Institutions, Political

VÍCTOR SAMPEDRO
Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Spain

Considering the press and the media as political institutions implies recognizing that they are both partially autonomous from external pressure and interdependent with other institutions. Different media systems and journalistic practices or ideologies exhibit some degree of internal homogeneity, which exert power over other social spheres or sectors. Academic debates focus on the stability of media institutions and their dependence on politics, economics, and cultural production. The 20th-century institutional regime of the press was shaped to fit into mass politics and markets. Multimedia corporations, polls, and general elections constituted the dominant institutional framework. Digital technologies underlined the shortcomings of this old media regime. The Internet fosters an institutional rearrangement to build a networked public sphere that is still emerging and under debate. Traditional media face a crisis of business model and political role while needing to fit in to the changing institutions of the digital economy and politics.

Modern societies are the result of a process of differentiation into semi-autonomous and increasingly specialized spheres of action, as Weber and Durkheim showed in their seminal works. By considering the press as a political (Cook, 1998) or a cultural (Kaplan, 2002) institution, late 20th-century media studies embraced the "new institutionalism." Institutions can be considered as defining the "rules of the game," which facilitate certain actions while preventing others. In other words, institutions enable, limit, or stimulate certain attitudes and behaviors. Because of their effectiveness and regulative power, institutions can encourage individuals and collectives to act from the distinctive positions they occupy through different incentives. Institutions also impose sanctions. Thus, they generate certain habits and norms of social behavior through socialization mechanisms (March & Olsen, 1989).

The press—or the media in general—provide the contextual features in which social actors generate and process public messages, social meanings, and collective identities. Media structures and personnel are crucial to understanding how social actors behave in pursuit of their political goals. Specific media logics can enhance or inhibit democratic norms and values. But the way we act within and across institutions matters as much as the formal configuration of institutions. Critical differences in the capacity to do so distinguish powerful decision-makers as those who can and often do change the structural arrangements under which they operate.

The media share a set of organizational routines and practices. They generate both professional and organizational bias. (In)formal scripts or guidelines promote a given role and certain resources to both journalists and their publics. Journalists' roles and media functions adopt distinctive configurations across different media systems (Hallin

& Mancini, 2004). The economy, the political system, and the professional culture of journalists are institutional orders, regimes, or fields that are interlinked and dependent on each other (Waisbord, 2013).

The sociological approach of field theory (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) and the principles of structuration theory (Giddens, 1986) complement the heuristic potential of institutionalism. Although there are differences and disagreements, they both consider "social fields" and "structures" as contextual constraints on collective and individual actions.

The notion of journalism as a social field can enrich our understanding of how the economic and cultural sectors constrain role of the media as a political institution. And the concept of habitus (again from Bourdieu) helps us to understand the relationship between structure and agency—how society shapes individual actions and vice versa. Habitus is a mental, cognitive structure to deal with the world. It provides internalized schemes to produce, define, interpret, evaluate, and judge media messages. As an internalized structure, habitus varies according to the objective position of individuals and groups in the field. Economic and cultural capital defines those positions, which are therefore related to power inequalities.

Habitus is collective, yet individualized. It develops over time and is linked to historical periods (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). (In)attentive publics, reporters, political and business elites, voters and consumers, intellectuals, and pundits perceive themselves as being in a certain position in relation to others. Specific habituses expressing different, although interdependent, positions are related to cultural, economic, or social capital. (In)formal education, budgets, and social networks matter in enabling one to perceive oneself as a (dis)empowered communicative actor.

The "structuration process" (Giddens, 1986) illuminates news and media-content processing. The consumption of political communications carries the key consequence of reproducing, reformulating, or contesting the social structures that shape various identities such as class, gender, and race. To examine the autonomy of the audience in building meaning, structuration theory seeks to explain the creation and reproduction of social systems based on the analysis of both *structure* and *agents*. The term structure refers generally to rules and resources. Agents—groups or individuals—draw upon these structures to perform social actions through embedded memory, called "memory traces." Structure is also the result of these social practices. Given the duality of structure, it is both the medium and the outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and "exists" in the generating moments of this constitution (Giddens, 1986, p. 5).

Structuration provides theoretical grounding to reception processes and defines the so-called "active audience." Consuming and processing the news and other media content have key political implications even for nonexplicit political messages. Well-established (structured) patterns of media consumption and understanding reinforce previous self-definitions and social identities. New or nonconventional (structuring) ways of media processing can transform the institutional biases expressed in the dominant messages.

Think of mainstream magazines targeted at women or men. Consider how marketing and advertising revenues, the gender composition of newsrooms, or prevailing gender

policies condition the prevailing content. Pressures from advertising corporations, gender biases of high-ranking journalists, and political maneuvering around certain issues (e.g., abortion or gay marriage) can influence the media agenda and frames along with other factors. Consider also the different meanings extracted from those magazines by audiences that define themselves as conventional or as having alternative gender identities. Structuration theory can help us to understand institutional "rules and resources" and the power imbalance that they embody. More importantly, the public reproduces or alters the power imbalance before, during, and after the reception process. Audience autonomy, social reproduction, and change depend on knowledgeable agents whose actions produce systems and prove capable of applying different schemas to contexts with differing resources. This vision is contrary to the almost deterministic conception of a universal habitus.

Considering the prevailing institutional linkages of the press, the literature of news production can be divided into three traditions or approaches: political economy, sociological, and cultural. New institutionalism schools distinguish themselves in terms of their academic links to political science, economics, and cultural studies. Economic pressures driven by corporate conglomerates and advertising markets shape news routines. Political systems and processes influence the press, and journalism appears as a hybrid institution always looking for political legitimacy (Cook, 1998). An intermediate position gives importance to both politics and economics while also considering the role that civil society plays (Benson, 1999). Finally, literature and the cultural environment in general condition journalists. For example legitimate narratives and the compelling stories shared in a given society make a difference and influence the varying definitions of objectivity that newsrooms have embraced through time (Kaplan, 2002).

New institutionalism has ambiguities and limitations because different schools apply narrow or broad definitions of the core notion of institution. Thus they propose an open research agenda. Institutional analysis focuses on the media's dependence on political and economic structures but also on the varying definitions of journalists' microinstitutions such as news routines. There is also an open debate about the prevailing institutional realm in exerting pressure upon the press (or vice versa). A firm conclusion is that the institutional driving force varies across countries and historical periods. National political regimes and economies, specific media markets, and journalistic conventions make a difference. The causes and limits of institutional change remain uncertain. Institutionalism provides a nondeterministic scientific approach that takes into account variance and even non-anticipated institutional outcomes.

The media are not a monolithic institution, either in a given country or across different nations and periods. The press acts as a governing social and cultural institution that is influenced by as well as shaping other realms, while journalists are always striving to gain legitimacy, both cooperating with and distancing themselves from other actors. The media are "semi-independent" from politics, and journalism is interconnected with politics and a partially "uninsulated profession" (Schudson, 1978, p. 8). The logics of political, economic, and cultural power have always intruded upon the norms and ideals of newsrooms, and over time the press has made various attempts to lay down special rules, routines, and formats for its occupational, economic, and political enterprise.

Institutionalism frames the media, providing a thought-provoking picture of the links of journalism with other realms throughout history. Western capitalist nations of the last century displayed an "old institutional regime of political communication" (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011); this is being replaced by a new (but still emerging and thus unknown) institutional system. An institutional triad—formed by the mass media, mass parties, and public opinion polls—was established from the 1920s onwards, while reporters, pollsters, and electoral candidates became the professional icons of the democratic public sphere (Beniger, 1987; Herbst, 1993). The three professions are still responsible for shaping the dominant institutional environment of conventional political communication.

The "old regime" of political communication has not yet disappeared, and shows severe democratic and social inadequacies. As a result of the growth of digital technology and the Internet, most media systems have, since the late 20th century, faced a transition toward a "networked digital public sphere" (Benkler, 2006). The "old" informational and political systems face an uncertain future in an unsettled institutional environment.

The traditional business model of the media is undergoing a severe crisis due to mounting difficulties in generating revenue from advertisers and audiences. Digital marketing has proved to be more efficient than the traditional media at identifying specific consumer profiles and reaching them. The press still does not know how to build customer loyalty among new publics or even how to make them pay for news, given the abundance of "free information." When the audience migrated to the Internet, the difficulties of the conventional media proved that they mainly served as biased marketing or state tools.

Most nations are undergoing a process of disaffection with political parties and ideologies. Elected public officials have to deal with new venues for the expression of public opinion in the digital realm. Political institutions do not seem receptive enough to the demands for transparency and participation expressed by the "digital natives." None of those difficulties result from mere technological innovation and they do not support an argument for digital determinism. The new social movements (feminism, ecology, and pacifism) have been questioning the media's cultural hegemonic role and the political and economic dependence of journalists since the 1960s. Over the past century, media enterprises have tried and managed to adapt to changing regulatory trends and the demands of new generations, and have overcome several economic crises. But their business and professional standards have finally clashed with new patterns of information and mobilization among digitally empowered audiences (Castells, 2012).

An account of these transformations in institutional terms can provide a fruitful point of departure for building a future research agenda. Analysts need to pay attention to three theses or theoretical hypotheses. A helpful way of understanding the present situation is to see it as a "crisis of institutional control," which is typical of periods experiencing the advent of a new technology of communication. Its novelty temporarily overcomes the capacity of the established centers of power to benefit from its effects. Certain technological uses and practices are unleashed and seem to be out of control. But institutionalism also states that processes of institutionalization resolve the crisis

by readjusting the forces of the state, the market, the professions, and the public, establishing new rules and norms of interaction and patterns of interdependence (Beniger, 1987). Eventually, the institutional regime of digital political communication will be forced to become "path-dependent," that is, it will reflect the power imbalances between the various actors. But, most importantly, it also will carry unpredictable institutional consequences.

The politics of mass parties was made possible when some democracies adopted universal suffrage in the early decades of the last century. "One man (then also one woman), one vote" became the bedrock of representative systems. Campaigns for general elections could be run thanks to the mass media, based on the Fordist economic model based on mass production and huge consumer markets. Journalists also had to develop a new professional ideology. They legitimated their work as "objective," and in welfare-oriented states they justified themselves as providing a "social service." They established their professional mission as being to build an "informed citizenship" able to deliberate and to make sound choices of apt representatives through regular elections and plebiscites (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995).

Some of the benefits of this institutional regime built by the media, polls, and electoral parties were sound. Political systems became more inclusive. They encouraged policies that promoted social and economic equality. The aggregated expressions of public opinion—electoral turnouts, opinion polls, and surveyed media audiences—gained ubiquity and speed. Political representatives could not easily escape from popular pressure as they had in former times and had to prove themselves responsive to widespread demands. A positive evaluation of the old regime of political communication relies on the capacity of the public to form rational opinions and influence government (Page & Shapiro, 1992). But the introduction of any technology and its processes of institutionalization are always ambivalent. They provide advantages and disadvantages for different social sectors, while the new ruling institutions distribute gains and losses among themselves. Institutions reflect the power imbalances of previous struggles and therefore they favor certain possibilities and outcomes of social emancipation and empowerment while hindering others.

Statistical research became the main technology to assess public opinion. It provided media companies, corporations, governments, and political parties with information about shared demands, positions, and attitudes amongst consumers and constituencies. Descriptive statistical methods summarize enormous amounts of diverse data. Inferential statistics draw conclusions from data that are subject to random variation. Used in combination, descriptive and analytical statistics make it possible to identify, anticipate, and model patterns of voting behavior and media consumption. News markets can then adapt to industrial and political markets without considering the shortcomings of statistics.

Throughout the 20th century the press responded to the demands of mass markets and electoral politics in democratic contexts. Statistical research ruled the strategies of industry, media companies, and political candidates. It could supply information to social sectors previously excluded from consumption, public debate, and decision-making processes. But the costs and losses entailed by such institutional logics led

journalists to accept certain "norms and rules" that affected the core tenets of classic professional ideology.

Quantitative analysis led to narrow economic goals, and media companies focused on the maximization of benefits generated by a "market-driven journalism" (McManus, 1994). Indifferent to the informational and communicative demands that the statistical market could not identify as "effective," journalists addressed citizens as if they fitted the profile of the average news consumer and spectator. This was an institutional construction. Nobody really fitted into that profile, but it became an abstract construct to which the mainstream media tried to appeal. The bureaucratization of news routines, the abandonment of any collective identities other than those defined by consumption or voting, the permanent surveillance of the public, and the marketing endeavor of generating and modeling consumer demands were all dynamics that finally endangered public trust and confidence in the media and in political representatives.

Historical overviews of media technology sustain the institutionalist approach. The rising cost of using mechanical presses required much higher circulation figures; these were also fueled by the increasing supply of information. All this reoriented newspapers toward a mass-circulation, relatively low-denominator advertising medium. Press economies intersected with the vast increase in industrial output, which in turn required new mechanisms of demand management. As a result advertising became the driving force of press corporations as they worked to detect, generate, and channel news demand. This led to the institutional outcomes that have been object of academic and social criticism.

Political information and news blurred with public relations, especially when parties or governments controlled, respectively, private and public media content that was electorally sensitive. Scandals were generated by media policies infected by clientelism or partisan control of media structures. Editorial support was used to gain advantage from policies that structured media markets. Regulatory choices favored big suppliers of media equipment as well as large-scale economies, first in radio and then in television. News coverage driven by multimedia industries seeking maximum financial benefit suffered due to corporate marketing when press economies became dependent on investments, faced business boycotts, or experienced financial pressures. From a managerial perspective, statistics were used by competing companies and parties to help them adjust their output to perceived demand. Audience and electoral polls guaranteed economic and voting returns. From a critical perspective this institutional media configuration limited the democratic role of the public as consumers and voters. In fact journalists monitored, shaped, and constructed the audience. And "democracies without citizens" (Entman, 1989) became the rule.

Institutional interdependence among big media conglomerates, catch-all parties, and market research have broken down. Representative democracies show clear symptoms of having difficulty in responding to professional standards and public service definitions of the press. In the 20th century many authors already affirmed that the media played an important role in fostering a "spiral of silence" or "public lies" imposed upon minorities by ever-present majorities. The failure of the media as promoters of public dialogue generated a "spiral of cynicism." Widespread and increasing political disengagement or distrust was an unavoidable consequence of the proliferation of scandals

laden with sensationalism and negative reporting typical of the commercial press and television news. The retreat of the public service ideology and the crisis of state- and publicly controlled media systems also damaged social cohesion and obstructed fair democratic debate. The Internet became the main disruptive force for all traditional institutions of political communication. But digital technology did not cause the lack of legitimacy of politicians and journalists as social mediators; rather, it made clear that their old institutional frameworks did not fulfill core democratic functions.

The driving force of a networked digital sphere—the Internet—is experiencing a constant evolution. Digital personal devices, and hardware and software innovations, succeed at an extremely rapid pace. Each innovation of audience interaction—from mailing lists to chatrooms, from chatrooms to blogs, from blogs to social networks—seems to erase the preceding context. Internet users also grow and change in social and national terms at an exponential rate. A changing environment makes it impossible to reach any but tentative conclusions about the final institutional configuration of a networked public sphere. Our societies and political systems have moved from a national to a transnational institutional regime anchored by the Internet. Oppositional media and new public spheres organized around specific issues and publics question and sometimes evade state control, giving strength to discursive public opinion trends that clash with electoral results and conventional policy-making.

New media institutions are being designed at the same time as novel configurations of markets and politics take place. Passive audiences of consumers become the legions of "prosumers" (*pro*sumers + con*sumers*) in new digital economies opened to (inter)active roles on the demand side. Market segmentation also takes place in the political realm. Identity and lifestyle politics replace traditional ideological cleavages. Finally, corporations and states are imposing "norms and rules" that have changed the Internet as it was conceived by pioneers. The distributed digital network that guaranteed anonymity and privacy has evolved into a centralized digital architecture where corporate monitoring and state surveillance collide. Previously anonymous users are now clustered into consuming and voting profiles extracted from automatically gathered macro-data that provide detailed information of their digital interactions (although not necessarily the content).

The debate about the pros and cons of the institutional readjustment of the press will continue fiercely, at least while the struggle for digital control persists. Optimistic thinkers forecast and sustain the rebirth of a journalism linked to improved and reinvigorated democratic systems. New digital media would rely on specific communities of active publics without pursuing large audiences formerly defined by the lowest common denominator. Journalists would cooperate with non-journalists and nonprofit organizations in providing a commonly generated flow of information and a watchdog function shared with the emerging institutions of civil society.

Digital critics insist that state control and/or market monopolies will control the new media institutions. Journalism will never be unfettered from economic and political pressures that could even take the Panopticon dystopia further. Our societies could be under permanent scrutiny by undercover observers acting without control. Government and corporate censorship are the worst institutional outcomes predicted by digital pessimists. Old power institutions could retain all their strength and even gain

force fostering degraded forms of democracy. Generalized self-censorship and a public sphere dominated by political correctness would be the less alarming scenario. Another possible option is that the digital logics of transparency and participation will revitalize democracies, breeding and including more direct models of self-representation and countervailing power.

The press as a political institution can experience a rebirth, it can collapse, or it can adapt to the new digital contexts. The last seems the most feasible outcome. The future of journalism depends on how creative news organizations adapt to the digital environment. Newsrooms will try "to routinize disruption with as little change to their work processes and ideological self-image as possible" (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2013, p. 47). As an institution the media are "path-dependent": Decisions are limited by the decisions they made in the past, even though the old media logics may no longer be functional. Systemic and self-imposed constraints of the new digital media will reflect the distribution of power shared by journalists, publics, politicians, and economic elites. All the actors involved are themselves subject to profound changes. Yet they are engaging in a process of gradual and constant readjustment among press institutions as they meet the challenge of becoming networked institutions.

SEE ALSO: Civil Society; Commercialization of Politics; Corporatism; Cynicism, Political; Democracy; Digital Democracy; Digital Public Sphere; Internet; Journalism, Political; Marketing, Political; Media as Political Actors; Media Democracy; Media Logic; Media Regulation, Political; Media–Politics Relations; Media System; News Media Organizations; Normative Theories; Parties, Political; Polarization, Political; Politainment; Political Communication Imaginary; Political Economy; Political Sociology; Political Culture; Professionalization; Public Interest; Public Opinion Polls; Reception Analysis; Transparency; Watchdog Journalism/Press

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Víctor Sampedro is full associate professor of political communication and public opinion at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain. He has extensively researched electoral campaigns and the impact of social movements on policy and media agendas, while progressively focusing on the ICT uses for collective action and policy innovation. He also coordinates an interdisciplinary and pioneering postgraduate program on digital communication, culture, and citizenship, with the logics of collaborative and open education (http://cccd.es). Most of his academic production can be accessed at: http://www.victorsampedro.com/. His most recent book is *El cuarto poder en red* (Icaria, 2014).