cross-national judgments reveal journalism's shared structural basis as a commercial enterprise, whereas differences highlight the distinctive social functions that journalists assume in particular national settings. We illustrate this framework via semi-structured interviews conducted between 2015 and 2020 with a strategic sample of French and American journalists evaluating their best work. In both country samples, journalists that express pride in attracting audiences by translating complex issues and dignifying story subjects highlight journalism's structural basis. Cross-national differences reflect nationally distinct understandings of journalism's social functions, with French journalists emphasizing their ability to shed light on large issues and their American counterparts highlighting efforts to pry information from power holders.

**Keywords**

comparative research, journalism, judgment, in-depth interviews, media sociology, French journalism, American journalism

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Comparative researchers regularly document cross-national similarities and differences in journalists' conceptions, enactments, and evaluations of their work (Christin 2020; Hanitzsch et al. 2019). Multiple theoretical frameworks, moreover, interpret and explain these similarities and differences at the cross-national level (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Norris 2000). Building on this research, this article asks how scholars might theorize the simultaneous co-presence of these cross-national similarities and differences. We suggest this effort can aid in the comparative ambition to make sense of what is—and is not—nationally distinctive in journalism, while also complicating the accurate, if overly simplified, binaries used to distinguish national cases. More broadly, we link this work to scholarship detailing the diversity of purposes journalists aim to fulfill around the world.

We develop this theoretical framework through an empirical analysis of journalistic judgment. Scholars examine many aspects of judgment (Cornia et al. 2020; McGregor and Molyneux 2020); we focus specifically on journalists' practical perceptions of and appreciations for their own work, which we access by asking journalists about their "best work." This understanding of judgment reveals the implicit (i.e., subconscious) and explicit (i.e., conscious) evaluations journalists hold regarding what constitutes "good" journalism. By probing best work, we gain insight into how similarities and differences are constructed both within and across national cases. Moreover, the analysis affords a view onto the diverse real-world purposes that journalists aim to fulfill, which prior comparative research finds to contain nationally distinctive and cross-nationally similar elements (Lemieux and Schmalzbauer 2000; Revers 2017).

Our theoretical framework builds on the early twentieth century writings of Max Weber (1998, 2008). For Weber, journalistic judgment provides a prism on the tensions journalists navigate as a result of their profession's shared structural basis as a commercial enterprise and its varied—and sometimes nationally distinctive—social functions. From this starting point, we posit that similar cross-national judgments reveal journalism's structural basis, whereas differences highlight the distinctive social functions that journalists assume in particular national settings. In similar instances, journalists' judgments highlight work that attracts audiences without abandoning professional beliefs regarding what constitutes "good" journalism. Cross-national differences, by contrast, draw on enduring and nationally specific understandings of what social functions journalists are expected to fulfill.

We illustrate this framework by analyzing journalistic judgment in France and the United States. Journalists in these countries are often viewed as holding binarily opposed professional evaluations, with French journalists oriented towards socially engaged, opinion-driven work while their American counterparts prioritize a fact-based, watchdog model (Alexander 1981). Through interviews, we show that journalists' judgments of their "best work" evince patterns of similarity and difference along the lines suggested by Weber. In both countries, journalists that express pride in attracting audiences by translating complex issues and dignifying story subjects highlight journalism's structural basis. Conversely, cross-national differences reflect nationally distinctive understandings of journalism's social functions. Specifically, the tendency among some French journalists to emphasize their ability to shed light on large issues

highlights what Albert (1998: 41) calls a "journalism of expression" committed to "the exposition of ideas." Some American journalists' emphasis on prying information from power holders highlights the watchdog function ascribed to the American press (Schudson 1978).

Both our theoretical framework and empirical results contribute to understanding the simultaneous co-presence of cross-national similarities and differences. Comparative scholars have theorized the effects of social structural elements (e.g., states, markets) on journalism, and documented how such elements shape cross-national similarities and differences in journalists' conceptions, enactments, and evaluations of their work (Esser et al. 2017). Our use of Weber adds to a growing literature that explores how such conceptions, enactments, and evaluations at the level of the individual journalist reveal broader social structural processes (Mellado et al. 2017; Revers 2017). Weber's emphasis on journalism's structural basis and social functions, moreover, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the mixture of similarities and differences in judgments across cases. Finally, our specific exploration of practical judgments—through journalists' best work—highlights the multiple evaluations that characterize journalists within and across national settings (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Lemieux and Schmalzbauer 2000).

## Similarities and Differences in Journalistic Judgment

Comparative researchers have long documented cross-national similarities and differences in journalists' perceptions and appreciations of their own work. Theoretical explanations for these similarities and differences generally emphasize "global" or national factors, respectively. These treatments usefully capture the general or dominant journalistic tendencies in and across nation states. We build on these important lines of inquiry by theorizing the simultaneous co-presence of these cross-national similarities and differences in journalistic judgments.

Scholars attribute cross-national similarities to "global" factors that exist in all countries. Some emphasize the homogenizing effects of market forces on journalistic judgment (Cagé 2015). Others point to the circulation of a generalized—interpreted by some as an "Americanized"—journalism culture that imposes similar professional standards of evaluation across diverse national settings (Blanchard 1986; Van Leuven and Berglez 2016). Still others highlight the potentially standardizing effects of new technologies (De Maeyer and Le Cam 2015; Petre 2015). Such factors are conceptualized across a diverse array of frameworks as inducing shared demands, logics, or opportunities that lead to similar journalistic judgments across discrepant national cases (Norris 2000; Volkmer 2012).

Scholars utilize these frameworks to interpret observed similarities in news judgment. Umbricht and Esser (2016) document the growth of "audience-friendly" news judgments in six countries over five decades, which they attribute partly to a growing (if uneven) orientation towards commercial concerns (see also Aalberg and Curran 2012). Cornia et al. (2020: 186) likewise find "strong similarities" in the ways that news organizations in six European countries legitimize cooperation

between editorial and commercial operations, which they interpret as evidence of a "new norm" being constructed across multiple national settings (see also Örnebring and Mellado 2018). Finally, Larrondo et al. (2016) show that European public broadcasters—despite possessing otherwise quite different historical trajectories—share similar perceptions of the potential for multimedia technologies to supplement their work.

Scholarship that highlights cross-national differences in journalistic judgment offers different theoretical explanations. This scholarship typically attributes these differences to social structural elements. These include the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the relationships between political and economic interests, and the development of civil society (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Pfetsch and Esser 2012). These elements are theorized as being "major, persistent, and relatively stable" (Esser et al. 2017: 23) influences on the professional and organizational cultures in which journalists operate. As such, they structure the historically defined contexts in which journalists perceive and evaluate their work (Humprecht 2016).

Scholars utilize these frameworks to understand observed differences in journalistic judgment. Mellado et al. (2017: 1101) find that media system and political environment features help account for "significant differences" in the ways that journalists in several Latin American countries conceive of and enact their work. Brekken et al. (2012) likewise note substantial differences in news judgments, and position them in light of media system differences. Revers (2017) and Christin (2020) each show social structural elements interact with "cultural repertoires" (Lamont and Thévenot 2000) in shaping distinctive forms of journalistic judgment in Western Europe and North America.

Comparative scholarship thus highlights ways in which journalistic judgments do and do not vary across national cases. By doing so, this body of scholarship presents a puzzle we explore below: namely, explaining the simultaneous co-presence of cross-national similarities and differences. Such an effort, we suggest, can give theoretical form to the diverse empirical results that comparative researchers regularly document.

## Theorizing Simultaneous Co-presence: A Weberian Approach

Our theoretical framework starts from Weber's (1998, 2008) writings on journalism. At its core, Weber's project was to understand the relationship between journalism's structural basis and its social functions.[1] Across Western Europe and North America, journalism had by the early twentieth century become a commercial enterprise. Yet this shared structural basis co-existed alongside different understandings of journalism's purpose. As a methodological individualist, Weber sought to learn how the actions and beliefs of social actors revealed both these shared structural bases as well as their differing social functions. Journalistic judgment therefore constituted one domain for theorizing and empirically exploring the simultaneous co-presence of cross-national similarities and differences.

Previewing a planned survey to colleagues in 1910, Weber (2008: 84) remarked that "what is fundamental for all our investigations is the fact that the press today is

necessarily a capitalist, business enterprise." Some at the time claimed this development reduced judgment to emphasize only stories that would attract audiences and sell newspapers. Weber argued that the structural basis created a tension for journalists who sought to attract audiences without forsaking their professional beliefs regarding what constitutes "good" journalism. They found themselves asked to write "readily and yet convincingly on anything and everything the 'market' happens to demand" without "falling into absolute banality" (176). Their judgments, he argued, focused not simply on news items that generated revenues or boosted audience share; rather, they sought to wed professional and market demands by providing entertaining news without offending story subjects and by translating complex issues into language readily understood by audiences.

Weber posited that similar cross-national judgments revealed journalism's shared structural basis. While what counted as entertaining or complex might vary across cases, he stressed the principles underpinning shared judgments (Weber 1998). Looking at our two national cases, we note that the shared judgments articulated by leading figures of the late nineteenth century popular press correspond closely with Weber's expectations. Joseph Pulitzer's admonition that his American reporters not write "over the heads of our readers" (quoted in Juergens 1966: 58) finds its French corollary in Moïse Polydore Millaud's invocation that his staff "have the courage to be stupid" (quoted in Bessire 2001: 121) by explaining events in terms easily grasped by a broad range of readers.

As a comparatist, Weber recognized that hardly all journalistic judgments were so standardized. The development of news judgments emphasizing the "purely factual" had clearly taken hold in some countries (he cited England, Germany, and the United States); however, things were "not quite the same in France" (Weber 2008: 87). In France, judgments often expressed specific opinions and views about the events. This difference, he surmised, could not be attributed to different political systems per se, as both American and French readers "claim to be democrats." Instead, the explanation derived from aspects of the "societal function of the newspaper" which he considered to be "quite different" in the two cases.

Weber did not pursue the point about journalism's social function in detail. Scholars since, though, have shown judgments to be shaped by leading figures during critical historical periods and institutionalized via journalism education, awards, and professional mythologies (Benson 2013; Hallin and Mancini 2004). With respect to our two cases, scholars have demonstrated that the enduring importance attached to opinion and literary expression reflects the powerful hold of literary and political figures during journalism's formation; Zola's "J'accuse" during the Dreyfuss affair serves as the most prominent example (Neveu 2009).[2] By contrast, the American emphasis on investigative reporting reflects journalism's emergence alongside Progressive Era efforts to reform institutions, and the muckrakers serve as its enduring exemplar (Schudson 1978). Such judgments are hardly nationally exclusive: French journalism has its own tradition of investigative reporting (Marchetti 2009), just as American journalism has its own history of literary and opinion-oriented writing (Roberts Forde 2007). These judgments do, however, capture the historically

dominant ideals and distinctive social functions that distinguish journalism across national cases.

Weber's writings suggest a theoretical framework and methodological approach for understanding the simultaneous co-presence of cross-national similarities and differences in journalistic judgment. Theoretically, similar judgments reflect the shared structural basis of journalism as a commercial enterprise and the tensions journalists face in it, while nationally distinctive judgments highlight distinctive understandings of journalism's purpose. Such judgments co-exist because journalism, as it has developed in Western Europe and North America, possesses a shared structural basis that interacts with sometimes differing social functions. Methodologically, Weber's "individualism" provides a path for exploring how such structural bases and social functions manifest in practice through individual journalists' judgments.

Additionally, Weber offers one way of interpreting the simultaneous co-presence of similarities and differences that comparisons of France and the United States have already documented. In contrast to the sometimes-binary oppositions (e.g., opinion vs. fact, see Alexander 1981) identified as differentiating the two countries' journalism, scholars have portrayed a more complex picture. Lemieux and Schmalzbauer (2000: 149), for example, document "greater convergence between French and American definitions of journalistic professionalism" than might be predicted by such binaries. Moreover, they note that scholars too often make "broad generalizations about differences between Europeans and Americans, neglecting to examine the *internal* differences within the press corps of each" (150, emphasis in the original). More recent scholarship has likewise identified complex patterns of similarity and difference in the two countries (Benson 2013; Christin 2020).

To be sure, Weber's insights hardly answer all questions about journalistic judgment. His own writings on the topic are suggestive and schematic; empirically, he offers little validation of his main claims, largely due to his failure to carry out the empirical research (Bastin 2013). Moreover, his framework does not exclude alternative explanations for the same data. Our use of Weber is an attempt to exploit his theoretical insights to understand the cross-national co-existence of similarities and differences in journalistic judgment.

## Illustrating the Framework: Data and Methods

To illustrate our framework, we draw on interviews—conducted as part of a larger comparative project examining transformations in journalism—with journalists in two cities: Toulouse, France and Seattle, United States. These cities are embedded in countries where aspects of journalism's social functions are known to vary (Benson 2013; Christin 2020; Russell 2007). Geographically situated in the periphery of their respective countries (southwestern France, northwestern United States), both cities are home to large aeronautics (Airbus, Boeing) and information technology sectors that have led lengthy periods of economic growth. Populations have likewise grown in both places in recent decades, and citizens tend to have levels of education, technology use and civic participation that are comparable to each other and slightly

**Table 1.** Journalists' Demographic Characteristics.

| | France ($N = 29$) | United States ($N = 35$) | Total ($N = 64$) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 11 | 19 | 30 |
| Male | 18 | 16 | 34 |
| Professional experience | | | |
| ≤10 years | 12 | 16 | 28 |
| 11–19 years | 10 | 8 | 18 |
| ≥20 years | 7 | 11 | 18 |
| Job title | | | |
| Freelance/GA reporter | 16 | 13 | 29 |
| Beat reporter/editor | 13 | 22 | 35 |
| Medium | | | |
| Print | 19 | 12 | 31 |
| Broadcast | 8 | 9 | 17 |
| Online | 2 | 14 | 16 |

*Note.* GA = General Assignment Reporter.

higher than national averages (for a summary, see Powers and Vera-Zambrano 2016). By holding these factors constant, we increase the likelihood that our findings reflect cross-national similarities and differences in judgment rather than other confounding variables. Moreover, by selecting these two cities, we also explore the degree to which nationally distinctive judgments—well-documented in New York and Paris—appear beyond the media capitals of each country (Boudana 2010; Usher 2014).

In each city, we interviewed a cross-section of journalists. This included male and female journalists holding a range of professional titles (e.g., freelancers, general assignment and beat reporters, editors) with varying degrees of professional experience working for diverse news media (i.e., print, audiovisual, online; see Table 1). By sampling for range, we sought judgments that reflect journalism's structural basis as well as its diverse social functions. Interviews followed a semi-structural format, eliciting responses about topics of interest for our larger project (e.g., career trajectories, daily routines, perceptions of change over time, definitions of excellence). Held in a location of the respondent's choosing, they ranged in length from 40 to 150 min, with an average of approximately time of approximately one hour. In total, we conducted sixty six interviews (thirty six in Seattle, thirty in Toulouse). Two journalists in the sample declined to answer the question about "best work"; we identify the sixty four respondents who did answer the question by the interview date and the city in which they work.[3]

Journalists were asked to identify and discuss a story from the past year of which they were most proud. In asking for specific examples, and rationales for choosing them, we sought insight into the practical perceptions of and appreciations for each individual's own work. Theoretically, this approach follows Weber's methodological

individualism by exploring how journalism's structures and functions are revealed through concrete individual judgments. (Broader questions regarding role perceptions and ideals would likely result in answers weighted more heavily towards nationally distinctive judgments; see Hellmueller and Mellado 2015.) Methodologically, this question allows journalists to offer their own definitions of best work (rather than ask how often interviewees perform a particular type of work; see Pugh 2013). By analyzing these specific examples, we document cross-national similarities and differences expressed by journalists in their own work.

Our analysis began by developing labels that accurately characterized the different forms of judgment expressed by journalists in their responses. Initially, we selected journalists' responses that seemed to differ strongly from each other. Discussing the cases, we created one-word labels that described the source of journalists' pride. We did this for multiple journalists in each country, and stopped only after developing four labels that covered the full range of responses.

Two labels highlight journalism's structural basis, in that they emphasize the perceived interests of audiences without degrading the subjects of news coverage. The label "decode" encompasses responses in which journalists express pride in translating complex issues into intelligible language for audiences. "Dignify" includes responses where journalists express pride in giving worth to individuals, especially those perceived as holding little social power. In keeping with our theoretical expectations, journalists' responses clustered under these labels were highly similar cross-nationally. The other two labels highlight nationally distinctive understandings of journalism's purpose. "Discover" encapsulates responses that take pride in revealing information that perceived power holders would prefer to keep hidden. "Edify" refers to work that uses particular cases to think about and express opinions on larger social issues. In keeping with our theoretical expectations, the former label refers primarily, though not exclusively, to American journalists, while the latter pertains mostly to French journalists. As such, they reflect nationally distinctive understandings of what journalism can be.

Each journalist's best work response was assigned one of these labels in a spreadsheet. Both authors discussed each case to ensure agreement. For each journalist, we input in the spreadsheet specific quotations that illustrated our reasoning for assigning the individual a given label. Below, we draw on these quotations to demonstrate the empirical evidence on which the labels are based, while also linking our empirical findings to the theoretical framework that we use to make sense of the simultaneous co-presence of cross-national similarities and differences in journalistic judgment.

## Similar Cross-national Judgments: Journalism's Structural Basis

As Weber's framework suggests, similar cross-national judgments reveal journalism's structural basis. In both countries, some journalists underscored the fact that their best work resonated with audiences. Such explicitly commercial considerations, moreover, were typically accompanied by professional concerns. In both samples, journalists took satisfaction in work that either translated complex issues into an intelligible language

that audiences could easily digest, or that entertained audiences without sensationalizing the individuals being covered. The former we call decoding, to emphasize the importance of translating the work of power holders in society. The latter we call dignifying, which highlights journalists' efforts to give worth to individuals, especially those who typically are the subjects of "sensationalist" news coverage.

Some journalists expressed pride in their ability to reach large or new audiences through their best work. A French journalist, for example, described a story about a new sporting record that he "managed to disseminate in many different newspapers and in particular big newspapers."[4] The article, he noted, was translated in three different countries and published by a magazine with a global circulation of 4.5 million. An American journalist espoused a similar judgment when discussing a Halloween story about the "haunted" hotels. "It did super well on social [media] and I…rewrote the copy on Twitter and Facebook several times to share it out…Each time, it has attracted a huge reach and a ton of [audience] share."[5] In both countries, journalists expressed judgments that reveal a concern for providing news that, as one person put it, would "resonate with readers."[6]

One way in which journalists wed concerns about reaching audiences with professional concerns was by emphasizing their efforts to "decode" complex issues. An American journalist illustrated the main features of decoding when discussing a story she did about legislation in Oregon. Popular perception had it that the newly passed legislation would "give everybody…access to free community college."[7] Reading through the bill, she saw its parameters restricted eligibility to individuals who had graduated high school in the past 6 months. Her story, she explained, translated the bill's content for an audience that would not read the original legislation. "People are not looking at the language of the bill to find out if it works for them." Taking aim at "irresponsible reports" that created the misunderstanding, she emphasized her efforts to decode: "It was not communicated to them well. I felt it was my job to explain it and it was good that I could tell people that."

French journalists expressed similar pride in distilling topics in simple language for audiences. One journalist told us about a story concerning gender inequality she did for a youth magazine. Her satisfaction centered not around her ability to make youth aware of the problem per se; rather, she emphasized the effort it took to make "big statistics" understandable to the publication's target audience.[8] Another journalist described a story she did about working conditions for employees at *Charlie Hebdo*, the Parisian weekly that was attacked by gunmen in 2015. "What I like [to do]," she explained, "is to try to understand and dissect and vulgarize" the issues for a wider audience.[9]

Another way journalists brought the audience and professional concerns together was by "dignifying" the subjects of stories that might otherwise appear sensationalist. A French journalist's response nicely captures some of the main features of what we term "dignifying." She described a popular profile she had done about an obese man who lost weight and subsequently founded a civic organization dedicated to weight loss. The journalist mentioned prior sensational news reports that focused on the fact he had not left his apartment for two years, and that firefighters had to break

down his door to remove him from his apartment. By contrast, "I contacted him. I went to his place. We talked for a while. I tried to ask him about his journey."[10] Describing the story, she explicitly noted her effort to ensure the man's worth. "I painted his portrait to describe his situation as best as possible without falling into the pathos, caricatured side, 'Look at the obese.'" Contrasting her report with the "false empathy" that in her view is shown on television reporting of such issues, she said: "I have the impression of having treated the subject in a correct way, without stigmatizing the person."

American journalists expressed similar pride in giving worth to story subjects on popular stories. One reporter talked about a profile she did on an Iraqi boy who had been adopted by a family in Washington state. Blinded by a gunshot wound at the age of 2, the reporter was not the first to tell his story. "I have seen other reporters cover him and call him disfigured and stuff like that. And I just thought that was completely [*voice trails off*]. You do not say that."[11] She was proud to highlight the child's unique skills. "He is really amazing. He is super independent. He does echolocation…so he can tell where he is going." Another journalist discussed a radio series called "Ask A…" that invites audience members to ask individuals from a specific community about their experiences (e.g., Muslim, transgender, immigrant). "The whole thrust" of the series, he explained, is "tell me your story." I'm talking to you as a person…Why do you believe what you believe?"[12]

As the examples suggest, some stories that appeal to audiences deal with populations perceived by journalists as being socially vulnerable. A French journalist talked with pride about a "series of reports on homeless people" he did. He recalled saying to one person in the interview, "You don't have to answer, but I'm asking you anyway. How did you get here? What was your life?"[13] Contrasting his approach with what he viewed as sensational peers, he said: "There's no voyeurism, if you don't want to answer." Through his reporting, he felt that he was able to show people who this person was. In similar fashion, an American journalist described a story he did about one family's first day back to school after a school shooting in which several people were killed. The idea was "me being in their house when they are having breakfast, when they are leaving to go to school and when they drop her [the daughter] off [at] school."[14] He took pride in being "the only" journalist able to give worth to this moment, despite many journalists covering the story. "This was probably going to be an important moment for hundreds of families in that school. But I did not think…anyone else was going to have that moment."

Journalists describing their work as acts of decoding complex issues or dignifying vulnerable individuals often began their answers modestly, suggesting a distance between nationally distinctive understandings of journalism and their own best work. One American journalist began his response to our question about his best work by saying: "It's not a really remarkable story in…that it broke news or shocked or moved the needle necessarily on some policy."[15] Nonetheless, he was proud of an article he did about a ballot measure concerning campaign finance reform. "[It]…was a little bit confusing…I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to explain what is in [it] in a certain digestible way." A French counterpart described a news report she had done about local floods. "Journalistically, there was

nothing to say," in that there was nothing to report beyond what local officials were telling her.[16] She took pride, however, in relaying the details of the events in a straightforward way to audiences.

## Distinctive National Judgments: Journalism's Social Functions

Cross-national differences in journalists' responses reflect journalism's nationally distinctive social functions. In France, some journalists described their best work as opportunities to think about—and opine on—the world. Such judgments highlight the enduring importance of literary and political expression in French journalism. We use the label "edifying" to highlight the importance these journalists place on using particular cases to shed light on larger issues. In the United States, some journalists described their best work as investigative efforts to pry information that others, especially those perceived as holding power, want to keep hidden. Such judgments correspond to the reformist impulses that have characterized American journalism since the Progressive era. We label this response "discovering" to highlight the centrality of a power struggle aimed at revealing—literally, dis-covering—hidden information.

Two French journalists illustrate the edifying orientation that characterizes journalism's dominant social function in that country. One told us about his report on the 10-year anniversary of riots in several cities. He visited areas where rioting occurred and interviewed individuals and civic leaders, to see how the latter sought to address some of the issues raised in the intervening years; he also looked at government policy to see how efforts at "urban renewal…move in the districts."[17] He contrasted his work against the *fait divers* that cover the same topic. "If the paper had been in the hands of *fait divers* people, there would have been a completely different story" that emphasized sensationalist imagery. His work instead focused on what he perceived as the "larger issues" (i.e., government policy) that shed light on the underlying roots of the riots and their lingering social effects.

Another French journalist underscored the importance of articulating one's opinions on the specific topics covered. His best work was about a couple that had once been active members of France's far-right political party. The story quoted the couple denouncing racist statements and sentiments within the party. The journalist was proud not only to show larger social issues concerning racism in French society but also to speak on behalf of a Republican social order. In showing racism, he explained, he was showing "things we don't necessarily think of French society."[18] Drawing a contrast between the 1968 protests that challenged a conservative social order with the right-wing collaborationist regime of the Second World War, he said: "We think of progressive, revolutionary France. When we say French society, we think of 1968 but we often forget Vichy. And France is that too."

American journalists highlighted their efforts to reveal information. Asked about his best work, one reporter working the aerospace beat told us that over the years, "I broke a lot of stuff Boeing didn't want known."[19] He provided several examples that correspond closely with journalism's distinctive social function in the United States: publishing details of a speech given at an off-the-record executive retreat, and stories

about production delays and cost overruns. In each, he took pride in his ability to report news that Boeing did not want reported. On publishing the details of a speech: "They were outraged that we had done so because it was supposed to be a private meeting." On publishing an article about production delays: "It caused a lot of confrontation within the company." He highlighted his satisfaction in going to the company and confronting them with facts they preferred to keep out of public sight. "When I get something…that I know they're not going to like, then I'll go to them and present it to them…and say, 'Look, I have this information. It looks bad…Now, what are you going to tell me?'"

American journalists took satisfaction in getting power holders to respond to issues that would otherwise be kept out of public sight. One reporter talked about a story that highlighted the Veterans Administration's failure to provide benefits to individuals who became gravely ill after consuming contaminated drinking water at a military base. "It created a lot of fuss inside the beltway and ultimately led to some changes."[20] Moreover: "Anything I can do as a journalist to shine a light and make people sit up and say, 'Hey, we've got to do better than this.' That, I'm very proud to be associated with." Several journalists employed language about being "troublemakers" to power holders. A city hall reporter, for example, expressed pride that her reporting got her "kicked out" of the office of a city council member.[21]

These nationally patterned judgments are distinctive, though not exclusive to their national cases. Some American journalists did express their best work in terms that approximate edifying. Yet not only are such judgments the least common in the U.S. sample (four journalists' responses were assigned the "edify" label); they also tend to assume slightly different understandings of social engagement. Where the French journalists defend particular social groups (e.g., the Republican social order), American journalists tend to frame engagement in general terms (e.g., for citizens or the common good). One journalist, for example, discussed a story about a mother on the verge of homelessness. Despite having a government voucher that directly subsidized potential landlords, the mother was unable to secure housing. "I really liked it because I love to do those kinds of stories that are able to tell a larger story through one person's life."[22] She emphasized that using a narrative not only helps readers get involved emotionally but also shows "you are talking about a much larger issue." In her case, this included shifts in homeless policy, the way nonprofits handle homeless people, and federal housing policy.

A small number of French journalists (four total) described their best work in terms that track closely with their American counterparts. One talked about a story he did regarding a financial crime case. "I am happy when I manage to reveal something hidden."[23] In that particular case, "the most difficult information to have was also the most interesting," and he was proud to have uncovered it. Another expressed pride in revealing that an important public figure was under police investigation. "I got the real information that nobody else had…For me, that's what journalism is."[24] The journalist's line about "real journalism" echoes the comments of American reporters, who distinguished their work from competitors that fail, in their view, to challenge power holders. The aerospace reporter referenced earlier made this point nicely when

contrasting his work with the work of paid aviation bloggers. "They are not going to reveal anything Boeing does not want revealed."

Audience considerations are not absent in judgments that reflect journalism's nationally distinctive social function. Such judgments tend, though, to link audience interest to specific understandings of journalism's purpose. Thus, a U.S. journalist talked about his reporting not in terms of the size of the audience it attracted, but instead of the reasons why he assumed audiences found it interesting. His reporting, he explained, is the "sort of thing that people like to read because they know they are not getting a press release."[25] French journalists whose best work emphasizing edification tended to describe their audience as their professional peers.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Prior comparative scholarship provides important evidence of—and theories for—cross-national similarities and differences in journalists' perceptions and evaluations of their work. Building on this research, our framework makes sense of the simultaneous co-presence of similarities and differences. Drawing on Weber, we posit that similar judgments reveal journalism's shared structural basis as a commercial enterprise, while cross-national differences underscore the distinctive social functions journalists are assigned in specific national contexts. Our French-American comparison illustrates these judgments in two countries in which journalism is sometimes viewed through the lens of opposing binaries (i.e., French "opinion" vs. American "facts"; see Alexander 1981).

Our empirical findings point to more cross-national overlap than such binaries generally acknowledge. In both France and the United States, journalists described the best work that appealed to audiences by "decoding" complex issues or "dignifying" story subjects. Prior scholarship documents important degrees of overlap in beliefs regarding what it means to be a journalist (Lemieux and Schmalzbauer 2000). Our work echoes these findings, while also extending them to consider how journalists evaluate their work. Weber's framework, moreover, offers an understanding of such judgments as combining economic and professional concerns. As such, they bring to the fore some of the wonder expressed by earlier theorists about journalists' abilities to produce their work "at once and 'on order'" (Weber 1991: 96).

At the same time, cross-national differences hardly disappear. French journalists' greater tendency to evaluate their best work as efforts to "edify" by using particular cases to think broadly about the world reflects the enduring influence of political and literary ideals on French journalism (Albert 1998). Conversely, American journalists' discussions of work that "discovers" information that power holders prefer to keep hidden highlights the reformist orientation that marked journalism during its nineteenth century formation (Schudson 1978). By sampling cities well beyond the media capitals of Paris and New York, our findings suggest that these nationally distinctive understandings of journalism's social purpose are held throughout both countries. Weber's emphasis on the principles that underpin these judgments, moreover, serve to remind what endures. The French journalists in our sample, for instance, did not discuss writing political

pamphlets for parties, as some of the nineteenth century counterparts did. Their discussion of work that we term "edifying" instead represents ways in which that older order endures through the principles to which they appeal in their judgments.

As other scholars of French and American journalism note, these nationally distinctive evaluations reflect the dominant—but hardly the sole—tendencies in each country (Benson 2013). While infrequent, some journalists in our American sample described their work as attempts to "edify" social issues, just as a few French journalists talked about their work using the language of "discovery." The nature of our samples (i.e., two mid-size cities far removed from each nation's media capital) suggest that enduring distinctions continue to characterize the judgments of journalists in their respective countries. Nonetheless, this sample is likely inappropriate for gauging the extent to which novel judgments might be emerging in either national case, as prior research suggests that such judgments typically emerge in media capitals and percolate outwards thereafter (Albert 1998; Schudson 1978). Future research might explore the degree to which trend-setting journalists or news organizations introduce novel principles for evaluating their professional work.

In our view, Weber's emphasis on journalism's shared structural basis and sometimes differing societal functions provides a useful framework for understanding the simultaneous co-presence of cross-nationally similar and different judgments. Nonetheless, it hardly exhausts the range of plausible interpretations for our empirical results. Similar cross-national judgments oriented towards attracting audiences, for example, might be attributed in part to digital technologies (e.g., social media platforms), which could be viewed as standardizing the types of stories that "count" as newsworthy (McGregor and Molyneux 2020). By asking specifically about "best work," we do not gather data about these more routine forms of judgment. However, to the extent that journalists did mention digital technologies when discussing their best work, such tools tended to be described primarily as a proxy for reaching audiences. Different cross-national judgments, for their part, might also be ascribed to the national "cultural repertoires" that journalists have at their disposal (Lamont and Thévenot 2000).

Weber's framework offers questions that can be pursued through other theoretical perspectives and utilizing different types of data. The diverse evaluations offered by journalists, for example, raise questions about the social distribution of journalistic judgment. Which journalists are most likely to offer nationally distinctive judgments of their work? Such a question requires data not analyzed here, and which might include demographics, educational credentials and career trajectories. Scholars have also long sought to explain the relative influence of different variables (e.g., organizational vs. professional) on journalists' conceptions, enactments and evaluations of their work (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). This "hierarchy of influences" approach might examine the extent to which different types of organizational and professional cultures influence particular forms of journalistic judgment both within and across national samples. Long-standing interest in how journalists' judgments relate to audience reception similarly remains important (Herzog 1941).

Future scholarship might explore these and related questions by expanding the analysis to national settings not examined here. Weber's framework suggests that every

national case should include subsets of journalists whose judgments reflect the profession's structural basis and those that reveal nationally distinctive functions. How journalists make sense of these underlying principles is likely to vary, just as they do in the two cases analyzed here. These principles may also vary across news beats, with activities like conflict reporting more likely to entail the "suspicion" associated with a journalism of discovery, or across media types (Aharoni and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2019; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2020). Weber's thinking provides one way of conceptualizing the simultaneous differences and similarities, while also paying attention to how those judgments manifest in particular contexts.

Weber wrote at a transformative moment in the history of journalism, when the consolidation of journalism as a commercial enterprise generated heated discussions about the effects of news media on public opinion and culture more broadly. Weber's contribution to this debate was to ask about the extent to which journalistic judgment could be attributed to the newfound structural basis that was shared widely across Western Europe and North America. In keeping with his methodological individualism, he argued that such transformations could be revealed by looking at the actions and beliefs of specific individuals. Doing so allowed him to develop an appreciation for the ways in which journalists navigate tensions between commercial and professional aims. At the same time, Weber's comparative sensibility informed his awareness of what journalism's shared structural basis—however powerful—could not explain. The simultaneous co-presence of cross-national similarities and differences in journalistic judgment was one of Weber's core insights.

It remains an insight for comparatively minded scholars today. Some of the major debates in recent decades have revolved in part around the extent to which journalism worldwide is or is not converging on a single model that reflects the commercial orientation historically associated with the American model of journalism. Reviewing the evidence, Hallin and Mancini (2017: 163–64) have argued that it is "time to abandon the strong version of the convergence hypothesis" and "move on to more sophisticated hypotheses" that account for the complex mixture of cross-national similarities and differences that characterize journalism around the world. Weber provides an interpretive framework for thinking about important parts of these issues. His writing about journalism also reminds scholars that some of the basic questions raised more than a century ago—what purposes journalists serve and how these purposes vary cross-nationally—continue to require scholarly attention.

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## Notes

1. For discussions of Weber's writings on journalism, see Bastin (2013) and Dickinson (2013).
2. As Ferenczi (1993: 27) notes the titles of nineteenth century newspapers likewise highlight this political and literary function nicely (e.g., *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*).
3. All interviews were recorded and transcribed into their respective languages.
4. Interview with Toulouse journalist, June 25, 2015.
5. Interview with Seattle journalist, December 2, 2015.
6. Interview with Seattle journalist, September 15, 2015.
7. Interview with Seattle journalist, December 10, 2015.
8. Interview with Toulouse journalist, November 2, 2015.
9. Interview with Toulouse journalist, October 6, 2015.
10. Interview with Toulouse journalist, November 24, 2015.
11. Interview with Seattle journalist, October 5, 2015.
12. Interview with Seattle journalist, July 18, 2018.
13. Interview with Toulouse journalist, March 11, 2016.
14. Interview with Seattle journalist, October 21, 2015.
15. Interview with Seattle journalist, October 30, 2015.
16. Interview with Toulouse journalist, October 22, 2015.
17. Interview with Toulouse journalist, November 9, 2015.
18. Interview with Toulouse journalist, October 22, 2015.
19. Interview with Seattle journalist, October 26, 2015.
20. Interview with American journalist, October 28, 2015.
21. Interview with American journalist, February 23, 2016.
22. Interview with Seattle journalist, October 30, 2015.
23. Interview with Toulouse journalist, May 8, 2015.
24. Interview with Toulouse journalist, September 28, 2015.
25. Interview with Seattle journalist, October 26, 2015.

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