




# Slander, Shouts, and Silence: Incumbent Resistance to Disruptive Logics

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## Abstract

This paper develops a typology of incumbent resistance to disruptive new logics. Although scholars of institutional change have studied public forms of resistance, a comprehensive understanding of how incumbents oppose disruptive new logics also necessitates attention to the quiet forms of resistance. Conceptualizing resistance as a form of institutional work, we draw on insights from the literatures on institutional change and social movements to develop a typology of public, hidden, and implicit resistance to disruptive logics. Broadening the understanding of resistance work to include its quiet forms enables institutional scholars to understand how field incumbents resist disruption and why such efforts may be successful. A broadened analysis of incumbent resistance is vital for theorizing the past and future resilience of some of the most central institutions of modern society, such as the carbon-based economy and democracy.

## Keywords

disruption, field incumbent, institutional change, institutional work, resistance, social movement

## Introduction

Disruption has become an increasingly familiar concept in both academic discourse and everyday life. Radical innovations disrupt industries

by rendering technologies obsolete (Henderson & Clark, 1990; Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000). New business strategies and management practices disrupt organizational routines and structures (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Strang &

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Macy, 2001). Even democratic institutions can be threatened by disruption, as political movements like the rise of populist and xenophobic political parties take hold. Common across these examples is their exemplification of *disruptive logics*—a “viable alternative model that fundamentally undermines the existing institutional order” (Jones & Massa, 2013, p. 1099; Seo & Creed, 2002).

In response to this development, institutional scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding how incumbent field members resist the introduction and spread of disruptive logics (Currie, Lockett, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2012; Vermeulen, Ansari, & Lounsbury, 2016). Although early studies of disruptive change often recognized resistance in the larger processes of institutional transformation (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hoffman, 1999; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), more recent works, drawing inspiration from the social movements literature, have directed their attention to the micro-level interactions that arise between those who resist and those who support disruptive logics (Malhotra, Zietsma, Morris, & Smets, 2021; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017). Several researchers have examined the way incumbent resistance successfully opposes disruptive logics (Simons, Vermeulen, & Knoben, 2016; Yue, Wang, & Yang, 2019), whereas others have investigated the role of resistance in negotiated settlements between contrasting logics (Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). These studies commonly assert that in order to understand institutional stability and change, it is necessary to recognize not only attempts at change, but also efforts at maintaining institutional stability (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017).

Although these works offer valuable insights into resistance and its role in institutional stability and change, they focus overwhelmingly on episodes of overt contestation, featuring incumbents and challengers engaged in active fights (Simons et al., 2016). These contestations are almost inevitably situated in public arenas (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), including traditional

and social media (Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Yue et al., 2019), the courts (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hoffman, 1999), and community protest movements (Simons et al., 2016). In a review of the social movement literature on resistance, Morrill, Zald, and Rao (2003, p. 392) lament that “this [literature] suffers from a narrow focus on open confrontation that overlooks a range of political action simmering beneath the surface of mass mobilizations and other movement-like phenomena.”

Following Morrill and colleagues (2003), the focus of our attention is therefore on how incumbent field members resist disruptive logics in “less dramatic form” (Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007, p. 800), away from public arenas. Incumbent field members can ignore disruptive new practices and ideas and emphasize the established logic (Colombero & Boxenbaum, 2019; Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010; Vermeulen et al., 2016). Alternatively, they can engage in decoupling by adhering to a disruptive logic in a merely symbolic way (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Tilcsik, 2010), hide their resistance behind a front organization (Oreskes & Conway, 2011), or work inconspicuously to dilute the logic (Lok, 2010). Such *quiet* forms of resistance may be widespread, given that they often require fewer resources and less effort than do public forms of opposition (Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017).

Despite its potential ubiquity and importance to the understanding of institutional dynamics, quiet resistance has received limited systematic attention from organization and management scholars. The literatures on decoupling (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017), institutional change (Clemens, 1993; Lounsbury & Rao, 2003), and institutional work (Colombero & Boxenbaum, 2019; Zilber, 2009) all detail actions that bear the characteristics of quiet resistance, but few have developed theoretical linkages among these actions as expressions of resistance. We lack a clear conceptualization of quiet resistance, how it contrasts with public resistance, how different forms of resistance are related to each other, and what guides incumbents to engage in different forms of resistance.

Conceptualizing quiet resistance and its relationship to public forms of opposition is crucial for developing a better understanding of “the conditions under which actors are able to resist the imposition of new logics and practices” (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012, p. 145). Without accounting for quiet forms of resistance, scholars risk missing or misinterpreting many of the most important struggles in contemporary society. For example, the resilience of the carbon-based economy in the face of overwhelming evidence of climate change and increasing activism is difficult to explain, until we consider the stunningly successful but mainly quiet resistance mounted by fossil fuel industry incumbents over the past decades (Bonneuil, Choquet, & Franta, 2021). More broadly, greater attention to quiet forms of resistance provides an avenue for understanding why disruptive new logics may be slow in bringing about broader institutional change, even when they seem to face little explicit resistance (Roos, Mampaey, Huisman, & Luyckx, 2020; Tashman, Marano, & Kostova, 2019).

In this paper, we integrate the literature on institutional work with the institutional logics perspective (Dalpiaz, Rindova, & Ravasi, 2016; Zilber, 2013), to advance a theoretically grounded conceptualization of incumbent resistance. Drawing on this conceptualization, we derive a typology of public, implicit, and hidden resistance. Re-interpreting and re-purposing empirical findings from earlier investigations of institutional change, we delineate the characteristics of each form of resistance and illustrate aspects of the dynamics between, and outcomes of, different forms of resistance. In doing so, we contribute to the extant literature in various ways.

We expand upon and systematize the understanding of resistance by providing a typology that allows researchers to distinguish various forms and to discuss systematically the drivers of shifts in forms of resistance. For scholarship that takes an institutional work perspective, and for those interested in the micro-level interactions among field members, the typology clarifies the need to examine not only the public shouts of resistance, but also the quieter forms of opposition, including slander and silence. To

do this, scholars must expand their repertoire beyond the “typical tools” of investigating contestation (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006) to systematically include less-observable forms of opposition.

By applying our typology to extant works on institutional change, we offer insights into the dynamics of resistance. Drawing on selected studies, we exemplify how incumbents often shift among different forms of resistance work, depending on their underlying cost and potential efficacy. Instead of theorizing a definitive outcome of incumbent resistance—either in terms of institutional change or institutional maintenance—we emphasize the ongoing nature of resistance work in its different forms. In particular, we highlight how resistance work can contribute to both delaying and diluting the disruptive logic’s legitimation and adoption.

Our typology raises new questions and suggests new avenues for research. Much work remains to flesh out and test important aspects of the dynamics and outcomes of the different resistance forms. Do the forms primarily substitute each other, or do incumbents mix and match public, implicit, and hidden resistance? We initiate a discussion of the antecedents and consequences of different resistance forms, with the goal of sparking further work in this area. We note the lack of studies on how, when, and why incumbents shift between resistance forms. Another important area for future work regards the efficacy of resistance and legitimation work in relation to each other. While quiet forms of resistance may be common, the question remains whether they are effective, or if they are simply “decaf” resistance (see Mumby et al., 2017). Questions also remain as to the organization of resistance; how, for example, do individual acts of resistance evolve into broader collective forms? While the social movement literature is informative with respect to collective public resistance, much less is known about the organization of hidden and implicit resistance forms (see Morrill et al., 2003). Ultimately, we hope that our typology will enable institutional scholars to engage in the study of the less visible reasons for the resilience of central societal

institutions—for instance, democracy and the carbon-based economy—so that we can better understand how to defend some, and dismantle others.

## Resistance to Disruptive Logics

Disruption is often manifested through the introduction into an organizational field of particular logics, i.e., “supra-organizational patterns of activity through which humans conduct their material life in time and space, and symbolic systems through which they categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 232; Thornton et al., 2012). An organizational field is “a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field” (Scott, 1994: pp. 207–208). Although fields may comprise several, sometimes conflicting, logics (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011), we begin with the simplified assumption of a single dominant logic in a field but return to the case of conflicting logics and what it means to our theorizing in the discussion section.

A disruptive logic offers a “viable alternative model that fundamentally undermines the existing institutional order” of the field (Jones & Massa, 2013, p. 1099; Seo & Creed, 2002). Such viable alternatives are often instantiated in particular practices, identities, meanings, and vocabularies (Lounsbury, 2007). Disruptive logics are introduced by challengers (Palmer & Barber, 2001; Thornton et al., 2012, p. 142)—individuals and organizations that champion and enact disruptive organizational forms, practices, and meanings and seek their legitimization (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Rao, 2008; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Challengers are often field interlopers or outsiders (Leblebici, Salancik, Copay, & King, 1991; Rao, 2008), but they can also be centrally placed actors who seek to expand their control of the field and therefore need to disrupt the existing logic (Suddaby & Viale, 2011). Challengers range

from “muscular” institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004) to less strategic, practice-based actors without a clear agenda for change (Delbridge & Edwards, 2008; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012). Their actions and behaviors serve as the primary mechanism by which a disruptive logic is legitimated within the field (Boxenbaum & Battilana, 2005).

### *Resistance as institutional work*

Resistance commonly refers to strategies and actions undertaken in opposition to institutional pressures for conformity and isomorphism (Oliver, 1991). Critical theorists frequently focus on resistance by subjugated actors who oppose the prevailing social order (Jones, Maoret, Massa, & Svejenova, 2012; Mumby et al., 2017; Quirke, 2013), whereas our focus is on incumbent resistance to disruptive logics and the ways in which “incumbents can mobilize. . .to resist the efforts of challengers” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 145). Although not often thought of in terms of resistance, incumbents are of particular importance in understanding institutional stability and change, as their field position also render them the field members with the greatest potential to resist disruptive new logics (see Lawrence, 2008).

Following work in the sociology of deviance (Becker, 1963; Heckert & Heckert, 2002), we see acts of resistance not as objectively defined, but as constructed as such in their social context; an act becomes resistance in the “interpretations and negotiations of local organizational actors” (Prasad & Prasad, 2000, p. 389). Most researchers have examined resistance that arises from “interactions between a movement and its antagonists” (Taylor, Kimport, Van Dyke, & Andersen, 2009, p. 867, emphasis added), but we take a broader view by also recognizing resistance as defined unilaterally by individual incumbents. An act can thus constitute resistance even if only one incumbent thinks of it in that way.

To develop this broader definition of resistance, we draw upon insights from the institutional work literature (Lawrence, Suddaby, &

Leca, 2009). Scholars have highlighted the way institutional logics are changed, maintained, and resisted through individual and organizational-level work (Creed, Dejordy, & Lok, 2010; Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Lok, 2010). Following this literature, we view resistance as purposive and effortful maintenance work, which incumbents understand as a means to confront, discourage, or block the legitimation of a disruptive logic (see Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013). In line with the institutional work literature, our definition predicates purposive agency and meaning (i.e., resistance work cannot be unintended or done unawares), but it does not require interaction with challengers (i.e., resistance work can be one-sided). Because incumbent resisters often aim to preserve and protect existing institutions, resistance work can be understood as a sub-category of maintenance work (Colombero & Boxenbaum, 2019; Micelotta & Washington, 2013). The two are not synonymous, however, as maintenance work also encompasses actions taken in response to changes within the prevailing logic, including internal breakdowns (Lok & De Rond, 2012) and “drift” (Smets et al., 2012). Resistance work, by contrast, is solely focused on conscious opposition to the legitimization of a disruptive logic.

Although the institutional work literature has made little explicit reference to resistance, our definition allows us to interpret previous findings in this literature and in the broader literature on institutional change in terms of resistance. Resistance can thus include oppositional rhetoric (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), boundary creation and enforcement (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), and the withdrawal of resources and support from those who support the disruptive logic (Leblebici et al., 1991; Palmer & Barber, 2001). Resistance work may also include negative actions and the withholding of positive actions (Becker, 1963). Negative actions include demonstrations, arguments, ridicule, and the downgrading of evaluations (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011); the absence or withdrawal of positive action entails the severing of relationships (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), excluding actors from

organizations or groups (Heckert & Heckert, 2002), and withholding positive evaluations. The actor who engages in this type of resistance may be an individual, an organization, or a social movement (Ferlie, Fitzgerald, Wood, & Hawkins, 2005; Kern, Laguecir, & Leca, 2018; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

Examples of incumbent resistance work abound within the institutional change literature, albeit not always named as such. Because scholars have yet to systematically classify different forms of resistance, we lack a deeper understanding of how well-organized and vocal dissent differs from individual-level unobtrusive opposition; while both represent forms of resistance, they differ in antecedents, form of organization, and consequences. Similarly, extant work neither seeks to explain the choices that incumbents make among the different forms of resistance nor focuses on their implications for the legitimation of the disruptive logic. In the following sections, we turn to these questions, beginning with a typology of resistance work.

## A Typology of Resistance Work

### *Public resistance work*

To date, most studies of institutional change have examined resistance work in public arenas (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), including the media, courts, and open gatherings. We define this as *public resistance work*. As previously noted, institutional work encompasses both action and meaning dimensions. *Visibility* signifies the extent to which an act is readily observable by other field members, including both incumbents and challengers (see Morrill et al., 2003, p. 399). *Ambiguity*, in turn, indicates the certainty by which field members interpret and understand the observed acts as resistance. Public resistance work—including open debates, legal challenges, and street protests—is both highly visible and unambiguous in its meaning.

Public resistance has been the primary focus in studies of institutional change at least partially because researchers tend to look

for contestation as an empirical strategy for identifying an institution and its workings (see Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006), and resistance has often been equated with episodes of contestation (Purdy & Gray, 2009). Because of its high visibility and unambiguous nature, public forms of resistance enable incumbents to galvanize communities, mobilize protests, and shape collective narratives against the disruptive logic (Fiss & Zajac, 2004; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003; Thornton et al., 2012). At the same time, the highly visible and unambiguous nature of public resistance motivates challengers to devote greater effort toward legitimizing the disruptive new logic and overcoming incumbent opposition (Ingram, Yue, & Rao, 2010; Oh & Jackson, 2011)—thus generating contestation around the disruptive logic.

### *Quiet resistance work*

We define *quiet resistance*, in contrast to public resistance, as institutional work against the legitimization of a disruptive logic where the work is characterized by lack of visibility or high levels of ambiguity in terms of its interpretation as resistance by field members. Evidence of acts of incumbent resistance that are invisible, or where its meaning as resistance is ambiguous to onlookers, can be found in various studies of institutional change processes. Rao, Monin, and Durand (2003) have noted that many of the chefs who resisted the logic of *nouvelle cuisine* did so without explicit remonstrations or open dissent. Fiss and Zajac (2004) demonstrated how German corporations that were opposed to the introduction of a logic of shareholder value orientation resisted unobtrusively by decoupling their adoption from practice. Vermeulen et al. (2016) similarly show how a disruptive market logic was rejected without highly visible public resistance.

Quiet resistance is often embedded in everyday routines and practices. Social movement scholars describe how dominated actors resist institutional pressures through the “mundane actions and behaviors” of everyday

organizational life (Prasad & Prasad, 2000, p.387). Indeed, attention to the micro-processes of contestation is a central contribution of social movement theory to institutional theory (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017). Scott (2008) notes how individuals and organizations interweave “everyday forms of resistance” into the fabric of routine practices to make them both unobtrusive and deniable. As a form of institutional work, quiet resistance assumes meaning and purposiveness through self-interaction in the awareness of one’s own cognitions, emotions, and identity (Colombero & Boxenbaum, 2019; Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014).

### **Hidden and implicit: Two forms of quiet resistance**

Quiet forms of resistance work are characterized by a lack of visibility and/or high levels of ambiguity. Variations along these dimensions implies two forms of quiet resistance—hidden and implicit—each with its own characteristics and likelihood of generating contestation.

#### *Hidden resistance*

Hidden resistance is characterized by low visibility; it occurs away from public arenas, in spaces with limited or no inspection by or interaction with challengers (see Rao & Dutta, 2012). When resistance work is hidden, its level of ambiguity is of less consequence for contestation; even the most unambiguous resistance will not trigger episodes of overt contestation if it cannot be observed. Hidden resistance often manifests itself in behavioral and discursive acts of everyday practices, which reduces the risk of attracting public attention that could trigger contestation.

The most well-known example of hidden resistance is arguably decoupling—the conscious separation of organizational action from structure (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p.357). Although Meyer and Rowan did not originally conceptualize decoupling as resistance, this approach is adopted in later works (Edelman,

1992; Edelman, Uggen, & Erlanger, 1999; Kern et al., 2018; Tilcsik, 2010). A key characteristic of decoupling in this context is its vulnerability to inspection; it must be hidden from view. Tilcsik's (2010) study of a governmental agency in a former soviet-bloc economy demonstrated that managers who perceived market capitalism as a disruptive logic did not protest openly; they pretended to comply, while secretly maintaining business as usual within their department by adhering to the previous logic in allocating funds to the organizations under their purview. Not visible to outsiders, their actions constituted hidden resistance undertaken to limit the legitimization of the disruptive new capitalist logic.

Decoupling has been associated largely with a need to maintain legitimacy vis-a-vis established institutional pressures (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017), but a resistance perspective suggests that it may also be an effective strategy to quietly obstruct the legitimization of disruptive new logics. As we discuss further in the section on the dynamics of resistance, there can be various costs associated with openly resisting new ideas, and decoupling offers a possibility of limiting the legitimization of a disruptive new logic, while minimizing the risk of overt contestation and its accompanying costs.

Hidden resistance can be organized. Dobbin and Dowd (1997) show that some early railroad firms in the United States resisted the introduction of a price competition logic in their field by organizing covert price-fixing cartels. Incumbent actors may also employ discursive forms of hidden resistance; they can use the vocabulary of the disruptive logic, for example, to coopt and negate its underlying purpose and meanings. Wright and Nyberg (2017) illustrate how many large firms readily adopted the language associated with environmentalism but translated it in a way that resisted the imposition of a pro-climate logic within their organizations. As in the case of decoupling, their resistance was hidden from view, thereby allowing them to avoid contestation while minimizing the impact of the disruptive new logic.

### *Implicit resistance*

In some cases, acts intended as opposition are readily visible to field members, yet ambiguous in their meaning, making them difficult for onlookers to identify as resistance. This type of opposition, which we refer to as *implicit resistance*, is often discursive in nature. Actors may purposely avoid the mention of new practices or ideas in order to limit their exposure, attention, and subsequent spread. Thus established political parties often refrain from debating with populist challengers in order to diminish their visibility and thereby their legitimacy (Thurre, Gale, & Staerklé, 2020). Actors may also engage in irony, political satire, or subtle jokes (Eagleton, 2019; Mumby et al., 2017) to delegitimize the arguments and claims of the proponents of a disruptive logic. The archetype of such implicit resistance is the court jester, who could use humor to criticize an absolute ruler without inviting conflict (Westwood & Johnston, 2013). Discursive forms of implicit resistance are visible, but can be plausibly denied; incumbents may explain their silence on a particular issue as a case of simple oversight, and parodies, humor, and satire are frequently billed as "good-natured" and "innocent fun" (Eagleton, 2019).

Actors may also engage in discursive forms of implicit resistance based on technical or seemingly neutral grounds, rather than explicit opposition to the disruptive logic. Thus, attempts by the United Nations to galvanize corporate support in response to the AIDS crisis were resisted by many major multinational firms. They framed their resistance in terms of costs and the impractical nature of the project, rather than describing it as opposition to the underlying argument that corporations had a moral responsibility for the health of the poor (Davis & Anderson, 2008). In a similar manner, the tobacco industry resisted anti-smoking campaigns by questioning the validity of their underlying research findings, rather than directly opposing the idea of anti-smoking campaigns (Hirschhorn, 2000; Oreskes & Conway, 2011). More recently, actors in the fossil fuel industry have sought to undermine the

validity of scientific work that points to the role of human activity in climate change (Dunlap & McCright, 2015; Supran & Oreskes, 2021), often behind the cover of neutral front organizations (Oreskes & Conway, 2011). This is a form of resistance that is visible, but ambiguous in terms of who the resisting actor is, and whether or not the resistance is based on valid science.

As the previous examples highlight, implicit resistance is visible yet ambiguous, making it difficult for challengers to attack or engage explicitly with resistance actors. A classic example of implicit resistance can be found in *Bartleby*, a character in one of Herman Melville's short stories (1853/1995) that has garnered attention among organization scholars (Beverungen & Dunne, 2007). *Bartleby* resists many of his employer's work demands, but he does so in such a passive and subdued manner—simply by saying “I'd prefer not to”—that the employer struggles to confront him effectively. Growing increasingly exasperated, the employer eventually sees no recourse other than to close shop and escape *Bartleby*'s very presence. In Melville's story, *Bartleby*'s resistance was clearly visible, yet because its subtlety and ambiguity made it difficult to challenge, it did not lead to open contestation.

### **Resistance Triggers, Dynamics, and Outcomes**

As Pache and Santos (2010, pp. 461–462) note, exposure to threatening logics “requires organizations to exercise some level of strategic choice,” forcing them to “make decisions as to what. . .to prioritize, satisfy, alter, or neglect.” While a number of earlier studies have focused on the resistance of marginalized actors (Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2012; Mumby et al., 2017), less attention has been paid to the question of how and why incumbents resist disruptive new logics. Where marginalized actors may have little other choice than to hide their resistance (Scott, 2008), incumbents typically have more numerous resistance options. The focus on contestation in extant literature suggests an expectation among researchers that an incumbent would confront a disruptive

new logic head-on with resistance (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2015). Yet, public resistance is not necessarily the obvious choice of opposition for incumbent actors; for example, members of the fossil fuel industry have often found it difficult to explicitly resist disruptive logics related to climate change and sustainability (Bonneuil et al., 2021; Nyberg, Spicer, & Wright, 2013; Supran & Oreskes, 2021). Despite this general recognition, however, the antecedents of different forms of resistance are not well studied (Morrill et al., 2003). In the following, we draw on earlier work to discuss the potential triggers of different resistance types, their dynamics, and potential field-level outcomes.

#### *Triggers of resistance work: The threat of a disruptive logic*

We begin by recognizing that the incumbent actors' decision to engage in resistance work depends on the extent to which a disruptive logic is viewed as a threat to existing institutions (Jones et al., 2012). In some cases, incumbents may simply ignore the disruptive logic, in the belief that it is too marginal to threaten the existing system. Leblebici and colleagues (1991) found that dominant radio producers ignored the emergence of disruptive new forms of broadcast financing because they did not view them as a viable alternative to the existing funding model. Similarly, Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) show how a disruptive new organizational form was initially left unchallenged by incumbents who did not believe it could displace traditional practices. In some cases, incumbents may even choose to actively work with and support disruptive logics which they do not view as threats; Hoffman (1999) and Wright and Nyberg (2017) show how the chemical, oil, and gas industries' initial reaction to the burgeoning environmental movement was to offer engagement, support, and cooperation, rather than public resistance.

The trigger for resistance is thus not the disruptive nature of the new logic itself, but the extent to which it is viewed as a significant threat; this, in turn, is shaped by challengers

who seek to legitimize the disruptive new logic. In the studies by Hoffman (1999) and Wright and Nyberg (2017), the growing support for the environmental movement—in form of legal decisions, government policies, and overall public approval—eventually triggered industry incumbents to engage in resistance work. Similarly, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) highlight how incumbent resistance was triggered by a large-scale acquisition, which served as a wake-up call for incumbents and regulators that the new organizational form could in fact displace existing practices and norms.

As the above examples illustrate, resistance is undertaken in response to challengers' actions and their outcomes. The goal for challengers is to legitimize the disruptive logic whereas the incumbent's objective is its delegitimization. The interaction is often instigated by challengers, who seek to disrupt the status quo, while incumbent resistance is undertaken in response to—and often directed at—the legitimacy of the disruptive logic (Pache & Santos, 2010). As noted above, in Hoffman's (1999) study a series of events led to greater efforts by challengers to legitimize environmental concerns, and in response the chemical industry shifted to public resistance. While this shift entailed greater conflict with the environmental movement, it was presumably deemed necessary as the threat was perceived to be more acute. These cases suggest a dynamic wherein incumbents initially ignore or tolerate a disruptive logic, but as they learn more about its disruptive effects, and as challengers engage in more active legitimation, they shift to active resistance work.

### *Dynamics of resistance work: The cost of resistance*

While the legitimacy of the disruptive logic helps explain why incumbents choose to engage in resistance work, it says little about their form of resistance, nor about why and how incumbents might subsequently alter their resistance form. While our typology might at a first glance seem to imply a linear resistance dynamic—from hidden to implicit to public—empirical research

suggests this is not necessarily the case. In the Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) study, for example, incumbents largely seemed to tolerate the disruptive new logic and offered minimal resistance, until a controversial acquisition triggered regulators and industry associations to engage in very public forms of resistance.

By contrast, the chemical companies featured in Hoffman's (1999) study responded to the increasing legitimacy of the environmental movement by first engaging in hidden forms of resistance (including behind-the-scenes manipulation of scientific research and stalling tactics), before subsequently opting for more public resistance, in the form of legal challenges. Wright and Nyberg (2017) illustrate yet another dynamic; initially supportive of climate change action and showing very little resistance at all, the studied Australian firms subsequently resorted to implicit resistance by seeking to dilute the effects of environmental legislation. Eventually, these efforts shifted to public resistance and an explicit defense of their core business.

We suggest that these different responses to the increasing legitimacy of the disruptive logic can be understood by examining the relationship between the costs of different resistance types, and the perceived threat of the disruptive logic. Resistance—like any institutional work—entails costs, as incumbents must mobilize human, relational, and social capital to counteract the legitimation work of challengers (see Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009). Costs of resistance work may also arise in the form of negative sanctions from other field members who support the disruptive logic (see Di Stefano, King, & Verona, 2015).

Importantly, costs vary by resistance form. Public resistance, for example, is often costlier since it typically necessitates more resources and social capital than hidden or implicit resistance. Incumbents may also face varying social sanctions for their resistance, depending on whether they engage in hidden, implicit, or public resistance. For instance, it may be costly for a firm's reputation to publicly resist a logic of climate consciousness, even if it is seen as disruptive to the firm's performance. In Wright and Nyberg's (2017) study, the political costs of opposing

climate mitigation policies were, for a period of time, such that the firms felt compelled to engage in more implicit forms of resistance. Once the political landscape changed, however, the political costs of public resistance declined, even as the costs of implicit and hidden resistance (in the form of pressures from shareholders and business partners) increased. In response, the firms opted to engage in more proactive forms of resistance to the disruptive environmental logic.

The costs of resistance depend not only on external factors, but also on the individual incumbents' position within the. A less powerful position can be a reason for choosing hidden or implicit resistance over public forms. Kern and colleagues (2018) show that while powerful heart surgeons publicly resisted a new logic of resource allocation, the organizationally weaker cardiologists at the same hospital opted for a less visible form of resistance to the same new logic where they engaged in selective decoupling and symbolic adoption, while still defending their core practices.

Conversely, even powerful incumbents can find public resistance too costly. Studies of the fossil fuel industry's response to concerns of climate change show how their resistance has shifted over time, from public disputation of the validity of climate science, to implicit or even hidden forms of resistance, for instance through surreptitious financing, promotion of climate-skeptical researchers (Bonneuil et al., 2021; Frumhoff & Oreskes, 2015; Oreskes & Conway, 2011), and implicit but frame-shifting advertising (Supran & Oreskes, 2021). These shifts have taken place largely in response to the increasing legitimacy of climate mitigation policies, and the increasing costs of engaging in public resistance to such logics. Variations in both direct resource costs, and the costs of sanctions, thus shape the incumbents' choice of resistance form.

### *Outcomes of resistance work: Defeated, delayed, and diluted disruptive logics*

Conceptualizing different forms of resistance and their relationship to each other provides an

expanded perspective on the outcomes of resistance work. As noted above, the goal of resistance is to counteract the adoption and legitimation of disruptive logics. While most works to date have focused on whether public forms of resistance can defeat disruptive logics or not, we suggest two additional outcomes of resistance: delayed adoption and diluted adoption. Below we exemplify these different outcomes and their concomitant resistance forms based on the existing literature on institutional change.

*Defeated disrupted logics.* Studies of institutional change or resistance often detail the defeat of a logic, wherein a change initiative is scuttled and resistance is victorious. Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) show how the Big Five audit firms were forced to abandon their new organizational logic in the face of public resistance from national regulators and other field incumbents. Kern and colleagues (2018) show how public resistance by members of a hospital's elite surgery unit successfully hindered the adoption of a disruptive new administrative logic.

A common aspect of many studies that detail defeat is that the resistance has been public; it has generated contestation and the new logic has been discredited and thereby defeated (see Gray et al., 2015). Yet, disruptive logics can also be defeated through quiet resistance forms. Tilcsik (2010) shows how old-guard bureaucrats from the communist era used decoupling to block the imposition of a disruptive market logic. In a similar manner, US railroad companies successfully employed hidden resistance (in the form of informal price cartels) to hinder the adoption of a competitive pricing logic (Dobbin & Dowd, 1997).

While the goal of resistance may be to fully defeat and delegitimize disruptive logics, such outcomes are rare. Reading the full story of Tilcsik (2010) shows that while the old guard was successful in defeating the market logic, they could not hold office forever, and when their numbers dwindled so too did the practice of decoupling. With new, younger managers came greater acceptance of the disruptive

market logic, and the system changed. Likewise, for a contemporary observer it may have seemed as if the railroad companies in Dobbin and Dowd (1997) had defeated the price competition logic with their price cartels, but this changed once the courts prohibited such practices, and a price competition logic was adopted. Any defeated disruptive logic—barring those so thoroughly vanquished and delegitimized that they become inconceivable—may only be temporarily defeated.

*Delayed disruptive logic.* Paying attention to the different forms that resistance may take, and thinking of resistance as a process rather than a discrete event, allows us to consider another important outcome: delayed logic adoption. Delay is one of the most commonly noted outcomes of resistance; the full study by Tilsik (2010) can be interpreted this way—while the bureaucrats successfully staved off the new logic for a while their success was temporal. Empirical work suggests that delayed legitimization is a common outcome of implicit resistance—as in the case where resistance by chemical, oil, and other major firms delayed the spread of the environmental movement’s logic of sustainable business practices (Hoffman, 1999; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). On the level of individual resistance, studies show how resistance by professional fund managers served to delay the acceptance of disruptive new financial and accountability logics (Jonsson, 2009; Lok, 2010).

In contrast to public resistance and contestation, implicit resistance delays the uptake of disruptive new logics by minimizing the opportunity for interaction between incumbents and challengers. Hoffman’s (1999) chemical companies, for example, initially responded to the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* by suggesting they could solve the issues through technological progress and innovation. In so doing, they limited the need for debate around their practices, but without publicly opposing or attacking Carson’s findings. Similarly, Jonsson (2009) finds that Swedish fund managers delayed the adoption of the logic of socially

responsible investment by arguing that such mutual fund products were less profitable than “normal” mutual funds, thereby avoiding a contestation over the validity of socially responsible investment as an alternative investment logic.

By limiting opportunities for interactions between incumbents and challengers—either by diverting attention or controlling the dominant discourse—implicit resistance can allow incumbents to slow the adoption and legitimization of disruptive new logics over considerable time. As shown by Bonneuil and colleagues (2021), fossil fuel industry incumbents have, after an initial bout of public resistance, implicitly resisted the validity and implications of climate change research for well over two decades, thereby delaying serious debates around solutions such as carbon taxation. We suspect that in many cases, implicit resistance permanently stalls or may even delegitimize a disruptive new logic. However, because most studies of resistance are primarily interested in institutional change, and not in its absence, there is a lack of research in this area.

It is not only implicit resistance that can generate delays in legitimization. In the study of the introduction of advertisement to finance radio broadcasting, Leblebici and colleagues (1991) show how incumbents’ hidden resistance (simply ignoring the fringe players) significantly delayed the adoption of the practice. In a similar manner, railroad companies in the US managed to delay the legitimization of a logic of price competition by engaging in hidden price cartels (Dobbin & Dowd, 1997). Public resistance can also lead to delayed adoption, as shown in the study of incumbent resistance to the legitimization of new logging practices in British Columbia (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

*Diluted disrupted logic.* While many earlier studies of institutional change and disruptive logics have categorized outcomes in terms of defeat or delay, another important outcome of resistance is the dilution of the disruptive logic. Disrupted logics are diluted when incumbent resistance succeeds in removing or reinterpreting aspects

of the disruptive logic or limiting its scope and expansion within the field. For example, Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) show how logging interests negotiated a settlement that interpreted the logic of environmentalists in such a way that accommodated and recognized some of the logging firms' interests, thereby diluting the disruptive logic's original objectives. In turn, Marquis and Lounsbury (2007) show how resistance by local banks served to dilute and limit the spread of the disruptive new commercial banking logic, thus ensuring that the incumbents' community banking could be maintained as a minority logic within the field. As these examples highlight, dilution is central to the notion of settlement, wherein a compromise is negotiated between challengers and incumbents (Helms, Oliver, & Webb, 2012; Rao & Kenney, 2008).

Disruptive logics can also be diluted through implicit resistance, without contestation and formal settlement. Lok (2010) shows how traders and institutional investors in the United Kingdom diluted the disruptive new logic of shareholder value by selectively integrating some practices into their pre-existing professional identities while discarding its most disruptive features. In her study of the construction of US equal opportunity law, Edelman (1992) similarly finds that while the law was adopted by large corporations, it was done so in a piecemeal fashion that diluted its disruptive impact on extant hiring practices and managerial discretion.

Table 1 summarizes our typology and lists select empirical studies that exemplify different outcomes from each of the resistance forms. As is clear from the table, many studies list several forms of resistance, and all resistance forms have been linked to multiple outcomes. Our typology enables a systematic study of the complex topic of resistance in the context of institutional change, while highlighting new connections and pointing to areas for future work.

## Discussion

Most research on disruptive institutional change has taken the perspective of challengers and outsiders that seek to transform the organizational

field (for instance, Rao, 2008). We complement this work by theorizing how incumbents resist such efforts at disruptive change. This expands the scope of studies of institutional change, from the extant focus on field disruption and transformation, to also include the case of seemingly stable fields. Some of the most important societal institutions of today exhibit remarkable stability in the face of ardent attempts at disruption. Cherished institutions such as democracy or academia, but also less universally appreciated institutions such as the carbon-based economy, have been strikingly resilient in the face of sometimes well-organized challengers. While such resistance has typically been categorized under the rubric of institutional maintenance work, we emphasize the need to theorize resistance work in its own right.

A central task for institutional scholars is to understand how and why incumbent resistance functions. Our typology is a first step towards conceptualizing how incumbents oppose disruptive logics through public, implicit, and hidden forms of institutional resistance. Our work, however, must be followed by further research into the dynamics and outcomes of such resistance. This will enable institutional theorists to ask new questions about the role, strategies, and practices of incumbents in both stable and changing fields. In what follows, we develop these ideas in greater depth and point to avenues for future work.

### *Expanding the analytical gaze of institutional change*

First and foremost, our typology offers organization scholars a means for expanding their study of incumbent resistance and institutional change. The typical examination of resistance has followed incumbents that oppose disruptive logics by engaging in vocal and public forms of resistance. This approach relies on a presumption that open contestation to disruptive logics is the norm, but in doing so it runs the risk of overlooking less obvious institutional dynamics. Consider, for example, a field in which

**Table 1.** Forms of resistance, their attributes and possible outcomes.

Form of resistance	Actions of resistance	Visibility and ambiguity of actions	Examples of field-level outcomes of resistance		
			Defeated logic	Delayed logic	Diluted logic
Hidden resistance	Decoupling; maintenance of existing logics in everyday actions and routines Co-optation of language and symbols	Low or no visibility; ambiguity not relevant	Tilcsik 2010	Leblebici et al. 1991 Bonneuil et al. 2021	Dobbin & Dowd 1997 Edelman 1992
Implicit resistance	Means-ends decoupling Silence; satire & humor Obfuscation and non-normative opposition	Visible, but ambiguous in meaning	Mumby et al. 2017 Davis & Anderson 2008	Bonneuil et al. 2021 Lok 2010 Kern et al. 2018	Wright & Nyberg 2017 Hoffman 1999 Frumhoff & Oreskes 2015 Oreskes & Conway 2011 Supran & Oreskes 2021
Public resistance	Refusal to adopt practices linked to disruptive logic Explicit debates and opposition, situated in public arenas	Visible & unambiguous in meaning	Suddaby & Greenwood 2005 Kern et al. 2018	Zietsma & Lawrence 2010 Jonsson 2009	Wright & Nyberg 2017 Marquis & Lounsbury 2007 Dunlap & McCright 2015

there is no overt sign of contestation because a disruptive new logic has become widely spread and seemingly accepted, but where incumbents are engaged in furious but hidden resistance. Such hidden resistance, while not readily observed, can lay the groundwork for the sudden eruption of more public opposition and contestation. Incumbent resistance, and concomitant institutional change, are thus not limited to public forms of contestation.

To expand the study of institutional change beyond the obvious and noisy shouts of opposition, institutional scholars require concepts that allow them to identify less explicit forms of resistance, such as slander and silence. Our typology addresses this need by offering clear construct demarcations of different forms of resistance, anchored in the literatures on institutional logics and institutional work. We add further construct clarity by distinguishing the public, hidden, and implicit forms of resistance, based on their visibility and ambiguity.

### *The dynamics and outcomes of resistance forms*

Previous works—particularly those in the social movement literature—provide a variety of different examples of incumbent resistance to disruptive logics (Malhotra et al., 2021; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Simons et al., 2016; Yue et al., 2019). Yet researchers have directed far less attention towards understanding when and under what circumstances different forms of resistance arise, and how these relate to each other. By recognizing the interplay between the efforts and costs of resistance on one hand, and the legitimation work of disruptive logics by challengers on the other, we offer a preliminary take on the mechanisms and contexts that influence the incumbent's form of resistance.

In our re-interpretation of earlier studies of institutional change, we observe that incumbents and challengers seldom stick to a single type of resistance work. Instead, the studies illustrate several different *sequences* of resistance, for instance from implicit to public to hidden, and from hidden to implicit to public. Our

hunch is that these sequences are related to shifts in the costs of each resistance form, in relation to the perceived legitimacy threat of the disruptive logic. Whether our hunch is correct or not needs further study.

Resistance forms need not be substitutes; they can sustain or enable each other. Some of the studies we refer to (e.g., Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Wright & Nyberg, 2017) detail what seems to be simultaneous use of different forms of resistance work. Ybema and Horvers (2017) suggest that resistance forms may be synthesized, and that one form may enable another. Future research can examine the potential interlinkages and overlaps between different resistance forms.

### *The cyclicity of resistance*

We further suggest that resistance should be understood in cyclical terms rather than as a linear process that proceeds from contestation to settlement, as has been assumed in earlier work (Gray et al., 2015; Rao & Kenney, 2008; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). The notion of cyclicity highlights the importance of adopting a process perspective on incumbent resistance (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013) rather than focusing solely on its “end points”. It also offers a theoretical explanation for the sudden resurgence of logics that had previously been delegitimized or defeated; our framework suggests that they may never be really gone, but simply hidden from view.

Of particular importance in terms of today's grand challenges is the role that our framework can play in providing a theoretical language to address the actions by which incumbent organizations successfully stave off real change in such areas as sustainability, governance, and diversity—in spite of the often large and growing legitimacy of these logics (Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Our typology and framework can be used to recast stories of insufficiently successful individual cases of challenger movements into stories of successful incumbent resistance, and thereby direct attention to wider questions of why and when this form of

resistance is effective. There is a great need for systematic investigation of successful resistance, and we believe our framework would be of use in guiding such a venture.

### *The organization of different resistance forms*

While resistance often starts with a single actor, it frequently escalates into a collective endeavor (Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015). Social movement scholars have studied how opposition evolves from a single actor into an organized collective, but this has typically been with respect to public forms of resistance. There are few studies of the organization of implicit or hidden resistance, and most of these lie outside the field of organization studies (for instance, Crossley, Edwards, Harries, & Stevenson, 2012). While the critical management literature provides work on collective resistance (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016), it offers substantially less insight into how incumbents organize implicit and hidden resistance. The organization of collective implicit and hidden resistance continues to be an under-researched, but increasingly important, topic.

Another question concerns the practices of implicit and hidden resistance. There is, again, much to be learned from the social movement literature with respect to practices of public resistance, but we know less about the practices of quiet incumbent resistance. We have begun to list some of the practices gleaned from earlier studies of institutional change, including the use of front organizations when public resistance is deemed too costly, or the funneling of resources to other organizations to do this bidding (see Keefe, 2021). Much remains to be done, however, in identifying the micro-level practices of implicit and hidden resistance.

### *Exploring resistance: Further avenues for future research*

Our typology also provides a basis for extending current institutional scholarship through expanded research designs, greater focus on the heterogeneity of incumbent power and positions, and more extensive exploration of the

link between field conditions and incumbent resistance.

*Expanded research designs.* Engagement with quiet resistance forms promises better understanding of institutional disruption, but this also necessitates expanding current research designs beyond the prevailing emphasis on contestation and explicit upheaval. Although the visibility of public resistance makes them easier to study than quiet resistance (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006), we suspect it may represent the minority of incumbent reactions to disruptive logics. A focus on public resistance and contestation may also contribute to the pro-innovation bias common to the management literature (Denrell & Kovacs, 2008), as it skews sample selection in a way that exaggerates the average spread and impact of new ideas.

These observations suggest scholars should select research sites based upon potential rather than observed resistance, as well as the opportunity for close inspection of the actual behaviors and discourses in which actors engage. To examine implicit and hidden resistance, scholars must examine fields that may appear settled and stable, but where resistance persists “under the surface.” As Schneiberg and Clemens (2006) suggest, this strategy may necessitate an examination of private or hidden scripts within a field (Bearman & Stovel, 2000). An increasing tendency to put private scripts in the (semi-) public domain of social media, coupled with techniques for natural language processing (McFarland, Lewis, & Goldberg, 2016) provide exciting opportunities for this type of research.

*Incumbent heterogeneity in power and position.* We have treated incumbents as a homogeneous group, but there is significant heterogeneity in actors’ resistance to disruptive logics. As suggested by Kern and colleagues (2018), differences in status position, power, access to resources, and network position impact both the effort and costs associated with different forms of resistance, and thereby the choice of resistance. Some actors, particularly those centrally positioned and with significant social capital,

may opt for public resistance, whereas those with less social, cultural, and political capital at their disposal may prefer more covert hidden resistance (Kellogg, 2009). Moreover, some actors may view the logic as more disruptive than others do, again leading to heterogeneous responses. We believe that these factors can and should be integrated into future research on resistance. One valuable line of inquiry could be to follow central and marginal actors over time, as their forms of resistance may develop in close relation to each other. While the literature on social movements has made progress in answering these questions, it tends to assume a challenger perspective; more work is needed to also capture the incumbent's viewpoint.

*Field conditions and incumbent resistance.* Although we have focused on contexts in which a disruptive logic clearly threatens the status quo, researchers recognize that most fields are characterized by multiple and often competing logics (Greenwood et al., 2011). While all three of our resistance forms are applicable under institutional complexity, we also recognize that complex field conditions may influence responses and their subsequent outcomes. The threshold for incumbent resistance in complex fields may be higher than in more uniform fields, given the existence of multiple logics (Vermeulen et al., 2016). In effect, actors in complex environments may become less sensitive to the possible threats of different disruptive logics.

Moreover, when incumbents in complex fields do engage in resistance, they may be more willing to negotiate settlements and truces, rather than engaging in public contestations, with the goal of delegitimization. Tolerance for multiple logics is presumably higher in complex institutional fields, and the effort required to reject a disruptive logic under conditions of complexity may be far higher than it is in fields characterized by a single dominating logic. Indeed, fields characterized by high levels of institutional complexity may see few cases of hidden resistance, as proponents and incumbents reconcile competing logics through hybridization and bricolage (York, Hargrave, & Pacheco, 2016).

At the same time, our typology challenges some of the assumptions undergirding the concept of field complexity. If quiet resistance does arise, it may preclude hybridization and settlements, as challengers find it difficult to identify and engage in productive contestations with opponents of a particular logic. Conversely, fields that lack evidence of public contestation may nonetheless be characterized by deep-seated but hidden resistance, as incumbents opt for less visible forms of opposition, thereby implying that multiple forms of resistance may be one reason for the persistence of complex fields with multiple logics. Moreover, a common view in theory holds that contestation is settled by truces, i.e., a negotiated decision to cease hostilities, which brings a form of field stability; by contrast, our dilution outcome suggests resistance may lead to an uneasy coexistence, wherein the disruptive logic is applied but only partially legitimized. Taken together, these observations point to the need for greater examination of resistance under conditions of institutional complexity.

## Conclusion

We have provided a typology of incumbent resistance to disruptive logics and, armed with our typology, institutional and social movement scholars can identify resistance even in fields that appear to be settled in order to better understand why some logics gain legitimacy yet fail to spread and become institutionalized. By making incumbent resistance the explicit focus of our work, we relax the implicit pro-innovation bias that characterizes much of the current theorizing on field-level disruption. Of particular importance in terms of today's grand challenges is the role that our typology can play in providing a theoretical language to describe the actions by which incumbent organizations successfully stave off real change in such areas as sustainability, governance, and diversity (Oreskes & Conway, 2011; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Our typology can be used to recast stories of insufficiently successful challenger movements into stories of successful incumbent resistance, thereby directing attention to wider questions of why and when particular forms of resistance are successful.

Sometimes there is a rightful need for a society to defend its institutions against disruptive logics—for instance, political parties that seek to undermine democracy—and institutional scholars should be able to participate in the discussion about the ways in which this can be done. There is thus a great need for systematic investigation of the elements that constitute resistance success, and we believe that our typology would be of use in guiding such a venture.

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