

The Great Wall of the Press: Layered Boundary Work of AI-Integrated Journalism

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly embedded in journalistic practice, debates often frame it as either a disruptive force or a tool for efficiency. This study moves beyond this dichotomy by examining how journalists themselves interpret, negotiate, and position AI within journalism. Drawing on 19 in-depth interviews with Chinese journalists, and informed by boundary work and boundary object perspectives, the study analyses how AI is selectively integrated, justified, and governed across journalistic processes. The findings show that AI is primarily confined to routine and low-risk tasks, while being excluded from core editorial functions involving judgement, meaning-making, and accountability. The study argues that AI intensifies journalistic boundary work because it challenges journalism not only operationally, but also epistemically and infrastructurally. Journalists therefore engage in layered forms of boundary negotiation that operate across task, discursive, and structural dimensions. At the same time, AI functions as a boundary object mediating relationships among journalists, technology companies, and governance institutions under conditions of asymmetric platform dependency and institutional control.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; boundary object; boundary work; digital journalism; generative AI; human–AI interaction; journalism; media governance; news production

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly become embedded in the contemporary news value chain. News organisations around the world increasingly deploy AI tools for tasks such as automated content generation,

data analysis, news recommendation, and editorial workflow optimisation (Diakopoulos, 2019; Marconi, 2020). Unlike earlier forms of newsroom automation, however, generative AI systems increasingly simulate capacities historically associated with journalistic expertise, including writing, summarisation, interpretation, and content creation in various formats (Dodds et al., 2025). As a result, AI raises not only operational questions about efficiency and workflow, but also epistemic and institutional questions concerning editorial authority, professional autonomy, and the boundaries of legitimate journalistic labour (Carlson, 2018; Lewis et al., 2025; Perreault et al., 2026).

Journalism has historically made efforts to maintain strong professional boundaries, distinguishing journalistic expertise from other forms of knowledge production and defending editorial judgement as a central professional value (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022; Schudson, 2012). The introduction of AI into newsrooms challenges these boundaries by introducing new actors, infrastructures, and forms of authority into journalistic work. In contrast to earlier technological systems primarily associated with production and distribution efficiency, generative AI challenges journalism at multiple levels simultaneously: operationally, epistemically, and infrastructurally. Journalists therefore respond not simply through adoption or resistance, but through active processes of negotiation, legitimisation, and boundary maintenance that redefine where AI belongs within journalistic practice (Cools & de Vreese, 2025; Dodds et al., 2025).

Drawing on boundary work and boundary object perspectives (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, 2019; Star & Griesemer, 1989), this article examines how journalists negotiate the role of AI within their professional domain. Based on 19 in-depth interviews with Chinese journalists conducted in 2024, the study analyses how AI is interpreted, justified, restricted, and institutionalised across journalistic practice. The article argues that AI-related boundary work operates simultaneously across task, discursive, and structural dimensions. At task level, journalists allocate AI to routine and low-risk functions while preserving core editorial work for humans. At the discursive level, journalists legitimise selective AI adoption through narratives of efficiency, authenticity, and professional responsibility. At the structural level, AI becomes embedded within broader infrastructures of platform dependency, governance, and organisational control. Together, these layered forms of boundary work reveal how journalism adapts to AI while simultaneously reaffirming professional authority and human-centred meaning-making.

By conceptualising AI as a site of layered boundary negotiation, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the institutional transformation of journalism in the age of AI. Rather than treating AI simply as a technological innovation, the article demonstrates how journalists actively negotiate the limits, meanings, and legitimacy of AI integration across professional, organisational, and infrastructural domains. The Chinese context offers a particularly valuable analytical setting because tensions between technological modernisation, platform dependency, commercial pressure, and political governance are especially visible and institutionally concentrated. Examining these dynamics contributes not only to the geographical diversification of AI and journalism research, but also to broader theoretical discussion concerning how journalism renegotiates professional authority under conditions of algorithmic transformation.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

2.1. *AI in Journalism: Adoption, Practices, Processes, and Tensions*

In recent years, the proliferation of AI systems and algorithms has had a profound impact on various aspects of society, including journalism (Diakopoulos, 2019; Kuai et al., 2023; Simon, 2024). Existing scholarship has examined the rise of automated journalism, algorithmic news production, and human-machine collaboration, highlighting both the efficiencies enabled by AI and the tensions it introduces into journalistic work (Carlson, 2018; Lewis et al., 2025). Studies have documented the use of AI in tasks such as automated writing, data mining, fact-checking, and recommendation systems, often emphasising its role in enhancing speed, scale, and personalisation in news production (Diakopoulos, 2019; Marconi, 2020).

At the same time, researchers have identified persistent concerns regarding the implications of AI for journalistic norms and professional autonomy (Becker et al., 2025). Journalists have been found to express ambivalence towards AI, recognising its potential to support routine tasks while remaining cautious about its involvement in core editorial functions such as interpretation, verification, and ethical judgement (Møller et al., 2025; Umejei et al., 2025). This ambivalence reflects broader tensions between technological innovation and the preservation of journalistic authority (Carlson, 2017).

While this body of literature provides important insights into the adoption and implications of AI, it often focuses on either technological capabilities or organisational strategies. Less attention has been paid to how journalists themselves delineate the boundaries of AI use across different stages of news production—broadly organised around the gathering, selection, processing, and distribution of news (Domingo et al., 2008; Karlsson, 2011). This gap is significant because AI raises not only operational questions concerning efficiency and workflow, but also epistemic questions concerning authorship, authority, legitimacy, and the boundaries of journalistic knowledge production (Perreault et al., 2026). These questions are especially important considering the growing precarity of the journalistic field (Örnebring et al., 2018) where current access to, and use of, AI is prone to be dependent on journalistic actors' accumulation of different forms of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2005).

In short, elite media and actors within them are more likely to have access to AI and set the standards. However, the disruptive nature of AI also provides opportunities for field mobility if actors, first, have access to AI and, second, can use it in ways that the field considers appropriate. Understanding AI in journalism thus requires examining how journalists actively negotiate where AI belongs within journalistic practices, which functions remain legitimately human, and how these distinctions are institutionally justified and maintained.

Addressing this gap requires an empirical examination of AI use in practice and thus, the first research question (RQ) asks:

RQ1: Which AI technologies are used in journalistic processes, and which processes are journalists hesitant to involve AI in?

2.2. Boundary Work and the Negotiation of Professional Authority

In journalism studies, boundary work has been widely used to examine how journalists construct and defend their professional identity (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, 2019). The concept of boundary work, developed by Gieryn (1983, 1999), describes the discursive practices through which professional communities establish and maintain distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate forms of knowledge or expertise. Boundary work serves to protect professional authority by defining what belongs within a professional domain and what lies outside it.

Scholars have shown that journalists routinely engage in discursive practices that distinguish journalism from other forms of communication, such as public relations, citizen media, political propaganda, or news aggregators (Örnebring et al., 2018; Tong, 2015). These boundary-making processes reinforce the legitimacy of journalism as a profession and help maintain its authority within the broader media ecosystem (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Carlson, 2017).

The introduction of AI into newsrooms introduces new actors and forms of expertise that may challenge these established boundaries. Automated content generation systems, algorithmic recommendation tools, and machine learning applications increasingly participate in tasks traditionally associated with journalistic work (Carlson, 2018; Dodds et al., 2025; Lewis et al., 2025). As a result, journalists may need to redefine the boundaries of their professional domain by specifying which aspects of news production can be delegated to machines and which must remain under human editorial control.

Importantly, this negotiation surrounding AI occurs not only at the level of discourse, but also through the allocation of tasks, the institutional embedding of technological systems, and the infrastructural conditions under which journalism operates. Building on boundary work scholarship (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, 2019; Gieryn, 1983, 1999), this study therefore conceptualises AI-related boundary negotiation as layered across task, discursive, and structural dimensions. “Task boundary work” concerns the allocation of journalistic functions between humans and AI systems; “discursive boundary work” concerns the narratives and justificatory frameworks through which AI adoption is legitimised or resisted; and “structural boundary work” concerns the embedding of boundaries within organisational, technological, and governance infrastructure that shape journalistic practice.

This layered approach extends understandings of boundary work by foregrounding how AI reorganises journalism simultaneously at professional, epistemic, and infrastructural levels. While this approach overlaps with work on metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016), the present study focuses more specifically on how AI-related boundaries are negotiated simultaneously through newsroom practices, professional narratives, and institutional infrastructures. Accordingly, the second RQ asks:

RQ2: How do journalists engage in boundary work when discussing the appropriate use of AI in journalism?

2.3. AI Technologies as Boundary Objects

The concept of boundary objects offers insight into how different social groups collaborate across institutional boundaries. The concept was introduced by Star and Griesemer (1989) to describe artefacts that are shared across multiple communities but interpreted differently by each. Boundary objects are sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse interpretations while remaining robust enough to support coordination among actors with different goals and perspectives. In complex sociotechnical systems, they often facilitate collaboration between professionals with distinct forms of expertise (Lewis & Usher, 2016; Star & Griesemer, 1989).

AI technologies in newsrooms may function as boundary objects. Journalists, engineers, managers, and platform companies may all interact with the same technological systems while attributing different meanings and purposes to them. For journalists, AI could be understood primarily as a tool to assist reporting and streamline production. For engineers, it may represent a technical system to be optimised. For managers, it could signify efficiency and organisational innovation. Conceptualising AI as a boundary object therefore makes it possible to analyse how collaboration between journalism and technology occurs despite divergent interpretations and institutional goals. It also directs attention to how technological systems connect different actors involved in contemporary news production. Importantly, such coordination does not occur between equal actors, but within asymmetrical relations shared by platform dependency, organisational hierarchy, and governance structures connecting the journalistic field with other fields (Bourdieu, 2005; Simon, 2024; Yu & Huang, 2021). Thus, the third and final RQ asks:

RQ3: In what ways do AI technologies function as boundary objects connecting journalists with other actors involved in journalism?

Taken together, this study conceptualises AI not simply as a technological innovation but as a site of boundary negotiation within journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). The lens permits a nuanced understanding of AI in journalism, one that foregrounds journalists' agency in shaping technological integration while situating these processes within broader institutional and professional contexts (Munoriyarwa & de-Lima-Santos, 2025; Wu, 2026).

3. Method and Data

3.1. Research Design

Guided by the RQs, this study employs semi-structured, in-depth interviews and a thematic analytical approach to explore the Chinese journalists' engagement with AI. A qualitative research design is particularly suited to this inquiry, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of journalists' experiences, interpretations, and evaluative judgements, key dimensions through which boundary work is enacted in practice. Rather than treating AI adoption as a purely technical or organisational process, this approach captures how journalists actively define the limits of acceptable AI use within their professional domain. Such processes are often context-dependent and shaped by broader political, social, and technological environments, making qualitative methods especially appropriate (Kuang, 2017; Yao & Han, 2025; Yu & Huang, 2021). The semi-structured interview format enables both consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe emerging themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This is particularly important for capturing how journalists

articulate their reasoning about AI use, including the distinctions they draw between appropriate and inappropriate applications. The research was approved by the Ethical Review Board at Karlstad University (Reference Number: HS 2024/150).

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who represent a diverse range of media organisations in China's hybrid and hierarchical media system (Meng, 2018; Wang, 2023; Zhang, 2022). The sample includes 19 journalists working in different beats, different formats of main journalistic outputs, a mixture of types of media outlets at various levels (including one freelancer), and geographical locations, ensuring different media organisations operating in China were represented (see Table 1). Chinese media organisations operate under varying combinations of political supervision, market pressure, and technological experimentation where the political field is very influential (Bourdieu, 2005; Zhang, 2022). Central-level media organisations, such as national broadcasters and news agencies, generally possess greater political authority, institutional resources, and responsibility for aligning with national technological

Table 1. List of interviewees from various media organisations.

Code	Media organization	Position	Gender	Career stage	Key beat	Format*
P-01	National news agency	Manager	Female	Mid-Career	General	Video
P-02	National TV new media	Journalist	Female	Mid-Career	General	Video
P-03	National new media	Journalist	Female	Mid-Career	General	Video
P-04	National news agency local branch	Journalist, manager	Female	Mid-career	General	Video
P-05	National TV in English	Journalist	Male	Mid-career	Technology	Video
P-06	National TV in English	Editor	Female	Mid-career	General	Video
P-07	National TV legal channel	Journalist	Male	Mid-career	Legal	Video
P-08	National TV financial channel	Journalist, manager	Female	Mid-career	Finance	Video
P-09	Provincial newspaper	Journalist	Female	Mid-career	Education	Text
P-10	Provincial newspaper	Journalist	Female	Mid-career	Culture	Text
P-11	Provincial new media	Editor	Female	Mid-career	International	Text
P-12	Provincial TV	Producer	Female	Senior	Business	Video
P-13	Provincial TV	Manager	Male	Mid-career	General	Video
P-14	Provincial radio	Journalist	Male	Mid-career	General	Audio
P-15	Municipal newspaper	Journalist, manager	Female	Senior	General	Text
P-16	Municipal newspaper	Journalist	Female	Mid-career	Education	Text
P-17	Private technology new media	Journalist	Male	Early-career	Technology	Text
P-18	Private financial magazine	Journalist	Female	Early-career	Finance	Text
P-19	Freelance	Journalist	Female	Mid-career	General	Text

Note: * Format here represents the primary format of the journalists' output, but interviewees sometimes also worked across platforms and produced multimodal content.

development agendas (Wang, 2023). Provincial and municipal outlets, while still embedded within the party-state system, often face stronger commercial pressures and resource constraints, requiring them to balance political expectations with audience competition and financial sustainability (Yu & Huang, 2021). Private and commercially oriented digital media organisations tend to be more market-driven and technologically adaptive, although they remain subject to broader regulatory oversight. This diversity aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the different organisational contexts and constraints that influence journalistic practices in the country. The names of the interviewees and the organisations they worked for were anonymised at the participants' request.

Interviews were conducted between February and September 2024. They were conducted either in person or via phone, depending on the participant's location and preference. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, allowing sufficient time to delve into the topics of interest while being mindful of the participants' time constraints. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into topics that emerged during the conversation, thus enriching the data collected. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and recorded with the interviewees' consent.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis follows an abductive and thematic approach, combining inductive sensitivity to the data with theoretically informed interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This approach is particularly suited to examining boundary work, as it allows the researcher to identify both explicit and implicit ways in which journalists define and negotiate the limits of AI use.

The coding process proceeded in three stages. The primary stage ensured all data was read closely and coded line by line using descriptive codes. The secondary stage was used to organise, synthesise, and categorise codes to generate more interpretive codes. During this stage, the analysis moved iteratively between the empirical data and theoretical framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The third stage, utilising axial coding, ensured smaller codes were categorised into larger categories based on reemerging patterns and were honed into different themes, such as technological concerns, organisational settings, and professional norms. These patterns were further interpreted through the lens of boundary work, addressing the overarching research problem.

4. Findings and Analysis

This section examines how the boundaries are drawn, justified, and negotiated in relation to AI in journalism across the three dimensions acknowledged in the RQs: (a) the allocation of AI across journalistic processes, (b) how journalists engage in boundary work, and (c) the ways AI functions as a boundary object connecting journalists with other actors. Together, these dimensions reveal how the boundaries of journalism are actively negotiated rather than passively reshaped by technological change.

4.1. Mapping AI Across Journalistic Processes: Where Boundaries are Drawn (RQ1)

4.1.1. AI as an Efficiency Tool for Low-Risk Tasks

The interviewees indicate that AI is strategically confined to routine and low-risk tasks, positioning it as assistive infrastructure rather than a transformative force. Across newsrooms, AI was most widely adopted in low-stakes tasks including transcription, translation, summarisation, and basic content generation. AI is also used in visual and multimedia production. Text-to-image and text-to-video tools are applied in posters, short videos, and social media content, while automated editing is particularly prominent in sports journalism: “You input the entire broadcast, and with one click it produces a one-minute news video (P-02),” noted a video journalist for national TV. Similarly, as noted by a manager at a provincial TV station, AI voice synthesis and digital presenters enable scalable production, where “a digital anchor can deliver thousands of scripts, but a real presenter would be exhausted (P-13).” Attempts were also made for light social media content aimed at increasing audience engagement and user retention but led to lower audience engagement: “We posted some AI-generated images of cats and dogs, but audiences did not respond positively. They did not want to see something virtual; they preferred something real” (P-03), stated a journalist for a central-level new media outlet.

Despite audience expectation and preference for authenticity, for the organisations, one of the key motivations for using these applications lies in efficiency. As the new media journalist noted, “if it can generate video directly from text, it would save a lot of labour and time costs” (P-03). However, these efficiency gains are limited. In more complex tasks, AI can be counterproductive. A journalist at a provincial newspaper described spending “an entire afternoon” revising AI-generated content, concluding that “it would have been faster to write it ourselves” (P-09). A video journalist working for English news at national TV also pointed to the importance of labelling AI-generated content and that AI use in content generation is largely confined to non-core content:

During Children’s Day, we produced a video featuring AI-generated images of children at different ages....This is possible because such content is not considered core news, but rather more entertainment-oriented material. As long as it is clearly labelled as AI-generated, it is acceptable and can significantly reduce workload. (P-05)

This reflects a clear boundary: efficiency is prioritised, but such institutional experimentation is controlled. AI is allowed where editorial risk is low and transparency is ensured. This pattern reflects a form of boundary work in which journalists position AI as a subordinate tool confined to the periphery of news production. By restricting AI to routine functions, journalists preserve the boundary around core professional competencies, particularly those associated with judgement, interpretation, and editorial responsibility.

4.1.2. AI as Performative Novelty for Commercial Logics and Political Assignment

AI is mobilised as a performative marker of innovation, shaped by commercial imperatives and political expectations. Journalists describe how clients require AI-generated content to be recognisable. This leads to explicit labelling and deliberate stylistic choices. As a manager at a provincial TV station noted, “they will put ‘AIGC’ [Artificial Intelligence-Generated Content] on the video, and they intentionally make it not look like

reality” (P-13). The rationale is clear: “If you want a real dog, you can just film it...the only way it feels new is if it looks different from what people have seen before” (P-13).

Additionally, AI functions as symbolic capital and a legitimacy signal, especially within state-owned media organisations, where journalism innovation has been promoted against the backdrop of China’s articulated AI ambition. Here, the political field’s dominance over the journalistic is evident (Bourdieu, 2005), as integrating AI in journalism is tightly integrated to a larger political mission emanating outside the journalistic field. In these cases, “embracing AI” has become part of the political assignment: AI is not just used but performed as novelty and showcased within institutions. As a video journalist for national TV news media stated:

In some cases, particularly in internal reports or promotional activities within the organisation, it is made clear that the work was done using AI. There are also training sessions or lectures where people share how these AI-based productions are created. (P-02)

However, this institutional performance of innovation and techno-optimism as organisational discourse has also created a paradox. The political expectation of “embracing AI” resulted in a departure from realism, as when AI achieves a high level of realism, its value may diminish. A manager at a provincial TV station told us:

When showing a virtual anchor to a supervisor, you often have to explicitly explain that it is a digital human, because otherwise they may assume it is a real person. But this does not generate any particular excitement or interest, since the real presenter is someone they see every day...While the original goal was to make digital humans as realistic as possible, there is now a tendency to deliberately make them less realistic. (P-13)

In this sense, AI operates within a performative economy of innovation, where its value lies not only in functionality but in its capacity to signal technological advancement to political overseers. This showcases the tensions between technological, professional, commercial, and political logics: Technologists might be proud of reproducing real-world, newsroom leadership with clients seeking visible innovation while audiences may prefer authenticity, and journalists have to navigate all these expectations. As the manager observed, this creates “a gap between producers, those who pay, and audiences” (P-13). AI thus functions not only as a production tool but as a performative marker of technological modernity—a marker determined by the political field.

4.2. From Human-in-the-Loop to Human-as-Irreplaceable Meaning-Maker: Justifying Boundary Positions (RQ2)

4.2.1. Selective Adoptions Amid Technical Limitations, Legal Ambiguity, and Over-Reliance Concerns

Journalists justify the appropriate use of AI through a combination of perceived opportunities and risks, producing a fundamentally ambivalent but structured boundary position. As mentioned above, the primary promise lies in efficiency and scalability. At the same time, significant concerns emerge regarding reliability. Generative systems are seen as prone to fabrication. A video journalist working in English news on national TV noted that AI “sometimes makes things up” (P-05), producing inaccurate content that appears plausible. This undermines trust and necessitates verification. Additionally, journalists are aware of the linguistic and

cultural misalignment, pointing to the data bias, localisation limits, Western-centric training infrastructure, and practical usability constraints of the AI tools. A video journalist working for national news media said:

These models are essentially developed abroad. Their foundations reflect that. For example, when generating images, they tend to produce predominantly white faces. It is quite difficult to generate an Asian face. Even if you specify very detailed prompts, such as hair colour and skin tone, the output is not necessarily accurate. (P-03)

Beyond technical limitations, AI raises concerns about professional degradation. Journalists worry about over-reliance, suggesting that prolonged use may lead to dependency and reduced skills. Journalists are also aware that using AI involves data extraction. As a journalist working for a private technology news media noted, "When I use these tools, I am providing my data for free for them to train models" (P-17). This leads to pragmatic strategies: AI is avoided for sensitive topics but used for routine tasks, such as "ordinary interview recordings." Additionally, data security and confidentiality concerns are raised. In some cases, this results in institutional restrictions on AI usage. As one video journalist working for national TV's legal channel noted:

Taking ChatGPT as an example, if you want it to help write a script or a news article, you need to provide a large amount of information. This includes interview materials and other news-related content. However, this raises a problem, namely the risk of information leakage. Since our interview materials and news data may be sensitive, using such systems could lead to confidentiality risks. Therefore, in practice, we are not allowed to use tools like ChatGPT when writing certain news reports. (P-07)

Legal uncertainty, particularly around copyright, is also a concern. As a manager for a national news agency noted, "The biggest concern for institutions is copyright...if compliance is not clear, no one dares to use it at scale" (P-01).

Taken together, these concerns justify a cautious and stratified approach to AI adoption, where its use is confined to contexts that minimise epistemic, legal, and professional risk.

4.2.2. Human Gatekeeping and Accountability Gap as Structural Boundaries

While these concerns shape where AI can be used, a more fundamental boundary emerges around responsibility and accountability. Journalism operates within systems where responsibility must be clearly assigned, and AI disrupts this structure. As a video journalist and manager of a local branch of a national news agency stated, "If a news report is produced by AI, who is responsible? AI cannot take the blame" (P-04). This accountability gap makes fully AI-generated journalism institutionally unacceptable. In contrast, journalists are expected to assume responsibility for their work, reinforcing human authorship as a core principle. This is reflected in editorial workflows, where human oversight remains indispensable. As noted by a manager of a national news agency:

In practice, there is always human review involved, or even more stringent human oversight. This is certain, and it is not a technical issue. AI can only address technical aspects of the process; it cannot replace or resolve issues in the overall production workflow. (P-01)

The importance of attribution further reinforces this boundary. Labelling AI-generated content is not only a matter of transparency, but also a mechanism for assigning responsibility. As noted by a journalist working at a provincial radio station:

Labelling the source is necessary to inform the audience; that is one reason. Another reason is that AI systems, such as ERNIE Bot, may sometimes produce inaccurate or fabricated content. Because of this, it is important to clarify responsibility and provide proper attribution, in case such issues arise. (P-14)

This reflects a form of boundary work centred on the protection of professional autonomy. By insisting on human accountability, journalists attempt to maintain control over editorial authority and prevent AI from encroaching on core institutional responsibilities.

4.2.3. Journalism as Affective and Value-Laden Practice and “Machine Trace” as Boundary Marker

While the accountability gap positions AI within a human-in-the-loop framework (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2019), journalists go further by asserting the irreplaceability of human meaning-making. Journalism is not understood as a purely technical process, but as an interpretive and value-laden practice grounded in human experience.

Editorial judgement is understood as a core professional competence that cannot be delegated. As a journalist working for national TV’s financial channel stated, “We expect journalists to use their professional judgement to find the most valuable content” (P-08), rather than simply repurposing information. Similarly, depth reporting requires interpretive work: “You have to find the story, the highlights, and dig deeper...even for us, that’s already difficult” (P-08).

AI is also perceived as lacking stylistic individuality. Journalists emphasise that different reporters bring distinct perspectives, whereas AI outputs risk becoming standardised. This raises concerns about homogenisation and loss of personal voice. As a video journalist for national new media noted:

For example, when it comes to in-depth reporting by journalists, their personal experiences and distinctive styles in interviews and reporting, these cannot really be replaced, at least for now. In our actual use, we have found that AI still struggles in these areas. (P-03)

This reflects a rejection of the idea that journalism can be reduced to information processing. Instead, journalistic work is constructed as interpretive labour (Zelizer, 1993), involving the selection, prioritisation, and contextualisation of information. AI, by contrast, is perceived as operating at the level of aggregation, lacking the capacity to identify significance or construct meaning. In this context, stylistic individuality is not merely aesthetic, but epistemic, shaping how meaning is constructed and interpreted.

A key concept emerging from the data is the notion of “machine trace.” AI-generated content is often recognisable as such, and this recognisability functions as a boundary marker. As one journalist working at a municipal newspaper observed:

I have only tried it briefly once, but I felt that the “machine trace” was too obvious, you could recognise it immediately....Also, our newsroom has relatively high standards for writing. The output generated by the system simply cannot meet these requirements. (P-16)

The recognisability of AI-generated content as “machine-produced” becomes a symbolic boundary marker, distinguishing legitimate journalism from synthetic output. This distinction is reinforced by a broader normative understanding of journalism as a human-centred practice. As a journalist and manager at a municipal newspaper stated:

Writing carries both power and warmth. This power and warmth come from the fact that each author perceives the world differently. A computational system may be able to process vast amounts of information and generate content in a balanced way, but it lacks a human touch. (P-15)

Together, these findings demonstrate that the limits of AI in journalism are not only technical, but epistemological and cultural. Journalistic work is constructed as interpretive, accumulative, and creative labour, rather than mere information processing. By emphasising the irreducible role of human judgement, experience, and affect, journalists move beyond a human-in-the-loop model to assert themselves as irreplaceable meaning-makers, thereby reinforcing the core boundary of journalism.

4.3. AI as Boundary Object: Mediating and Reshaping Journalistic Boundaries (RQ3)

4.3.1. Political Economy, Platform Dependency, and Uneven AI Adoption

Beyond its role within news production, AI functions as a boundary object that mediates relationships between journalism and external actors, including technology companies, state institutions, and market forces. Interviewees indicate that AI becomes transformative only when it reaches a cost threshold. As a manager at a provincial TV station explained, “The turning point will come when AI can replicate reality at a lower cost than real production” (P-13). Until then, it remains supplementary, constrained by the tension between innovation and commercial viability. A seasoned journalist who now works as a freelancer said: “The broader issue is that media organisations are generally not profitable....In some cases, there is not even sufficient funding for human labour, let alone AI” (P-19).

These economic pressures are unevenly distributed across the Chinese media system. Large national-level organisations generally possess greater institutional resources and stronger policy incentives to experiment with AI technologies, while provincial and municipal outlets often face sharper financial constraints and limited technical capacity. For commercially oriented and digitally native outlets, AI adoption is more closely tied to audience competition, workflow efficiency, and platform visibility. As a result, the ability to integrate AI meaningfully into newsroom operations is shaped not only by technological availability, but also by organisational resources, market position, and institutional priorities.

At the same time, news organisations are structurally dependent on external technology providers. As a manager for a provincial TV station noted, “We are beneficiaries of technology, not developers” (P-13). This dependency reflects a broader asymmetry in the political economy of AI-integrated journalism. Most news organisations lack the financial and technical capacity to independently develop large-scale AI systems and therefore rely on infrastructures controlled by major technology companies such as Alibaba, ByteDance, and Baidu. In this arrangement, journalism increasingly becomes dependent on external platforms not only for distribution, but also for technological innovation itself. Technology companies therefore gain growing influence over infrastructural conditions under which journalism operates, including the tools available

for content production, moderation, recommendation and workflow optimisation. This dependency externalises innovation and limits newsroom autonomy, positioning technology firms as key actors shaping journalistic practice.

To mitigate these constraints, some organisations engage in experimental collaboration with universities and research institutions. As a manager for a national news agency described, such partnerships involve “continuously exploring and improving” AI systems together (P-01). Experimental collaborations with universities and research institutions partly function as strategies for mitigating infrastructural dependencies. Such partnerships allow media organisations to access technical expertise and participate in AI experimentation without independently developing large-scale systems. At the same time, these collaborations illustrate how journalism increasingly operates within broader networks of technological co-production involving academia, industry, and state-supported innovation agendas.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that AI adoption in journalism is shaped not simply by technological innovation, but by asymmetrical relations of economic power, infrastructural dependency, and institutional capacity. News organisations do not engage with AI on equal terms. Instead, AI integration increasingly occurs within an ecosystem where technological infrastructures are concentrated within major platform companies, while media organisations remain financially constrained and structurally dependent. In this sense, AI functions not only as a production technology, but also as a mechanism through which existing inequalities and dependencies within the media system are reorganised and intensified.

4.3.2. AI as Governance Infrastructure and Politically Embedded Boundary Work

AI also operates as a boundary object linking journalism with governance structures, particularly through its role in monitoring, compliance, and risk management. Journalists describe the integration of AI systems that detect sensitive content, including keywords and politically sensitive individuals, embedding automated checks into editorial workflows. One video editor at a national TV station explained that their organisation developed a system that “uses big data to identify sensitive figures...mainly for public opinion control” (P-06). These systems are integrated into editorial workflows, where content must pass automated checks before publication:

They [the technical team] have an AI system that can identify certain elements....Yes, around 2022 [the system was implemented]. I remember this clearly because I once had to write a self-criticism report. In one of my videos, some disgraced officials accidentally appeared alongside senior leaders. After that incident, all such content had to go through AI review. (P-06)

Their adoption is driven partly by human limitations, such as incapacity to keep up with the ever-expanding sensitive words and figures, and most importantly, these systems reduce organisational risks. Such systems have been adopted locally as well, as explained by a producer for a provincial TV station:

For example, certain sensitive individuals may appear very frequently, and it is difficult for human reviewers to remember all of them. Another issue is that in group photos, individuals may appear very small and are hard to identify with the naked eye. However, if such content is later flagged during review, it can create problems for the person responsible for screening the material. With this kind of software in place, it helps to detect and remove these elements in advance, reducing such risks. (P-12)

Importantly, such tools extend beyond individual organisations. Some are used by regional authorities, indicating that AI is embedded within broader governance infrastructures. This demonstrates that AI is not only reshaping how journalism is produced, but also how it is governed. It mediates the boundary between permissible and impermissible content, embedding journalistic practice within institutional power structures originating from the political field. In this sense, AI becomes a key site of politically embedded boundary work, aligning journalistic processes with regulatory expectations.

4.3.3. Discursive Framing: Techno-Optimism, Inevitability, and Regulatory Necessity

Finally, AI functions as a boundary object at the level of discourse, shaping how journalism relates to broader narratives of technological change. Journalists describe a predominantly techno-optimistic framing, in which AI is positioned as a strategic priority and a driver of future development. A video journalist and the manager of a local branch of a national news agency said:

We hope that AI will become one of the key industries for future development. As a result, in terms of overall public discourse, there is a preference for highlighting the positive aspects of AI and its potential for growth. Accordingly, our reporting tends to focus more on the positive dimensions of AI. (P-04)

This framing is reinforced by a discourse of technological inevitability. As a journalist and manager at a national TV financial channel reflected, “This technological wave is inevitable...even if we do not promote it, it will still arrive” (P-08). Such narratives naturalise AI adoption, positioning it as part of an unavoidable historical trajectory rather than a contingent choice.

At the same time, a journalist at a national TV legal channel expressed the need for regulation and oversight:

Whether in our personal views or in the perspectives we present to audiences in programmes, there are always boundaries. These must be subject to effective and strong regulation. It cannot be allowed to develop freely without constraint. If it were left unchecked, the consequences could be significant, and it is difficult to predict what might happen. (P-07)

Together, these discursive framings shape how AI is understood and integrated within journalism. They influence not only its adoption, but also the boundaries of critique, often limiting critical engagement while reinforcing alignment with broader institutional agendas.

5. Concluding Discussion

5.1. Towards a Layered Model of Boundary Work of AI and Journalism

Building on the empirical findings, this study proposes a layered model of boundary work to explain how journalism negotiates the integration of AI across multiple dimensions. While prior studies conceptualise boundary work primarily in terms of discursive processes of professional distinction and legitimation through expansion, expulsion, and protection (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Gieryn, 1999), the findings suggest that AI intensifies and multiplies boundary negotiation because it operates simultaneously as a production tool, epistemic actor, organisational infrastructure, and governance technology. As a result, boundary work

surrounding AI extends beyond discursive legitimisation alone and becomes embedded across task allocation, professional narratives, and institutional infrastructures. These layers are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing, together shaping how AI is integrated, restricted, and governed within journalism.

5.1.1. Task Boundaries: Allocating AI to Peripheral Functions

At the level of practice, boundary work is enacted through the allocation of AI to specific journalistic tasks. The findings show that AI is systematically confined to routine, standardised, and low-risk processes, such as transcription, editing, and content formatting, while being excluded from core editorial functions including news judgement, narrative construction, and in-depth reporting. This reflects a form of boundary work centred on task differentiation, where journalists actively define which activities are compatible with automation and which require human expertise (Carlson, 2018; Örnebring et al., 2018). By restricting AI to technical execution, journalists preserve the boundary between production and interpretation, ensuring that core professional competencies remain human-centred. Importantly, these task boundaries are not fixed, but conditional. They shift depending on perceived risk, technological capability, and organisational priorities (Cools & de Vreese, 2025). However, the consistent exclusion of AI from meaning-making tasks suggests a stable core boundary around editorial judgement.

5.1.2. Discursive Boundaries: Constructing AI as Both Opportunity and Threat

Boundary work is also performed at the level of discourse, where journalists construct narratives that justify the appropriate use of AI. The findings reveal a dual framing in which AI is simultaneously positioned as a tool for efficiency and innovation, and as a source of risk, uncertainty, and professional threat (Jia et al., 2024). On the one hand, techno-optimistic narratives emphasise AI's role in improving productivity and aligning journalism with broader technological development (Ji et al., 2024). On the other hand, concerns about reliability, bias, legal ambiguity, and "machine trace" are mobilised to justify limiting its use. These discursive constructions serve to legitimise selective adoption. By framing AI as useful but fundamentally limited, journalists can incorporate it into peripheral domains while maintaining boundaries around core practices. In this sense, discourse becomes a key mechanism through which boundary positions are stabilised and defended.

5.1.3. Structural Boundaries: Embedding AI Within Institutional and Governance Frameworks

Finally, boundary work operates at a structural level, where AI is embedded within broader economic, technological, and political systems. Structural boundary work refers to the embedding of journalistic boundaries within technological infrastructures, governance systems, organisational hierarchies, and platform dependencies that shape how journalism operates. In this sense, boundaries are not maintained solely through discourse, but are increasingly codified into automated compliance systems, AI moderation infrastructures, editorial workflows, and relations of technological dependency. The findings show that AI adoption is shaped by political agendas, platform dependency, financial constraints, and regulatory frameworks, positioning journalism within a network of external actors (Bourdieu, 2005; Kuai et al., 2023; Simon, 2024). AI functions here as a governance infrastructure, particularly through its role in content monitoring and compliance. By automating the detection of sensitive content and integrating regulatory requirements into workflows, AI reinforces institutional boundaries around what is permissible and

publishable. At the same time, reliance on external technology providers externalises innovation, limiting newsroom autonomy and redistributing power towards technology companies (Simon, 2024). This highlights that boundary work is not only performed by journalists but also structured by the conditions under which journalism operates.

5.1.4. Interactions Between Layers: Reinforcing and Negotiating Boundaries

These three layers—task, discursive, and structural—interact to produce a coherent boundary regime: task boundaries define what AI does; discursive boundaries define how AI is understood; structural boundaries define how AI is enabled and constrained. These layers also mutually reinforce one another: discourse legitimises structure; structures constrain tasks; task allocation reinforces professional ideology. For example, discursive concerns about reliability and authenticity justify the exclusion of AI from core tasks, while structural constraints such as regulation and platform dependency further shape how these boundaries are enacted in practice.

At the same time, these boundary processes do not occur between equal actors. AI integration unfolds within asymmetrical relations shaped by platform dependency, economic precarity, organisational hierarchy, and political governance. Technology companies increasingly control the infrastructures through which journalism accesses AI capabilities, while automated compliance systems embed governance requirements directly into editorial workflows. Boundary work surrounding AI is therefore not only professional, but also political and infrastructural, reflecting broader struggles over authority, autonomy, and control within the evolving media ecosystem (Becker et al., 2025; Perreault et al., 2026).

The findings further highlight that boundary work around AI is shaped by uncertainty. Journalists face ambiguity regarding AI's reliability, legal status, and long-term implications, leading to cautious and conditional adoption. This uncertainty does not weaken journalistic boundaries but intensifies efforts to stabilise them (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022; Schapals & Porlezza, 2020). Concerns about misinformation, copyright, and data security justify restricting AI to low-risk domains, while reinforcing the centrality of human accountability. At the same time, institutional pressures to adopt AI create a countervailing force, encouraging experimentation. This tension produces what can be understood as “conditional flexibility,” where boundaries are neither fixed nor eroded but dynamically adjusted in response to shifting technological and institutional conditions.

This study contributes to journalism studies in three ways. First, it extends boundary work theory by demonstrating that AI becomes a site of simultaneous expansion, protection, and negotiation, making boundary processes more explicit and multi-layered. Second, it conceptualises AI as a boundary object in journalism, highlighting its role in mediating relationships between heterogeneous actors and institutional domains. Third, it introduces a layered model of boundary work, showing how boundaries are constructed across task, discursive, and structural dimensions. This provides a more comprehensive framework for analysing technological change in journalism. Together, these contributions offer a more nuanced understanding of how journalism adapts to AI, not through disruption, but through structured and negotiated transformation. Future research may extend this analysis to other media systems and explore how different institutional contexts shape the layered dynamics of boundary work in AI-integrated journalism.

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ChatGPT (GPT-5.5) was used for stylistic and grammatical refinement.

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