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Why Conceptual Models and "Big" Institutions Matter: A Response to David Altheide, Nina Eliasoph, William Gamson, and Todd Gitlin

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I would like to begin this response by thanking Michael Schudson for encouraging me to risk writing a critical essay about how media sociology might be better incorporated into political communications research. In the broadest sense, this is a project that all of the discussants endorsed, and I am grateful for the constructive comments of David Altheide, Nina Eliasoph, William Gamson, and Todd Gitlin. I certainly have no objections to their suggestions that research questions other than my own are also important. So I would heartily endorse Nina Eliasoph's call for more research on everyday public conversation, or David Altheide's urging to examine how the line between entertainment and journalism is becoming increasingly blurred, or Todd Gitlin's supplementary point that media studies would benefit from a more sophisticated social psychology that takes emotion as well as rational calculation into account. But I would like to focus my response on three specific critiques of my essay that I think have larger implications for sociology and political communication.

First, is it really necessary to "reinvent" media sociology, as William Gamson asks? Certainly, we should build upon what has come before. What I tried to argue is that previous attempts to categorize "factors" shaping the news, many of them two or more decades old, need to be clarified and updated. The dominant models are either too micro-oriented or too macro-oriented; in both cases, they are leading researchers to look in the wrong places for explanations. Sociologists, having discovered the existence of organization-based news routines, often fail to adequately connect these to larger structures of power. But political economists or cultural analysts who see the news as only an epiphenomenon of broad social forces are also missing something. This is where I introduce the notion of "field," as the interorganizational, professional, social, and indeed cultural space within which journalists situate or orient their action and interaction. It is in part because of enduring, taken-for-granted rules of the game within such fields that intensifying external commercial or political pressures do *not* automatically transform distinctive national journalistic practices. As a spatial model mapping the types (cultural, economic, etc.) and overall volume of capital possessed by various media outlets, the concept of field provides a means of explaining diversity as well as uniformity in the production of news and editorials.

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Via analysis of fields, a number of previously underemphasized variables are highlighted for their potential shaping effects on the news: interorganizational dynamics of professional as well as economic competition, morphological aspects such as the number of agents competing for positions relative to those available, and the historical trajectory of the field's formation. As part of a broad field theory, or added to existing macro-factor models, this consideration of field dynamics is indeed quite new, and worthy of further development. It is not the same old political economy (much less that of Chomsky); in fact, with the focus on the semi-autonomous, mezzo-level organizational environment of the field, the emphasis is on "refraction" of external pressures where political economy (or much of cultural theory for that matter) has seen only "reflection."

Second, is it just a "nominalist shell-game," as Todd Gitlin pithily puts it, to insist on using words like institution or field, or even political economy, rather than culture or, for that matter, "discursive opportunity structure"? In my view, no. Concepts matter to the extent that they direct (or fail to direct) our attention toward potentially relevant social phenomena. In *Shaping Abortion Discourse*, Gamson and coauthors' notion of discursive opportunity structure could certainly be a lot worse jargon-wise. My objection was to the fact that this structural term ended up telling us so little about the distinctive features of the U.S. and German media systems. In contrast, even though they do not put as much emphasis as I might on general economic constraints (advertising, form of ownership, etc.), I find much more theoretically satisfying the "media systems" model of Hallin and Mancini (2004), which identifies four relevant dimensions of media systems: (a) historical development of a strong or weak mass circulation press, (b) political parallelism or the extent to which the media system reflects the major political currents, (c) journalistic professional training and tradition, and (d) type and extent of state intervention in the media sector. Media sociology could only benefit from an open-ended discussion about the forces shaping the news, as well as the most parsimonious, yet comprehensive, terms with which to categorize these factors.

Likewise, institutionally grounded uses of the term "culture" may be useful, as in Altheide's notion of a journalistic professional culture that he sees as increasingly shaped by the popular entertainment industries. And I would certainly concede that cross-national research on journalistic organizational fields would be enriched by studies of audiences or publics. For any sociology of culture to be complete, all of the corners of Wendy Griswold's "cultural diamond" (1994) ought to be examined (see, e.g., J. Gamson, 1994; Gripsrud, 1995), and the reason they are not in any given study has more to do with our human limitations as researchers than theory per se. I admire Nina Eliasoph's (1998) masterful and innovative ethnography of various publics' "political etiquette." What I would object to is her theoretical use of "culture" to evidently deny or minimize the existence of institutional power (big or otherwise). I do not believe all cultural processes are about power, but enough of them *are* (or *were* at some point in the past)—certainly in the realm of political communication—that it would seem far wiser to bend the stick too far in this direction (and orient one's action accordingly) than toward overly voluntaristic conceptions of cultural action and interaction.

Far from being marginal and ignored, Eliasoph's and other forms of cultural(ist) sociology are widely acknowledged to be among the fastest growing subfields in the discipline, with a well-established book series at a leading university press and a strong presence across national boundaries. In contrast, within the sociology of culture and mass media, during a historical period marked by hyper-commercialism and increasing concentration of wealth, political economy and institutional studies—that is, approaches

that criticize rather than accommodate themselves to power—seem less common than ever. Since the early 1980s, there have been only a handful of major newsroom organizational studies, most of them outside of sociology (see, e.g., Kaniss, 1991, and McManus, 1994; cf. Benson, 2000; Klinenberg, 2000, 2004), and the rare works that have attempted to understand media as a broad institution, as previously noted, have mostly emerged out of political science rather than sociology. A "field" theory approach, while influential for some sociologists of culture, is only now beginning to influence the sociology of media (Pujas, 2002; Born, 2003; Couldry, 2003; Benson & Neveu, 2004; cf. Schlesinger, 1990, for an early admonition on behalf of field analysis). To the extent that field theory does have increasing appeal, it is precisely because it is not part of the straw-man macrosociology that Eliasoph disparages.

Third and finally, does studying "big institutions" mean that one assumes the public is passive? Not at all. I would readily concede that ideas and forms of discourse emerging out of what one might term the associational or social movement field have the potential to shape news media discourse, although, as even Eliasoph's own work shows (1998, pp. 210–229), this potential power is usually rebuffed by the working routines and assumptions of American journalists. Personally, I see an institutional approach as complementary rather than antagonistic to Eliasoph's project. Isn't, in fact, a more systematic attempt to understand what goes into producing "journalists' roadblocks" (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 256) an essential part of empowering the public? For example, what is it about the American journalistic field that leads it to systematically dismiss the very notion of political activism and to refuse an open, wide-ranging public debate, since, in fact, we know that some European media systems are not nearly so hostile to ideas and activism (as Eliasoph acknowledges)? Elsewhere, Eliasoph admits that "institutions do not all necessarily inspire a cycle of political evaporation; they can inspire the opposite" (1998, p. 259). This leads her to cite, for example, the possibility of an "unusual media outlet" that "honors publicly minded talk." But where do such "unusual" media outlets come from? Are they just a happy coincidence? In fact, at least one form of media outlet which often facilitates public dialogue and citizen activism—"alternative newsweeklies" such as the (San Francisco) *Bay Guardian* and the *LA Weekly*—has been shown to be the product of distinct professional, organizational, and economic conditions (Benson, 2003).

In sum, if we all agree that media sociology can contribute a great deal to political communication, there is thankfully no consensus on how to go about doing it. I have tried once again to make the case for a comparative sociology of media that includes the following elements: a new manner of conceptualizing the patterned social environment, both near and far, within which media organizations operate; the introduction of terms such as "field" which, if operationalized carefully, can facilitate new kinds of research questions; and a focus on institutional constraints that weigh on elites and diverse publics alike. Although the etiquette of this forum provides me with the last word, I am sure that there remains more to say, and I hope there will be other opportunities to continue this and related debates.

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