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The radical ambiguity at the heart of Pierre Bourdieu's critique of journalism

Steve Harrison¹ 

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Abstract

The influence of media theorist and sociologist of the journalistic field Pierre Bourdieu has been widespread since his death in 2002 yet his relationship with journalism was at best an ambivalent one. On the one hand, he acknowledged journalism's primary role in shaping public discourse, and his ideas have spurred on journalism researchers and writers. On the other, he authored a best-selling polemic which offered a withering analysis of what he saw as television's malign influence over not only journalism but cultural production as a whole. Through a close reading of key texts, this paper identifies an underlying ambiguity within Bourdieu's writings regarding the status and legitimacy of journalism. It argues that this ambiguity produces theoretical effects which work against—or at least outside—the self-declared aims of field theory to provide the tools for an objective critique of journalism by smuggling into the theory terms which are value-laden. Finally, some of the epistemological and ontological grounds on which Bourdieu's thought has been labelled as reductionist are considered. This fresh perspective helps to re-contextualise Bourdieu's important contribution to journalism studies.

Keywords Field theory · Symbolic capital · Pierre Bourdieu · Habitus · Journalism

Introduction: from structuralism to field theory

This paper focuses on the writings Pierre Bourdieu has devoted to journalism; not only the writings on journalism which present themselves as such but also the commentaries uttered *sotto voce*, in the examples, epithets and admonishments delivered in texts ostensibly about other professions and institutions. Such consideration is not intended as a judgement on, and far less a condemnation of, Bourdieu's work on journalism, but an effort to give due weight to the extensive, sometimes challenging thought he devoted to the topic. By paying attention to these voices off, the full

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richness and complexity of Bourdieu's thought on journalism and the journalistic field is acknowledged. The development of the field and its associated concepts are first outlined, together with ways in which Bourdieu's theory has been employed and extended, before attention turns to the various ways in which journalism figures in Bourdieu's thought.

This paper's methodological approach is qualitative since I aim to provide an interpretation of those previously unanalysed, or at least under-analysed, aspects of Bourdieu's writings which touch on journalism, even when his putative gaze is fixed elsewhere. My starting point is the observation Paul de Man makes in his essay on the rhetoric of reading that "it is necessary ... to read beyond some of the more categorical assertions and balance them against other much more tentative utterances that seem to come close, at times, to being contradictory to these assertions" (de Man 1983, p. 102). By looking at the ways in which journalism functions in Bourdieu's writing—as opposed to what he asserts about journalism—a different and more complex picture emerges.¹ It is not simply a question of reading Bourdieu but of reading against Bourdieu and identifying those places in his text which are critical of journalists and journalism without theoretical justification.

Bourdieu began his intellectual odyssey as a structuralist but his thought later developed into the analyses of social relations and socialised reality of which field theory forms a part. That his early investigations were imbued with structuralist presuppositions is clear when he characterised his 1963 ethnographical work on the Kabyle house as "perhaps the last work I wrote as a blissful structuralist" (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 9). It was the lack of a dynamical dimension which led Bourdieu to turn away from structuralism: "Bourdieu's objection to strictly internal analysis [including structuralism] ... is quite simply that it looks for the final explanation ... within some sort of ahistorical 'essence'" (Johnson 1993, p. 10). While structuralists acknowledge the effect of historical processes on the objects of study (i.e., the elements within their structures, what Wacquant dubs the "empty places" (Wacquant 1992, p. 19), they generally fail to appreciate the effect on the structures themselves. As Bourdieu himself declared: "The separation of sociology and history is a disastrous division" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 90; emphasis in original). It is here that Bourdieu's "field" comes into play—its metaphors are spacio-temporal rather than purely spacial because change and dynamism is built into the very notion of a field; a field of play is dynamical and ever-shifting, rather than rigid and eternal. In the words of Bourdieu's sometime collaborator Loic Wacquant, fields have "a historical dynamism and malleability that avoids the inflexible determinism of classical structuralism" (Wacquant 1992, p. 18); the field "is a force-field as well as a field of struggles which aim at transforming or maintaining the established relation of forces ... fields are force-fields but also fields of struggle to transform or preserve these force-fields" (Bourdieu 1990a, pp. 143, 194).

¹ De Man insists this other reading can never enter into a dialectical relationship with the "surface" reading because one is hidden within the other "as the sun lies hidden within a shadow, or truth within error" (op. cit., 103). An Hegelian sublation of the two readings is thus ruled out in advance.

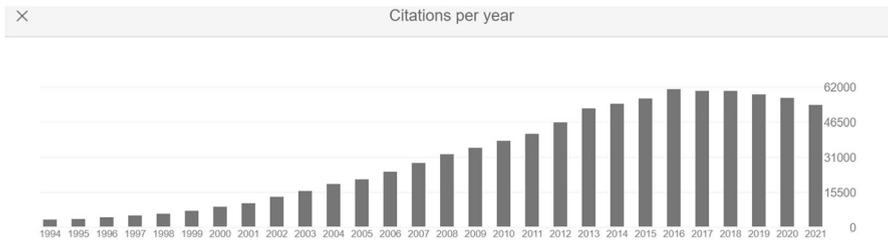


Fig. 1 Citations of Bourdieu from 1994 to 2021 (Source: Google Scholar)

The troika of habitus, capital and field are interwoven throughout Bourdieu’s thought. The term “habitus” derives from the ancient Greek thinkers via Scholasticism, although Bourdieu is at pains to point out his radical departure from earlier usage (it was “a concept which I completely rethought”), and is characterised as a system of acquired dispositions which have generative capacities (Bourdieu 1990a: 10, 13). It can be understood as a way of escaping from the choice “between a structuralism without subject and the philosophy of the subject” (ibid., 10) in that it functions analogously to muscle memory in a sportsperson, making a way of being that is “necessitated without ... being necessary” (ibid., 15). Often, habitus is described as “having a feel for the game”, that seemingly natural ease with which sportspeople take up precisely the optimum position on the field of play without having to think about it first. Habitus allows Bourdieu to account for the effects of agency without invoking a metaphysical subject, and its link with capital is made explicit when Bourdieu describes habitus as “incorporated capital” (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 53). However, Bourdieu cautions against the reductionism which views habitus as either mechanically deterministic (“Habitus is not destiny”: Bourdieu 2000, p. 180) or as operating solely at the level of the unconscious (op. cit., 220).

Much of Bourdieu’s writing which explicitly concern journalism draws on considerations of the field. In order to appreciate the contours of a field, it is necessary to establish the field’s degree of autonomy—the rigidity of its borders, as it were—and the autonomy of the agents acting within it.² Bourdieu argues that the erosion of autonomy within the journalistic field signalled by increased commercial pressures leads to the corporate conformity of media products (TV chat shows, news magazines, newspapers), which in turn has led to an increasingly undifferentiated and anodyne media: “here, as in other areas, rather than automatically generating originality and diversity, competition tends to favour *uniformity*” (Bourdieu 1998a, p. 72; emphasis in original). This judgement, based on field considerations, would be difficult to sustain were the analysis on the level of individual journalists or media organisations alone.

² The field can be viewed as a site of struggle over the nature of the field—see Bourdieu (1998b: p. 18).

Employment and extension of Bourdieu's thought

Bourdieu's work has been subject to much amplification and extension in recent years. A measure of Bourdieu's growing intellectual impact can be seen from Fig. 1, which shows the number of citations of Bourdieu's work from 1994 to 2021 as indexed by Google Scholar, although admittedly these citations are across all disciplines. The point is that Bourdieu's influence has steadily grown over the past two decades. It is clear this also applies to his influence on journalism studies: Maeres and Hanusch helpfully summarise the extent to which journalism scholarship has appropriated Bourdieu's thought via an analysis of 249 journal articles. They observe that:

since the early 1990s, field theory has become a key theoretical approach for journalism scholars, starting first with French scholarship (Bourdieu, 1994; Champagne, 2000), followed by English publications (Benson, 1999; Marlière, 1998) and later spurred on through Benson and Neveu's (2005) seminal edited volume. (Maeres and Hanusch 2020).

Similarly, the main trend identified in Steensen and Ahva's survey of theoretical approaches to journalism studies since 2000 has been to emphasise sociological perspectives: "This selection of articles emphasises sociological perspectives and therefore falls in line with the main trend towards increased sociological inquiries" (Steensen and Ahva 2015). Field theory is defined as falling within the sociological category.

More recent work which draws on Bourdieu includes Ward's analysis of the controversy surrounding the 2009 pandemic flu vaccine. He notes that "the emergence of a neo-institutionalist sociology of journalism, in particular the application of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to this subject, provides sociologists of science with new tools to make sense of journalists' work in controversies" (Ward 2019). He goes on to explain how:

I aimed to show how neo-institutionalist sociology of journalism defined broadly, and bourdieusian field theory in particular, can help shed light on journalists' coverages of scientific and technological issues in general, and of vaccination in particular (ibid).

Munnik provides a second example of the recent application of field theory to journalism studies in his analysis of the relationship between journalists and their sources, claiming that "the field theory perspective exposes relations that contribute to the work of representation but are invisible to other forms of analysis" (Munnik 2018). He concludes:

It is incumbent upon sociologists to give the media full and proper scrutiny, and Bourdieu's writings provide tools to do so with rigour and creative attention (op. cit.).

Again, Nilsson and Esmail's study into the experiences of women TV journalists in the Middle East makes use of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of field and capital:

“For women journalists, the cost of transforming their cultural and social capital into symbolic capital that is effective in the journalistic field is affected by both the journalistic field and the society at large, which creates contextually bound obstacles to women journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan” (Nilsson and Esmail 2021). Other recent research which rely heavily on Bourdieusian concepts include Tworek (2020), Loar (2021), Lucie and Fabien (2021), and Nölleke et al. (2022), to mention just a few.

In addition, it should be noted that both the reception and extension of Bourdieu’s work is subject to what Neveu terms the “selective translation effect”, whereby the selective translation of work by Bourdieu and subsequent European scholars limits their transmission in the Anglophone world. For example, field theory plays an important role in Ferron et al.’s (2018) study “Réinscrire les études sur le journalisme dans une sociologie générale” (“Re-situating studies on journalism within general sociology”), where the authors propose a research program “that is structured around the mapping of the journalistic field and the analysis of its relations with other components of the field of power”. Other examples of papers not published in English and which therefore may be under-appreciated by Anglophone scholars include among others Christin’s comparison of French and US news websites (Christin 2018), Hubé’s comparison of Bourdieu with the German theorist Niklas Luhmann (Hubé 2020), and Pacouret and Ouakrat’s study of the economics of media digitisation (Pacouret and Ouakrat 2021). The result of the foregoing is to demonstrate that the impact of Bourdieu’s thought upon media theorists is considerable and has grown over the past two decades.

In terms of the ways in which Bourdieu’s thought has been extended, Atkinson argues from a phenomenological perspective that habitus and field should be generalised to what he terms “horizons of perception” and “world horizon”, allowing for a fresh analysis of, for example, physical space or gender (Atkinson 2016) — even though Bourdieu does to some extent address the former in *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu 2000) and the latter in *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu 2001). Atkinson identifies what he claims are two major gaps in Bourdieu’s work: its inadequacy in accounting for the full richness of quotidian lived experience, and, second, in understanding “how we each come to be who we are as a whole” (Atkinson 2016, p. 6). As a result, Atkinson proposes supplementing Bourdieu’s fields with the notion of “lifeworld” as the intersection of world and habitus (ibid., p. 24). According to this view, while the journalist experiences an interview differently from his or her subject because of their place in the field, the journalist’s class, employing organisation and family all contribute factors of differing potency to that experience (the tenor and instance)—and this will of course vary with time. Couldry, meanwhile, proposes an extension of the notion of meta-capital to account for the media’s ability to affect a wide range of fields; the media’s position is privileged because it is both a field and potentially an influence on all fields (Couldry 2003, p. 653). Meta-capital is attributed to the state because of its range of influence across multiple fields and its ability to set “the rules of the game” for fields (ibid., p. 667). Couldry proposes that media power should be treated analogously as a form of meta-capital through which the media exercise influence over other forms of power. As an example, Couldry refers to Bourdieu’s observation (Bourdieu 1998a, p. 59) that appearing on television can endow an academic with symbolic capital in their own field:

Television exerts also ... an indirect pressure [on the academic field] by distorting the symbolic capital properly at stake in the academic field, creating a new group of academics whose symbolic capital within the academic field rests partly on their appearances on television (Coudry 2003: 668).

That is, journalism—like the state—has the power to determine what counts as capital in a variety of fields; it is in a position of “*definitional* power across the whole of social space” (ibid. 669).

However, one of Bourdieu’s interpreters warns against reducing Bourdieu’s thought to that of the field: “In much the same way that Weber offers more than ‘rationalization’ ..., ‘field’ cannot summarize Bourdieu. This concept must be considered as part and parcel of a toolbox” (Neveu 2007, p. 339); field theory is not a grand integrative theory but is useful precisely insofar as it deepens our understanding of the phenomena under study. Bourdieu describes the journalistic field as emerging during the nineteenth century from the opposition between sensationalised, populist newspapers (an example would be the *Illustrated Police News*, founded in 1864) and the more analytical, serious newspapers such as the *Times* (founded in 1785 as the *Daily Universal Register* but which reached the height of its influence under Delane from c. 1840–1870).³ The field is therefore a site of opposition between two standards of what constitutes success—one of legitimation through peer recognition, delivered by those who have most completely internalised the values specific to the field; and the other through recognition by the public, in terms of sales and profits. The two poles of the journalistic field are market forces (commerce) and journalistic integrity (culture). Drawing comparison with the literary field, Bourdieu notes the hierarchy constructed according to the external criterion (sales) is the reverse of that set up by the internal criterion (serious journalism). The complexity of the chiasmic structure so constituted is.

re-doubled by the fact that, at the heart of print media or television, each one of which functions like a sub-field, the opposition between a “cultural” pole and a “market” pole organises the entire field. The result is a series of structures within structures. (Bourdieu 1998a: 94).

Bourdieu regrets that values associated with the cultural pole (serious journalism, analysis, political reporting) are being displaced by the values of the commercial pole (ratings, media visibility, marketing). In this sense, Bourdieu concludes that all journalism tends to the condition of television in its superficiality and quest for sensation. He argues this is because the journalistic field is increasingly subject to domination (directly or indirectly) by the market model, and this in turn threatens other fields of cultural production because the journalistic field exports its reliance on market forces to these fields [Schudson is mistaken here when he writes that Bourdieu claimed the journalistic field was “engulfing” the political field (Schudson

³ See for example the verdict of Martin Conboy that by the mid-nineteenth century, the *Times* had established “a position of absolute dominance in terms of ...defining a position for the political role of a newspaper in bourgeois society” (Conboy, 2004: p. 18).

2005, p. 216)]. Bourdieu goes on to observe that a direct consequence of journalism's market-driven approach is the homogenisation of content, as editors rush to review the same books or films, interview the same celebrities and cover the same topics. According to this analysis, journalism as a whole tends to uniformity regardless of the intentions of individual journalists: "Even if the actors have an effect as individuals, it is the *structure* of the journalistic field that determines the intensity and orientation of its mechanisms" (Bourdieu 1998a, p. 73; emphasis in original). Benson traces this back to the socialisation of journalists when he observes that "the social and educational attributes of new journalists serve primarily to reproduce the field" (Benson 2005, p. 101).

Illuminating the blind spot

Despite the attention he pays to it, Bourdieu's attitude to journalism is far from uncritical; indeed, he appears to hold it in low regard, often invoking the profession when he is searching for an exemplar of superficiality or illegitimacy. On the explicit level, Bourdieu views journalism as a field *par excellence* since it has the power to define other fields (Bourdieu 2005, p. 45). The effects of the field may be (in Bourdieu's view, are) detrimental to the well-being of society, but there is nothing inherently good or bad about the journalistic field in itself. But nevertheless, as we shall see below, the way in which journalism functions within Bourdieu's text is as a proxy for whatever is superficial or lacking in seriousness. What is at stake is a vacillation between journalists constructed as epistemic agents and journalists as living and breathing individuals; only the former can be objects of a scientific inquiry⁴ but time and again Bourdieu smuggles into his analysis the failings and foibles of individual journalists. In his critique of Bourdieu's theoretical foundations, Nash agrees that in principle Bourdieu's thought leaves no room for individuals: "Working at the level of structure and practice Bourdieu recognises the strategic behaviour of groups but not individuals" (Nash 1990, p. 434). However, it is at the level of the individual journalist that Bourdieu often directs his ire. So too the appeal to undefined terms (such as "cultural journalism" used as a pejorative) breaks with the level of epistemological objectivity to which Bourdieu's thought aspires. These concerns are echoed in observations about Bourdieu's scientific outlook by H el ene Mialet:

Instead of allowing things and beings the space they need to deploy their field of action and their mutual self-definition, the sociologist (Bourdieu) performs an operation of reduction, by relating the multiplicity of social (?) phenomena to underlying causes (like the systematic reference to social systems or structures), or by relating agents to the determinations that are supposed to make them act. (Mialet 2003: 618).

⁴ "We have only to speak of an object to think that we are being objective. But ... scientific objectivity is possible only if one has broken first with the immediate object" (Bachelard 1987: p. 1).

Often, it is as though Bourdieu is asserting the autonomy of his own field (that of the intellectual) by contrasting it with the illusory depths of journalism. For example, when discussing what he regards as the insubstantiality of Roland Barthes' essays, Bourdieu disparagingly refers to way in which Barthes is “condemned, in order to exist, or subsist, to float with the tides ... notably through journalism” (Bourdieu 1998b, pp. xxii), and journalism is condemned as a middlebrow form of culture offering an ersatz shortcut to recognition and renown (i.e., symbolic capital—see, for example, Bourdieu 1998b, p. 113). In addition, the function of time in academia is contrasted unfavourably with its function in journalism: in the academic field, time is the correct measure of distance (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 87), whereas for journalists, the field demands speed (Bourdieu 1998a, p. 72). While these are presented as value-free statements, the distinction gives Bourdieu a surreptitious permission to refer to “the intrusion of journalistic criteria and values” into academia (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 112) or the narrowness of “journalistic vision” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 209).

As one might expect, Bourdieu's disdain for the coarser, commercially led aspects of journalism finds fullest voice in *On Television and Journalism*—but it also appears at unexpected moments in his writings when Bourdieu wishes to evoke the low-brow, the culturally-impooverished or the mendacious. The tendency is most notable in *Homo Academicus*, but slighting references to journalism can be found throughout Bourdieu's work. For instance, in his late work *Pascalian Meditations*, after observing that the search for the truth is often obscured by “the most trivial appearances”, Bourdieu amplifies the scope of this phrase by immediately adding: “... those of daily banality for daily newspapers” (Bourdieu 2000: p. 8). Newspapers, it appears, are home to the most perfectly banal of discourses, and journalists are the most trivial of writers. *Homo Academicus*, ostensibly a study of the French higher education field, cannot resist talking about journalism or journalists on almost every page. Indeed, the work owes its very inception to a survey published in the periodical *Lire* of the “top 50” intellectuals in France; the fact that Bourdieu appeared in lowly joint 36th place may have some bearing on his evident antipathy. Portmanteau expressions such as “journalist-professors”, “journalist-writers”, “journalist-academics” and “academic-journalists” litter the text without further explanation,⁵ as though the status of journalism itself were indeterminate; it is an indeterminism reflected in the (translated) title of his polemic *On Television and Journalism* (the original Collège de France TV broadcast was titled *Sur la television* and, as we shall see, was later supplemented by additional texts for UK publication), and echoed in phrases such as “... the mass media (journalism, television) ...” (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 83). Bourdieu's phrase implies that journalism is both separate from and subsumed by television: the parenthetical “(journalism, television)” suggests these are two mutually exclusive aspects of the mass media. Yet these are not two discrete, non-overlapping institutions: journalism and journalists regularly make an appearance on television, just as television is often the object of journalism. It is

⁵ The pairing is clearly hierarchical, with journalism on the lower rung – Bourdieu never feels the need to write “academic-writers” or “writer-professors”.

as if for Bourdieu television were both more and less than journalism, while journalism were both more and less than itself.

Journalism, and especially the loaded but nowhere defined phrase “cultural journalism”, is contrasted throughout *Homo Academicus* to academic rigour; journalism is seen as a short-cut to the symbolic prizes which others have earned through dint of hard work and dues paid in the currency of academia: time (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 87). It is “those teachers least certain of realizing the ambition of scientificity and modernity” who.

must transgress the old academic norms prohibiting all compromise with journalism⁶ in order to obtain, outside the institution, and especially in so-called cultural journalism, a symbolic capital of renown partly independent of recognition within the institution ... it represents the weak point of the university field for the intrusion of journalistic criteria and values.⁷ ... journalism offers both a way out and a short cut (op. cit., p. 112).

In giving an instance of this mendacious and improper short cut from journalism to academic prestige, it is telling that Bourdieu gives the case of the “journalist academic” Catherine Clement, well-known for profiling key intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Claude Levi-Strauss, who because of her power to consecrate the reputation of others, in return has her own reputation consecrated as a “favour” (op. cit., p. 120). By drawing his example from the very field in which he operates, Bourdieu is again asserting the autonomy of the intellectual field. Note that in this example, the entirety of the journalistic field is conflated with the role of the commentator, ignoring the raft of news reporters, sub-editors and news editors who make up the vast bulk of journalism professionals and who have no interest in consecrating or being consecrated by anybody, whether powerful patrons or award bodies such as the Pulitzers. That it is commentary rather than news reporting which Bourdieu means when he uses the word “journalism” here is emphasised by the fact that he immediately goes on to chide the practice of academics reviewing books written by journalists (ibid.). A final example of Bourdieu’s identification of the “journalist” with the “commentator” comes in the letter he wrote to Frederic Vandenberghe declaring that the latter’s critical interpretation of his political interventions in the public sphere “does not rise far above the level of journalism” (Vandenberghe 1999, p. 62).

⁶ The phrase “dubious compromise with journalism” had been used on the preceding page.

⁷ These values are subsequently equated with those of “middlebrow culture”, as opposed to the authentically avant-garde (op. cit., 119).

On on television

It is striking that *Sur la television* and *Le champ journalistique et la television* (Sociología Contemporánea 1996), Bourdieu's televised critique of television,⁸ eschewed the conventional grammar of the medium (the broadcasts used a fixed camera and studiously avoided any of the techniques, such as zooms, pans, fades, transitions, traditionally employed to inject a sense of movement into shots of what is essentially a talking head), and was considered grave and profound, while the published transcript containing the self-same words was condemned (by journalists, at least) as being lightweight and lacking rigour. Bourdieu remarked that critics of the book mis-characterised it as "a series of utterly hackneyed positions punctuated by a smattering of polemical outbursts" (Bourdieu 1998a: p. 2), a conclusion with which Greg Whelan concurs in his account of the work's reception (Whelan 2002). In what may have been an attempt to ward off such accusations, the English edition of the transcript is bookended by a nine-page prologue plus a preface, and its academic rigour bolstered by the inclusion of a formidably foot-noted essay "The Power of Journalism", and an appendix ("The Olympics—An Agenda for Analysis") is thrown in for good measure. The usual academic apparatus of a bibliography, notes and a translator's note complete the effort to counter the charges of populism.

Hence the book *On Television and Journalism* (simply *On Television* from this point on) is far from a simple transcription of what was uttered during the Collège de France broadcasts. Bourdieu gives as one reason for this what he terms "the transcription effect": print's elimination of the non-verbal cues which temper the viewer's understanding of what the televised speaker means. Hence the academic paraphernalia which accompany the printed version of his lectures supplement the written word in an effort to compensate for the absence of the spoken word. But one might also view the supplementary texts which accompanied the lectures in their print form as a strategy to "academicise" a work originally conceived as a popular exposition and in that way to pre-emptively spike the guns of the journalists who, Bourdieu correctly surmised, would focus their critical ire on a book which calls their profession into question. Bourdieu is attempting to subvert journalism's claim to occupy a position from which his work can be judged; he wants to elevate *On Television* beyond the reach of "cultural journalism" by placing it within the protection of the academic sphere. It is a technique remarkably similar to that which Bourdieu accused Heidegger of employing to deflect unwelcome criticism of ontology by casting right-wing, socially conservative values into the rarefied language of philosophy. According to Bourdieu, Heidegger's work attempts to dictate in advance the conditions of its own perception: "The imposition of form ... protects the text from 'trivialization'." (Bourdieu 1991, p. 89) just as Bourdieu's academic apparatus seeks to shield *On Television* from those who would challenge its intellectual credentials. In his critical engagement with Bourdieu's ontology, Evens goes so far as to observe:

⁸ The programmes were recorded on March 18 1996, and broadcast by the Paris Première station in May 1997.

I confess that I have sometimes found myself caught up short in following out my critical observations to their conclusions. For every fault one finds in Bourdieu's theory, there appears already to exist a compelling reply by him to the effect that one must have misread (Evens 1999: 5).

However, the general thrust of Bourdieu's claim that the drive for audience-share which is characteristic of television has a corrosive effect on (some forms of) journalism and public life in general seems well-supported by the evidence; journalists are finding, at best, that editorial decisions are based on real-time audience metrics and, at worst, their jobs are on the line should they fail to meet targets for social media engagement and page views. And yet, despite this important kernel of truth, Bourdieu's generalisations about journalism in *On Television* and elsewhere do miss significant differences by smudging the media into an homogenous whole; one has only to think of the variety of ways in which a story such as the row over anti-Semitism in the UK Labour party from 2016 was covered by the BBC, the *Morning Star*, the *Jewish Chronicle*, the *New Statesman*, *Private Eye* and the *Daily Mail*, for instance, to appreciate the gulf between them which no theoretical framework can hope to encompass in an homogenising term such as "the media".

Bourdieu and reductionism

Bourdieu's analysis of the journalistic field appears open to charges of reductionism, firstly in treating both journalism and television as homogeneous and, secondly, in treating the effects of television on journalism as unambiguously univocal. That is to say, Bourdieu's manifold use of "journalism" as a pejorative in *Homo Academicus* and elsewhere (albeit often in a disguised form) operates on the same reductive level as does his conflation of "journalism" and "television". However, there is a particular difficulty in arguing that Bourdieu's field theory is reductive. The principle of homology—on which field theory relies⁹—undermines charges of reductionism on the basis that the field and sub-fields share the same structural characteristics. As noted above, Bourdieu's fields and sub-fields display a complex, double chiasmic structure which constitute a series of nested structures. For example, the opposition between the commercial and cultural poles of the journalistic field in general also operates at the level of individual news organisations and broadcasters. Hence the multiple instances of the reduction of a field to its sub-field (journalism to broadcast journalism; the media in general to journalism in particular; journalism to reporting; general reporting to political reporting, etc.) can be seen as a sign of the fruitfulness of Bourdieu's thought rather than a symptom of its weakness: nothing is lost through the reduction because one structure echoes the other and hence conclusions about a field are equally valid of its sub-field(s).

⁹ "... there is a homology between the space of the microcosms of production and the encompassing social space" (Bourdieu 2005: p. 45).

There are, however, more far-reaching critiques of Bourdieu's reductionism which focus primarily on the concept of "habitus". T.M.S. Evens, one of Bourdieu's most penetrating commentators, concedes that Bourdieu's sociology has "been brilliantly defended by its author against the thrust of criticisms, like mine, that see it as reductionist" (Evens 1999: p. 4). Nevertheless, Evens objects that the theory is two-faced, made up of an operational framework alongside a meta-commentary which helps protect that framework by misrepresenting it (op. cit., p. 5). The overarching disagreement between Evens and Bourdieu is whether ethics (Evens) or power (Bourdieu) lies at the heart of social life, and Evens argues that by making power primary, Bourdieu is unable to extricate himself from the Cartesian duality his theory seeks to overcome (op. cit., p28 n 24). Evens believes Bourdieu reduces human practice to a materialism (albeit a "generalised materialism") which is inadequate to the task. The failure occurs because instead of attacking dualism on the grounds of ontology, Bourdieu approaches it as a matter of epistemology, and in consequence the theory is basically deficient. Interestingly in the current context, Evens too invokes the charge of blindness, writing that Bourdieu "seems blind to the distinct possibility that ... he has misread his own work" (op. cit., 6; emphasis in original). Whatever the justice of Evens' critique—and one cannot help but wonder how to understand what is meant by an ontology which is not an ontology¹⁰—what is interesting in the context of the current work that Evens identifies a deep-seated reductionism in Bourdieu's thought which re-introduces the very dualism it professes to resolve.

King (2000) also focuses the reductionism inherent in the concept of habitus (indeed, one section of his paper is headed: "The reductiveness of the habitus", op. cit., p. 429). King's view is that Bourdieu intended the habitus to overcome subject-object dualism "by inscribing subjective, bodily actions with objective social force", and agrees with Evens that habitus itself swiftly relapses into objectivism. But habitus is not the only strand of Bourdieu's sociology; King turns attention to Bourdieu's practical theory, which he believes does offer a genuine way out of dualism. This insight leads King to conclude that "there are two separable and, indeed, incompatible strands in Bourdieu's writing" (King 2000, p. 418). Echoing the language of the current author, King declares that "Bourdieu has failed to take his own greatest insight seriously" (op. cit., p. 431) by not developing his theory of practical logic further.

Conclusion

Charges of reductionism and a theoretical blindness, then, run deep among scholars. Evens and King argue the vehicle of this oversight is Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which is simultaneously the non-conscious (not "unconscious", as King

¹⁰ Evens' argument ultimately makes appeal to an "ontology of ambiguity", adding: "[A]n ontology that presents reality as basically ambiguous is markedly out of keeping with *ontology* in the strict sense of the term" (Evens 1999: p. 7; emphasis in original).

would have it) prompter of individual action and the bodily inscription of material forces. My point here is that Bourdieu vacillates between treating journalists as objects of scientific inquiry constructed as epistemic subjects, and as named individuals who come with their own baggage of previous reporting and personal foibles. Catherine Clement is herself lionised by academics because she in turn validates their intellectual output; Roland Barthes drifts along on an insubstantial ebb and flow of journalistic commentary. This technique is generalised into slighting phrases—journalistic values represent a “dubious compromise”; journalism is “hack” work; nothing is more trivial than the “daily banality” of daily newspapers—but which avoid epistemological vigilance because these comments are presented as asides rather than the meat of any argument. The force of such comments is nevertheless felt.

One might speculate as why the blind spot may have arisen (a temperamental aversion to unwelcome journalistic scrutiny; the academic’s disdain for “hack” writers; intellectual snobbery); but regardless of its genesis, Bourdieu has already considered this blindness. Writing about the philosopher and journalist Raymond Aron’s attack on Parisian intellectuals in the 1950s, Bourdieu declares Aron is:

entirely blind, as blind as those whose blindness he denounces, to the space within which he is situated, yet within which may be defined the objective relation which connects him to them, and which is the source both of his insights and of his oversights (Bourdieu 1998b: xvi).

Bourdieu goes on to dub Aron (who was—perhaps not unrelatedly—placed second in *Lire*’s intellectual “hit parade”) “the most anti-intellectual intellectual”.

As a result, Bourdieu wonders whether domination of the intellectual field is now dependent upon “rational exploitation of the ‘media’, with everything that implies”, given that the intellectual field has become subservient to the “problems and procedures of journalism” (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 324). Perhaps it is here, in this anxiety over the subordination of the intellectual to the journalist allied to Bourdieu’s own reluctance to play this particular game, that Bourdieu’s ambivalent relation to journalism and his own insights and oversights lie.

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