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When Sourcing Norms Redirect the News: Production Capture as a Perspective on Editorial Credibility

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Abstract: This academic perspective article proposed production capture as a lens for explaining how a news outlet's editorial credibility could be redirected while its formal accountability markers stayed intact. Trust and press-freedom indicators registered pressure on independence but could not show redirection through an outlet's ordinary procedures. The article integrated capture theory, including Stiglitz's cognitive capture; news-sourcing theory, including indexing; normative theory of the press; and research on credibility heuristics. It argued that redirection could run through sourcing norms rather than reporters' beliefs, and defined the core form as the strategic limit case of indexing. A three-part evidentiary standard adapted from regulatory-capture research, with channel and certification judged separately, relaxed its intent requirement to documented strategic action. One core case and two boundary cases, each read against a rival explanation, illustrated the lens: *New York Times* coverage of Iraqi weapons claims from 2002 to 2003, Fox News after the 2020 election, and Hungary from 2010 to 2026, with Russia as contrast. The core case's placement of dissent was compatible with the norm-mediated channel, with interested-party action documented for one article and partly elsewhere, and the boundary cases showed where evidence for the channel ran out. The article proposed an unvalidated Production Capture Index, with exposure and symptom subscales to be checked against documentary evidence of interested-party action, and eight untested practical implications. It concluded that when capture ran through procedure, an outlet's own checks could become its cover, so intact credibility markers were necessary but not sufficient evidence of independence.

Keywords: Production Capture, Media Capture, Cognitive Capture, Indexing, News Sources, Editorial Independence, Journalism Ethics, Media Ownership

1. Introduction

Independent journalism serves democracy when its procedures serve those who receive information, not those who supply it. The monitorial role carries an "intention to benefit the receiver of information rather than the agents of information or control" (Christians et al., 2009, p. 139). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) add that journalism's "practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover" (p. xxvii). The question is therefore whom an outlet's procedures serve.

Audience surveys suggest falling trust, a partisan gap, and perceived owner and political influence. The 2026 *Digital News Report* surveyed about 2,000 people online in each of 48 markets in January and February 2026, using non-probability samples (Egan et al., 2026, pp. 2–3). Trust in news "dropped to 37%, the lowest figure since we started measuring trust in 2015," and was 25% in the United States and 15% among right-leaning Americans (p. 15). Browsing and viewing data from 2016 to 2019 placed about 17% of Americans in partisan-segregated television news diets, on a lenient definition, against roughly 4% online (Muise et al., 2022, pp. 1, 3). Across 26 markets (n = 52,857), 70% judged media owners influential on coverage, 70% government or politicians, and 59% advertisers (Egan et al., 2026, p. 16). But

the trust item measures trust in news, not news organizations (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 143), and perceived influence need not be actual influence.

Expert indicators suggest owner interference is common. Since 2022, the World Press Freedom Index has scored 180 countries and territories from recorded abuses and a specialists' survey covering the previous year (Reporters Without Borders, 2026). In the 2025 edition, covering 2024, a majority of respondents in 92 of the 180 "reported that media owners 'always' or 'often' limited their outlet's editorial independence" (Reporters Without Borders, 2025, "Media concentration" section, para. 5). None of these indicators can show which outlets or channels are involved, or register redirection that leaves formal markers intact.

Recent peer-reviewed work addresses parts of this problem. A scoping review of 56 studies reports: "The vast majority of studies show that media ownership affects journalistic content" (Theine et al., 2025, p. 865). Sinclair's acquisitions moved local stations' slant rightward by about one standard deviation (Martin & McCrain, 2019, p. 380). Murdoch's purchase of the *Wall Street Journal* raised its front-page political coverage relative to *The New York Times*, measured by amount, not slant (Archer & Clinton, 2018, p. 353). In a German debate, journalists' selection norms gave a minor far-right party outsized coverage (Knüpfer et al., 2026, p. 170). Across more than 940,000 COVID-19 posts that 78 news outlets in seven countries published on social media in 2020, political sources dominated (Mellado et al., 2021, p. 1261). Whether capture runs through political economy, routines, or cognitive capture is unresolved (Mabweazara & Pearson, 2025, p. 35). These studies establish owner effects and norm vulnerability separately, which leaves open how the two meet at a single outlet.

The *Times*' prewar reporting on Iraq illustrates how ordinary procedures can carry a contested official claim. Two intelligence agencies judged the aluminum tubes Iraq sought "probably not intended for a nuclear program," in classified assessments by October 2002 (S. Rep. No. 108-301, 2004, p. 86). On September 8, 2002, the *Times* led with officials' account of the tubes, and its reporters learned of the interagency debate five days later (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 23). Whether more than the lapse its editors later acknowledged was at work is this article's question.

2. Problem Statement

The practical problem is that news organizations' formal safeguards can stay intact while output tilts toward an interested party, so audiences, regulators, and newsrooms may be unable to tell independence from its appearance. Democracy, in Christians et al.'s summary of the Hutchins Commission, which elaborated the idea of social responsibility, "depended on a flow of trustworthy information and a diversity of relevant opinions" (2009, p. 5). In one structural model, favor exchange would have cut a Hungarian portal's corruption coverage by 42% after its 2016 sale, compared with a world without favors or the sale (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021, pp. 283, 291). That lever is advertising, so the estimate speaks to the stakes and leaves aside the mechanism at issue here. Sourcing studies suggest reach: across 1,434 network evening stories before the Iraq War, administration officials were quoted most often (Hayes & Guardino, 2010, pp. 59, 61), and across more than 940,000 COVID-19 posts, political sources dominated (Mellado et al., 2021, p. 1261). Reach of this kind does not by itself show capture.

Existing safeguards work only under some conditions. The Society of Professional Journalists' (2026) code states: "Deny favored treatment to advertisers, sources, donors or other special interests" (Act Independently section). Yet the press does well when officials disagree and often fails when a dubious policy goes unchallenged inside government (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 14). For Tuchman (1972), "Newspapermen regard the statement 'X said A' as a 'fact,' even if 'A' is false" (p. 665). Fox News's research unit rated claims about the voting-technology company Dominion false on November 13, 2020, yet such claims kept airing (*US*

Dominion, Inc. v. Fox News Network, LLC, 2023, pp. 11, 17, 93–130). Correction reaches at least some simple errors of fact but rarely goes further (Hindman, 2005, p. 235). These safeguards can stay intact without governing the direction of output.

Each available concept covers part of this gap but offers no outlet-level, norm-mediated diagnostic. Media capture is "a macro concept indicating AN OUTCOME" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2019, as cited in Schiffrin, 2021, p. 6); cognitive capture concerns "how reporters perceive the world" (Stiglitz, 2017, p. 14); and indexing (Bennett, 1990, p. 106) has specified failure conditions (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 14). Under what conditions do an outlet's own sourcing norms, followed by journalists who need not share their sources' views, carry an interested party's account into the news while its formal accountability markers stay intact? How could that condition be detected at the level of a single outlet? Answers would inform how official claims are displayed, how editorial governance is insulated, and what audits measure.

3. Purpose of the Inquiry

The purpose of this academic perspective article is to propose production capture as a conceptual lens. This article argues that a news outlet's editorial credibility can be redirected through its own sourcing norms without reporters adopting their sources' beliefs. When an interested party's action exploits those norms, the outlet's accountability checks become cover for the redirection, because checks that examine attribution and sourcing need not examine display, order, or the handling of dissent the outlet held. Audits that count formal markers would not register this condition. Audits that compare the direction of output with documented source action could, and the remedies they suggest concern what checks examine (how dissent is displayed, what is done with doubts the outlet holds). The article draws on capture theory, news-sourcing theory, normative theory of the press, and credibility-heuristics research. Three aims follow: (1) to define production capture and distinguish it, by channel, capturer, and level, from adjacent concepts; (2) to illustrate it through one core case and two boundary cases, read with one set of analytic questions, graded against an evidentiary standard, and weighed against rivals; (3) to propose an unvalidated outlet-level diagnostic and eight untested practical implications. Its distinctive contributions are a graded evidentiary standard, the certification property, and the outlet-level diagnostic.

Three questions guide the article. GQ1 (Sections 4 and 5): How does production capture differ from media capture, cognitive capture, access capture, and indexing, and what does it add to them? GQ2 (Sections 6.1 to 6.3): Read through the same analytic questions, what do one core case and two boundary cases illustrate about norm-mediated redirection and where evidence for it runs out, and what can they not show once rival explanations are weighed? GQ3 (Sections 7 and 8): How could the condition be made diagnosable at the level of a single outlet without circular reasoning, and what practical responses would follow? The cases illustrate but cannot establish prevalence or validity.

4. Theoretical Foundations

4.1. Capture Theory: Regulatory, Cognitive, and Media Capture

Capture theory supplies the core idea and a standard for claiming it. For Stigler (1971), regulation is, as a rule, "acquired by the industry and is designed and operated primarily for its benefit" (p. 3). Carpenter and Moss (2014) define capture as regulation "consistently or repeatedly directed away from the public interest and toward the interests of the regulated industry, by the intent and action of the industry itself" (p. 13). Benefit alone could reflect bureaucratic drift, coincidence, or mistakes (p. 14). A claim therefore needs a defeasible public-interest model, a shift away from it, and industry action and intent plausibly explaining a meaningful part of that shift (p. 15). Section 5.1 relaxes that demanding intent requirement openly.

Non-material accounts locate capture in what reporters come to believe, fear, or rely on. Stiglitz (2017) notes that reporters and owners may act as if captured because adverse

stories may cost access (p. 14), here called access capture. Cognitive capture, the hardest form to prove (p. 14), includes reliance and herding, since no one can weigh all the evidence and a reporter who follows the crowd is rarely blamed (p. 15). Through association, financial reporters often "come to adopt their beliefs and perceptions"; such capture "is pervasive and often unintended" (p. 15). Two differences nonetheless remain. Cognitive capture does not require a capturer to act, although Stiglitz's examples include corporate public relations (p. 15); production capture requires an interested party's action, which a claim must document. And Stiglitz floats beat rotation only to note its cost to expertise (p. 15), closing instead on checks and balances that aware media could set (p. 16); a norm channel specifies which checks, namely ones that examine display and available dissent rather than form.

Media-capture research treats capture mainly as a system-level outcome, though some authors link it to sources. Besley and Prat (2006) model how and when government captures the media, including noncoercively (p. 720), and captured media are controlled "either directly by governments or by vested interests networked with politics" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008, as cited in Schiffrin, 2021, p. 5). Governments and allied businesses act on regulation, public media, state funds, and private media (Dragomir, 2024, p. 163); in Turkey, state-owned enterprises' advertising rewarded pro-government newspapers and punished critical ones (Yanatma, 2021). Nechushtai (2018, p. 1048) notes that earlier work linked access journalism, or elite-source dependence, to capture, and under-resourced local outlets can become "more vulnerable to capture" as they rely on information subsidies (Napoli, 2021, p. 48). Capture through sources thus already has a name. Still open is whether routine norms can carry it where resources are ample, and how it could be diagnosed at one outlet.

4.2. News-Sourcing Theory: Indexing, Cascading Activation, and the Hierarchy of Influences

News sociology has long held that elite sources dominate news through routines rather than reporters' convictions. Tuchman (1972) treated objectivity as a strategic ritual that shields reporters from the risks of their trade (p. 660). Fishman (1980) found bureaucracies forming hierarchies of credibility (p. 94), with journalists' participation "not simply a matter of belief; it is also a position of convenience" (p. 96). Reese (1990) traced the profession's claim that routines kept a socialist *Wall Street Journal* reporter's values out of the news (p. 390), while reliance on officials let elites define news (p. 395). In reconstructions of 480 Israeli news items with 1,307 sources, reporters by default judged messages by their sources' credibility in over two-thirds of cases (Barnoy & Reich, 2022, pp. 204, 206, 213). Journalists in focus groups on immigration news at Belgium's largest press agency recognized "an implicit hierarchy in terms of reliability and credibility" favoring government sources over opposition parties (Verleyen et al., 2025, p. 652). This article takes the mechanism from that literature and claims only that it can be read as capture.

Indexing names that norm, and later work specified when it fails. Bennett (1990) hypothesized that journalists index voices "according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic" (p. 106). As a norm (p. 109), indexing need not look like bias to journalists (p. 110), and the *Times* offered a critical test (p. 113). Bennett et al. (2007) find the press failing when government's own inquiry does not question a policy although credible outside sources are available, and trace the Iraq failure to administration tactics and press conventions (pp. 14, 16). Entman's (2004) cascading activation adds a belief-level pull (pp. 9, 13). The scope of indexing is contested. For evening news of the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf crisis, the evidence "suggests that journalists exercised considerable discretion in locating and airing oppositional voices" (Althaus, 2003, p. 381). In *New York Times* and CNN coverage of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, in which the United States was only indirectly involved, frames on which U.S. officials nearly agreed were challenged about a third of the time, mostly through foreign sources (Rowling et al., 2021, pp. 2132, 2135, 2136 n. 2). Section 5.3 states what this article adds.

The hierarchy-of-influences model organizes these accounts by level and locates the three levers. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) distinguish individual, routines, organizational, extramedia, and ideological levels, with routines central to professional identity (p. 106). "By relying on these official sources, reporters receive most of their information through routine channels," and not-for-attribution ground rules let sources avoid accountability (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 129). At the organizational level, "Whenever media workers deduce what their supervisors want and give it to them, de facto control has been exercised" (p. 170). Gatekeeping, the selection of events that become news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 5), and framing, which emphasizes some parts of an issue so that one interpretation is favored (Entman, 2004, p. 5), enter here through this model and cascading activation. On this map, source supply is an extramedia actor using a routines-level norm, owner and management levers are organizational, and state levers are extramedia.

4.3. A Normative Benchmark

Normative theory supplies the benchmark for judging a shift and anticipates part of the problem. Reporters "act as double agents of communication, serving their sources as well as meeting the informational needs of the public" (Christians et al., 2009, p. 140). Even under normal conditions, media and government usually cooperate at least partly, and authorities often control the news supply (p. 127). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) define independence as "intellectual independence rather than neutrality" (p. 161). Social responsibility theory treats the press as answerable to society (Christians et al., 2009, p. 5); that duty, and not formal compliance, is the warrant for using output as the test. In open-ended answers from 20,638 journalists in 67 countries, watchdog and monitor ranked among the six roles named most often, a set the authors treat as journalism's normative core (Standaert et al., 2021, pp. 919, 927, 932). The monitorial role supplies the defeasible public-interest model that Carpenter and Moss (2014) require. What editorial independence requires in practice varies with the influence at issue, so it is relative rather than absolute (van Drunen & Fechner, 2023, p. 1725). Because independence is a state of mind, a norm-mediated mechanism could redirect output while independence holds, and the benchmark itself offers no evidence of capture.

4.4. Credibility Heuristics and the Audience

Audience research explains why intact markers could lend credibility, but the evidence is mixed. Sundar's (2008) MAIN (modality, agency, interactivity, navigability) model, built for digital interfaces, includes an authority heuristic turning on "whether the source is an official authority or not" (p. 84); applying it to sources quoted in news is an extension. Audiences lack the resources to check news thoroughly and seem to judge its credibility heuristically (Kohring, 2019, and Yale et al., 2015, as cited in Strömbäck et al., 2020, pp. 141, 149), yet transparency cues barely moved credibility in an experiment ($N = 1{,}320$; Karlsson et al., 2014, pp. 670, 674). The certification claimed here is institutional (Section 5.1); this mixed evidence leaves open whether markers reassure readers. Motivated reasoning, the tendency to "arrive at conclusions that they want to arrive at" (Kunda, 1990, p. 480), explains partisan sorting and says nothing about how an outlet's output was redirected.

5. Production Capture as a Proposed Perspective

5.1. Definition and Evidentiary Standard

Editorial credibility is used here in an institutional sense: the standing an outlet's procedures confer on what it publishes. Redirection means that this standing is lent to one party's account. *Production capture* is the condition in which an interested party's action reaches the public through a news outlet's maintained production routines, such as authority-weighted sourcing, attribution, and editorial review. The outlet's output then tilts consistently toward that party's account and away from the public's information needs. Routines are maintained when they are in force and applied in the ordinary way; reporting that escapes them lies outside the

concept. Where an outlet's checks examine form, items that follow the routines pass them, and formal accountability markers (bylines, attribution, editorial review, a corrections policy, and, where they exist, standards review, an ombudsperson, or an editorial charter) stay intact.

In this article, in an internal sense unlike third-party certification, an item is certified when, at publication, it satisfies the checks an outlet applies (attribution, sourcing rules, standards and legal review, where the outlet has them) and the features that tilted it (display, order, follow-up, and the handling of dissent the outlet held) lie outside what those checks test. Certification is thus narrower than compliance, which every routinely published item shows. Bennett (1990, pp. 108–109) makes the point that a sourcing rule can be defended to managers and concerned citizens. The addition here is the gap between what checks test and what tilts output. Whether readers are reassured is a separate question (Section 4.4). Formal attributes "protect the professional from mistakes and from his critics" (Tuchman, 1972, p. 678), so they also shield a redirected item. Professional standards "don't help much, of course, when commercial interests at a news channel supplant reporting and editorial practices" (Goldman, 1999, p. 187). Production capture is the case in which the practice itself carries the interest.

Adapted from Carpenter and Moss (2014, p. 15), a claim of production capture needs a defeasible benchmark (here the monitorial role; Christians et al., 2009, p. 139), a documented shift in one outlet's output, and an interested party's documented strategic action plausibly explaining a meaningful part of it. Their test also requires intent: the industry must "actively and knowingly push regulation away from the public interest" (p. 14). This article relaxes Carpenter and Moss's intent requirement to documented strategic action aimed at the public information environment, because intent toward a particular outlet is rarely documented. They foresee this objection: so high a bar may miss real cases, but they accept that cost because false diagnoses, in their judgment, are now the more frequent error (p. 14; see also p. 16), and on their definition a claim without intent is not capture (p. 14). The relaxation draws on Carpenter's (2014, p. 62) reading of intent as an attempt, somewhere along the way, to rig an institutional process or shape the frames of those involved, and it widens that reading, which concerns regulators and professionals in regulation. Claims made under the relaxed standard fall short of what Carpenter and Moss call "the gold standard for a diagnosis of capture" (p. 15), so the core case is graded on the relaxed test and, for action, on the original; the boundary cases are graded on the relaxed test.

Grades (met, partly met, or not met) follow Carpenter and Moss's (2014, p. 15) call for circumspection when a component is missing. A test is met when a record (an inquiry, court file, internal document, advertising or procurement data, or the outlet's own account; for a shift, also a content analysis of the outlet's output) shows the element; partly met when the record shows only part of it, as when a party's public omissions are documented but its supply to the outlet is not; and not met when only the party's benefit, its public advocacy, or inference from output is available. A shift is a departure from the benchmark in the party's direction; where no earlier baseline or comparison outlet exists, the grade says so. The channel is judged separately: only a shift carried by routines is production capture. For source supply, public advocacy alone does not count; the action must exploit the norm, as when a source supplies claims while withholding or minimizing dissent it holds. Without documented action, a claim of production capture cannot be made, and the pattern can be described only as indexing; with evidence of error alone, it is verification failure (compare p. 14). Channel is judged against the predictions in Section 5.3, chiefly whether display moves with the range of official debate: it is read as norm when a named procedure was followed and a doubting reporter would still have followed it; as another channel when a lever replaced the procedure or when belief or reprisal is shown; and as undetermined when the record cannot separate these. Certification is judged by whether the item satisfied the checks at publication and whether those checks examined what tilted it.

5.2. Three Levers and the Scope of the Concept

Production capture takes three forms, which differ by lever. Each counts as production capture only where the lever works without an instruction on content or a change of editor, so that the item reaches the public through a routine applied as usual. Form 1, source supply, is the core form (Section 5.3): an extramedia actor feeds authoritative claims into a routines-level norm (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 129). In Form 2, owner and management levers act organizationally: promotions reward pleasing superiors (Gans, 1979/2004, p. 97), and owners choose the audiences served (Theine et al., 2025, p. 866). Form 3 brings state levers to bear on private outlets, including regulation, ownership transfers to allies, and advertising, "a powerful tool of political favouritism" (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020, p. 44). State-run media fall outside the concept. By lever, Form 2 is media capture by ownership (Stiglitz, 2017, pp. 11–13) and Form 3 is state-led media capture (Besley & Prat, 2006; Dragomir, 2024); production capture adds only the routine-channel question and the diagnostic. Forms 2 and 3 stay in the diagnostic, but no case below illustrates either as production capture, and the article's claim rests on Form 1.

5.3. The Norm-Mediated Mechanism

The mechanism at issue is a procedure an unconvinced reporter, fearing no loss of access, would still follow. Journalists "do not, by any means, parrot these values, but being objective and detached, they don't rebut them either" (Gans, 1979/2004, p. 145). Local U.S. reporters surveyed in 2022 ($n = 253$) favored steps to bolster confidence in elections yet felt "compelled to let election deniers explain their views in the news" (Peterson et al., 2025, pp. 774, 780). The norm is also convenient (Fishman, 1980, p. 96) and defensible before executives (Gans, 1979/2004, pp. 130–131), overlapping the reliance and herding that Stiglitz (2017, p. 15) places in cognitive capture. Yet the redirection needs no belief, and here intact markers result from the compliance that carries the redirection. Stiglitz's herding may need no belief either; what remains distinct is an identifiable party's action and a named procedure. Channels can co-occur (Hallin, 1986, pp. 9, 12).

Form 1 is the strategic limit case of indexing: the case in which indexing is exploited by an interested party and certified by the outlet's own checks. Knüpfer et al. (2026, pp. 160, 170) already revise indexing theory for a party outside government that wins coverage by disrupting politics; Form 1's exploiters instead supply authoritative claims, and the question here is why the outlet's checks do not register the result. Indexing is, on these accounts, the normal condition (Bennett, 1990, p. 106; Hallin, 1986, p. 10), and its failure conditions, administration tactics and credible outside sources within reach, are Bennett et al.'s (2007, pp. 14, 16). This article adds a graded evidentiary standard (Section 5.1); the certification property, a gap between what an outlet's checks test and what tilts its output; and an unvalidated outlet-level diagnostic (Section 7), answering Knüpfer et al.'s (2026, p. 170) call for organizational-level study. A norm is shared across a field, but its application varies by outlet, and that variation is what the outlet-level diagnostic examines. The dissent that matters is dissent available to the outlet at the time of publication.

The channels make different predictions. Against belief, the norm reading predicts redirection that (1) holds across reporters whose stated views differ at one outlet and (2) tracks source authority rather than those views, though retrospective records rarely preserve reporters' views. One design that does gather them linked 626 Austrian political news items to their authors' surveyed left-right orientation and found limited individual-level effects, which depended mainly on how much autonomy journalists perceived and on their role orientations (Riedl et al., 2026, pp. 761, 775–776). That qualifies the prediction more than it supports it. Output did not simply follow views, but views left traces, some of them reversed by overcorrection, and the authors reject the idea that professional restraints remove them (Riedl et al., 2026, pp. 776, 778). The study measures partisan bias, not source authority, so it cannot show that output tracked authority or how a contested official claim was sourced or

displayed. Against access, demand, and owner direction, the norm reading predicts that sourcing and display move with the range of official debate, the break Bennett (1990, pp. 107, 113) used, whereas access predicts movement with the particular source the outlet depends on, demand with audience response, and owner direction with appointments or instructions. Rule changes are a weaker test: a rule that moves dissent up the page changes output under any channel, and rotating reporters also disturbs their access. The norm reading fails for a case, or for a placement within it, if output follows reporters' stated views where they depart from source authority, or if display holds steady when the official range widens, or moves only with audience response or appointments. Indexing predicts these patterns as well, so what separates Form 1 from it is the action test of Section 5.1: documentary evidence that an interested party worked the norm.

5.4. Position Among Adjacent Concepts

The perspective joins two literatures rather than discovering an unnamed phenomenon. The propaganda model's third filter holds that media are drawn into "a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2008, ch. 1). Herman's afterword to the 2008 edition (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2008, Afterword) reads the September 2002 tubes story as a propaganda-model case. Capture research describes access-based and belief-based routes by which sources capture reporters (Stiglitz, 2017, pp. 14–15). This perspective joins news sociology and capture research at the level of one outlet, where an interested party's documented action turns ordinary sourcing norms into the channel of redirection (Table 1).

Table 1. Production capture and adjacent concepts

Concept (anchor source)	Level	Channel of redirection	Formal markers	Relation to production capture
Production capture (this article)	Single outlet	Interested party's action carried by ordinary routines (sourcing, attribution, review)	Intact; items pass the checks an outlet applies, and what tilted them lies outside those checks	Proposed lens; claimed only as graded on the three-part evidentiary standard, with channel and certification judged separately
Media capture (Besley & Prat, 2006; Schiffrin, 2021)	Mainly system or market; an outcome	Ownership, funding, regulation, or coercion by government or vested interests	Intact or degraded	Shared outcome; owner and state levers overlap it; production capture adds the routine channel and its outlet-level diagnosis
Cognitive capture (Stiglitz, 2017)	Reporter	Association shapes reporters' views; reliance and herding lead them to follow conventional wisdom; capturer action not required	Intact	Production capture requires a capturer's action, which a claim must document, and does not require belief; it names the checks a remedy would need

Access capture (Stiglitz, 2017)	Reporter and outlet	Anticipated denial of access by a specific source	Intact	Different channel: anticipated reprisal versus a procedure followed without fear
Indexing (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2007; Knüpfer et al., 2026)	An issue's coverage at leading outlets	Norm calibrating sources to the range of official debate	Intact	Already includes administration tactics and available outside sources; production capture adds the evidentiary standard, certification, and outlet diagnosis
Propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2008)	Media system	Five structural filters, including sourcing	Intact	Includes a norm channel at system level; no outlet-level diagnostic
Framing and cascading activation (Entman, 2004)	Frames from elites to press to public	Motivations, cultural congruence, power, and strategy	Not addressed	Explains spread; production capture asks whether one outlet's routines carried a party's frame
Gatekeeping and hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Knüpfer et al., 2026)	Individual to ideologic al levels	Selection shaped at five levels; indexing as one gatekeeping mechanism	Not addressed	Supplies the levels; production capture locates redirection where an extramedia actor acts through a routines norm

6. Illustrative Cases and Critical Analysis

The core case (the *Times*) is chosen because owner and state financial levers are absent from the record, which narrows the channels in play. Two boundary cases (Fox News, Hungary) show where evidence for the norm channel runs out. All three are offered as illustrations and none as a test. Each answers five questions: whether output shifted against the monitorial benchmark; whether an interested party acted, toward the public or the outlet, and at which level; whether the shift passed through a norm, a belief, an anticipated reprisal, or direct control; which markers stayed intact and what is known of how audiences read them; and what the strongest rival predicts and the case cannot show. At its close, each case states what the benchmark required there, grades the shift and action tests of Section 5.1 as met, partly met, or not met, and reports channel and certification.

6.1. The Core Case: The New York Times and Iraq's Aluminum Tubes (2002–2003)

Besides the absence of any documented owner or state lever, two features recommend the *Times*: it later reviewed its coverage, and it is the canonical indexing case. Inside government, the Department of Energy had doubted a nuclear use for the tubes since 2001 in classified assessments, though by the October 2002 estimate it agreed that Iraq's nuclear program was being reconstituted (S. Rep. No. 108-301, 2004, pp. 86, 89–92). A committee majority later concluded, over minority objection, that officials' statements, though generally substantiated, "did not convey the substantial disagreements that existed in the intelligence community" (S. Rep. No. 110-345, 2008, pp. 15, 132). A White House Iraq Group, formed in August 2002, prepared news events and other publicity for a campaign opening that September (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 18). The September 8, 2002, lead article concerned tubes the administration insistently promoted as nuclear-fuel parts, a claim the editors say came from intelligence sources rather than defectors, and placed hints of doubt 1,700 words into a 3,600-word article (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 23). The paper's own 2004 investigation,

which rests on records and interviews, many with unnamed officials, says the White House "did much to increase the impact" of that article (Barstow et al., 2004, White House Makes a Move section). That morning, the Vice President cited it on *Meet the Press*, called Iraq's search for the tubes public, and declined to discuss intelligence sources (NBC News, 2002). Five days later the reporters learned of the interagency debate, which, by the editors' account, appeared well down in a page A13 article (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 23).

Read through this lens, the placement of dissent is compatible with the norm-mediated channel. By the editors' account, "articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried" (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 15), and the International Atomic Energy Agency's later challenge ran on page A10 (p. 23), so the tilt recurred. On the September 8 article the outlet had, by the editors' account, only hints of doubt about the tubes' use, and it learned of the interagency debate five days later (p. 23). The paper's 2004 investigation says the article "gave no hint of a debate over the tubes" (Barstow et al., 2004, White House Makes a Move section). The reading offered here takes the two accounts to fit together, since doubt about use is not notice of a dispute among agencies. By the rule on available dissent (Section 5.3), the norm reading can apply only to the later placements on pages A13 and A10, and the end of this section says how far it reaches for each.

Many of the faulted articles relied at least partly on Iraqi exiles whose claims officials often confirmed (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 15), though the tubes claim came from official intelligence sources (p. 23). Supply to the paper itself, as this reading has it, is best documented for the September 13 article, which gave the public its first word of the debate in its sixth paragraph, a position the editors' note calls deep. By the paper's 2004 investigation, that passage cited two unnamed administration officials: one waved the debate away as a "footnote, not a split," and the other was the basis for saying that top scientists at laboratories such as Oak Ridge sided with the CIA. A senior Oak Ridge official told the Senate committee the reverse, that the Energy Department's laboratory experts mostly opposed the CIA's view (Barstow et al., 2004, Dissent, but to Little Effect section). The investigation does not say what either official knew of the dissent's extent or why they spoke. It concedes that the route by which word of the dispute reached senior officials remains unclear, and it reports, from two unnamed senior officials, that the national security adviser knew of the debate before a September 8 television appearance but learned of the rocket explanation only afterward (Barstow et al., 2004, opening section, paras. 2, 10). A spokesperson dated the Vice President's awareness to around the October estimate (Barstow et al., 2004, Scrambling for an 'Estimate' section). Two other acts narrowed the dissent available without being supply to the paper. On the day the article ran, the Energy Department told staff not to discuss the matter with reporters; the department answered that this was a proper reminder that nuclear secrets must be guarded and no attempt to silence dissent. A senior CIA official later recalled telling legislators behind closed doors to keep the rocket explanation out of public view, lest Iraq take it up (Barstow et al., 2004, Dissent, but to Little Effect section). Beyond that article, supply to the paper is documented only through its sourcing: in the public editor's words, "cloaked government sources…insinuated themselves and their agendas into the prewar coverage" (Okrent, 2004, as cited in Hindman, 2005, p. 237). The channel, as interpreted here, was authority-weighted attribution (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 129; Tuchman, 1972, p. 665), which the public editor describes, though belief cannot be excluded.

The markers are less secure. In 2002, the paper had no public editor or standards editor; both posts date from 2003 (Hindman, 2005, pp. 235–237). The articles carried attribution and reached print through editors, but by the paper's own account, its editors may have put speed

ahead of skepticism (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 15), and the public editor blames a system that let some reporters escape normal newsroom supervision (Okrent, 2004, as cited in Hindman, 2005, p. 237). Where routines were bypassed, this article treats the case as a lapse and does not count it as capture. Only the action evidence separates this reading from ordinary indexing, and most of it documents a campaign aimed at the public information environment generally and not at the *Times* in particular. The September 13 article is the main instance of supply to the paper itself.

Two rivals are strong. The editors judged some of the coverage insufficiently rigorous (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 14), a lapse reading that, on Hindman's (2005, p. 238) definition, would repair the paradigm by defending routines. The public editor, however, called the failure institutional and traced it partly to a "hunger for scoops" (Okrent, 2004, as cited in Hindman, 2005, p. 237). A lapse reading expects properly applied procedures to have caught the error; a capture reading expects them to have foregrounded the official claim. As read here, the editors' diagnosis of display and placement fits both.

Access capture needs no threat, only awareness that adverse stories may cost access (Stiglitz, 2017, p. 14), and, interpreted in that light, an exclusive is itself a favor. Bennett et al. (2007) record no specific threat to the *Times* in 2002 or 2003 and no favor beyond the exclusives themselves, but the editors' account of scoops perhaps rushed into print (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 15) and the public editor's account of anonymous sources indulged (Okrent, 2004, as cited in Hindman, 2005, p. 237) both fit this rival. So do Bennett et al.'s (2007) reading of the apology as admitting a quest for inside access (p. 34) and their view that close ties between officials and reporters lie behind much of the page-one coverage (p. 24). Access and norm cannot be separated for articles built on unnamed officials. The challenge from the International Atomic Energy Agency came from outside the administration's sourcing, so its placement on page A10 (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 23) is where access is least implicated.

In summer 2002, reporters and editorial writers joined elite dissent over immediate war with Iraq and over the administration's claimed link between Saddam Hussein and bin Laden (Entman, 2004, p. 3), so press deference was not total, although dissent among elites is what indexing itself predicts. Network evening news from August 2002 to March 2003 quoted administration officials most often, yet foreign opposition was widely reported (Hayes & Guardino, 2010, pp. 59, 61). The editors also report that the faulted articles came from different reporters and covered different subjects (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 15), which fits, without testing, a channel not tied to individual reporters (prediction 1, Section 5.3). One of the paper's reporters later defended her prewar reporting: the job, she said, was to tell readers what the government thought, not to assess its information (Massing, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 37); read here, that after-the-fact defense states the attribution norm itself. Deference to officials also recurred in reporting on the treatment of detainees, starting in the very month of the editors' note (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 15), a recurrence that a lapse reading, as interpreted here, would not expect. On this interpretation, the case is mixed: verification lapses and norm-mediated amplification co-occurred.

The case illustrates the channel without establishing capture. The Senate committee found no evidence that political pressure caused the intelligence errors (S. Rep. No. 108-301, 2004, p. 16), and the norm reading is Bennett et al.'s (2007, p. 16). No audience evidence isolates *Times* readers: Kull et al. (2003, p. 581) grouped respondents only by primary news source. The grades that follow are this article's interpretation. The benchmark is that doubts the paper held be displayed with the claim, and it would be defeated if those doubts were not credible then. Shift is met for the later placements and partly met for the September 8 lead, where the outlet had only hints; both grades rest on the editors' own account of display and placement, with no earlier baseline or comparison outlet (The Editors, 2004, as cited in

Bennett et al., 2007, p. 23). On the relaxed test, action is met for the September 13 article on one ground only: the outlet's own later account shows unnamed administration officials supplying claims while minimizing a debate they had plainly heard of. That account does not show how much of the dissent they knew or why they spoke (Barstow et al., 2004, Dissent, but to Little Effect section). For the coverage as a whole, action is partly met. By the committee majority's finding, senior officials' public nuclear claims omitted the intelligence community's disagreements (S. Rep. No. 110-345, 2008, p. 15), and a White House group planned the campaign (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 18). Yet public advocacy alone does not meet the test (Section 5.1), the unnamed officials behind the September 8 article are not shown to have held the dissent then (Barstow et al., 2004, opening section, para. 10; White House Makes a Move section), and across the wider coverage supply came through exiles whose accounts officials confirmed (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 15). On the original test, action is not met, since intent toward the outlet is undocumented.

As this article interprets it, the channel is compatible with the norm for the placement of dissent the paper held, though no single placement isolates it. Authority-weighted display is a procedure a doubting reporter or editor would still have followed, and the agencies' doubts were classified and, on the majority's finding, officials' public statements did not convey them (S. Rep. No. 108-301, 2004, p. 86; S. Rep. No. 110-345, 2008, p. 15). The public range of official debate on the tubes in September 2002 is taken here to be the one the paper's 2004 investigation describes: officials promoted the centrifuge theory openly, while the evidence best able to challenge it "remained almost entirely off limits for public debate," and several Democrats who heard it in closed hearings said secrecy rules barred them from raising it publicly. Facts undercutting that theory first reached the public on September 23, in the first of several reports from an arms-control group, none with classified material. Energy Department experts had quietly helped prepare them; coverage was thin, partly because reporters were unaware of that help, and the *Times* carried nothing on them (Barstow et al., 2004, Dissent, but to Little Effect section). Some official questioning did occur: Democratic senators sought a fresh National Intelligence Estimate covering Iraq soon after the Vice President's appearance, though the investigation does not tie that request to the tubes, and Senator Graham told the paper in an interview that doubts about the tubes were part of why he voted against the war resolution in October (Barstow et al., 2004, Scrambling for an 'Estimate' and The Vote for War sections). The channel is undetermined for articles built on unnamed officials, where norm and access cannot be separated, and the September 13 placement is among them. Interpreted under the failure condition in Section 5.3, the January 2003 placement weighs against the norm reading: by then the paper itself reported officials at two departments proposing a rocket use, yet the challenge still ran inside, on page A10 (Barstow et al., 2004, The U.N. Inspectors Return section). Support for the norm reading therefore rests on the repeated pattern the editors describe (Section 6.1, paragraph 2) and on no one placement. Among the markers, attribution was kept and editorial review was in question. Certification, in this article's grading, is partial. At publication the items carried attribution and cleared editors, and the sources cited report no check on display or on the placement of doubts the paper held. But some reporters worked outside normal supervision (Okrent, 2004, as cited in Hindman, 2005, p. 237), so not every item satisfied the checks.

6.2. A Boundary Case: Fox News, Dominion, and the Newsworthy-Allegations Norm

Fox News adds an owner and management lever to partisan orientation and audience demand, and its court record shows a sourcing norm used in defense. Partisan orientation shows in its slant, which grew more conservative from 2000 to 2008 (Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017). In editorial decisions, after viewers protested its Arizona call, the chief executive stressed "keep[ing] the audience who loves and trusts us" (*US Dominion*, 2023, pp. 13–14). Owner communications form a third strand: the Murdochs sometimes attended editorial meetings (p. 22); Rupert Murdoch doubted the fraud evidence, and Lachlan Murdoch told the chief

executive how a rally for the then-President should be covered, which the chief executive acknowledged (p. 24). The chief executive testified that the Murdochs made suggestions and did not give orders (p. 47). This is documentary evidence produced in discovery, recited by a court that did "not weigh the evidence" on responsibility or actual malice (p. 64); the case settled on April 18, 2023, for $787.5 million (Fox Corporation, 2023, Item 8.01).

This article reads the record as showing verification that kept running, aired claims, and a norm-based defense. On November 13, 2020, the research unit rated claims that Dominion switched or deleted votes "100% false"; 17 of the 20 statements at issue aired, 14 of them after that date (*US Dominion*, 2023, pp. 17, 45, 85–130). Claims entered through the then-President's and his team's public allegations (p. 12), a source-supply lever, and management's audience concern (pp. 14–15), an organizational one. Fox News Network (FNN) argued it was "fulfilling its journalistic duty to 'present[] newsworthy allegations made by others'" (p. 31) and invoked the neutral-report privilege (pp. 32, 70–71). The court held the privilege unavailable and, in any case, the reporting not disinterested (pp. 72–73). FNN contended that hosts believed the allegations or at least did not wholly disbelieve them (p. 59), but one host privately wrote that a source never answered a request for evidence (p. 24). As interpreted here, the norm, Tuchman's (1972, p. 665) attribution formula as a legal defense, was the stated justification, but the record cannot show whether it operated. The research unit went on checking, yet its verdict did not govern what aired, and a host urged the firing of a reporter who had fact-checked the then-President (*US Dominion*, 2023, pp. 17–18, 23–24).

Demand-side slant is the strongest rival. In U.S. dailies, consumer preferences "account for roughly 20 percent of the variation in measured slant," and owners about 4% (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010, pp. 35, 38). Owners can win market share with bias (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, p. 34), and a feedback loop disciplines those who stray (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 79). Fox News's slant exceeded the viewership-maximizing level, though the authors decline to infer a profit sacrifice (Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017), and choosing an audience is an ownership decision (Theine et al., 2025, p. 866). Fox-primary respondents held the most misperceptions in 2003, a gap the authors report held after controls for political attitudes (Kull et al., 2003, pp. 582, 589, 592–593), though cross-sectional data remain open to self-selection through selective exposure (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, p. 19). In this article's judgment, the rivals overlap, the defense fits both, and the case lies on the border with demand-side slant.

The case cannot show owner direction of specific claims or an adjudicated motive: Fox Corporation's role and actual malice were left to a jury (*US Dominion*, 2023, pp. 48, 64) before settlement. It covers one topic over weeks. Interpreted against the evidentiary standard, the case is graded as follows. The benchmark is that claims the research unit rated as false should not be aired as fact. It would be defeated if the claims were then open, but the research unit had rated them false by November 13 (p. 17), and falsity was later granted (p. 43). Shift is met for the Dominion claims, with no earlier baseline or comparison outlet. Action is partly met on the relaxed test. The then-President criticized the network and retweeted calls for viewers to switch networks (p. 14), and an adviser attacked its Arizona call (p. 13), which is pressure on the outlet. Guests tied to the then-President's legal team were hosted repeatedly and voiced the allegations on air (pp. 7, 85–86), which FNN defends as presenting newsworthy allegations (p. 31). No withholding or minimizing of dissent by those guests is documented, and the pressure fits anticipated reprisal at least as well. Owner direction of the Dominion claims is contested and unadjudicated (pp. 46–48), though owner input on how coverage was framed is recited (pp. 24, 48 n. 337). The channel is undetermined. Certification, as this article reads it, fails here: FNN witnesses agreed that a claim the research unit found false should not air (p. 18), so items it had rated false failed a check the outlet itself recognized. Fox News marks the boundary at which a norm can serve as a defense whether or not it was the channel.

6.3. A Boundary Case: Hungary (2010–2026), With Russia as Contrast

The unit is privately owned outlets, chiefly Origo and Index, from 2010 to April 2026. Hungary was chosen because editors at two outlets were displaced while the publisher's ownership stayed the same, an outlet-level study exists, and its 2026 change of government offers a test. Prevalence is unmeasured, though advertising favors are suggested in democracies home to over 2 billion people (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021, p. 281). New media laws came in 2010 (Urbán, 2024, p. 28), and the state's average share of advertising revenue in the newspaper market rose from 6.6% in 2006 to 26% by 2017 (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020, pp. 53–54). In 2014, Origo's editor was replaced under an unchanged owner, allegedly after government pressure, and its corruption coverage fell below Index's, further after a 2016 sale (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021, pp. 283, 287, 291, 294). By 2020, Index's newsroom was entrapped "without any change in its ownership structure," after a pro-government businessman acquired the holding that ran its advertising sales and information technology (Polyák et al., 2022, p. 136); its editors had named freedom from external influence on content and staffing as conditions of independence (Index, 2020, para. 3). Tisza won a two-thirds majority in April 2026, and Parliament amended the media law in June (Nemeth, 2026, p. 3).

Seen from the perspective proposed here, governance and economic levers reached these newsrooms while the publisher's ownership stayed the same: at Origo before its 2016 sale, and at Index through the holding that ran its services. One untested hypothesis, after Napoli's (2021, p. 48) information-subsidy route, is that commercial outlets took up the free copy the state news agency, MTI, offered by 2017 (Urbán et al., 2017, sec. 4.1.2) as a routine and so carried the state's account. The test is the share of MTI-sourced items in their political coverage, by outlet and period. Uptake is documented on commercial radio, where hourly news blocks built on the agency's releases ran on 31 local and regional stations (sec. 4.1.2); uptake in the print and online political coverage at issue here is not documented. The sources cited here do not document which markers stayed intact at Origo and Index, or how readers took them; in pro-government newsrooms generally, professional standards are reported to carry less weight (Polyák et al., 2022, p. 136).

In this article's reading, the strongest rival, whole-system capture, explains most findings. Hungary is described as "the most advanced system of media capture in the EU" (Egan et al., 2026, p. 92). Owner ideology and favor exchange, not audience demand, mattered (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021, pp. 281, 291, 295). As read here, the 2010 turn tracked politics: Hungary ranked high on press freedom until 2010, when the Orbán government took office (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020, p. 46). In the 2007 to 2011 data, though, it sat, among 11 Central and Eastern European countries, in the three-country cluster with the most political parallelism and least press freedom (Castro Herrero et al., 2017, pp. 4803, 4810). Soft censorship names Form 3's mechanism (Urbán et al., 2017, sec. 3.3), leaving production capture only the routine-channel question.

Russia is the contrast. The V-Dem Institute classed both countries as electoral autocracies in 2025 (Nord et al., 2026, pp. 11, 24), but after 2000 the Russian state retook control of the oligarchs' media and brought back partial censorship across state and private outlets alike (Roudakova, 2012, p. 261). In this article's interpretation, direct control there replaces routines, so the question posed here does not arise. Hungary's private outlets are where it can still be asked. Stiglitz (2017, p. 14) writes that calling such control capture "adds no insights," and by the same interpretation direct control forfeits the standing that a routine channel borrows.

At Origo and Index, no routine is shown to carry the redirection, and the favor-exchange estimates rest on identifying assumptions (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021, pp. 283, 304). This article's interpretive grades for Origo are these. The benchmark is corruption coverage not traded for advertising, and it would be defeated if coverage simply tracked the number of scandals. Shift (against Index, that study's comparison outlet) and advertising-favor action are

met under those assumptions, though the pressure behind the 2014 editor change is alleged (p. 291). The channel is governance and economic levers, which makes this media capture. Certification is not applicable, since no routine is shown. The 2026 reform offers a future test. Table 2 sets the grades for the three cases side by side, with Russia as the contrast.

Table 2. The cases graded, with Russia as contrast (this article's interpretation)

Case	Shift	Action (relaxed test; original test)	Channel	Certification	Reading
New York Times, aluminum tubes (2002–2003)	Met for the later placements; partly met for the September 8 lead; no earlier baseline or comparison outlet	Met for the September 13 article on one ground; partly met for the coverage as a whole; original: not met	Compatible with the norm for the placement of dissent the paper held; undetermined for articles built on unnamed officials	Partial	Candidate instance on the relaxed test
Fox News, Dominion claims	Met; no earlier baseline or comparison outlet	Partly met; original: not assessed	Undetermined	Failed for claims the research unit rated false	Boundary: a norm used as a defense
Hungary, Origo	Met against Index, under the study's identifying assumptions	Met for advertising favors, under the same assumptions; original: not assessed	Governance and economic levers; no routine shown	Not applicable	Media capture
Russia (contrast)	Not assessed	Not assessed	Direct control	Not applicable	Outside the question: direct control replaces routines

7. Proposed Diagnostic Considerations

Existing measures are mainly country-level judgments (Reporters Without Borders, 2025; Egan et al., 2026, p. 16; Nord et al., 2026, p. 13), single-dimension outlet measures such as slant (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Martin & McCrain, 2019) or advertising (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021, p. 282), which indicator 3 adopts, and voluntary standards against which an outlet's stated procedures can be assessed, such as the Journalism Trust Initiative (European Committee for Standardization, 2019). A difference-in-differences study of 17 Austrian outlets found that a former chancellor's visibility rose at the tabloid alleged to have exchanged favorable coverage for government advertising (Balluff et al., 2026, pp. 91–92). Table 3 proposes an unvalidated Production Capture Index (PCI) with exposure and symptom subscales; higher values mean greater exposure or stronger symptoms.

Table 3. A proposed Production Capture Index (unvalidated)

Indicator	**Subscale**	**Observable (data source)**	**Rival reading of a high value**	**Validation anchor** (documentary evidence of interested-party action, and of how the outlet handled it)
1. Source concentration	Symptom	Share of attributed claims on a contested topic from one source cluster; share of high-impact claims from unnamed officials (coded sample of news items, by topic and period)	A genuine information monopoly, or normal indexing	Records of the cluster's action, plus the outlet's record that the items passed routine review
2. Ownership dependence	Exposure	Owner can appoint or dismiss the editor without an independent check; no written independence protection; owner interests in covered domains (corporate filings, editorial charters, ownership registers)	Power left unused; cost-efficiency or audience targeting	Owner or management communications about coverage
3. Interested-revenue dependence	Exposure	Share of advertising from state-owned firms or politically interested buyers, against the outlet's share of private advertising (advertising monitoring data; procurement records)	Advertisers buying audience reach	Communications tying revenue to coverage
4. Elite-consensus adherence	Symptom	Share of contested-policy coverage whose sourced views stay inside the official range when dissent was available to the outlet at publication (coded coverage plus the outlet's records and contemporaneous public sources)	Normal indexing; the available dissent was not credible or verifiable then	Records that an interested party narrowed the range, plus the outlet's account of how it placed the dissent it held
5. Correction asymmetry	Symptom	Share of corrections favoring rather than disfavoring a given interest; time to correction (the outlet's correction archive)	Unequal error rates or complaint pressure	Internal records of known errors left uncorrected, and of the review that cleared them
6. Source-rule exposure	Exposure	No written rule on anonymity or on placing contrary information; standards review does not examine display (editorial guidelines, standards records)	Informal practice does the same work	Records of how review treated the display of held dissent

To avoid circularity, symptoms (indicators 1, 4, 5) operationalize departure from the benchmark, exposure (2, 3, 6) measures structure, and the anchor, never an indicator, operationalizes the action test. Validity is the association of symptoms with anchors, given exposure; symptoms alone never establish capture. The index alone cannot separate the norm channel from belief or access; Section 5.3's predictions test that. Low values can mislead too: a low symptom score may reflect independence or a party's action that left no dissent available to the outlet, varied attribution can mask reliance on one source cluster (indicators 1 and 4),

and missing records can depress indicators 2, 3, and 5. Because anchors surface through litigation and inquiries, which track scandal, and a suit opens only one defendant's records, validation would compare outlets reached by one disclosure for reasons unrelated to their symptom levels, such as a sector-wide leak or inquiry, by analogy with Szeidl and Szucs's (2021, pp. 281–283) comparison of outlets around events that changed their political connections. The index would fail if, among outlets equally exposed to such a disclosure, high-symptom outlets were no likelier than low-symptom ones to have anchors. Indicator 5 presupposes knowing which errors went uncorrected, so the index should not rest on it alone. Coding needs a codebook, two trained coders, a pilot on matched items, a stated agreement threshold, and chance-corrected agreement; weights, cutoffs, reliability, and validity await future work.

8. Implications for Journalism Ethics and Practical Recommendations

Table 4 sets out eight implications of the analysis, none of them tested; its Basis column separates evidence of the problem from support for the action.

Table 4. Practical implications (untested proposals)

Issue	**Proposed action**	**Who could implement**	**Basis** (problem; support for the action)	**Progress measure**
1. Independence audited only as written policy	Periodic assessments of appointment power, owner communications, and revenue	Boards, regulators, press councils	Problem: reported owner interference in over half of countries (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). Support: revenue dependence is measurable per outlet (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021); effect untested	Assessments published; written appointment protections
2. Claims concentrated in one source cluster	Track source type and anonymity per topic; flag concentration on high-stakes stories	Standards editors, newsroom analysts	Problem: official channels dominate (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996); norms can be exploited (Knüpfer et al., 2026). Support: untested	Share of contested-policy stories with sourced dissent
3. Owners steer without visible orders	Editorial charters, protected editor tenure, logged owner and management requests	Owners, boards; legislators for public media	Problem: de facto control without orders (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 170). Support: untested. Caution: one newsroom was entrapped when the holding that ran its services changed hands, its publisher's ownership unchanged (Polyák et al., 2022)	Charters adopted; logs disclosed
4. Official claims run with available dissent placed low	Corroboration and prominent placement of dissent the outlet holds, especially for unnamed officials	Editors, standards desks	Problem: doubts placed deep or inside in the tubes coverage (The Editors, 2004, as cited in Bennett et al., 2007, p. 23). Support: anonymity rules already exist (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, pp. 151–153); effect untested	Position of dissent in audited stories; single-source official claims
5. Corrections may favor some interests	Annual review coded by the interest each corrected claim favored	Standards editors, ombudspersons	Problem: untested at outlet level. Support: untested	Symmetry ratio; time to correction

6. Ethics judged as written, not as practiced	Audits comparing sampled output with the code	Press councils, researchers	Problem: objectivity as a ritual of formal attributes (Tuchman, 1972). Support: untested	Policy-practice gaps reported
7. Audiences read markers as credibility cues	Teach what bylines, attribution, and corrections do and do not show, and how prior beliefs shape judgments of them	Educators, public broadcasters, libraries	Problem: authority heuristic (Sundar, 2008) and heuristic judgment generally (Strömbäck et al., 2020); motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). Support: short tips on spotting false news helped a U.S. national sample and an educated Indian online sample tell false from mainstream headlines, though not a rural Indian sample (Guess et al., 2020); effect on reading of markers untested. Caution: transparency cues barely moved credibility (Karlsson et al., 2014)	Cue knowledge before and after
8. The index is unvalidated	Pilot the PCI on matched outlets exposed to one disclosure event	Academic teams, monitoring groups	Problem: no outlet-level measure joining source use to documented action (Section 7). Support: event designs work per outlet (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021); Hungary's reform as a test (Nemeth, 2026)	Coder agreement; symptom scores against anchors

9. Limitations and Future Research

The perspective's limits are those of a conceptual article built on documented cases. Selecting cases with documented redirection selects on the outcome; two primary records are cited through secondary sources; the evidence of supply to the core outlet is that outlet's own later account of articles whose sources it did not name; no comparison outlet is examined for the core case; and the relaxed action test makes every claim graded and weaker than capture theory's standard. Anchors are rare, late, and selected by scandal; norm and belief channels are hard to separate; and the cases come only from the United States and Central Europe.

Future work could pilot the PCI in matched-event designs, test Section 5.3's predictions at the organizational level (Knüpfer et al., 2026, p. 170), and follow Hungary's 2026 reform (Nemeth, 2026, p. 3), asking whether redirection outlasts a change of government, though ownership concentrated in KESMA, a foundation of pro-government outlets, remains (pp. 7, 13).

10. Conclusions

Sourcing norms, this article has argued, can redirect an outlet's credibility without reporters adopting their sources' beliefs, and when an interested party exploits them, the outlet's own checks become cover. Unlike cognitive capture, production capture requires a capturer's action rather than belief and names the checks a remedy would need; unlike access capture, it needs no anticipated reprisal; unlike media capture, it turns on a routine channel, not an outcome. It adds a graded standard, certification, and an unvalidated outlet diagnosis to Bennett et al.'s (2007) conditions for indexing failure.

On this article's reading, the placement of dissent the paper held in the core case was compatible with the norm-mediated channel, although no single placement isolated it, and norm and access could not be separated for articles built on unnamed officials. As graded here, the relaxed action test was met for the September 13 article and partly met for the coverage as a whole, the original test was not met, editorial review was itself in question, and

verification lapses co-occurred. At Fox News, the newsworthy-allegations norm was the outlet's stated defense, but whether it operated cannot be told from the record, and demand-side slant competes. Hungary, as read here, was whole-system media capture, with the norm route an untested hypothesis. None of the cases establishes the concept. The interpretation offered here is that the *Times* is a candidate instance on the relaxed test, with certification only partial, and that the boundary cases mark where evidence for it runs out: a norm used as a defense after a failed check, and levers that need no routine.

Counting formal markers would miss this condition; comparing output with documented source action could, and the remedies it suggests concern what checks examine. The PCI and the eight implications remain proposals. Intact credibility markers are necessary but not sufficient evidence of independence, and the next step is to pilot the index against channel-specific anchors.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The author used Grammarly AI in preparing this article to copyedit and revise text. The author reviewed the final text and is responsible for the article's content, including its citations.

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