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## Bringing the Sociology of Media Back In

RODNEY BENSON

*In political communication research, news media tend to be studied more as a dependent than independent variable. That is, few studies link structural characteristics of media systems to the production of journalistic discourse about politics. One reason for this relative silence is the inadequacy of prevalent theories. Influential scholars in sociology and political communication such as Jürgen Habermas, Manuel Castells, and William Gamson provide only sketchy, institutionally underspecified accounts of media systems. Likewise, models in the sociology of news have tended to either aggregate societal level influences (chiefly political and economic) that are analytically and often empirically quite distinct or overemphasize micro-level influences (news routines, bureaucratic pressures). In between such micro- and macro-influences, the mezzo-level “journalistic field” represents an important shaping factor heretofore largely ignored. As path-dependent institutional logics, fields help ground cultural analysis; as interorganizational spatial environments varying in their level of concentration, they explain heretofore undertheorized aspects of news production. Drawing on the sociology of news and field theory (Bourdieu and American new institutionalism), this essay offers a series of hypotheses about how variable characteristics of media systems shape news discourse. Since variation at the system level is most clearly seen via cross-national comparative studies, international research is best positioned to build more generalizable theory about the production of journalistically mediated political discourse.*

**Keywords** American and European journalism, Bourdieu, comparative media research, culture, discourse and content analysis, field theory, journalistic field, new institutionalism, political economy, sociology of news

If research on journalism, as Philip Schlesinger (1990) warned some years ago, has too often been “media-centric,” political communication scholarship suffers from the opposite malaise, what one might even term “media-phobism.” To paraphrase Evans et al. (1985), it is about time that we bring the media back in to the study of political communication.<sup>1</sup> One of the most useful contributions sociology can make to political communication, in short, is offering methods, theories, and accumulated research findings about the workings of the news media.

This might seem a curious demand. Clearly, media are central to a large proportion of political communication studies, as the *dependent* variable. Media texts and images are more easily accessible than ever via electronic databases, and in turn are measured and analyzed in increasingly sophisticated ways. Inspired by the work of Todd Gitlin

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(1980), Daniel Hallin (1986, 1994), William Gamson (1988, 1992), Robert Entman (1991, 1993), and others, media frame analysis has become a veritable sociological industry. In *Political Communication* alone, virtually every issue contains at least one article drawing upon some form of media content analysis. Moreover, in a particularly promising development, a number of recent studies have attempted to operationalize and measure the “quality” of news discourse, that is, the extent to which mediated political debates approach normative standards offered by Jürgen Habermas and other theorists of deliberative democracy (see, e.g., Livingstone, 1996; Page, 1996; Simon & Xenos, 2000; Peters, 2000; Risse, 2002; Ferree et al., 2002; Steenbergen et al., 2003).

The challenge, then, is to bring the same sophisticated analysis to bear on understanding media as an *independent* variable, as part of the process of political meaning making rather than just a convenient indicator of the outcome. This is done too rarely, and when it *is* done, such research generally offers vague references to a multiplicity of “media-specific factors” (Terkildsen et al., 1998) or “news routines” (Oliver & Myers, 1999; Watkins, 2001), or without theoretical justification, to one particular factor, such as journalistic “role perceptions” (Vreese et al., 2001). In some cases, media as independent and dependent variables are even muddled, as in the otherwise impressively constructed news content study of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). In this article, media outlets are categorized according to an (impressionistic) evaluation of their content (serious and sober vs. sensationalistic) rather than any independent assessment of their structural and organizational features (funding, ownership, demographics of journalists and audiences, etc.). Thus, the authors’ conclusion that “sober and serious” media outlets tended to frame politics differently than “sensationalist” news organizations only seems to restate the obvious, without telling us anything about why some media outlets are more sensationalistic than others. Explanation is too often relegated to speculation, even if such ruminations are quite intelligent and include acknowledgments of the need for additional research (e.g., Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Kruse, 2001).

Given the media’s role in shaping political debate, I am suggesting first that political communication studies draw upon the sociology of news media far more extensively than has been the case in the past. Any political communication researcher who heeds this advice, however, will quickly find that this literature, while voluminous, suffers from certain gaps and provides often conflicting findings. Thus, this article secondarily offers a brief road map to this literature, as well as suggestions on how “new institutionalist” and “field” theories might also make a contribution. I conclude with a discussion of how systematic cross-national research has and can continue to build more generalizable theory about media/politics relations.

### **Media and Political Communication: General Models**

Among contemporary social theorists, Manuel Castells and Jürgen Habermas have done a great deal to bring the media back in to the study of political communication. From another direction, social problems “constructionism,” the work of William Gamson and collaborators has also been especially influential. Yet with all three models,<sup>2</sup> the conceptualizations of media (and the forces that shape them) are underspecified, minimizing their usefulness for systematic research.

Manuel Castells argues that contemporary political debates are increasingly forced to take place inside what he calls the “media space.” Inside this space, Castells (1997, p. 312) suggests that politics is “structured” by the “logic” of electronic media, a logic defined as involving “the dominance of television, computerized political marketing,

instant polling as an instrument of political navigation, [and] character assassination as political strategy.” Elsewhere, Castells speaks of the “inherent logic of the media system” (p. 316), which he links at various points to a variety of factors: technological, economic (business advertising and audience ratings), and journalistic professional ideology. As for how constraining this media logic is, Castells evidently wants to both have and eat his proverbial cake: “What happens in this media-dominated political space is not determined by the media: it is an open social and political process. But the logic, and the organization, of electronic media frame and structure politics” (p. 312). What does this mean for Castells? He cites the usual litany of ills tied to the news media: news as entertainment, lack of context, simplification, personalization. Fair enough. Castells does an admirable job in documenting changes in political communication that are increasingly evident around the world (see also Moog & Sluyter-Beltrao, 2001). But in the end, his model is too broad to provide much theoretical leverage; Castells’s concept of “media space” cannot help explain why some political debates are more or less simplified, personalized, dramatized, or contextualized than others.

Despite some modifications in his model (see Habermas, 1992, 1997), Habermas’s conceptualization of the mass media’s relation to the public sphere largely revolves around the single variable of commercialization.<sup>3</sup> Historically, Habermas argues, the “press itself became more manipulable to the extent that it became commercialized,” beginning in earnest in the mid-1800s (1989, p. 185); the public sphere was thus transformed from a forum for rational-critical debate into a “platform for advertising” (p. 181). Even as voting and other political rights were extended to previously disenfranchised groups, expanding participation in public life, political debate in a commercialized public sphere lost its independent critical edge and became more sensationalized and trivialized. In short, for Habermas, commercialization leads to wider participation (or at least spectatorship) while lessening the likelihood of attaining a truly rational-critical debate. Here, at least, is a clear hypothesis. But Castells is closer to the truth in acknowledging the multiple facets and aspects of media systems.

William Gamson and his various collaborators (e.g., Gamson, 1988; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, 1989) offer a third important attempt to incorporate media into political communication research. In this model, “media practices” are generally identified as one of three major factors, along with culturally available symbols and themes (“cultural resonances”) and strategic political communication (“sponsor activities”) in shaping public (media) discourse about social problems. Which practices are highlighted generally depends on the study, and they range from the minimal (the tendency to favor official sources and the “two-sided” balance norm, as in Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) to the comprehensive (the impressive cataloguing of “what’s newsworthy” under the general rubrics of public recognition, importance, and interest, in Ryan, 1991). Because “media practices” is so flexible and malleable a notion, it has been widely appropriated or adapted (e.g., Beckett, 1996; Oliver & Myers, 1999; Watkins, 2001; Kruse, 2001). The chief problem is that these practices are nearly always unself-consciously equated with *American* media, and little attempt is made (except to a certain extent by Ryan) to systematically link them to particular structural characteristics. For example, Oliver and Myers (1999, pp. 45–46) identify journalistic predispositions, news values, and news routines as the chief “systematic factors” that “determine the likelihood that an event will receive news coverage.” Despite their broad review of the literature (primarily of organizational studies), just how these predispositions, values, and routines themselves emerge is rather mysterious; there are only passing references to the increasingly concentrated control of the mass media and the (assumed) autonomous shaping power of journalism schools.

One would think that such loose, U.S.-centric conceptions of media would be fleshed out considerably in the recent collaborative study of the German and American public spheres (Ferree et al., 2002). In their theoretical introduction, Gamson and coauthors describe the mass media as a “forum” for public discourse and, indeed, as the “master forum” since “all of the players in the policy process assume its pervasive influence (whether justified or not)” (p. 10). This forum is envisioned as a sort of “stadium” with the crucial distinction that the arena in which public communication takes place is not “like the flat, orderly, and well-marked field in a soccer stadium.” Rather, according to Ferree et al., “the field in which framing contests occur is full of hills and valleys, sinkholes, promontories, and impenetrable jungles” and thus “provides advantages and disadvantages in an uneven way to the various contestants in framing contests” (p. 12). Conceivably, the contours of this “field” should vary systematically in at least some ways between Germany and the United States. Yet, when it comes to mapping and identifying the patterns in their respective hills, valleys, and jungles, the American and German authors have remarkably little to say. Despite having identified the media as the single most important forum, they devote less than two pages of their 324 page book to describing German-U.S. differences, compared to six pages for political systems and 11 pages for sociocultural elements (arguably, quite short shrift for these factors as well). Potentially significant and well-documented U.S.-German media differences—in level and type of commercialization, professional ideologies, bureaucratic organization, and state regulation—are glossed over entirely (see, e.g., Esser, 1998, 1999; Deuze, 2002; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Bertrand & Urabayen, 1985; Greenberg, 1985; Bagdikian, 1992). The single most significant difference between the two systems, they argue, is the greater openness of U.S. journalists to sources other than state and party actors (p. 82), a claim they provide no evidence for other than the content of the news itself, thus engaging in entirely circular reasoning and conflating media as both an independent and dependent variable.

To be fair, the focus of Gamson and his coauthors is on social movements, not media per se, and it is obvious that most of their considerable effort went into creating a truly innovative content coding scheme as well as the best available comparative survey of “democratic theories of the public sphere.” But given the scope of the authors’ claims, these don’t seem adequate excuses. If media are to be incorporated into studies of political communication, they ought to be just as fully realized, theoretically and empirically, as the other social actors and institutional fields presumed to be important. Since Ferree et al. have not seriously developed or tested the alternative hypothesis that differences in media systems account for differences in public discourse, how can we trust their conclusion that the “two very different abortion discourses generated in these two countries are best explained by the deliberate efforts of social actors to shape them” (p. 288)?

One problem with this “social problems” model is its inadequate conceptualization, visualization if you will, of the media. Portraying the media as simply “a *site* on which various social groups . . . struggle over the definition and construction of social reality” (Gurevitch & Levy, 1985, p. 19, cited in Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3) relegates the media, a priori, to an essentially passive and secondary role. Especially at a time when there is good reason to believe the media are playing a primary role in structuring politics (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 1999; Callaghan & Schnell, 2001), we need to be able to understand the why, how, and how much of what John Thompson (1995) has termed the “mediatization” of politics. To begin this exploration, we turn first to the fruits of previous sociological research on the news media.

## Sociology of News: A Recategorization of Key Influences

What are the major factors that shape news coverage of politics? Gitlin (1980, pp. 249–251), drawing on Gans (1980), emphasizes three basic theories: (a) journalists themselves, (b) organizational structures of news outlets, and (c) “institutions or social conditions outside the news organization . . . technological factors, national culture, economics, the audience, the most powerful news sources, and/or the ideologies of the dominant social powers.”<sup>4</sup> Taking a slightly different tack, Schudson (2000) suggests three main influences on news production: political economy of the society, the social organization of newswork, and (political) culture.

Both listings seem fairly comprehensive, but the categorical divisions hide almost as much as they reveal. The case for culture as an independent causal factor has yet to be made convincingly. Organizational constraints are conceptualized at too micro of a level (and this is a problem for the original research as well), and for this and other reasons lack explanatory power. And, in order to be truly useful, the category “political economy” needs to be broken down into its constituent parts.

To claim that news discourse in any national context is shaped in part by culture, and thus by history, is both true and a paralyzing sort of truism. It is true enough to say that the BBC is a part of British culture. But we also need to remember that the BBC was made and might have been made differently, just as a close U.S. counterpart was not made, but might have been, as McChesney (1993) shows. In other words, the notion of culture clouds rather than elucidates our understanding of media and political communication, unless we keep in mind that culture is not static and unchanging, some sort of unmoved mover, but is itself the product of a series of social struggles. Schudson insists that there is something in cultural codes that “transcends structures of ownership or patterns of work relations” (2000, p. 189). But many of the research findings he then goes on to cite (e.g., differences between Soviet and Western journalists’ conceptions of newsworthiness, Gans’s listing of core values of American journalism, U.S. vs. Italian news conventions) could also be accounted for by social structural factors. To the extent that culture can even be distinguished from social structure, it is as a sort of “sediment” of past struggles over the hierarchical organization of power and the allocation of resources, in other words, the state and the market, which return us to political economy. Historical research on the processes and contests involved in forming the institutions within which contemporary social actors (whether journalists, politicians, or intellectuals) operate seems a useful, indeed essential prerequisite to any analysis of the current power structure<sup>5</sup>; positing “political culture” as an important alternative hypothesis to social structural factors seems to me less fruitful. Schudson’s own concluding lament that each of the three dominant “perspectives” (political economy, organizational, and cultural) are “typically ahistorical” (2000, p. 194) suggests he too might be more favorable to a “contextual” than an “alternative hypothesis” use of culture. Or to put it another way, an analysis of “institutional logics” (Mohr, 2000, p. 64)—whether political, economic, or journalistic—would necessarily involve a simultaneous analysis of social structure and culture and their complex interplay.

On the other hand, organizational pressures, identified as a central factor by both Gitlin and Schudson, do not seem to vary enough to provide much help in explaining differences in news coverage. As Schudson notes, the central and consistent finding of such studies is that “officials dominate the news” (p. 185) due to the centrality of reporter-source relations in the gathering of political news. Other organizational factors identified include newsroom hierarchies, technical constraints, and time pressures. But if



these factors are findings of organizational studies, that does not make them a result, *per se*, of newsroom organizational processes. One could just as reasonably insist that the social organization of newswork is the outcome of the news media's relationship, as a relatively homogeneous institution, to political and economic power. Indeed, this is precisely Bartholomew Sparrow's "new institutionalist" conclusion, in his 1999 study which showed relatively consistent treatment of a number of major news events by the U.S. mainstream media. If there is some evidence that organization of newsrooms varies, the most significant differences seem to be cross-national (Esser, 1998), that is, at the institutional rather than individual organizational level.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, organizational dynamics are important. However, they probably exert their most powerful semi-autonomous effects not at the level of individual organizations, but at the *mezzo* level of the "institution" or interorganizational "field." This concept of field would also incorporate Gitlin's first factor—journalists—both in terms of their individual social and educational backgrounds and as a corporate group defending (and struggling to define) a professional identity. It is only by adopting this "field" unit of analysis and looking at the interactions of the whole range of journalists and news organizations in Chicago that Eric Klinenberg (2002) could offer his compelling and comprehensive analysis of the ways in which both politicians and journalists constructed the Chicago heat wave of 1995 as a "natural" rather than an all-too-human disaster. A field-level analysis also shares much in common with Benjamin Page's (1996) examination of news coverage of the 1992 L.A. riots. In that study, Page notes systematic differences in both the news coverage and editorial stances of the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, but concludes that it is "harder to be confident about the reasons why different media take the positions they do" (p. 75). Page suggests that relevant factors could include "owners, advertisers, and/or audiences" and calls for "future research" to assess which are most important; the following discussion hopefully will contribute to clarifying this future research agenda.

Finally, we are left with the broad catch-all category of "political economy." As Schudson (2000, p. 181) notes, because it has taken "liberal democracy for granted," Anglo-American media research in the political economy tradition has "been insensitive to political and legal determinants of news production," and for this reason has been "far more 'economic' than 'political.'" In other cases, as in Herman and Chomsky's "propaganda model" (1988), the political is collapsed into the economic as part of a larger, unified ruling complex. Certainly, there is good reason to keep the "political" and the "economic" analytically distinct. Government and business are far from always in accord (Cook, 1998). Moreover, each of these institutional sites of power encompasses within itself multiple and potentially cross-cutting effects.

In sum, I am suggesting a basic recategorization of the "major factors" shaping news coverage of politics. These factors are (a) commercial or economic, (b) political, and (c) the interorganizational field of journalism. This recategorization entails the analytical separation of "political economy" (a and b) and the subsumption of individual organizational and journalistic factors into the broader organizational and professional field (c). Broad national culture would no longer be considered as a distinct, alternative variable. However, historical and cultural analysis would necessarily precede and accompany examination of these three broad structural variables, helping to explain the origin and solidity (or lack thereof) of the journalistic field's relation to political and economic power.

Surveying previous research, I now turn to a consideration of the ways in which the first two factors—commercial and political—may produce variable effects on the pro-

duction of political news. Since the third factor—interorganizational field—has scarcely produced a research literature, I will only suggest some preliminary hypotheses.

### Commercial, Political, and Field Effects: Some Hypotheses

Commercialism is often portrayed as a unitary phenomenon when it clearly is not. A careful reading of the literature (see hypotheses below) suggests at least four distinct kinds of commercial pressures: concentration of ownership, level and intensity of competition, profit pressures related to type of ownership, and type of funding. As for variable government or political constraints, the literature provides even less guidance. Gans's only significant discussion of government pressures (1980, pp. 260–265) focuses on particular instances of officials attempting to influence news coverage. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) devote just six pages to “government controls” in their book-length review of “influences on mass media content” and likewise suggest no general theories of statist influences. Kuhn (1995, p. 49) offers perhaps the best, if not only, classification of analytically distinct state roles vis-à-vis the media—censor, regulator, enabler, and primary definer. Censorship needs little explication, although the “chilling effect” (Gans, 1980, p. 249) probably varies depending on the force, regularity, and timing (pre- or post-publication) of the censoring acts. Regulations may be relatively minor and even helpful for the media industry, or fall just short of censorship in imposing criminal or civil penalties for certain kinds of journalistic practices. The state acts as an “enabler” when it literally enables the media to exist or thrive via indirect (technology, distribution networks) or direct financial aid (Cook, 1998; Gandy, 1982). Finally, because of its authoritative status in society, augmented by overt attempts at manipulation, the state acts as a “primary definer” of the issues and ideas on the media agenda (Hall et al., 1978).

The emerging “new institutionalist” understanding of journalism as an “organizational field” (Cook, 1998, p. 68) has to this point not included a consideration of variable field effects on journalistic discourse about politics. Instead, scholars have sought to simply establish that journalism is an institution, that is, that despite the appearance of diversity, media outlets within a given national journalistic field largely share the same news values and practices (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 1999; Kaplan, 2002). Pierre Bourdieu's conception of “field” (Bourdieu, 1993, 1998, 2004; Benson, 1999; but see also Friedland & Alford, 1991; Fligstein, 1990, 1991; Martin, 2003), which stresses to a greater extent internal dynamics and relations, provides a useful supplement to this approach. While each field has its own unique “rules of the game,” they are all, at least according to Bourdieu, structured around the same basic opposition between cultural and economic power. Economic power dominates, yet cultural power (as in Weber) remains influential to the extent that it is perceived as necessary to legitimate and mask economic power. Whether or not power can be reduced to just two forms (Benson, 1999; see also Coudry, 2003), the injunction to think relationally and spatially seems an important advance. For the case of the “journalistic field,” scholars are just beginning to analyze how variations in field properties shape the production of political news. Relevant factors may include relative autonomy vis-à-vis political and/or economic power<sup>7</sup> and morphological characteristics related to the number of social actors and organizations, and the level and intensity of direct competition within the field.

Drawing on some of the most widely available studies, primarily based on research in the United States and Great Britain, we may thus posit the following *ceteris paribus* hypotheses about commercial, political, and journalistic field influences on news discourse about politics:



1a. Concentration of ownership lessens competition, thus producing a narrower ideological debate (McChesney, 1999; Bagdikian, 1992).

1b. However, as Bagdikian concedes (1992, pp. 8 and 37; see also Baker, 2002, p. 36), large, profitable media companies have more resources to devote to reporting and for legal defense, thus making them potentially more willing and able to challenge the state, powerful interest groups, or other large corporations. In some cases, then, concentration or even local monopolies<sup>8</sup> may actually contribute to more critical, in-depth political reporting.

2a. (Related to Hypothesis 1a, as Bagdikian, 1992, also argues) The existence of more media outlets competing directly in the same media market ought to increase the topical and ideological diversity of the news.

2b. Setting aside the question of ideological diversity, research on local television and newspapers in the United States (McManus, 1994; Coulson & Lacy, 1996; Lacy et al., 1999) suggests that increased competition leads to more sensationalized, superficial news coverage.<sup>9</sup>

3. Media companies traded on the stock market, as opposed to those privately or at least partially owned by families or trusts,<sup>10</sup> will face greater pressures to maximize profits, and this in turn will contribute to both ideological homogenization and audience-pleasing dramatization (Squires, 1993; Underwood, 1995; Entman, 1989). In combination with other factors, such as the rise of commercial television, political image consulting, and an adversary culture within journalism, profit pressures are said to promote a more cynical, scandal-driven political reporting (Castells, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Fallows, 1996).

4. Greater dependence on advertising is likely to contribute to more positive (and less negative) coverage of business, more critical (or sparse) coverage of labor unions, as well as a pro-consumerist depoliticization and ideological narrowing of the news (Bennett, 1983; Curran et al., 1986; Schiller, 1989; Tasini, 1990; Baker, 1994).<sup>11</sup>

5. Government regulations, particularly via legal definitions of defamation and libel, may crucially shape patterns of news coverage. In particular, we might suppose that more restrictive defamation and libel laws will contribute to lesser public discussion of the private lives of government or other officials (Saguy, 2003, p. 93), and perhaps less critical and cynical coverage. Likewise, stricter laws and regulations concerning journalistic access to confidential government information are likely to contribute to fewer revelations about governmental corruption or mismanagement.

6a. Depending on the specific policy and kind of subsidy, the state as “enabler” could actually contribute to a range of media “public goods” (Baker, 2002), a broader representation of groups and ideologies in the news, greater attention to government and political life in general, and more sustained, in-depth debate of issues (Curran, 1991).

6b. Such subsidies, however, also may place particular news outlets and the media system as a whole in the uncomfortable position of financial dependency on the government. For this reason, other scholars (De Tarlé, 1980, p. 146; Charon, 1996, pp. 118–122) suggest that state “enabling” intervention has a chilling effect on news coverage of politics, or at least, the party or leaders in power.

7. A great deal of previous research has focused on reporter-source relations (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1980; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994), emphasizing how powerful sources shape the news. We would thus expect content analyses to show official sources appearing most frequently and most prominently in news stories. But since reporters everywhere rely on high-level sources for certain kinds of information, this factor may actually explain very little in the way of cross-national variation (or, alternatively, that news

content will only reflect cross-national differences in political hierarchies, e.g., the relative power of judges, party leaders, local versus national officials, particular government agencies, etc.).

8. A field's rules of the game or "conceptions of control" (Fligstein, 1991) are established when the field is founded, and once "routinized" tend to persist over time. As Fligstein and McAdam (1995, pp. 22–23) explain, fields "are born of the concerted efforts of collective actors to fashion a stable consensus regarding rules of conduct and membership criteria that routinize action in pursuit of collective interests. If the initial consensus should prove effective in creating an arena advantageous to those who fashioned it, then it is likely to prove highly resistant to internal challenge." These rules, involving both overt beliefs and habitual practices, are linked to the dominant national political culture but not reducible to it.<sup>12</sup> Field internal "logics" will tend to persist even when conditions external to the field change.

For instance, journalistic professionalism in France has been defined not as a detachment or distance from political or ideological allegiances, but in fact as the right to hold and defend a set of ideas (Albert, 1990, p. 41). This ideal goes back at least as far as Article 11 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which states: "The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the rights most precious to men. Every citizen may thus speak, write, publish freely, except to be accountable for this liberty in those cases determined by law." This "political/literary" French journalistic tradition, significantly, defines itself in part against the "American model," via a less strict separation of "news" and "opinion" (Padioleau, 1983) and a lesser concern with "sourcing" every fact or opinion included in a story (Ruellan, 1993, p. 202). It is a tradition that developed over two centuries of heavy-handed state censorship and the political and intellectual dominance of Paris literary culture, absorbing along the way certain aspects of the "Anglo-American model" (Palmer, 1983; Ferenczi, 1993; Chalaby, 1996). In contrast, the American informational, "objective" press tradition owes a great deal to the Progressive political movement of the early 20th century, in particular its reformist desire to uncover government corruption, its skepticism toward traditional party politics, and its faith in objective technical solutions to complex policy problems (Schudson, 1978; Kaplan, 2002). Despite significant changes in the external environments shaping both the American and French journalistic fields (most notably increasing commercial pressures, but also changes in political party and state/bureaucratic involvement with the press), historical quantitative and qualitative research on French and American political journalism between the mid-1960s and mid-1990s (Benson, 2000; Hallin & Benson, 2003) demonstrates remarkable continuities in narrative formats, source usage, and other measures of news content.

9. Since autonomy is always relative, we might posit that journalistic fields with a greater degree of noncommercial ownership or funding (state, church, associational) or diversified to a greater extent in their commercial funding (paying audiences as well as advertising, various forms of advertising, lesser concentration of advertisers) will be better able to maintain professional continuity in the face of external "shocks" (see Marchetti, 2004). At the same time, drawing on Bourdieu's general model (1996, p. 220), those national journalistic fields which have been able to institutionalize "negative sanctions" against heteronomous practices (those originating in an external institutional logic, whether the political, economic, or even religious or activist fields) and "positive incitements to resistance and even open struggle against those in power" will be more likely to maintain continuity in their professional practices over time. Bourdieu mentions these aspects only as "indicators" of a field's autonomy; he does not explain how and why they might

emerge. But one implication surely seems that professional reform movements that institutionalize such things as journalism schools, awards for journalistic excellence, ombudsperson positions, and critical journalism reviews may have a significant semi-autonomous power to shape the news.

10. If certain field properties contribute to cultural inertia, under what conditions is there likely to be significant transformation? Bourdieu (1996) suggests that a simple increase in the number of individuals or organizations producing journalism (p. 225), as well as an increase in the volume of “readers and spectators” (p. 232), will have transformative effects. Since to exist in a field is to mark one’s difference, every generation of journalists has an incentive to “import innovation regarding products or techniques of production” (p. 225). At the same time, a massive increase in the sheer number of journalists attempting to find positions contributes to increasing job insecurity; owners will be tempted to replace full-time, better-paid older workers with part-time or freelance college graduates. Such a dynamic will tend to strengthen the hand of economic power over journalists as a whole (Balbastre, 2000).

11. Underplayed in Bourdieu’s account, however, are organizational aspects of fields that may also shape journalistic production. Schudson coined the term “structural ecology” to describe all of the potential institutions and actors of the public sphere (1994, p. 539), listing such characteristics as size of the polity, distribution of wealth, and the extent to which “political authority and intellectual leadership” are centralized in a capital city. Related to this last characteristic, I want to suggest that an important ecological aspect of the “mediated” public sphere or journalistic field is the type and intensity of competition among news organizations, which is related to the degree of centralization versus fragmentation of the field. We may expect that more centralized, direct competition among media outlets will tend to produce more sensationalistic or dramatized news coverage of politics. The form of competition is certainly a kind of commercial pressure, but since it is also bound up with professional competition and social networks, it finds a more “ample” explication via the notion of field. To the extent that Bourdieu’s field theory is stretched to take better account of organizational “ecological” aspects, it would benefit from a serious infusion of organizational theory and research (Scott, 1998; Fligstein, 2003).

### **Conclusion: The Contribution of Comparative research**

Of course, this list is far from exhaustive, and others might produce a different set of hypotheses. Yet, any attempt to systematically link media system characteristics and news content would be a significant improvement on the all-too-frequent framing study with methodological sophistication to spare but which only obliquely links discursive production to structural characteristics of media systems. For instance, in an otherwise impressive quantitative content analysis study, Vreese et al. (2001) show that the British, German, Dutch, and Danish press all emphasize the “conflict” frame in their coverage of the launching of the Euro. But their discussion of “what might influence the use of particular frames”—“journalists’ role perceptions and their personal and professional values on an individual level . . . organizational features and constraints [but which?] on an institutional level . . . [and] the nature of the issue covered and particularities of the economic-political context”—only arises “tentative[ly]” and in a rather ad hoc manner at the very end of the article (p. 117).

In contrast, Wittebols’s comparison of U.S. and Canadian TV news coverage of social protest (1996) is exemplary of research explicitly oriented toward linking structural

variables and the production of journalistic discourse. Wittebols posited that the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC), because of its noncommercial funding and organizational legacy influenced by the British BBC, would cover social protests more “seriously” (p. 351; not exactly a social scientific term, but the proof is in the operationalization) than its American commercial network counterparts. His data supported this conclusion, showing that the “CBC was far more likely to give lengthier treatment to protest” and that “protesters on CBC were more likely to be quoted and for longer segments of time” (p. 358). Excusing himself from any accusation of rampant media-centrism, Wittebols also attributes some of the differences to Canada’s political system and its place in the larger global political economy.

Given the complexity and multiplicity of factors involved, it is certainly fair to say that media framing of politics is overdetermined. In other words, since multiple factors often push the media in the same direction (e.g., both state and commercial factors potentially contributing to ideological narrowing), it simply may not be possible to identify the one or two most important factors. Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 5 and Footnote 4) even challenge the appropriateness of “the language of dependent and independent variables” for a constructionist account of media discourse, instead favoring what they term a “value-added process.” I share their uneasiness over a strictly linear regression approach that would ignore how forces shaping news production are often intertwined and interrelated. Nevertheless, the simple lumping together of factors as encouraged by such a value-added model offers little hope of any insight into the significant variation, cross-nationally and across types of news outlets within a national context, which clearly does exist.

Comparative research, at least initially, may be less able to resolve questions about causality than to punch holes in the existing assumptions.<sup>13</sup> But this alone would be an impressive step forward. Just to take a few of the preceding hypotheses, firstly, how important, really, is concentration of ownership (beyond the obvious limit point of monopoly, and even then)? Many of the media systems in Western Europe are at least as concentrated or more than that of the United States. The still too rare U.S.-European comparative news content analyses have produced mixed results: Some studies have shown relatively greater source and ideological diversity in countries such as France and Italy (Hallin & Mancini, 1984; Benson, 2000), while others find that the U.S. press provides more room for voices from civil society and for “more of an even debate between contending, incompatible frames” (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 113). Discrepancies may be due to differences in the topical focus (e.g., immigration vs. abortion) or operationalization and measurement of source and framing categories. Moreover, other factors besides media ownership are at work. But more such comparisons could greatly contribute to a scholarly debate that is just emerging in the United States—the growing suspicion that concentration of ownership explains much less about media content than previously believed. Instead, broad advertising and audience maximization pressures that affect most if not all mainstream U.S. media outlets are seen as the most influential variables (Latteier & Gamson, 2003). The logical conclusion (if difficult to assert in the contemporary U.S. political climate) is that genuine content diversity would be best promoted by “a more mixed system of mass media with different modes of financing,” meaning various forms of noncommercial civic, professional, or minority-owned media as well as commercial media (Horwitz, 2003; see also Curran, 2000, and Baker, 2002).

To take another aspect of journalistic discourse, more dramatized, cynical, and scandal-driven coverage of politics has been linked to a number of factors, including commercial pressures, level of competition, and government libel and defamation laws. Esser

(1999) finds that national press coverage of politics is less “tabloidized” (defined here as less cynical toward politicians and less scandal-oriented) in Germany than in the United Kingdom. He identifies two factors that seem plausible causes: the U.K.’s more direct and intense competition among national newspapers (most of which rely on daily street sales as opposed to subscriptions for most of their revenues) and Germany’s stricter privacy laws that protect public figures. My own research on the French and American national press (Benson, 2000, 2002) helps qualify this finding somewhat by showing that privacy laws may help dampen certain kinds of news coverage (e.g., of politicians’ private lives) but evidently do not have a dampening effect on the dramatization of other political news stories. In this case, greater reliance on direct street sales and more intense economic competition among the leading press outlets than in the United States seems the best explanation of France’s relatively more crisis-oriented, dramatized coverage of politics.

Perhaps the most important finding of research on media systems other than the United States is the potentially positive effects of carefully targeted government programs (see, e.g., Curran, 1991; Kuhn, 1995; Skogerbø, 1997; Murschetz, 1998). The prevailing anti-government orthodoxy in American political discourse, but particularly so in the absolutist First Amendment tradition of American journalism, makes any discussion of the state’s role particularly difficult. Yet, given the range of negative externalities (Baker, 2002) strongly associated with (if not solely caused by) laissez-faire capitalism, a sober assessment of the benefits as well as costs of various kinds of government intervention in the media sector is perhaps the most urgent item on the political communication research agenda.

In sum, the project I am advocating goes far beyond bringing the media back in to political communication research, that is, simply adding one more ingredient to our pre-existing theoretical recipe. As I have hoped to show, some serious work needs to be done on the recipe itself. In order to bring the media back in, we first need to figure out what the media actually are, and what it is we’re bringing the media back in to. And to do that, it seems we are led naturally to broad questions of social theory and method. This essay certainly does not aspire to resolve such questions. But it does aim to open a discussion—a debate even—one that despite exhortations long before mine, has been delayed too long.

## Notes

1. In a short essay on the public sphere, Schudson (1994) also called for “bringing the state back in,” meaning that “government must be understood as a part of the public sphere and not as a separate dimension of social life” (p. 532). As will become evident, I see a renewed research focus on the media as part of the same larger project, that is, explaining how political communication is shaped by various kinds of institutional relations (state, media, economy, etc.), but with the media at the center of the analysis. One could conceivably object that the media were never “in” political communication research in the first place, but this is clearly not true when one reflects upon the important place accorded the media in the pioneering work of Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton, Elihu Katz and others.

2. Not discussed here is Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991), a work which highlights how emerging national press systems helped construct “national consciousness,” clearly another important aspect of political communication. As Schudson (2002, 2003) points out, however, Anderson’s concerns with identity and community are logically distinct from the liberal problematic of public discourse and democratic institutions, which is more the focus of this essay.



3. To the extent that Habermas looks at the role of the “mass-welfare state,” he sees it as largely complementary to market pressures, rather than providing a counterpoint to these pressures. Moreover, he portrays the mass media as completely lacking in defenses against this commercial/state complex.

4. Gitlin also notes, but rightly dismisses, “the event-centered” theory much favored by journalists themselves that sees news simply as the reflection of what happens in the world. Since virtually no event is so simple that it can be reflected in only one way, this theory obviously cannot account for the particular and variable inflections given to the same event (not to mention wide variations in selection of what constitutes a news event) by various news organizations. Nevertheless, the “mirror theory” functions as the null hypothesis of much media research, and perhaps rightly so; before any shaping power of media can be established, the analyst is expected to show that the actual events or social conditions transcend or differ in some way from subsequent media accounts.

5. As Pierre Bourdieu (1996, p. 206) notes, “the stakes of the struggle between the dominants and pretenders [within any given field of cultural production, including journalism], the issues they dispute ... depend on the state of the legitimate problematic, that is, the space of the possibilities bequeathed by previous struggles, a space which tends to give direction to the search for solutions and, consequently, influences the present and future of production.”

6. Padioleau (1985) finds significant differences in newsroom structure and journalistic behavior between the *Washington Post* and *Le Monde*, differences that may not all be attributable to the U.S. and French press as a whole. *Le Monde*, a journalist-owned and managed newspaper with close ties to French intellectuals, is in some ways a unique institution. Nevertheless, it shares many important characteristics with its chief national daily competitors, *Libération* and *Le Figaro*.

7. In this essay, I introduce “journalistic field” as a factor that might be incorporated into existing research paradigms. However, “field theory” in fact offers an alternative model, in which case one would speak of the “political” and “economic” (or commercial) as fields as well. This project would build upon Craig Calhoun’s call (1992, p. 38) for a more comprehensive “internal analysis” of the public sphere, in other words, a mapping of the public sphere as a “socially organized field, with characteristic lines of division, relationships of force, and other constitutive features.” See also Schlesinger (1990, pp. 77–79). Field theory shares this ambition with Hilgartner and Bosk’s “public arenas” (1988), Asard and Bennett’s “marketplace” (1997), and Hallin and Mancini’s “media systems” (2004), and thus could benefit from a dialogue with these approaches as well.

8. This is assuming that media companies remain distinct from other kinds of businesses, which is increasingly not the case in this age of mergers and acquisitions (Curran, 2000).

9. Rosenstiel, Gottlieb, and Brady (1999) show that U.S. local television news broadcasts with a “more sober, information-based approach” may in fact achieve higher ratings in some markets than tabloid-style broadcasts. The authors also confirmed, however, that on average “most local TV news is superficial and reactive” and that news quality was lowest in big-city markets (where competition is most intense, an aspect the authors did not emphasize as a factor).

10. As is the case with the *New York Times*, in which two kinds of stocks are issued, one limited to family members that offers enhanced voting rights and another open to the general public. Dow Jones (*Wall Street Journal*) and the Washington Post Company are also publicly traded, but the owning families also have preserved extra control. See Cranberg et al. (2001).

11. In these studies, pro-business, anti-labor coverage may in fact be linked to the broad capitalist, commercial nature of the media system, rather than to advertising per se. Usually, though, advertising funding is stressed. Systematic anti-labor coverage does not necessarily mean business will be treated more favorably in general news reports (Davis, 2002). Nevertheless, the mainstream press rarely if ever offers a labor equivalent to the business section within which the corporate worldview is presented largely uncritically.

12. Schudson (1980), in dismissing an organizational “bureaucratic” explanation for differences between an American newspaper and *Le Monde*, points to “cultural” reasons: “The difference



between the French news product and the American news product is no less broad than that between French and American social science.” This may or may not be true. What I am suggesting is that at least for some salient aspects the differences may be rooted in particular fields rather than in the culture as a whole.

13. For discussions of the virtues and limits of comparative methodology, see Blumler et al. (1992) and Hallin and Mancini (2004, especially chap. 1).

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