

**A Bourdieuean analysis of the field
of British journalism, looking at the
construction of news and the
newspaper's role in the current
media climate**

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Abstract

This research takes key ideas from Pierre Bourdieu's book 'On Television and Journalism' and tests them against the reality of newsrooms in Britain today. I met with many prominent figures in the media industry to interview them about some key areas of the media; notably on how the media acts as a bandwagon, that news is biased towards the 'new', the television culture of pseudo-experts, and the market imperatives dominating news production. My interviews exposed how the political field powerfully influences the journalistic field. Most centrally, this research looks at the values that drive journalists, the competition within the journalistic field and how that affects news output. The key purpose is to see how the news report is a social construction of reality. I believe that my results prove the relevance and pertinence of Bourdieu's ideas to the British journalistic field today.

Keywords : Bourdieu, Journalistic Field

Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu wrote in his book *On Television and Journalism* that the journalistic report is always "a social construction of reality". The purpose of this research is to explore in what sense the news report is a social construction. Bourdieu offers an analysis of the journalistic field and the structures that produce the news. The news as we receive it is a product of selection, analysis and crucially, an evaluation of reality. Bourdieu wrote his polemic in France in 1996 and delivered it as a television lecture. His thoughts are still pertinent today and translate onto the contemporary British journalistic field. My interest is in interrogating some of Bourdieu's key observations and colouring them in with examples from British media today.

I wanted to bring theoretical ideas to life and into contact with the reality of newsrooms and the news industry as a business. Much of my research uses primary sources, as I conducted interviews with key figures. I brought Bourdieu's ideas into direct dialogue with the producers of news as well as with those that criticise the news.

The current media field is changing and developing at a rapid pace. New technologies and increasing competition are transforming the field and disorientating journalists. News is now being provided in more forms than ever before across different platforms. Buzz words in the industry are phrases like 'device-agnostic' with content-providers trying to offer people news when they want it, how they want it, and where they want it. As news producers of all kinds chase the developing technologies and trends, thought and analysis is needed more than ever before. Many people now access their news online. I wanted to analyse the news agenda at this critical time and Bourdieu provides a frame within which to embark on this journey.

The focus is clearly on television news and newspapers. Primarily, this study shall focus on illustrating and testing Bourdieu's ideas about the media as a whole acting as a bandwagon, that news is biased towards the 'new', the television culture of pseudo-experts, the market imperatives dominating news production and the question of how the newspaper should best survive in such a climate. Furthermore, while Bourdieu focuses on the journalistic field he also alludes to how that is itself in a wider social world that

must effect it and be effected by it. Thus, I look at how the journalistic field interacts with the political field in illuminating ways.

There has obviously been much work done in this field, with dedicated media studies departments at other Universities. The full bibliography of my reading on this subject is attached. I tried to limit my reading as I was keen to do independent research and that has always been the focus of this project, armed with Bourdieu's ideas. I found that the Glasgow Media Group and the Institute for Public Policy Research in the UK held excellent data sources. The Glasgow Media Group has held prolonged studies on television output for years and amassed excellent evidence to show how television coverage displays specific biases. The work of these groups has been undertaken by teams of people on a grand scale and is well beyond anything I could have undertaken. I direct the interested reader to those groups. With this research, I wanted to observe newsrooms at first hand and talk directly to news producers, asking open questions so as to determine the reality and relevance of Bourdieu's observations. Overwhelmingly I found that they proved Bourdieu to be accurate.

I chose to undertake this research originally as my dissertation. That alone was a struggle, as my course is English Literature and Theatre Studies. I argued my case because I had encountered Bourdieu in a Literary and Cultural Theory class taught through the department of English. Soon my research spiralled out of control, as I kept booking more interviews further afield and so I applied for funding. I plan to enter the journalistic field professionally myself and so this research was an important chance for me to really think about the field I was entering and what kind of journalist I would like to be, utilising the luxury of academia to subject my choices to deep thinking, analysis and critique.

Methodology

I wanted to be conducting original and observational research. For this purpose, and so that I could be specific about my line of questioning, I mainly pursued interviews with individuals, as well as drawing on my own practical experience of doing work experience in newsrooms. I went to lots of talks by journalists as these were often events where they spoke freely and were followed up by questions from the audience, which I took advantage of. Travelling to The Guardian's Hay Festival was brilliant for getting lots of useful people in one space. I managed to speak to the journalist George Monbiot there, see Andrew Marr again, and watch lots of interesting debates about the news agenda between journalists from different papers. I went to the British Newspaper Library at Colindale in London to ensure I put my findings in an historical context. I wanted to know if news had always been this way, and I did find that certain criticisms of the news seemed endemic to the form from its inception, though many changes had clearly occurred. Later in my research I found a club in London called The Frontline Club which is a meeting place and forum for independent and professional journalists. I saw John Simpson and Martin Bell speak there, in intimate surroundings, talking off-the-record with their peers. These evenings examined the media agenda and were very relevant to the issues covered in my research. It was reassuring to find a place where these issues were being addressed by the professionals who wrestle with them on a daily basis.

Most of my interviews lasted an hour and were recorded on Dictaphone. I had detailed interviews with MP George Galloway, Head of BBC News Peter Horrocks, Andrew Marr, Sunday AM Producer Barney Jones, Sky News Guest-Getter Jessica Wilson, Assistant Managing Editor of The Telegraph Christopher Lloyd, and Head of Ferrari Press Agency Matthew Bell. At other times, I stole questions with people after talks, and observed newsrooms and news programmes such as Sunday AM in preparation and operation. I also attended The Guardian's Student Media Summit where journalists from various organisations shared advice and observations. This was another event where people spoke frankly and were available after their talks for further questions, which I pursued. At the festival Marxism 2007 I was lucky to see Michael Wayne from The Glasgow Media Group share his data, findings and observations critiquing the British media structure and agenda.

Results

Journalism is a narcissistic field. Bourdieu asserts, "I have nothing against competition, but I observe that competition homogenizes when it occurs between journalists or newspapers subject to identical pressures and opinion polls"¹. The Institute for Public Policy Research in the UK confirm that, "research shows that, particularly in news markets, a slight increase in number of channels leads to competitive pressures that encourages a focus on the centre ground in terms of the news agenda"². *Guardian* reporter Hugh Muir told me, "The media operates as a bandwagon. It's not one of our strengths. There is not as much independent thought as there used to be"³. Bourdieu uses the subheading 'The Circular Circulation of Information'⁴ to summarise the media bandwagon. Nothing better demonstrates the circular circulation of information than a press agency. While press agencies do produce and sell their own news stories, they normally act as parasites feeding upon other media. I worked at Ferrari's Press Agency for a week and was instructed to watch *Richard and Judy* and look out for any comments of interest made by celebrities that could be re-spun in a different context and sold off as a little 'news in brief' article to tabloids such as *The Sun* or *The Star*. Ferrari's are certainly in the business of recycling news, taking from one format and transforming it into another. It's an excellent commercial formula because information is circular and everyone does talk about the same things. One dangerous result of the narcissism in the field is that it reduces independent thought and leads journalists down a line of argument that is often quite unthinking and unconscious. The amplification and resonation of one story, and one angle, creates a sort of white noise that distracts you from the ability to look at the subject afresh. Andrew Marr demonstrates the nuanced problem by talking about Britain's press coverage during the lead-up to the Iraq war. Marr says, "We were too interested in the legality issue and the UN and whether the Labour party would split. We weren't looking at the bigger

¹ Bourdieu Pierre, *On Television and Journalism*, p23

² Tambini Damian and Cowling Jamie Eds, *New News: Impartial Broadcasting in the Digital Age*, p7

³ Muir Hugh, Reporting on the Line (talk), *Guardian Student Media Conference 2006*

⁴ Bourdieu Pierre, *On Television and Journalism*, p23

philosophical question of what happens when you kick the door in on a country. It's so different. We failed to analyse that properly"⁵.

A point of concern is that journalists will sometimes pursue speed over accuracy. *Sky News* employees laugh over the motto 'not wrong for long' which refers to the fact that any factual errors on *Sky* can quickly be changed when the rolling ticker corrects itself, and will be just as quickly forgotten. Jessica Wilson, the Guest-Getter at *Sky News*, acknowledges that in "live television you'll always lose a bit of accuracy from human error as there is that pressure to get it on air. Pressure even to get it on a few seconds before the BBC because the rivalry is that tense. It does get a bit ridiculous but that's part of the fun of it"⁶. Twenty-four-hour news channels increase the pressure on being first and being immediate.

Head of BBC News Peter Horrocks ponders, "Does the news move on too fast? I think sometimes it does"⁷. Horrocks relates how, only days earlier, breakfast news ran a story about maternity services. It was featured on the lunchtime news, but by the six o'clock and ten o'clock evening slots, the story had been dropped. "Actually, the audience were interested in it in the day and we got kind of bored with it because we were watching the news intensely the whole time, but we always have to remember that the audience isn't. There is an issue with journalists having too short an attention span"⁸.

John Birt and Peter Jay have suggested that "a bias against understanding"⁹ exists in television news partly because of the lack of background information provided by normal bulletins. Bourdieu also acknowledges that the news cannot really do what is necessary to make events truly understandable; they can't reinsert the events into a complex network of relevant relationships. Bourdieu asserts that the field induces a 'structural amnesia'. The fact that events appear without explanation and disappear without solution contributes to political apathy. Andrew Marr recognises this as a worsening trend with increasingly condensed news and notes it as a loss to democracy itself.

The Internet can pose as an antidote to amnesia, as it allows you to easily trace back stories through archives on newspaper websites and establish a context.

Bourdieu talks about the culture of soundbites and the need for television to recruit pseudo-experts to comment in a media-savvy fashion on topical stories. These media pundits fill the gap where genuine experts should be. Many genuine experts do not appear because the autonomy of their specific field is too compromised by the TV's short time span. *Sky News* call their pseudo-experts 'Rent-A-Gobs'. The guest getter at *Sky News*, Jessica Wilson told me that she has some characters who call her every other day offering comment on various stories. She concedes, "There are people that just love being on television, who I'll call up to see if they're free, and they'll say 'yeah, yeah, oh, what am I talking about?'"¹⁰ Wilson's example illustrates precisely Bourdieu's words a decade earlier, that "by agreeing to appear on television shows without worrying about whether you'll be able to say anything, you make it very clear that you're not there to say

⁵ Marr Andrew, *Sunday AM* Presenter, (Interview)

⁶ Wilson Jessica, Guest-Getter at *Sky News*, (interview)

⁷ Horrocks Peter, Head of BBC News (interview)

⁸ Horrocks Peter, Head of BBC News (interview)

⁹ Glasgow University Media Group Members, *Really Bad News*, p115

¹⁰ Wilson Jessica, Guest Getter at *Sky News* (interview)

anything at all but for altogether different reasons, chief among them the desire to be seen”¹¹.

Journalism is immediately answerable to the market, and with more media platforms emerging, rivalry is intense. Newspaper sales are falling, followed by advertising revenue. Even the BBC is subject to what Andrew Marr called “intense ratings pressure” because they aim to reach 80% of the British population each week with their news in some format, so as to serve the license-fee payers. *Sky News* is most openly chasing the ratings model with their motto of ‘Trust the Audience’. They are modelling their content more clearly to fit audience ratings so that they provide people with more of what they want. With television and newspaper websites, proprietors can now measure the most ‘clicked on’ stories and see which individual stories are most popular. This does lead to a temptation to give more coverage to those stories in order to serve the public’s curiosity. Editor of *The Guardian* Alan Rusbridger condemns the *Sky News* emphasis, “It’s a dangerous idea to give people more stories about what they already know. Journalists should persuade people to know about things that they don’t know about. There is a paternalistic or maternalistic duty to inform the audience of knowledge that may not otherwise be brought to their attention”¹². BBC Producer Barney Jones notes that the biggest change within the journalistic field in his lifetime is that journalists “are much more responsive to audiences”¹³. He explains that every producer is fighting for their time slot and that that is held accountable to the viewing figures, the number of audience contacting the show and the audience ‘Appreciation Index’.

I found that the major understatement of Bourdieu’s book was in the influence of the political field. Peter Horrocks is clear that media coverage is “not just about our selections, it’s about the lines of tack that politicians are using as well”¹⁴. He is keen to state that the BBC do not tow any party line and will treat any politician sceptically. Nonetheless, overall Horrocks concedes absolutely, “On the broader point, how far does what politicians say shape where the ground for debate is? That’s clearly true.”¹⁵ Politicians regularly frame the debate. Embedded journalists were the greatest PR coup of the Iraq war. Many journalists have personal relationships with politicians, as it is important for them to get scoops. Peter Horrocks narrates, “Blair asked a group of us in a couple of months ago just to have a chat about the final few months of his premiership. That’s quite interesting to get an insight into his mind. He’s trying to persuade us of his point of view. I regularly have meetings with senior politicians who are trying to do that. But it doesn’t always work”¹⁶. The fact that ‘it doesn’t always work’ carries the implication that sometimes it just might. Bearing in mind that these conversations are occurring with the BBC, purportedly an independent and non-partial broadcaster, it leaves questions as to how close other proprietors are with politicians as they can offer far more in terms of editorial support and partiality.

There is a danger that journalism is becoming more of an image-based culture. Andrew Marr is concerned about the direction of news, warning that an image-based culture does

¹¹ Bourdieu Pierre, *On Television and Journalism*, p13

¹² Rusbridger Alan, The Future of Journalism (talk), The Guardian Student Media Conference 2006

¹³ Jones Barney, Sunday AM, (interview)

¹⁴ Horrocks Peter, Head of BBC News, (Interview)

¹⁵ Horrocks Peter, Head of BBC News, (Interview)

¹⁶ Horrocks Peter, Head of BBC News, BBC Television Centre (Interview)

not allow people to work their way through subtle arguments and distinctions. That work requires developed language and syntax. Marr states, “That’s why the Nazi’s invented the Nuremberg Rally because if the images are strong enough they can stop you thinking”¹⁷.

I would like to conclude with an anecdote that illustrates how the news is a ‘social construction of reality’. I asked Peter Horrocks why the BBC and other news media had failed to cover the genocide in Darfur over the past four years. Horrocks replied that the BBC had featured a few programmes on Darfur every year. These programmes do not amount to real news coverage. In answer, Horrocks replied that the BBC hadn’t focussed on Darfur because the politicians didn’t. Darfur is unpopular for a number of reasons, primarily because Africa possesses little economic interest for Britain. Accepting the lack of political interest in Darfur, the region still possesses humanitarian interest and requires international intervention. The suggestion is that if the news media did cover Darfur, then the public inevitably would question why the Government were neglecting the issue. Surely the media realises its power to set the agenda as much as the politicians do, the media is responsible for holding our politicians to account, its part of a functioning democracy. Horrocks replied, “That’s not our job. It’s not our job to get people to do things. It’s our job to reflect the world accurately”¹⁸. Few statements have ever been so loaded with irony. Reflecting the world accurately would of course be to acknowledge the significance and human tragedy of hundreds of thousands of people dying in Darfur. When Horrocks talks of reflecting ‘the world accurately’ he in fact means reflecting the political priorities of Britain accurately. That is what the British journalistic field does. These are crucially different things that the social construction of reality often hides from our comprehension. Bourdieu is a tool in opening our eyes to this fact.

Conclusion and Outcome

It is difficult to reach a ‘conclusion’ with such research, I think the results section already illustrates the trends and key observations of my findings. I tried to select some of the most interesting quotes from the extended interviews that I did. In terms of solutions, I am attracted to John Major’s proposal that newspapers should print or broadcast corrections to mistaken stories in the same slot in which the error was made. If a front-page story turns out to be false, the following front-page should have the correction boldly as its title. It won’t be popular and hopefully it would be a more suitable deterrent to inaccurate journalism premised on speed.

I conclude that newspapers should engage in a strategy of differentiation to distinguish themselves from television news. They should take the opportunities afforded to them to ‘add value’ to news stories by offering considered analysis, context and opinion. They should resist image saturation and content reduction. Only then do they offer something that television doesn’t. The newspapers most resilient to falling circulation are adopting that strategy. They have the space to print reasoned argument, linking cause and effect and can go far beyond reduced soundbites. However, they are subject to many of the pressures already listed and remain instantly answerable to the market.

¹⁷ Marr Andrew, Sunday AM, BBC Television Centre (Interview)

¹⁸ Horrocks Peter, Head of BBC News, BBC Television Centre (Interview)

I think I achieved a great deal during this project. I managed to get some very high-profile interviews and speak to some of the people that determine our news agenda. I made Bourdieu's thoughts demonstrably relevant to the British media today, and in doing so succeeded in my initial aim. I enjoyed undertaking this research very much, and I've been cramming more in right up until this report's deadline. I expect to be researching this topic for a long while yet and retain sustained interest in it. This is the field in which I hope to make a home for myself and this research project has prepared me for that better than any work experience could have done.

I disseminated my research in various ways. I wrote a double page feature for The Warwick Boar entitled 'What's Wrong with the News' to communicate my findings to the campus body. I received some excellent feedback from students and some complimentary messages from unknown students who had looked me up on Facebook to offer their praise. This was very rewarding and I was thrilled that the ideas merited such an interested response. I have now uploaded the article onto my personal website to ensure it remains available to people. Furthermore, I broadcast numerous anecdotes and observations from my interviews on my radio show Morning Glory on Radio Warwick. I attended the Reinvention Centre conference at Warwick in September and presented a poster presentation of my findings. There is also talk of preparing a paper for the Journal *Reinvention* and also of returning to Warwick to speak to students about applying theory to practise. I sent a copy of my final dissertation to Andrew Marr and his producer Barney Jones and received an encouraging letter in response. I also sent a copy of the article to the journalist George Monbiot and, as a result, he has asked me to undertake some research for him. Finally, I used knowledge from this work to write a critique of Panorama, and I have just heard that I have been offered a month's work experience on Panorama at the BBC in Manchester beginning in November. So, the work continues.