

**Corporate Power and Political Consciousness:
Rethinking News Media and
U.S. Public Policy in the Neoliberal Era**

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There has been a surge of scholarship on the politics of U.S. public policy amidst the growing economic inequality of recent decades. However, the role of the news media in this narrative has been largely neglected. In response, I highlight underappreciated theoretical connections by suggesting that the media may be a key site of political dynamics in two related — yet distinct — senses: 1) As an (unevenly effective) mechanism of corporate power that shapes public opinion on tax, social welfare and economic policy issues to facilitate the goals of business and the wealthy, and 2) As an organ of civil society that itself is being shaped by corporate power through the neoliberalization of media policy. This framework suggests that political scientists exploring inequality and democracy at both the (mass) behavioral-psychological level and the (elite) institutional-policymaking level would benefit from a serious engagement with critical theories of power relations in the field of mass communications. I use previous analyses of the 2001 Bush tax plan and the emergence of the Tea Party as empirical prototypes for this research trajectory. Scholarship along these lines promises to shed light on the forces that are driving the neoliberal policy turn, and to draw out the larger implications of these forces for democracy.

I. Introduction: Public Policy and the Politics of Economic Inequality: A Case of “Assumed Transmission”

U.S. political news coverage in November and December 2012 was dominated by the showdown between President Barack Obama and Republican congressional leaders over the looming “fiscal cliff.” Strident cable TV pundits and sober prestige newspaper writers alike reported, analyzed and commented at length on the debate between the president — who insisted on letting the Bush-era tax cuts for the top income brackets expire — and Republicans, who refused to consider that possibility absent a deal on domestic budget reductions to resolve a presumed deficit and debt crisis. Lack of agreement would trigger automatic tax increases on a broad swath of Americans as well as sharp cuts in government spending that threatened to throw the economy officially into another recession. According to the standard media narrative, elected officials pulled the nation back from the brink with a last-minute compromise that kept current tax rates in place for all but the very wealthiest Americans, while putting off negotiations on budget cuts and revenue increases until the new Congress took office. Meanwhile, another dimension of the “fiscal crisis” loomed: expiration of the current federal borrowing limit. Republicans, eager to force spending reductions, have refused to raise the debt ceiling, despite the possibility of government default.

These debates are just the latest in a series of political battles over the last 35 years whose policy outcomes have greatly exacerbated economic inequality in the United States at the same time that they have tightened the grip of the wealthy and corporate interests on the American political system (Baker 2007, Hacker and Pierson 2010). The outcome of the current budget controversies and of other ongoing policy episodes — such as a renewed drive to raise the federal minimum wage — will go a long way toward determining the extent to which the United States will turn away from the neoliberal political-economic model that has dominated the mainstream of both major parties and helped lead to the 2008 financial collapse and subsequent Great Recession.¹ With continued large-scale unemployment and underemployment, increasing poverty and stagnating wages, a tax system that is at historically low levels of effective progressivity, and a fraying social safety net (even with modest health care reforms slowly coming on line), the stakes of these debates for a sustainable and equitable economic system — and for the social conditions that underpin a healthy democratic polity — could scarcely be higher.

¹ My understanding of neoliberalism is grounded in the definition offered by the geographer David Harvey (2005: 2): “a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” In the United States, the policy moves that have characterized neoliberalism focus on supporting and promoting markets by redirecting state action in business regulation, taxation, labor-management relations and social welfare provision, including moves to expose public functions to market discipline. In Section IV, I expound on neoliberalism and corporate power in the context of U.S. media policy.

But missing from most mainstream accounts of these policy episodes — both popular and academic — have been thoughtful and sustained efforts to understand the role of the news media as a site of mass political discourse that is firmly embedded within larger dynamics of political-economic power. Coverage of the recent budget controversies offers a window into the media’s role. Despite the seemingly wide array of information and interpretations available today, news depictions of these episodes have been exceedingly narrow in many respects. In the corporate-owned media — which, both in its traditional and online forms, remains the chief channel of political communication for the vast majority of Americans (Pew Center 2011) — the legitimate policy options continue to be defined as those offered by leaders of the two major parties, who are primarily right-wing Republicans and neoliberal Democrats. For example, according to a media watchdog organization, there has been little mention — and almost no serious discussion — of a possible financial transaction (or “Robin Hood”) tax, which is an idea advocated not only by social activist groups but by respected academic economists and liberal members of Congress (FAIR 2012). Moreover, usage of the arguably misleading and inflammatory buzzword “fiscal cliff” was ubiquitous in mainstream news coverage of the budget debates, while nearly three times as many TV segments mentioned the potentially negative economic effects of the automatic tax hikes as mentioned the negative effects of spending cuts (Kleine et al. 2012).

Serious engagement with the role of the news media in these key policy debates is essential in order to fully understand — and effectively contest — the dominance of neoliberalism as an ideology and a set of institutions that has thwarted the prospects for economic justice and social democracy not only across the world but in the United States. We need to know much more not only about *how* the media covers economic and social welfare policy debates in the contemporary political-economic context, but about *what effects* this coverage may be having on popular political consciousness and policy opinion, and — perhaps most importantly — about *why* the news media produces the patterns of discourse that it does. Political scientists have barely begun to address the first two questions, and they have scarcely recognized the importance of the third — or even thought to ask it. In this paper, I respond to these oversights by proposing a set of underappreciated and underdeveloped conceptual pathways linking U.S. political communication and public policy in the neoliberal era.

Energized in part by the American Political Science Association’s landmark series of reports on inequality and American democracy (see Jacobs and Skocpol 2005), scholars have produced compelling accounts of the political dimensions of the steep rise in income and wealth concentration since the late 1970s, connecting conservative trends in economic and social welfare policy to complex patterns of public opinion and political behavior and to the shifting dynamics of political institutions. Many authors have also

explored the implications of this policy shift for citizen engagement with government, raising questions about popular sovereignty and democratic accountability while emphasizing the troubling role of class-rooted inequalities in political voice, participation and policy outcomes (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 2002; Hacker and Pierson 2005, 2010; Bartels 2008; Page and Jacobs 2009). However, despite its significant contributions toward understanding and critiquing the role of public policy in the increasing economic and political influence of the wealthy and privileged business interests during the era of rising inequality, this research seems to adhere to an increasingly untenable assumption of most mainstream American political science: that the words and actions of political elites, the effects of public policy, and even basic social and economic conditions themselves are transmitted to citizens in a transparent fashion (Althaus et al. 2011). Decades after media scholars effectively banished the “minimal effects” theoretical paradigm to the dustbin of social science history, political scientists as a whole have yet to fully recognize the importance of public communication either as a driver of policy outcomes or as a product of political battles and policy choices thoroughly implicated in relations of power.

This underappreciation of the media is especially curious in light of the formidable social scientific knowledge base that has been built over the last 40 years concerning the ways in which news coverage — and the largely elite-constructed information and discourse that it propagates — can shape public opinion. I discuss this research on *news media as an independent variable* and place it in the context of the substantial literature on mass opinion during the era of rising economic inequality and the conservative turn in public policy under neoliberalism in Section II. But equally problematic for political science is the virtual absence of any serious attention to the potential *effects* of public policy on the content of the news itself, or *news media as a dependent variable*. I review these conceptual dynamics in Section III, drawing on a venerable tradition of scholarship in the political economy subfield of mass communication studies, and connecting this work to the rich vein of political science research on “policy feedback” (Mettler and Soss 2004, Soss and Schram 2007). In Section IV, I propose a cross-disciplinary synthesis whereby political scientists exploring the politics of public policy in the neoliberal era can re-center the concept of *power* in a way that combines empirical rigor with theoretical depth and critical engagement.

II. News Media as an Independent Variable: Mass Policy Preferences and Political Consciousness

Serious political science accounts of the neoliberal swing in economic and social welfare policy that examine mass public opinion tend to converge on the basic position that Americans have long exhibited a pattern of “programmatically liberalism” (Ferguson and Rogers 1986) or “pragmatic egalitarianism” (Page and Jacobs 2009) — i.e., while most people express abstract opposition to government and support for private

markets and capitalist enterprise, survey questions probing preferences on general policy direction show strong backing for progressive taxation and for many areas of social spending and business regulation to help ensure broad economic security and opportunity (see also Cook and Barrett 1992, Page and Shapiro 1992, Ch. 4). Starting from a normatively driven assumption of responsiveness to the popular will, scholars have sought to understand how governing elites could nevertheless consistently enact specific programs that pull sharply against these preferences.² Explanations for this democratic disconnect have proliferated.

Important research has examined the partisan gerrymandering of House districts (Hacker and Pierson 2005: 124-125), the decline of unions as a potent mechanism of working- and middle-class political interests (Hacker and Pierson 2010: 139-143) and the aggressive counter-mobilization by business groups since the 1970s (ibid: 116-136), and the growing upper-income tilt of liberal advocacy organizations as they have morphed from mass membership vehicles into professionally managed research and lobbying shops (Skocpol 2003, Hacker and Pierson 2010: 143-146). Scholars have examined partisan control of government and the timing of short-term economic growth to coincide with Republican electoral wins (Bartels 2008), corporate campaign spending and its effects on the agenda of the Democratic Party (Ferguson and Rogers 1986), and internal political strategies and policy design tactics deployed by the ultra-conservative GOP leadership cadre of the 1990s and early 2000s (Hacker and Pierson 2005). Others have argued that recently intensified institutional and administrative restrictions on voting have exacerbated the longstanding class, racial and age biases of the electorate, contributing significantly to declining responsiveness to broad public opinion and to unequal responsiveness along socioeconomic lines (Gilens 2005, Bartels 2008).³ And the specific designs of neoliberal policies themselves may be obscuring these policies' impacts on citizens' material conditions and their connections to citizens' self-understood ideological commitments (Howard 1997, Mettler 2011), as well as dampening political efficacy and participation among lower-income people (Soss 1999), which in turn may facilitate further policies that favor the wealthy and business interests.

While these accounts are compelling and largely persuasive on their own terms — and while some touch on the role of the news media — none squarely engage the concrete discourse and information about the economy, society and politics itself that Americans have been exposed to during the neoliberal shift. For example, we do not know why — despite solid evidence of the public's pragmatic egalitarianism

² Like most scholars in the main currents of American politics research, the authors I cite in the following passage do not use the term “neoliberalism” to describe the dominant ideological and institutional framework of the domestic (and global) political economy over recent decades. Nevertheless, I believe that the conservative policy reorientation that they describe and seek to explain is best understood by categorizing it as part of the broader neoliberal turn.

³ See Piven and Cloward (2000) for the definitive historical account. Such state-level restrictions, including felon disenfranchisement (Uggen and Manza 2002) and voter ID laws, have multiplied in recent years.

— large polling majorities have, in most cases, continued to express support for *particular policies* entailing significant cuts in social provision and regressive tax code reconfigurations. There are many reasons to suspect that media influence may be playing a central role, however.

First, we know that mass communications can have significant — though complex and nuanced — effects on public attitudes as expressed in polls. There is by now a voluminous and methodologically sophisticated literature, generated mainly from experimental studies in the tradition of political psychology, that shows how particular patterns of news discourse can have substantial effects on patterns of public belief and opinion. Exposure to the news media can shape people’s factual knowledge of politics and public policy (Jerit et al. 2006); can affect their perception of the importance of particular social issues, policy debates and political events (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder 1989, McCombs and Reynolds 2002); can shape the conceptual frames they use to interpret policy issues, political institutions and political actors (e.g. Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b; Iyengar 1991); and can affect the standards they use to evaluate government institutions, political figures and policy choices (e.g. Nelson and Kinder 1997, Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. 2002).

Moreover, we know that mainstream political elites (again, in the contemporary era, primarily right-wing Republicans and neoliberal Democrats) are the overwhelming source of the information and ideas that appear in the mass media (e.g. Bennett 1990, 2011 [1983]; Hallin, 1994). And we have growing evidence that these elites — contrary to their nearly universal insistence that they do not “govern by polls” — increasingly (and in increasingly sophisticated ways) attempt to shape public opinion to legitimate policy stances that are favored by their core ideological and financial bases (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Jacobs 2005, 2011). Over the last 30 to 40 years, message construction, public relations and media management techniques and technologies have been carefully honed (often with the help of social scientific research). And especially in today’s pseudo-populist U.S. cultural environment, the ability for those in power to claim plausibly that “the people” are on their side is a major political advantage that can complement and facilitate more traditional bargaining and procedural maneuvering strategies.

However, few scholars have connected these insights from political communication and political psychology to the growing body of research in American politics on the right turn in economic and social welfare policy that I discussed previously. Particularly rare are focused, theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous accounts of specific issue debates that are geared toward exploring the potential effects of news coverage on public attitudes. In an earlier study, I demonstrated that network TV news coverage of the 2001 Bush tax plan heavily favored neoliberal voices and frames, and I presented suggestive evidence that these media message flows shaped mass opinion to legitimate this major policy shift (Guardino 2007). Employing a somewhat different content-analytic scheme, Bell and Entman (2011)

generated similar findings about this debate as well as Bush’s follow-up “supply side” tax plan in 2003. In ongoing research, I am extending this work to examine patterns of news content and public attitudes on the 1981 Reagan economic plan and the 1996 welfare reform plan, and I am applying my media content findings to the individual level through survey experiments that specify a range of effects on mass opinion that support the neoliberal turn in public policy (see Guardino 2011, 2012).⁴

But these studies are exceptions. Scholars of mass political behavior that seek to understand the role of popular opinion in the rightward policy shift that has done so much to facilitate rising economic inequality ought to take the news media’s potential effects on public attitudes much more seriously. For instance, in their incisive book-length study of pragmatic egalitarianism in American public opinion, Page and Jacobs (2009: 103) devote just one paragraph to the role of news coverage.⁵ Similarly, in a spirited exchange about the sources of public attitudes toward the George W. Bush tax agenda — an exchange that strays far beyond statistical analysis into the philosophical domain of “enlightened” opinion and the role of values in political decision-making — neither Bartels (2005, 2007) nor Lupia et al. (2007) have anything to say about the possible effects of elite and media messages. Despite their important differences, the studies on both sides of this debate focus narrowly on individual cognitive capacities and deeply rooted partisan attachments. They seem to treat “opinion” as a purely individual-level phenomenon and mass political knowledge (or the lack thereof) as emerging mysteriously from the “American mind” as manifested in National Election Studies survey data. To their credit, Hacker and Pierson (2005: 174-181, 2010: 155-158) devote a bit more attention to the media. But while they offer helpful summaries of some relevant background research, their discussions lack both a detailed, in-depth and systematic empirical analysis of news coverage and public opinion, and a theoretical framework that can anchor a larger understanding of media’s role in the politics of economic inequality. It is telling that in a lengthy series of responses to the APSA task force reports on inequality that was published in one of the organization’s official journals, the only substantial mention of the media was in a brief essay by Piven (2006) arguing that the reports, while promising, were exceedingly cautious and politically naive.

Specialists in political communication and public opinion, however, have developed a number of theoretical understandings and analytic tools that would be useful for exploring the media’s role in shaping

⁴ Gilens (1999) produced a landmark study of the long-term process by which mainstream media representations both encouraged and were shaped by the racialization of poverty policy starting in the 1960s. But this work neither focuses on patterns of news coverage and public opinion during specific policy episodes, nor intervenes in the scholarly debates about the overall conservative turn in public policy that has occurred during the neoliberal era.

⁵ Interestingly, Page and Jacobs in this passage highlight the media’s potential to distort the views of political elites, not ordinary citizens. This is curious in light of these scholars’ important work on the (often manipulative) impacts of media and elite messages on public opinion (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1992, Page 1996, Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

patterns of popular opinion on the key policy issues that have defined the neoliberal turn. Researchers in political psychology tend to view news coverage (and the primarily elite-generated information and interpretations that it offers) as the main mechanism that connects people's more stable and generalized (and often materially rooted) social and political predispositions, on the one hand, to specific contemporary issue debates and events, on the other hand, in ways that enable them to express policy preferences in opinion polls (e.g. Zaller 1992). This means that understanding both the quantity and quality of media coverage — including the specific content and texture of the information and discourse that it presents — is crucial. It is only when the news offers the requisite discursive resources that the vast majority of people have opportunities to express opinions on, for instance, the bipartisan neoliberal welfare reform agenda, the Reagan and Bush tax plans, Social Security privatization, and the loosening of controls over the financial sector, that comport with their broader interests and values (Page and Shapiro 1992: Ch. 9).

We might go a step further and suggest that people's material interests should not be understood as given or as transparently and objectively apprehended — by academic researchers or by themselves. Our experiences of the political-economic world beyond our immediate surroundings are always mediated in some way, deeply embedded in a politically charged ensemble of social and cultural influences that are proximately located in civil society.⁶ Especially in contemporary capitalist democracies like the United States, news media is both a primary carrier and a major generator of those influences. In a sense, it is through discourse (as it flows through the media in short bursts or over the long term, directly or at some steps removed) that people apprehend particular dimensions of social life *as political*. Thus, the news is a central location at which the “the political” is constructed for mass publics.

Political scientists in recent years have expended many thousands of pages of ink and terabytes of hard disc space in methodologically elaborate and earnest attempts to understand how economic indicators (e.g. the degree of income and wealth inequality), government programs (e.g. social insurance benefits and tax provisions) and measures of social position (e.g. income and occupation) relate to people's views on relevant political debates and policy issues. However, very little of this work concerns itself with what, precisely, citizens actually know (or believe they know) about the economy, policy and politics — and almost none of it explores the potential sources of those beliefs in mass media discourse. In light of the

⁶ News coverage, of course, is far from the only important social mechanism through which political beliefs and opinions are formulated and reformulated: the workplace, the education system, voluntary groups, labor unions, religious organizations, commercial advertising, entertainment media and families all play roles in shaping how people see politics — and even how they see specific policies. Certainly, the political linkages and implications at some of these sites are more explicit and transparent than at others, but none are politically neutral, none are ideologically innocent and none are untouched by public policy. I explore some of these broader dynamics in Sections III and IV.

media's demonstrated capacity to construct people's understandings of their political interests, this is a major shortcoming.

Scholarly reaction to Hacker and Pierson's (2010) important recent book about the political causes of the neoliberal turn in U.S. public policy is instructive. Another official APSA journal, *Perspectives on Politics*, published no fewer than seven critical responses to the work in its September 2011 Review Symposium. However, these scholars devoted very little serious attention to mass public understanding of the key political-economic dynamics and domestic policy debates at issue — and they essentially ignored the possible role of the news media.

For instance, near the end of an interesting account of differences in income inequality and related policies across capitalist democracies, Pontusson (2011: 656) asks why the U.S. public has not pushed hard for measures to ameliorate these striking levels of economic concentration. He suggests that “another piece of the puzzle may be that Americans know less about what the distribution of income looks like and are also poorly informed about the distributive implications of public policy.” As it turns out, there is an increasing volume of empirical work at the intersection of political behavior and policy studies that investigates Americans' levels of information about economic inequality and related government programs, and most of it bears out Pontusson's suspicion (e.g. Mettler 2011). There is also a relatively new yet growing body of social scientific research in comparative political communication studies that investigates the mass behavioral and opinion effects of differently oriented macro-level media structures in capitalist democracies. Most of this work suggests that the deeply market-oriented model of communications that dominates the United States both lowers popular levels of political and public policy knowledge, and exacerbates inequalities of knowledge along socioeconomic lines (see, e.g., Curran et al. 2009). I delve into these kinds of systemic political communication influences during the neoliberal era in the next section.

In short, rather than being just “another piece of the puzzle” that “may” be important, the informational and discursive context of political debates — with the mass media at their center — ought to be understood as an essential component of any broad explanation of the causes of the neoliberal policy shift. The aggregate poll numbers that are generated from people's survey responses during specific public policy debates are powerful political weapons for elite actors who seek to associate their plans with a measure of democratic legitimacy. These survey results are one crucial (albeit not the only) mechanism through which popular consent for public policies is registered. But poll numbers — and the individual opinion statements on which they are based — do not emerge in a vacuum. They are deeply enmeshed in cultural and communicative contexts of which the news media forms a central — perhaps the most important — part. Conceptual and empirical work in political psychology and political communication,

along with the few focused empirical studies of policy debates that have been conducted, suggest strongly that media coverage has contributed substantially to the generation of public consent for neoliberal policies during this historically pivotal period of reaction against the welfare and regulatory state. Scholars of the right turn in American politics would produce more cogent, comprehensive and critically acute descriptions and explanations if they were to draw on these insights in nuanced and targeted ways.

III. News Media as a Dependent Variable: The Political Economy of Mass Communication Policy

If news media's potential role as an independent variable during policy debates — in particular, as an influence on mass opinion during the conservative shift since the 1970s — has been marginalized in the main currents of political science, its role as a *dependent variable* has been virtually ignored. This is a major omission that significantly impoverishes our understanding of the neoliberal turn in economic and social welfare policy, and of U.S. politics more generally. In particular, there is strong theoretical and historical support — mainly from work in the field of communication studies — for the proposition that government policies specifically directed toward the media may be having demonstrable and consequential effects on patterns of political news coverage. In short, just as some of the most important political causes of neoliberal policy shifts may be located in news coverage, some of the most crucial *effects* of such policy shifts may actually be on the *structure of the media* and the landscape of subsequent political debate.

Scholars of mass media political economy have made strong arguments that for-profit corporate control in general — and the increasing conglomeration and commercialization under the neoliberal media policy regime in particular — reproduce and intensify basic news coverage tendencies that favor broadly conservative political-economic interpretations and policy prescriptions in a range of issue areas (Smythe 2002 [1981]; Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney 1999, 2004, 2008; McAllister 2002; Bagdikian 2004).⁷ This means that shifts in relations between the state and the media industry since the early 1980s, themselves the outcome of political struggles over many decades, may have created fertile structural ground for the propagation of political discourse that legitimates and promotes further neoliberalization of

⁷ These patterns of mainstream media practice and discourse include narrow reflections of the range of debate among prominent national Democratic and Republican Party elites (Bennett 1990, 1996, 2011 [1983]; see also Hallin, 1994; Bennett et al. 2006, 2007; Zaller and Chiu, 1996); coverage of interest groups and social movement organizations that favors the largest and wealthiest lobbies, and depicts protests and demonstrations sparsely and negatively, sidelining substantive policy demands and political perspectives (Danielian and Page 1994; Thrall 2006; Gitlin 1980; McLeod and Hertog 1992; Wittebols 1996); and general narrative formulas and communications codes that marginalize policy substance and the institutional or structural context of political and social problems, possibly cultivating mass depoliticization and deference to established nodes of power (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar 1991; Bennett 2011 [1983]; Bourdieu 1998; Gerbner et al. 2002; Shanahan and Morgan 1999).

U.S. domestic policy across a wide scope. But this valuable theoretical and historical work has attracted little interest from scholars in political science, and — so far as I can tell — none at all from the cutting-edge researchers working on the dynamics of *policy feedback*, who in recent years have produced important studies that identify public policy itself as a driver of subsequent elite political agendas and patterns of mass opinion and participation amidst the ongoing retrenchment of the U.S. welfare and regulatory state (Mettler and Soss 2004). As Soss and Schram (2007: 111) put it, “policies must be analyzed, not only as efforts to achieve expressed social and economic goals but also as forms of political action designed to enhance particular actors’ abilities to achieve long-term political goals.”

In this section, I build on the work of these disparate scholars to argue that *media policy* may be having profound feedback effects by shaping the landscape of mainstream political discourse to reinforce and accelerate the broader neoliberal political project in economic and social welfare policy. In light of the media’s central role as an engine of mass consciousness and opinion in the overall political architecture of capitalist democracies, these potential effects on media discourse suggest that political scientists ought to understand media policy as a species of state activity that is at least on par with tax, financial regulatory and social welfare policy in its importance to the dynamics of economic inequality and political power since the late 1970s.

While concentrated private ownership in the American news media is not new — large, for-profit media corporations arose during the last decades of the 19th century and the newspaper industry has been dominated by chains at least since the 1930s — the neoliberalization of media policy has vastly increased the scale, and transformed the nature, of mass media oligopoly.⁸ Four major trends have characterized the changing economic landscape of the media as it has been shaped by neoliberal communications policy: (1) horizontal integration (corporations owning multiple news outlets in particular formats) has increased exponentially; (2) media corporations now control outlets across multiple formats, such as newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations, and websites; (3) vertical integration (concentrated ownership of firms at multiple levels of the production and distribution process) has accelerated; and (4) the vast majority of U.S. news outlets have come to be owned by massive global conglomerates (such as Disney and General Electric) with core business interests in sectors other than news (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004, 2008).

These policy changes may have profoundly impacted the operation of the news media as a site for political information and democratic debate. While media regulatory policy in the United States has always been weaker and more unevenly enforced than in other industrialized capitalist democracies, from the

⁸ For an historical account of the changing economic structures of the U.S. news media from the 19th to the mid- 20th centuries, see Schudson (2003: 64-89).

1930s through the 1970s the national government imposed a number of policies that shaped both media markets and, more directly, media content, enabling a stronger public service function for electronic news outlets in particular.⁹ These have largely been swept away by the broader neoliberal swing and its rhetoric of free choice through the genius of the market (Tunstall 1986; Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004, 2008). Key examples include the demise of the Fairness Doctrine under the Reagan administration (Aufderheide 1990) and the 1996 Telecommunications Act.¹⁰ The latter policy, enthusiastically endorsed by the Clinton administration, substantially relaxed controls over TV and radio consolidation (McChesney 2004), which energized an already growing tidal wave of media mergers and acquisitions (Aufderheide 1999: 89-92).

These and related neoliberal shifts in U.S. media policy have changed the industry terrain in ways that may have increased the reach and intensity of the public informational and discursive complex that advances the broader neoliberal political project.¹¹ For instance, explicitly conservative talk radio — which continues to dominate the genre — probably would have been impossible on a nationwide scale under the Fairness Doctrine. And the demise of this policy led many local TV and radio stations to move away from — and in some cases, to eliminate — serious political news and public affairs coverage of any stripe. Moreover, relaxation of antitrust laws and deregulation of media commercialism have cultivated a climate in which the financial demands of shareholders, and the broader economic and political interests of owners and advertisers, have taken increasing precedence in the production of content (McChesney 2004).

Advertising's role is especially crucial here. Contrary to popular conceptions, the primary business of content providers, especially in TV media, is not to “supply” news and entertainment programming to satisfy the “demands” of the audience as customers (or citizens). Rather, the corporate mass media is in the business of selling audiences (or audiences' attention) to advertisers. This has led to a systematic emphasis on programming that appeals to the kind of audience demographic that advertisers generally covet: white, middle- and upper-middle-class viewers with substantial disposable income. More generally, the corporate media tends to disseminate content that cultivates a “favorable buying mood,” which has created broader pressures to avoid complex and troubling issues that may challenge audiences' political-economic assumptions (Herman and Chomsky 2002 [1988]: 14-18; Sparrow 1999: 76-85). Though such advertising-

⁹ For a comparative portrait of media systems in capitalist democracies, see Hallin and Giles (2005). For analyses of the mid-20th century media regulatory regime, see McChesney (1993).

¹⁰ While it may have mitigated the worse political excesses of broadcast media, the Fairness Doctrine did not actually require “equal time” for opposing viewpoints and was never strongly enforced, and no firm ever lost its Federal Communications Commission license solely as a result of Fairness Doctrine violations (Aufderheide 1990: 47-72).

¹¹ Other neoliberal policy moves have included abolishing subsidies for women- and minority-owned, as well as nonprofit, news outlets, additional relaxations of (or enforcement rollbacks in) public service broadcasting requirements, and further loosening of ownership rules (Horwitz 2005). On a parallel track, opponents of government funding for public media have stepped up their attacks during the neoliberal era (Aufderheide 2000: 99-120).

driven pressures certainly existed during the mid-20th century, neoliberalization has greatly magnified them (McChesney 2004). This advertising dynamic suggests that market individualism — which is a key cultural-ideological base for the patterns of public opinion that support the neoliberal turn in policy areas such as taxes and welfare — is also a crucial cultural-ideological base for the economic vitality of the capitalist media complex itself, especially in the neoliberal era.

A few scholars have produced interesting empirical research on the concrete effects of concentrated corporate ownership arrangements and commercial imperatives on media content (Gilens and Hertzman 2000, McAllister 2002). But we know much less than we ought to about how such factors might actually shape political discourse. Again, particularly rare are focused case studies that narrow in on one or a small number of political episodes and trace the possible connections between structures of media ownership and control enabled by neoliberal communications policy, on the one hand, and observable patterns of news content related to debates over economic and social welfare policy, on the other.

A study on the emergence of the Tea Party that I conducted with a political economist offers one model for such work (Guardino and Snyder 2012). Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of CNN and Fox News content in 2009 and 2010, we demonstrated strikingly similar coverage patterns on these seemingly ideologically opposed networks. We linked these patterns to neoliberalized media structures enabled by government regulatory policies, and showed how this coverage supported continuation of the overall neoliberal project at a moment — the aftermath of the financial collapse and subsequent Great Recession — when it might have been more thoroughly questioned and vigorously contested.

But also needed is research on particular dimensions of media policy — especially landmark changes like the end of the Fairness Doctrine and the implementation of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 — that carefully measure news coverage of key issue areas before and after these shifts, and that are creatively designed to grapple with possible alternative explanations of their empirical findings. For instance, scholars might conduct comparative analyses of media debate over the guaranteed-income proposal (the Family Assistance Plan) during the Nixon administration and the 1995-1996 welfare reform debate (which occurred after the Fairness Doctrine had been repealed). Such studies may allow us to identify how particular shifts in media policy affected important dimensions of mass politics (e.g. public opinion) *through the mechanism of* news coverage. This approach could point to potentially important — and currently neglected — causal forces by showing that (roughly) similar kinds of news outlets covered (roughly) similar issue debates differently, under a very different media policy regime. A third kind of study that could help set a foundation for research on how government policy affects news coverage might focus on the political battles that have shaped media policy over time, perhaps zeroing in on the role of news

coverage itself and the activities of various interest groups (including corporate media players) in generating the dominant commercial (and now neoliberalized) political-economic model for U.S. media.¹²

Political scientists in the wing of the discipline known as American Political Development have produced illuminating studies of how political institutions (such as bureaucratic agencies) and public policies (such as social insurance arrangements) have shaped patterns of elite- and mass-level politics. But with precious few exceptions (e.g. Cook 2005 [1998]), this work has ignored those institutions (e.g. the FCC) and policies (e.g. the Fairness Doctrine) most directly related to the news media. Scholars of institutional politics — especially those who work within the conceptual framework of policy feedback — would do well to view news media itself as a structurally determined (and thoroughly “political”) institution. This means that government agencies and policies that are explicitly directed at the media must be seen as key facets of the complex story of how and why U.S. politics has “developed” in particular ways and not in others, especially in the context of the major economic and political changes that have occurred under neoliberalism. Just as the institutions and policies surrounding welfare provision (e.g. Piven and Cloward 1971, Soss 1999, Soss et al. 2011), Social Security (Campbell 2002), education (Mettler 2007), taxes (e.g. Howard 1997, Mettler 2011), electoral administration (e.g. Piven and Cloward 2000) and criminal justice (Manza and Uggen 2006), to name just a few, produce and reproduce particular political patterns, so do the institutions and policies dealing with the key organs of mass communication. In fact, media-related institutions and policies are arguably among the most important domains for political scientists to understand because the news and political information system — in one way or another — plays a crucial role in *every other* important policy debate.

Thinking about how media policy might fit into the conceptual typology for mass feedback effects developed by Soss and Schram (2007) helps to illustrate the underappreciated importance of political communication. As a policy area unto itself, media policies (e.g. anti-trust regulations and subsidies, targeted tax provisions, laws protecting journalists from being forced to reveal their anonymous sources, freedom of information provisions etc.) should be placed in the “low proximity- low-visibility” category (ibid: 121, Figure 3). In terms of proximity, media *policy* certainly does not “exist(s) as a tangible presence affecting people’s lives in immediate, concrete ways.” (Soss and Schram 2007: 121). However, I would suggest that for most people media policy does not even exist “as a distant object appraised for its effects elsewhere,” which is how Soss and Schram describe “distant” policies (ibid). Media policy should be placed on the far outer edge of the proximity dimension, mainly because most Americans likely do not know even

¹² For an excellent example of this kind of scholarship from the field of communication studies, see McChesney (1993).

that most media policies exist as public policies. This is almost certainly the case for some of the most important policy changes that have shaped the news media during the neoliberal era, such as the rollback of corporate consolidation and market concentration rules in the 1996 Telecommunications Act.

This quality of distance from everyday public experience is closely linked to the extremely “low-visibility” status of media policy: most observers suggest that the major policy changes that have enabled the neoliberalization of media in the United States have received almost no news attention — at least in the outlets relied upon by broad masses of Americans (McChesney 2008: Chapter 15). Mainstream coverage that has been produced has tended to support the economic interests of media corporations that stand to benefit from neoliberalization (Gilens and Hertzman 2000). As for direct measures of public awareness, it is very hard to determine how much people know about these issues, because commercial, media — and, importantly, academic — surveys virtually never include questions about such policies. This, in itself, is a revealing marker of just how far outside the space of public discourse media policy has historically been. As such, media policy seems to be an extreme example of an issue area that “maximize(s) autonomy for state officials and relevant organized interests.” (Soss and Schram 2007: 121).¹³

So far, integrating media policy into the policy feedback framework seems to largely confirm Soss and Schram’s (2007) theoretical expectations. However, complications arise when considering the news media’s special place in the systemic infrastructure of contemporary democratic politics. While low-visibility policies are expected to hold little capacity to produce feedback effects on mass political opinion and behavior, it seems that media policy may be one of the few key issue areas in which this logic breaks down. This is because the policies that shape the operation of news media fundamentally condition the extent and nature of mass feedback effects in most — if not all — *other* areas of public policy. Rather than merely being transparent and objective features of particular policies, both the “visibility” and “proximity” of *any* policy are deeply shaped by the character and volume of news coverage related to that policy.

Thus, to take just one facet of the situation, it is not just that “elite and media frames...structure and condition mass feedback effects” (Soss and Schram 2007: 122), although this is certainly the case. I would suggest that these frames also are often a primary *causal mechanism* for feedback effects: i.e., political information and message flows can shape patterns of public knowledge, opinion and

¹³ Rigorous empirical research engaging these questions is scant, to say the least. This, of course, supports the thrust of my larger argument. Still, there is strong historical evidence to suggest that media policy in the United States has been a classic case of “subterranean” politics, where narrow, privileged groups bargain in bureaucratic agencies largely outside of public view (Hacker 2004). This is unsurprising in light of the ways in which the media system has been ideologically constructed as natural, inevitable and off-limits to political debate (McChesney 2008: pp. 341-353). The broad-based protest movement for media policy reform that has emerged in the United States especially over the last decade has begun to counteract these trends, with at least some modest success (see McChesney et al. 2005).

(dis)engagement related to a range of policies. These flows operate through the vehicle of the news media (although their less immediate sources usually lay elsewhere — in the U.S. political communication system, primarily in mainstream governmental and powerful interest group circles). Finally, these framing and other communications dynamics are indirectly generated by media *policy*, producing a situation in which media policy may produce mass feedback effects that relate not only to its particular issue area, but to a variety of other areas, ranging from welfare (which has been Soss and Schram’s primary substantive focus) to taxes, Social Security, health care and more. In the end, then, media policy might play an indirect yet powerful role in a number of more specific kinds of mass feedback effects across the panoply of state activities identified by Mettler and Soss (2004: 62-63), including “framing policy agendas, problems and evaluations,” “defining membership,” “forging political community or delineating groups,” “building or undermining civic capacity” and “structuring, stimulating and stalling participation.”¹⁴

Seen from this conceptual vantage point, the role of news media in general — and media policy in particular — in the political-economic trends of the last 30 to 40 years comes into sharp relief. If, as Soss and Schram (2007) suggest, we ought to understand policy as, at least in part, a strategic effort to structure certain short- and longer-term patterns of political relationships, then critical examination might suggest that neoliberal media policy has been a key aspect of the neoliberal center-right’s multifaceted political project: Neoliberal media policy may have shaped patterns of mass political knowledge (or ignorance) and (dis)engagement in ways that favor particular visions of the U.S. (and global) political economy. This would be a strategy to, in effect, use state capacities and institutions to increase and consolidate the power of the wealthy and business elites through the molding of public discourse. Ultimately, then, news coverage dynamics as they have been influenced by the neoliberal media policy regime may be one of the lynchpins in the overall neoliberalization of U.S. domestic political and policy arrangements, helping to explain why the march to the “free-market” right has generally been so effective under both Republican and Democratic control of the federal government.

In short, as I argued in Section II, public opinion is embedded in a cultural-communicative complex of media discourse that can have subtle, multidimensional (long- and short-term) effects that are deeply consequential for public policy and political power. In turn, this discourse is itself embedded in a larger,

¹⁴ Moreover, careful empirical and historical research might identify possible “critical junctures” (Pierson 2004: 54-78) and “path dependent” (ibid: 17-53) policy feedback trajectories in the larger historical narrative of media regulatory policy and politics. Such path-dependent dynamics may be related to changing mass discourse and citizen attitudes in a number of issue areas, but they also might be connected to the entrenchment of vested interests in favor of deregulatory policy caused by the increasing economic strength of media companies as they took advantage of new policy-created openings to concentrate their holdings, or to some combination of these (and other) factors.

structural political-economic complex, a crucial part of which is constituted by government policy regimes targeted at the news media. A few political scientists — and several communications scholars — have produced valuable studies that can provide historical and conceptual foundations for the focused and rigorous analyses of media as a dependent variable that I call for (Cook 2005 [1998]; Sparrow 1999). But the systematic, theoretically informed, multi-method empirical work that is necessary to engage these questions in the context of the neoliberal policy regime largely remains to be done. Because political scientists have yet to afford communication dynamics the seriousness they deserve, we have yet to trace either the distinctively political effects of government policy on media coverage, or, in turn, the effects of that coverage on mass political (mis)perceptions and (in)action. In the final section, I argue that a significant reason why we fail to accord the media an important place in our analytic models is that our discipline remains hesitant to take on troubling questions of power relations that are raised by this understanding of communication.

IV. Discussion and Conclusion: Linking Empirical Political Science to Critical Theories of Power

The imperative to understand the role of public communication in the dynamics of the neoliberal turn calls for political scientists to expand and complicate our models of public policy making, and to dialogue with other disciplines that can help us to see power in richer and more complex ways. This necessitates critiquing the conceptual frameworks — and perhaps the epistemological assumptions — of much of what counts as mainstream empirical political research. To conclude, I will sketch a few promising analytic pathways for understanding mass media synoptically as part of a historically shifting yet structurally patterned architecture of political-economic forces. But first, I will explore why the role of the news media continues to be sidelined in the main currents of political science: in order to sketch a way forward, we need to identify some of the tendencies — intellectual, professional and political-economic — that have militated against the meaningful embrace of public communication as central to politics.

There are a number of reasons why communication has been underappreciated in U.S. political science. One of these is the durability of older conceptual understandings of media effects that had their roots in research conducted during the 1940s and 1950s, which — despite their rejection by several generations of communication scholars deploying more sophisticated theoretical models and methodological techniques — continue to implicitly anchor the perspectives of many specialists in American public opinion and political behavior who seem to have barely been exposed to the compelling

media research conducted during the 1970s and 1980s, let alone the explosion of work since then.¹⁵ Another reason may be the privileged social position of academics in general, whose own gravitation toward unrepresentative communication channels — especially *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, but more recently, newer forms of online media such as political blogs — deeply distorts their understanding of how the great majority of Americans encounter political information and discourse. Rigid disciplinary boundaries — along with the galloping hyperspecialization of the social sciences over recent decades — also probably plays some role: political scientists study “politics” (conventionally understood as government and routinized channels of political engagement like parties, elections, interest groups and public opinion), while leaving civil society largely to sociologists and the business world to economists. This overwrought division of academic labor results in the relative neglect of aspects of social reality — like the news media — that traverse the conventional political sphere, civil society and the capitalist market economy, and that do so in deeply political ways. This reinforces the fragmentation not only of our academic disciplines, but more importantly, of our analytic models and substantive understandings.

However, one of the most important — and least acknowledged — dimensions of political science’s relative ignorance of mass communication may stem from the deeper assumptions about social life in capitalist democracies that undergird this academic division of labor: the artificial separation of the state (“politics”) from the market (“economics”) (Wood 1995). Because the U.S. news media has been primarily a private, for-profit concern for approximately the last 150 years, its political facets — and, crucially, the power relations that it enacts and contests — have traditionally received scant attention from political scientists, especially those whose substantive focus is the United States. Just as the mainstream of the American economics discipline has progressively jettisoned notions of power and politics from its models of the relationships among firms, workers and consumers (Hunt and Lautzenheiser 2011), so has the mainstream of political science too often left “the economy” — as a prepolitical or apolitical realm — for someone else to study. This bifurcation of state and market — which is rooted in the broader institutional and ideological framework of capitalism — has left a yawning gap in political scientists’ understanding of the media.¹⁶

¹⁵ Research from the so-called “minimal-effects” era suggested that the news media had little influence on mass political opinion and behavior — or on politics generally — because of the presence of stable intermediary groups like the family and civic organizations, as well as the inability to locate directly observable influences on voting choices and elite decisions. However, this work was conducted before the nationalization of U.S. news media, the rise of television, the emergence of contentious politics in the 1960s, and the development of experiments, advanced statistics and more nuanced concepts of power grounded in the work of European theorists (Baran and Davis 2011).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Rupert (2005: 484-5), Swanson (2008). This separation of state and market, while rooted in the material and institutional organization of capitalism, has in the neoliberal era been re-energized as an ideological construct and a set of rhetorical devices that legitimate the broader political attack on the welfare and regulatory state (see

This strict separation of politics and economics has both reinforced and been enabled by the crude and narrow concepts of *power* that continue to pervade the discipline, particularly in the subfield of American politics. Because of the (mainly implicit, sometimes explicit) sense among many scholars that power operates primarily in formal governmental realms and participatory institutions (but *not* in the market-capitalist economy), deeper relations of *political-economic power* — which should be a central concern for political scientists — are often ignored or sidelined. As Winters and Page (2009: 732) put it in an important essay suggesting that the contemporary United States is an “oligarchy” based on concentrated wealth: “Political science as a whole and the American politics subfield in particular needs to treat power, especially in its material form, much more seriously than it recently has done.”

In short, understanding the role of the news media in American politics — and especially, its place in the neoliberal policy turn — requires us to look into neglected corners of our own discipline, as well as outside the field altogether, to widen and complicate our conceptions of power. I turn now to some strategies for doing so, focusing first on power relations as they impinge on news media as an independent variable, then on power as it operates through media as a dependent variable. We might describe the former role of the media as highlighting *discursive power*, which manifests the cultural (and psychological) dimensions of material influence, and the latter as highlighting *structural power*, which manifests the material underpinnings of cultural (and psychological) influence. Table 1 summarizes my understanding of the two basic roles of the news media in the broader neoliberal turn and the associated forms of power that these roles most directly highlight.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

There is a rich vein of scholarship in critical-cultural studies that understands the mass media as a crucial vehicle of *discursive power* and, therefore, as a key engine of popular political and social consciousness. Political scientists who are exploring the sources of public opinion toward neoliberal policies would benefit by connecting with this work. Because of its deeply material and concrete tenor, scholarship rooted in the tradition of British Cultural Studies based on the early work of Stuart Hall (1979 [1977], 1980a, 1980b, 1985) would be particularly useful for helping empirical researchers understand the news media as an independent variable that shapes people’s beliefs and opinions in ways that support certain political-economic forces in the neoliberal era (Turner 2003 [1990]).

Guardino 2011, esp. Chapters 5 and 7). It is ironic that one of the popular ideological keys to neoliberalism’s ascendance has simultaneously been a major analytic obstacle in the way of political scientists who are seeking to understand that implications of that ascendance.

In this understanding, organs of civil society like the media are crucial sites where popular consent for power relations (including particular government policies) is shaped and reformulated. In propagating certain representations of society, economics and politics itself, the media provides discursive material that interacts with people's concrete experiences and existing cultural and ideological understandings to produce patterns of belief and action. In other words, news discourse selectively magnifies and mutes aspects of social reality in ways that resonant with — and organize — certain culturally and materially grounded fragments of popular common sense, producing ideological configurations in mass consciousness that lead to particular political-economic beliefs and activities (Gramsci 2005 [1971]).

Importantly, people are not “brainwashed” or “duped” by these media representations. Rather, media discourse operates as part of a subtle process of *articulation* (Hall 1985), through which such discourse enables audiences to forge certain *connections* between their own (typically highly fragmented, contradictory and ambivalent) understandings, their material social experiences, and the various concrete political projects that are advocated in the public realm. This means that while, in principle, a variety of connections are possible, the process of making certain cultural-political-economic linkages simultaneously works against the forging of others. For example, articulating the condition of being a lower-middle-income, working single mother (a material social experience), with widespread popular ideas and language forms surrounding the individualist work ethic (a cultural understanding), with neoliberal welfare reform policy (a political project) disables potential alternative articulations that contradict the political-economic assumptions underlying these connections.¹⁷ Working from this understanding of media as a force that subtly exercises discursive power, empirical researchers could use the analytic devices and methodological tools of political psychology that I review in Section II to rigorously investigate the formation of public opinion during key policy debates in the neoliberal turn. In short, this view suggests that news coverage of politics and public policy as it shapes public belief and opinion is a crucial mechanism by which elite political-economic actors struggle to enforce ideological visions and promote political projects.

Media influence of this sort, which we may view as a particular manifestation of Lukes' (2005 [1974]) “third face” of power, is suffused with political-economic power relations at multiple levels. This is not only because people's concrete social experiences (marked by, for example, their level of income and wealth, occupation, race and gender) are circumscribed by a set of power relations that orient the nature

¹⁷ On the ambivalence and fragmentation of public opinion from a social scientific-psychological perspective, see Zaller (1992). For a cross-paradigm synthesis of Zaller's model with neo-Gramscian cultural theories of articulation and popular common sense, see Guardino (2011: esp. Chapter 2).

and extent of their engagement with and reception of media discourse.¹⁸ It is also because the nature and extent of the media representations themselves are conditioned by a set of political-economic power arrangements that complexly determine the *production* of news content. This is where the analytic focus turns from media as an independent variable to media as a *dependent variable*, including the aspects of neoliberal policy itself that may shape how the news has represented politics and public issues in this era of rising economic inequality.

The obverse of mass media as a mechanism of discursive power is media as a manifestation or outcome of *structural power*. While most of the formative scholars in British Cultural Studies have understood that media texts are produced — not just received — in a complex tangle of political-economic power relations, other researchers have taken up this strand more forcefully and directed their focus to the structural side of the media power equation. Critical scholars of mass media political economy, many of whom I discuss in Section III, have made important theoretical interventions and produced compelling historical accounts of the connections between government and corporations that have resulted in the macro-media systems that obtain today. Although, as I argue above, a variety of public responses to discursive power at the site of the media are possible, these responses are substantially constrained by what is produced by the major organs of mass communication, and these organs are themselves subject to political-economic power relations, including particular government policies toward the media. And crucially, these policies — and the news coverage tendencies that they subtly encourage — serve particular political-economic interests.

As I note in Section III, the distinctively political sources and effects of communication policies and broader patterns of media industry-government relations remain largely unexplored.¹⁹ I suggest that there may be important causal stories to be told not only about the feedback effects of media policy on media coverage, but about the lobbying, campaign contributions and social network connections that have punctuated the relations among neoliberal media industry elites, elected leaders and bureaucratic officials,

¹⁸ On the varieties of “subject positions” and their relationship to audience “decodings” of media, see Hall (1979 [1977]). The discursive power of the media offers a compelling analytic lens for the wide and growing socioeconomic disparities in political knowledge and engagement among Americans (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997, Prior 2007).

¹⁹ Another possible reason why these multidimensional understandings of power relations in mass communication have failed to take hold in the American discipline of political science — and why no one has applied them specifically to the politics of public policy in the era of rising economic inequality — may be that the United States has never had a large and formidable tradition of materially grounded critical scholarship even in the field of media studies. Work on the cultural influence of the media that is firmly rooted in material conditions and concrete class politics came initially from the United Kingdom. In contrast, critical studies of mass communication in the United States — as well as a good deal of more recent British Cultural Studies work — have tended to take on a highly discursive cast that has often emphasized shifting and fragmented racial, gender and sexual identities, while marginalizing class relationships and political-economic structures (McChesney 2002, 2008).

and about how the organization of particular institutions (such as the FCC) has generated favorable circumstances for the kinds of media policies that have characterized the neoliberal era. Political scientists could apply a variety of rigorous qualitative research methods to produce rich empirical accounts of the institutional politics surrounding media policy, including archival analysis, interviews and process-tracing.

Especially because of the media's central role in the construction of political debate and the formation of public opinion in all other policy areas (discussed in Section III), scholars of American Political Development who are working to understand the role of policies and institutions in the neoliberal era could benefit from engaging with this theory and research from the political economy tradition of mass communication. Doing so, however, requires that we understand media corporations — and all large businesses — as structurally rooted political actors that are embedded in a set of power arrangements that cut across the state and the economy, rather than as just another interest group engaged in ordinary pluralistic bargaining on the neutral field of a fully autonomous democratic state (Lindblom 1977). Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model of media and public policy that highlights these two complementary dimensions of power relations.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

This conceptualization might lead us to see media-government interconnections as constituting a specific dimension of the larger complexes of state-society relations that prevail in particular historical periods. For instance, neoliberalism has entailed a particular set of material conditions and economic arrangements, as well as a particular configuration of political forces localized in formal governing apparatuses (e.g., Congress, the Presidency, the Supreme Court, executive-branch agencies etc.) and allied institutions (such as major party organizations). These forces have engaged in real and consequential contestation over economic and social welfare issues, but usually as circumscribed within definable parameters set by a dominant conservative political-economic fraction. Thus, the era has generated a particular economic and social welfare policy regime (tending toward upper-income tax cuts, privatization and devolution, reduction of social supports and re-regulation in favor of business interests). Further, neoliberalism has entailed a particular set of legitimating ideas and discourses — and a dominant (though not uniform or uncontested) flow of these ideas and discourses through the media of mass communication. Neoliberalism has also brought a particular set of policies that are specific to media, which may produce feedback effects on subsequent patterns of news content, public opinion and policy outcomes.

None of the constituent parts of the media (society)-government (state) complex ought to be considered strictly determinative of the others. While we might specify general patterns and dominant configurations in particular historical contexts, there is some contradiction and contestation at all levels: we

are dealing with an “open system” of complex reciprocal causation in which social agents shape structures even as structures constrain agents (e.g. Hall 1985; Sayer 2010 [1984]). And complicated as they are, all these nominally domestic dynamics are embedded within an even more multifaceted and shifting global configuration of political-economic-cultural-ideological forces. Finally, material power (in its discursive form and its structural form) operates at all these levels (i.e. both inside and outside the formal state apparatus and other institutions that are typically thought of as “political”).

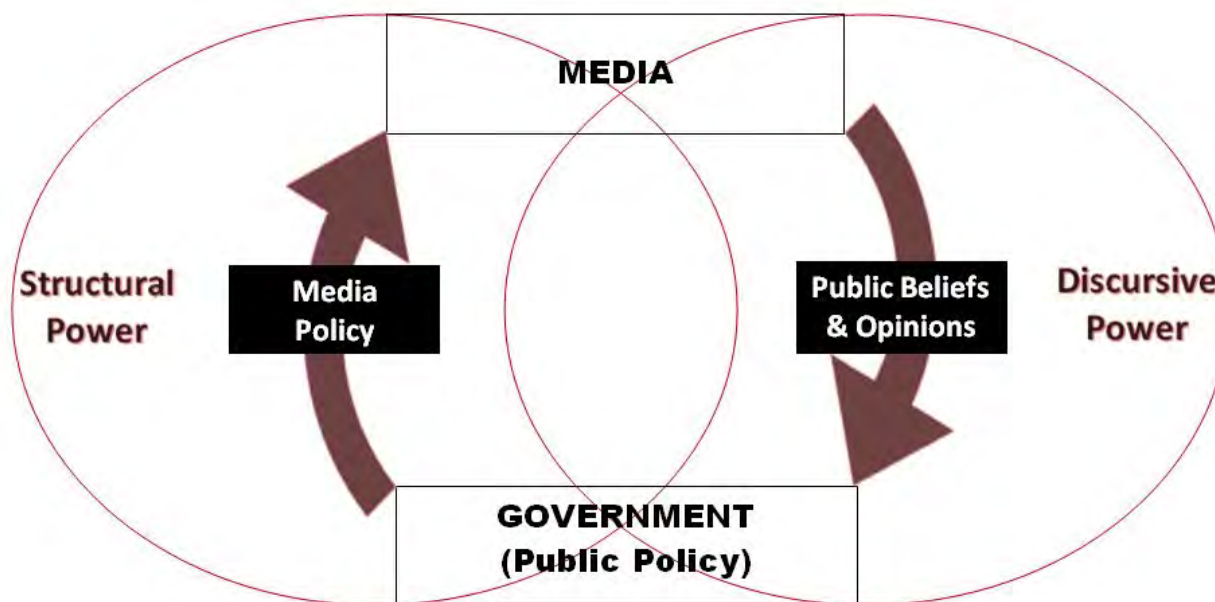
This broader understanding places long-running questions about the independence of the news media from the government in capitalist democracies in an interesting light: it suggests that we should see the media as *relatively autonomous*, i.e. neither fully dependent on the state nor fully independent of it. News media is deeply shaped by state activity (including policies specifically directed at it), but it also shapes state activities through its effects on political debate and public opinion. In this sense, my usage of the terms *independent variable* and *dependent variable* to describe the media is merely an analytic device intended to conveniently organize our understanding of the role of the media and orient our focus toward concrete empirical analysis. In reality, the media is always both an independent and a dependent variable.

In conclusion, if we want to more fully understand the neoliberal shift in economic and social welfare policy in the era of rising inequality since the late 1970s — and especially the role of public attitudes, beliefs and knowledge in this story — we can no longer afford to ignore, marginalize or assume away the news media. As Althaus et al. (2011: 1078) put the matter with concision and understatement, “when communication is taken seriously, better theories result.” Moreover, public communication is deeply suffused with power relations both on the level of cultural discourse and the level of material structure. Taking the media more seriously would not only assist political scientists in understanding the sources and implications of the neoliberal turn in U.S. public policy, but also promises to help us build a richer conceptual understanding of power, and thus come to a better sense of the practical prospects for contesting the political-economic forces that have produced the remarkable durability of neoliberalism. Conducting this kind of theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous and critically oriented research would be one way that we political scientists could use the resources and tools at our disposal to act as responsible social agents in ways that could play some part in making politics and public policy more democratic, egalitarian and humane.

Table 1: News Media Roles and Forms of Power in the Neoliberal Turn

Media's Role	Form of Power
Independent Variable	Discursive Power (cultural dimensions of material influence)
Dependent Variable	Structural Power (material underpinnings of cultural influence)

Figure 1: Circuits of Media Power



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