



# The News Media as A Political Institution

**Abubakar Mamman-Muhammad\***

School of Media and Communication, Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos, Nigeria

**\*Corresponding Author:**

Email: [abubakar.muhammad@pau.edu.ng](mailto:abubakar.muhammad@pau.edu.ng)

**Abstract:** *As societies move away from state-controlled broadcast, the news media progresses into new roles that are political in nature. Therefore, listing these new functions if any, and presenting a simple characterization of them would help to elucidate the assumptions about the political power of news media. This study has investigated how the newfound political power of the news media has been used by it, considering the point of political institutions being an integral part of any political system. Although, news media practitioners commonly try to be liberal in their pronouncement, they are expected to magnify any opposing views on political actors. This seeming opposition implies freedom and independence of the media even when it is clearly within the rims of dissension established by policies of an editorial board, whose common dogmas are in covenant with those of the political class. The ontology of an institutional realm, and the purposive actions of political actors, coupled with the analysis of the news media and its political tendencies have been deployed in this paper to emphasize the assumption that the news media is a political institution. This paper has also recognized that despite the institutional conflicts, paradoxes, polemics and the degree of political control or independence, the news media remains an axiom of the political class that sustains political actors and in extension, political power.*

**Keywords:** *Political institution, Political parallelism, Mediatization*

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars of political science to a large degree have denied the news media its rightful place as a political institution. This denial has ignored the rich history of the broadcast media, as a subsidized institution irrespective of the growing number of political and media scholars that highlight the empirical 'mediatisation' of the political landscape. Recent studies in the social and behavioural sciences are now considering the institutional legitimacy of the news media in this contentious landscape (Schudson, 2002). However, this paper has been interested in studies that approach the news media from the perspective of political economy, focusing on the architecture of media ownership and the behaviour of news establishments on one hand, and the patterns or mechanism of interaction between the news establishment and news content on the other hand.

After the institutional theories of news advanced by Cook (1998) and Sparrow (1999), media analysts have challenged to see and interpret the news as an outcome of interaction between news organizations and other political actors. They argued that this perception gives room for modification in news coverage about a common proclivity geared towards uniformity in the news. Albeit, news organizations do not have any formal or legal role in the political system. Yet, in recent times, the political and media landscape has become almost inseparable. This paper has further established how the news media is able to define and structure the actions of political actors as both individuals and organizations, and how the news media frames and sets agenda for political actors.

The power of the media is simply persuasive and arguably symbolic; the media does not have complete control on a person or group of persons but has to some extent the power to influence the minds of its audience. Other arguments have seen the deliberate control of action or the use of coercive force as the ultimate exercise of power. Yet, the deliberate manipulation of intentions, societal schema, foundations of the norms and beliefs or the opinions on political actors has been accepted in those arguments.

Another important argument in analysing media power is that of access. Studies have proven that political actors to guarantee power must have access to some valued social resources. Therefore, if public discourse is a social resource and the news media has access to it, then the news media is factually powerful. Thus, a key condition for controlling social power in a modern society laden with too much information, it has become necessary for political actors to have unhindered access or a degree of control of mass communication. Certainly, political groups are aligned to political and social conditions of power either by active or passive access to various forms of public and important discourse. In this argument therefore, the social strata determine the degree of constraint each person or group of persons will encounter. Access to every day discourse, and the controlled access to the social and political decisions of the society is to a large extent dependent on the social strata in the society.

Even though ordinary people may have access to the news media, they generally have no direct power on its news content, nor are they typically the chief actors of news stories. However, social elites or political institutions have a range and choice of access to public and important discourse; this is especially true for their access to media discourse.

### **The news media**

The news media is an umbrella term, which includes mediums used for the dissemination of news to the mass public or any target group of persons. These mediums will include-

- The print media (newspapers, news magazines and community journals),
- Broadcast news (radio and television), and
- The Internet (online newspapers, news blogs, etc.).

As a credible source of political information and a key actor that supports and shapes public discourse in any given democratic society, the role and importance of the news media cannot be over emphasized.

According to Oseni (1991), the most central democratic value of the news media is to act as an agent of development and nation building; furthermore, the news media must be supported where necessary with subsidies just like other political institutions or be allowed to operate freely in pursuit of the following political goals-

- Provide a forum where the electorate can react to governmental policies and activities;
- interpret actions of political actors for adequate understanding and background of events;
- deploy necessary platforms in the pursuit and articulation of national interests;
- provide and mobilize informed criticism and viable alternatives to ineffective policies;
- monitor and gauge the performance of political actors and to
- Act as an agent of the political system by assisting to set agenda of priorities in the social, economic and political frameworks of the nation.

### **Institutions**

The term institution has gained common acceptance within the social and behavioural sciences, reflecting an obvious usage of the institutional concept in several disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, politics and even geography. Despite its long history dating back to Giambattista Vico in his *Scienza Nuova* of 1725, there appears to be no agreement in the definition of this term (Hodgson, 2006). The term 'institution' has severally appeared in a political sense that applies to the creation or body of governmental institutions or particular bodies of the political system responsible for overseeing or implementing policy.

This paper has ruminated the specific characteristics of institutional structures, procedures, and actions. Against the common idea that institutions are defined by a recurring pattern of behaviour, institutional

mechanisms assert that stability of values is sacrosanct and conveyed by the actors themselves. It is therefore necessary to consider the ontology of an institutional realm to identify how mechanisms work in this realm or rather the mechanisms of mediation in the news media.

### **Political Institutions**

In the political realm, institutional mechanisms are deployed by the purposive actions of political actors within institutional checks. In this study, it has been attempted to establish how the news media enforce laws, mediate the conflicts of expectations within a political system, and in a narrow sense, classifies the axiology of a society such as what political actions are good, and how good they are. Additionally, this paper has examined the functional tolerability, normative credibility and specificity of political institutions as criteria for categorizing the news media as a political institution.

According to Cord Schemelzle (2013), the functional tolerability of the news media as a political institution exists to fulfil specific roles; they represent the political actors who require a certain set of functional mechanisms that are tolerable and derived from the institution itself. He further asserted that the normative credibility of the news media is only attractive if the relationship between political institutions has been legitimized. Finally, he argued that institutional roles cannot confer any normative status on the news media different from that of the citizens, but derived by specific actions of the news media that correlate the aspirations of the citizens. This specificity according to Cord ensures legitimacy of the news media itself as a political institution.

### **Democratic systems of governance and the news media**

In the last two decades, the news media has undergone major transformation as an institution. News is not only a common reportage of the news media, but has become a big influencer on political actions because of its new descriptive and interpretative styles. Additionally, the public now has a choice of news outlets to choose, this institutional shift has introduced a new political entrant within the political sphere with dramatic implications for public policies.

In countries with strong political systems, there is a perceptive relationship between the news media and political institutions. A political institution survives in representation of the majority by the minority. Moreover, the representation is actual if there is an effective, transparent and symbiotic communication pathway deployed in the representation process. In the modern political system, this communication pathway is primarily consisted of the news media in whose absence, the political accountability would simply disappear.

### **Political parallelism and the news media**

In comparative media studies, political parallelism refers to the oddity of links between political actors and the news media and the degree to which the news media reflects our political divisions. It is beyond recognized political and news media alliances, but encompasses other important factors like ideological history, the political profile of the news media, and the relationship between the news media and diverse political interests or groups.

Hadenius and Weibull (1991) argued that most news media has a geographically concentrated audience. Despite the increased deployment of mass news through satellite and the internet, most political parties have found a news media organization, which represents and promotes its activities and ideologies, thus; making it an extension of the political party itself. To strengthen this argument, we must understand the three levels of political parallelism of the news media namely:

1. the organizational level;
2. the content level, and
3. The audience level.

Nurd and Stu'r (2009) and Allern (2010) all argued that despite the increased independence of the news media from political parties, studies have proven that editorial content- a key feature of the print media

cannot be absolved from privileging one party or another. Another important factor across the news media is content and how the news media shapes its contents towards a given political viewpoint. Accordingly, political parallelism in the news media can also differ. When factors like political history and the civil profile of the news media key into the equation (political parallelism), two levels of political parallelism become obvious, namely –

- a. Parallelism at the ownership and organizational levels and
- b. Between news media content and its ideological orientation

This peculiarity allows us to see that political parallelism at the organizational and ownership level is dying thus; the news media is no longer an extension of the political party system. Yet, it points to the continued ideological influence on news content. This buttresses the argument that the party press is likely to exercise more independence than the modern news media, where political ideology is more apparent in its news content.

We can however argue that the news media may not be biased like a traditional party press, but we cannot ignore an obvious fact on how news media frames the political struggle, and their interventions in political processes. These actions by the news media is connected to the news media's own political history and traditions.

#### **Historical characteristics of news media as political institutions**

Over time, news organizations have developed common institutional features, such as-

1. Common ideas about ethical norms in a political system,
2. understandings of institutes 'good political actions' and
3. Aggregation of views forming roles for political actors, both as individuals and as institutions.

In the last two decades, a key institutional feature of the news media is their role as conduits and grounds for communication in the public sphere. Normatively, this is a news media's feature primarily hinged as a prerequisite for political democracy. It sets the news media as a primary reservoir of public knowledge, by scrutinizing actions of political and social actors while also providing the needed platform for public debate. By virtue, and significance of these historical roles, philosophies and conceptual myths, media establishments have positively presented themselves as legitimate representatives and guardians of the news institution and in extension the political institution.

Graham Murdoch (1982) noted that the news media has also evolved into a communal institution affecting our perception and understanding of reality. He argued that, the news media is now deeply rooted in the political, social and cultural history of the societies they represent. It is a relationship that has made the news media a focal point for political struggle and a continuing focus of academic concern.

#### **Press subsidies and democracy**

The allocation of subsidies to political institutions is a fundamental provision of public goods. It advances institutional capacities by improving social welfare. The aim is to generate conditions of efficiency and equalization for political representation in decentralized areas, and to prevent a collapse of the broadcast media and in extension the news media. Many countries have directly intervened in the news media from simple tax cuts in equipment procurement to subsidies in production. The common assumption is the practical value of the right to publish and disseminate information freely while sustaining a plurality of news media establishments and hopefully their diversity.

The institutional mechanism for subsidizing the news media varies from one country to another, but several common problems still exist. In several cases, subsidies appear to have the practical effect of strengthening those already leading in their market, while weakening other news media establishments by denying them the possibility to become commercially powerful, and to compete with new media technologies (Hazakis & Ionnidis, 2014).

A key concern is the degree of interference by way of subsidies in news media establishments. While subsidies are most often injected to influence the news media, the allegations of political influence cannot be overruled

when subsidies are allocated; thus, the different levels of political parallelism as discussed earlier become manifest.

To understand the concept of press subsidies in a democracy, it is important to understand the nature of political struggles in various democracies. The amplification of tension by political actors due to competing socio-economic interests has given rise to a continued struggle of classes in the polity. The struggle by political actors to survive in the political space will force a seeming control over the news media, because they cannot act, or develop strategy without the consciousness of the news media. The consciousness that politicizes and mediates the political space is no longer a hypothetical issue, but a practical necessity.

Therefore, as a practical necessity, the introduction of press subsidies is to defend political diversity and the freedom of speech. This political argument classifies the news media as a political institution. In contrast to this argument, the economic argument was that market forces, particularly the uneven circulations of income from advertisement for different types of news media, are capable of threatening political diversity and in the end, would weaken democracy (Lund, 2009).

#### **From channels and arenas to directors and interpreters**

News media audience must understand the construction of news to be able to interpret it. This goes beyond simple comprehension to underlying meanings of deliberate words introduced in news reportage. The increased use of technical terms in modern politics has become a common concern, and the need to interpret the news is gradually becoming the norm. For the audience to understand the media within the context of political institutions, they must comprehend the meaning of headlines, leads and background information (van Dijk, 1995).

According to Teun Van Dijk (1995), the calculated control of knowledge is a key criterion in the control of political discourse and of access to discourse. This control can be extended to a given degree to counter the power of oppositional comprehension of the news and its underlying meanings. Beyond information, there are other critical forms of social cognition, such as the schemata of politically shared opinions and ideologies commonly referred to as attitudes. A grip of this mechanism (control of knowledge) will influence our political perception, political behaviour and political evaluation.

After the dissolution of the party press and the liberalization of broadcasting, news media became the primary sphere for public discussion. This development led to political pluralism within different media establishments by also strengthening the normative role of the news media as an independent political institution (Sigurd & Blach-Orsten, 2011). With this new role therefore, the news media is today more proactive in its directing and interpretative role between political actors and actions.

#### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, this paper describes the institutional news paradigm of the news media under a common understanding of some elementary genre rules, tenets, implicit mechanisms and tenacities concerning the new role of the news media. March and Olsen (1989) refer to this logical understanding as the 'logic of appropriateness' rather than a 'logic of consequentiality'.

The mechanisms and influence of the news media in this new environment (as a political institution) and the interest in this debate extend to all forms of the mass media including the rise of the internet and the social media. This paper explores the consequences of media consumerism in societies driven by the news media that runs 24 hours a day and seven days a week interpreting and evaluating the actions and performances of political actors.

Therefore, in conclusion, this paper has argued the plausibility and political legitimacy of the news media as a political institution, which consists of its normative power to create and maintain political order and alter the rights and obligations of political actors. However, the political authority of the news media to create and

mediate binding duties on political actors, will thus be an inevitable aspect of its institutional (political) legitimacy.

To solidify this argument on the institutional legitimacy of news media as political institutions, this paper has narrowed down the relationships that are normatively binding. This however, does not exclude other forms of power as irrelevant or obsolete, but rather includes a question of if such power is fair, represented and justified. However, if the posited arguments are true, then it will be clear that the news media's political power and its legitimacy as a political institution cannot be easily separated. Putting a claim of success to this argument is not the primary purpose of this paper, but rather to provide empirical illustrations that precisely answer the question on the legitimacy of the news media as a political institution.

On a final note, this paper has demonstrated that there is a paradigm shift in the political and conceptual roles of the news media, as institutions of the society and more political in its actions, the news media is arguably more dependent on the economic and political landscape than before. Today the news media is increasingly playing a political and ideological role by representing the increased influence on the actions of political institutions.

This paper has substantiated the claim that the news media is an extension of the political class with both actors producing and disseminating shared ideologies, even when each of them is acting independently within the political sphere; they are largely dependent on each other. Non-amplification and support for political policies cannot be legitimized and sustained. Popular policies are seriously eroded by bad publicity or strong institutional antagonism. Conversely, it remains nearly impossible for the news media to function without the cooperation of the political and economic elites.

## References

1. Allern, S. (2010). From party agitators to independent pundits: the changed historical roles of newspaper and television journalists in Norwegian election campaigns. Bristol: Intellect Press.
2. Cook, T. (1998). Governing with the news: the news media as a political institution. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
3. Hadenius, S., & Weibull, L. (1991). Partipressens död? [The death of the party press?]. Stockholm: SIM.
4. Hazakis, K., & Ionnidis, P. G. (2014, September 29). The influence of local government institutional reforms on subsidies distribution among municipalities: Evidence from Greece. Retrieved from ResearchGate: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266149476\\_The\\_influence\\_of\\_Local\\_Government\\_Institutional\\_Reforms\\_on\\_Subsidies\\_Distribution\\_among\\_Municipalities\\_Evidence\\_from\\_Greece](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266149476_The_influence_of_Local_Government_Institutional_Reforms_on_Subsidies_Distribution_among_Municipalities_Evidence_from_Greece).
5. Hodgson, G. M. (2006, March). What are institutions? Journal of economic issues, XL (1). Retrieved March 4, 2016, from <http://www.geoffrey-hodgson.info/user/bin/whatareinstitution.pdf>.
6. Lund, A. B. (2009). Udredning af den fremtidige offentlige mediestøtte [A Report on the Future of State Media Subsidies]. Copenhagen: Ramboll.
7. March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1989). Rediscovering institutions. New York: The Free Press.
8. Murdoch, G. (1982). Large corporations and the control of the communication industry.
9. Nurd, L., & Stur, E. (2009). Tyckandets tid. journalistik, kommentar, valrörelse [The time of opinions. journalism, commentaries, election campaigns]. Stockholm: SIM.
10. Oseni, T. (1991, March 15-17). The media in democracy. Africa leadership forum, p. 28.
11. Schmelzle, C. (2013). The function of political institutions and the concept of legitimacy. ECPR General Conference.
12. Schudson, M. (2002). The news media as political institutions. Annual review of political science, 5, 269. doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.5.111201.115816.

13. Sigurd, A., & Blach-Orsten, M. (2011). The news media as a political institution. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2010.511958
14. Sparrow, B. (1999). Uncertainty guardians. The news media as a political institution. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
15. van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Power and the news media. Retrieved from <http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/Power%20and%20the%20news%20media.pdf>.