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# **Institutional work of maintenance by peripheral players: the case of Mediapart in the French press field.**

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# **Institutional work of maintenance by peripheral players: the case of Mediapart in the French press field.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the emphasis put on institutions permanence and their continuity through self-reproduction (Scott 2003; Zilber 2006), the theoretical underpinning for the concept of institutional work stressed that an active effort is yet required to maintain institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). According to Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) “institutional work aimed at maintaining institutions involves supporting, repairing or recreating the social mechanisms that ensure compliance (p 230). A key question in institutional work literature is “who” can perform maintenance work (Lawrence et al. 2011). It is widely recognized in the literature that field position of actors acts as an enabling/constraining condition for performing institutional work. Based on this assumption, a distinction is made between two extreme field positions: central or incumbent players and challengers or peripheral players (Batilana 2006).

Extant studies acknowledge that incumbents and central players have a higher propensity to perform institutional work of maintenance since they are those who are the most favoured by the *status quo* (Hampel et al. 2017). An additional argument that supports this thesis consist in considering incumbents and central players in the field as more socialized and endowed with adequate resources to ensure compliance and policing of existing institutional setting. However, these assertions leave much untold about how peripheral actors can maintain institutions. Yet, several studies highlighted how peripheral players may play the role of “gatekeepers” (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000) of the field and work on maintaining and

repairing institutions. Such situation is more likely to happen when elite actors in the field deviate from institutional settings and the core values of the field (Rao et al. 2003). The hyper concentration of power among few elite actors as well as their exposition to increasing conflicting institutional pressures and imperatives are more and more common phenomena that push central players to discard institutionalized practices and betray its core values. Therefore, institutional maintenance by peripheral players lends itself as a worthy phenomenon to study.

This paper aims at addressing this theoretical gap through the exploration of institutional work of maintenance performed by peripheral players in their field. We draw on a qualitative study based on an extreme single case study (Yin 2003) of the work of institutional maintenance performed in the field of press in France by Mediapart. Mediapart is an online newspaper founded in 2008 with the aim of defending the independence of press from financial and politic hegemony as well as mainlining field practices such as investigations and the involvement of journalists in the governance of newspapers.

As a new entrant, Mediapart has low resources and no recognition from the professional networks and inter-organization networks in the field. Its peripheral position in the field is therefore a transparent and compelling phenomenon.

Our findings show that the work of maintenance performed by Mediapart is threefold. First an extensive use of historical narrativization and memory work intended to invoke an affiliation with reformist and figures of resistance from the past and to recall obscure periods of history of the field of press in France such as the autocratic era of the restoration of the second empire. Second, since peripheral players are not well endowed with resources, Mediapart constructed an alternative model of gathering resources. Mediapart worked on delegitimizing existing modes of access to resources and theorizing new resources such as the monetization of news online. The third finding derives from the insularity of Mediapart as a peripheral

actor and consist in a work of rebellion and opposition toward established power in the field. Mediapart had fuelled controversy and scandals targeting political and economic elite in France and engaged in illegal actions geared toward gaining acceptance in the field.

This article makes several contributions to institutional work of maintenance and to institutional theory more broadly. First it contributes to challenging the structural determinism in institutional theory that restrict maintenance work to elite actors. Therefore, we build a theoretical underpinning of when and how institutions peripheral players maintain institutions. We show how peripheral actors may substitute resources and power that they are deprived of by other means in order to perform maintenance work.

Second, we contribute to the recent turn to history and memory in institutional work since we show how maintenance work connect the past with the present and build social meaning by invoking reputation trajectory of figures from the past (Jansen 2007). The analogy and the multiple comparisons made with obscure and dark periods in the French history of autocratic political power and corruption sheds light on the role of memory work through triggering emotions such as fear and anxiety in maintaining institutions. We therefore expand the use of history and memories in institutional maintenance beyond the work of mythologisation (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). We locate this contribution in historical institutionalism, and we extend the use of memory as a strategic asset (Foster et al. 2011) to institutional maintenance.

### **Institutional work of maintenance:**

Institutional work is defined as the daily efforts of actors in the creation, maintenance and destabilization of institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). It is focused on the daily, repeated, routine, decided or unexpected interactions of a wide range of actors, without distinction of their status or position in the organizational field (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey,

2017). Unexpectedly, the turn to institutional work revived the interest in the process of institutional continuity and maintenance while institutional scholars' attention was geared toward explaining institutional change and disruption.

Whereas early explanations of institutional continuity and maintenance relied on self-reproduction mechanisms (Jepperson, 1991), institutional work brought to the fore the vital role of continuous and intentional efforts of actors to insure institutional maintenance. Therefore, institutional maintenance relies on agency and needs actors' willingness and purposeful actions to insure institutional reproduction even for highly institutionalized social arrangements.

According to Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) "institutional work aimed at maintaining institutions involves supporting, repairing or recreating the social mechanisms that ensure compliance (p 230). Assuming that institutional maintenance requires agency and purposeful action has as a corollary which is that institutionalized practices and institutions may vanish and erode as they face outsider driven attacks (Maguire and Hardy 2009) or when they are slowly left in oblivion (Douglas 1985).

In their study of the high table dinners in Cambridge, Dacin et al. (2010) shows the importance of rituals in maintaining institutions against oblivion. When institutions are called into questions or face legitimacy attacks, actors maintain their institution through work of policing, that consists of using sanctions and inducement, deterring aimed at inculcating obedience through the fear of sanctions and through valorizing and demonizing behaviours (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). Building on the recent development on the role of emotions and institutional dynamics, Gill and Burrow (2017) uncovered the role of being frightened in maintaining practices in the French haute cuisine.

Institutional work of maintenance can take several forms. Micelotta and Washington (2013) introduced institutional repair to refer to work of maintaining broken institutions. Maguire and Hardy (2009) pinpointed the defensive nature of institutional work when the institutions at place are attacked by outsiders such as activists or social movement.

Key to institutional work concept is addressing the question of “who” can engage in efforts of institutional change and maintenance. Such question echoes the enabling conditions (Hardy and Maguire 2008) which facilitate and constrain the propensity and the willingness of actors to engage in institutional work of maintenance. Since the organizational field is the arena where actors live in/with, struggle over the meaning and fight over resources (Fligstein 1997), actors’ position in the field is crucial to the understanding of who may engage in which kind institutional work.

### **Field position as an enabling condition of institutional work:**

Institutional theory owes much to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu from which it borrowed the concept of organizational field which became one of its iconic concepts. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) the organizational field refers to “*those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products*” (p 148). Organizational fields have a high degree of autonomy from macro political and social phenomena (Naidoo 2004) and generate their own rules, social meaning, values, and behavioural imperatives. Bourdieu used his theory of the field to acknowledge the existence of particular institutional life in many fields such as education and the field of press. Having the field as level of analysis allowed Bourdieu and his followers to uncover how power relations manifest and how they shape social interactions and practices (Bourdieu 1994). The translation of the concept of field and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu broadly speaking in institutional theory got rid from power and domination (Greenwood and

Meyer 2008) in favour to more cultural and cognitive mechanisms. Institutional theory acknowledges that actor's positions in the field reflects their degree of socialization to the institutional setting and their propensity to comply to rules and avoid sanctions for deviant behaviour (Battilana 2006). Field position is therefore an important lens from which institutional work and agency in institutional theory should be grasped.

Institutional scholars often distinguish between two extreme positions: central players and peripheral players (Leblibici et al. 1991; Rao et al. 2003; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). Taking a strategic lens, Batillana (2006) uses a different terminology: incumbent and challenger to designate the two extreme positions.

Incumbents and central players are deemed the more socialized actors to the institutional setting and the actors who profit the most from the status quo (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Peripheral players or challengers are actors who hold less powerful positions in the field and whose access to resources is made difficult by their insularity (Maguire & Hardy 2008). Since they are less favoured by the established institutions and are less exposed to the risk of being sanctioned because of deviance. They are often portrayed as the source of institutional disruption and novelty of their field (Leblibici et al. 1991). According to Croidieu et al. (2017) peripheral players are also those who may afford discarding institutionalized practices the most.

Even though institutional theory had put much effort to discard some of its early "unfortunate intellectual baggage" (Scott 2008) such considering actors as "cultural dopes", it got trapped again, in an unfortunate structural determinism regarding actors' position in the field and the institutional work that they can perform.

Indeed, incumbents and central players are expected to maintain institutions and to defend the status quo as they are favoured by the institutional setting at place and peripheral players are



condemned to disruption (Batilana 2006; Leblibici et al. 1991). Few works tried to challenge this determinism by showing how incumbents and central players may bring about institutional change. For instance, Rao et al. (2003) show that a major change in the field of French cuisine had been triggered by elite chefs with multiple Michelin stars. The explanation lies in the connections that high status actors in the field may have with other high-status players outside their field and how such interactions is conducive to challenging extant values of the field and social meaning. Chefs like Bocus or Troisgros visits in Japan contributed heavily to changing how they perceive and view the art of haute cuisine in France. In a similar vein Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) show that incumbents are nested in different organisational field and may import practices from one field to another and bring about institutional change. Incumbents can therefore easily challenge the status quo if they preserve and sustain their advantages (Ben Slimane 2012). However, institutional theory still struggles with the conundrum of peripheral players performing maintenance work.

### **Institutional work of maintenance by peripheral players**

Because they are less socialized, they are disadvantaged by status quo and are less resourceful, institutional theory falls short in explaining institutional work of maintenance by peripheral players. However, literature is replete with stories and cases of peripheral players defending the status quo and performing institutional work of maintenance.

In this section we will discuss the counterexamples and the situations where peripheral players may work on maintaining institutions rather than being restricted to the straitjacket of institutional deviance and disruption. In their study of the emergence and the rise of microbreweries movement in the late nineties in US Carroll and Swaminathan (2000) show that the dissatisfaction with the quality of beer and the critics of incumbents' practices who turned to mass production, pushed a wide variety of challengers to start a movement of restoration and defense of the old taste as well as old practices in the beer industries. The

challengers have been dissatisfied with the commoditization of beer and the deterioration of its taste. Their aim was to bring back craftsmanship practices and aesthetic values to the field.

In the music field, peripheral players reacting to the hegemony of big Majors record label constituted an association of independent labels (Williamson & Cloonan, 2007) to defend what they've advocated was the core values of the field such as plurality of tastes and raising stars. Peripheral players appear therefore as gatekeepers (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000) of the institutional order that is threaten by the concentration of power of few actors and their deviation from the core values of the field.

Scholars showed that the work of institutional maintenance is driven by the interests of incumbents which position and advantages in the field are favored by existing institutional settings (Dacin et al. 2010). This raises the question of the motivation of peripheral players to defend and maintain the institutional order. Insights from the beer industry (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000) and the music industry (Anand and Petterson 2000) show that the concentration of power of incumbents and their deviation from core values of the field (Rao et al. 2003) act as a motivation for peripheral players and challengers to perform institutional work of maintenance.

Institutional work of maintenance by peripheral players differs from the maintenance work of incumbents in two aspects. First, the motivation of maintaining institutional order doesn't hinge on favoring interests and advantage but is rather driven by symbolic and cultural dimensions of the field such as cores values and collective identity.

Second, institutional work literature is unanimous on the necessity of power and resourcefulness to perform institutional work of maintenance and defensive institutional work (Micelotta and Washington, 2013). Examples of institutional work of maintenance such as valourizing, demonizing or policing can only be performed by resourceful and powerful

actors (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). All these developments raise unanswered questions yet on how peripheral players who lack resources and who are more insular than central players maintain institutions in their field. Accordingly, we formulate the following research question:

*How peripheral players maintain institutions of the field?*

## **Case description, data collection, methods and data analysis**

### ***Case selection***

This research is based on an exploratory case study whose aim is to build theory through revealing the richness and trustworthiness of extreme cases (Gioia et al., 2013; Langley and Abdallah 2015; Yin 2003). We've selected the case of the newspaper Mediapart in the French press field for two reasons. First, Mediapart position in the field of press in France satisfies with the theoretical conditions of peripherality: (1) lack of resources and (2) lower socialization as concerns about Mediapart membership to the press unions and the acceptance of its journalist as professional had been raised in the aftermath of its creation and continued thereafter. Second, the field of press in French is the locus of criticisms for the high concentration of incumbents and the continuous attempts by political and economic power to control press. Pierre Bourdieu who dedicated many of his works to the study of the field of French journalism raised the concern of the high degree of control held by market logic over journalism (Bourdieu 1994).

Mediapart is an independent and participative online newspaper, founded in 2008. Its founders: François Bonnet, Gérard Desportes, Laurent Mauduit and Edwy Plenel, aimed at creating an alternative, independent newspaper that responds to the crisis of independence of the press in France. Challenging what they call "the old press", the four journalists had the

ambition to create the conditions for their independence through the establishment a new newspaper aimed at embodying and maintaining the values of the field.

Mediapart is an independent newspaper that refuses to be owned by industrial groups or wealthy businessmen, rejects public subsidies and advertising revenues.

The newspaper started with limited resources: "We really worked on the bone, that is to say we didn't spend anything. We set up, each person set up their own desk with their own screwdriver, table, chair... We were careful with all our expenses" (MH Smiejan).

### ***Data collection***

Data collection was conducted between 2014 and 2015. We've conducted 15 semi-structured interviews that lasted between 1.5 and 2.15 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We interviewed 14 respondents and met with the co-founder, president and director of Mediapart, Edwy Plenel twice. All of the interviewees were involved in the creation of the Mediapart and are hold key positions in Mediapart.

We triangulated primary data with secondary data for more reliability. We analyzed 50 articles written by the founders about the launch of Mediapart. We've also analyzed 4 books written by two of the co-founders on the press and the independence of the press and collected 10 videos of TV shows and conferences.

### ***Data analysis***

In order to enhance the rigor of our data analysis process that is often called into question for qualitative research (Pratt 2009), we adopted the Gioia method that offers a "boilerplate" for qualitative data analysis. Gioia method is a methodological framework that guarantee a systematic conceptual and analytical discipline that allows the achievement of rigorous and relevant interpretations of data (Gioia et al., 2013). Our analysis followed multiple steps.

First, we have conducted an open coding of our data looking for what are the major issues in the field and how they are framed and viewed by the different constituencies of the field (Hoffman 1999). We have revealed numbers of themes such as press independence, economic power, political power, advertisement, public subsidies, competition, business model, democracy, freedom of speech, the profession of journalist, journalism practices etc.

In the second step and consisting with Gioia method, we've initiated a process of iteration between open codes, which reflects how actors perceive and talk about the object of the study, and theory, institutional theory more particularly. This second step is close to what Strauss (1987) designates as an axial coding and resulted in the identification of templates of second order codes. For instance we've coded the concerns and critics voiced by Mediapart against advertisement and public subsidies as "strategies of delegitimizing existing resources". From an institutional prescriptive discursive struggle about legitimacy (Hardy and Maguire 2008) is an important process in the dynamic of institutional continuity and change.

The third step of Gioia method consists of lumping second order themes in aggregate dimensions as portrayed by Figure (1). At this stage we are firmly located in the theoretical realm looking for labels that resonate with theory and that could answer to our research question. As an illustration our label "memory work and invocation of the past" refers to how peripheral players through invoking affiliation with reputed figures of the past in their field and through recalling on obscures periods of the field.

Following Gioia et al. (2013) we support the transparency of our data analysis with a figure of the data structure (Fig 1) with an illustration of coding schemes

## ***Findings***

Our analysis shows three kinds of institutional work performed by peripheral players to maintain the institution of their field: historical narrativization and memory work; constructing an alternative model of gathering resources and work of rebellion and opposition.

### **1- Historical narrativization and memory work**

This work of institutional maintenance is based on the use of field memory and historical narrative. We have identified two sub-strategies for this maintenance work. The first strategy consists of invoking a filiation with historical figures of the press field known for their reformism and resistance for a free and independent press. In the second strategy, Mediapart drew a parallel between the current situation of the field and dark episodes when the press totally lost its independence.

#### ***Invoking an affiliation with reformist and resistant figures***

In interviews, books and articles published, as well as in blogs and public conferences, Mediapart's founders repeatedly invoke references to historical figures in the field. These figures are well present in the memory of the field and embody the values of freedom and independence of the press from both political and economic power. The speeches refer to several figures, ranging from Albert Camus and his newspaper *Combat*, to Charles Delescluze and his newspaper *Réveil*, via Robert Ezra Park, Georges Orwell and John Dewey.

"There is a bit of Camus, a bit of Orwell... There is even some John Dewey" (Edwy Plenel, founder and CEO of Mediapart).

Mediapart was almost named Combat after the resistance newspaper founded by 1957 Nobel Prize winner Albert Camus. The co-founders refer to Albert Camus (1913-1960) as an inspiring figure. Camus is also an activist and committed journalist who calls for revolt, protests against ideologies and established power in place, especially during the French occupation of Algeria, as illustrated by this verbatim.

"At the risk of always displeasing, in all camps, Camus refused the consoling half-truths which only glimpse what suits the dominant prejudices... In the moment, this attitude of independence isolates, arouses misunderstandings or estrangements, creates ruptures and detestations..." (Edwy Plenel).

In the same vein, the interviewees often refer to the committed British writer and journalist George Orwell (1903-1950). Coming from a bourgeois background, Orwell never stopped opposing British imperialism. He was always scandalized by a press that fell victim to the noise of communication, which relays "false" and unverified information and worked to make known the "truth". He writes to denounce lies and draws attention to issues as valuable as Mediapart as the verbatim below attests.

"Orwell, whom I cherish, said about the "industrial press" that they are in the hands of people who have good reasons to have bad

interests for the press" (Fabrice Arfi, Journalist and Reporter at Mediapart)

Other figures are invoked, each one referring to a particular memory and embodying the values that Médiapart claims. For example, the journalist Robert Ezra Park (1864-1944) is cited for having placed inquiry and investigation at the heart of journalism. While to insist on the values of freedom, independence, opposition, resistance, the founders of Mediapart evoke in their speeches Charles Delescluze one of the figures of the press, the political landscape during the French Revolution. Critical and rebellious, Delescluze opposed the Second Empire, denounced its tools, men and institutions. His publications and positions earned him several trials, fines, prison sentences and exile. He fought for the Republic and democracy for forty years and until his death on a barricade.

These figures of the past symbolize a committed, militant, critical, non-conformist and revolutionary journalism, which opposes the powers that be, the totalitarian regimes and ideologies. They embody thoughts on the fringe of the dominant currents.

### ***Invoking dark periods of history***

Mediapart's use of history has also served to recall the dark episodes in French history when the press was enslaved by the authorities and prevented from playing its role as an essential cog in democracy.

The speeches of the founders call for great vigilance, and recall the dark times of the Second Empire, the Third Republic and the interwar period. Periods marked by censorship, "systems



of corruption", and media-financial and political scandals that destroyed, among others, the French press.

The Second Empire (1852-1870) represents one of the darkest moments of democratic life in France. During this return of the monarchy, the field of the written press was the scene of a mixture of genres where famous businessmen invested "at all costs in the press to better consolidate their influence and maintain relations of connivance with the power". Those close to Napoleon III, the new monarch, bought and put under supervision almost all the newspapers. The press was thus muzzled and the right to information was scorned by the powers of money. According to Laurent Mauduit, co-founder of Mediapart, the today state of the French press reminds us of the dark days of the Second Empire.

"In a way, we were reliving the fate of the press under the Second Empire. Obligated persons of the Palace acquiring newspapers to please Nicolas Sarkozy [President of France 2007-2012], and buying themselves at the same time a power of influence, in the manner of the Duke of Morny, the half-brother of Napoleon, and of the speculator Jules Mirès, buying up the press in turn to reinforce their speculations, notably around the railroads, and to put it at the service of the Empire " (Laurent Mauduit, co-founder of Mediapart).

A second reference to history by Mediapart and which makes a parallel with the current situation of the written press in France is that of the political-financial scandals of the Third Republic (1870-1940). This period was marked by the Panama scandal and the Raffalovitch scandal. The Panama scandal is a case of corruption related to the construction of the Panama Canal. The construction project, which was much riskier and more expensive than competing projects, was selected because of bribes. The raising of public funds, blocked twice by

parliamentarians, was made possible by bribing parliamentarians and, above all, the press, which promotes the project and the company that is carrying it to public opinion. The company that led the Panama project went into receivership in 1889, ruining hundreds of thousands of subscribers. At the same time, another financial scandal of the same kind was taking shape: the Arthur Raffalovich affair of Russian loans. A financial affair of corruption of the press, which made it possible to promote the placement of Russian loans, in France at the beginning of the XXth century.

The French press, corrupted by more than 25 million Euros, praises the strength of the Russian economy. A "misleading press campaign" promotes the Russian sovereign bonds placed and sold by French banks to constitute a third of French savings.

"One of the biggest financial scandals of the time: if nearly one and a half million French people were swindled by these loans, it is because the press was stipendiated to entice them" (Laurent Mauduit).

Mediapart warns against a return of "the business press" as in the interwar period. A conniving, complacent, conformist press, which gives a smooth image and serves the interests of those who have power and money. They draw a parallel between the press of today, which is highly concentrated and inbred with the business world, and the press of the time, which was controlled and financed by the employers' organization, the Comité des Forges, which on the eve of the First World War worked to promote the interests of the steel industry in France.

## **2-Constructing an alternative model of gathering field resources**

The second institutional maintenance work performed by Mediapart relates to resources. Our results show that Mediapart has built an alternative revenue model, and therefore of resource appropriation. Mediapart has invested in a work of delegitimization of the existing modes of resource appropriation responsible for the drift of the field. Secondly, through a process of bricolage that we have labelled financial bootstrapping, the co-founders of Mediapart have succeeded in gathering the necessary funding to launch their activity. Third, Mediapart theorized the paying nature of online information and thus a new revenue model.

### *Deligitimizing existing sources of revenues*

The founders question the legitimacy of the dominant revenue and financing model of the print press, which relies on three resources: capital participation by industrialists or investors, advertising and public subsidies. According to Mediapart, these three resources are responsible for the drift of practices in the press field.

In France, the capital of newspapers is most often held by industrial groups and rich French investors whose business is not journalism. As the following excerpt illustrates, this type of financial control necessarily leads to a control of the editorial line and reduces the independence of the press and deviates it from its role as a cog in democracy. Mediapart castigates the risk of censorship.

"We can see very well, for example, what happened, we wrote about it in the newspaper a few days ago, how Bolloré censored a documentary on Canal+ that had been validated by the

program management and the legal department, which was even announced in the newspapers. He censored it a few days before it was broadcast because it was a very disturbing investigative documentary on a French bank, Crédit Mutuel, which happens to be one of Mr. Bolloré's main financial partners" (Fabrice Arfi).

The founders refuse to finance the newspaper through subsidies, a key source of income in the press field. They consider that direct state aid is detrimental to the independence of a newspaper. Subsidies mean owing something to the government in power.

"In addition, Mediapart says no to the question of subsidies, we do not want it because we want to remain completely independent of power" (Laurent Chemla).

In addition to undermining the independence of newspapers and journalists, subsidies create a bias in the press economy. The founders speak of a sector and companies under perfusion. Many newspapers cannot find a financial balance without direct subsidies, which ultimately undermines their independence.

"When we see that the State gives 17 million euros to Le Monde, 10 million euros to Libération, etc., it is unhealthy for the economic balance of the newspaper. And it's unhealthy because a press company, like any other, must find a financial balance, otherwise it will never be independent" (Marie-Hélène Smiejan, co-founder of Mediapart).

The founders also denounced the subsidies, which they described as a democratic scandal. Indeed, there is a strong opacity around the grants and how they are distributed.

This work of delegitimization also touches advertising revenues, which are strongly criticized for several reasons. The advertising models require a strong consultation, a race to the audience, a race to the click, thus dictating a certain type of content. "You have to do people, sex and sports. There you can hope on this trio" (Marie-Hélène Smiejan).

The editorial choices are thus strongly determined by the logic of the massive click. According to the founders, the editorial model is increasingly being pulled down.

The contingency of the advertising model is also caused by censorship imposed by the advertising companies and/or their clients. The founders point out that the most important advertisers are close to the economic and political power and that this implies editorial complications. Independence is challenged when some newspapers show more freedom in their editorial choices and publish articles that displease the advertisers and their clients, with the risk of losing advertising and advertising revenue.

"Libération paid the price with Bernard Arnaud, because one day they made a headline "Casse-toi riche con" [f\*\*\* off rich jerk], which he found insulting" (Laurent Mauduit).

### ***Financial bootstrapping***

Mediapart's revenue model reflects the founders' commitment to editorial independence, which they believe is intimately linked to the economic and financial independence of the

newspaper. The financial aspects of the project, the sources and flow of income (s) have been thought out in this sense, starting with the constitution of the capital. For a year the founders "groped to find the right system".

"Our ambition, both in financial and legal terms is to resume the path, which was interrupted by the loss of economic independence of "Le Monde", "Libération" and other newspapers, of a press of journalists...So what I want to show is that we can arrive serenely, step by step, to build in a loyal, honest, transparent way, without selling our soul," (Edwy Plenel).

To start the newspaper and ensure its viability for three years, five million euros had to be raised. The founders did not want the newspaper to be under the control of a "Boss", a rich French businessman or industrialist who would put the five million euros on the table. This led the founders to look for financing in increments of 500,000 euros. Finally, two independent entrepreneurs, actors in the computer and new technologies sector, Jean-Louis Bouchard and Thierry Willem, embarked on the adventure convinced by the project and by their support for the cause and values of the founders. They contributed with 1,110,000 euros. Marie-Hélène Smiejan and Edwy Plenel, the co-founders, also had to go into debt to raise the first Million Euros. Together with the other co-founders, they contributed with 1,325,000 euros to Médiapart's capital.

"Today the guarantee of independence is ... the capital belongs to the journalists" (Marie-Hélène Smiejan).

The founders then set up a simplified joint stock company, the "Société des amis", which initially brought together about forty people. According to the president of "Société des

amis”, Michel Broué, a university mathematician close to the founders, it is a question of "friends" who brought for some 1500 euros for others a few thousands or tens of thousands euros by solidarity.

### ***Theorizing new resources: the monetization of online news***

The independence of the newspaper is determined by the way its capital is constituted, but also the sources of income. Mediapart is an online newspaper, whose capital is majority owned by its founders and editors, which gives access to different editorial contents via a monthly subscription of nine euros. It is a newspaper whose revenue model goes against the doxa of the time.

In the 2000s, pure players did not exist, the Internet meant free, a freeness that eventually affected the paper press, where revenues are generated by advertising.

"It was in those years that all the paper titles built low-cost websites that essentially did flow and dispatch, fed by editorial teams of young journalists on precarious contracts, paid by the slingshot, and that's how the Internet sites were run. That's what is used at the time" (François Bonnet, co-founder of Mediapart).

Mediapart arrived with a model that was different from the dominant model, an online paying newspaper and long articles of 35,000 to 40,000 characters against an average of one thousand to one thousand five hundred characters. In the field nobody believed in it, the model provoked a lot of criticism.

According to the founders, the model that supports the economic and editorial independence, which are very intertwined, is the paying model.

"The best way, even if it is unorthodox, to have economic independence is to depend only on the trust of its readers and nothing else. (Fabrice Arfi).

The founders' challenge was to find fifty thousand readers willing to pay for independent, quality information. Since the revenues come only from the readers, no influence can prevent the newspaper and the journalists from publishing what they want to publish, hence their slogan "only our readers can buy us".

The founders worked to establish an economic universe around the production of information, independent information that has value, public interest, and a price. The interviewees talked about the behind-the-scenes production of information, the long time it takes, the resources it consumes, the cost of information and independence, and normalized the payment of information by the readers. The discourse was that by accepting "this pact", readers guarantee the independence of the newspaper, build it and maintain it.

### **3-Rebellion and opposition**

Mediapart also had to invest in an institutional work of rebellion and disobedience against the rules of the field that constrained the work of maintenance especially coming from an actor at the periphery of the field. By bringing political and financial scandals to light, Mediapart opposed the powers and proved its independence. Secondly, Mediapart has entered into



resistance against the rules that do not recognize it as a full member of the field and that call into question its legitimacy.

### ***Fueling controversy and scandal***

The starting point of Mediapart was the will of its founders to get out of the agendas of those who have the power of speech and communication, of storytelling, of media noise, of the "train-train" of AFP (Agence France-Presse), to be apart. The objective was to create information that is not a willing victim of communication, information that is democratic and of public interest, information that is often hidden, that sometimes disturbs and upsets. The best way to do this, according to the founders, is to put investigative journalism back at the heart of the editorial activity, to be independent and to have intellectual autonomy.

The founders and their collaborators have set up an offensive, critical, rebellious journalism that "does not bend. They have made this known through their articles, their speeches in various TV and radio shows, the videos they publish, etc.

At its creation, the newspaper was engaged in the fight against "Sarkozysm", to reveal a shadowy part of the French power at that time (2007-2012).

"We were anti-Sarkozy, it was Sarkozy who was President. Every day, we were saying bad things about Sarkozy, so the government didn't like it. There was only hostility... It wasn't fun every day" (Gérard Desportes, co-founder of Mediapart).

The independence of Mediapart and the investigative journalism that embodies this independence, have allowed to reveal a first major political and financial scandal under the Sarkozy era: the Bettencourt affair.

The Bettencourt affair is the "signal" of independence for Mediapart. It was published by the newspaper in 2010 and refers to links between the Minister of the Budget Eric Woerth and the businesswoman Liliane Bettencourt, the largest shareholder of the L'Oreal group and one of the first fortunes of France. The newspaper published authenticated recordings that shed light on conflicts of interest between Liliane Bettencourt and the Minister of the Budget and a suspicion of illegal financing of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential campaign (2007).

"We managed to completely disrupt the national agenda by putting out information that was so much in the public interest that it earned us several trials in France... we had a very strong attack from the State. We were watched, we were robbed, we were insulted"  
(Fabrice Arfi).

The investigative journalism on political and economic powers in a "locked information system" has allowed to unpack other cases such as the Libyan financing of the presidential campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy, in 2007.

The person in charge of investigations for the newspaper, Fabrice Arfi, stresses that the spectacular and scandalous nature of these cases should not be overlooked. The scandal and the noise of the scandal are effective means of raising public awareness, learning lessons about corruption, tax evasion, power, etc. and to mark the independence of Mediapart.

In the name of press independence, the founders and journalists have brought to light information, files, scoops, scandals, however they have faced retaliation from attacked actors lying in intimidation, lawsuits and indictments.

Mediapart is also Arfi [journalist]. With what he did on Bettencourt etc... he's smart, he's tenacious, he's brave... the other day he was on a bike when he turned the block a car hit him brushed. I told him not to take a bike, a bicycle accident happened so quickly! (Michel Broue).

Some investigations on French businessmen, French industrial groups and media group have earned the newspaper several legal attacks. For instance they have been suited after revealing the Caisses d'Epargne (private bank) affair, as Mediapart pointe to "an illegal taking of interest" and questions decisions taken at the top of the State in favour of the private bank.

«We still live in a universe that is quite hostile or sometimes even criminalized. Me in my investigations on the Caisse d'Epargne in 2010, I was the subject of 12 defamation complaints and I was under examination 12 times. Eventually I'll win the case and we'll have the bank convicted of malicious prosecution. Plenel, as he is director of publications, it is even more frequent” (Laurent Mauduit).”

Mediapart, then barely a year old and financially fragile, launched an appeal for financial support to deal with the 12 libel suits filed against it by the Caisses d'Epargne.

« Our determination is intact, but we need you. Pot of clay against pot of iron, the disproportion of financial means is obvious here... you can therefore support Mediapart financially...” (Edwy Plenel)”

Mediapart's opposition continued after the Sarkozy era, in 2012 François Hollande (socialist party) was elected president of the Republic, six months later, Mediapart released the Cahuzac affair, the budget minister who had been defrauding the taxman for 20 years. Revelations that the newspaper has "almost paid dearly". Since a few months later, the newspaper was subject to a tax audit, followed by a tax adjustment of several million euros.

The founders pointed to a "vengeful attitude" of the administration and the government that the scandal Cahuzac, which led the budget minister to resign.

### ***Performing illegal actions***

At the beginning, and this lasted a few years, the public authorities did not consider Mediapart as a newspaper and therefore as a legitimate actor in the field of the written press. As a consequence, the VAT rate applied to Mediapart was 19.6% and not the super reduced rate of 2.1% applied to the press. The question of the super reduced VAT rate, which allows to lower the financial balance rate and increases the independence of a newspaper, especially during its first years of existence, has been transformed later into a political fight led essentially by Mediapart.

Mediapart has posed as a reformer of the press field. In order to make the law evolve, Mediapart stood up against the law and refused to pay the 19.6% VAT and to pay it at 2.1%. While informing the tax authorities, of its creation and until 2014, Mediapart had applied the super reduced VAT reserved for the paper press.

For the tax authorities, in order to benefit from the 2.1% VAT, you must be a press company and have a number of the Commission Paritaire des Publications et Agences de Presse (CPPAP). The CPPAP is a body composed of equal representation of the State administration and press professionals. It was in charge of : Issuing an opinion relating to the benefit of the economic regime of the press (privileged postal and tax rates) of the publications; proposing the registration on the list of the companies having the status of press<sup>2</sup> agency.

As soon as Mediapart was created, the directors asked for press cards for their journalists and a CPPAP number, but to get it, they needed a printer's number. The CPPAP refused Mediapart's request.

"So we had to fight to get a number from a joint press commission" (Laurent Mauduit).

Mediapart reiterated its request in the CPPAP appeal commission, the administration blocked the agreement because behind this status of press company there is the question of the super reduced VAT of 2.1% of the press or the VAT of 19.6%. At that time the Council of State is seized.

An arm wrestling match between the newspaper and the public authorities, actors/institutions in the field of the press, the tax authorities.

Mediapart is engaged in a legal battle supported by law firms to benefit from the VAT at 2.1%.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cppap.fr/presentation-de-la-cppap/>

The General Direction of Media and Cultural Information has encouraged Mediapart to have a representative, a structure that will be present at the CPPAP, in the commissions for the attribution of subsidies and that will carry the specificities of online press companies. Thus the Union of the Independent Press of online information (SPIIL) was created.

Mediapart launches a media, political and legal battle to benefit from the 2.1% VAT and to obtain a CPPAP number. The SPIIL has played a lobbying role in particular with the General States of the Press and public authorities, parliamentarians and also in Brussels.

The battle, which according to the founders is a battle for the profession, was won in 2014. now Mediapart as well as all online press is taxable at 2.1 %.

Meanwhile, in 2013, Mediapart was subject to a tax reassessment of 3.3 million euros, plus 1.3 million in late penalties, while the newspaper acted in full transparency vis-à-vis the tax authorities.

## **Discussion**

In this paper we addressed the question of how peripheral players maintain institutions in their field. Based on an exploratory single case study of the work of Mediapart in the French field of press we've revealed three main findings that answer to our research gap. In the following section we discuss our two contributions to institutional work of maintenance and to institutional theory more broadly.

Our first contribution challenges the structural determinism of institutional theory which restrict institutional work of maintenance to central players. Actors position in the field is an important explanation of their agency in the field (Battilana, 2006). Scholars have shown how different roles in bringing about institutional change or in insuring institution continuity are played by actors according to their central or rather peripheral position in the field.

This structural determinism builds on an early assumption within institutional theory that emphasize that degree of socialization of actors in the field and their adherence to institution is high for central players and incumbents and low for challengers and peripheral players (Leblibici et al. 1991). Strategic arguments had also been brought to support his theoretical underpinning arguing that central players maintain institutions because their interest are favoured by the status quo (Vaccaro and Palazzio 2015) and because they enjoy an easy access to resources.

Peripheral players are therefore deemed less socialized (Croidieu et al. 2017) and lack resources to maintain institutions. Few works tried to challenge this structural determinism by showing how central players may bring about changes in their field and deviate from established norms (Rao et al. 2003). However, extant literature is still puzzled by considering how peripheral players could maintain institutions. A key question deriving from this assertion is how peripheral players may substitute and subvert resources and power in their institutional work of maintenance. DiMaggio (1988) in his early conceptualisation of strategic action that aims at shaping institutions highlighted the importance of being a “resourceful actor”. However, despite the prominence of this concept there was few efforts to study how actors in the field define what resources are and how their substitution by other resources may unfold in the field (Bourdieu 2016).

Our findings show that rather than mobilizing and using extant resources of the field to perform strategic action and institutional work of maintenance, peripheral actors commit themselves into an undocumented work of redefining critical resources of the field. They achieve that in two ways. First, they infuse exiting resources with a negative meaning and work on their delegitimization. In their rhetoric they theorize a causality relationship between the vey kind of resources used in the field and the institutional disorder and entropy that characterises the field. Resources appear therefore as a core component of institution and

institutional order rather than a generic dimension and a mere instrument of action. While studying institutions and institutional order scholars should pay attention to define what are the resources that allow institution to work and how players shape their meaning and their definition.

Pierre Bourdieu (2016) argues that social actors have multiple forms of capital (social, economic and cultural) and these different kinds of capital may be substituted by others depending on the social context. For instance, economic capital may be a substitute to social capital. Our findings are consistent with this theory of the substitutability of capital, here resources, as maintenance work by peripheral players brings new kind of resources. Our data shows how Mediapart substituted the extant resources in the field of press in France (advertisement, public subsidies and private investments) by new resources (crowdfunding and the monetization of online information). This institutional work of substitution is vital for the institutional work of maintenance by peripheral players. Their lack of access to extant resources should lead them to bring new kind of resources. The dynamic of resource substitution should attract more attention from scholars interested in studying the dynamics of institutional continuity and change.

Second, we contribute to exhibit stances of illegality and rebellion in institutional work. Extant works have portrayed that institutional work is mainly geared toward finding our agreements and seeking cooperation between multiple actors with different interests (Hampel et al. 2017). They have also pointed to the importance of targeting through discursive and symbolic work, collective cognitive schemas that allow actors to define collectively what is accepted, proper and appropriate in their field (Ben-Slimane et al. 2020). However, few works explored the use of violence, rebellion in institutional work and how they may be used in defying established institutional orders. Recent works showed that peripheral players and powerless actors when they attack highly guarded institutions don't speak up and act covertly



while hiding their actions and intentions (Claus and Tracey 2022). The threat of retaliation has been pointed as an important endeavor for peripheral actors who attack powerful and central players (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015). Our results provide a balanced view of the perspective of how powerless actors engage in institutional work geared toward dislodging powerful players and guarded institutions. First, we show that powerful players retaliation strategies may be mitigated by peripheral players and doesn't necessarily hinder them from acting against the established institutions. Mediapart showed resilience after the several attacks by the government and the attempts to unravel their organization. Second, we assume that when peripheral players engage in aggressive institutional work and when they directly attack powerful incumbents, they may enhance their chance of shaping institution in directions they favor.

Recently Roulet (2020) acknowledges how actors may capitalize on public hostility and negative evaluations in order to harvest positive effects and to achieve their institutional projects. Such strategies have been documented for activists when they use extreme actions often illegal to raise the awareness of audience on a given issue such as Greenpeace and PET (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals) (Roulet 2020).

Our findings show that extreme action such as rebellion, outlaw activities and fueling political scandals are useful to maintain institutions by peripheral players. Such actions are even more successful when they target powerful actors and reveals their misconduct and misbehavior. Power is indeed ambivalent in that attacks of powerful actors may attract wider audience and receive positive feedback and support as shown by Maguire et al.(2004) on the attacks of big pharma by AIDS patients. We advocate that such extreme actions because they target powerful actors and raise concerns about their hegemony are crucial to the work of maintenance by peripheral and low power players to maintain institutions.

We locate our third contribution in the realm of historical institutionalism (Foster et al. 2011). The historical turn in neo institutionalism stresses how memories may be used as a strategic asset in institutional work. Our findings portray two ways of using memories and historical narratives with the aim of maintaining institutions by peripheral players. The first relates to managing and using reputational trajectories of key figures from history of the field (Jansen 2007). By so doing, peripheral players enhance the meaning of affiliation with key figures which may convey the meaning of them playing role of gatekeepers. Of great importance is how the choice of the figures from the past is made. Based on their reputational trajectories and on the values, they embody, peripheral players pick figures that resonate with the audience memories and convey the meaning they are looking for. This strategy shows how the mechanism of association with figure from the past is conducive to the creation of social meaning in the field.

The use of memory work and historical rhetoric can also be used to convey negative meaning.

The second use of memory work aims at triggering negative emotions such as fear through recalling dark episode from the past. The analogy and the multiple comparisons made with obscure and dark periods in the French history of autocratic political power and corruption sheds light on the role of memory work through triggering emotions such as fear and anxiety in maintaining institutions. We therefore expand the use of history and memories in institutional maintenance beyond the work of mythologisation (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006)

Emotions play an important role institutional work and emotions such as fear had been shown to play a role in maintaining the power of chef in French cuisine. However, the fear that we relate in this strategy resembles more to strategies of dramatization or constructing scenarios of the worst (Vaara and Tienari 2002). The idea is that peripheral players tell the audience that history may repeat itself and the field may slip into dark era.

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