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## The Politics of Progress: A Field-Level Analysis

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Business

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## Abstract

A hallmark of the modern era is the incredible pace at which technical and social progress gets made. Modern societies are organized to facilitate the work of making progress and institutions help ensure the work gets done. Sometimes, however, the progress we seek is destroyed, delayed or diminished. Politics are blamed when this happens. A close reading of the institutional literature betrays that supposition. Scholars have documented many cases and ways in which progress has been impeded by self-interested political action within organizational fields. But, even when the progress we seek is not fully implemented, some progress is usually getting made. This dissertation explores the dynamics of those politics of progress by asking the research question: What role do politics play in the progress that does get made?

To answer that question, I studied a regulatory rulemaking undertaken in the American telecommunications field using archival data and a research design inspired by the methods of theorizing with microhistory. Findings are presented in three chapters. First, a new institutional concept is developed: “Zones of Appropriateness”. I theorize that field actors hold a range of views about what conduct is deemed appropriate in an institutional context. That variance is an essential ingredient in negotiating how progress can get made. Second, I present novel political mechanisms that enable the carving of spaces out of institutional structures in which progress can be imagined and explored. Finally, I theorize mechanisms through which opponents and proponents of progress negotiate the structuring of those carved out spaces.

My dissertation contributes to the institutional power and politics and organizational fields literatures. First, I contribute theorizing about how actors use politics

to explore the limitations of existing structure and the potential of progress. A relational view of power is essential to understanding those politics. Second, insights about the value of political resistance to progress are theorized. Finally, to the fields literature I contribute theorizing about how and why organizations take issues to the relational spaces of fields to seek guidance, pursue their interests, and work out the meaning of progress within their institutional contexts.

### **Keywords**

Power and politics, organizational field, progress, microhistory, structuring.

## Summary for Lay Audience

Modern societies are organized to help the work of progress get done. We see the benefits of this every single day. New ways of doing things and new technologies show up to help make life a little better. Sometimes, though, the progress we are hoping for does not materialize. This frustrates us. We ask what has gone wrong. Often, we come to believe that it is our politics that get in the way. No wonder. The political exchanges we see in the public square and on the news make us wonder how any progress gets made. If we look past the spectacle, though, we can see that some progress is getting made even when it seems like we can never agree on what or why. My dissertation focusses on the politics that help organizations – however haltingly – make progress.

My research examines how organizations in the American telecommunications sector work together – often amid conflict – to work out how to make that progress. Specifically, the organizations I studied worked out how to fund, build, and operate a new communications network for public safety agencies to use during emergencies. What fascinates me about this example is that a lot of generally accepted and taken for granted rules of doing things had to get set aside to carve out a space in which that progress could be considered. Throughout the story, organizations engaged in political negotiations to figure how to go about improving public safety communications. This is surprising for a couple of reasons. First, we tend to think about rules of interaction and appropriateness – what we sometimes call institutions – as being very strict and unbending. Second, we think of politics as a force working against progress. Yet my research shows that both of those ways of seeing the world may need to be updated. I will endeavour to explain why by telling you about the politics of progress.

## Acknowledgements

It takes a village to complete a doctoral dissertation. I am deeply grateful to the many individuals who have agreed – however unwisely – to be villagers with me.

To my wife Jessi. Walking through the world with you is the greatest honour and joy of my life. I am so proud of the home and family we have built together. And I recognize that you are the thing that makes the whole endeavour possible. You see so clearly the frailty I try so hard to hide. I need encouragement and support. I need stability and peace. I get them. They come from you.

To my children. Thank you for the meaning and purpose you brought into my life. Henry, you are amazing to me. You have taught me so much about kindness and justice. My wish for you is that you come to understand how phenomenal and precious those qualities are. Hold fast to them. They will serve you and the people you love very, very well. My Alice. You are a force of nature. You have taught me that everyone I meet can be a friend. My wish for you is that as you blaze your trail through the world you remember to turn around from time to time and recognize how many lives you have touched and made better. Then turn right back around and go on giving the world hell. Polly, thank you for giving our family another place to meet and find joy. Jack, we will remember you always.

To my family. Thank you for giving me examples to live by. Mom and Dad, it is not possible to express my gratitude for the innumerable times your support has made the difference in my life. You are the finest people I know. I stand on your shoulders. Drew, you are the most generous and resilient person I know. I have looked up to you my entire life. Mimi and John, I like to think that I inherited – in some circuitous way – my love of

teaching from you. You have taught me so much about how to find and give grace under pressure. Genève, you have more courage than any ten other people I know. You are my fierce and loyal sister.

To my mentors. Dr. Martha Maznevski, I could not have known that I would end up here when our paths first crossed 22 years ago. You did. Thank you for lighting my way home. Dr. Fernando Olivera, I often wonder if you realize the peace you create in the lives you touch. Thank you for letting me make my mistakes and never losing faith that I would figure out how to learn from them. When I am on course, you are my compass. Dr. Mark Zbaracki, you have taken so much time to figure out what I needed to say in this dissertation. Thank you for your patience and your many assurances that I would find a way to say it. And Dr. Greg Dunn, it is both literally and figuratively true that I could not have gotten my doctorate without your support. Your honest, wise counsel allowed me to start down this path. Your care and concern kept me moving forward.

To my great friends. Thank you for taking the time to see and support me. I am so grateful to have you in my life: Dr. Lee Watkiss, Dr. Lauren Cipriano, Dr. Craig Simpson, Dr. Dean Wright, Dr. Shima Shahidy, Dr. Will Diebel, Dr. Samantha Ortiz Casillas, Dr. Ruthanne Huising, Dr. Pedro Monteiro, Dr. Kathrin Sele, Marti Olivieri RN, Heather Somerville, and Joelle Shea.

To the many professors, colleagues, classmates, committee members. Thank you for the many, many ways you supported, guided and taught me along the way: Dr. Alison Konrad, Dr. Ann Frost, Dr. Tracey L. Adams, Dr. Lucas Monzani, Dr. Karen MacMillan, Dr. Tiffany Bayley, Dr. Nadine De Gannes, Dr. Krista Pettit, Dr. Matt Thomson, Dr. Ann Peng, Dr. Barnini Bhattacharyya, Dr. Hayden Woodley, Dr. Wren Montgomery, Dr. Miranda Goode, Dr. Natalie Allen, Dr. John Meyer, Dr. Paul Tremblay, Dr. Chuck Ruud,

Dr. Don Abelson, Dr. Diana Owen, Dr. Eric Zimmer, Dr. Julian Barg, Ryan Millar, Chloe Cameron, Peter Pei, Sabrina Goestl, Sandra Flear, Sofia Mastronardi, the team at the Ethnography Atelier, the participants of the Ontario Qualitative Working Group, the team at the CCPA, and my PhD Cohort.

Finally, to my dearest friend and most cherished mentor. Kathy, you have given me so many gifts since we met 20 years ago. First, you gave me your friendship. Then you gave me my first job, you mentored me, you helped me find my way in the world countless times, and you helped me understand how to be a professional and true to myself at the same. The work we did together all those years ago introduced me to my research context. It is from you that I got my lifelong fascination with and respect for the underdogs who insist on progress when the rest of the world is willing to rest. You are, in that grand old phrase, a public citizen. The world is better, safer, happier, smarter, and more just because of you and your labours. Most of all, though, you helped me understand the importance of self-care. You are the one who saved me.

I dedicate this dissertation to you,

Kathleen Mary Harte Wallman

1957 – 2024

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## Preface

Politics. I recently asked students in my undergraduate negotiations class to raise their hands if they thought politics was a force for good in our societies. Not a single hand was raised. I cannot blame my students for their skepticism. We are beset with messages that paint politics as unseemly. We do not want to attend to the role that politics plays in our societies because that would reveal to us the often questionable and unethical behaviours people engage in as they go about pursuing their interests.

Robert Caro's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Robert Moses is one example of a work that does delve deeply into how power and politics operate. As a young idealist, Moses recognized that the wealthy had an effective monopoly on access to the beaches of Long Island. He dreamed of a future in which that monopoly was broken, and a series of parks and beaches were created that many more New Yorkers could access and enjoy. It was a grand vision of a better, fairer, and more just world. In stark contrast to the idealism of that vision, Caro documented the many terrible, illegal, and unethical tactics Moses employed to make that vision – that progress – a reality. Caro's account made manifest the tension between progress and politics that I think makes people – like my students – uncomfortable. We can recognize the importance of making changes in our societies that address the social, economic, and technical challenges we face. But we do not particularly want to confront the ways that progress sometimes gets made. The goal of my research is to rehabilitate the way we think about the role that politics plays in the making of a better world.

I recognize that this will not be easy. Indeed, organizational and institutional scholars are famously reticent to bring politics into their analyses for an array of reasons.

There are methodological problems. How do we see and then theorize about political action when much of it is covert (Morrill et al., 2003; Oliver, 1991)? There are conceptual problems. Power and politics are generally thought of as mechanisms to control people and pursue one's own interests (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Pfeffer, 1981, 1992). How do we start to think about politics as a vehicle for making progress? And there are theoretical problems. The existing literature has not established a solid foundation upon which scholars can either theorize political mechanisms or integrate politics with other processes. An article published in *Organization Science* in 2024 points out that organizations are conceptualized in the literature as political systems, but we have yet to integrate that thinking with the ways things get done within those systems (Levinthal & Pham, 2024; See also: March, 1962). Politics remains an independent stream of work.

The facts of my life and lived experience tell me that these challenges are worth confronting and overcoming. I have seen how politics can help unstick stubborn problems. I have seen how politics can make people's lives just a little bit better. I have seen how politics can open new avenues to economic prosperity for firms with very little power. Simply, I have seen politics work. In this dissertation I hope to contribute a hopeful and practical view of politics to the institutional theory literature. For me this is more than an intellectual exercise. As a citizen I see the problems our society faces. As a parent I am terrified that we will not find a way to solve those problems in time. What I can contribute to the solution is an integration of my experience with the literature through a qualitative analysis of a field of organization that finds ways to make progress.

*Nil Desperandum.*

## Introduction

Progress is meant to be the great work of the modern world. Fuelled by a moral duty to contribute to the construction of a better, more just world, rational actors pursue innovation and reform (Strang & Meyer, 1993). The result is to be the sweeping away of old, traditional modes of action and forms of technology in favour of new ways derived through scientific inquiry (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Together, actors in modern societies co-construct great institutions and organizations that are designed to facilitate the work of progress and keep the creation of newer and better humming along.

Why, then, do our institutions keep disappointing us? Both world news and the academic literature are replete with examples of institutions not yielding the outcomes we expect. The COVID-19 pandemic was punctuated by widespread resistance to public health measures designed by experts to keep people safe and an inability or unwillingness of political leaders to enforce compliance. Barley's (2010) scholarship has shown in detail how pro-business actors in the United States have worked systematically to undo the work of environmental and public interest groups through the construction of an elaborate field of actors designed to "corral government". These examples disappoint on two levels. We lament that specific opportunities to make meaningful progress have been stalled or squandered. What is more troubling is that these specific instances point to the failure of our institutions to steward and facilitate progress over time (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

Scholars have considered the question of how progress is made from many angles. A common theme is that politics has frequently been presented as the culprit in cases of progress impeded or delayed. Politics – once defined as a form of bargaining that occurs when "the arena of bargaining is not taken as fixed by the participants (March & Simon,



1958, p. 150).” – has become synonymous with the underhanded and unseemly pursuit of individual interests. The literature presents many versions of that self-interest seeking as ways that politics can impede progress. This happens when: powerful actors coopt the innovations of peripheral players (Leblebici et al., 1991), efforts to create more just working conditions are undermined (Kellogg, 2009), power is seized to subjugate opponents (Holm, 1995), new environmental standards are resisted (Shu & Lewin, 2016), and efforts to enhance government efficiencies and processes are confounded (Azad & Faraj, 2008; Læg Reid & Serigstad, 2006). A common storyline has emerged about the politics of progress. Opportunities to make progress beget political responses from actors seeking to advance their self-interests. Actors are then dichotomized as being for or against maintaining a status quo (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). This dichotomization is made starker when scholars select examples of progress for study that appear to be inherently virtuous. That means that supporters of the status quo are often the opponents of progress and possess the greatest capacity and resources to mobilize efforts to forestall that progress. The result is a depiction of actors engaged in a “war” in which progress is a frequent casualty (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Hoffman, 1999).

The challenge with this way of thinking about institutional politics is that it assumes a mutual exclusivity of the two fundamental roles that institutions are meant to play in modern societies. On one hand we expect institutions to have the power to constrain action to behaviours deemed appropriate within a given context (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). This institutional pressure to conform can be thought of as inherently resistant to change as it encourages routine, repetitive enactment of accepted modes of behaviour and interaction. On the other hand, we expect our institutions to be stewards of progress in modern life (Lounsbury & Wang, 2020; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). This

institutional pressure to make a better world encourages actors to critically assess existing tools and practices and make improvements when possible. That process is inherently political because the benefits of change are often ambiguous and place actors' own interests at risk (Oliver, 1992; Strang & Meyer, 1993; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). The canonical view of politics pits these two institutional roles against one another to explain how progress is impeded or delayed. But actors did make some form of progress in each of the examples of political impediments to progress mentioned above. This suggests that all or nothing, change or stability, win or lose tropes of power plays and political action are not sufficiently accounting for the rich and theoretically important variance in institutional outcomes.

My dissertation is designed to explore the complex relationship between politics and progress. It is essential, though, to establish from the outset that these are problematic terms. Progress is a term that inspires hope for some and fear for others. What has been called progress has been revealed – in the fullness of time – to have been destructive. Similarly, what has been decried as political action has – ultimately – proven to be constructive. I will return to the meaning of these paradoxical terms in the concluding chapter. In the meantime, I use the term progress more as a verb than a noun; to refer to efforts introduce new technologies and practices that solve problems or improve upon existing solutions. I use the term politics in the spirit of March and Simon (1958), to refer to efforts to negotiated resolutions to conflicts in which interests may be incompatible.

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between politics and progress at the institutional level of analysis? Taking the power and politics of progress seriously means theorizing from the assumption that in moments when progress is possible, actors must contend with the contradictory signals that can arise when the roles of institutions to

guide action and to facilitate progress come into tension. Barley's (1986) concept of occasions of structuring provides a compelling starting point for theorizing. He argued that critical to reconciling the introduction of new technologies – a form of progress – with existing structure are the interactions through which institutional participants negotiate the ways that roles, interdependencies, and interaction norms will adapt to accept and integrate those new technologies. Structure and action flow together as actors work out what needs to change.

I adopt this theoretical lens to study how the politics of progress unfolds within organizational fields. An organizational field is “a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field (W. R. Scott, 1995, p. 56; See also: Wooten & Hoffman, 2017).” Those interactions provide the essential space in which field actors can explore the meanings of institutional structures (Leibel et al., 2017; Zilber, 2011), discover alternative methods of action (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996), and, most importantly to my work, engage in debate and contestation of various issues and opportunities. It is through such interactions that field actors can both explore the influence of institutional structures on their own local, on-the-ground activity and influence those structures (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Leibel et al., 2017). I selected for my study the American telecommunications field, which includes a state regulator, many different types of firms, trade associations, and interest-based advocacy organizations. This is a field that interacts regularly to debate various elements of field structure and the forms of organizational behaviour that are condoned by those structures. It is also a field in which actors are well-practiced at using institutional processes as vehicles for

advancing their own interests and constraining those of their competitors. This made it an ideal setting for my exploration of the politics of progress at the field level.

In this dissertation I report the findings and conclusions of that exploration. Three fundamental research questions guided my exploration. First, I ask: What role does politics play in the portion of progress that does get made? That question is explored first in the literature review and theory chapter. There I review the relevant literature on the two roles of institutions: to facilitate progress and to control behaviour. It was through the comparing and contrasting of the scholarship on these roles that I developed the theoretical themes and potential contribution of this dissertation. Three themes emerged: the interaction of structure and action, the necessity of relational spaces, and the role of politics in “working out” how to make progress. These themes are fundamental to the study of institutions and politics. My interpretation of them opens new avenues to contribute to the management literature. Those interpretations and the specific research questions they illuminated are presented in the latter half of chapter 1.

Second, I ask: Do we need *more* politics? This is an uncomfortable question given the way many have come to expect politics to play out in the public square. But my findings suggest that more politics may be precisely what we need. Those findings arose from my analysis of a field-level political process. I select for my study a rulemaking process undertaken by the American Federal Communications Commission from 2006-2007. The process set rules for the use and auction of valuable radio frequency spectrum. During the process, a new and exciting opportunity to make progress was created in the form of a partnership to construct a new communications network for public safety agencies. The lack of such a system had hampered first responders for years and likely cost lives during mass casualty events – such as school shootings – and natural disasters –

such as Hurricane Katrina. I describe the methodological considerations and processes I followed to explore my archival data in Chapter 2. The findings of my research are presented in the subsequent three chapters. Chapter 3 presents the findings of a frame analysis (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Goffman, 1974) I conducted of the regulatory filings submitted by field actors during the rulemaking. Those findings form the basis of a new concept in institutional theory I have termed “zones of appropriateness.” Chapter 4 examines how opportunities to make progress are created through the carving out of spaces in which actors can consider how to adapt institutional structures to permit progress to take root. I show the essential role that politics plays in those efforts. Chapter 5 looks at how field actors then rush into those carved out spaces to debate the precise rules that will bring structure to them. This, again, is a highly political process of negotiating which of the existing elements of field structure should apply and the creation new structure designed to make progress possible.

The final chapter begins by presenting my conclusions on these first two questions. That involves both an exploration of the boundary conditions of my study and direction for the future of my research program. The centerpiece of that discussion is an assertion that we do need more politics, but of a particular form. Specifically, an integrative form of politics that allows actors with conflicting interests to pursue their own aims while contributing to the collective work of understanding and advancing the common values of the field (March & Olsen, 1989). I conclude the dissertation, though, by asking and attempting to answer one final questions: Why do institutions disappoint us? This is the primary question that has motivated my research throughout my doctoral studies. I begin by asserting that the fact that we still can be disappointed should be seen as a hopeful sign. We get disappointed because we dare to believe that wonderful things

can happen in our societies. Disappointment is felt when we feel that our institutions have failed in their role of guiding the creation of a better, more just world. Perhaps, I argue, that is an important part of the journey of progress. Through field level interactions, organizations do the important work of sorting through the progress we could make to find the progress that it is possible. Disappointment, then, may be a sign that our institutions are working as they should.

# Chapter 1

## 1 Literature Review, Theory and Research Questions

### 1.1 Literature Review:

Two of the roles that institutions are expected to play in our societies are relevant to this research. The first is the role of institutions in modern society to facilitate and shepherd progress (Lounsbury & Wang, 2020; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). The second is the role of institutions to guide conduct by defining the behaviours deemed appropriate within an institutional context (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). I take the view that making progress relies on the finding a balance between these two roles. For progress to be made, the behaviours that facilitate the development and implement of innovative solutions to technical and social problems must be deemed appropriate and encouraged. My review of the literature, however, revealed that scholars tend to think about these roles as being in opposition to one another. As a result, they see progress as either winning or losing, succeeding or failing based on how actors operate within extant institutional structures. Moreover, politics are often presented as the culprit when progress loses.

Here I examine the way scholars have come to that assessment by reviewing the existing literature. First, I explore the progress role. The obligation to contribute to the work of progress has been theorized as a central tenet of actorhood in modern societies (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). How to reconcile that obligation with the agency to self-interest has been a stubborn theoretical challenge. I then examine the role institutions play in shaping and constraining organizational behaviour. Scholars of institutional politics

and power have, perhaps, overstated the role of agency over institutional structure by focussing on questions of why and how organizations seek to control institutional structure (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017; See also: W. W. Powell & DiMaggio, 2023). Finally, I seek to integrate thinking about these two roles. That work reveals an encouraging finding. Even when politics gets in the way of the progress we might prefer, some progress is often getting made. That revelation lays the groundwork for the theory chapter that follows.

### *1.1.1 The Progress Role:*

We live in a time of amazing progress. Stories of great innovators and their scientific and cultural breakthroughs have become commonplace. Meyer and Jepperson argued that that flow of breakthroughs is a feature of modernity, starting: “Society is instrumentalized as a modifiable vehicle for...progress and justice (2000, p. 103).” As societies modernized, they secularized. The goal of reaching a better world through individual salvation was set aside and society was reorganized around the objective of creating a better world here on earth. The result was a gradual but fundamental shift in our institutions. Societies came to be organized “around universalized notions of progress and justice (Strang & Meyer, 1993, p. 501).” Religious collectives of individuals seeking the path to salvation were replaced with organizations in which rational actors sought to understand the natural world and how it could be shaped. This reorganization allowed innovation to flourish and facilitated the rapid flow of innovations throughout society.

The organization of society around progress and justice has meant that there is an endless flow of new problems to solve and new innovations to adopt. The potential for



change comes frequently and from many sources. Those sources range from social and technical innovations (Barley, 2020; Leblebici et al., 1991; Zbaracki, 1998), to praxis following the identification of institutional contradictions (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002), to institutional entrepreneurship (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Levy & Scully, 2007; Maguire et al., 2004), to regulatory changes (Holm, 1995; Oakes et al., 1998), to new social justice standards (Kellogg, 2009, 2011). These new solutions create an ongoing problem for organizations. On one hand, they exist in and are shaped by a society that instills in actors a moral duty to contribute to the work of progress (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Strang & Meyer, 1993). On the other, is the work of incorporating these changes into organizations with individuated objectives and interests.

Ideally, contribution to the collective work of progress helps organizations achieve their objectives. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic medical researchers and pharmaceutical companies were able to produce viable vaccines in record time. As the *New York Times* printed in October of 2023, that achievement was “a stunning success for medical science.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, that success was achieved in a situation in which the need to make progress helped firms’ bottom lines. The moral duty to save lives aligned with firms’ objectives and interests.

That alignment is not always present, however. Indeed, a primary objective of the “new institutionalism” has been to better understand the tension that arises when institutional pressures and organizational imperatives are not consistent (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations in modern societies are frequently in situations that pit a moral duty to support and facilitate progress against the practical imperatives of survival and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/15/briefing/attorney-general-barr-sandra-lindsay-russia-hackers.html>  
Accessed October 12, 2023

economic success. To explore the tension between these forces, Meyer and Rowan (1977) theorized a distinction between the rhetoric and reality of how organizations deal with powerful institutional requirements for how they operate and contribute to society. They argued that organizations are structured to appear to be following institutional rules while they engage in practices and process that may violate those rules but are practically useful. Organizations say they are doing all the right things while going on executing routines designed to meet their local objectives (See also: Zbaracki, 1998). This can seem, on its face, to be a cynical theory. It is not. Meyer and Rowan argued that institutional rules reflect and function as rationalized myths. Myth, in this context, should not be assumed to mean false or unfounded. Myth refers to the fundamental stories that make up the character and values of a society<sup>2</sup>. Organizations that adopt these myths as formal structure gain legitimacy because they are seen to be operating in ways consistent with societal values. Sometimes, living up to those values is precluded by performance- and interest-based imperatives. Rarely, though, do organizations so completely lose sight of the myth that they gain the dubious reputations and fates of the likes of an Enron.

We should think of this tension between contributing to progress and achieving operational imperatives as one that organizations face on an ongoing basis. Understanding how organizations manage that tension is one of the founding purposes of new institutionalism. From the beginning, neoinstitutionalists have focussed on isomorphism as a mechanism through which the tension is relieved (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Selznick, 1996). The canonical argument was that organizations seek legitimacy as a path to survival. To do that, actors look around among similar organizations and adopt the

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<sup>2</sup> I base this assertion both on my own reading of Meyer and Rowan as well as Meyer's other writings (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Strang & Meyer, 1993).

practices and ways of organizing that are most likely to bring about legitimacy. What followed was a wave of institutional scholarship that examined the ways that organizations came to look more and more like one another via the diffusion of legitimate practices. Soon, this led to a criticism that, however, that scholars were not sufficiently accounting for the role of agency and self-interest in institutional models (DiMaggio, 1988; Oliver, 1991, 1992).

Tolbert and Zucker (1996) were among the first to theorize about how that diffusion process might be susceptible to the influence of self-interested actors seeking to manipulate diffusions to favour their preferred solutions. They argued that organizations seek out new practices when they fail to meet performance objectives. Organizations, ideally, engage in rational processes to define the problems they are facing and solve them with solutions culled from their environments based on cost-benefit analyses. The process is susceptible to self-interest seeking, however. For example, champions of specific innovations will seek to sway organizations to choose their innovation even if it is not the rational choice.

This theorizing reflects the way that scholars had come to think about the tension between rational choice and self-interested action. Essentially, these were conceptualized as two separate paths to decision making, in this case about which practices to adopt from an environment. The first, and preferred, path was born of rational decision-making rooted in scientific enquiry and comparison. The second path was the route self-interested actors took to manipulate decisions through political action<sup>3</sup>. Tolbert and Zucker (1996)

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<sup>3</sup> See also Dean and Sharfman's work on organizational strategic decision making which argues that procedural rationality and political behaviours are independent paths for pursuing decisions (Dean & Sharfman, 1993).

argued that practices diffused through institutional environments in stages. The “theorization” stage was susceptible to the influence of the political actions and self-interest seeking because that was when champions would have the opportunity to manipulate how problems are specified and solutions are justified.

This bifurcated way of thinking about the rational, proper way and the self-interested, political way of doing things has been increasingly cemented in the literature. Subsequent scholars worked with this way of thinking about the theorizing of the actors they studied. In some cases, that work revealed the various ways that champions could influence diffusion processes. For example, Appelrouth (2003) and Rao and colleagues (2003) both included discussions of the role of journalists and thought leaders as champions and opponents of change. Appelrouth showed that the acceptance of American jazz as a mainstream art form was shaped by the response of classicists who abhorred the rule breaking and improvisation that are essential to jazz. Rao and colleagues showed that the press helped coalesce support for the movement toward nouvelle cuisine by highlighting the benefits of new over classic approaches to the culinary arts. These findings suggested that interpretations of the meaning of problems and solutions are fluid. That fluidity arises from both from the differing points of view of actors and how those interpretations evolve over time (Zilber, 2017). It is particularly through interactions at the field level of analysis that those interpretations are updated and potential solutions to social problems become suffused with meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

This led some to examine how theorization processes could be manipulated to legitimize specific practices within institutional contexts. Suddaby and Greenwood’s (2005) study of the legitimization of multidisciplinary partnership as advocated by the Big Five accounting firms is a compelling example. The Big Five had determined through

that they could enhance their economic performance by branching out from the traditional model of accounting practice by adopting a multidisciplinary model. Suddaby and Greenwood argued that from a purely market-driven rationality, the discussion of the accounting profession permitting multidisciplinary practice would be a foregone conclusion as it would support the maximization of materialistic objectives. What they observed, however, was a prolonged fight in which actors championing and opposing multidisciplinary practice were forced to confront the tension between institutionalized notions of professionalism embedded within the culture and governance of the accounting profession and the commercial interests of members (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005, p. 61). In the end, advocates of multidisciplinary practice prevailed and the professional body governing accountants accepted the new form of practice. But, first, the members of that body had to consider the implications of the change and reconcile the tension between the behaviours and structures traditionally values within the profession and the commercial interests of accountants.

This bifurcation of the paths to diffusion as rational or political has, unfortunately, become the accepted wisdom in the institutional literature. Ansari and colleagues (2010) demonstrated this thinking in their review and theorizing of how practices vary as they diffuse. One dimension of their model of was the “fidelity” of practices as they were adopted. They assigned some blame for the “low-fidelity” adoption of practices to politics. They argued that such low-fidelity adoptions of diffusing practices are the result of actors either insisting on adoption to serve their own interests (i.e. championing (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996)) or political resistance to those adoptions from intraorganizational actors. In such cases, the technical merit of diffusing practices is

typically stripped away, and adoption moves from technical to ceremonial implementation (Ansari et al., 2010).

This scholarship reflects how challenging it has been to incorporate Meyer and Rowan's theorizing about the tension between rationalized myths and organizational imperatives. Rather than exploring the tension between myth and imperative, the literature has adopted the view actors *either* engage in the rational, technical adoption of better ways or they manipulate the adoption process to achieve self-interested aims. One example of a scholar exploring the tension in their theorizing was Zbaracki's (1998) study of the diffusion of total quality management (TQM). The study found that the once promising set of tools and practices that made up the original technical core of total quality management got stripped away as the practice moved from innovation to fad<sup>4</sup>. The inclination of many institutionalists would be to blame the adopters of the practice. They simply did not take the time to understand the TQM practices and tools and opted for ceremonial adoption. They then claimed to be using the practices simply to garner legitimacy without putting in the work. Zbaracki saw it differently. While many ended up adopting TQM rhetorically, different actors were variously faithful in their adoption of TQM. Zbaracki wrote that "...the models presented here suggest that the use of TQM rhetoric has a seriously technical intent; the social construction of TQM is not simply a symbolic process (1998, p. 630)." Zbaracki's attention to the intent of TQM implementers reflects an effort to integrate the influence of the myth – in this case the societally valued goal of achieving rationality in decision making through scientific interventions – with the reality that adopting technically advanced tools is just really hard.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of how a few actors have faithfully resurrected TQM as a technical practice see: (Ansari et al., 2010).

What is compelling about the TQM example is that it gives us a way to think about what we often code as “failure” without resorting to questioning the intentions of adopters. This section began with the idea that we are surrounded by progress. Newer, better technologies and practices show up all the time. That constant arrival of progress has given us the impression that the trajectory towards a better world is an unbroken, exponentially accelerating path into the future. Indeed, Meyer and colleagues’ (2000; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1993) theorizing is rooted in the idea that progress is a societally mandated objective that is accomplished through the work of actors on the ground who use rationality to develop the newer, better ways of doing that we refer to as progress. How then are we to account for failure? TQM represented an opportunity for organizations to make progress in the way they made strategic decision through the use of technically sound tools and practices. This is an important reminder that the road to progress can be a circuitous one. The shoulders of that road are littered with the detritus of efforts to make progress that failed (Barley, 2008; DeJordy et al., 2020; Schneiberg, 2007). These failures are an essential component of the work of progress. Indeed, these are not really failures. After failing hundreds of times to make a working lightbulb, Thomas Edison famously quipped that he had not failed 1,000 times, but rather had learned 1,000 ways how not to make a lightbulb.

Schneiberg and Soule’s (2005) study of rate regulation in the United States is a rare example of a paper that specifically addresses the tension between the forces of (1) cultural determinants like the pursuit of progress, (2) diffusion as imagined by neoinstitutionalists, and (3) politically shifted institutional orders. The paper draws attention to and seeks to clarify how those tensions play out in a specific context. They construct a model that depicts institutionalization as a multi-level, contested process. The

answer to the puzzle of how institutions evolve is not which of the forces prevails, but how they interact. The paper detailed how citizen collectives, firms, advocacy groups, regulators, and legislators processed the competing interests of rate payers and rate setters. Explaining this effort requires taking all the forces seriously and examining the ways they reinforce and oppose one another. The resulting system of rate regulation did not choose sides. Rather, it was a set of settlements that allowed for competing principles and logics to operate concurrently. The authors wrote that "...these settlements constituted not a unitary or isomorphic insurance system, but rather a fractured field characterized by variations on core themes...and the combination, recombination, and persistence of multiple logics and forms (2005, p. 128)."

That article marked the apex of the effort to integrate the forces that compete to control the progress that gets made. The authors understood that progress did not require agreement, but rather settlements among competing views of the possible. Put another way, progress operates as a rationalized myth. Rather than an end state, progress is a series of provisional, hard-fought settlements that accumulate over the long run. While progress may be halting, the legitimacy and worthiness of making progress endures as a rationalized myth in the modern society (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The salve to the frustrations of making progress is the belief that someday the myth will be made reality.

### *1.1.2 The Control Role:*

Fundamental to theories of institutions is that they affect and control actors through the influence of taken for granted conceptualizations of what constitutes appropriate conduct (Jepperson, 1991). That systemic power is made manifest through institutionalized processes of socialization, professional standards and norms, and routine



processes that induce and enforce compliance (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). Systemic power works because actors take for granted that there exist limits and requirements on the roles actors inhabit and the ways those roles interact and are interdependent with one another within an institutional context. Individual actors are not powerless over these forces, however. Actors possess the ability to act strategically, in various ways, to resist and change the institutional structures that guide behaviours and enforce compliance. This is referred to as episodic power (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). For, example, one of the ways that actors can act strategically is to resist the control of the institutionally expected standards of conduct (Oliver, 1991, 1992).

The fundamental logic behind these two forms of power is a duality of institutional and agentic forces. Systemic power is the primary force that preserves the stability of institutional structures over time. Systemic power enforces compliance with the existing, taken for granted ways of doing things in a context (Jepperson, 1991; Mills, 1956). Episodic power is the force that promotes change. Inherent in theorizing about the use of episodic power is that such attempts are rooted in the intention to seize control of institutional structures. Such control grants actors the power to pursue their self-interested objectives (Levy & Scully, 2007; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). Once in position of power over institutional structures, actors can manipulate those structures and, in turn, the behaviours they require (Holm, 1995). This thinking has led to a conceptualization of institutional power as an ongoing battle to control the structures that control action on the ground (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012). What Hoffman called “institutional war” (1999, p. 367).

Petter Holm’s (1995) study of the power dynamics of the Norwegian fishing industry provides a case study. At the beginning of Holm’s story there was a clear and

institutionalized role structure in the fishing industry. The greatest share of power was held by fish merchants who acted as wholesalers. They accumulated catches from fishing families and took them to market. Since fishing is a seasonal industry, merchants could demand the lowest prices at the top of the season. Excessive supply rationalized that reduction in price at precisely the time that fishing families needed to maximize income to survive during off seasons months. This was seen as entirely appropriate in Norway in the 1920s. Holm argued that the situation could be “explained by the class bias of Norwegian politics at the time. The merchants were core constituents of the ruling liberal-conservative coalition, while fishermen, peasants, and workers were but marginal groups within the Norwegian polity (Holm, 1995, p. 406).” The role structure in the fishing industry gave merchants power over fishers. The norms of the broader society gave justification for that power imbalance. Various legal and regulatory precedents supported that status quo.

Then two things changed that led to the upending of the power dependencies. First, fishing families forged a coalition with the rising liberal party that opposed the traditional social structure. Second, fishing families seized the opportunity when the liberal party took power by lobbying for change. An alliance that had been forged outside of the halls of power was activated when power in government changed hands. The result was the creation of mandated sales organizations (MSOs), a form of seller cartel, that gave fishing families monopoly control over components of the fish trade. Power dynamics were inverted. This meant that fishers each got an average price for the catch they delivered to market rather than having to accept the merchants’ price on the day their catches happened to come into port. As in the previous role structure, government control enforced the system. Government action created MSOs and police departments would

ensure that fishers abided by the new rules. A new dominant coalition set about deinstitutionalizing the status quo and established a new set of coercive structures and requirements that gave fishers a power previously enjoyed by merchants. This new set of power dependencies would reign in the fishing industry for more than 60 years, until the winds of political change shifted again. MSOs were systematically weakened and then replaced (Holm, 1995).

Holm's study is an especially vivid articulation of how politics is conceptualized at the institutional level. Actors are categorized into one of three groups of combatants: supporters, challengers, and referees. Supporters are the group of organizations that possess the greatest share of power at the beginning of the fight. These organizations benefit from their positions of power in several ways. These include the power to: resist or coopt innovations (Leblebici et al., 1991), influence definitions of appropriate conduct and actorhood (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), and take advantage of unfolding environmental changes (Maguire et al., 2004). Not surprisingly, these organizations seek to cement their power through the institutionalization of favourable norms, structures, and practices.

Barley (2010) described the most robust and coordinated version of such an effort in his study of the creation of an intricate network of actors and strategies designed to curb growing regulatory intervention and scrutiny in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. The eventual field of organizations included trade associations, advocacy groups, corporate political action committees, and public relations, law, and lobbying firms. Together these actors presented a "choir" of voices against over-regulation and contributed to the re-emergence of a pro-business policy paradigm in Washington. The effort did not just seek to influence government decision making. Actors actively worked

to embed individuals in government jobs who would act and regulate in pro-business ways. This undertaking reflected an understanding that regulative authorities, such as state actors and professional bodies, play an important role in the legitimization of organizational behaviours (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011).

Challengers, then, have a steep hill to climb to effect change in a field.

Challengers are actors whose interests would be served by a fundamental change in the social order. They understand who has power and why as well as the dominant conceptualization of the norms and rules action in the field. And they tend to have very different visions for how the field *should* operate and how their own roles would change in that alternate reality. They use politics to pursue fundamental changes in the field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). Social movement mobilization is often the source of change efforts (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). These movements produce conflict by articulating how institutional forces allow corporate actors to cause and perpetuate social problems. Political action can destabilize the status quo and create opportunities for change to be made. Over time, social movement actors learn from one another and adapt their tactics in different local context (DeJordy et al., 2020).

The final category includes the various actors that referee the disputes among supporters and challengers. Typically termed regulative actors or governance units, this category includes such actors as state regulators, professional bodies, and accrediting bodies. Regulative actors are generally conceptualized as being internal to a specific organizational field. That is, the term refers to state regulators that oversee a specific segment of a market or society. The term does not, generally, refer to the broader state apparatus (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). The role of these actors to referee disputes reflects their obligation to oversee the “smooth

functioning of the system (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 6).” It is likely that that focus on smooth operations influences the quality of settlements that they broker. Referees that are most focussed on smooth operations may be more focussed on ending conflicts and returning to normal actions than in seeking to resolve the competing interests that underlie conflict.

This image of institutional power and politics has been described as one of institutional war (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Hoffman, 1999). The clearest articulation of this image comes from Fligstein and McAdam’s (2011) theorization of strategic action fields. They conceptualize these fields as meso-level social orders that provide the context for contestation among actors. The ongoing fight between supporters and challengers constitutes an ongoing “constitutional struggle” over control of who does what and why in a field (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005, p. 122). Settlements in that struggle – typically imposed by regulative actors – bring varying levels of stability to the field depending on the entrenchment of the underlying beliefs about how the field should operate. The more settled a field, the more likely it is that actors can maintain their positions. But that relative stability is conceptualized as the result of the most recent settlement of the constitutional struggle as opposed the “expression or enactment of some taken-for-granted principles (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005, p. 128).” As a result, settlements are expected to be temporary and require regulative enforcement while in effect.

So, we have a clear plot in the story of institutional stability and change. Institutions have the power to shape and control action in a context. That power is coveted by actors who use their own agency to seize control of institutions so that they can determine what behaviours are subsequently deemed appropriate. This thinking appears to have its roots in the theorizing of sociologist C. Wright Mills who introduced

the idea that positions of power in large, institutionalized organizations, such as banks, universities, and government agencies, are “command posts”. Control of the command posts permits actors a level of control in societies. Mills argued that this network of command posts constituted the bases of power through which the social elites controlled the conduct of citizens and maintained their elite status (Mills, 1956). This thinking continues to hold sway over scholars. Zald and Lounsbury (2010) argued for a return to the coordinated study of elites and command posts to enhance the power and authority of social movement actors seeking to redress inequality. Levy and Scully (2007) used the work of Gramsci to argue that institutional entrepreneurs could use their knowledge of institutions and personal characteristics to become “modern princes” with the power to unseat hegemonic incumbent actors. It is understandable that some actors, especially social movement actors, would see the path to change as including the unseating of the powerful actors who seek the stability of the vary institutional practices that social movements coalesce to eradicate. The construction of a view of change that requires the expulsion of such actors and their policies makes intuitive sense.

The question that remains, however, is whether this approach is likely to identify pathways to making progress. Does control of structure need to change hands for progress to emerge? At a theoretical level, there is good reason to conclude that progress is more likely to arise from within status quo systems when actors either (1) initiate change through the strategic enactment of their roles, or (2) find ways to work together to solve problems. The first category, working strategically within existing roles has its theoretical roots in the work of Christine Oliver (1991, 1992). Oliver’s primary research question lay in understanding how institutionalized structures change. She argued that much of the impetus for those changes came from the assessments of actors that institutional processes

were impeding their ability to achieve their individuated strategic goals. Oliver's perspective challenges the underlying concept of social movement scholars that actors are easily divisible among insiders who support institutionalized structures and outsiders who seek to replace those structures. Rather, Oliver argues that organizations are actively sorting through institutional requirements on their conduct. This effort is the mechanism through which these organizations balance their potentially competing desires to conform with institutional expectations to achieve legitimacy and to pursue self-interested objectives. As a result, actors will strategically respond to institutional processes in ways that balance these goals. Oliver's typology of those responses ranged from acquiescence to avoidance to manipulation of institutional processes.

An empirical example that mimics Oliver's thinking came from Leblebici and colleagues study of the American radio broadcasting industry (1991). They showed how powerful actors used their positions as central players to take advantage of the innovations of less powerful players. As they artfully describe, radically new practices are introduced by "shady traders, small independent stations, renegade record producers, weaker networks, or enterprising advertising agencies (1991, p. 358)." Initially, central players seek to resist that radicality by using their resources to maintain the status quo. Eventually, competition among central players leads to the adoption and legitimization of radical practices. In such cases, radical ideas and their renegade progenitors become the test beds of future institutionalized practices. Proofs of concept at the periphery create a pool of innovations. Powerful players adopt those practices as tools for competition among dominant players. Along the way, those new ideas become accepted standards of organizational behaviour. Other scholarship has deeply embedded this idea of leveraging the innovations of fringe player (Burt, 2004; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Perry-Smith

& Shalley, 2003). Fringe players are often sought out as sources of innovative ideas and practices. Their ideas may be threatening. But they play an important, valuable role in the construction of progress at the field level because, as Leblebici and colleagues showed, dominant players pay attention to these players and sample from their ideas strategically.

This example substantiates Oliver's theorizing because it examines some of the mechanisms through which change, innovation, and progress can take root in an institutional context without having to burn that context to the ground. Oliver's (1991, p. 174) objective was to draw the attention of scholars to the middle ground between "[c]aricatures of organizations as passive recipients or political manipulators of institutional pressures." I agree with this assessment and argue that the political activity that occurs in that middle ground deserves a second look. Fundamentally, examining the interaction of the institutional and the political has been at the heart of neoinstitutional theory from the beginning. Oliver (1991, p. 173) is among those who have reminded scholars of "DiMaggio's...recommendation that institutional and political models should be regarded as complementary tools for understanding institutional phenomena." So long as scholars operate under the assumption that politics are an inherently negative force working against progress, we will continue to struggle to understand how and why progress does emerge. And politics will remain a segregated stream of research in the management literature; a state of affairs that has been pointed out as being an impediment to understanding collective processes of adaptation and change (Levinthal & Pham, 2024).

This review of the literature has attempted to show how scholars have approached theorizing about the ways institutions control behaviours and how behaviour controls



institutions. When institutions are included in analyses, they tend to highlight a series of tensions that, fundamentally, come down to whether actors' conduct is guided by institutional forces or their own self-interests. What emerges from those tensions is the primary impetus of my research and dissertation: to figure out how to get institutional pressures to promote progress and justice can align with the profound ability of actors to shape their own actions and, in turn, their environments. Perhaps too often, that alignment is not achieved. It is those moments that we look at our institutional and see that they have been barriers to progress. Disappointment in those moments is understandable. Next, I turn my attention to trying to understand how some of the various elements of the literature suggest ways to reconceptualize the way we think about, and therefore study, the tension between the self-interest and the collective interest.

## **1.2 Theory**

### *1.2.1 Analysis of literature*

Perhaps the ideal scenario in a modern society is for the two institutional roles to come into perfect alignment with the goal of making a better, more just world. Meyer and colleagues have argued compellingly that the impetus for progress is deeply engrained in modern societies (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Strang & Meyer, 1993). We are surrounded by evidence that our societies can do great, important things together. In the better world to which we aspire we imagine that institutional structures align to keep societies moving forward, making progress. It is demoralizing to compare that world to the world we live in. In this world, we are also surrounded by evidence that actors are willing and able to set aside the collective effort at progress to pursue their own

self-interested aims. In those moments, we tend to feel disappointed in our institutions. When medical science produced the Covid-19 vaccine I felt elated. Soon after, that elation was replaced with great disappointment when political institutions appeared stymied by actors resisting the implementation of the vaccination at levels required to stem the tide of the pandemic as quickly as possible. Others were disappointed and then elated by the same sequences of events.

In response to outcomes like these, some institutional scholars have focussed on getting actors with preferred values and intentions into power (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Levy & Scully, 2007; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). This way of thinking replaces the societal alliance for progress imagined by Meyer with a series of political battles over control of institutional structures. In so doing, these conceptualizations of institutional struggles for control have pitted the role of institutions to facilitate progress against the role of institutions to shape what behaviours are appropriate against one another. The former may still operate in the background, but the latter leads to back and forth of control that impedes the making of tangible progress. Put simply, politics is the impediment to progress.

There are two fundamental challenges with this thinking. One is practical. If we really believe that institutional politics comes down to a war for control, then victories in that effort will always be pyrrhic. Sustained progress towards a better, more just world is virtually impossible. The second challenge is theoretical. Thinking about institutional politics as a fight for control assumes a mutual exclusivity of the two fundamental roles that institutions are meant to play in modern societies. That imagines that only structure *or* agency, self-interest *or* collective interest can be active at once. This form of thinking is inconsistent with theorizing about the role institutions play in guiding action in a

context. Actors within institutional contexts exist within a “constraint/freedom duality” (Fararo & Skvoretz, 1986, p. 227; See also: Jepperson, 1991). Institutions guide action by supplying actors with conceptions of which actions are legitimate. Those conceptions are not restrictively specific, however. As in the rules of grammar, a person has a sense of the appropriate ways they might construct sentences and statements, but in a specific moment that actor has freedom within those constraints. This echoes Giddens’ (1984) argument, echoed by Oliver (1991), that constraints on action also constitute opportunities for action. Meyer and colleagues wrote of the construction of actors in modern societies who are socialized to pursue progress. That socialization instills in actors a moral duty to contribute to the work of modernity (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Strang & Meyer, 1993). Actors are also incentivised to pursue progress in by the more immediate rewards that they might achieve. As Leblebici (1991) and colleagues pointed out in the radio broadcasting industry, that pursuit may destabilize the very institutional structures that had facilitated and protected central organizations’ power. They pursued innovation anyway.

So, there are instances when actors can simultaneously pursue their own interests while contributing to the work of progress. This assertion raises again an old question in institutional theory: can we integrate thinking about institutional models with political models that explore how self-interest is sought? Or, put another way, can we isolate and amplify the role politics play in instances when progress *is* made?

It is virtually impossible to do that with the conceptualization of politics we are working with now. Lawrence and Buchannan (2017, p. 480) defined institutional politics as the “interplay” of institutional control and institutional agency. To them, institutional control was referred to as the capacity of institutions to control actors’ behaviours and

beliefs. That control is achieved through systemic power, which relies on “routine, ongoing practices to advantage particular groups without those groups necessarily establishing or maintaining those practices (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017, p. 480).” Because systemic power and its beneficiaries prefer existing structure, it is assumed that they oppose change. Change, then, is achieved through institutional agency. That agency is enacted through episodic power which is defined in similarly malevolent terms as: “strategic acts of mobilization initiated by self-interested actors (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017, p. 480; See also: S. Clegg, 1989)”. This construction of institutional politics is indicative of a way of viewing politics that plagues the management literature. Scholars see politics exclusively as a vehicle for achieving and maintaining power. With that mindset, it is easy to see why politics would be thought to be primarily a barrier for progress. Actors are too busy fighting for control that they never get around to making progress of the form that Meyer and colleagues imagined.

Consider the story told by Shu and Lewin (2016) in their study of Japanese regulators’ effort to enhance emission standards among automakers. They portrayed a political story that pitted the most powerful firms against an informal coalition of regulators, environmental groups, and Honda Motor Company during the 1970s. Honda was then a smaller company competing for market share against the likes of Toyota and Nissan which jointly controlled as much as 70 percent of the Japanese market (Shu & Lewin, 2016). The political fight was over emissions standards. The dominant firms opposed stricter emissions standards on the basis they were technically impossible to achieve with existing engine designs. Environment groups and regulators insisted that the standards must be met. Then Honda announced it had an engine that was compliant. I suspect most would end the story at this point and argue that the political efforts of the

dominant coalition of automakers was foiled by the arrival of a technological achievement. A rare story of David defeating Goliath. Fortunately, Shu and Lewin's analysis was astute to the deeper political dynamics at play. State regulators were able to impose stricter emissions standards, but not only because of Honda's technical prowess. The new Honda engine led to a substantive shift in the public debate over emissions control because it "exposed inconsistencies in the claims of the existing dominant coalition (Shu & Lewin, 2016, p. 1052)." Without the work of regulators and environmental groups using the new engine to call the arguments of the dominant automakers into question the result might have been different. Politics nearly cost the Japanese progress on emissions standards. Then politics saved that progress.

This is a surprisingly common plotline in the literature. Azad and Faraj (2008) studied how government employees learned to accept a new computerized records system after 11 years of resistance. Kellogg (2009, 2011) examined the decades long, multilevel process needed to make meaningful changes to the working conditions of surgical interns in hospitals. Laegrid and Serigstad (2006) analysed the path that Norwegian homeland security agencies went through to create a new, integrated ministry of security. While coordination improved, the model solution was not implemented. Barley (1986) compared the implementation of CT scanners in two hospitals with varying results. As shown above, Leblebici and colleagues (1991) documents how the cooptation of fringe actors' innovation led to changes in institutional structure and process in the radio broadcasting field. In each of the papers, the story begins with an example of an institutional change that appears inherently virtuous. Scholars then track the process through which actors in the context of the change struggle to make that change a reality. In some cases, the outcome is a half measure, in others there is variation between sites, in

others the triumph of progress takes over a decade. Implicitly or explicitly, the blame for those circuitous or disappointing outcomes is laid at the feet of political action. But if politics was working *only* against progress, none of those papers would have any progress to report at all

What we need is a conceptualization of institutional politics that theorizes how politics is responsible both for some of the delays and diminutions of progress as well as that portion of progress that is achieved. Papers like the ones I mentioned above provide a great deal of contributions to that revised concept of institutional politics. Three themes arise from this sample of papers.

#### *1.2.2 Making Progress within institutional structure and action:*

First, opportunities to make progress must often be implemented within the context of existing institutional structures and ongoing action (Barley, 1986). There are very few truly blank spaces within which novel solutions can be implemented. The literature often looks at the set of a priori conditions as barriers to the faithful implementation of new ideas and solutions. That position is rooted in the conclusion that existing structures are the result of the influence of powerful actors who have rigged the context to serve and protect their own interests (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012). There are also perspectives in the literature that suggest that the structures and ongoing action that precede the moments when progress is possible can set the conditions for actors to work out what portion of a new solutions can be implemented and how (Barley, 1986; Lægreid & Serigstad, 2006; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). Laegreid and Seristad's (2006) study of efforts to reform the Norwegian governments apparatus for managing and assessing homeland security risk demonstrate the relevant dynamics. The opportunity to

make progress in their study came from a commission report that recommended substantial changes to how the various government ministries and agencies involved in homeland security were organized. The commission recommended replacing the existing network model. In that model, different ministries and agencies operated separately and shared the data they deemed relevant with other departments. The report argued for a hierarchical model that subjugated these departments to a specialized ministry of homeland security. Most of the existing departments, including the powerful defense and justice ministries, rejected the model and argued for greater coordination among existing departments. The sitting government of Norway supported that conclusion. In the end, a refinement of the existing model was chosen over the “radical” hierarchical model. The scholars wrote that this was “incremental and not seen as optimal by either side (Lægreid & Serigstad, 2006, p. 1407).”

While this solution may have been suboptimal, it does reveal the ways that existing structure can constrain the quantum of progress that is possible at any particular moment in the evolution of an organizational field. For example, the defense ministry was reticent to give up to other departments their traditional authority over military responses to national threats. The authors point out that that reticence was rooted in the values and norms of the existing department. Those values and norms dictated the range of potential progress that the department and its leadership was willing to accept. Interestingly, the tension between the defence and justice ministries was mimicked by a tension between their respective oversight committees in the Norwegian parliament. Frankly, it seemed entirely unlikely that either camp would have accepted a radical solution like moving directly to a hierarchical model under a new national ministry of homeland security.

Looking at this detent and seeing only obstinance, however, misses a set of important features of the debate. Most importantly, supporting the hierarchical model necessitated accepting assumptions that were unlikely to be true. For example, the model assumes that top-down control by a new ministry is even possible in the existing context of institutionalized departments. It assumes that a newly formed organization *could* have the power to alter the relationship between the existing departments that existed in the field. It was unlikely that such a power could exist in the existing structure. As the authors pointed out, in homeland security fields the wish to better coordinate operations is often greater than the willingness to adopt the changes necessary to make that wish come true. The existing structure likely would have made successful implementation of that model impossible. Once that aspirational, but practically improbable, model was set aside, the options that were left were actually plausible. The paper concluded on a cautiously hopeful note that the resolution represented “a robust and flexible solution able to handle the unpredictability and unforeseen character of the tasks...and thus a promising solution to the coordination challenges of the field. In what direction it will develop in practice remains to be seen. (Lægreid & Serigstad, 2006, p. 1410). It is to the implications of the final sentence, that I turn my attention now. As this paper implied, the real character of the solutions developed in Norway would ultimately be determined by how they were implemented and how that implementation led to the adaptation of how activities were coordinated among the various organizations in the field.

### *1.2.3 Making Progress Requires Relational Spaces.*

Many opportunities to make progress are presented to fields of organizations like gifts. Here, the progenitors of new solutions seem to say, is the answer to all your



problems. In many cases, as observers of our institutions in action, we see the merit and promise of those gifts. That is why we end up disappointed when our institutions fail to steward progress through the gauntlet of history, structure and self-interest that define field-level processes. The reality, however, appears to be that those gifts are simply the beginning of complex interactional processes in which organizations sort out what is possible from what is mere folly. As in the foundational argument of Aristotle, acorns do not necessarily become oak trees. But under the right circumstances and, perhaps, with the right tending, they can grow into great oaks. Interactions, even political interactions, are the means through which field actors set the circumstances and tend to the cultivation of opportunities to make progress.

Kellogg's (2009) work theorized the importance of these relational spaces through the study of a fight over the introduction of more just working conditions for surgical interns in hospitals. In that study, relational spaces were areas of isolation, interaction, and inclusion. Isolation referred to isolation from the defenders of status quo practices. Isolations allowed change agents to form shared understandings of their oppositional identities and frames. The mechanism for forming those oppositional frames and identities was interactions among actors from different ranks and roles outside of daily tasks. That element of inclusion of actors from different ranks and functions was also essential to forming a unified collective of reformers that could withstand the resistance of status quo defenders that would be encountered outside of these relational spaces. This contribution is important because it draws attention to the collective nature of making progress. Coalitions and alliances are an essential building block of political interaction. For a political solution to a problem to be identified and implemented, there needs to be enough support for change that the dominant, powerful players in the space realize that

they will need to take the effort seriously and seek to find a solution outside of the normal implementation of power and authority in the system (March & Olsen, 1989; J. Scott, 2001; Wrong, 2017). We sometimes assume that political mobilization of coalitions is rooted only in creating the ability to meet the power of leaders with strength in numbers. It is important to remember, however, that leaders also have the power to identify when practices become inconsistent with the values and aspirations of the context. In those cases, political mobilization can include more powerful actors in the cause of change and progress. Kellogg found exactly that to be the case. Hospital administrators eventually mandated changes to intern's working conditions at some sites. The most potent resistance came from surgical residents who would be the actors most disadvantaged by the change. Improving interns' working conditions did not mean there was less work to do. That work had to be taken on by others. Resistance from those individuals is understandable, even if it constituted resistance to progress.

Political conflict between coalitions plays out in many forms of relational spaces. Organizational fields are one such relational space (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). One of the objectives of field scholars is to understand how the phenomena and mechanisms identified and directly observed at the organizational level – such as in a hospital – may transfer to the field level. Some features of fields suggest that transferability is likely. For example, field actors are described as being “profoundly aware” of the goings on within their fields, in particular to the dependencies that exist between the organizations and its external environment. Further, like individuals and departments within organizations, organizations interact “frequently and fatefully” with one another in their fields (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017, p. 56 citing Scott, 1995). Indeed, it is through those interactions that

fields dynamics may shift and change (Barley, 2010; Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Maguire et al., 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zilber, 2011).

A challenge with field-level studies, though, is that it is difficult to observe how coalitions form and are maintained. Within organizations, that work can be accomplished with ethnographic methods (For examples see: Baldrige, 1971; Kellogg, 2009; Pettigrew, 1973; Zbaracki & Bergen, 2010). At the field-level, studies tend to portray inter-coalition battles. The method of choice for these analyses is to examine the discourse, rhetoric and framing of mechanisms of field dynamics (Leibel et al., 2017). Leibel and colleagues (2017) have argued that these analyses, however, give a static view of how interactions among field actors unfold. Methods like framing analyses give a static view of field-level interactions and meaning making because they often rely solely on the public statements and archival documentation of interactions. Interesting findings can be inferred from such data. For example, Barley (2010) used secondary data to chart the creation of an institutional field of pro-business interests in the United States. Additional mechanisms were identified, such as lobbying, public relations campaigns, and the placing of sympathetic actors in positions of governmental authority. Even in that study, though, the story of how pro-business interests insinuated themselves into the public policy apparatus of Washington remains static.

I argue that one of the reasons why this is the case is that many of these studies using analyses like frame analysis to try to show who wins contests at the field level. They become case studies that adopt the field-level war construction of self-interest seeking actors having at one another in the efforts control the spoils of those wars. This approach forces scholars to rely on a number of assumptions about the contests they are observing. First among those assumptions is that the organizations on the various sides of

these contests represent coordinated coalitions with grand designs on controlling institutional structures. As a result, the political mechanisms through which progress is made often escape analysis. For example, frame analysis was originally designed to understand both how actors understand and interpret their environments *and* how they seek to influence the interpretations of others (Goffman, 1974). Scholars have largely forgotten the former objective and focusses frame analysis on the second. Framing contests are examined to understand which actors won the interpretive battle and then controlled subsequent action (Kaplan, 2008). A more dynamic view of field dynamics would be aided by bringing the collective interpretive component of framing back into analysis. This would allow scholars to better explore how meaning is made within fields (Leibel et al., 2017; Zilber, 2017). That form of empirical approach is more likely to reveal how actors work out how progress is made as opposed to how control is won and exerted.

#### *1.2.4 Progress is Aided by Political Negotiation.*

The third and final theme that appeared across the papers I reviewed was that of political negotiation. Before showing how this applies to field dynamics, I first must clarify what is meant by *political* negotiation here. March and Simon defined politics as the form of bargaining that occurs when “the arena of bargaining is not taken as fixed by the participants (March & Simon, 1958, p. 150).” What did they mean by that? Bargaining, they argued, is one style of conflict resolution that is used by groups – such as organizations or nation states. Bargaining is used when two conditions are met. First, parties’ goals are different. In union bargaining, for example, it is the goal of the organizations to minimize the cost of the agreement and it is the goal of the union to

maximize the value it can extract for its members. Second, persuasion is not going to be the path to an agreement. A union is not going to convince management that maximizing the economic value of the agreement is in their best interest or inherently virtuous. Instead, bargaining will involve “acknowledged conflicts of interest, threats, falsifications of position, and (in general) gamesmanship (March & Simon, 1958, p. 150).” Bargaining becomes *political* when the assumption is dropped that bargaining is a structured process between pre-determined parties over a finite set of issues. For example, a union becomes political when the parties draw in outside interests and participants, such as the news media, government actors, and like-minded compatriots. The goal of making something political is to remove the bargaining from the strictures of the power and exchange dependencies that exist among the parties by calling on strength in numbers, legitimate authority of higher powers, or risks to the reputation of opponents.

Two elements of March and Simon’s theorizing warrant greater attention considering how scholars have come to perceive politics. The first is the role of tactics, like threats, deception, and gamesmanship. March and Simon noted that these are the “paraphernalia” – meaning the equipment needed for a particular activity – of bargaining. These paraphernalia are contrasted to decision making based on problem solving, which involves the search for additional information and alternatives to solve the underlying problem. Bargaining relies on different paraphernalia because the goal is not to resolve the underlying conflict of interests, but rather to bring an end to conflict and facilitate a return to action. The literature, on the other hand, reflects a much more extreme assumption that the goal of politics is to achieve dominance and control over others through gamesmanship and deceit for the purpose of advancing one’s own interests. As I have acknowledged, this may, in fact, be the goal of some actors. In those cases, however,

the goal is domination and not a politically negotiated resolution to conflict. When we observe political “gamesmanship” we should not leap to the conclusion that the goal is achieving domination over another party.

The second element of March and Simon’s theorizing that warrants greater attention is the “extent to which bargaining “solutions” represent appeals to shared values...rather than a struggle in terms of persistence, strength, etc. (1958, p. 150)”

March and Simon’s theorizing is rooted in the idea that the disagreement about goals is a “fixed” element of conflict dynamics. That is why persuasion is not seen as a viable pathway to agreement. As a result, frankly, March and Simon sidestepped the role that values may play in political negotiations. Elsewhere, though, March and Olsen (1989) took up this issue directly by making the distinction between aggregative and integrative political process. Aggregative processes are those which actors use to politics to pursue their own interests. Positions of leadership are used as bases of power to broker among those interests as well as to pursue the leaders own interests. Integrative processes are those in which the process is about seeking to understand the meaning of shared values and how to pursue ends consistent with those values (March & Olsen, 1989). If we accept that these two approaches are theoretically possible, then the way we tend to think about politics as the pursuit of self-interest is less an endemic failing of politics and more a failing of how politics has been used. We have gotten used to politics being about self-interests alone. And so, when we observe political action, we tend to assume that it is only about seeking self-interest. Levinthal and Pham (2024) adopted this way of thinking about intraorganizational politics in their recent paper. They talked about politics as a set of contests through which self-interest is sought *instead* of the collective interest.

The view of politics that the literature has adopted reflects the reality that we have forgotten that politics can be a mechanism through which actors seeking to understand and pursue the collective good. Instead, we have decided that politics is a set of tactics that are used to pursue self-interests over the collective interest. It should come as no surprise, then, that many individuals shy away from engaging in politics (Gandz & Murray, 1980). Scholars are not alone in their cynicism about politics. But this means that our collective discomfort with conflict and distaste for politics has meant that we have set aside one of the primary means through which conflict can be resolved and the collective interests can be better understood. An example from the management literature shows the impact of this thinking in organizations. Zbaracki and Bergen (2010) conducted an ethnographic study of the fallout of the introduction of a new manufacturing technology on a firm's pricing routines. The new technology created huge cost savings. The marketing team believed that the pricing routine should be updated such that those savings be applied to list prices to entice customers. The sales team wanted to keep prices stable and leverage the savings to offer discounts during the sales process. The Vice President in charge asked the teams to sort out the problem amongst themselves. What ensued was described as a "political battle" in which an organization that had been operating well and collaborating devolved into a set of departmental coalitions that fought for their respective positions. Eventually that battle ended in a "deadlock" and the VP was forced to make a decision that ultimately favoured the marketing team more. In response, the director of the sales team said: "You've got to move on. You can't keep fighting it. It is pointless. You have to move on and make it work (Zbaracki & Bergen, 2010, p. 966)." This story follows the common plot for how we think about politics. A change in circumstances, in this case of technology, led to a battle among different factions to

control the implications of that new technology. Both sides focussed so narrowly on their own interests that they were not able to reach an agreement. A settlement had to be imposed by a higher power.

Two important implications arise from this story. The first is that most actors are averse to engaging in protracted political battles. When the opportunity to end hostilities was presented, the sales department accepted a settlement that was detrimental to their interests and then pledged to “make it work”. In that firm, the decision to stop fighting determined that the outcome of the battle was aggregative. A broker, the VP, chose which party’s interests would be best served. We are left to wonder what might have happened had the sales department resolved to keep fighting. Would their interests have prevailed? Or would the further process have led to a solution that allowed both parties some measure of success by identifying outcomes that could serve the collective interest?

There is reason to believe that further politics might have helped. Ganz (2023) used modelling techniques to explain that, over time, political “chaos” can lead to desirable exploration of alternative outcomes. An important question, then, is under what circumstances do actors opt to engaging in that politically aided exploration? As Zbaracki and Bergan (2010) showed, the answer has to do with how actors discern the value of exploration vis a vis the value of calling a halt to hostilities. There were, at least, two moments of discernment that were clearly important in the pricing example. The obvious one was the decision of the sales department to call off the fight by accepting the VP’s decision. That outcome is consistent with how we have come to think about politics. There is a fight. Then there is a winner and a loser. Then the winner enjoys the spoils of war. But there was another moment that preceded the decision to end the fight which often escapes the attention of scholars. Long before the *détente* between sales and



marketing, the Board of Director of the firm had been persuaded to invest \$24 million to construct the factory that allowed the massive cost reductions in the first place. That decision, which may well have been a political battle too, set the subsequent process in motion. Ironically, when the director of sales said that they would need to “make it work”, the entire company was already in a process of making the effects of the \$24 million investment in a new factory work. By focussing narrowly on each battle, we run the risk of missing the importance of the broader campaign. It should be noted that Zbaracki and Bergen’s story was one of the politics of making and then living with progress in the form of a more advanced manufacturing system.

This leads to the second implication highlighted by this paper. What does it mean to “make it work”? As I pointed out above, we do not have a lot of studies of field-level processes of making it work. They tend to adopt the classic political model of winners and losers (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). From Zbaracki and Bergen (2010) we can see that political contestation is an element of making it work if we peg the beginning of the episode they studied as the decision to fund the new plant. In the papers I reviewed above we see signals of a role for politics at the field level of analysis. Schneiberg and Soule’s (2005) study of institutionalization as a multilevel process certainly makes ample room in their theorizing for political action. Shu and Lewin’s (2016) study of the creation of higher emissions standards for Japanese automakers takes a similar view. But in each study the analysis stopped at the moment when a settlement is reached and then works backward to determine the causes of the settlement.

Perhaps the best example of an institutional story of making it work comes from Barley’s (1986) study of the aftermath of the introduction of advanced computerized scanners – CT machines – two hospital radiology departments. Barley’s analysis focussed

on how the new technology led to different changes in role and power relations in the two hospitals. Historically, radiologists had interacted very little with the technicians who conducted scans. Those interactions never included discussions of the interpretation of the results of scans. The scripts for those interactions had been developed over the long history of analog imaging in hospitals. The introduction of computerized imaging could not be accomplished with the existing interactional scripts. The most senior radiologists had not been trained to read and interpret these scans in medical school. This necessitated the creation of different role relations with the new group of technicians brought in to conduct computerized scans (i.e., CT techs). The two hospitals that Barley studied hired different groups of technicians. One opted for more experienced CT techs and the other less. Those choices resulted in different effects on role and power relations in the two departments. The department with more experience techs ended up with a more decentralized role structure. More experienced techs interacted differently with radiologist, resulting in greater consultation and mutual execution of tasks. Yet, the fundamental features of the roles of tech and radiologist remained. For example, CT techs still expected radiologists to have greater knowledge of disease and to make diagnoses. But the relations among the roles that supplied the information necessary to make those determinations changed while implementing the more advanced scanners.

Barley's work puts some of the challenges of "making it work" in perspective. Even when societies are constructed to facilitate the work of progress, local collectives must do the work of figuring out what accepting and implementing a change will mean for their existing norms, roles, and interactional scripts (Barley, 2020). In Barley's example, that meant changes to roles and the relations among those roles. Two features of that change are essential to consider. The first is power relations. Senior radiologists

found themselves in a difficult spot when they had to confront the truths of computerized scans. The newer scans were objectively better and would save lives. And they did not know how to conduct or interpret the scans. Reconciling those truths meant a material change in the role relations among senior radiologist and technicians. That senior radiologists were willing to accept those changes is a testament to the organization of the medical world relative to progress. Even when adoption of new technology meant becoming more dependent on techs, senior radiologists put patient care ahead of their own self-interest (Barley, 1986).

This reveals the second feature of these changes that must be considered. Barley's central contribution to the sociology of work was the reconceptualization of technology as social objects and the explication of organizational structure as an unfolding process rather than an end state. There are two tasks to perform when artifacts of progress – in this case a new technology – arrive at the doorsteps of local contexts. The first is to discover the use of the artifact, which involves questions about its function, operation, and intended contribution. One can imagine both a calculative analysis of the suitability of the solution followed by a side-by-side comparison of the various versions of the artifact leading to the selection of a specific one. The second task requires asking more challenging questions about the meaning of the change to the local context. In Barley's hospitals, those questions were answered through interactions. By working with the technology the newly constituted teams each formed agreements about how the roles would work together to make use of the scanners. It is understandable then, these two teams would come to different agreements. While the inputs were roughly the same – the same new scanners – the same institutional structure a priori – how interactions unfold in each hospital constituted different ways of making it the progress promised by the new

scanners work. Through those interactions, the elements of the institutional structure had to adapt in different ways.

Barley (1986) selected the term “occasion for structuring” to describe what he observed in the hospitals. This reflected the view of structuring that it is an ongoing process of the coming together of “a flow of ongoing action and as a set of institutionalized traditions or forms that reflect and constrain that action (Barley, 1986, p. 80).” So, when the new scanners showed up in the two hospitals, how they were used and the interactions around and in that use combined with traditional structure to create a new set of new ways of doing tasks and relations among roles. This unfolds over time, though many interactions. Barley’s theory, though, was that eventually some form of those new ways of doing and being would become institutionalized, and variation would fall away. Common scripts would be adopted across local contexts and procedures would become more and more alike...at least until a new change arrived.

Barley’s (1986, 2020) work suggests that there is an important distinction to be added to the way we might think about aggregative and integrative politics. We can think of “making it work” as the set of interactions needed to implement a brokered decision. As in the pricing example, the VP decided on a path forward. It fell to the departments to make that decision work. Contrast that to the homeland security reform example. A commission recommended a network model that was ultimately rejected. So too was the extant model. Rather than making the recommended model work, the agencies and committees worked out a new model based, in part, on the extant structures and beliefs of the field (Lægreid & Serigstad, 2006). Perhaps, then, we can think about integrative processes as less about making something work and more about working out how something *should* work. As in Barley’s CT study, that process can lead to different

processes and different outcomes in different settings. I suggest we need to know more about how to work things out and focus less on how to make things work.

### **1.3 Research Questions:**

I have explored existing theorizing and empirical findings regarding a tension between two of the fundamental roles of institutions play. On one hand is the role of institutions in the stewardship of progress. Institutions in modern societies are organized to facilitate progress and justice (Strang & Meyer, 1993). Actors in modern societies are trained and socialized such that they have the skills to create innovative new solutions and a moral duty to put those skills to use (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). It is understandable, then, that we are disappointed when we encounter examples of the failure of institutions to steward progress. During the Covid-19 pandemic we experienced a situation in which medical science created a lifesaving vaccine with stunning speed and efficacy. We then felt the disappointment when our political institutions failed in their role to ensure that the vaccine was implemented sufficiently. I have argued that this suggests that the stewardship role had come into conflict with institutions' role in enforcing standards appropriate of organizational behaviour. Fundamental to how we think about institutions is that they have the power to shape and constrain the conduct of the actors within a context. For progress to take root, we need these two institutional roles to be operating in concert. What scholars have found, however, is that progress can be impeded at various stages by actors who place their self-interest ahead of the collective interest. This is most problematic when such actors hold positions of power in institutions. Through that power, actors can manipulate institutional structures to protect and serve their own interest (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). Actors use political action to seek and hold on to those

bases of power. The result is an ongoing war for control of institutional structures (Hoffman, 1999; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). Under such a framework, it is easy to see how progress could be forestalled. And as a result, politics is often presented as the culprit when progress is not achieved.

My analysis of the literature found one major problem with the canonical view of institutional power and politics: *progress is getting made*. Examination of the portion of progress that does get made revealed three insights. The first was that progress can be made without seizing control of and throwing out all institutional structure. But that form of progress requires actors to attend to the integration of progress with the existing structure of the field. The empirical findings suggest that when progress does get made, political battles are more focussed on what elements of structure must be adapted rather than who will control those structures. Second, when progress gets made there is a relational space in which different coalitions of actors can come together to imagine what progress would mean and how to go about achieving its implementation (Kellogg, 2009). Those efforts, though, can be very challenging to observe empirically. So, field scholars are most often left with archival data showing the positions that various actors in what are present as political battles. Instead of seeing those political battles as interactions that can help progress along, scholars have tended to adopt the view that they are little more than framing contests. This misses the important work that may be going on in those interactions to understand the meaning of progress and how to achieve it within the existing context of actors and structures. Finally, I observed that political negotiation among actors is an important ingredient in making progress. The presence of negotiation can make the crucial difference between actors arriving at *détentes* or finding ways to combine interests and pursuing the collective good. I have referred to the latter as

“working it out”. A substantial and understandable impediment to that negotiation taking place is that most people are uncomfortable with political action and are sometime too eager to see conflict cease. But the ceasing of conflict does not necessarily mean that the conflict has been resolved. For inspiration into how those conflicts may be resolved, I drew on the concept of occasion for structuring. Barley’s work shows progress can be implemented the coming together of “a flow of ongoing action and as a set of institutionalized traditions or forms that reflect and constrain that action (1986, p. 80).” The difference comes from the interactions among actors. Those interactions serve as a form of ongoing negotiation through which the actors work out what progress will mean and how to adapt institutional structures to permit it to be implemented.

The thread that weaves its way through these three insights is that they each point to political mechanisms as the means through which progress – however modest – gets made. This leads to an uncomfortable question: Do we need more politics? In the pages that follow, I outline a series of research questions designed to facilitate research that explores the ways that politics can help us make more progress. I have three sets of questions to pursue with my empirical data to try to determine if the “more politics” thesis has merit. The first has to do with how power operates at the field level and how that power influences progress. The second set of questions asks how politics might help actors work out what progress to pursue and how. The third set of questions examine how existing structure might guide and promote progress.

### *1.3.1 The Influence of Power on Progress:*

What is the influence of power on the progress that is made? My review and analysis of the existing literature reveal that the canonical description of the role of power as a source of controlling institutional structure and action is, at minimum, not able to satisfactorily explain the portion of progress that does get made. I argue that the challenge scholars face in understanding the role of power in progress lies in the way systemic and episodic elements of power have been adopted in the literature. In essence, systemic and episodic power are viewed as separate and, often, opposing forces (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). Thinking about power that way leans, still, too heavily on the explanatory power of resource dependence theory. If systemic power is the expression of the power help in institutional structures, then episodic power should be used to control those structures. Hence the construction of an ongoing battle over control of those structures. I have no doubt that there are specific events in which that dynamic adequately explains field dynamics. Ongoing political headlines certainly reflect those dynamics.

But if we want to understand the portion of progress that is getting made, it is important to set aside that resource dependence theorizing in favour of a conceptualization of power that allows for systemic and episodic power to work together to facilitate progress. The most promising conceptualization in the extant literature is that of power as a relational phenomenon (Jepperson, 1991). Power is relational in the sense that it is an effect of social relations, rather than a commodity that a specific actors can hold wield (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017, p. 480). If social relations are central to our theorizing, then it is important to attend to how those relations operate within the strictures of institutional structure (Barley, 2008; Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Barley's



(1986) CT study is predicated on the idea that radiologist willingly accepted the new scanners. Their professional standards and training required them to embrace a technology that could help diagnose and treat patients better. Barley documented how radiologists had to give up some of their power to implement and fully utilise the new scanners. This is an example of systemic and episodic power working together to ensure that progress was being made.

The way that field dynamics are often studied obscures the ways that actors might work together to make progress (Leibel et al., 2017). There are suggestions in the literature, as I have shown above, that there are circumstances under which dynamics can facilitate progress. The question is what those circumstance might be? I suggest that there are two important places to look for those circumstances. The first is the roles that exist among field actors. If the power to make progress is relational in nature, then actors must be willing to seek and accept opportunities to make that progress. Inside an organization, for example, there are actors with the authority to direct employees to pursue progress. The board of directors did that in Zbaracki and Bergin's (2010) examination of changing pricing practices in a manufacturing firm. Are there actors at the field-level that have the sole authority to make such commands? If power is truly relational, then it will be the interactions among multiple actors that will be required to create and pursue opportunities to make progress. In that case, *who are the actors* who together determine what progress gets made?

A second place to look for the circumstances that facilitate progress is the how actors in a field make discernments about *when* to pursue progress. Modern society is such that innovations arrive in a constraint flow of new technologies and practices that could be used to make progress. What we have seen in the institutional literature is that

there is a difference between arriving at an innovative solution and clearing the structural barriers to the implementation of those innovations. I have shown that actors make discernments about whether to fight for or against progress. Look again at the pricing battle in the manufacturing firm. There were two pivotal moments in that story. The first was when the board was convinced to invest in a new manufacturing facility. The second was when the sales department decided to stop fighting and “make it work”. How are those moments selected or constructed at the field level? Leibel and colleagues (2017) have argued that field-level interactions – even political interactions – should be studied for their role in meaning making. Perhaps one such mechanism for meaning making is the sorting through of the many opportunities to make progress and selecting those to explore further. If that were the case, there would be evidence in field level interactions of actors seeking to understand both what problems require solutions and what solutions are viable.

### *1.3.2 The Politics of “working it out”:*

The next step in making progress would be finding ways to work out how to facilitate making those solutions realities. Actors need to work out both what solutions to implement and how to clear the institutional barriers to that implementation. This requires looking at politics in a different way by asking what political dynamics and mechanisms might actually facilitate progress? The literature suggests that is it possible to observe this form of political action. Ganz (2023), using simulated data, found that under some circumstances politics can aid in exploration. To Ganz, exploration refers to the process of seeking out new ways of accomplishing tasks and performance objectives (See also: March, 1991). Put another way, exploration is about seeking out alternatives. Those

alternatives represent opportunities to make progress by implementing new ways to solve old or stubborn problems. It is a long-held tenet of neoinstitutional theory that field actors seek out ways to interpret their problems and find solutions by looking around their fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). The conventional wisdom is that politics is utterly unhelpful to this process because we see politics as a purely self-interest seeking process. As a result, scholars have not studied how politics might help in processes like adaptation (Levinthal & Pham, 2024; c.f. Rerup & Zbaracki, 2021). And, so, it remains an open question how field-level politics could function as an exploratory process. One important consideration in understanding those politics might be figuring out what constitutes a viable alternative at the field level. If it is true that no single actor has the power to demand that progress be made, then there may be merit in examining how the viability of alternatives is constructed. I argue that, at the field level, an alternative is viable to the extent that relevant actors believe it solves the underlying problem *and* are willing to contribute to the implementation of those alternatives in material ways.

### *1.3.3 Structure as Facilitator of Progress:*

A significant challenge to the kind of constructive political exploration I seek to identify is the dense web of interests and interdependencies that exists at the field level. Exploration of the type that Ganz has studied typically occurs within an organization. The work that organizations do to explore new solutions certainly has an institutional component. Ganz' (2023) theorizing reflects an acknowledgement that who participates in a particular decision process will have an influence on the outcomes of that decision

because they will bring their own interests to bear on the process. That is not treated as a vice, but a virtue of the process. Divergent interests can create chaos. And they can be harnessed to find novel solutions. As the literature shows, field actors excel at creating political chaos that can preclude rather than support progress. Scholars have argued that when progress fails it is due to actors engaging in a politics of control. They seek to seize control of institutional structures to achieve their own interest (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017).

This way of thinking about politics is the basis of the belief that systemic power in institutions – the power that arises from institutional structure and practice – is primarily a force against progress. Structures are barriers to progress because they keep actors from breaking out of the “make it work” mindset and exploring ways to construct alternatives. The occasions for structuring concept suggests a different way to think about the role of structure in progress. Barley presented structuring as the coming together of action and structure. He argued that technological change is capable of “triggering dynamics whose unintended and unanticipated consequences may nevertheless follow a contextual logic. Technologies do influence organizational structures in orderly ways, but their influence depends on the specific historical process in which they are embedded (Barley, 1986, p. 107).” To make progress, things need to change. Change triggers processes with a host of often surprising consequences. Structure is what brings coherence to various moments of change across time. For example, Barley showed that interactional scripts evolve through many changes in practice and structure. They are not set aside and rewritten from scratch when a change in practice or technology occurs. Scripts, then, are one form of institutional structure that carries the contextual wisdom of a context forward. Others would include roles, role relations, power dependencies and so on.

How might a similar process unfold in field-level interactions? One of the common interactional forms analyzed in the institutional field literature is the framing contest (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Kaplan, 2008). In such interactions, actors tend to use their conceptions of how things do work as a basis either of change or stability in structure depending on their own views of the change at issue (Leibel et al., 2017). It is the institutional equivalent of a manager responding “that’s not how we do things here” to an idea from a new employee. Structure is used as a litmus test for the viability of new solutions. The framing contest interactional trope assumes that the interpretation of the winning contestant prevails. Subsequent action follows on from that interpretation. Actors make the interpretation work. If we look at the same situation from a “work it out” perspective we might see the deeper benefits of framing. Frame analysis was originally designed to understand both how actors understand and interpret their environments *and* how they seek to influence the interpretations of others (Goffman, 1974). In that spirit, looking at the viability of new solutions through the lens of existing structure could reveal ways in which the solutions should be modified or trailered to a given context. Frankly, even the obstinate resistance of field actors to progress could carry important insights about why to reject or how to refine a specific alternative. The question is whether field actors are tuned into those signals and how they are incorporated into how they work out how to make progress.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Methods

#### *2.1 Research Design*

The study of politics has largely occurred in segregated streams of research in organizational theory (Levinthal & Pham, 2024). Institutionalists have long called for politics to be more deeply integrated into analyses (DiMaggio, 1988; Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017; Oliver, 1991; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). As a result, designing a research project to study the politics of progress at the field level required examining and adapting the methodological approaches of scholars seeking to theorize similar questions. My research design brought together insights from three sources. First, I drew from other studies at the institutional level of analysis, in particular Barley's work on structuring and field politics (Barley, 1986, 2010, 2020). Second, I constructed my analytic framework using the logic of theorizing with microhistory. Finally, I drew on my own lived experience to aid in the selection of a field and case for analysis. Here I describe how each of those sources of inspiration influenced my research design and data analysis. Then I describe the historical case I selected for this study and my data analysis.

From Barley (1986), I drew inspiration from the idea that the adoption of new technology creates opportunities for structuring. That form of structuring and the methods Barley used to theorize it are relevant to my work for two reasons. First, Barley studied progress being made. That progress arose, in part, from the willingness of hospital radiology team members to adapt their work process and power dynamics – two critical elements of institutional structure – to implement the new CT scanners. The work of that

adaptation occurred through the interactions of team members. Barley's theorizing about that process and methodology for studying it were both rooted in symbolic interactionism (Barley, 2008). The symbolic interactionist approach is one of the ways that scholars can observe the ways that elements of structure are negotiated among actors over time (Strauss, 1978). In the CT study, those negotiations appear not to have risen to the level of politics – per the definition I use here – as the arena or boundaries of the negotiations were fixed in several respects. There was a clear power structure, institutional history, and ways of coordinating interdependent tasks. Through interaction, those elements were re-enacted and renegotiated to varying degrees in two hospitals, but the arena remained fixed.

I had to consider if the occasions for structuring concept could be applied to political interactions at the field level of analysis. That consideration was guided by Barley's (2010) later work examining the creation of a field of organizations with a shared interest in encouraging more pro-business regulation of American industry. That study documented the development of an array of political strategies enacted by lobby groups, PR campaigns, foundations, and political appointees to influence the negotiations of policy that occur in regulatory processes. Barley argued that through the activities of these various individuals and organizations the regulatory "tenor" of government became more friendly to business interests. I observed important similarities in this study as compared to the earlier CT study. Most importantly, what Barley observed being negotiated and changing were the elements of institutional structure that guided action in these two contexts. In the field-level study, Barley attended closely to what the various actors in the archival dataset were doing. He observed a range of activities from influence campaigns to securing control over institutional command posts, such as the appointment

of friendly regulatory commissioners. These activities are political – in the colloquial sense – in that they seek to control structure and action for self-interested purposes. Barley (2010, p. 780) also focussed on the “linkages” among the various actors that “structure the populations into a field or system.” Over the period Barley studied, several new institutional roles were created and then linked into existing roles and ways of doing things within and around government. As a result, institutional structures began to change. This is the element of the Barley’s study that was the most political, in my view, because it set aside elementary assumptions of who the players in Washington were and what they were doing. It set aside the idea of fixed boundaries on the arena of political action. Once that assumption is dropped, then change can be observed and theorized as the result of the mutually constitutive forces of structure and action. Viewing field-level action and interaction in this way allows the observer to see both the ways that politics is guided by institutional structure and the effect of politics on those structures over time. Thus, I concluded that the occasions for structuring concept was not only appropriate for field-level political analysis, but that that it would be a viable analytic approach to breaking away from the common ways of seeing politics as *only* institutionally subversive self-interest seeking.

So, following Barley (1986, p. 80), I define structuring as “simultaneously ... a flow of ongoing action and as a set of institutionalized traditions and forms that reflect and constrain that action.” I also follow Barley by making the interaction the unit of analysis. In the case of this project, interactions occur between organizations<sup>5</sup>. I argue that

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<sup>5</sup> Imagining organizations as interactants is objectively challenging. Field scholars have approached this problem obliquely in one of two ways. Some have used ethnographic methods to observe human interactants in situ and then theorized institution-level phenomena based on those observations (See: Barley, 1986; Zilber, 2002, 2011). Others have observed organizational conduct at the field level, often using



adopting this definition and approach at the field level also creates an opportunity to build on Barley's work. The CT study began with the implementation of the new scanners. Studying progress at the field level can allow scholars to observe the action that precedes implementation. In those moments, my data will show, actors must figure out when to set aside the strictures of field structure and imagine new ways of doing things. That is a stage of the work of progress that I refer to as the carving out of a space within which potential progress can be explored. In my findings and discussion, I refer to opportunities to make progress. By that I simply mean a process of first carving out a space for progress to be explored within followed by a process of structuring that space.

I drew additional inspiration for my analytic framework and coding practices from microhistory research (Hargadon & Wadhvani, 2022). Thinking about how opportunities for progress get created and then pursued at the field level requires taking seriously that different actors are likely to have different interpretations of what a problem is and what solution is likely to solve that problem. I selected microhistory as it directs the attention of scholars to how the situated interpretations and motivations of individual actors contributes to how problems are interpreted (Hargadon, 2016; Hargadon & Wadhvani, 2022). Sufficient variation in those situated "points of view" enables theorizing about how conceptualizations of social problems yield institutional change (Wadhvani, 2018). That theorizing is rooted in a comparison of situated action and interaction within the processes of continuity and change that emerge over time (Hargadon & Wadhvani, 2022).

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archival data, as the basis for their theorizing (See: Rerup & Zbaracki, 2021; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Both are viable analytic strategies because the objective of field-level research is to understand how the relational space of the field operates as a meaning making context in which actors seek to understand events. I may be an outlier in calling the debates that occur among organizations a form of interaction. My goal is to respond to recent calls to see field-level doings as interactions in the hope of constructing a more dynamic image of what goes within field-level contexts (Leibel et al., 2017).

For example, Wadhvani (2018) used an analysis of the history of savings banks to show how changing societal ideas about poverty shaped the development of the institutional form of these banks. In turn, bank practices – even architecture choices –transformed. Action and institutional form are viewed as mutually constitutive forces of change. This was on full display in Hargadon and Douglas’ (2001) study of the introduction of the electric lightbulb. They showed how Thomas Edison built his disruptive electric lightbulb to mimic its gas-power antecedents as closely as possible to ease the adoption of what was a radically new technology. Edison made the structure he was trying to replace an asset. As it was for Edison, these processes of change are rife with political activity. Microhistory invites scholars to take the longer view of the historian when observing those politics. Rather than focusing narrowly on who won or lost a specific battle on a particular day, microhistory seeks to understand how those battles lead institutions to evolve over time. Studying the battles creates the datasets necessary for observing and theorizing that evolution.

Microhistory is well suited to my research because it provides a lens to view politics as more than reflexive opposition or interest seeking. Microhistorians see political interactions as a way of understanding change because political action is a window into how actors interpret problems and solutions as well as the institutional structures in which they arise. I believed that such an approach would be necessary if I hoped to understand both how opportunities for progress get created and how they become structured through the interactions of field members. As I have shown, a common approach to field-level politics has been to focus on the use of episodic power to gain and exert control over institutional structures. That approach is rooted in the idea that actors use their agency to pursue their own interests. To a microhistorian, that is only part of the story because the

resulting change is viewed as having its root in and being shaped by the institutional structures that are evolving. Specific episodes of conflict and political action are the interactions that bring continuity to that change over time.

To select a specific field and case for my analysis I drew on my lived experience and institutional knowledge. I worked for three and a half years as an advocate for organizations in the American telecommunications sector who participated in Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rulemaking processes. The American telecommunications sector constitutes a mature organizational field because it has stable and routinized interaction norms, a strong mutual awareness of field actors, and a stratified hierarchy in which elite firms are distinguished by scale and reputation (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006, p. 28). Leblebici and colleagues' (1991) analysis of changes in the radio broadcasting segment of this field demonstrates this maturity. This is important to my study because in mature fields there can be assumption made about how actors engage with one another and participate in field-level interactions. These assumptions include that actors are aware of the organizations that constitute the field and have histories of interacting with those organizations in field-level processes. As a result, they have at least an impressionistic understanding of those organizations' interests, the resources they wield, the allies with which they commonly collaborate, and so on. Further, organizations in a mature field know and understand the processes through which decisions are made that influence the field and are well practiced in engaging in those process from having gone through them multiple times. Put simply, organizations in mature fields are steeped in the structures of the field (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017).

The importance of this is that actors in mature fields know how to work within existing structures. That knowledge can be important for actors engaging in political

action. Knowledge of interests allows actors to identify potential allies with similar or compatible interests. Practice engaging within field structure can provide experience in the construction and mobilization of those allies into political coalitions. Particularly important to my research was my experience working within these politics of the field. That experience was essential to observing how field actors engaged in political action to create specific opportunities to make progress and the structuring processes that followed. Going into data analysis I had a baseline understanding of questions like: Who did organizations commonly ally with? Whom did they oppose? On what issues were they considered knowledgeable or influential? Within sets of allies, who would be expected to hold sway? Each of these questions is relevant to which actors the FCC would be interested in hearing from and being influenced by on an issue-by-issue basis as field actors worked through the finite details of technical solutions and their potential to affect field structure and dynamics. My experience allowed me to observe nuances that exist among firms of various sizes, the power dependencies that typically exist between service providers and suppliers, and the role played in policy debates by trade associations and advocacy groups.

Beginning a research project with this baseline of knowledge about the field aided in my analysis and theorizing. First, my analysis was aided by understanding the boundaries of the field and which organizations constituted that field. Fields are not simply the collection of organizations that happen to participate in a common sector. Fields are constituted by the “frequent and fateful” engagement of organizations in a common meaning system (Hoffman, 1999, p. 352). That engagement occurs through “common channels of dialogue and discussion” (Hoffman, 1999, p. 352). Understanding that a field has been constituted in this way requires the observation of organizations

engaging in dialogue about issues that are “important to the interests and objectives of a specific collective of organizations” (Hoffman, 1999, p. 352). Observation of that level of dialogue is more challenging than it might seem. Indeed, I worry that scholars may impute their own assessments of both what issues are important and what interests organizations are pursuing through their field-level engagement. Experience in a field provided me with contextual knowledge that gave greater confidence that I was observing issues and interests faithfully. Similarly, when scholars are imputing their own assessments of issues and interests onto field actors, they may be more likely to engage in the categorization of organizations as good and evil or for or against the progress the scholar values most. To see how political action aids in the making of progress it is important to see actors and their engagement with issues in a more nuanced way. I believe that my experience with the field helped me do that for two reasons. First, I was starting the analysis with a sense of the fundamental issues at play in the field. Second, I understood the ways that actors generally went about engaging with issues and pursuing their interests. To borrow an expression from the world of dance: I knew the moves. I found this was exceptionally helpful in overcoming the notorious difficulty of observing political action. This was partly because I knew where to look and because I could observe when action deviated from common interactional patterns and ways of presenting arguments.

## *2.2 Case Selection*

That experience also helped me know that FCC rulemaking processes are most often the processes through which issues are debated and interests are pursued. These processes make for excellent research opportunities because they bring together field

actors to discuss issues and advance their interests. Some of these rulemakings are more consequential than others. For example, among the most consequential are those that set the rules for the use of radiofrequency spectrum. “Spectrum” is the resource used by, among others, wireless service providers and television broadcasters to deliver services over the air. It is through rulemaking processes that the FCC sets two types of rules to govern spectrum assignment and use. Spectrum assignment, beginning in the 1990s, was generally done by competitive auction<sup>6</sup>. Organizations bid on the specific licenses. Rulemaking processes determine the rules for those auctions. Rulemakings also determine how the spectrum is to be used once it is auctioned. These “service rules” establish the requirements for the use of specific licenses, such as the type of services that can be deployed, the size of the geographic areas covered by each license, and performance and renewal requirements. These rulemakings are consequential because wireless services providers require spectrum to operate. Spectrum is a finite, naturally occurring resource and, therefore, scarce.

Rulemaking processes are also consequential because they provide one of the venues within the relational space of a field in which actors discuss and debate the important issues they face. Often, these issues relate to the maintenance and change of field structure. FCC rules themselves are an element of structure. Securing rules that permit a particular form of organizational behaviour has tangible impacts of the services and innovations available to consumers. More generally, rulemaking processes are used to establish and advocate for various other elements of institutional structure. For example, the role structure of a field can be reinforced or changed by the outcome of

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<sup>6</sup> For a concise summary of FCC auction authority and processes see: Federal Communications Commission, *About Auctions*, <https://www.fcc.gov/about-auctions>, Accessed April 16, 2024.

these processes. As can the requirements for how the holders of those roles interact with one another on the ground. Understanding this consequentiality, actors are incentivized to engage in rulemaking processes both to secure favorable practical outcomes for their own interests, but also to shape and manipulate the institutional structure of the field. Rulemakings would be one of the mechanisms used by the pro-business field described by Barley (2010) to advance deregulatory policies in the United States.

The specific rulemaking process I selected to be the focus of this research was undertaken by the FCC from 2006-2007 to set the service and auction rules for the 700 MHz spectrum band. In the 1990s, the major American television broadcasters opted to transition their operations to high definition. The technical requirements of that decision meant that they vacated their previously held spectrum in the 700 MHz spectrum band. Though that spectrum was not suitable for high-definition television broadcast, it was incredibly valuable for wireless voice and data services. The value of this spectrum added to the consequentiality of the rulemaking, which meant that a wide cross-section of field actors participated in the rulemaking by advocating on an array of issues. It was that assembly of actors and issues that drove the selection of this rulemaking. As defined by Hoffman (1999; See also: Wooten & Hoffman, 2017), fields are constituted by two things: actors and issues. To theorize about field-level political dynamics I thought it essential to ensure that my study captured, at least, a representative sampling of those actors and issues. Organizations can be considered “field actors” when two criteria are met. First, they interact at the field level to pursue their interests. But not all actors that pursue their interests via field-level interactions should be considered field actors. The other necessary condition is that actors engage in those interactions via the common meaning system of the field (Hoffman, 1999, p. 352). To my mind, field actors do that by

engaging both to pursue their own interests *and* to explore and advocate for their interpretations of the issues before the field.

Issues are much more challenging to define specifically. A number of field scholars have invoked the language of issues but tend to leave the definition of the term to the reader's imagination (Exs. Barley, 2010; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Hoffman, 1999; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017; Zilber, 2017). Two common elements are evident in how those scholars described and invoked the idea of issues. First, the word issue tends to be invoked when the subject matter being discussed transcends the organizational level of action and decision making. For example, Hoffman (1999) refers to "environmental issues" and Barley (2010) to "policy issues". From these invocations of the term, I take that an issue involves the discussion of a subject matter that then guides action at the organizational level. Put another way, issues are the topics of discussion and debate at the field level that guide actions at the organizational level. In a mature field, these issues may have been discussed many times and may continue to be discussed repeatedly with the effect of maintaining field structure. In other cases, new issues or new ways of seeing old issues may yield change in structure and then action at the organizational level. The discussion of issues at the field level is one of the ways, then, that organizations receive guidance about what action is deemed appropriate on the ground. The second theme is that of coordination among actors to develop that guidance. Organizations "take" issues to the field level to explore their meaning and interpret how to go about formulating the guidance about what conduct at the organizational level will be deemed appropriate among field actors (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Increasingly, field scholars have come to the conclusion that a multiplicity of meanings are active and operating within fields at any given time (Zilber, 2017). One way to think about an issue, then, might be those questions



of policy and coordination that arise from the dissonance that is created by multiple meanings. One can understand how organizations might want that dissonance reduced. The incentive is to attend field-level interactions with the objective of constructing guidance that permits the pursuit of interests. Field politics can be broadly understood as efforts to negotiate guidance regarding issues without necessarily aligning the interests of field actors.

One of the issues that was debated heavily in the rulemaking I selected was that of how to go about constructing a nationwide interoperable communications network for public safety agencies. The creation of that network was believed to be a solution to a life-or-death problem. An interoperable system is one that is shared among agencies to allow first responders from different agencies can coordinate and communicate directly with one another during critical incidents. The existing practice was for each agency to operate its own distinct and secure system, which created coordination problems at emergencies like school shootings and natural disasters. The FCC had been working on solving the interoperability problem for years. It was proving to be a stubborn problem. The technology to solve the problem was available. The persistence of the problem was due to two factors. First, there was a lack of agreement on the specific technical solution to be implemented. Second, public safety agencies lacked the resources to implement a solution once it was selected.

By 2006, an important opportunity to solve the problem had been created. The FCC was due to set rules for and then auction powerful and valuable radio frequency spectrum in the 700 MHz band. Several public safety actors described the 700 MHz spectrum as a “one-time” opportunity to construct that interoperable network for public safety officers (APCO 6/4/2007, APCO & NPSTC 6/21/2007). The question was whether

this opportunity would result in the construction of the network. In reality, a number of issues were at play in the debate about how to build this network. I explore those issues and how they were debated in the next chapters. What became clear was that the stubbornness of the interoperability problem had more to do with institutional structure than it did with technological challenges. The creation of the new network would require fundamental changes to structure to become a reality. Through this rulemaking, field actors devised one way to do that, and the FCC enabled that solution in its rules.

Ultimately, this solution failed in the implementation phase and a new solution had to be created. Despite that eventual “failure”, I believe there is still much to be learned from this case study about the politics of progress. Selecting such an example is consistent with organizational theory research (Barley, 2008; DeJordy et al., 2020). My objective is to better understand how field actors use politics to make progress. The interoperability issue opened a window through which to study those mechanisms.

### *2.3 FCC Rulemaking Processes*

The FCC conducts public rulemaking processes in advance of spectrum auctions. The purpose of these rulemakings is to set two types of rules. Service rules govern the use of the spectrum. Rules are also set to determine the procedures of the auction itself. Rulemakings typically begin with Notices of Proposed Rulemaking in which the FCC invites comment on a range of issues. Actors generally have 45 days to submit comments then an additional 30 days to submit reply comments. During the period I studied, the FCC engaged that process twice. After the first cycle, it made some decisions and requested comment on some new issues and further comment on the issue it was still

considering. While the FCC asks for comment on specific issues, actors are free to raise new issues and policy alternatives for the FCC to consider. They are also typically permitted to meet with FCC officials throughout the process so long as they publicly report the content of those meetings. The result is a robust public record concerning the range of issues under consideration. Within that record, field actors respond to and question, challenge and support one another's positions and preferred alternative. That back and forth constitutes both a debate and a set of interactions. These features of FCC rulemaking processes make them well suited to studying field-level opportunities for progress.

#### *2.4 Cast of Characters in Analysis & Findings*

A challenge of field-level research is knowing which actors to include in analysis based on the research questions being asked. Frankly, not all actors who participate in field-level goings on merit analytical attention. White and colleagues (2004) made an important distinction about the subset of networks that constitute fields. They defined fields as “those networks that emerge as structured and structuring environments for organizational and individual participants (White et al., 2004, p. 97).” This meaningful distinction relates closely to the Hoffman's (1999) definition of field actors as those who engage in the common meaning systems of fields. Both definitions take seriously that not every individual or organization that may participate in field-level interactions should be considered “members” of a field. So, an important component of my methodology was determining (1) which organizations and individuals met the standard of field actor, and (2) which of those actors to sample for deeper analysis and then presentation in findings.

FCC records report that many dozens of organizations participated in the 700 MHz rulemaking processes. More than 250,000 individuals also submitted comments on their own behalf. Making that enormous number of participants in the rulemaking manageable for analytical purposes and for the presentation of findings was an important methodological task for this project. I accomplished that in two ways. First, I reviewed and coded the arguments presented by each of the organizations. I excluded from coding the comments of most individuals because their submissions were virtually identical. For example, about 225,000 of the individual submissions came from one MoveOn.org petition. I did include comments of some individuals, though, such as U.S. Senators. The decision rule that guided inclusion versus exclusion came from the definitions of Hoffman (1999) described above. I selected for inclusion those commenters – organizations and individuals – that I deemed to be participants in the common meaning system of the field.

That still left a very large sample of actors to contend with. I found it helpful to establish categories of actor and then to select exemplars from those categories based on theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Several categories were identified. Business firms were divided into three categories. Service providers are those firms that provide service directly to customers. It was helpful to further subdivide that category based on firm size. There are three subcategories: large, nationwide providers, regional providers, and small, rural providers. Several recognizable names appeared, including AT&T, Verizon Wireless, DirecTV, and Comcast. Typically, I used the self-descriptions organization used in their filings to identify which subcategory was appropriate. In a few cases, I used the “About Us” pages from the organizations’ websites to understand their

categorization<sup>7</sup>. Device and equipment manufacturers were another category. These are the firms that make the network technology and consumer devices that constitute and operate on providers' networks. Some firms fell into multiple categories. That did not pose any analytical issues through the coding or theorizing processes. I simply attended to that as I developed an understanding of their interests and goals. Advocacy organizations fell into two categories. Trade associations are those advocacy organizations that worked to advance the interests of definable sets of firms. There are trade associations for wireless providers, device manufactures, rural providers, and so on. Other advocacy organizations that identified based on the constituencies they advocate for. Several organizations represented the interests of customers. Here they are typically referred to as public interest advocacy organizations. That label is from the data. Others represented categories of organizations in ways like that of trade associations, for example, public safety advocacy organizations. This categorization was helpful for analysis because it gave me a way of seeing the different sets of interests in the field and to ensure that my analysis was robust to that variance.

The actors that are presented in the findings were theoretically sampled based on the procedures I describe in detail below. Essentially, there were two primary bases for selection. The first was to ensure that findings displayed the variance in arguments and interests I observed in the data from organizations I deemed field actors. The second was based on wanting to include actors that made their arguments and interests most compellingly so that readers could see the nuances between actors' comments vividly. In

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<sup>7</sup> The website Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org>) provides a searchable archive of the internet that allows users to view websites as they existed as different points in history. This allowed me to read the About Us sections of actors' websites as they appeared in 2006 and 2007.

the findings chapters I describe each organization selected for presentation and describe both the organizations and why it was selected.

## *2.5 Data Analysis*

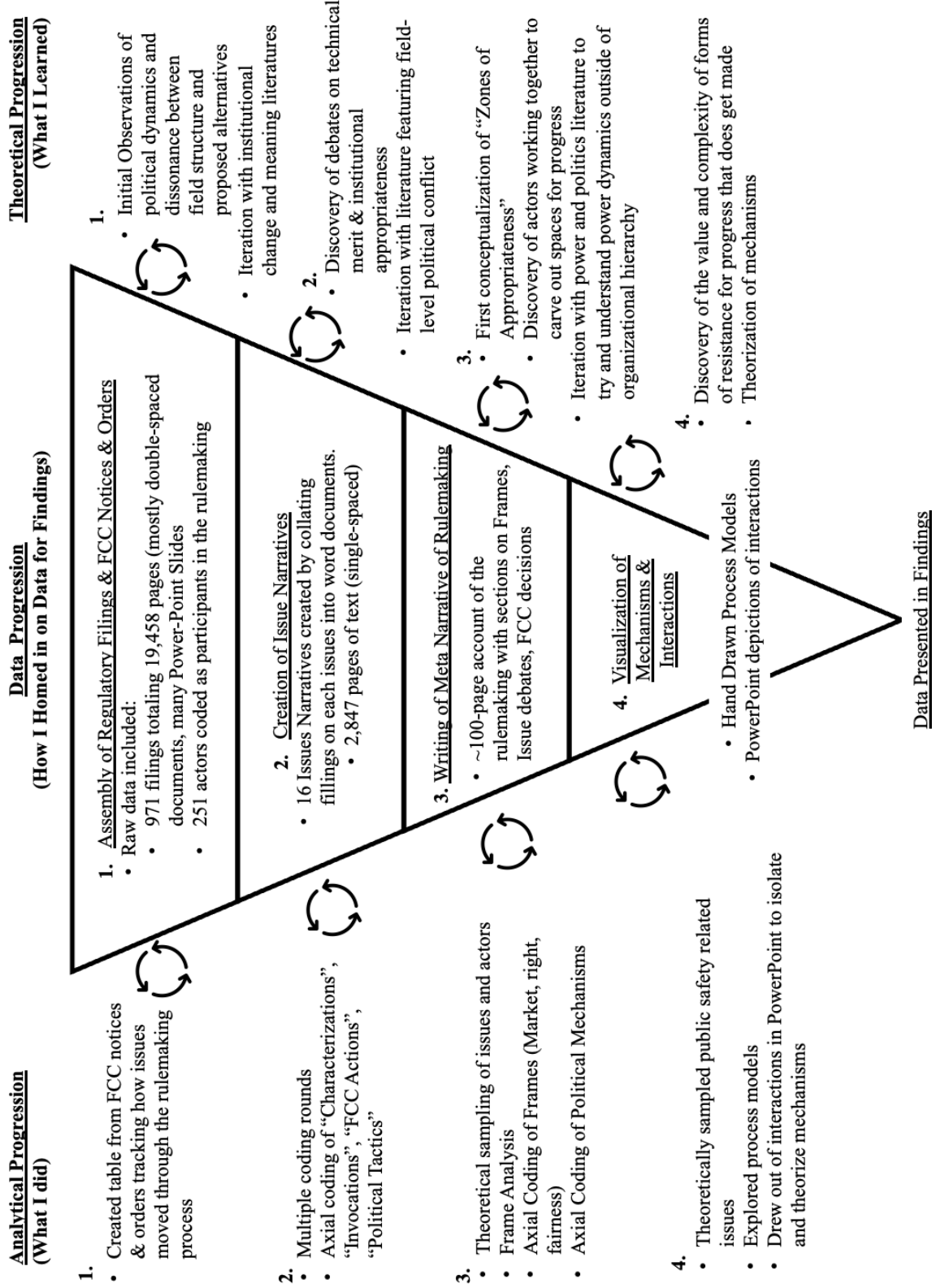
Figure 1 provides a summary of my data analysis process. My intention with the figure was to show three things: (1) how and why I homed in on the specific data included in the findings, (2) what analysis I conduct along the way, and (3) what theoretical discoveries emerged from that work. The central triangle shows how I worked from nearly 20,000 pages of public record content down to the data present in the findings chapters. The numbered, underlined headings each refer to artifacts I drew from or created with the data at each step. The Analytical Progression column describes the analysis I conducted to create and interpret those artifacts. The Theoretical Progression column describes the discoveries that emerged from analysis of the artifacts. My goal in that column is to present a synopsis of the internal or unfolding logic of the research project (Locke et al., 2020). I use the term discovery in the spirit of Locke and colleagues (2016, p. 371) to refer to the “open-ended, imaginative dimensions” of data analysis that prompt theoretical insights. Describing the process of conducting qualitative research in a figure necessitates simplification of the steps in the process and can often yield a figure that suggests a much more neat and tidy process than occurred. The cycle icons are meant to acknowledge that a great deal of iteration, thinking and rethinking occurred along the way.

*Step 1.* The public record contained vast data on a variety of opportunities for progress because many issues were raised and debated. My first step was to get a clear

sense of those issues and debates. I did that by creating a table based on the FCC's requests for comment and decision orders. That process identified 66 issues. I coded as issues those subjects about which the FCC requested public comment. As noted above, issues are those subject matters that are debated at the field level and involve efforts to establish guidance for organizations about what conduct is deemed appropriate in the field. The request for comment often marks the beginning in earnest of those debates. Occasionally, additional issues were raised by field actors along the way. Once the FCC asked for comment on those they were coded as issues. The 66 issues were easily grouped into 16 issue categories. This categorization was largely driven by filings in the public record, which tended to group the issues very similarly. Step 1 yielded an impressionistic sense of the raw data. My attention was drawn both to the political dynamics of the rulemaking and a dissonance between filed structure and the alternatives field actors were proposing to address issues. Iteration with the literatures on institutional change and meaning was helpful at this stage.

*Step 2.* My next step was to construct narratives of these 16 issue categories from the filings in the public record. I went through the regulatory filings and collected the statements that focussed on each issue category in separate documents to isolate those debates. These narratives allowed me to see and understand the unfolding nature and logic of the debates on each issue (Locke et al., 2020). I conducted multiple rounds of coding and axial coding at this stage. First, I coded narratives for participants in the debate, political tactics, invocations of various rules, norms, arguments, and

Figure 1: Analytical Process & Theoretical Discoveries





alternatives suggested to address each issue. I then used axial coding to create categories of those initial codes. At this stage, I had several broad categories of codes. There was a category of “characterizations” that grouped together different ways that field actors characterized things in their filings. For example, a common tactic was to characterize the public record as being generally in support or opposition of a particular alternative. There were – importantly – also many attempts to characterize elements of field structure and how they should apply to different issues. An “invocations” category grouped together efforts to bring ideas, historical decisions to invoke different ideas, prior events, and issues as components of arguments for and against alternatives. Finally, there was a category of political tactics.

Coding during step 2 led me to see that two forms of debate were ongoing in the public record: one on the technical merit of the various alternatives proposed in the record and one on the institutional appropriateness of those alternatives vis-à-vis the structure of the field. This realization was an important discovery in my research (Locke et al., 2016). I assumed, based on experience and my understanding of the literature, that rulemaking processes were self-interested political fights. Discovering and then further coding for this deeper layer of the debates opened my mind to new theoretical possibilities and reinvigorated my own thinking about what was going on in these rulemaking processes. I was seeing anew that debates about appropriateness are not just about constructing rationales for preferred outcomes (i.e. framing contests). They are also a way for field actors to explore the meanings of progress. I then went back to the literature featuring field-level political conflict, which resulted in a decision to include frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) in the next steps of my analysis.

*Step 3.* Discovery of the two forms of debate led me to theoretically sample issues as case studies for finer grained analysis. I sampled a range of issues, from the most hotly contested to the those with the greatest agreement among actors. This range was important because I wanted to be able to ascertain why debate of some issues led to opportunities for progress and how those opportunities were created. The public safety interoperability issue was one of those case studies, which I subsequently selected as the exemplar for presentation here. I also sampled actors for further analysis that represented some of the great diversity of roles in the field. I then conducted a frame analysis of the theoretically sampled data. This was a particularly iterative and circuitous part of my analysis. I started by hand coding the theoretically sampled data and making copious notes and memos on the backs of the printed pages. Eventually, I felt ready to write up the findings of the frame analysis. Retrospectively, I called that artifact a metanarrative of the rulemaking as it retold the story of the rulemaking in my own words through the prism of the frame analysis.

Frame analysis was an essential analytical step for two reasons. First, I needed to understand how organizations in the field interpreted issues. Frames are the interpretive lenses that are used to understand what is going on in a particular context. Second, I needed to understand how organizations in the field interacted with one another and sought to influence the outcomes of the rulemaking process. Frames are important components in those communications because they give actors ways to describing particular issues and to construct arguments in ways that can be understood by other actors and even influence their own interpretations. Indeed, frame analysis is a preferred empirical tool for researchers seeking to access and understand how actors work to

integrate “their own political interests and others’ values and beliefs (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014, p. 198).”

Writing and then reflecting on the metanarrative led to crucial discoveries in my analysis. First, it was at this stage that I began to conceptualizing “zones of appropriateness” as a way to capture and think about the many differences of belief in the record about field structures and the conduct they permitted. I report my early theorizing of the concept in Chapter 3. Second, I discovered the importance of figuring out how multiple actors needed to work together to maintain the status quo or create opportunities for progress. This led to iteration with the power and politics literature to try to understand how to think about power dynamics outside of the relative simplicity of organizational hierarchies.

*Step 4.* Following these discoveries I focussed my analysis on theory building. First by hand and then in PowerPoint, I started drawing out models and interaction patterns. I selected and used public safety-related issues for these exercises while frequently thinking through if the models and mechanisms I was developing were robust to other issues. From these efforts I was able to theorize the process of making progress and the mechanisms of that process. It was during that work that I discovered that resistance to opportunities for progress is a rich source of theoretical insight. I began thinking about resistance as an important part of the process of making progress. Resistance reflects field actors’ interests. But it also creates questions and ideas that can be used to refine plans to make progress. Theorization of the mechanisms of the progress process flowed from this work.

## 2.6 Roadmap to Findings Chapters

My findings are presented in three chapters. The first (Chapter 3) reports the results of my frame analysis and my theorizing of **Zones of Appropriateness**. This concept is integral to how I think about how that progress is achieved at the field level. The idea behind this concept is straightforward. The range of organizational behaviour and conduct that is deemed appropriate in an institutional context, such as a field, is broader than we might think. Frame analysis drew out that breadth and enabled theorizing about how a lack of agreement about the strictures of field structure *could* enable progress rather than deadlock.

Chapters 4 and 5 report my findings about how progress is made at the field level. Chapter 4 is, fundamentally, about a discernment process through which field actors come together to decide if progress is needed. “Option 1” is maintaining the status quo. I show how field actors go about maintaining the status quo by presenting the issue of the extension of the FCC’s enhanced 911 rules to the 700 MHz spectrum. The goal of presenting those findings first is to supply a base case. Supplying a base case is useful to understanding how field actors invoke existing structure to frame their views of alternative policy options. This shows how the status quo can be maintained in this field. The mechanisms of **justifying appropriateness** of existing structure and **deny accommodation** are used to maintain the status quo.

“Option 2” is carving out a space in which progress can be made. I show how an opportunity for progress is constructed despite the reality that it was an obvious violation of existing structure. The issue in this version of the story is the creation of a public/private partnership to facilitate the construction of a new, nationwide

communications network for public safety agencies. This example shows how field actors carved out the space to make progress by agreeing to set aside the strictures of existing structure. The mechanisms of **problematizing structure** and **arbitrating the negotiable** become essential when this option is selected.

Chapter 5 is about the negotiated structuring of that carved out space. The chapter explores the ways that actors debated which elements of the status quo structure of the field should be brought into the carved out space. In some cases, those efforts were designed to constrain – even hobble – the effort at progress. In others, those efforts were designed to ensure the viability of the progress being imagined. Taken together, these were efforts in a structuring process in which actors made different arguments for and against alternative ways to construct rules for a new model for interoperable public safety communications. My analysis revealed two forms of tension playing out in the rulemaking process. The first was between old and new structure. Once the opportunity to create this progress was carved out, opponents rushed in to express their concerns. They argued that various components of the opportunity violated field structure in unacceptable ways. Opponents used existing structure to construct their arguments for why the changes needed to make the opportunity viable should not be made. From that story I developed a mechanism termed **precisifying the opportunity**. The second tension was between organizations' interest. Fascinatingly, I found that structuring debates were not just between opponents and proponents of change. In the second half of chapter 5, I examine the often-heated debates among *proponents of the plan* over what rules should govern the construction and use of the new public safety network. The mechanism of **safeguarding control** is present.

Table 1 summarizes these findings and where they are reported:

*Table 1: List of Mechanisms in Chapters 4 & 5*

<b>Maintaining the Status Quo</b>	<b>Carving Out Opportunities for Progress</b>	<b>Negotiated Structuring</b>
Mechanisms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Justifying Appropriateness</li> <li>• Denying Accommodation</li> </ul>	Mechanisms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problematizing Structure</li> <li>• Arbitrating the Negotiable</li> </ul>	Mechanisms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Precisifyng the Opportunity</li> <li>• Safeguarding Control</li> </ul>
Chapter 4 (“Option 1”)	Chapter 4 (“Option 2”)	Chapter 5

## Chapter 3

### 3 Findings: Zones of Appropriateness

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce a concept I have termed “zone of appropriateness”. In reviewing the literature, I found myself questioning the way that scholars have come to think about the relationship between systemic and episodic power. The existing literature takes the view that within fields there are factions that hold differing beliefs about the conduct that should be deemed appropriate in an institutional context (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). The discrepancy between those beliefs is what fuels competition to control institutions as that is understood to be the mechanism for insisting upon and enforcing preferred forms of conduct (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). This way of thinking essentially divides actors into supporters of the existing structure, challengers who want to change it, or regulatory actors who act as referees. This creates a dynamic that has been described both as “war” and as an ongoing constitutional struggle (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Hoffman, 1999; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). My own experience in practice and what I was seeing in my data did not support that framework. But, more importantly to my research questions here, that framework did not help me understand the portions of progress that are made through field-level interactions.

There is absolutely evidence of episodic struggles in my data as I will show. Political approaches have long assumed that conflicts of interests, preferences and goals are fixed features of environments (Ganz, 2023; March, 1962; March & Simon, 1958; Rerup & Zbaracki, 2021). That is why bargaining, negotiation, and politics are used by

actors to find ways to broker agreements among themselves that permit collectives to continue to operate. It is through such processes that actors work within existing structures to advance their interests and goals. As I outlined in detail in the previous chapters, despite differences in values and interests, progress is usually getting made within and through political action. I want to understand how that happens and the role politics plays in making it happen.

The concept of the zone of appropriateness is part of how I think about how that progress is achieved at the field level. The idea behind this concept is straightforward. The range of organizational behaviour and conduct that is deemed appropriate in an institutional context, such as a field, is broader than we might think. When we think about rules and rulemaking processes, we tend to think that the rules are definitive and absolute. The rules tell actors how to behave and make clear what behaviours are not acceptable. This is a fundamental assumption behind the argument that actors seeking to control institutional structures: because they then get to set and enforce rules that control how actors behave thereafter. What I have seen in my data and will try to show here through the findings of my frame analysis, is that there are much broader ranges – or zones – of conduct that actors believe are deemed appropriate. The boundaries of that zone are established by the various elements of institutional structure: rules, roles, relational norms, and beliefs about institutional norms. In the field I studied, beliefs about what constituted the optimal regulatory model were the most important to the zones of appropriateness.

In this way of thinking, the fundamental job of rulemaking processes is to assemble a set of potential alternative rules and then debate whether those rules condone conduct that is within the zone of appropriateness. When alternatives fall outside the zone



of appropriateness, as might often be the case when opportunities to make progress are suggested, field actors must debate whether the boundaries of the zone should be shifted to accommodate new alternatives. In the field I studied, the authority to set final rules is held by the FCC. When they change rules to permit new forms of organizational behaviour, the zone expands. If, through a rulemaking process, the FCC decides to make behaviour that is currently appropriate inappropriate, the zone shrinks over time. Of course, there are other forces at work determining the boundaries. The zone is continually fluctuating as field actors go about constructing the forms of conduct that should be deemed appropriate and then set rules to operationalize those determinations.

An essential assumption to my thinking about zones of appropriateness is that actors hold different views about what conduct is or should be deemed appropriate within an institutional context. This assumption is shared with much of the extant literature. My thinking departs from that literature, though, because I see those differences as being an important ingredient in how progress gets made. As I will show here, when actors in the American telecommunications field contributed to FCC rulemaking processes, they attended closely to the various structural boundaries of the zones. They debated the role of the FCC and its power. They debated how firms were fulfilling their roles and obligations. They debated fundamental differences of belief in how the field *should* be regulated and the models of fairness that under lied that regulation. Those debates, which unfold across many issues within each rulemaking and across many rulemakings, appeared to keep those differences of belief “alive”. Even when there was broad consensus about the decisions the FCC should make, there were still many different perspectives and rationales communicated about *why* the FCC should make those decisions.

The analysis that allowed me to see these dynamics and then theorize about how engaging in rulemaking processes yields stability and change in the boundaries of zones of appropriateness was frame analysis. The form of frame analysis I utilized cleaved closely to that originally outlined by Goffman (1974). For Goffman, frames and framing are two related tasks. The first is interpretive. Frames, drawn from the broader culture in which action occurs, are used to understand what is going on and what role actors are expected to play in those goings on. The frames that were most prevalent in the rulemaking I studied were those of markets, rights, and fairness. The second task is the use of frames to construct arguments that are meant to influence the interpretations of other actors. This is typically called “framing”, though Goffman (1974, p. 45) used the term “keying” to describe how actors systematically alter interpretations that will then “radically reconstitute what it is for them that is going on.” Below I explore each frame in turn. After showing how a diverse set of actors used the frames, I then discuss the implications for the zones of appropriateness concept that I drew from the analysis of each frame.

I selected three actors from the field to use as exemplars of how the three frames were used in the field. Three actors were selected: AT&T, Rural Cellular Association, and the Ad Hoc Public Interest Spectrum Coalition:

*AT&T:* At the time of the rulemaking, AT&T was the largest provider of broadband internet and telephone serviced in the United States. It also held a large ownership stake in Cingular Wireless which was the largest wireless carriers in the United States, serving nearly 60 million customers<sup>8</sup>. I selected AT&T because I wanted to include

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<sup>8</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20061101040932/http://att.sbc.com/gen/investor-relations?pid=5711>  
Accessed April 2, 2024.

the perspective of a large, powerful firm in the field. AT&T is the classic case described in Leblebici and colleagues (1991) of a powerful firm that must respond to competitive and innovative threats in ways that may destabilize the institutional structures that allowed them to flourish. Compared to other very large firms, such as Verizon Wireless, I found that AT&T's use of the three frames to be the most vivid.

*Rural Cellular Association:* The Rural Cellular Association or "RCA" is a trade association that represented small and rural telecommunications services providers. They reported in the record that their membership included over "90 small and rural wireless licensees providing commercial services to subscribers throughout the nation...No member has as many as 1 million customers, and the vast majority of RCA's members serve fewer than 500,000 customers (Rural Cellular Association, Comment, 9/29/2006)." At the time of the rulemaking, RCA was focussed on ensuring that its members would have "the ability to gain reasonable access to auctioned spectrum in the 700 MHz Band presents one such issue (Rural Cellular Association, Comment, 9/29/2006)." I selected the Rural Cellular Association for two reasons. First, I wanted to include the views of much smaller firms to reflect both that the field includes firms of various sizes and to provide a juxtaposition of the AT&T perspective. A trend at the time was the consolidation of media companies in the United States. This was creating the fear among smaller, especially rural, carriers that they would be shut out of access to spectrum at auction because they could not afford to compete (RCA 09/29/2006). Second, I wanted to include a trade association. There are many trade associations that represent and advocate for the interests of different segments of the field before the FCC. Regulatory interactions are not simply among firms and regulators. The role structure of a field includes many types of organizations that can be influential.

*Ad Hoc Public Interest Spectrum Coalition:* This coalition – typically referred to by the acronym PISC – is a made up of public interest advocacy organizations. Such organizations advocated for a range of consumer interests. The member organizations were Consumers Federation of America, Free Press, Public Knowledge, Media Access Project and Consumers Union. These organizations were active leaders in a media reform movement at the time of this rulemaking and many of the individuals involved were and continued to be central and influential players in the field. The objectives of that movement were to increase competition in the market in hopes of encouraging greater innovation, choice, and deployment of telecommunications services. I selected this group because I wanted to include a voice that primarily served and represented the interests of customers. Their viewpoints were not mediated by corporate financial interest, such as profits motivations and shareholder value. I also knew from my own experience that these groups were among the most knowledgeable about extant wireless technology, regulatory precedent and procedure, and consumer issues.

Together, the way that these three actors used the market, rights, and fairness frames to interpret and advocate on the various issues in the rulemaking represented a robust cross section of the arguments I coded. My goal in the analysis was to understand the variance in the use of these frames. So, in presenting the findings it made sense to theoretically sample from field actors to give a sense of that variance. Below I present how each of the three sampled organizations used the three frames to interpret the issues in the rulemaking and advocated for their preferred rules. I also discuss how my analysis of each frame contributed to the way I was theorizing zones of appropriateness. I begin with the market frame and a discussion of the role structure of the field.

### **3.2 Market Frame:**

When field actors in the American telecommunications field were talking about markets they were also talking about the regulatory model of the field. There was an oft spoken assumption from many actors that government regulation should be balanced with the regulating influence of market forces. This is one point on which each of the three actors I sampled agreed in principle. Of course, some thought the FCC should be more interventionist. Others argued that interventions from the FCC should be avoided because of the harm they might do to the operation of the market. The central theme in the use of the market frame, then, was about when and how the FCC had an obligation to step in. Primarily at issue in those debates was how to determine when the market had demonstrably failed to yield competition and deliver the benefits of innovation to customers. Much of this debate should be considered in light of the broader cultural mood of the era. This rulemaking took place in the mid-2000s. The deregulatory fervour of the 1980 and 1990s was still foremost in the minds of regulators. That was partly because business interests had worked since the 1970s to push a pro-business regulatory agenda and to seed government posts with sympathetic appointees (Barley, 2010).

AT&T was among the actors that argued for the purest form of market-based regulation possible. They were quite direct in stating: "...AT&T believes that the Commission should continue to allow market forces, and not regulatory fiat, to shape the development of telecommunications services...(AT&T 7/2/2007)." This was a common refrain for AT&T and many other firms when they encountered proposals to increase regulatory intervention. As evidence for the efficacy of this approach, AT&T and others cited the state of competition and innovation in the marketplace. With respect to

competition, AT&T cited that there were more than 150 providers competing “head-to-head” for wireless consumers. That competition was driving innovation in the market and spurring greater adoption and utilization of wireless services. AT&T argued: “The expansion of wireless services and the meteoric rise in wireless subscribership and minutes-of-use, as well as the dramatic decline in prices per minute of use, are well-documented, and the wireless industry is universally recognized as the most competitive sector of the telecommunications industry (AT&T 5/23/2007).” AT&T used such arguments in their comments on a variety of issues. The basic argument structure was consistent. The market was working. Therefore, no additional regulatory intervention was warranted.

The Rural Cellular Association’s arguments were also often constructed with a market frame. However, the association believed that the market had failed in specific ways that did warrant greater FCC action. They recognized that the FCC had embraced a general regulatory stance of relying on market forces but warned of situations in which doing so could be harmful. In multiple comments they referred to the FCC’s own statements. The Commission had written that its own responsibility was: “

... to establish an appropriate level of regulation for the administration of CMRS.

Such a regulatory regime will ensure that the marketplace – and not the regulatory arena – shapes the development and delivery of mobile services to meet the demands and needs of consumers, **except where relying on market forces might lead to a result that is harmful to competition or to consumers.** (RCA

5/23/2007 & RCA 10/20/2006 – emphasis added by RCA)

The specific market failure that the association was concerned about was the provision of service to rural areas. RCA had seen two trends coming together in the FCC’s decisions

that were problematic. First, license areas were getting bigger. That means that the amount of territory that a given license included had been growing. That made licenses more expensive and potentially unaffordable for rural carriers (RCA 09/29/2006). Second, as those licence areas grew in size, more and more rural customers were being left out of network buildouts as larger carriers chose to “serve only the low-cost, high revenue customers” in rural areas, such as those in towns (RCA, Comment 9/29/2006). To correct that market failure, the association called on the FCC to adopt much stricter performance and buildout requirements for 700 MHz licensees *and* require that unused portions of license areas be return to the FCC for re-auction. This did not mean abandoning market-based regulation, however. Rural Cellular Association argued that a set of policies to encourage rural build-out are “fully consistent with the pursuit of market-based goals; it adds to such a system by curbing inefficiencies.” (RCA 6/4/2007). Those inefficiencies could be corrected by requiring spectrum to be returned to the FCC for reauction if it was allowed to lie wastefully fallow by larger carriers. (RCA 5/23/2007)

Finally, PISC invoked the market frame to characterize and criticize the existing state of the market and the regulatory policies that had permitted it to evolve. To PISC, the market, as it existed in 2007, was defined by consolidation and anticompetitive behaviour that threatened consumer rights and technological innovation. The fault for this was laid at the feet of the FCC:

“Unfortunately, the Commission’s narrow view of market structure and acceptance of a highly simplified view of market incentives has...created a world in which wireless networks have greater incentive to create “walled gardens” for

subscribers, exact rents from equipment manufacturers, and warehouse spectrum to maintain scarcity and prevent the emergence of competition.” (PISC 4/3/2007)

PISC’s argument was not that market-based solutions were not viable, but rather that the view of what a market was and how it should operate had been so narrowly cast by the FCC that competition and the innovation had been systematically constrained. As evidence of that constraint, PISC argued that the pace of innovation in the American market was slower than European and Asian markets because the creators of innovative products, devices and applications could not get access to the “walled gardens” (PISC 7/18/2007). As a corrective measure, PISC argued that the FCC should use its regulatory authority to encourage competition from a new broadband provider that would be independent of the existing oligopolists. A host of specific policy alternatives were presented to further that competition. PISC argued for requirements that 700 MHz licensees open their networks to all devices and software applications (PISC 7/18/2007), that large license areas be auctioned to facilitate the creation of a new competitor with a nationwide footprint (6/19/2007), and the exclusion of incumbent providers from the upcoming 700 MHz auction (4/3/2007).

These three uses of the market frame to advocate for specific regulatory approaches to the 700 MHz spectrum reflect some of the diversity of opinions in the record. There are many variations on each of these themes. Considered together, these uses of the market frame reflect both a consensus in the field that market forces should play a major role in the function of competition and the advancement of innovation. There was wide consensus on that. However, actors held varying positions and beliefs about how what the relationship between market forces and regulatory intervention ought to be.



### *3.2.1 Implications for the Zones of Appropriateness Concept:*

Studying and thinking about the ways that field actors viewed the relationship between market-based regulation and FCC intervention drew my attention to the diversity of beliefs that actors held about the role structure of the field. At the field level of analysis, scholars must pay considerable attention to what Barley (2020) referred to as role systems. He used the analog of how roles in railroads worked together to avoid train collisions. For collisions to be avoided, signalmen had to operate signals, signal maintainers had to build the signals and ensure they were operational, train engineers had to oversee the signals and act accordingly. For the telecommunications field to be competitive and to deliver innovative solutions to customers, a range of field actors had to fulfill their roles. The debate about reliance on the market forces versus FCC intervention was, in effect, a debate about the boundaries between roles and the ways those roles would coordinate action. Perhaps surprisingly, actors appeared to maintain and advocate for substantially different views of where those boundaries should fall and how action should be coordinated.

That variance in beliefs is compelling to me, but not for the reason you might expect. My focus is not on optimising roles and role relations in this field. That would be a form of invoking the control-thesis I am hoping to refute. Instead, I am intrigued by the variance itself as a potential resource in the process of making progress. There are at least two ways to think about the variance in beliefs. Under a framing contest way of thinking, the process is like a competition to win a prize for one's art. Each artist assesses the requirements of the contest and submits their version of the art. A judge reviews each of the submissions and declares one the winner. In that model, the judge controls which form

that the painting could take is deemed most appropriate. I think a more fruitful theoretical perspective would be to shift the thinking to the setting of an art studio rather than a competition. In the studio, several artists sit in a circle and paint the model or still life positioned at the centre. Each artist has a different point of view in two important ways. First, they have their own goals for the studio in mind. Maybe they have a preferred style, colour palette, or medium that they prefer using. Second, they are each sitting in a different space and therefore have a different vantage of the subject they are painting. The result is not a single winner, but a series of interpretations of the same subject. This way of thinking about a framing activity at the field-level may be superior because it factors in the ability of each artist to interpret the situation differently and from their own point of view. The array of interpretations is less an effort to define the properties and characteristics of the subject and more an effort on the part of each artist to take their perceptions of the subject and translate those into a representation of the subject in their art. Moreover, the artists in the studio benefit from seeing a set of interpretations about the same subject. This would allow for the nuances of each interpretation to be highlighted and examined.

Assuming that we are willing to see field actors' various interpretations in this way, the question becomes: what are the actors *doing* if they are not solely trying to select a winner from that set of interpretations? My analysis of the data suggests that two important things are happening. The first is the definition of the situation they are debating within. What is the policy goal being pursued? Why is that goal important? What problem does it suggest requires a solution? How does advancing – or not – towards that goal fit into the shared work of the field? These questions tend to focus on the meaning of the situation itself. For example, each of the three actors I highlighted

looked at the marketplace for wireless services in different ways, from their different points of view. The images of the market they painted in the record were not the same. AT&T saw a market working very well and feared regulatory action that meddled with market forces. RCA also saw a market working, though not as well. The market had failed in specific ways that required specific solutions. PISC saw the need for much more sweeping and forceful intervention to correct the problems created by the FCC's "narrow view of market structure and acceptance of a highly simplified view of market incentives (PISC 4/3/2007)." The work going on in the debate over the state of the market went beyond deciding what rules to set in a specific rulemaking in a specific moment in history. The work was about constructing how field actors should work together to yield the competition and innovation that played out in the marketplace.

This leads to the second important observation of what is going on in these debates. To my eye, these debates bear a far closer resemblance to structuring activities as described by Barley (1986) than a competition for dominance described by others (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). Barley's view of structuring was that through action and interaction, actors figure out how to adapt structural elements to enable the acceptance of new technologies and ways of doing things together. The actors in the field I studied engaged in a form of that. They were arguing for how elements of field structure should operate and then suggesting alternatives that would reorganizing – however slightly – the role structure to enable those structural modifications. Each of the market framings invoked by the actors above is deeply rooted in views about the roles that need to be played in the field how those roles should fit together to enable the functioning of the field. AT&T appeared to imagine the FCC's role as protecting the operation of market forces from unhelpful regulation. This was rooted in the belief that existing market was

evidence that market forces were successfully driving innovation, build out, and adoption. The role of firms was to deliver those things to consumers. The FCC should make that easier, not harder with additional regulation. RCA saw the FCC's role as akin to a medical doctor: to diagnose market failures and to plan and implement interventions designed to treat those failures. RCA had no objection to adding or changing regulatory rules to facilitate that work. PISC, finally, saw the FCC's role as being to enable competition and clear the way for innovation. Their argument was that the FCC should use its role-based power more forcefully by requiring incumbents to open their networks to innovators and restricting their access to the 700 MHz spectrum auction. In each of these points of view, the actors were considering the roles that actors in the field should be playing and imagining ways to facilitate those roles.

My objective with this description of the market frame and the art studio analogy is to try to open up the way we think about the role that frames and framing play in theorizing about fields. The extant literature tends to look at framing solely as a tactic achieving control, either of decisions and the action that follows or of or institutional structures themselves. Differences in framing are taken as evidence of the variance in the values held by actors in the field. The goal of framing is to reduce the variance and gain control of subsequent action. The ongoing oscillation of fields from settlement to war is evidence of the persistence of variance in values, leading to the ongoing constitutional struggle (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Hoffman, 1999; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). Two assumptions underlie that theorizing. The first is that values are held by actors and are fundamentally incompatible. The second is that institutional structure cannot serve multiple values simultaneously. The studio analogy invites us to set those assumptions aside by recognizing that different points of view and values can be held within a

collective without there being a need to reduce that variance. That is a virtue, not a vice, for it provides multiple points of view from which to consider each policy challenge. Indeed, the difference in points of view aids in the effort to assemble an array of potential alternative solutions to those policy challenges. Maintaining the debate about, for example, the optimal role of regulation in the field alive ensures that the array of solutions remains available over time (Schneiberg, 2007).

The zone of appropriateness concept assumes that variance in values – as well as interests and preferences – is a fixed element of fields. That variance is unlikely to go away. We should not want it to. What that means for structure, though, can be unsettling. It means we should expect structural elements – like roles and rules – to be much more fluid over time than we have come to expect. Or, put in the language of the zone of appropriateness – what is deemed appropriate at any one moment in time may shift in the next moment as new settlements about what should fall inside and outside the zone are renegotiated. Using the next two frames, I will argue that there is a continuity at work in those fluctuations that also arises from the fixed nature of variance in values, interests, and preferences. That is not to say, however, that there is no coherence to how those structural forms evolve. I turn to that question next in my analysis of the rights and fairness frames.

### **3.3 Rights Frame:**

Since the founding of their republic, the rights frame has been central to how Americans view what their citizenship entitles them to and the obligations they owe back to their collectives. There are certain unalienable rights, and all that. In the field I studied, the rights frame figured prominently in the interactions, debates through which the

appropriateness of alternatives was considered. Again, I will provide a brief articulation of the way each of the three sampled actors viewed the field through the prism of the rights frame and how that frame was utilized in arguments during the rulemaking process. I will show that the rights frame is a useful way to see and understand how field actors think about and manage relations among the various roles in the field. The interdependencies that make role structures functional. Two sets of relations are most evident in the data: the relations between the FCC and spectrum licensees and the relations between those licensees and their customers.

Rules set by the FCC are intended to determine how spectrum is going to be used. In the past, the FCC had been very specific and restrictive in how spectrum was to be used. Many field actors remembered that past as one encapsulated by the term “command-and-control” regulation. It was common for the FCC to impose strict conditions on licences that both directed the use of spectrum and instituted requirements for how that use should serve the public interest. Aligned with the broader deregulatory fervour that began in the 1970s and picked up steam through the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the FCC’s rules became progressively less directive. Zones of appropriateness had grown. By the mid-2000s, when this rulemaking took place, several field actors were calling for a return to a more interventionist FCC. Fundamentally, that debate was about the balancing of the rights of actors in the field with the obligations they owed to one another and customers.

PISC was one of the actors arguing for much more directive FCC rules that imposed much greater obligations on licensees to serve the public’s interests. PISC suggested several rules that were described in the public record as “radical” (MetroPCS 4/17/2007). What made PISC’s views so different from other field actors was that they

were rooted in an atypical way of thinking about rights and obligations in the field. PISC thought about rights and obligations from the point of view of the consumers for whom they advocated. They saw spectrum as a public good that continued to be owned by the citizenry. The regulatory model that had evolved in the United States held that use of that public good would be licensed to private interests. Citizens held a collective right to be fairly compensated by the licensee for the right to use the spectrum. It was the job of the field generally and the FCC specifically to determine the form that compensation would take. Over time, many in the field such as AT&T, had advanced the view that buying a license at auction was sufficient compensation for a firm to gain the right to use the spectrum however they saw fit. The market would determine if that use served the public interest. PISC believed that the public was not being fairly compensated under that model.

PISC was arguing for a return to a previous model of regulation under which the FCC placed clearer and more strenuous obligations on how licensees were expected to serve the public interest by imposing conditions on licensees. PISC wrote:

“It is entirely appropriate for the Commission to exercise its traditional authority to condition a license for exclusive use of the publicly-owned spectrum resource on obligations that promote the public interest, convenience and necessity... [T]he Communications Act provides for auctions to resolve conflicting applications for an available license, but it in no way diminishes the Commission’s responsibility to ensure that the ultimate use of the public airwaves promotes the general public interest.” (PISC 4/5/2007)

To support their view of how to ensure the public's right to fair compensation for the use of spectrum, PISC pointed to the state of competition and innovation in the market. As I showed above, PISC was not satisfied with the level of either. Moreover, PISC warned that the situation would worsen if the FCC did not act, writing: "Unless action is taken now to extend fundamental principles of consumer choice and openness to wireless services, consumers will lose the transforming benefits that the Internet has made possible over the past decade (PISC 4/5/2007)." Based on that argument, PISC asked the FCC to impose a host of conditions on the 700 MHz auction and licenses that it hoped would spur greater competition and innovation.

A common response to PISC's proposals to increasing competition and innovation was that they would reduce the value of spectrum licenses to potential auction bidders and therefore reduce the proceeds of the auction. PISC responded that the FCC's obligation was to remind the Commission that it was "charged by Congress with maximizing the public interest, not maximizing auction revenue (PISC 7/6/2007)." Given the deregulatory trajectory that field regulations had been on, this would have seemed a radical set of policies to many. PISC was, in effect, asking the FCC to reverse recent regulatory policy. The conditions PISC sought were likely within the FCC's authority to impose but would change the obligations that licensees owed to the FCC and the public. PISC's goal was to reshape the relationship between service providers and consumers by increasing competition and therefore the flow of innovative services and applications from which consumer could select. The norm at the time that PISC made these arguments was that service providers would have highly restrictive control over which of those innovations were offered to their consumers. The force and effect of the rules PISC endorsed would have been to increase consumer choice by decreasing the control licensees had over



access to their networks. For example, at the time, it was common for phones to be “locked” for use on specific networks. If a network did not offer a particular phone, then customers could not use it without changing networks. Today, we enjoy the right as customers to use nearly any phone we want on any network we choose. That shift came about, in part, because of the work of PISC members over several rulemakings and years.

Rural Cellular Association also argued for changes in the relations among the FCC, licensees, and consumers. At the root of the association’s argument for change was that licensees were not meeting their obligations to rural customers. The FCC had rules that required licensees to build out their networks to have their licenses renewed. RCA argued that those rules were too lax and were permitting licensees to build out networks only in areas that were deemed economically viable. The result was that rural populations were being left out of those builds. That was both disadvantageous to rural customers and an inefficient use of scarce and valuable spectrum. RCA asked the FCC to impose stricter performance requirements on 700 MHz licensees and to require that those licensees return to the commission for reauction the spectrum that they did not utilize. The latter was known as a “keep what you use” rule. RCA argued that such a regime “strikes the proper balance between carriers’ rights to pursue profit opportunities and the public policy goal of expediting the availability of wireless broadband services to rural areas (RCA 6/4/2007).”

Many carriers responded to these arguments. The primary retort was that the FCC, as a matter of regulatory policy, did not require carriers to buildout out their networks to every corner of their license areas. Decisions about where to build was a right held by licences. So long as they met the FCC’s minimum standards for service, service providers were deemed to have met their performance requirements. Beyond that, the economic

decision making of licensees and the market should determine where the networks were built out. The trade association representing wireless carriers argued that: “The notion that every hertz of licensed spectrum must be put into use throughout each licensed area does not make sound economic sense. Rural markets, by their nature, will generate less demand than more populated urban or suburban markets (CTIA 5/23/2007).” It did not make economic sense for the FCC to “force” licensees to buildout those areas.

AT&T, like many firms, argued that the imposition of additional regulations and obligations on licenses violated their rights. The logic they employed was not dissimilar to how feudal societies would think about enclosure of common lands. Once a boundary has been established around a public space, it becomes a private space and the rights of a property owner apply. In return for paying the most to acquire licenses at auction, firms had the right to expect that the FCC regulate in a way that granted licensees “flexibility” to operate their business as they saw fit and as the market demanded. This right to flexibility relates to obligations placed on licensees. The principle is that regulation should allow licensees’ “flexibility to develop and deploy the wide range of new services that may be delivered over this spectrum in an economically viable manner in accordance with their unique business plans and market demands (AT&T 10/05/2006).” AT&T argued that flexibility should be maximized so that firms could respond nimbly to and compete in their marketplaces. Regulation can diminish that flexibility and should therefore be limited.

For AT&T, protecting that right to flexibility was best accomplished by staying the course the FCC had been on to reduce regulation and rely more and more on market forces to ensure competition and innovation. They wrote:

“Most importantly for present purposes, the Commission has long embraced a policy of flexible, exclusive-use, geographically defined licenses that – rather than dictate a business plan based on one particular company’s untried vision of the marketplace – allow carriers to choose the business model that will enable them to compete in this highly competitive market.” (AT&T 7/12/2007)

AT&T put a fine point on their argument by relating it to the outcomes that consumers experience in the market. In response to a proposal that would have deviated from the flexibility policy, AT&T said it “fails because it runs counter to the Commission’s and Congress’s deregulatory framework for wireless – an approach that has been overwhelmingly validated in the marketplace and which continues to lead to unprecedented consumer welfare.” (AT&T 7/12/2007). The thriving telecommunications market could be stifled. FCC policy encourages or discourages that thriving with each decision. The benefits of competition that flow to consumers were dependent on the FCC’s decision to protect the rights of licensees.

The way field actors were using the rights frame revealed insights into how these different actors were thinking about roles and the relations among those roles in the field. The language of rights was used to declare those things to which the holders of each role were entitled. AT&T’s arguments for the right to flexibility, for example. When the language of rights was combined with the language of obligation, however, the debate began to include how the roles would need to work together to accomplish the work for which the field is ultimately responsible. When RCA, for example, argued that a requirement existed to ensure that rural customers were served, they were commenting on the content of the various roles in the field. Service providers’ role required them to deliver service and innovations, including to rural areas. The FCC’s role required it to

ensure that those benefits were in fact delivered. Using language of obligations takes that a step further by forging linkages and interdependencies between those roles. If service providers were unwilling to meet their obligation to serve rural customers, the FCC would need to use its authority and rules to require that providers act, either by providing service or returning the unused spectrum.

### *3.3.1 Implications for the Zones of Appropriateness Concept:*

What fascinates me about debates that include the rights frame is that they open window into how field actors approached the important question of when modification of structure is warranted. Both RCA and PISC were trying to convince the FCC that the existing roles structure of the field was failing to yield the levels of service and innovation that would deliver what PISC called the “transformational benefits of the Internet” to customers in all corners of the United States. They believed that that was a problem that required the regulatory action to solve. RCA’s preferred solution was those stricter performance requirements and, if necessary, the return of unused spectrum for reauction. Both RCA and PISC believed that the FCC had authority to induce actors to meet their obligations that it was not using. But the FCC had, for years, been moving away from using that type of authority in favour of relying on market forces to guide the evolution of services. That is, the existing zone of appropriateness constrained the FCC’s use of its own authority. The decision before the field, then, was whether to alter the boundaries of the zone of appropriateness.

These dynamics influenced how I think about the zone of appropriateness idea. It can seem painfully obvious, when looking backward in time, what policy makers should have done in a particular instance. But as those moments unfold in real time, there are

many forces at work on each decision. With respect to roles and role relations in this field, there were three forces operating on determinations about how those elements of structure were constituted and evolved over time. The first was the general effect of how American's thought about rights and obligations. In American culture, rights are often considered more important to protect than obligations are to enforce. In this case, there are a contentious debate about whether a licence's right to fairness was more important than their obligation to serve the public from which they had leased the use of spectrum. Second, the deregulatory processes underway within American government clearly influenced the way the FCC had been setting policy and rules. Many actors in the field, including the FCC itself, frequently championed the benefits of those deregulatory processes and dynamics they created in the market. Moreover, the rationale of relying on market forces was used to justify some of decision making that left people unserved. If an area could not be served economically, then carriers should not be forced to do so. Standard FCC approaches to buildout and performance requirements supported that rationale. The third force, though, was the growing reaction to the effect of those deregulatory processes. Actors like PISC and RCA were looking across the telecommunications market and seeing troubling outcomes for both service availability and the flow of innovations to consumers. As a result, they brought very different – even “radical” – ways of thinking about what the FCC should do in this rulemaking. Interestingly, they looked backwards in time to when the FCC was a more activist regulator for models of how to re-balance the rights and obligations of field actors.

Those forces came together in rulemaking processes. Such processes gave field actors the opportunity to look anew at the outcomes that the existing zone of appropriateness was creating in the market. Differences in the way those outcomes were

viewed meant that a range of policy alternatives were assembled in the public record. Those included everything from staying the course to “radical” changes to the boundaries of the zones. Through the many arguments in the record, the field was comparing a range of potential policy choices to the existing boundaries of the zone. In so doing, field actors were seeing that ways that structural elements of the field would need to change to pursue specific policy goals.

### **3.4 Fairness Frame:**

Fairness is a frame used to evaluate the implications of events and their outcomes. Whether looking back at previous outcomes or projecting the implications of potential outcomes forward, models of fairness are used to try to understand what those outcomes mean for the parties involved. That was the way that field actors used the fairness frame in the rulemaking I studied. They considered specific rules and alternatives using concepts of fairness to assess the potential implications of those policy choices. Arguments that invoked fairness frames provided great insights into two issues relevant to zones of appropriateness. First, fairness-based arguments convey imperatives for action. If we are talking about fairness, we are talking about the ways that things should be done. Constructing arguments for those actions with a fairness frame, then, reveals both what standards of fairness actors aspire to and how they believe various actions would measure up to those standards. Fairness-based arguments speak directly to the conduct actors believe should be deemed appropriate and why.

Second, fairness-based arguments are used to explore how things need to change to achieve a particular standard. In that way, discussions and debates about fairness bring together the ways that actors think about the past and the future. Whether talking about

how things used to be or why things need to change, actors provided insights into how structures have evolved and may continue to evolve in the future. My data revealed actors doing that by examining specific policy alternatives as potential new steps in that evolving story of fairness. Those who observed fairness in the existing market and zone of appropriateness understandably argued that it would be unfair to change course. Others used their arguments for change to establish why the status quo was inherently unfair in some way. Fascinatingly, both types of arguments showed actors working to construct coherence between the past and future using their own ideals of fairness as guides.

AT&T invoked the frame to assert how fairness could and should be maintained by the FCC in the 700 MHz rulemaking. AT&T and its compatriots had been arguing that the FCC engage in deregulation by systematically removing conditions and encumbrances from spectrum licenses. That effort had been successful in many respects. The goal of an actor like AT&T was to cement and extend those gains. To do so, they argued that the FCC should act in accord with the principle of regulatory “symmetry”. Symmetry refers to the practice of applying the same regulatory rules and principles to each of the segments of the telecommunications industry. From the consumer’s point of view in 2024, telecommunications services appear to be a monolith of interconnected offerings. In the mid-2000s, however, when these rules were being set, the distinctions between home phone, home broadband, cable, and wireless cellular services - called commercial mobile radio services in field jargon – were much starker. Symmetry was the principle that the FCC’s decisions and rules should be consistent across the various sub-sectors it regulated. In the case of the 700 MHz auction rules, AT&T’s argument was that the FCC’s decisions should be consistent with the rules for other spectrum. They wrote:

“The adoption of more burdensome regulation of 700 MHz Band spectrum...would not only frustrate the operation of market-based incentives for the development of this spectrum but also would fail to provide the “symmetrical regulatory framework for commercial mobile radio services” that is supported by longstanding Commission policy.” (AT&T 10/20/2006)

Clearly, AT&T believed in the value of market-based regulation. The existing regulatory model was already working well. Diversion from the model would be unfair and “burdensome” to field actors. Such departures would violate AT&T’s preferred fairness standard in another way. They saw the symmetry principle as a way to cement and extend the movement away from an interventionist form of regulation to one that relied on market forces. When the FCC engaged in deregulatory action, AT&T and others would argue that those policies should proliferate to other rules by virtue of the principle of symmetry.

Moreover, AT&T argued that turning back the clock on those changes would be unfair. Specifically, they argued that adding back conditions on spectrum licenses would reduce their value. Firms would pay less for a license with conditions than they would for a more flexible license. AT&T saw efforts by firms to attach conditions as the seeking of unfair “windfalls” by getting spectrum at discounted prices. In response to one such proposal by Google, AT&T stated:

“Google’s request...is a self-serving attempt to obtain spectrum at discounted rates that would turn the clock back on a decade of bipartisan consensus on the proper approach to wireless deregulation, deprive taxpayers of billions of dollars, inhibit the explosive growth of wireless broadband, and – perhaps most importantly – expose the Commission to reversal in the courts and thereby delay



the vital public purposes to be served by the 700 MHz auction (AT&T 7/12/2007).”

This passage spotlights AT&T’s view of fairness in regulation. Put simply, the FCC’s role was to protect the ability of the market to function. When the market functioned well it brought tremendous benefits to the public. Constraining the free functioning of that market imperiled the arrival of those benefits. Achieving fairness as AT&T defined it required both arguing for symmetry within FCC regulatory action to reinforce a trajectory towards greater and greater deregulation generally. Achieving that fairness standard would both cement the role of market-driven policy and further ensconce licensee rights to flexibility within those policies.

Rural Cellular Association’s view of fairness was rooted, instead, in the text of the legislation that governed the FCC. The *Communications Act* called on the FCC to promote:

“...economic opportunity and competition and ensuring that new and innovative technologies are readily accessible to the American people by avoiding excessive concentration of licenses and by disseminating licenses among a wide variety of applicants, including small businesses, rural telephone companies, and businesses owned by members of minority groups and women...” (47 USC Section 309(j)(3))

For the association, the standard of regulatory fairness was determined by Congress. The FCC’s job was to meet and enforce that standard. RCA believed strongly that the FCC had failed in its obligation to ensure rural customers had access to new technology and services and to ensure that licenses were available to rural providers. That failure

necessitated that the FCC act. RCA's preferred remedies – stricter performance requirements and a keep-what-you-use provision – faced determined opposition in the public record. Rules that enabled those remedies would necessarily violate the principle of symmetry and open the door to the return of a more interventionist form of regulation. In response to those criticism, RCA argued that “[n]either statute nor market logic requires symmetry in performance requirements; nor in fact is there symmetry in the Commission’s Rules as to construction requirements for all commercial radio service licenses of a certain type (RCA 5/23/2007).” Further, the *Communications Act* gave the FCC the discretion to impose stricter requirements on 700 MHz licensees. Thus, RCA wrote: “Here that discretion should be used to adopt performance requirements that promote the rapid deployment of new technologies, products, and services for the benefit of the public, including those residing in rural areas (RCA 5/23/2007).” Rather than a fairness that tried to treat all regulatory challenges symmetrically, the association argued for a fairness that held all actors to the standard set in the act. The state of the market necessitated the FCC’s use of license conditions and requirements to meet the standard.

PISC’s invocations of the fairness frame were rooted in the belief that FCC policy had failed to promote a market that provided consumers with service quality commensurate with the value of enclosing the spectrum. That was the ultimate test of fairness to PISC – does the public receive sufficient value for the use of *their* spectrum? PISC argued “no” by contrasting the American telecommunications sector to those in Europe. They wrote:

“The primary difference between our broadband failures and international broadband successes comes down to policy choices. Better broadband policies in

the rest of the world have led other countries to much higher levels of market competition, which in turn has resulted in lower prices, better service and higher overall adoption rates.” (PISC 4/5/2007)

For PISC, different regulatory models set different trajectories for innovation. At that moment in time, the American trajectory had it being outpaced by other markets. “Better” policies could change that trajectory and speed the arrival of the benefits PISC imagined. Only the FCC could induce the market to operate more fairly through a different regulatory approach. In this rulemaking, PISC was ardently in favor of several rules that they argued would encourage new entrants to build a new nationwide network independent of the existing systems and oligarchs.

The excerpts from the public record I have included here were meant to highlight how these field actors used fairness arguments to do two things. The first was to try to create an imperative for action. A fairness-based argument attempts to recast the way that the FCC thought about its own actions. The decision was not between action and inaction or this alternative versus that alternative. The choice was between fairness and injustice. Second, I attempted to show actors constructing what we can think of as fairness stories. Essentially, storytelling requires that narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In a fairness story, the beginning is the assessment of the existing zone of appropriateness and the market dynamics it encouraged. The middle of the story portrayed the alternatives that the FCC should opt to accept or not. The end of the story is the fairness that those choices would create. Taken as a whole, we can see how these fairness stories are used by actors to construct coherence in field regulation over time. If the goal is a regulatory model that takes fairness seriously, then each set of FCC rules is a step in the path to

achieving that fairness. Fairness stories attempt to bring that progression to the foreground of decision making.

#### *3.4.1 Implications for the Zones of Appropriateness Concept:*

I suggested above that there are two elements of the use of the fairness frame that are relevant to how I am theorizing the concept of the zone of appropriateness. The first was that fairness framings convey imperatives for action. When we speak in a language of fairness, we are either saying something *needs* to change or that we *must* stay the course to stave off or encourage a particular outcome. Those imperatives were clear in the ways these three actors employed the frame. What is compelling to me about those arguments was that these actors were repeatedly arguing for their preferred fairness standards. This occurs in each of the rulemakings the FCC conducts. That means that field actors are continually working to refine and the fairness standard that the FCC was enacting through its rules. In this rulemaking, the FCC adopted rules that operationalized alternatives that were supported by each of these three fairness models. What I take from that is that there is a fluidity to how fairness is conceptualized and then operationalized in the field. Put another way, what is fair is continually being considered and reconsidered. Rules, then, should be expected to move the boundaries of the zone of appropriateness with some regularity. As the field encounters new alternatives and models of fairness evolve, rules too will shift and evolve. We can think of this as a series of structuring movements that extends across time. Meaning that behaviours that were ruled inappropriate in one rulemaking can become appropriate in the next.

This connects to the second element of the fairness frame that is relevant to zones of appropriateness. It was in discussions of fairness that I observed the most direct efforts

by field actors to forge coherence in regulatory policy across time. For AT&T it meant maintaining a trajectory of deregulation. RCA and PISC both sought a return to more interventionist regulation, though in different ways. Each of these actors was operating with a clear sense of what model of fairness should prevail in the FCC's rules. The tension between those models appears to have supplied the material for field actors to engage in a process of understanding what different rules and alternatives could mean. In those moments of meaning making, many different ways of seeing each potential regulatory action were alive in the discussion. Again, it appears to have been to the benefit of the rulemaking process that these different models were present in the record.

### **3.5 Zones of Appropriateness and Progress:**

The frame analysis I conducted of this rulemaking provided theoretically compelling insights into how actors in this field interpreted the events of the rulemaking. Through the analysis of these three frames, I came to understand that in addition to their own interests in the rulemaking, actors were using their own beliefs about what conduct was deemed appropriate in the field. There was substantial variation in those beliefs. I have argued that that variation is a fixed element of fields. Like differences in interests, difference of belief about appropriateness is an ongoing fact of this field. It is somewhat natural, I think, to see those different beliefs through one's own views of ethics and justice. I did that in the earlier iterations of my analysis. It comes quite naturally to assign actors to lists of heroes and villains. By staying in the data and iterating with the literature, I realized that making those lists was both unhelpfully cynical and missing the value of the variation that emerges from in those different views. As Ganz (2023) suggested, the conflict can be viewed as chaos. The haphazard and volatile work of

securing one's preferred outcomes. Conflict can also be viewed as the coming together of different views and interests that assembles a set of alternative paths forward that can be taken seriously, learned from, and, even, assembled in a way that allows actors to better understand how their values and interests are compatible.

Following that reasoning led me to reconsider the way I think about the role that the systemic power of institutional structure plays in how decisions were made in this field. The zone of appropriateness idea emerges from that theorizing. What I have come to see in my data is that the exploration of policy alternatives at the field level involves the mutually constitutive forces of structure and action. We prefer to think of the systemic power of institutional structure as providing clear direction on what conduct is appropriate. A stable structure is like the proverbial square hole that allows only square pegs to pass through. What I saw in my data is that field actors do, sometimes, look at structure that way and try to exclude the pegs that do not fit. But other times, actors look at the square pegs and find them wanting in some respect. Perhaps they are encouraging a conception of fairness that they find unjust. In those moments, actors turn their attention to the square holes and begin to consider new options. Maybe they think about rounding their edges of the existing holes. Maybe they think about punching new round holes beside the square ones.

That led me to look for a way to conceptualize actors' relationship to institutional structure that leave open a fluidity in how and when structure is used in different ways. I started with the idea that different actors hold different – sometimes very different – views about institutional structures are and should be. Each actor may see variance between what they see a role as being and what they think it should be. Between actors there is, demonstrably, considerable variance between the two. The same is true for other

elements of structure, such as rules and how interdependencies operate. There are two ways that those forms of variance are constrained. The first is the outcome of field-level interactional processes like rulemakings. The FCC listens to a range of opinions and then makes a spate of decisions that bring clarity to how conduct will be constrained in a specific context, such as the use of 700 MHz spectrum licenses. The second way is that as structure evolves over time as actors work to create coherence in the evolution of that structure, such as by advocating for different rights or fairness models. Of course, cultural frames shape that evolution too, such as a deregulatory fervor. What that creates is a zone of appropriate conduct that is bound by the negotiated conceptions of rules, roles, interdependencies, and other forms of structure. Those negotiations occur and unfold across a continual series of interactions over time. Through those negotiations, field actors are engaging in a series of structuring efforts that make and remake the institutional forms that guide action on the ground.

I think this way of thinking about institutional structure has important implications for how progress gets made. For Barley (1986, 2020), structuring processes were initiated when new technologies arrived and had to be incorporated in existing role structures and patterns of action. Thinking about structuring at the field level requires us to think about the ways that different opportunities to make process get created. As the findings presented here suggest, that is not as simple or straightforward as responding to the advent of a more advanced medical scanner. I would postulate that the form of evolutionary technological progress that Barley was studying would be likely to fall in the category of instances in which there is a match between square pegs and square holes. Those structuring efforts still required substantial effort and attention to the elements of structure that still needed to adapt to experience the full benefits of the new technology.

Field-level structuring processes are more likely to deal with problems arising from the shapes of the holes and the shapes of the pegs. I found it very compelling to see that work through the lens of the zone of appropriateness concept. The diversity of values and interests that collide in field-level structuring efforts create both the ingredients for conflict *and* the ingredients for figuring out when structure needs to change to embrace alternatives. That is when progress is becomes possible.

A reasonable question at this point would be to ask why the progress that emerges from these processes tends to be less than the progress we had hoped for. I will explore those dynamics in much greater detail in the next chapter. In general, I believe that those outcomes are the result of the stubbornness of status quo structure. Because structuring is fundamentally a process of adaptation through interaction and negotiation, it is unlikely that any one voice will have the power to get everything they want. Again, it is important to try not to view that cynically. While hindsight may make things remarkably clear, in the moment, actors are contending with a lot of contradictory signals that emerge from interpretations of both existing structure and alternatives for making progress.



## Chapter 4

### 4 Findings: Carving Out Spaces for Progress

#### 4.1 Introduction

In the following two chapters I bring greater focus to how field actors can work together to make progress. The purpose of this chapter is to show two things. First, I show a base case. Through the examination of an issue on which field actors were remarkably aligned in terms of the decision the FCC ought to make, I show how the zone of appropriateness concept applies in cases when the stability of institutional structure is maintained. That stability is rooted in agreement among field actors that the existing definition of the zone should continue to apply. As I laid out in the previous chapter, there was considerable variance in the arguments that different actors used to support this outcome. The purpose for showing a base case is to highlight and theorize from how those different arguments were used to construct the final decision the FCC made. I explore two specific mechanisms: justifying appropriateness and denying accommodation. The net result is that alignment on outcomes yields no change in the specific regulatory approach being discussed. The zone of appropriateness is maintained.

Second, I then turn my attention to the antecedents of progress. The basis of my theorizing is that for progress to be made, field actors need to carve out a specific space in which to discuss that progress and to adapt institutional structures to permit the progress to take root. That is, the zone of appropriateness needs to be expanded to include a new approach to solving a policy problem. I argue here that the a priori zone of appropriateness becomes a way of interpreting whether and how progress must be made

to solve a pressing policy challenge. In this example, the necessity to construct an interoperable communications system for public safety agencies to use to coordinate the response to emergency scenarios. The first step in that process is a mechanism termed problematizing structure. Specifically, I address how public safety actors' interpretations of the existing zone of appropriateness shift. In a short time, they go from being utterly opposed to a public/private partnership model to calling for the FCC to actively consider such a model in the rulemaking I studied. What changes through that transition is the elements of structure that public safety actors view as barriers to solving the interoperability problem. Then I examine the role that specific actors play in carving out a space in which to consider very different approaches to that problem. I argue that this subset of actors holds a joint, relational power to acts as the arbiters of the negotiable. By that I mean, these actors come together to set the initial terms of the negotiation over the creation of a public-private partnership model.

What I hope you see in the presentation of these data and mechanisms is twofold. First, I show that the existing zone of appropriateness can serve two functions. On one hand, these zones permit actors to come to similar views about maintaining structure through different ways of seeing the tenets of the preferred regulatory paradigm. You will see the familiar frames of market, rights and fairness operationalized in different ways by different actors. One can easily see from the dynamics I explore how progress could be delayed or destroyed. On the other hand, I show how the elements of institutional structure that had been developed over many rulemakings and debates, can come to form a lens through which actors begin to see what needs to change to pursue the progress they seek. I show though, that not just any actor has the power to initiate the structuring processes that are essential to getting progress of the drawing board and into reality. In

fact, the power to do that is held jointly by multiple actors. When those actors agree to set the terms for a debate about progress and change, what they are also doing is carving out a space that is *somewhat* liberated from the strictures of the zone of appropriateness and a diversity of ideas and approaches can be negotiated. The resulting rules do two things. They alter structural forms to facilitate the implementation of that progress and they govern the subsequent action on the ground. Of course, this subset of actors does not have total discretion to change institutional structure. In the subsequent chapter I discuss how other actors seek to destroy or reign in the progress by arguing that existing structure cannot be violated in the ways necessary to implement progress.

The deeper theoretical story here is about the role of power and politics in the making of progress. As I have argued and shown, the literature, not to mention the citizenry of many modern societies, is convinced that power and politics are impediments to progress. Of course, that is sometimes true. But my objective here is to understand the role that power and politics play in the progress that does get made. Here I hope you begin to see what I refer to as politics as exploration. Making progress requires the successful completion of two tasks: (1) selecting and implementing a new and presumably better way to solve a problem, and (2) adapting institutional structures to permit that progress to take root and flourish. Sometimes, existing structure is such that progress cannot be made in a specific time. Even when that occurs, elements of structure play an important role in the exploration of what progress gets deemed possible. The process I will describe of sorting alternatives inside and outside the existing zone of appropriateness is essential to figuring out what is possible and, perhaps most importantly, how and why something is impossible. Other times, structure is seen as sufficiently mutable that progress is possible. Then actors must figure out what elements

of the structure need to change. In both of these cases, politics supplies the interactional context in which things get sorted out at the field level. Without politics, what I describe would take the much more static form of a framing contest in which the FCC simply selects from the available alternatives. What I describe is a dynamic process in which the progress that does get made is politically negotiated among field actors.

#### **4.2 Option 1: Maintaining the Status Quo**

The purpose of describing the process of maintaining the status quo is to provide a base case for how outcomes in the field are often constructed. Typically, the FCC asks for comment on a host of issues and then decides to stick with the existing ways of doing things in many cases. Providing the baseline, then, presents a simplified example of how an issue is addressed that highlights common interaction patterns and scripts. In this example, a group of actors with different roles in the field all agreed that the FCC should proceed with its existing way of doing things. Two features of that agreement are highlighted. The first is that organizations arrive at agreement through different arguments. Because of the widespread agreement on an outcome, that variation does not become a contested disagreement about how the issue should be interpreted and understood. The second feature that is highlighted is how the FCC constructs its decision on the issue from the arguments made by organizations in their comments.

The issue in this example is whether to impose the FCC's existing "Enhanced 911" or "E911" rules on the 700 MHz spectrum. E911 is a technological solution to aid in the location of people who dial 911 from mobile devices. At the time of the 700 MHz rulemaking, the FCC had existing E911 rules that it had developed for and applied to other swaths of spectrum. At issue in this rulemaking was whether to apply those off-the-

shelf rules to the 700 MHz spectrum, much of which was to be auctioned to carry mobile communications services for the first time. The FCC tentatively concluded that those rules would be extended.

What follows is a select reconstruction from the public record that represents the debate that occurred among field actors on this issue. The organizations that have been sampled for inclusion in this reconstruction represent both a diversity of roles in the field and a diversity of arguments relating to the E911 issue. The comments along the left margin support the FCC's tentative conclusion. Among those organizations are three services providers, the relevant public safety advocacy organization – NENA – the National Emergency Number Association, a firm that manufactures mobile devices as well as provides service to consumer, and the trade association that represents device manufacturers. Note the different ways these actors frame their support for extending the E911 rules. The firms tend to focus their arguments on the relationship between market forces and regulatory intervention. In this case, they accept regulation as reasonable on different grounds. Notably, too, the language of obligation is used which is also consistent with invocations of the rights frame. All told, this support supplied the FCC with both a consistency in the public record of support for the rules and an array of justifications for why those rules were appropriate.

The comments that are right justified are from two organizations that represent the interests of rural service providers. These organizations ask the FCC to delay the implementation of the E911 rules or to provide accommodation for providers that cannot comply with the rules with available technology. These actors express a concern that they might fail to comply with the E911 rules if device and equipment manufacturing firms failed to create the technology necessary for them to be compliant. The final section of

the debate reconstruction shows how the FCC responded to these concerns in their final rules. This example was selected to show how field structure is maintained through interactions that (1) justify the appropriateness of the FCC's tentative conclusion and (2) provide the rationale to deny accommodation sought by a small minority of field actors:

### **E911 Debate Reconstruction**

“[W]e seek comment on our tentative conclusion that services provided in the 700 MHz Band...should be subject to requirements concerning 911 and enhanced 911.”

**FCC, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 3/8/2006**

“Dobson supports the Commission's tentative conclusion that services provided in the 700 MHz band should be subject to requirements concerning the 911, E911... **The public interest will clearly be served by imposition of these obligations.**”  
**Dobson Communication Corp, Comment, 29/9/2006 (Rural and suburban service provider)**

“...[R] regulation which serves a legitimate public safety...purpose is more justifiable than regulation of carriers' **core economic decision making...[This regulation] is justifiable on grounds of both regulatory parity and the broader public interest.**”

**United States Cellular Corp, Comment, 29/9/2006 (Service Provider with 5.7 million subscribers in 26 states)**

“**There is nothing peculiar about 700 MHz spectrum that warrants unique treatment with respect to E911 matters.** Rather, it is the services to be provided that are most important here, and 700 MHz licensees should be subject to the same (no less, and no more) E-911 requirements as other licensees providing services where E-911 obligations exist.”  
**Aloha Partners, L.P., Comment, 29/9/2006 (Spectrum licensee)**

“As NENA and other public safety associations have...it is time to get ahead of the curve. Instead of trying to retrofit E9-1-1 to services long after their introduction, as occurred with conventional cellular telephony, **it would be better to forewarn entrepreneurs of emergency calling access obligations that will apply to 700 MHz services meeting the chosen regulatory criteria.**”

**National Emergency Number Association, Comment, 29/9/2006 (Advocacy organizational supporting universal emergency telephone systems)**

“QUALCOMM supports these requirements and is in agreement that the 911/E911 rules should be extended to services in the 700 MHz Band that meet the Commission's criteria for inclusion.”

**QUALCOMM, Comment, 29/9/2006 (Device Manufacturer, Service Provider)**

“TIA...agrees with the FCC’s tentative conclusion that services provided in the 700 MHz Band **that meet these criteria should be subject to the 911/E911 requirements.**”

**Telecommunications Industry Association, Comment, 29/9/2006 (Trade Association representing device manufacturers)**

**“RTG believes that the imposition of [E911] requirements is premature...The technologies chosen to deploy 700 MHz services may or may not be able to comply with existing [E911] requirements.** RTG notes for example, that currently, many rural GSM carriers cannot meet the Commission’s E911 accuracy requirements because no GPS handsets are available for GSM and cell sites tend to be deployed in a “string of pearls” along highways. By imposing [the] requirements on 700 MHz deployments now, **the Commission may completely stifle rural deployments.** Accordingly, RTG encourages the Commission to wait to see how services develop and to revisit the issue in the future.”

**Rural Telecommunications Group, Comment, 29/9/2006 (Trade Association representing rural service providers)**

“The Blooston Rural Carriers support the application of [E911] rules to 700 MHz licensees that are using their spectrum for Commercial Mobile Radio Services... However, if such requirements are imposed, the Commission must recognize that the development of 700 MHz equipment is not yet as far along as the development of PCS and cellular equipment; and the timetables for complying with E911...**requirements should not put licensees into a compliance quandary when they have little or no control over the equipment manufacturing process.**”

**Blooston Rural Carriers, Comment, 29/9/2006 (Law firm advocating for rural service providers)**

**“We conclude that [our rules] should be amended to apply 911/E911 requirements to all commercial**

**mobile radio services (CMRS), including services licensed in the 700 MHz Commercial Services Band...** We find that **RTG's concerns regarding the possible difficulty of implementing 911/E911 in rural areas do not support delaying the extension of the 911/E911 provisioning requirements** to other bands and services. RTG bases its argument on conjecture only – that technology being developed for 700 MHz may not support provision of E911 service. Given the critical importance of E911 to consumers and the public safety community, we cannot accept this unsupported assertion as a basis for delaying imposition of E911 requirements and putting at risk the safety of life and property. **In this regard, we agree with NENA that deployment of E911 service is most effectively accomplished by establishing E911 requirements at the outset of establishing service in new bands...** Blooston...caution[ed] that the development of 700 MHz equipment is not as far along as it is for broadband PCS and argue that the timetables for E911 compliance should not “put licensees in a compliance quandary when they have little or no control over the equipment manufacturing process.” **...[W]e are satisfied that manufacturers will have adequate opportunity to produce compliant solutions for these new services by the time service providers are ready to begin incorporating them. This view is further supported by the fact that the manufacturing interests that commented on the 911/E911 issue, Qualcomm and TIA, both fully supported extension of 911/E911 to the 700 MHz Band.”**  
**FCC, First Report and Order & Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 25/4/2007**

#### *4.2.1 Justifying Appropriateness:*

What is important about this example is not the outcome that the FCC selected, but how that decision came about. In this case, the existing structure of the field guided interactions that, in turn, constituted a consensus through which the FCC's tentative conclusion was justified as appropriate. Actors, even those raising implementation



concerns, agreed in principle that the extension of the rules was consistent with regulatory norms and the role structure of the field. The decision was justified on normative grounds via the principle of regulatory parity. Firms and their trade associations were weary both of new regulatory interventions and inconsistent regulatory requirements across the various forms of service provided to customers. The oft stated argument was that regulatory intervention should be “justifiable”. In this case, the organizations supporting extension of the rules found that there was “nothing peculiar” about the 700 MHz spectrum that would necessitate a novel regulatory intervention. The FCC agreed and extended the rules.

The language of obligation used in this debate draws attention to how the justification of the extension of the E911 rules was rooted in the status quo role structure of the field. Dobson and United States Cellular recognized and willingly assented to the obligations of service providers to support public safety operations by providing for the communication of location data to 911 call centers. They accepted that obligation as part of their role in the field. Firms also accepted that the extension of the E911 rules fell within the power and authority of the Commission’s regulatory role. United States Cellular Corp’s contrasting of the appropriateness of requiring E911 support to the inappropriateness of regulating “core economic decision making” is one way of recognizing that the FCC was enacting its role appropriately.

I began this subsection by stating that *how* the decision to extend the rules got made is the important part of the story. The decision got made by well-scripted actors playing their roles to perfection. Remember that the job of the script is to convey the story, to move the plot along. The script in this example conveys the story of maintaining the status quo by justifying the appropriateness of the decision to extend the rules. That

decision allowed firms to fulfill their obligations to public safety agencies and customers. The imposition of that obligation was deemed appropriate as a regulatory matter on the grounds of the parity principle. Interpretations of those roles and principles placed the E911 decision in the context of the structural elements of the field. Agreement on the justifiability of the decision in the moment gave actors guidance on how to proceed.

Justifying appropriateness is theoretically important because it is a mechanism through which actors use field structure to determine if maintaining the status quo will satisfy both the problem being debated and the interests of field actors. At a practical level, the existing E911 rules and technology were working as expected in other spectrum. The relevant interest group, NENA, attested to that and advised a stay-the-course strategy. Most firms saw the existing E911 rules as a solution to a coordination problem between their systems and first responders. It would not have served the interests of firms deploy services on the 700 MHz spectrum that did not ensure that customers would be able to dial 911 and be located during emergencies. Agreement that the extension of the E911 rules was justifiably appropriate reconfirmed these conclusions and gave credence to the FCC's decision. It can seem odd to call widespread agreement a negotiated settlement. But it is. Through the justification of the appropriateness of the E911 rules, field actors determined that their oft-conflicting interests were compatible. That agreement was simplified by the ability to implement an existing solution.

At an institutional level, the elements of field structure that were called forward to justify the appropriateness of the E911 solution were themselves reconfirmed as appropriate. Institutional structure is maintained through interaction. In this example, the decision to extend the E911 rules came after field actors with varying interests and ways of framing the issue reasserted that the existing role structure should continue. Role

structures have two components: roles and interdependencies among those roles. The roles of service providers, device manufacturers, advocacy groups, and the FCC itself were all reaffirmed in this debate. The role of the FCC received the greatest scrutiny, but in the end, all agreed that it had the authority to decide the E911 rules should apply in the 700 MHz spectrum. Also reaffirmed were regulatory norms and the script that conveyed those norms. In this case, several frames were invoked via that script. The market frame was used to test the justifiability of FCC imposing the E911 on the 700 MHz spectrum. The rights frame was used to test if the obligations on services providers were justified. And the fairness frame was used to justify that the parity test had been passed. Rather than being the basis for disagreement and conflict, these framings formed the foundation of the agreement to extend the rules and re-enact extant structure. Thus, the maintenance plot unfolded as it should have.

#### *4.2.2 Denying Accommodation:*

The requests for accommodation from RTG and Blooston reveal another way that structure guided action in the field. The provisions of E911 services required field actors with different roles to work interdependently. Two categories of business firms held relevant roles: the firms that build the networks and served customers (i.e., carriers) and the device manufacturers that designed the technology that made those networks and the devices that operate on them E911 compliant. Firms holding both of those roles expressed their support for the E911 rule extension. That support enabled the FCC to deny requests for accommodation rooted in the fear of being unable to comply with the rules because device manufactures would not build the necessary technology. Sufficient time would be available for device manufacturers to fulfill their role and develop that

technology. The FCC agreed with NENA, the relevant subject matter expert, that building E911 capability into 700 MHz networks from day one was preferable to permitting delays based on “conjecture”.

In denying the requests for accommodation from rural providers, the FCC sent a powerful signal about the role structure of the field and the interdependencies that animate that structure. There would be no exceptions to fulfilling the role requirements of field actors on this issue. The obligation to support public safety operations had been affirmed. Feared technical challenges were not a sufficient basis to be excepted from fulfilling that obligation. While that message was delivered most strongly to the rural providers seeking the accommodation, the FCC sent a similarly strong signal to device manufacturers. They, too, were expected to fulfil their obligation by ensuring the availability of the that technology rural providers needed to be technically compliant with the E911 rules.

There is an important dynamic to note in this example regarding the interplay between elements of field structure. As the service providers that fully supported the extension of the E911 rules noted, there was a deeply held belief in the field that firms had the right to make decisions for themselves about the technologies they selected to build their networks. That was a business decision and an example of what United States Cellular Corp called a carriers’ “core economic decision making.” Rural providers had chosen to use “GSM” technology for which E911 compatible technology was not yet available. The FCC did not question those decisions. It did, however, make clear that an economic decision about which technologies to employ was not a basis for a firm to rid itself of the obligation to be compliant with the E911 rules. This dynamic is important to note because it reveals how the various elements of field structure can work together to

ensure that – in this case – role requirements are fulfilled. That was an essential building block to ensuring that the shared obligations of the field were met.

This denial of accommodation has important implications for how we think about progress and politics at the field level of analysis. Progress in this case was preserved more than advanced. The reality was that in the mid-2000s when this rulemaking was conducted, E911 functionalities were still in their infancy as were geolocation-based services and applications generally. This was a time when drivers were still reliant on dash-top GPS devices for routing information and directions. The immediate and precise geolocation functionality we experience on phones and other devices today was not yet available. By getting behind the extension of the E911 rules, organizations in the field were encouraging the maintenance of the progress. By denying accommodations of exceptions to the rules, the FCC was ensuring that progress did not recede. In that way, the fairness-based argument for regulatory symmetry helped to maintain and spread the adoption of a relatively new form of progress uniformly through the field. On a political level, each of these interactions provides field actors the ability to reiterate its arguments and interests. In the end, the specific rationale the FCC chose to extend the rules is not particularly relevant because the consensus that the rules should apply was so broad. But by presenting the various analyses and arguments in the record, field actors were keeping those different ways seeing and interpreting issues alive in the record and therefore alive in the field.

This presentation of a base case example that shows how the status quo was maintained reveals important political dynamics and mechanisms at play in the field. Fundamentally, organizations in the field agreed that the E911 rules should apply to the 700 MHz spectrum. That agreement shows how structural elements of the field both

reflected the beliefs of field actors and guided their action. That agreement came despite variation in how actors with different roles framed their support for the rule extension. Service providers' arguments were rooted in conceptions of regulatory fairness that governed the FCC's role in the field. Firms should be subject only to regulation that justifiable, in this case on the bases of public interest obligations and regulatory parity. TIA, which represented device manufactures, was seeking clarity on which services are subject to these rules. That would, presumably, aid in their members' efforts to plan their development and production of essential technology. NENA focussed on the quality of the link between commercial and public safety communications systems. The commercial and public safety communication systems had historically been kept segregated to avoid signal interference and because the system requirements were substantially different. Without the E911 rules and technologies in place it would be impossible for commercial carriers to transmit location data to the public safety networks via 911 call centres during emergencies. NENA's role was to advocate for the best possible link between those systems.

Even though the organizations came to their support of the E911 rules from different perspectives, they agreed that an obligation existed to support public safety operations and that the FCC had the authority to implement those rules in the 700 MHz spectrum. This is the kind of de facto political coalition that does not tend to get a great deal of attention in the press or the academic literature. These organizations came together to take principled stands about their obligations to serve their customers and fulfill the requirements of their roles in the field even when those obligations incurred substantial economic costs. That acceptance of the obligation reinforced the field-level structures that, quite literally in this case, saved lives.

This finding is theoretically important. I think many would look at this and say this is less a story about a politically negotiated agreement and more a story of the influence of systemic power. Actors believed that they were required to support public safety operations and so they “agreed” to do so. That this de facto coalition of the willing, which included the FCC itself, overcame the resistance to maintaining the status quo suggests a deeper story about the alignment of systemic and episodic forms of power. The canonical view of institutional politics sees episodic power as strategic action intended to gain control over structure for the purposes of pursuing interests. I see this case differently, as the strategic mobilization in support of maintaining progress previously made. Meyer and colleagues have argued that within modern actors is a drive to pursue progress and justice and that that shows up at the institutional level as rationalized myths (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Strang & Meyer, 1993). We can view the interactions that led to the extension of the E911 rules as an expression of those ideals. Meaning that politics is not always a pitched battle for control. These moments of subtle negotiations of agreement that allow multiple interests to be served by a single outcome have escaped scholarly attention for too long.

#### **4.3 Option 2: Carving Out Opportunities for Progress**

Determining how organizations in a field figure out how to create opportunities to make progress is as essential purpose of this research. I think about opportunities for progress in a specific way based on the finding presented below. When the status quo is maintained, field structure remains stable and the action that follows unfolds in expected, practiced ways. For progress to get made some of those structural elements need to be set aside so that new ways of coordinating action that advance progress can be negotiated.

The metaphor that comes to mind to describe the process is one of carving out a space within the existing structure in which something new and progressive can be imagined. I induced two mechanisms from my data that aid in that work. The first is problematizing structure. This mechanism describes how public safety organizations came to see how the structural elements that had been essential in protecting their interests were, with respect to the interoperable communications system, standing in the way of the progress they needed. The second, arbitrating the negotiable, shows the importance of specific actors setting the agenda for what elements of that structure will be set aside to carve out a space in which progress can be explored.

The example I will use to describe these mechanisms is the debate over how to create a nationwide, interoperable communications system for public safety agencies. Solving the problem of creating that system was not straightforward. Technically, the problem was solvable. What stood in the way was field structure. The status quo structure intentionally maintained a segregation of commercial and public safety systems. Rules and roles structure all reinforces the segregation of the systems. Also of importance to the status quo structure was a norm of deference to public safety that I will discuss in detail below. Traditionally, public safety organizations viewed that segregation and the structural elements that enabled it as essential and protected it zealously. Here I explore the mechanisms through which public safety actors came to realize that those very structural barriers would need to be lowered to achieve the system they believed they needed to fulfil their life-saving role. These mechanisms created the opportunity to make progress on the public safety communications system precisely because they carved that project out of the confines of the extant structure. The result was a structuring process designed to make the new system a reality through a novel approach – public/private



partnership – that intentionally violated the structural features that kept public safety communications segregated.

#### *4.3.1 Problematizing Structure.*

As the auction of the 700 MHz spectrum drew closer, leading public safety organizations’ statements to the FCC reflected an evolving realization that the status quo structure of the field would need to change if the desired national, interoperable network would be built. Table 2 presents a chronological progression of the elements of that change with representative quotations. As described, the status quo was very much one in which public safety networks were segregated from commercial networks, designed and built by public safety agencies, and funded with public dollars raised at the local level. Then, the world changed in important ways. Public safety agencies were increasingly expected to be able to respond effectively to mass casualty events and terror attacks. Public Safety actors were “recognizing” that that expanded role required more advanced communication tools, especially mobile broadband. They needed a better, interoperable network. The first solution they considered was to lobby for additional, public safety-held spectrum. They argued:

“As with any other electronic data transfer, the greater the available bandwidth, the faster such information can be delivered. Especially, when public safety is at risk, speed is obviously critical. A police officer cannot be expected to stand by while a mugshot slowly downloads over a narrow bandwidth (NPSTC & APCO, 4/28/2005, WT 05-157).”

As these arguments were being made, public safety remained stridently opposed to reducing the segregation from commercial systems. They believed that with additional spectrum they could both build the network they needed *and* maintain the traditional system segregation.

Within a year, public safety was openly considering the merit of “public/private partnerships” to solve their communications problems. They remained fearful that their communications systems would be “dependent on business plans, successes, or failures, of commercial providers (APCO et al, Comment, 10/20/2006, PS – 05-157.” Public private partnerships were believed to be a way to mitigate those dependencies by putting additional spectrum under the control of public safety. With a path to accessing additional spectrum conceptualized, concerns about how to utilize that spectrum were raised. Even as the FCC began exploring public/private options in early 2007, public safety officials were expressing the “major concern” that they could not afford to construct using typical funding mechanisms. Soon after, Frontline Wireless submitted its proposal that included the condition that a commercial licensee be required to pay for the construction of the public safety system. Public Safety actors then urged the FCC to seek public comment on that proposal.

In just two years, public safety actors moved a great distance in terms of the structural elements of the field to which they were willing to entertain changes. That movement began with and then was accelerated by changes in public safety actors’ own interpretation of how status quo structures were contributing to the persistence of their communications challenges in the face of an expanding role. The final row of Table 1 shows the anxieties that lowering the barriers to commercial partnership entailed. Segregation of the two systems did more than support operational needs. Segregation generated systemic power that public safety actors used to secure their resources, shaped their systems, and, ultimately, control their own fate. Partnership with a commercial firm augured the loss of that control because public safety’s communications systems would be dependent on a commercial partner for the first time. That meant a very practical loss of

control in the sense that they would no longer be free to design and build their systems themselves. They would need to rely on the commercial partner to fund, build, and operate the system. It also meant a loss of control in a more abstract sense. They had never been dependent on the business success of a private firm to have their communications needs met. So, as the public comment period on the Frontline proposals opened, public safety found itself in a structuring process with potentially irreconcilable goals. On one hand they wanted to lower structural barriers to facilitate construction of an advanced communications system. On the other, they wanted protections that maintained the control to which they had become accustomed. That was the fundamental structuring task that would need to be accomplished to make the new system a reality.

This progression through which public safety organizations moved from zealously protecting the status quo structures to openly calling for the FCC to consider proposals that would dramatically change role structures and interdependencies in the field is theoretically important for both how to understand how progress is made at the field level as well as institutional politics. With respect to progress, I have endeavoured to show that public safety became more and more accepting of structural changes as their understanding of the barriers to fulfilling their expanding operational role became clearer. First came the realization that protecting the public safety in a world rocked by events like 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and school shootings like the one at Columbine High School required new tools and new functionality. With these mass casualty emergencies came a life or death need to coordinate responses across multiple agencies. But it was not just mass casualty events that public safety was thinking about. As in some of the passages from public comments that I have cited here, public safety was also considering the benefits of improved, mobile broadband service for even day-to-day operations. Those

realizations set off a progression of gradually accepting the problems posed by structural elements that would make realizing the benefits of enhanced communications systems impossible. That was when public safety began putting different elements on status quo structure up for negotiation.

The elements of that status quo structure that formed the zone of appropriateness had been painstakingly constructed and zealously defended. Then, those very structural elements came to be seen as the barriers to the progress public safety sought and brought clarity to the things that would need to shift and change to make a new system possible. But public safety did not put them all up for negotiation at once. They first explored paths that would have required virtually no structural changes, such as securing access to more spectrum, to radical changes, such as a public-private partnership. One can easily imagine a situation in which actors had not seen the importance of these structural changes. At the beginning of the rulemaking I studied, public safety knew it needed a better system, but had not yet accepted the extent to which that new system might require changes to roles and role interdependencies in the field. At many points along that progress, public safety might have dug in its heels and insisted that the segregation of the systems be maintained. In moments like those, the chances for opportunities for progress to end in disappointment. Instead, what we see is a set of actors accepting that change to structure was needed to bring about the sought after change in operations on the ground.

That finding has further theoretical implications for how we think about institutional politics. Public safety began by using its episodic power to maintain the status quo segregation from commercial systems. Eventually, they were ones calling for change to that structure. This was not a story of other field actors with conflicting values seeking to coopt structure to pursue their own interests. Quite the opposite. Public safety

likely had the role-based authority to demand that the status quo be maintained. Instead, they opened the door to a negotiation of changing that structure without knowing what the result would be. The anxiety that is palpable in the final line of the table betrays how risky the decision to invite that change was. I turn now to an analysis of how public safety worked to manage that risk by maintaining control over the form that a public/private partnership would take.

*Table 2: Evolution of Public Safety Statements*

<b>Change in Content of Communications to the FCC</b>	<b>Representative Quote</b>
<p><i>Public Safety recognizes inability to fulfil expanding role. Public Safety Organizations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public safety organizations relate changing operational requirements to need for expanded communication capability and spectrum.</li> <li>• Affirm that commercial networks cannot be used for mission critical operations.</li> <li>• Use of commercial systems for “mission critical” communications is ruled out.</li> </ul>	<p>“...the events of 9/11 and the subsequent nationwide focus on improved homeland security have <b>placed new, unanticipated demands on public safety agencies and their communications system...Public safety agencies are increasingly recognizing the need for mobile broadband capability...</b>[Some] have suggested that as much as 30 MHz [of additional spectrum] may be required to accommodate local, state and federal public safety broadband requirements... However, for mission critical public safety communications, there are likely to continue to be significant <b>constraints on the ability to rely upon commercial services.</b> These constraints relate to public safety agencies’ unique needs for geographic coverage, reliability, access, predictability and security.”  <b>APCO &amp; NPSTC, Comment, 4/28/2005 (PS – 05-157)</b></p>
<p><i>Public Safety seeks additional spectrum but not modifications to role structure or interdependencies: Public safety organizations report discussions with FCC staff about the need for additional</i></p>	<p>At the meeting NPSTC representatives related that the need for additional spectrum by public safety agencies, fueled by an expanding demand for services, including broadband, had generated discussion within NPSTC. These discussions are continuing and encompass consideration of the</p>

<p>spectrum to expand communication capabilities.</p>	<p>current 700 MHz wideband channel plan with regard to potential broadband use.”  <b>NPSTC et al, Ex Parte, 10/26/2005 (PS 05-157)</b></p>
<p><i>Public Safety begin exploration of revising interdependencies with commercial partners:</i>  Public Safety organizations express openness to public/private partnerships to secure additional spectrum access and reservations about becoming reliant on commercial partners.</p>	<p>“[A]n auction [of additional spectrum to commercial licensees] would forever place control of the spectrum in the hands of <b>commercial enterprises that do not have public safety as their principal, overriding objective.</b> In contrast, assigning the spectrum to a <b>government-created entity with public/private partnerships</b> would ensure that a broadband network developed for the spectrum, while used in part for commercial purposes, would be built and maintained to public safety specifications, including coverage, reliability, survivability, functionality, and on-demand access. <b>Critical first responder communications should not be dependent upon the business plans, successes, or failures of commercial providers.</b>”  <b>APCO et al, Comment, 10/20/2006 (PS – 05-157)</b></p>
<p><i>Public Safety combines need for spectrum with acceptance of the need for a new role structure, interdependencies:</i>  Public Safety organizations encourage Congress and the FCC for direct assignment of an additional 30 MHz spectrum for public-private partnership.</p>	<p>We urge Congress and the Commission to take necessary steps to facilitate and provide further definition to this approach. While the Public Safety Organizations do not necessarily endorse all elements of the...Petition, <b>we do strongly support the additional spectrum allocation and the concept of assigning that spectrum to a public safety [entity] that would pursue appropriate and beneficial public/private partnerships.</b> <b>APCO et al, Comment, 11/29/2006 (RM 112348)</b></p>
<p>Public Safety identifies funding procedures as a material impediment to new role structure: Raise “major concern” about funding the construction of a national network.</p>	<p>However, it remains <b>unclear how [public safety] would pay for this infrastructure build-out.</b> As noted above, there is not likely to be sufficient "excess capacity" to generate significant revenue that might otherwise be the incentive for commercial network participation in the network deployment. User fees from public safety users would eventually provide some funding, but that would not occur until after the network is operational. <b>Normally, public safety systems are funded through municipal bonds or general tax revenue.</b> The national public safety licensee, while necessarily representative of government bodies, will not have similar access to public funding. <b>Again, the absence of a clear model</b></p>

	<b>for funding is a major concern.” APCO, Comment, 02/26/2007 (PS 06-229)</b>
<p><i>Public Safety asks FCC to consider Frontline-like proposal:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 30 MHz more spectrum to commercial partner</li> <li>• partner to fund public safety system</li> <li>• partner to give priority access to commercial spectrum in emergencies),</li> </ul> <p>Shifts advocacy to questions of control within a modified role structure</p>	<p>The FCC should seek comments on proposals to <b>impose conditions on certain auction winners that they be required to build a broadband network covering public safety frequencies and provide public safety access to auctioned spectrum.</b> Any such proposal must <b>ensure that public safety entities retain unfettered control over public safety spectrum.</b> In this regard, the auction winner should be required to complete a <b>binding agreement with public safety prior to, and as a condition of, obtaining its license.</b></p> <p><b>APCO et al, Ex Parte, 04/24/2007 (WT 06-150)</b></p>

#### 4.3.2 Arbitrating the Negotiable.

Public safety actors worked hard to ensure that any framework for a public-private partnerships that the FCC accepted struck a balance between those duelling goals of securing a new network and maintaining control of their spectrum and operational needs. I argue here, though, that public safety organizations’ advocacy work relied on and was aided by a specific form of power inherent in their role in the field: the power to act as one of a set of arbiters of what elements of field structure were on the table for negotiation. Three roles would need to be fulfilled to make the public-private partnership model viable and to ensure that the new public safety communication system was constructed. Regulatory changes would be necessary to modify field-level rules and permit a public-private partnership to be created in the 700 MHz spectrum. Commercial interests would need to be willing to contribute their expertise and capital. And public safety actors would need to be willing to fundamentally alter the roles and

interdependencies that had long operated in the field and protected their ability to control their fate. As public safety actors recognized the need for structural changes, they began expressing willingness to negotiate changes to an increasing number of specific structural elements as shown in Table 1. As that process unfolded, public safety actors took care to clearly articulate the contours of the changes that they would find acceptable.

Subsequent action tracked closely with the contours preferred by public safety actors.

In March 2007, Frontline Wireless submitted its proposal for a public/private partnership into the public record. Their proposal mapped closely to the concerns and expectations of public safety advocacy organizations. Specifically, Frontline proposed that the FCC condition the auction of 10 MHz of spectrum adjacent to the public safety spectrum to a firm that would be required to: (1) construct an interoperable network at no cost to public safety, (2) provide priority access to the commercial (10 MHz) spectrum to public safety during emergencies, (3) ensure public safety control of its network. That 10 MHz of additional spectrum was referred to during the rulemaking process as the “E Block”. Under the Frontline plan, a national public safety licensee would control public safety spectrum and a network sharing agreement would set out the terms of the public/private partnership. The consistency of the Frontline plan to public safety’s vision was not by chance. Many of their filings framed the proposal as in service of and tailored to public safety requirements. The preamble to their first substantive filing stated: “Frontline’s proposed service rules will provide critical benefits to our public safety agencies by ensuring that they can rely on a modern, reliable, robust, secure and interoperable network supporting full mobility for their emergency communications (Frontline, Comment, 6/3/2007).” This tailoring of their proposal to public safety’s desired parameters suggests two important dynamics in the field. First, public safety



actors enjoyed the deference of field actors. The E911 issues showed that field actors willingly acknowledge and fulfill their obligation to support public safety operations. The Frontline proposal takes that a step further, showing that firms are also deferential to public safety actors on the form that support takes. Second, Frontline's strategy suggests that the firm recognized that aligning its proposals with public safety's needs and desires would serve its interests.

Deference to public safety's preferred parameters is also evident from the FCC itself. For example, the Commission appears to have been careful to support public safety's efforts to fulfill its expanding role. They wrote in the notice that sought comment on the Frontline proposal that "...the needs of [public safety] also have evolved in recent years... We expect that modern public safety services will increasingly depend on the advanced communications...to enable public safety entities to perform their vital safety-of-life and other critical roles (FCC, First Report and Order & Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 25/4/2007)." Perhaps the most compelling evidence that field actors deferred to public safety actors is that at least one FCC Commissioner's office called a leading public safety organization to make sure they supported a Frontline-style approach. APCO reported in the record that one Commissioner's office asked to "verify APCO's position on a conditional auction approach (APCO, Ex Parte, 4/24/2007)." APCO referred the office to a statement already in the record that affirmed APCO's support of the approach being put out for public comment. Three days later the FCC formally sought comment on the Frontline proposal and that Commissioner expressed support for approach so long as it met public safety's requirements (FCC, RO & FNPRM).

This deference to public safety's preferred contours of a public/private partnership reflects public safety actors' role as *one* of the arbiters of what elements of structure were

negotiable during the structuring process that was about to commence. Unlike agenda setting authority, the power to act as an arbiter of the negotiable is fundamentally relational in nature. Agenda setting power rests in the hands of a single actors and derives its force from that individual's control of a specific base of power. Public safety's power to set the parameters of the negotiation about how to structure a public/private partnership was contingent on, in this case, both Frontline Wireless and the FCC. Public safety had already accepted that they could not construct the new network on their own. Frontline could have tried to use that admission to gain power over public safety. Instead, Frontline recognized that it needed support from public safety to get the rules it required to turn their plans in a viable business. Aligning its plan to public safety's preferred structure opened the door to that support and lent credence to Frontline and its proposal. In return, public safety got a potential partner willing to align interest and get the new network built. Even together, though, these parties had insufficient power to control the subsequent negotiation. That require the FCC to agree to consider the option and, ultimately, to adopt rules that legitimized the plan.

The FCC's decision to put the Frontline proposal out for public comment signified an opportunity for progress had been created. Two mechanisms facilitated the creation of that opportunity. Public safety actors recognized that their role was changing, and that existing structure was a barrier to meeting the demands of that expanded role. That realization triggered anxieties for public safety actors that were conveyed in their public filings. To allay their concerns, public safety attempted to set the terms of what would be negotiated in the coming structuring process. The FCC and Frontline joined with public safety to create a relational power to arbitrate the parameters of what would be negotiated in the structuring process to follow. Thus, these two mechanisms – problematizing

structure and arbitrating the negotiable – shaped the contours of the opportunity for progress that was created. Those mechanisms were essential to the carving out of a space in which a novel solution to the interoperability problem could be reimagined. To make the partnership viable and the new public safety network a reality, field actors would next need to engage in a structuring process to negotiate the rules and standards of appropriateness for conduct within that carved out space.

The importance for progress of even reaching the point of carving out that space for structuring should not be underestimated. In this example, carving out that space constituted a process of determining what progress was actually possible at that specific moment in time. A crucial step in that process was the recognition that both institutional structure and the ways action was undertaken and coordinated on the ground would need to change. There are two ways to think about that process and its effects. On one hand, recognizing institutional and operational barriers to progress is a way for actors to liberate themselves from their preconceptions about what is appropriate in a given context. The progression of public safety recognizing that more and more elements of structure needed to be reconsidered was, in a sense, a process of removing some of the barriers to progress that existed as structural elements. One can imagine this as making the work of progress easier. On the other hand, public safety was making that work more challenging by setting aside the structural elements that had guided action. Prior to the realization that a public/private model was likely necessary, public safety had been able to rely on a set of longstanding rules and conventions that maintained that segregation of its systems and operations from those of the commercial networks. Dropping the assumption that segregated systems were appropriate and essential meant that the finely honed and strictly adhered to script of segregated systems did not apply anymore. It is little wonder that as

public safety expressed greater and greater openness to setting aside extant structure, they became more and more focussed on asserting their need to maintain control of their fate.

Public safety actors were grappling with the tensions between the promise of something new and the anxieties of setting aside the old. I saw several actors coping with that tension in my data across several issues. Actors in that situation would equivocate in ways similar to how public safety actors did. For example, AT&T generally opposed the Frontline proposal, but it left the door open to bidding against Frontline for the license. According to a filing from PISC, an AT&T spokesperson told that press that the firm would “take a look” at the final rules and consider whether the business model it endorsed was attractive enough to considering bidding on the spectrum (PISC 7/6/2007). PISC took this as evidence that “even ardent opponents” of new regulator requirements could find their way to accepting new business models (PISC 7/6/2007). Examples like these draw attention to the importance of how opportunities to make progress get constructed at the field level. The easier path is going to be, in most cases, the path that recreates the status quo structure and ways of doing things. The harder path, however, creates more opportunities to make progress simply because it sets aside the ways that existing structure constrain action. The importance of carving out these spaces in which to consider what progress to make and how should not be underestimated.

My analysis bears out that there are specific actors with the power to shape if and how those spaces are created. Notably, I found that that power is relational in nature. It is not a power held by one actor. There are specific tasks that single actors control, such as the FCC’s sole authority to put specific concepts out for public comment. But how those spaces are constructed and what is suitable to be discussed within them is held jointly by multiple actors. In this case, at least three arbiters contributed to making that space

possible. Certainly, the FCC being willing to engage in the debate and consider new ways to facilitate an interoperable network was essential. Public safety being clear about the elements of structure it was willing to reconsider or not brought greater clarity to the range of potential progress that could be discussed. The role of Frontline was also critical. Getting progress out of the minds of actors and into practice is a challenging task. Bringing forward a specific proposal that jived with the public safety's evolving openness to change made the space in which to discuss a new model for interoperable communications more concrete. Rather than debating conflicting views or models of progress making, the field was able to talk about a specific plan and the structuring required to make it viable. This is an important nuance because the institutional literature has long focussed on the agency of particular actors to disrupt or resist existing structure to pursue their own interests (See: Levy & Scully, 2007). Theorizing the power to arbitrate what progress can be negotiated as a relation power held and – more importantly – made manifest by the coming together of a set of actors gives a perspective to further consider how political action and interaction can explain the portion of progress that does get made.

Moreover, the carving out of these spaces for progress making is an inherently political process. I say that because of the multiple layers of negotiation that had to be conducted just to get the point of debating a specific proposal like the one brought by Frontline. Arbitrating the negotiable is a form of negotiation in and of itself. Both public safety actors and Frontline were signalling to one another what the elements of a viable proposal were. Public safety did so by agreeing in the record to discuss previously sacrosanct structural strictures. Frontline, in their proposal, was making an offer to public safety that outlined the contribution they were willing to make to bring about a new and

interoperable network. In effect, they were negotiating the agenda for the more specific negotiation that would take place within the carved-out space. In so doing, the parties to the negotiation were beginning the work of understanding how their interests might be sufficiently compliant to make an agreement on what progress to make viable.

#### **4.4 Choosing an Option: Politics as Exploration**

The purpose of this chapter was to show how field actors go about maintaining status quo structures versus carving out opportunities in which to debate and consider ways to make progress. In both cases, I have highlighted some of the ways that those two paths are political in nature. This was evident in both examples I shared. Both showed a diversity of actors with a diversity of interests engaged in debates about how the FCC should set its rules. In the E911 examples, field actors decided that new progress was not needed. But through that discussion the FCC was able to assemble the rationale required to deny accommodation to actors asking to be exempted from the existing zone of appropriateness. In the public safety communications example, I showed how actors came together to construct a space in which to engage in a structuring exercise that might make a new, interoperable network possible. Through this form of political interaction, actors were engaged in exploration of alternatives. Those politics allowed the FCC to understand which alternatives to make progress were available for consideration and what various actors were willing to contribute to move that progress forward.

One objective in laying out these dynamics was to highlight two important realities of the politics of progress. The first was to bring new scrutiny to the relationship between systemic and episodic power at the field level of analysis. The traditional view of deinstitutionalization has been that actors resist or defy the requirements of institutional

structure once they see that those structures are impeding the ability to pursue their self-interests (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017; Oliver, 1992). Others explored how the arrival of new technologies or practices might initiate processes of structuring (Barley, 1986, 2020). My findings point to a third way by suggesting that opportunities to engage in structuring can be constructed by actors as they come to understand the limitations that existing structures place on the making of progress. Rather than thinking of episodic power as a mechanism for deinstitutionalizing or seizing control of extant structure, I presented evidence of systemic and episodic power both operating in efforts to create opportunities for progress. Public safety actors did in fact compare the strictures of the existing zone of appropriateness to the challenges being faced on the ground by first responders. That exploration led them to problematize the existing structure and then begin the progression towards the realization that a structuring exercise was necessary if those on-the-ground challenges were going to be resolved. They engaged in politics to get that structuring exercise created. That effort met the definition of episodic power in action. However, the power to carve out a space for that structuring exercise relied on the relational power of specific actors to act as arbiters of what could be negotiated. That was very much rooted in systemic power of actors holding defined roles in the field. Without public safety agreeing to set aside the segregated model and the FCC formally initiating a public comment process, it is likely that the opportunity for progress would have died on the vine. The power of those actors was very much systemic in nature. Further investigation of how these forms of power might work together to create opportunities for progress is warranted.

My second objective in presenting these data was to contribute to the rehabilitation of how we view organizational politics in the management literature. That

objective was inspired by lived experience and my data, both of which indicate that politics play an important role in the progress that does get made at the field level. The current state of the literature has held the study of politics separate from the study of stability and change in the organizational theory (Levinthal & Pham, 2024). This has been understandable because the inclusion of politics necessitates the inclusion of conflicting interests that may not be reconcilable (March & Simon, 1958). We tend to see that conflict of interests as chaos (Ganz, 2023). In that chaos, I see opportunities to explore progress. I have tried to show here that actors in the field I studied see that opportunity too. This is an important discovery because it allows me to study these field-level politics as integrative processes of understanding and pursuing shared values in tandem with the pursuit of individuated interest (March & Olsen, 1989). As a result, I was able to discover and theorize some of the mechanisms through which that integration became possible. That job is about to get harder. In the next chapter I examine how the structuring of that carved out space for progress unfolded. I turn my attention to how a much broader group of field actors engaged in and contested the opportunity for structuring that was created to find solutions to public safety communications challenges.



## Chapter 5

### 5 Findings: Negotiated Structuring

The previous chapter came to a hopeful conclusion. Field actors with conflicting interests found a way to carve out a space in which to develop a solution to the public safety communications problem. In this chapter I examine the dynamics that unfolded within that carved out space for progress. Those dynamics include some vociferous debate and some forms of political action of which many have become cynical. My objective here is to find the politics in those dynamics that actually helped field actors make progress. I explore two political mechanisms. The first, termed “precisifying the opportunity”, examines the resistance to the public/private partnership concept from a broad swath of organizations in the field. Opponents of the partnership engaged in a sustained effort to keep it from becoming a reality. Those organizations surely preferred that the FCC deny the Frontline proposal outright. They were not successful in that effort. But their advocacy did influence the rules the FCC set. Here I explore how that influence may have helped Frontline, public safety organizations, and the FCC reach a specific set of rules to govern the potential partnership. The second mechanism, “safeguarding control”, examines how public safety actors worked to maintain control over their communications systems and spectrum through the process of negotiating the rules. This mechanism also helped to bring clarity and specificity to the rules, roles and interdependencies that would govern any partnership between public safety and a commercial entity, such as Frontline.

### *5.1 Precising the opportunity.*

When surgeons remove a tumour, their goal is to maximize the amount of tumour removed while minimizing damage to healthy tissue. “Surgical margin” is medical term for the plane through which the surgeon’s scalpel travels<sup>9</sup>. The planes through which the FCC’s rules would carve out a space for the public/private partnership from the status quo structure were fiercely debated. This field had a lot of experience with these debates. It was common for field actors to try to convince the FCC to set rules that furthered specific policy or business goal. A primary way for the FCC to do that was through the attaching of requirements – called regulatory conditions – to spectrum licences. Those efforts often failed because the rules themselves or the conduct they enabled were deemed to fall outside the zone of appropriateness. They are too far outside the existing structure of the field to be contemplated seriously. As a result, organizations in the field are well practiced in opposing these conditions. Over time, scripts developed to activate the systemic power of the structural features of the field that supplied the rationales and authority for the FCC to deny requests for conditions. We saw a version of that process unfold in the E911 debate when the FCC denied the regulatory accommodations requested by rural service providers.

Frontline’s proposal included several regulatory conditions that would specify the structure under which the public/private partnership would operate. To many, these conditions appeared designed to create competitive advantages for Frontline itself. Not surprisingly, the organizations whose interests would be threatened by that competition attacked the suitability of each one of the conditions Frontline proposed. Particularly

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<sup>9</sup> Hinni ML, Ferlito A, Brandwein-Gensler MS, Takes RP, Silver CE, Westra WH, et al. Surgical margins in head and neck cancer: A contemporary review. *Head Neck*. 2013;35:1362–70.

objectionable to existing service providers and their allies was the condition that the licence be used to offer a wholesale-based commercial network. Essentially, this condition required the private partner to build a commercial network and lease access to that network to any firm wanting to provide service directly to customers. To incumbent providers, this represented both a threat of substantive new competition and a violation of field regulatory norms. The latter was rooted in the belief that economic decisions – like the selection of a wholesale business model – should be left to licensees and not regulatorily defined.

The following is a selected reconstruction of the debate over the wholesale condition. This debate is one example of the precisifying the opportunity mechanism at work. Through this debate, actors presented their arguments for whether the wholesale condition should have been included in the FCC's. Again, the influence of the existing zone of appropriateness is at work in this debate. Particularly, at issue are competing models of fairness. Many field actors were ardent in their view about relying on market forces as primary regulator of the field. The FCC dictating licensees' business models deviated from the pro-business policies that had defined FCC decisions in recent years. Such deviations were unfair and foolhardy. Frontline attempted to counter those arguments with their own fairness model. They argued that incumbent firms had been "indifferent" to public safety needs and had learned to game the auction system to ensure new competition did not arise. What is fascinating about the FCC's decisions on this issue is that they used the contents of the public record to construct a decision that both enabled the public/private partnership *and* narrowed the extent to which that model departed from the existing zone of appropriateness. In so doing, the commission applied the status quo regulatory paradigm in some places and set it aside in other.

Again, in the following reconstruction, supportive arguments are left justified and oppositional arguments are right justified. The “E Block” that is mentioned in this debate refers to the 10 MHz of spectrum that Frontline wanted to place conditions upon:

### **Precisifying the Opportunity Debate Reconstruction – The Wholesale Condition**

“We...seek comment on Frontline’s proposal that the “E Block” licensee be required to operate a wholesale network.”

**FCC, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking,  
4/27/2007**

“[T]he wholesale-only business model, open access requirements, and other **burdensome and unnecessary service restrictions proposed by Frontline would force the Commission to implicitly subsidize a particular business model** that would make the proposed E Block unattractive to so many potential bidders that it would likely reduce the number of serious contenders for the spectrum (as well as the price of this 700 MHz block).

**AllTel, Comment, 5/23/2007 (Service Provider)**

“[T]he Commission has held to the view that a competitive bidding regime...is most likely to achieve the agency’s ultimate goal – awarding licenses to those entities most likely to put them to the highest and best use. Under this approach...[t]he marketplace, rather than regulation, determines winners and losers...[I]f **indeed there is demand for a wholesale broadband service provider, the Commission should trust a free and open auction process – and the marketplace forces it unleashes – to uncover it.**”

**AT&T, Comment, 5/23/2007 (Service Provider)**

“Frontline’s Plan is the only set of proposals that constructively seeks to achieve [Commission] goals. The only other option – **maintaining, or more accurately cementing, the status quo by allocating the spectrum in the usual manner for it to be acquired by deep-pocket incumbents with a history of indifference to public safety’s needs and a business strategy and motivation that resist competition and innovation – would not serve the public interest.**”

**Frontline Wireless, Reply Comment, 6/4/2006 (Potential New Entrant)**

“Most commenters see through Frontline's scheme of having the Commission earmark... spectrum to match its own business plan for commercial use...[The] Commission would be making a serious mistake, do violence to a host of regulatory principles, and be subjecting public safety and first responders to significant risk were it to endorse the Frontline proposal in any significant respect.”

**MetroPCS, Reply Comment, 6/4/2006 (Service Provider)**

“The Commission has a clear choice to make: Either continue to embrace a market- oriented flexible-use approach to 700 MHz licensing, or abandon this policy and follow a “command and control” route by picking winners and losers.”

**AT&T, Reply Comment, 6/4/2006 (Service Provider)**

“Frontline proposes poison pill conditions that would drive away all prospective bidders who currently own spectrum or run wireless networks, leaving Frontline a clear shot at winning the spectrum at a huge discount.”

**Verizon Wireless, Reply Comment, 6/4/2006 (Service Provider)**

“What Verizon calls poison is elixir for the public; these conditions do not in fact bar Verizon from buying the E Block...**Instead these conditions are structural measures intended to promote competition by reducing capital costs not for the E Block licensee but for its [wholesale] customers, the logical best hope for local and regional competition against the cellular duopoly...** [Frontline's proposal] would also encourage and rely on market-based forces, rather than command-and-control regulation, to meet the concerns identified by commenters.”

**Frontline Wireless, Reply Comment, 6/4/2006 (Potential New Entrant)**

“AT&T has no objection if any given bidder or licensee voluntarily chooses to follow a particular business model, such as operating solely as a wholesaler. **That is what “flexible use” and market-based competition based on service distinctions are all about...**[M]andating a particular business plan such as wholesale-only would be a serious mistake...AT&T believes that the Commission should continue to allow market forces, and not regulatory fiat, to shape the development of telecommunications services. The Frontline proposal is inconsistent with this principle...”

**AT&T, Comment, 7/2/2006 (Service Provider)**

“Based on the record, we decline to restrict the [E] Block licensee to operating exclusively on a “wholesale” or “open access” basis. Instead, we provide the [E] Block licensee with flexibility to provide wholesale or retail services or other types of access to its network...[G]iving the [E] Block licensee the flexibility to choose the commercial service it will provide based on its determination of market needs should improve the viability of the 700 MHz Public/Private Partnership and serve the interests of public safety.”  
**FCC, Second Report & Order, 8/10/2007**

It is important to view this debate at two levels. Clearly, each field actor is constructing their arguments with their own interests in mind. The higher level of debate is about the role of conditions in field regulation. Regulatory conditions are often viewed as tools for manipulating regulatory actions and auction outcomes to serve one set of interests over others. Conditions act as “poison pills” because they remove flexibility from licensees by requiring specific actions that an unconditioned license does not. This reduces the value of the spectrum by reducing the pool of firms willing to bid on the license. Opponents argue that this violates the norm that the market – and not the FCC – should determine “winners and losers”. As AT&T argued above, market forces and not “regulatory fiat” should shape the evolution of telecommunications services. Frontline adopts another common script, arguing that the market was a duopoly that stifled competition. AT&T effectively countered that argument by highlighting the principle of “flexible use”. A licensee was free to choose a wholesale model. The FCC need not require a specific business model. Of course, this would remove one of the “poison pills” attached to the license. The FCC adopted AT&T’s logic and language in its final rules.

The condition was not imposed on the grounds that giving the licensee flexibility to select a business model would enhance the odds of the public/private partnership succeeding.

One might view this as a story of powerful actors succeeding in using the rules that cement their power against the scrappy underdog. A second observer may see something different. By bringing field-level structures – like the preference for market forces over “regulatory fiat” – back into the debate, field actors induced the FCC to pay close attention to the precision with which it carved the public/private partnership rules out of the status quo field structure. This second view proceeds from the premise that there is wisdom using structural elements of the field as a form of regulatory litmus test. Each condition proposed by Frontline would have removed the public/private partnership rules further from the status quo structural elements of the field. To many field actors, that distance represented a risk of doing “violence to a host of regulatory principles”. In response, those structural elements were used as tools to explore the meaning and implications of the various conditions that Frontline was asking to be attached to the potential partnership. In this case, the process appears to have honed the FCC’s decision by drawing attention to those conditions of the Frontline proposal that might reduce the chances that the public safety communications needs would be met. Viewing the wholesale condition through the prism of the principle of regulatory flexibility allowed the FCC to conclude that leaving the choice of a business model to the private partner could hold open more pathways to business success. That conclusion was consistent with the goal of ensuring the viability of any resulting public/private partnership.

This mechanism was integral to the structuring process that resulted in rules that permitted the public/private partnership model. Like in the hospital radiology departments that Barley studied, many actors have very little control over when new technologies will

arrive for implementation. In those moments, structuring is the process that allows collectives of actors to sort through the elements of institutional structure that will need to be altered to allow progress to take root. In a field-level structuring process, actors do have some role to play in the construction of opportunities for progress, as I showed in the previous chapter. But regardless of how those opportunities arise, many more actors then get to have their say in how the field will structure the implementation of those opportunities. The extant literature on institutional politics suggests that the process will be a winner-take-all style of pitched battle in which progress either succeeds or fails. Under that model, observers seem to be disappointed more often than not.

Here I have attempted to reveal the politics of striking a different balance between maintaining the status quo or choosing to make progress. I do not contest the assertion that opponents of the Frontline proposal sought to kill the plan in its proverbial infancy to serve their own interests. But, counterintuitively, those efforts to kill the proposal may have actually helped it get approved. The FCC's rules indicate that the opposition to the proposal was helpful in the culling of Frontline's long list of proposed conditions. To actors like PISC – who supported the conditions that were culled – the FCC's decisions were likely disappointing. The text of the FCC's decision clearly reinforces the preference for market-driven regulation and to preserve the rights of flexibility for licensees. Yet the FCC enshrined the public/private partnership model in its rules. Their decision bears resemblance to the fairness model that the Rural Cellular Association advocated for elsewhere in the rulemaking. The FCC accepted public safety's conclusion that a new model for the construction of communications systems was necessary for them to meet their role requirements in a world where mass causality events were becoming more common. The FCC used its authority to permit a solution targeted at solving that problem.



Efforts from Frontline opponents to bring structure back into the debate appear to have helped with the targeting component of that action.

## 5.2 “Safeguarding” Control.

Elements of the Frontline proposal also drew opposition from public safety organizations. Specifically, public safety was concerned that entering a public/private partnership would rob it of control over its communications systems and spectrum resources. To address those concerns, the FCC planned to require public safety and their private partner to enter into a Network Sharing Agreement that would govern many of the interactions between the partners. There would be two parties to that agreement. The private partner would be the firm that won the E Block at auction, perhaps Frontline. The public partner would be the National Public Safety Broadband Licensee that would hold the public safety spectrum licence and represent public safety interests in the partnership. That organization was created by the FCC’s rules and would be made up of representatives from a defined set of public safety agencies and organizations. A sticking point among public safety organizations and Frontline became what to do if an agreement could not be reached by these two parties. The Frontline plan explicitly tied the fate of the public safety network to the E Block licensee. If a network sharing agreement could not be reached, public safety would be left with spectrum it could not afford to utilize and no viable partner. To avoid that eventuality, the FCC’s notice of rulemaking tentatively concluded that the parties would be required to enter binding arbitration to ensure a deal. That tentative conclusion sparked an intense exchange between public safety actors and Frontline. The exchange reveals that public safety had much greater concerns than not reaching an agreement. As the following reconstruction of the exchange shows, public

safety actors were adamant that they would retain control over their spectrum and the final say about whom they would be partnered with to construct the new network. Frontline’s increasingly adamant responses reflect a growing concern that deferring to public safety’s demands could result in the loss of the license they hoped to win at auction and the re-auction of the spectrum.

### **Safeguards – Network Sharing Agreement Debate Reconstruction**

“[W]e tentatively conclude that the Commission would not grant a license to the bidder winning the “E Block” at auction until the winning bidder files a Network Sharing Agreement with the Commission for approval. We would also condition the national public safety license on the licensee submitting to binding arbitration in the event it cannot reach agreement with the “E Block” winner.”

**FCC, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 4/27/2007**

“The most critical aspect of any [Frontline-style] approach is to ensure that no matter what, public safety spectrum will remain firmly in the control of the national public safety licensee. Thus, successful completion of a network sharing agreement must be a condition precedent to the grant of the license to the auction winner. The auction winner should not receive its license *and then* negotiate with public safety, as Frontline initially proposed.

We strongly oppose [binding arbitration] option as it would also take control of the spectrum out of the hands of the public safety licensee, effectively placing it in the hands of a third party arbitrator...The Commission had it right in the Ninth NPRM, where it said that the national public safety licensee would have the *option* of entering into a network sharing arrangement. That option is meaningful only if the national public safety licensee has the ability to say “no.”

**APCO, Comment, 5/23/2007, *Emphasis original*, (Public Safety Advocacy Association)**

The reality is that the public safety licensee and individual agencies have little or no leverage... Unless some incentive is imposed on the prospective E Block licensee and the Commission establishes what parameters the agreement must address, no agreement will emerge... The only appropriate

solution in that case is to re-auction the spectrum, a result that neither party will want, but the only remedy that preserves public safety control over public safety spectrum.

**NPSTC, Comment, 5/23/2007 (Public Safety Advocacy Association)**

“Frontline supports the Commission’s proposed two-fold approach requiring an executed network sharing agreement before the license will be issued to the E Block licensee, but accompanying this requirement with a provision for binding alternative dispute resolution (“ADR”) by the Commission. This approach avoids giving either party a “veto” over establishment of the crucial, public/private network for innovation and public safety communications, but, importantly, incentivizes the E Block licensee to reach a mutually beneficial agreement with the NPSL in a timely manner.”

**Frontline Wireless, Comment, 5/23/2007 (Potential New Entrant)**

Presenting the disputed network sharing agreement to the FCC for resolution is less objectionable than binding arbitration, but could still force public safety into an unacceptable long-term partnership. A far better approach would be to re-auction the spectrum if no agreement is reached. In any event, public safety concerns must be paramount. Thus, if the Commission itself resolves disputes, its decisions must be based first on what is necessary to meet public safety needs, even if that leads the auction winner to reject the Commission's judgment, forcing a re-auction or other alternative solution.

**APCO, Reply Comment, 6/4/2007 (Public Safety Advocacy Association)**

“[T]he APCO comments suggest that the NPSL should be free to walk away from the Commission’s arbitral decision, thereby triggering a forfeiture and re-auction of the E Block license...Frontline is willing to support a requirement that the E Block licensee...would have its license conditioned on accepting the Commission’s arbitration decision over contested parts of the network sharing agreement....If the NPSL... rejects the Commission’s arbitral decision...then its license should terminate and public safety’s broadband spectrum should be licensed to...appropriate state or local agencies. **This may seem like tough medicine...But if agreement cannot be reached...the Commission must step in to** assure that public safety’s needs are met and valuable spectrum does not lie fallow.”

**Frontline Wireless, Reply Comment, *Emphasis Added*,  
6/4/2007, (Potential New Entrant)**

“The FCC rules should provide for issuance of the E Block license after the successful negotiation of the NSA. If no NSA has been agreed to...the FCC would resolve any differences between the parties. If the NPSL accepts the FCC’s resolution, the E Block licensee would be bound by it as well...If the NPSL rejects the FCC’s decision, the E Block would be re-auctioned.”  
**NPSTC, Position Paper, 7/6/2007 (Public Safety Advocacy Association)**

“The NPSTC statement also identified certain issues about how to implement the New Build proposal. For example, there is not yet agreement on when to issue the E Block license or whether the NPSL should be able unilaterally to deny that license to a winning bidder that is willing to abide by the Commission’s arbitral decision about any disputed term of the network sharing agreement...These implementation issues should be resolved [later].”

**Frontline Wireless, Reply Comment, 7/9/2007 (Potential New Entrant)**

**\*\*\* Details of the FCC’s soon-to-be-released order are obtained by Frontline**

**Wireless \*\*\***

“Frontline Wireless understands that the draft order reserves to the Commission various options for dealing with an impasse between the two parties... [T]he Commission’s order should make clear that it will not cancel the results of the ...auction if the high bidder is willing to accept the Commission’s resolution of any impasse or if the Commission determines that the...high bidder has acted in good faith.”

**Frontline Wireless, Letter, 7/24/2007 (Potential New Entrant)**

“We establish that the relationship between the Public Safety Broadband Licensee and the [E] Block licensee will be governed by the Network Sharing Agreement (NSA) to be negotiated by the parties...and we provide that compliance with the terms of the NSA shall be a regulatory condition of the [E] Block license. Breach of this licensing condition may, at the determination of the Commission, result in remedies including, but not limited to, cancellation and subsequent award of the license...if [Commission officials] determine that

negotiations have reached a likely impasse, we delegate authority to [Commission officials] to take certain actions jointly in the public interest to adjudicate the dispute. As appropriate, these actions may include but are not limited to one or more of the following:

- (1) granting additional time for negotiation; issuing a decision on the disputed issues and requiring the submission of a draft agreement consistent with their decision;
- (2) directing the parties to further brief the remaining issues in full for immediate Commission decision; and/or
- (3) immediate denial of the long-form application filed by the winning bidder for the...license.

Remedies shall not, however, include ordering private third-party arbitration.”

**FCC, Second Report & Order, 8/10/2007**

This exchange may appear to be a straightforward power struggle, a battle for control. To understand its deeper meaning, it is important to place the exchange in the context of the field. Before this rulemaking, field structure explicitly and firmly maintained a segregation of public safety and commercial communications systems. Within those segregated worlds, field actors enjoyed a great deal of control over how they operated. Public safety actors were accustomed to having that control and saw it as essential to ensuring that their communications systems met their operational needs. Public safety actors were also accustomed to deference from other field actors regarding their essential role and how best to support the fulfillment of that role. Public safety’s arguments in the exchange appear to assume that those same dynamics will carry over into the public/private partnership negotiations. Right up to the moment the final rules were promulgated, public safety held to its position that third-party arbitration was unacceptable, that they would have right to veto an FCC-negotiated compromise, and

their veto would necessitate a re-auctioning of the commercial spectrum. With this context in mind, it should not be surprising that the FCC's decision deferred to public safety's interests in most respects: the Commission ruled out third party arbitration and left open the option to deny Frontline its license. Deference to public safety influenced the negotiation of the rules for the partnership.

Frontline appears to have underestimated the grip that the norm of deference to public safety would have on these negotiations. Throughout, Frontline argued for a structure that created a power balance between the public and private partners: neither side could have a veto, both parties would lose their licences. Were they not negotiating with public safety, these arguments might have worked. As the E-911 and wholesale condition interactions showed, firms often constructed their arguments with fairness frames of equal treatment and parity. What Frontline found, though, was that the models of fairness that governed the treatment of licensees by the FCC did not extend to all roles in the field. Fairness models in the field called for deference to public safety, its life-or-death role, and its control of its spectrum and operational requirements. Frontline's interpretation that the Network Sharing Agreement would be negotiated among equals was in error. The legacy of deference to public safety prevailed. Indeed, the FCC's order stated that they "provide structural and procedural safeguards applicable to this public/private partnership to address public safety's concerns (FCC Second Report & Order, 8/10/2007)".

This effort to safeguard public safety's control over its spectrum and communications systems reveals one of the most important dynamics that unfold through politics at the field level. Public safety was instrumental in the carving out of a space to consider the public/private model for interoperable communications. As I showed in the

previous chapter, without the agreement of public safety to consider such models it was unlikely that they would have been taken seriously by the FCC. Once that space was carved out, though, actors began an iterative process of figuring out what elements of existing structure would still apply in that new space. In the case of safeguarding of control, features of the pre-existing role structure were maintained and reinforced. This suggests that a continuity is maintained across time in field structure even through efforts to make progress. This is another example of how the forces of systemic power and episodic power come together and find a balance as institutional contexts evolve. It is compelling to me that effects of those balancing mechanisms can be the sources of disappointment with institutional outcomes.

### **5.3 When Structure Strikes Back**

These mechanisms through which the ultimate shape of the public/private partnership rules were negotiated fascinates me. The reason for that is that these mechanisms speak directly to the most fundamental question of my dissertation: why do institutional keep disappointing us? To some, disappointment arises when politics get in the way of progress. Certainly, these mechanisms involved political action. Whether the more formal negotiations over the Network Sharing Agreement or the more overtly political campaign by opponents like AT&T, these mechanisms brought together many actors with many points of view on how the legacy structures of the field should apply to the public/private partnership model. In my own imagination, these processes suggest two images. The first reflects the view that these political mechanisms are the source of disappointment. In Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, the protagonist, a

fisherman named Santiago, faces an 84-day streak without catching any fish. On the 85<sup>th</sup> day he resolves to go further from shore than ever. He lands a huge marlin, but in the process of harpooning the great fish blood seeps into the water. Smelling he blood, sharks begin pecking away at the fish lashed to the side of the boat. By the time Santiago arrives back on shore all that is left is the skeleton of the once great marlin. This sort of image comes most easily to mind in cases of progress diminished or delayed. A once great opportunity for progress reduced to a shadow of its former self. That view is understandable, especially for social movement actors like the members of PISC who – from there point of view – were attempting to save customers from an unfair, duopolistic market.

My goal here, though, is to find the progress that is made and seek to better understand how politics can help in achieving those ends. This brings to mind a second image. When a sculptor confronts a raw piece of marble or an artist approaches a blank canvas, the art they will create exists only in their imaginations. With each tap of the chisel or brushstroke the final work comes more and more into view. Many tools, skills and tactics are used to bring about that final clarity. The work of reaching politically negotiated agreements on how to make progress a reality can resemble that process. It is a circuitous path of exploration, discovery, and invention. In political process that reach the integrative level, the step along that path require the confrontation of the values that making progress can contribute to or detract from. It cannot be clear at the time of the negotiation whether progress will succeed or fail in moving the pursuit of those values forward. What actors can see with relative clarity is the magnitude of departure from accepted structural constraints – the zone of appropriateness. Applying those structural elements as barometers of the worthiness of the progress being sought is one way actors



have to try to understand the ambiguities that trying something new creates. The member organizations of PISC were likely disappointed by the success of incumbent provider in the removal of the wholesale and open access conditions. But the FCC determined that the removal of those conditions increased the odds of success. Frontline clearly would have preferred rules that put it on equal footing with public safety. But many members of the field saw deference to public safety as part of how the obligation to support first responders was achieved. Bringing these structural constraints back into the process of designing how progress would be made was, in the end, essential to the FCC's decision to enshrine a new model in its rules.

Which image is preferable? The most realistic answer is that it depends on the judgement of the actors involved in the negotiation. Making progress is a political process because clearing the way for something new, often, activates or exacerbates conflicting interests. Coming to agreements in such situations requires negotiation because no party is likely to persuade everyone else to accept a specific result that may work against their own interests (March & Simon, 1958). Power does not operate at the field-level of analysis with the same efficacy as it does at other levels of analysis. Organizations are expected to respond to institutional forces they deem contrary to their interests with political resistance (Oliver, 1991, 1992). As a result, achieving or forestalling progress through dominance seems unlikely (c.f. Holm, 1995; Oakes et al., 1998). The option that remains is politics. So, we had better understand how politics can help us make progress on a variety of issues and in a diversity of fields.

## Chapter 6

### 6 Conclusions

In this chapter I attempt to bring the related threads in this dissertation together. In so doing, I will provide my current conclusions about the fundamental questions of my work. The first question is: What role do politics play in the progress that does get made? To answer that question, I return to the concept of “zones of appropriateness” that I began to develop in the first findings chapter. I believe that there is potential to construct substantive contributions to the institutional literature through this concept. That potential is rooted in the idea that zones of appropriateness allow for mechanism of both stability and change to operate by providing the necessary room to maneuver as field actors seek out ways to address issues when interests conflict. Considerable attention is paid here to the boundary conditions of this study. It was this context and data that led me to develop the concept. I ask here if the concept applies to other contexts and how future research might explore that transferability.

The second question asks, with some trepidation, if what we need is more politics. I believe we do. My rationale for that conclusion is that politics proffer the framework through which actors can find answers to complex issues while maintaining their ability to pursue their conflicting interests. That, as I have argued, is politics of the integrative form. You will get no argument from me that fewer political processes of the aggregative, zero-sum variety would serve all people well. Making that distinction and figuring out how to encourage better politics led me to reconsider the role that agency plays in field-level explorations of progress. I discuss that here and propose future research directions that might lead us to understand how to encourage a higher quality of politics.

I end this dissertation with my own answer to the question that has driven my research to date: Why do institutions seem to keep disappointing us? My answer to that question is rooted in a reconsideration of the way that politics and power have been conceptualized at the institutional level. I argue that the structuring approach is a much more viable basis for the study of those politics, in part, because it allows for two essential deviations from extant theory. The first is that field actors take progress and their role in that progress seriously. The second is that there may be valuable wisdom in the institutional structures that yield disappointments in the short term. Put another way, disappointing outcomes may be evidence of institutions working exactly the way we need them to operate. Those arguments have led me to consider how to continue my research on field politics. I have argued here that examining politics as simply contests for control has limitations that keep us from seeing how progress gets made. I see now that that is only part of the story. Another essential question is similarly fundamental. What is an issue in field-level politics? I explore that idea and how it might be studied constructively.

### **6.1 Conclusion 1: What Role Do Politics Play in the Progress that Does Get Made?**

The canonical view of field-level politics is that actors vie for control of institutional structures so that they can control both those structures and the conduct they encourage or discourage (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). That view is rooted in the assumption that field actors have conflicting values and interests. Values conflict such that different beliefs are held about the form institutional structure should take and the conduct that those structures should encourage. Those values are seen as being tightly aligned with the interests of field actors, such that interests shape values. Differences in values lead to an ongoing constitutional struggle over institutional structure

because control of structure raises the likelihood that actors will be able to pursue their interests with an institutional stamp of approval (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). This school of thought sees fields – even mature, settled fields – as being the sites of frequent conflict (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Interests shape values. Incompatibilities in interests mean that values are similarly incompatible. Conflict is inevitably perpetual.

I do not contest the assumption that field actors have differing values and interest. Where I disagree is in the role those differences play in field level structuring. It is my contention that the “chaos” that can arise from conflicting interests and values *can* be a source of progress. Ganz’ (2023) recent contribution to the literature makes the case using simulated data that there are circumstances under which political conflict can yield the constructive exploration of alternatives. My archival data shows similar findings and adds theorization of some additional mechanisms through which that exploration occurs and is then shaped into tangible opportunities to make progress. The existence of conflicting values and interests is a fixed element of organizational fields. But rather than trying to eliminate the resulting conflict, we should be looking for ways to increase the value of the agreements among field actors that bring those periodic conflicts to a close.

As a basis for that effort, I have proposed the concept of the zone of appropriateness. At its most basic level, this concept reimagines the way we think about variation in beliefs about institutional structure. That variation is not only a source of conflict. Variation in beliefs of what conduct is deemed appropriate within an institutional context yields multiple interpretations of the many issues that field actors must confront over time. That variance creates room to maneuver because there is no single taken-for-granted belief about what is or is not appropriate. Especially constructive is that field actors can come to see that different interpretations can coexist. That allows different

interests to be pursued simultaneously when agreements are reached that permit a diversity of action to be deemed as appropriate. Those agreements are forged through political negotiations. Politically negotiated agreements can lead to the peaceful coexistence of field actors as opposed to wars over the ability to dominate structure.

In the field I studied, the FCC plays a pivotal role in the formation, implementation, and enforcement of those agreements. That leads me to wonder if the existence of a powerful regulative actor, steeped in the history and structure of the field is a boundary condition to the transferability of the zone of appropriateness concept to other contexts. There are many contexts in which regulative actors can play the brokering role the FCC plays in the American telecommunications field. Such contexts exist in several countries. Professional bodies have been shown playing similar roles (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) as have different actors within fields (Maguire et al., 2004). Future research could examine whether the zones of appropriateness concept applies to these similar context and if they permit similar forms of exploration and negotiation. Scholars have also begun to examine how field configuring events, such as trade shows and conference, bring about stability and change in fields. What is compelling to me about those events is that they provide a specific relational context in which actors can discuss issues, devise guidance, and coordinate subsequent action on the ground (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). Zilber's (2011) study of high-tech conferences in Israel used ethnographic methods to show how interaction at these events allowed multiple meanings to be maintained in the field as well as the coordination of guidelines for action within those meanings systems. Findings like these suggest to me that there are zones of appropriateness being constructed in many fields. The level of interaction and debate

about the boundaries of those zones and how they should guide action is likely to be variable and warrants further study.

A combination of Zilber's ethnographic approach with more common archival analyses could lead to important contributions. The ethnographic approach gives scholars a view into the inner workings of specific field actors. This can reveal what values and interests they hold and how they devise strategies for advancing them at the field level. It was my intention to include that form of data gathering in my dissertation, but the strictures of time and the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to delay that form of data collection and analysis for a future project. Here, I was able to use archival data to see how many views being expressed revealed the boundaries of zones of appropriateness in the telecommunications field and set the stage for debates about how those boundaries could and should change to accommodate progress. A study that brings these approaches together to study how field actors respond to a shared problem or opportunity could be very valuable to the literature. Such a study would allow scholars to see more clearly into the processes through which field actors develop the positions they take in field-level interactions as well as how those positions are molded into agreements through political negotiations. Ideally, the ethnographic data collection could continue to include the ways that intra-organizational processes result in the implementation of the guidance derived from field-level agreements.

## **6.2 Conclusion 2: Do We Need More Politics?**

Perish the thought. It is exceptionally challenging to imagine needing more politics given the state of civic discourse in many societies across our world. I assert, however, that it is not politics that has led to gridlock and polarization. Politics, as I

define it, is the negotiation of agreements among conflicted interests where the boundaries of that bargaining are not fixed (March & Simon, 1958; Rerup & Zbaracki, 2021). The worst forms of politics we observe in news headlines do not rise to meet that standard and for two reasons. First, the boundaries have become fixed. Actors are expected to fall into sharply defined categories of acceptable beliefs and conduct. This has led to what Leibel and colleagues (2017, p. 168) referred to aptly as the “totalizing tendencies of crude identity politics.” Second, these politics feature very little negotiation. At best we see evidence of brokering in which scraps of tangible resources are thrown to the many ravenous stakeholders vying for their interests. More often, what we see is evidence of efforts to coopt institutional command posts as means to dominate those of conflicting interests and identity cadres. Gender politics in the United States are an oft-referenced example of this by the left (Bouie, 2023; “The Campaign Against Women,” 2012). But the right has its own concerns about efforts to control culture and conduct by the left (See: Goldberg, 2024).

So, it is not that we need more politics of the type that we have been forced to endure in the public square. What we need is better politics. A step forward would be moving to more integrative political process. Such processes are animated by the purpose of discovering and elaborating the meaning of the fundamental values of a collective (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 126). Even through the sometimes hotly contested debates over the Frontline proposal and other issues in the 700 MHz rulemaking, I saw ample evidence of the organizations in the field engaging in that work. It was on that basis of those observations that I began to see field politics as having much less to do with domination and much more to do with the exploration of the issues that field actors were facing.

Two forms of exploration were evident. The first was the exploration of alternatives. This form of exploration can be viewed as being somewhat technical in nature. Similar to the thinking of Tolbert and Zucker (1996), exploration of alternatives involves the specification of problems and the justification of solutions. In the case of the interoperable public safety network issue, the technical components of matching problem to solution were actually very straightforward. By 2006, the technology needed to construct the network was available. The challenges arose from the second form of exploration: the exploration of meaning. Making progress subjects both problems and solutions to a deeper form of scrutiny in which field actors must explore what that progress might mean for field structure and functioning. There is a political component to this form of exploration because how problems and solutions are defined and matched has a direct effect on the interests of the organizations making those determinations. I showed in some detail how the public safety actors in the field had to come to terms with two problems that stood in the way of their interoperable network. The first was that existing structure valued the segregation of public safety and commercial networks. That structure had served the field well but was not sufficiently pliant to permit the much more technically advanced, spectrum hungry, and expensive solution they needed.

The second problem was that public safety actors were fearful of losing control to commercial actors. It took substantial work from public safety, Frontline, and, ultimately, the FCC itself to establish a set of rules that gave public safety sufficient comfort that their control would be safeguarded. Opponents of the plan engaged in a corollary process of exploring and, ultimately, attacking what assenting to the Frontline plan would mean for the regulatory paradigm of the field. As I showed via frame analysis, different fields actors held different beliefs about how the FCC should regulate. Aspects of the Frontline



plan conformed with some of those beliefs and deviated from others. Engaging with a proposal like Frontline's gave actors an opportunity to both pursue or protect their interests *and* to discover and elaborate on the meaning the values they held about the regulation of the field.

Observing and theorizing about these two forms of exploration helped me to answer my question about whether we need more politics. I think we do. And, new questions arose. One question is: What are fields for? From the point of view of a power and politics scholar, fields are conflict resolution systems. In the traditional sense, fields supply the relational space within which conflicts of interests can be contested or brokered among field actors. There is ample evidence of field interactions involving both forms of resolution. As Hoffman (1999) described most viscerally, fields can be fields of battle in wars over control of institutional structure. There is also evidence of field-level interactions yielding brokered resolutions to conflict (Lægreid & Serigstad, 2006; Maguire et al., 2004; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005). In these forms of resolution, actors "take" their conflicts to the field level to be sorted out through various processes.

Sometimes the conflicts are not among actors but between actors and their environments or circumstances. In these cases, actors take issues to the field level so that they can receive guidance on how operations at the organizational level should be undertaken. Organizations encounter problems that they cannot solve on their own, like the interoperable communications issue. In these circumstances, fields are "for" meaning making (DeJordy et al., 2020; Leibel et al., 2017). That realization leads to the second question that arose for me as I considered the implications of my findings: What do actors "do" when they travel with issues to the relational space of the field? It is clear to us what

actors do when operating at the field level as contestants in conflict. The framing contest image is a vivid example. Actors seek to win the contest to define the situation to control the action that follows it (Kaplan, 2008). That is not the only thing they do, however. As I have shown, even actors with no particular interest or stake in a specific issue still contribute their thinking about the specification of problems and the justification of solutions. They apply frames based on their unique vantages on the issues and make recommendations about what alternatives might mean for field functioning and structure. Thus, meaning making is what they do. They figure out what existing and new structures mean for action on the ground in the context of changing environmental, technical, and social circumstances.

These contributions to the meaning making processes that are undertaken at the field level are an important form of agency that merits further attention. Existing conceptions of institutional agency have been criticized for being too “muscular” (Leibel et al., 2017, p. 166; Powell & DiMaggio, 2023). And rightly so. Images of “institutional entrepreneurs” using their knowledge and experience to coopt institutional structure by seizing control of “command posts” have contributed to that criticism (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). In an effort to bring agency and politics back into institutional scholarship, the literature has adopted caricatures of heroic agents locked in battle to control “cultural dopes” (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). The institutional inhabitant image is one that bears much closer resemblance to the way I observed field actors behaving in my lived experience and data (Bechky, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Peggy Noonan (1990), *Wall Street Journal* columnist and former speech writer to Ronald Reagan, wrote of her former boss that he saw people as doing as much bad as they must and as much good as they can. I do not agree with Ronald Reagan often, but on this

subject I do. The inhabitants of the American telecommunications field often excelled at pursuing their own interests. They occasionally did bad, distasteful things to achieve those ends. And they took their responsibility to steward institutional structures and progress seriously. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983, p. 148) oft cited definition described fields as "those organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life." I suggest it may be time to update that definition to reflect that field inhabitants are those organizations that, in aggregate, *accept responsibility* for an area of institutional life.

DiMaggio and Powell (2023, p. 19), more recently, called on institutional scholars to engage "distant ideas and insight" in hopes of avoiding the field becoming insular. Some of the ideas from the old institutionalism that have become distant warrant another look. One such concept might be the idea of organizational character first theorized by Selznick (1949). He wrote:

"Organizations like individuals strive for a unified pattern of response. This integration will define in advance the general attitudes of personnel to specific problems as they arise. This means there will be pressure within the organization, from below as well as from above, for unity in outlook. As unity is approximated, the character of the organization becomes defined. In this way, the conditions under which individuals may "live together" in the organization are established, and a selective process is generated which forces out those who cannot identify themselves with the evolving generalized character of the organization (Selznick, 1949, pp. 181–182)."

This concept has largely escaped scholarly attention as the focus of study has moved from institutionalization at the organizational level to field-level dynamics. That is a missed opportunity. This form of character makes intuitive sense as a sort of buffer between organization and environment. An organization's character could help protect organizations from the "whimsical demands of external environments" (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 291). A way to figure out what issues require attention and how the organizations values apply to those issues. Then when organizations travel to the field level to explore issues they would also take some conception of their organizations' characters along and contribute them to the field-level meaning making process. If this is the case, then there is an important connection to be studied between the values and ideals that makeup organizational character and the positions they take and interests they pursue in field-level interactions. I fear that we have been too busy vilifying organizations to notice the ways that their ideals and values help to move progress – however haltingly – forward.

What appeals to me about this concept is that it is a way to bring the form of modern actorhood that Meyer and colleagues wrote about back into the way we think about the politics of field-level interactions (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Strang & Meyer, 1993). If organizations are taking action in ways consistent with the values and ideals that make up their characters, then the debates that unfold at the field level contain at least some of the substance of those beliefs. That can form the foundation for the kind of integrative political processes I hope for. I believe that my dissertation has developed some theorizing about how those process may be unfolding within the chaos of interest seeking. I also believe that returning to the original objectives of frame analysis as envisioned by Goffman (1974) is a promising methodological approach to seeing those process in archival data. But, again, ethnographic study of field actors as they engage in

these debates would add considerably to how we understand the function of politics as the exploration of meaning.

### **6.3 Conclusion 3: Why do Institutions Keep Disappointing Us?**

In Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Trees*, the terminally ill protagonist is told by Renata, his companion in the waning days of his life, that every day is a disillusion. "No," the Colonel replies, "Every day is a new and fine illusion." The exchange lays bare one of the deepest truths of the human experience. We are disappointed because we dare to expect wonderful things to happen in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we share the spaces we inhabit. The contrasts in these dualities, between illusion and disillusion, expectation and disappointment, have never been starker than in the modern era. We receive, are beset by a seemingly endless stream of progress that would have marvelled any other person living in any other time. We have come to expect that progress will just arrive. "This is the way of modern life. We live in magic and are curiously unillusioned (Noonan, 2008, p. 3)." And, so, it comes as a shock when the progress we expect is extinguished. We are quick to anger when this occurs. We want to point fingers. We ask questions like: Why do our institutions keep disappointing us?

My objective in this dissertation has been to begin to get to the root of that question. To my surprise and delight, the more I engaged with my data, the more hopeful I became. The American telecommunications field is a fractious place. But when one looks past the derision a different image comes into view. Actors in this field take their obligation to steward progress seriously. The form that stewardship should take is hotly contested. To whom should the benefits of progress accrue is hotly contested. It is chaotic. But, from time to time, space is created to try something new. As I have argued, creating

that space begins a new version of conflict and chaos as field actors rush in to try and structure that space in ways that permit them to pursue their interests and bring coherence to an unfolding story of progress. What progress emerges from this gauntlet is hard to predict. And it is often not the purest form of the potential progress that entered. To make progress possible, the illusion is constrained.

What if that is the system working as it should? If politics is, among other things, the exploration of alternatives and meanings then we should expect that that process will help field actors to sort through potential progress and find the progress that is possible in any particular moment in the ongoing history of a field. I believe that approaching field-level interactions with a symbolic interactionist lens and an interest in understanding the effect of those interactions on field structuring were important ingredients in seeing how politics does contribute to the portion of progress that gets made. That analytic framework allowed me to see more nuance and dynamism in these interactions. Typical approaches to studying field-level action have not really embraced the idea that discursive, rhetorical and framing strategies are just part of the story of how issues are address and guidance is worked out. Interpreting and then analysing the expressions of those strategies as contributions to interactions that can yield negotiated agreements allowed me to see a more dynamic picture of field-level action and to theorize some of the mechanisms that permit those agreements to arise.

Studying those dynamics also led me to new insights about power and politics at the institutional level. In recent years, the discussion about intuitional politics has revolved around two criticisms of the existing literature. The first is connected to the idea that institutional models of agency have gotten too “muscular” (Powell & DiMaggio, 2023). The criticism has been that scholars, in search of agency, have put too much power

in the hands of individual actors. This led to thinking about episodic power – the strategic mobilizations of actors and resources in self-interested ways – as being in largely polar opposition to the systemic power of institutional structure (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). That moved the focus of inquiry from the tension between status quo and change to wars of control over institutional form with fields serving as the battlefields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). That seemed to evolve the way some scholars viewed institutions themselves. Rather than sources of meaning, shared systems of interpretation and understanding, and forces for continuity *through* change, institutions become prizes to be won.

The ultimate challenge with that view is that it forgets the most important and fundamental reasons why actors travel to the field level. Whether intuitively or from experience, actors understand that fields are the tether between on-the-ground doings and the environments in which those doings are contextualized. It is interactions at the field level that allow actors to figure things out. Leibel and colleagues (2017, p. 155) captured this function succinctly: “These interactions reveal how broader institutional rationales are tethered to local understandings. Such tethered understandings partially reflect the fields in which they occur, but also have a generative role in those very fields.” When actors engage at the field level, they are generating meanings, interpretations, and the guidance that they need to respond and adapt to the issues they face on the ground. The generation of that guidance is political. And it should be, because it establishes “the conditions under which individuals may “live together” (Selznick, 1949, pp. 181–182).”

That leads directly to the second criticism of neoinstitutional scholarship. Almost from the beginning, scholars have called for greater integration of institutional and political models (DiMaggio, 1988). The literature is still struggling to achieve that

integration. Part of the reason for that, I propose, is that institutionalists have made two assumptions about power and politics that do not hold. The first is that politics is the set of behaviours used to seize power (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). Consistent with that view, politics came to be seen, in Salancik and Pfeffer's (1977, p. 3) words, as "dirty business". Organizational and institutional theorists have struggled to bring politics back into the literature in a holistic way ever since (Levinthal & Pham, 2024). Surprisingly, it was Salancik and Pfeffer (1977, p. 3) who explained how to do that most directly, stating that: "Political processes, rather than being mechanisms for unfair and unjust allocations and appointments, tend toward the realistic resolution of conflicts among interests." It is in that spirit that theorists might return attention to the study of institutional politics.

The reintegration of this way of thinking about politics has benefits beyond moving past "[c]aricatures of organizations as passive recipients or political manipulators of institutional pressures (Oliver, 1991, p. 174)." It would allow scholars to deepen understandings of the role field-level interactions play in the mediation of the institutional and the local. Institutionalists have long sought to understand how actors seek and shape legitimacy. The study of legitimacy, as it is imagined in institutional theory, is concerned with "prevalence, similarity and "normality" (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 292)." Legitimacy is sought and enacted within a consequential logic. Actors do what is deemed legitimate to garner the benefits of legitimacy (March & Olsen, 1989). The most sought-after consequence is survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Politics, especially when imagined as I have here, follows a different logic. Politics seeks to understand what conduct is appropriate given a situationally determined set of roles and practices (March & Olsen, 1989). This logic does not require appropriateness to be narrowly defined because it assumes that conflicts of interest are a fixed feature of collectives (March & Simon,



1958). A zone of appropriateness is constructed. Politics allows actors to find negotiated solutions to those conflicts that can permit multiple interests to be pursued simultaneously. As a result, multiple meanings are permitted to persist. Indeed, as I have tried to show here, those multiple meanings are a valuable resource in the field-level politics of progress.

My hope is that future research will embrace this view of politics. One tranche of the research might investigate and theorize much more directly what “issues” are taken to the field level for consideration, how they are considered, and how organizations implement that resulting guidance. As I explored briefly in the methods chapter, institutional scholars generally and field scholars specifically have left what constitutes issues to the imagination of their readers. Hoffman (1999, p. 352) argued convincingly that “[i]ssues define what the field is, making links that may not have previously been present.” Yet what constitutes an issue is not clear. In later work, Wooten and Hoffman (2017) returned to this theme, again without definition of the term. It seems clear that issues are one of the ways that field actors have to relate to one another. Issues provide a subject matter that can be raised and debated from the many points of view available in fields. In this way, issues allow actors to seek and receive guidance from fellow field members about how to respond to issues that arise either from their environments or through on-the-ground action.

This raises, for me, a spate of research questions. How do organizations select issues to raise at the field level? What risks are they taking in doing so? What potential gains make those risks appear worth taking? What role does each organization’s character play in how issues are framed, adjudicated resolved? How is guidance constructed in emerging or less structured fields? What do organizations do with that guidance? Does

anyone care? These questions are compelling to me. Why should field scholars care? Fundamentally, I believe that they access one of the most important dynamics of fields, which is how actors relate to one another (Wooten & Hoffman, 2017).

\* \* \*

How actors relate to one another is a fascinating puzzle at any level of analysis. Trying to solve that puzzle reveals what is really going on inside and through the countless interactions that animate our societies. Investigating those deeper goings on allows us to see important things. We see our institutions at work. We see the progress we can and sometime do make collectively. And we see the long list of forces, process, and actions that hold it all together. I hope that my dissertation has been successful – to some degree – in rehabilitating one of the items on that list. Politics.

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# Curriculum Vitae

## Cameron McAlpine

Ph.D. Candidate, Organizational Behaviour, Ivey Business School

### EDUCATION

Ph.D. Candidate, Organizational Behaviour <b>Ivey Business School, Western University</b>	2018-Present
M.A. (with distinction), Communication, Culture and Technology, <b>Georgetown University</b>	2006
M.A., History, <b>Western University</b>	2004
Hons. B.A. (with distinction), History and Political Science, <b>Western University</b>	2003

### RESEARCH

#### **Published Articles:**

Zbaracki, M.J., Watkiss, L., McAlpine, C. and Barg, J. (2021), "Truth, Beauty, and Justice in Models of Social Action", Beckman, C.M. (Ed.) *Carnegie goes to California: Advancing and Celebrating the Work of James G. March (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 76)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 159-177.

#### **Working Papers:**

Olivera, F., MacMillan, K., McAlpine, C., Mohan, G., (2023) "The Effect of Candour on Workplace Relationships: The Influence of Trust" (Working Paper)

McAlpine, C., Watkiss, L., Zbaracki, M., (2022) "Models of Decision-Making in Organizations" (Working Paper)

McAlpine, C. (2021). "How the Field Gets Taken: Joint Negotiation of Field-Level Social Orders and Institutional Rules" (Dissertation Proposal)

Monzani, L., McAlpine, C., Olivera, F. (2018). Alexa gets a job: Digital leadership as the nexus between social, technical, and digital systems.

#### **Conference Presentations & Posters:**

"The Effect of Candour on Workplace Relationships: The Influence of Trust", Human Relations Conference, April 20, 2023 (Presented By Karen MacMillan)

“Political Dynamics of Temporal Order: Catalyzing Events & Coalitions”, Organization Science Winter Conference, March 4, 2020 (Cancelled due to Covid)

“Risk vs. Reward: Status in Creativity-for-Hire-Firms”, Ivey Business School, Faculty Retreat, May 7, 2019

### TEACHING

Negotiations, MBA, <b>Ivey Business School</b> <i>Teaching Evaluation Average 6.9</i>	Fall 2023
Negotiations, HBA2, <b>Ivey Business School</b> <i>Teaching Evaluation Average 6.8</i>	Winter 2023
Leading People & Organizations, HBA Core, <b>Ivey Business School</b> <i>Teaching Evaluation Average 6.7</i>	Fall 2022
Negotiations, MBA, <b>Ivey Business School</b> <i>Teaching Evaluation Average 6.6</i>	Fall 2022
Negotiations, HBA2, <b>Ivey Business School</b> <i>Teaching Evaluation Average 6.8</i>	Winter 2022
Sessional Professor, <b>Durham College, School of Justice</b>	2010-2011
Sessional Professor, <b>Sheridan College, School of Community Studies</b>	2009
Graduate Teaching Assistant, <b>Georgetown University</b>	2005-2006
Graduate Teaching Assistant, <b>Western University</b>	2003-2004

### AWARDS, AFFILIATIONS & SERVICE

#### **Honors and Awards:**

SSHRC, Doctoral Fellowship	2022-2023
Ontario Graduate Scholarship	2020-2022
C.B. (Bud) Johnston Ontario Graduate Scholarship	2020-2022
John F. Rankin Doctoral Scholarship	2020-2021
Brock Scholarship, Ivey Business School	2018-2022
David H. Swankie Jr. Award in History	2002
Joseph Henry Marshall Prize	2001

#### **Professional Affiliations:**

Academy of Management  
European Group for Organizational Studies  
INFORMS (*Organization Science*)  
Business History Conference



**Volunteer Service:**

Team Member, Ethnography Atelier	2023-Ongoing
Coordinator, Ontario Qualitative Methods Working Groups	2021-2023
Committee Member, Navigating Qualitative Dissertations, AOM PDW	2021-2022
Chair, Parent and School Council, R.H. McGregor Elementary School	2017-2018
Board Director, North York Women's Shelter (Toronto)	2016-2017
Board Director, The Neighbourhood Centre (Toronto)	2013-2016

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Special Advisor to the CEO	2018-Present
Director, Communication & Marketing <b>Canadian Chiropractic Protective Association</b>	2016-2018
Director, Communication & Marketing	2014-2016
Manager, Member Communication <b>Ontario Chiropractic Association</b>	2012-2014
Principal <b>Ideative, Inc.</b>	2009-2013
Strategist <b>Public, Inc.</b>	2011-2012
Account Manager <b>Cossette, Inc.</b>	2009
Communication Consultant <b>Wallman Consulting (Washington, D.C.)</b>	2006-2009