Journal of Consumer Culture

The Hidden Injuries of Media Power

Nick Couldry

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

Additional services and information for *Journal of Consumer Culture* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://joc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://joc.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://joc.sagepub.com/content/1/2/155.refs.html

ARTICLE
The Hidden Injuries of Media Power

NICK COULDRY
London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract. The consumption landscape is saturated by media messages and media values, as many pessimistic diagnoses of contemporary culture have emphasized. We lack, however, the tools for understanding the details and the structural forces at work within that landscape, a gap which this article aims to fill by developing a concept of media and the boundaries and hierarchies that help produce the media's legitimacy. 'Media power' means here the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions, particularly those of television, radio and the press (the common-sense definition of 'the media'), although the long-term impact of new media on media power is considered in the article's conclusion. The central parts of the article discuss, first, the theoretical framework that underlies this approach, which draws by analogy on Durkheim's account of the social generation of the sacred/profane distinction, but also on the work of Bourdieu and others; and second, material is presented from the author's empirical research on situations where non-media people come into close contact with the media process (both at leisure sites, such as Granada Studios Tour, the home of the set of the UK's longest running prime-time soap, *Coronation Street*, and at protest sites featured in the media). The conclusion looks more broadly at the implications of this approach for grasping the tensions and conflicts inherent in today's mediated landscape of consumption.

Key words
boundary ● celebrity ● hidden injuries ● media power ● ritual ● symbolic power ● symbolic violence

INTRODUCTION
THERE ARE MANY LARGE-SCALE THEORIES about the consumption landscape and its saturation with media messages and values, from Jean

Baudrillard's vision of America as merely 'publicity space', 'space for the image' (1993: 244), to Richard Stivers' (1994) diagnosis of America's 'culture of cynicism' in which all distinctions between reality and truth have disappeared in a play of spectacle and performance. But these claims are so general (in spite of being directed at a single object, America) that they give us no insights into what particular consumers do. Surely people make particular directed and self-reflexive journeys across the consumption landscape, and as theorists we too need concepts that will cut into that landscape, so that we can grasp its detailed formations. This is the justification for this article's insistence upon structural categories that on the face of it lie some way from the patterns of consumption, since I will suggest it is precisely such categories that are at work in our everyday experience of a media-saturated consumer culture.

The question of the media's impacts on the wider landscape of consumption has been gaining momentum for some time, and geography, as a discipline, has been central here. If an earlier generation of geographers (Jackson, 1994: viii; Meinig, 1979: 183) lamented the loss of a symbolic landscape based in architecture and place, recent work has explored how media references have created a new symbolic landscape. The 'magic' of mediated place encompasses shopping malls (Hopkins, 1990; Kowinski, 1985; Langman, 1992) and theme parks, particularly those which are sites of current or historical media production (Couldry, 2000: part two; Davis, 1996; Gottdiener, 1997), hence Sharon Zukin's claim that DisneyWorld's architecture matters 'not because it is a symbol of capitalism, but because it is the capital of symbolism' (Zukin, 1991: 232). Rather than reduce this new landscape to an extension of the audience's supposed passivity before television (Sack, 1992: ch. 5), it is more useful to attend to its details, and the divisions and hierarchies that structure them; in short, to take seriously the idea that it is a 'landscape of *power*' (Zukin, 1991), with all the complexity that implies.

I want to examine some key concepts for grasping the mediated consumer landscape, and its fault-lines: in particular, 'media power', and the categorical distinction between 'media' and 'ordinary' (things, people, events) that underlies it. There is indeed a symbolic dimension to the power relation between media consumers and producers; and, like the fault-line of class which Sennett and Cobb (1972) eloquently analysed three decades ago, it brings its own hidden injuries. The term 'hidden injuries' may seem surprising in relation to media power, in particular the power of popular media, and I will explain this point further later. For now, let me explain that the hidden injuries I discuss (like those of class) concern

personal value, but they are linked to the media-related frameworks through which we perceive the social world as a whole. Those frameworks span the media's factual/fictional dimensions, and implicitly connect the consumer's space, which is paradigmatically private, and political space, which is paradigmatically public. This has wider implications, to which I return in the conclusion.

To study media at this general, almost ecological, level is to rework a question Lazarsfeld and Merton (1969 [1948]) raised about 'media effects'. Although many of their original questions about media effects have been superseded, at least in the form in which they posed them, their first question remains important, and surprisingly neglected: what are 'the effects of the existence of . . . media in our society' (p. 495)? However, in spite of some suggestive comments, they concluded that, given the impossibility of comparative 'control' studies of societies without mass media, this question could not be researched empirically. Now, with the benefit of a less narrow paradigm of empirical research, I want to suggest otherwise. There are (contra Baudrillard) always, potentially, 'cracks' in the mediated world we inhabit, moments when underlying assumptions and beliefs come into view, and those 'cracks' offer a way into researching media power, as it is reflected within and beyond consumer practice.

By 'media', I will generally mean the common sense definition of '*the* media' (television, radio and the press), quite large enough a topic to deal with for now; I will not be concerned so much, for reasons I explain, with the differences between media, but rather with our broader sense of 'the media' as a site of value and truth within the social landscape. However, I return, in my conclusion, to the changes new media and media digitalization may bring to that landscape. By 'media power', I do not mean the power (ideological or otherwise) exercised upon us by specific media texts; I mean more generally media institutions' differential symbolic power, the *concentration of symbolic power* in media institutions: that is, the fact that we take it for granted that the media have the power to speak 'for us all' – indeed to define the social 'reality' that we share[1] – a power which individuals, corporations, pressure groups, professional bodies and even perhaps the state do not have.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The television theorist John Corner has written that 'the conception of "power" within a notion of televisual process has now become a matter of the utmost importance and difficulty' (1997: 258). The same might be said of 'power' within the media process more generally. There is a tension

157

between appreciating the variable contents and contexts of daily media consumption and yet maintaining our grip on the society-wide issue of media power. I am interested less in how media contents reflect external pressures (ideological, economic, statist, and so on) than in how media affect social *ontology*: what kinds of things become 'social facts' and 'social realities'? How do media affect the categorizations which enable us to order the social world as a structured space, or landscape, at all?

An analogy from Durkheim

Any theorization of the media's social impacts must start from their privileged role in framing our experiences of the social, and thereby defining what the 'reality' of our society is. Roger Silverstone (1988; cf. Couldry, 2000: 42–4) has analysed how television is a ritual 'frame': a cognitive, imaginative and practical space through which everyone can access simultaneously the things that mark off the 'social' – what is shared by everyone – from the private and particular. This analysis, which I would argue captures something fundamental about not just television but also radio, and to some extent the press, derives in part from an analogy with Durkheim's theory (1995 [1912]) of how religion's pervasive distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane' is socially generated. Crucial here is Durkheim's underlying distinction between social experience and ordinary experience, the force of which, he argues, grounds the sacred/profane distinction itself. This force derives from the individual's awe in the presence of the 'social' (1995: 208–25). Durkheim's account relates specifically to the sense of the sacred in a particular nomadic Aboriginal society which he describes as coming together only occasionally for ritual occasions focused around totemic objects, but his description of the totemic object's power is still highly suggestive for an analysis of television:

> Imputing the emotions [of the social] to the image is all the more natural because being common to the group, they can only be related to a thing that is equally common to all. Only the totemic emblem meets this condition. *By definition, it is common to all. During the ceremony, all eyes are upon it.* Although the generations change, the image remains the same. It is the abiding element of social life. (p. 222, emphasis added)

Analogously – and this is *only* an analogy, as I explain later – in a society of almost universal television consumption, and largely shared patterns of programme availability,[2] the simple fact that television is 'by definition common to all' itself grounds its function as a frame for the social.

158

Television's 'authority depends on its continual presence' (Silverstone, 1983: 150). This function has over time been reinforced by many 'media events' (Dayan and Katz, 1992) when television has performed that framing role quite explicitly (major sports events, royal ceremonial, political crises), but it is not only a dimension of exceptional media events; it is inherent to the media's permanent position as the frame through which private worlds face the social.

It is artificial here to separate television from other mass media: radio and the press (compare my earlier broad 'common-sense' definition of 'the media'). First of all, while these media vary in the degree to which they have 'mass' audiences (and if the press has always had a segmented readership, see Abercrombie, 1996: 153, the same is increasingly true of television and radio); all these media, in any case, interpenetrate in consumption, referring to each other in a web of significance. Second, I am arguing that, over and above the detailed differences between these media, we have a sense of 'the media' which relates to the underlying functional position of media in society as the 'frame' through which we (as private citizens) access the social. The phrase 'the media', in this sense, while it maps onto the broad institutional sphere that links television, radio and the press, is a *constructed* term, that operates by contrast to another constructed term, 'the ordinary' (that is, the part of the social world that is not 'in' the media). It is this categorical distinction between 'media' (person, thing, world) and 'ordinary' (person, thing, world) that is at the root of media institutions' power, and the hidden injuries to which I suggest that power gives rise.

At this level also it is misleading to separate the media's fictional and news contents (whatever the importance of doing so in other contexts, for example in genre analysis), because both derive their status from the media's special symbolic authority (Couldry, 2000: 51–2). Joshua Meyrowitz (1992) has put this point well:

> [Fictional] programmes are massive, shared experiences that everyone perceives as massive shared experiences. Through such conscious sharing, they come to seem as real as – sometimes more real than – the varied and less shared experiences of our individual lives. (p. 466)

The significance of this apparently merely definitional point is clear, if 'most people watch fiction [rather than news] on television most of the time' (Morley, 1999: 139). The implication is not that we should downplay questions about the factual accuracy of television, but that we should

investigate how television's authority is reproduced across both news *and* fiction, and in the blurring of the two.

The media's 'framing' function connects with another argument, about the categorization, or the 'ordering', of the social world (Couldry, 2000: 44–50), which I have already touched upon in explaining the particular way in which I am using the term 'the media'. Important here, once again, is Durkheim's theory of the social origins of religion: particularly his account of the 'sacred'/'profane' distinction (1995: 33–9). It is not that the media are literally 'sacred'. Rather, the sacred/profane distinction is a useful structural analogue for a different distinction: between 'media world' and 'ordinary world'. This latter distinction is particularly important in naturalizing the media's concentration of symbolic power.

What distinguishes the division between 'sacred' and 'profane' according to Durkheim (1995[1912]) is not content ('anything . . . can be sacred', p. 35) nor its use to rank objects and people (there are many rankings whose significance is less profound), but simply the fact that the division is 'absolute': 'the sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common'. The division divides 'the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane'; hence maintaining this division requires in practice a general *separation* of sacred and profane things (pp. 34, 36, 38). As we will see, there is a structural parallel between these points and the media case.

I want to be quite explicit about what I intend by adapting Durkheim here, and what I do not intend. I do not intend to claim that media contents are like religious contents (although many have suggested that media are a sort of religion); at most I am claiming a *structural* analogy between Durkheim's argument about how social categories such as sacred/profane are generated and how (in different circumstances) another categorical distinction (media/ordinary) is generated. (Still less am I taking a position on whether Durkheim's analysis of the sacred/profane distinction is a satisfactory account of contemporary religion's central features, nor do I need to do so.) Like Bourdieu (1991) in his work on symbolic power, I am interested in Durkheim's *general* notion of categorical distinctions, but with the added twist of arguing that Durkheim's account of sacred and profane helps explain some particular features of the media/ordinary distinction, since both distinctions have their origins in a regular experience of sociality, the experience of 'togetherness' before shared reference-points, or what *pass for* shared reference-points. Just as the hierarchical distinction between sacred and profane is (according to Durkheim) grounded in the way the social is

framed in a sacred context, so too the framing of the social through a media context is what grounds a pervasive, and I suggest hierarchical, distinction between 'media world' (everything associated with the media process) and 'ordinary world' (everything outside it). It is this categorical distinction that underlies, I suggest, our sense of media power as both 'natural' and legitimate.

I will come back to the question of hierarchy in a moment and seek to justify it further through my empirical examples. First, however, let me emphasize that, while we can develop an analogy from Durkheim that helps us capture the depth of the media's power, and its roots in the organization of social experience itself, it is equally important to see the *limits* of any Durkheimian model of media power. The media/ordinary distinction is *not* a 'social fact' in the Durkheimian sense: it is not beyond contestation. Although it operates as if absolute, it is constructed, not natural. It cuts across and *reshapes* social reality, mystifying the process of media production as a world somehow 'apart' and reifying the vast sector of social life outside media production as a so-called 'ordinary' domain. It also masks the complexities of media production processes themselves. And above all, it disguises, and therefore helps naturalize, the far from natural inequality of symbolic power from which the complex institutional sphere of the media benefits.

This gap[3] – between the enormous rhetorical reach of media representations (their claims about the social 'whole') and the partial reality which the media process itself comprises – is one way we can approach this article's title: the 'hidden *injuries* of media power'. For if our sense of 'the media' (as the source of truths about the social) is based on an overvaluation of the media's status, then our sense of 'the ordinary' (the ordinary world, the ordinary person) is based on an undervaluation: a pervasive devaluation of the ordinary as a site of meaning and value. This might seem paradoxical in an age of reality television (on which more below), until we recall that it is *mediated* versions of the ordinary that generally have our attention, not the sphere of the 'ordinary' proper that lies in the shadow of the media's operations, and which is my main concern.

If my argument is correct then it becomes plausible to speak about media power (and the hierarchical distinctions which sustain it) not just as an inequality of resources, but also as a source of 'injury': an injury connected with the pervasive misrecognition of everyday life as '*merely*' ordinary (not, that is, touched by the 'glamour' of mediation). The idea of media power's 'hidden injuries' draws, then, on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of 'symbolic violence' (pp. 209–12), that is, an inequality imposed not by

force, but by consent: consent based on a misrecognition of the social world as already structured to 'fit' that inequality.

Bourdieu himself does not use the term 'hidden injuries', of course, which I take from Sennett and Cobb's (1972) account of how class inequalities are embedded in individuals' categorizations of the relative worth of themselves and others. Class power – and the same can be argued, I suggest, for media power – works partly through a mistaking of its arbitrariness for something natural. In the case of 'class', however, the injury, if not the misrecognition, is fairly obvious: people are disadvantaged because they value themselves less, imagining their subordinate position in the distribution of society's economic resources as somehow justified by an underlying moral or psychological inequality. But where in the case of media power does the hidden injury lie? It lies (analogously) in people's accepting as somehow justified their subordinate position in the distribution of society's *symbolic* resources, the ability to speak and be listened to on what matters to the world at large. If I am correct in analysing this as an injury, then it surely has implications for the constitution not only of the political field (see Couldry, 2001) but also of the private sphere.

This at least is my hypothesis but, to develop it, we need to look more closely at how our beliefs about the media are reproduced in practice. We affirm media's power at a distance, not because media actually bring us together, but because they construct themselves, and we construct them, *as if* they did. As many recent theories of power[4] have suggested, media power, for all its basis in institutional brute facts (including profound inequalities of access to the means of media production), is sustained in a dispersed way, through our beliefs and patterns of thought about media institutions. They not only evidence the fact that we lend legitimacy to media institutions; they are part of the process through which that legitimacy is sustained, and it is this process in particular on which I want to cast some light.

A research strategy

How can we research those beliefs and patterns of thought, the culture of media belief? How can we research the subset of beliefs which sustain the media/ordinary distinction and hierarchy, that I have suggested underlies both media power and the mediated landscape of everyday consumption? A good entry-point is situations where non-media people and media institutions meet close up, and non-media people's talk and beliefs about such situations. You might object that the whole point about the media, as institutions of broadcasting, is that such moments are rare: the media are

precisely communication at a distance. But just because a social process is rare does not mean that it is insignificant. Indeed the fact that non-media people rarely do have free access to media people may *itself* reveal something about the power disparity between those two groups, or at least its sources. To take a broader analogy from the study of religion, the fact that many ritual experiences (such as pilgrimage, communion) are rare or ritually controlled, does not make them any less worth studying. On the contrary, such ritual interactions, when they occur, tell us a lot about how the social power of religious institutions is more widely reproduced.

If people's general attitudes to the media are shaped by their normal separation from the process of media production, then their accounts of what happens when (rarely) they see that process close up may bring to the surface precisely the assumptions about media – the background expectations and judgements which normally remain unarticulated – that interest us. This, broadly speaking, was how Harold Garfinkel sought to analyse the 'background expectancies' at work in everyday social interaction by studying what happens when those expectancies are breached (Garfinkel, 1984: ch. 1).

ON THE TRACK OF MEDIA BELIEFS

In this section, I introduce some empirical material on media consumption, which does not come from the places where we normally look for evidence of our relationship to the media. It does not come from the home, still our main site of media consumption, nor even from the scattered public sites where we consume media (McCarthy, 2001), but from those points in the wider landscape of consumption and public action where our beliefs about the media are at issue: first, voluntary situations, where people choose (for leisure) to visit a place of media production (where the connection to the wider consumption landscape is clear), and, second, involuntary situations where people find themselves close to media production, because they are involved in events that are the subject of media coverage (here the connection with consumption is latent but emerges below). The first type of situation I label '*pilgrimages*' and the second, acts of '*witnessing*'. The half-dead metaphor of 'pilgrimage' has indeed become a cliché of media reporting on tourism; 'witnessing', by contrast, is a live metaphor for situations where the normal hierarchies of the media landscape are encountered in their full arbitrariness. (The terms 'pilgrimage' and 'witnessing' are of course ideal types: I am not claiming that they are mutually exclusive in everyday practice, or that they are the only forms of engagement with the media process from the outside.)

The media threshold

As pilgrimage sites, I studied tourist locations based on sites of media production (such as television sets or film locations), in particular visits to Granada Studios Tour (GST), Manchester, home of the set of Britain's longest-running prime-time soap opera, *Coronation Street*.

One of the first things that interested me about GST was that it was a place where people expended substantial amounts of money and time to see a place that, by definition, they had already seen countless times on television: the main outside set of a familiar television programme. What is the meaning of such visits?

Let me approach this first through one visitor's comment on why he would not want to go to an exhibition *about Coronation Street* a few miles away at Britain's famous seaside resort of Blackpool, run by the same entertainment company, Granada, and called predictably 'World of Coronation Street':

> I've no desire to go, I would hate it, because it's not the real one. [short laugh] All right, so people could say, 'But that [Coronation Street set] isn't the real one'. But it is, it's where they film the outdoor scene, it's the one where the actors are, where the studios are, where it all originated. Where did Blackpool come into it? (John)

Note that John's sense that the *Coronation Street* set, and nothing else, is worth visiting co-exists with his knowing that it is only a set and that others regard it as such. This knowingness fits uneasily with the apparent post-modern truth, wittily expressed by Umberto Eco, that we live in a world in which the 'completely real' is identified with the 'completely fake' (Eco, 1986: 7, quoted in Rojek, 1993: 160). At the same time, there is a sense of 'aura' in John's comment: aura in Benjamin's broad sense (1968), yet not the aura of something outside the mechanical reproduction of filming, but the aura of the place and process of filming itself. This was present in many other comments by visitors, for example:

> It's magic, it's a great feeling, sitting at home when you watch telly and say *I was there*! To think you could do that. (woman interviewed on site, original emphasis)

We need to unpack this sense of aura a little, and I can describe only a few of its interesting implications. One is the possibility that the set works as a place for ritual performance. Here is how Michael, an Irish fan of the

programme, with whom I corresponded, described being on the set (he had visited two times, and was planning to return):

> From the moment I put my foot on the Street I feel like a star. I start my walk down the Street starting from the 'Rovers Return' [the programme's pub] to the 'corner shop'. I look through *all* the windows and through *all* the letter boxes. I touch the stone cladding of number 9. (. . .) Every time I walk down the Street I get that same wonderful happy feeling. It is the best thing and most wonderful thing I have ever done. (original emphasis)[5]

Or here is John again, describing his sense that he didn't want to enter the buildings on the set (in fact, you cannot do so, which disappointed many other visitors!):

> I didn't think for one minute that I'd be able to get in (. . .) I actually felt privileged just to turn the knob and try to get in [to the Rovers Return pub] (. . .) No, no, it was just brilliant to be photographed outside it.

Specific to this sense of ritual performance is a sense of a ritual *boundary*, embodied in the set and the basis of its ritual status. The boundary in question is that between the world in which visitors usually operate (the 'ordinary world') and the world the set inhabits, the 'media world'.

The importance of this boundary – which, as I have already argued, is central to sustaining the media/ordinary hierarchy – emerged elsewhere in my interviews with set visitors in their reflections about other occasions when they had approached that boundary. Here is Debbie, a printing-worker in her 20s, talking about a separate occasion when she was walking round Liverpool's old dock area, now transmuted into a heritage site, which at the time was where live weather broadcasts on a popular magazine programme, *Richard and Judy*, were filmed, with the forecaster afloat in the dock!

> . . . the weather was at twelve o'clock. And there was a big crowd of people (. . .) And out came the cameramen . . . and he starts filming . . . doing the weather (. . .) it was (. . .) a bit unbelievable really (. . .) seeing him really like small. Yeah, he's on the telly, and then actually being there and like the camera crew are there and you're thinking, Oh, I wonder if I'll get on telly (. . .) [one page earlier] I enjoyed seeing that, thinking, Oh wow! That's on telly! And I'm standing there and . . . Oh Mum, quick! Put on the weather! You know I was standing up there.

165

It was the excitement of that moment, Debbie recalled, that started her interest in visiting media locations generally, including GST. Exceptionally, she had found herself 'standing *up there*': the other side of the boundary between media and ordinary worlds. Her words reflect in stark form the normal existence of that boundary: 'That's on telly! And I'm standing there'. As she put it elsewhere, summing up the meaning of her visit to GST:

> It's not just somewhere on telly now, it's actually somewhere I've been, I've actually stood there.

This distance between 'media world' and 'ordinary world' emerged also in the idea that even the shortest appearance on television (for example, as an 'extra') can be significant, because it crosses a boundary which embodies a categorical distinction. Peter, a catering worker in his 20s from the Midlands, had for some time applied unsuccessfully to be an extra on *Coronation Street*:

> I approached Granada [the TV production company, not the manager of GST] (. . .) to be an extra. But they won't let me (. . .) I wouldn't mind, just going into the Kabin [a shop in the programme] and ordering . . . a paper or something and then walking out, I don't want to speak or anything. Just . . . once to be on television. On the show. I'd be happy then . . . I think.

However small and 'ordinary' the action, it would be significant if it meant having once entered the 'media world'. Even doing something ordinary on television (like 'ordering a paper'), however brief, makes a difference. And when Peter did finally appear on television on a talk show, he felt that he had changed in some way:

> Totally different now from the way I used to be (. . .) I was so quiet, I never dreamed of working in the bar, I was (. . .) always in the back scenes, come out on the bar now (. . .) It did change me [appearing on TV] (. . .) I'm in the open now, talk to anybody.

Patricia Priest's important study of US talk show participants (Priest, 1995, 1996; cf. Gamson, 1998) points in the same direction. Her interviewees commented on the reactions of other people once they had appeared on television: even if they were identified with a group facing public hostility, they met positive responses, simply because they had appeared on television. Participants' feelings of empowerment derived not just from what they had said publicly, but from the transformative power of

television itself: "I felt like I had contributed to society", "when I think I'm useless . . . , I think 'But wait, I have touched these people'" (Priest, 1996: 74). Of course there are differences between speaking on television in the first person and appearing as an extra in a fictional programme – thus for most of Priest's interviewees, the importance of making a self-disclosure outweighed any specific desire to be on television (1995: 46) – but the structural pattern is similar. Both acts are ways of transforming one's relation to the 'media world'.

While 'ordinary viewers' *do* appear on television – indeed daytime talk shows and evening 'reality TV' are full of them – it is the normal impossibility of appearing that matters more at the level of people's 'dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977). As one US talk show participant said: "I guess the average American doesn't think they could ever get on a talk show" (Priest, 1996: 71). Debbie's experience of herself being on a talk show (as part of the studio audience for the popular UK daytime talk show *Kilroy*) is significant here. In recounting it, she dwelt more on the experience of watching a videotape of the programme back home, than on being on the programme itself. Watching the tape shocked her:

> I thought, God, that's me, I'm on telly. God, that is so strange [short laugh] (. . .) I couldn't remember sort of like . . . being there, it just didn't seem the same watching it on telly, it was totally different (. . .) Or it's not like telly, it's like a sort of home video that someone's brought round that's done on a camcorder. You think, God, is that really on the telly? Is there millions of people watching it? Don't know, I honestly had to tape over it in the end, because it was making me cringe.

Debbie could not make a credible connection between the two states (being on television and being at home). She could no longer effectively recall what it felt like to 'be there' on television. She started to doubt the status of the recording: was it just a piece of '*home* video' (made entirely outside the media world)? In destroying her best evidence of ever crossing the boundary between her world and the media world – something which elsewhere she made clear she wanted to do – Debbie registered the dislocation caused by the absolute boundary between her 'world' (the world of 'home video') and the 'media world' (the world which 'millions' watch).

"Her picture in the paper, but her on the corner"
I turn now to the situations of 'witnessing' mentioned earlier, where people involuntarily come up close to the media process. I researched, in particular,

167

people's experience of protests which were featured in media coverage, situations far removed from media consumption it might seem, but striking for how they consolidate the picture of the mediated symbolic landscape we gained from GST. I concentrate on interviews conducted with people who had protested at Brightlingsea, one of a number of British ports whose protests combined to make live exports of veal calves and lambs a major issue in the British news agenda in 1995. Note that I am deliberately abstracting from the detailed issues of that protest to concentrate on participants' reflections on their relation to the protests' intense media coverage.[6]

For almost every protester at Brightlingsea – as the media emphasized – this was their first experience of protesting. In fact, people came 'in touch' with a whole other world: of animal cruelty, police intimidation, morally questionable business practices, behind-the-scenes government influence. At the same time, emerging through all these other factors was a disruptive dimension which the media did not highlight. The events provided protesters with their first direct experience of the *process of media reporting itself*. Protesters suddenly found themselves 'subject[s] of media representations as distinct from . . . consumer[s] of media images' (Benton and Redfearn, 1996: 58). Journalists, camera crews, press photographers, satellite transmission dishes – all the trappings of media production on location – were there. Protesters as non-media people were interacting directly with media institutions (or at least their representatives). The shock of seeing face-to-face the media process – and realizing the gap between media coverage (that of a previously trusted 'window onto the world') and their own direct experience of the protests – encouraged many to reflect on their earlier attitudes to the media.

I want to concentrate on my (NC) interview with Rachel, a social services worker in her early 40s. Like many others at Brightlingsea, Rachel reported that she had lost her trust in the media:

> NC: What effect do you think it had on you, being so close to the media? (. . .)
>
> Rachel: I think it completely took away . . . any awe that I may have had . . . respect isn't the right word.
>
> NC: Awe rather than respect? (. . .)
>
> Rachel: Yeh, I suppose yeh, because things on the telly aren't always real, are they? It's all exciting, and it happens to other people, so the opportunity to be right in the

> midst of it . . . didn't have an effect that if you'd asked me two or three years ago, it might have done. I'd have said, 'Ooh, I'd have pushed myself, or I'd hide so that nobody could see me' (. . .) I don't think my reaction could have been predicted at all (. . .) You know, [I would have said] 'I'd have hidden and not had anything to do with it, out of coyness' or 'I'd have been really brave and I'd have said something, I'd have told them what I really thought'. But it was still with that sort of feeling, [a click sound, indicating surprise] 'Ooh! these big people have come from the television!' you know.

NC: So what had changed? Why didn't you feel that this time, do you think?

Rachel: Because they let me down, I think. Because I had enough short-term experience of what they were doing . . . to feel that . . . they weren't getting it right. It still needed me to tell my friends what was going on (. . .) I think, resentment, that we were totally at their mercy, as to whether anything was said at all.

Rachel's reflections back beyond the time of the protests to her previous attitudes to the media are striking. Previously she had felt more than respect for the media: she had felt "awe'" expressed in her sense of "media people" as "big people". "Awe" is a strong word to use, but it is consistent with her analysis of her likely previous reaction to appearing in the media: either avoiding the media through nervousness, or "pushing herself" and "telling them what [she] *really* thought". Either way, as she sees, she would have been acknowledging a sense of the boundary which media participation involves: "it was still with that sort of feeling, 'Ooh, these big people have come from the television!'".

That sense of a boundary between 'media' and 'ordinary' worlds is another version of the boundary we found in people's reflections on visiting GST. The implied barrier between an 'ordinary person' and the media process emerged elsewhere in an interview with another animal rights campaigner, Louise, who began using a camcorder to film maltreatment of animals at a local livestock market. A phrase of Louise's summed up her feeling of the shift her involvement in media-related protests represented for herself and others:

> It's all changed. We're just ordinary people with no experience *of the media* or protests or anything. (emphasis added)

For Louise, implicitly, being an "ordinary person" meant having no experience of the media (or as Rachel put it, "television's all exciting and it happens to *other people*").

Perhaps the most vivid sense of that boundary, and its materiality, came when Rachel described how during the protests she saw outside her bedroom window the local 'lollipop lady'[7] surrounded by police for no apparent reason, and then saw a similar photo of her in the UK daily newspaper *The Independent*:

> And Sandra the lollipop lady who speaks to us every day and remembers my kids' names and everything, is totally surrounded by uniformed police officers, and she'd done *nothing*, she was standing on the kerb, and it was just so bizarre that Sandra was *in the paper* (. . .) I can't even describe how utterly inappropriate it was. Because Sandra stands down there, Sandra Jones with her lollipop. [original emphasis]

Rachel had felt genuine anxiety at Sandra's situation, yet something else breaks through: the sense of shock that the '*ordinary* world' Rachel inhabited was temporarily part of the '*media* world', which everyone in the country could see. Compare Rachel's description of seeing her friend's husband in the paper:

> And the other picture was again so very very poignant and . . . it just said it all, is Geoffrey, who is . . . is just Geoffrey, he's got two little boys and he's just normal and he works ever so hard and he's in a sea of police officers and he's pointing . . . shouting at them . . . and the futility of it (. . .) But he was so recognizable, you just opened *The Independent* and there's Geoffrey in *The Independent* [laughs] (. . .) It was just so . . . I can't describe it, but just two . . . very very very very normal boring ordinary people (. . .) And that for me epitomized it all. Her [Sandra's] picture in the paper, but her on the corner.

What Rachel "can't describe" is the temporary fusion of 'ordinary' and 'media' worlds that overrides the normally naturalized boundary between 'ordinary' and 'media' worlds. The shock of this – its 'impossibility' – is expressed precisely in the insistent banality of the language (Couldry, 2000: 104–5, 196ff; cf. Billig, 1997: 225): it was "just Geoffrey", "just normal",

170

"just two", "very very very very normal". Yet paradoxically this 'ordinary world' had become mediated, creating a gap which was strange: "her picture in the paper, *but* her on the corner". In that small word "but", the division between media and ordinary worlds is expressed in a naturalized, and therefore uncontestable, form.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

In examining media power, and the hierarchy and boundaries which help legitimate it, it has been necessary in the last two sections to focus on the details, first, of the theoretical framework with which I am working and, second, of how traces of such large-scale patterns can be found in empirical evidence of people's reflections on their encounters with the media process. In concluding, I want to widen my focus considerably and indicate a range of debates where it is helpful to pay attention to the forces that structure the mediated symbolic landscape, which is not detached from, but closely overlaps with, the general landscape of everyday consumption.

There is, I have argued, a boundary, regularly legitimated and symbolically effective, between 'media world' and 'ordinary (that is, non-media) world', a boundary which is 'absolute' in Durkheim's sense, so that *any* crossing of it, or even approach to it, is automatically significant. It is because we stand in such a relationship to the media world, that Cecelia Tichi's (1991) apparent statement of fact rings true: 'to be transposed onto television is to be elevated out of the banal realm of the off-screen and repositioned in the privileged on-screen world' (p. 140, quoted in Priest, 1996: 80). This boundary condenses a categorical difference which is not simply optional – something we can think with, if we want – but compulsory, or at least usually compulsory, since naturalized, unless we explicitly work to deconstruct it. As a constructed boundary, it operates to distort the actual complexities of the media process. Of course, in practice, media production draws its personnel and its themes very often from 'ordinary' life, but that does not undermine the media/ordinary boundary; on the contrary, it is what makes it all the more compelling as the frame through which ('ordinary') social life becomes glamorous by virtue of being mediated. As with all social constructions, the reality underlying the arbitrariness of the construction is messy. That gap, which the constructed authority of the media/ordinary boundary bridges, may be painful at times, as we have seen. Yet our belief in the legitimacy of that boundary (a belief that is odd, when stated so baldly, which is why it rarely is stated so baldly) is the basis of what I have called the 'hidden injuries of media power'.

If this argument is accepted, then it can help us better grasp various

areas of contemporary cultural consumption. First, there is the space of celebrity and fandom, in particular the seemingly endless reinscription of the media/ordinary boundary in new media forms, including the 'ordinary' celebrity who appears to transcend the media/ordinary boundary in a move which generally just reinforces its legitimacy: television games such as *Big Brother*, as played in many countries in 2000, are a good example (Couldry, forthcoming). Second, there is the phenomenon of 'participatory' media, which claim legitimacy from their inclusion of 'ordinary people who watch television':[8] talk shows and all forms of 'reality TV', from those which simply show clips of surveillance footage (traffic accidents, and so on) to highly crafted docusoaps organized around a theme from everyday life (in the UK, recent examples would be *Hotel*, *Driving School*, and *Airport*). Underlying all such programmes is a fascinating question: why do people wish to participate in them, in spite of often significant costs? How the media/ordinary boundary is negotiated varies greatly between these types of programme, of course, but rarely, I would contend, is it de-naturalized or called into question. More broadly, the idea that the media put us 'in touch' with the 'larger' world (the other side of the 'merely ordinary' world in which we live) structures many consumer phenomena, from the growth in media-related tourism (such as GST in Britain and Universal Studios in America) to the media-saturated rhetoric of large-scale commercial events. We can hear that rhetoric in comments on Vancouver's *Expo 86*, where one visitor spoke of "the wonderful line-ups which enabled me *to meet the world*" and another reflected that "remembering the time I sang with my friends *in front of the world* live in a studio was something extraordinary for me" (quotes from Ley and Olds, 1992: 188, 190, emphasis added). The symbolic landscape which the media imply is a dimension of our 'sensuous geographies' (Rodaway, 1994), which has been insufficiently studied.

My argument throughout, however, has been that we must do more than describe the surfaces of the symbolic landscape that media have generated, important though that is. As sociologists concerned with power and the naturalization of inequality, we need to think about the impacts of the inequalities built into that landscape and entrenched in the media/ordinary distinction. Underlying his rhetorical excess, Baudrillard's enduring insight may be to have seen that media institute 'a separation . . . a social *division*' (1981: 128). To put it crudely, why else would the transition to celebrity (and the games played in celebrity's border zones) matter so much?

An important qualification is however necessary to my overall argument. I am not saying that the media/ordinary boundary is simply reproduced everywhere and evenly (without any possibility of ever being

de-naturalized) or denying that there are many ways of living with that boundary, just as there are with any other social division. We can play with the boundary, imagining we have transgressed it (for example, by 'real life' actions that pretend to work within the space of media fictions: people who send flowers when a soap opera character dies).[9] We can fantasize about crossing that boundary (Couldry, 2000: 55–7). We can be ironic or mocking about the boundary. All these are ways of negotiating distance from the media/ordinary boundary that at the same time reinstitute it (Bourdieu, 1991: 89–91). As Slavoj Zizek (1989: 33) has argued – and this point has been neglected in accounts of the 'fluidity' of the postmodern – 'even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them', that is, still reproducing the form of the division we claim to mock. There are many ways, as Bourdieu puts it, of 'loving the inevitable' (1977: 77).

In any case, mediation is only one dimension of social reality; it is not its totality and as sociologists we must always insist upon this, even as we recognize that it is precisely the media's claim to represent the social *whole* that is the basis of their power. Behind that totalizing claim, there are many important distinctions which we need to explore further. First, there are the barely explored differences in territories' cultures of media belief, each territory having its own history of relations between state, market, religion, and media. Media power is not the same thing in America, Russia, Singapore or the UK and, if we pretend it is, we obscure from view a potentially rich field of comparative research. Second, it remains unclear how new media and the digital convergence of media will affect media power: will it lead to its gradual dispersal across a flattened landscape of interconnected consumer/producers, or will it only serve in the long run to entrench the symbolic power of a new digital 'supermedium' (Castells, 1996: 358–64)? Will 'narrowcasting' become the dominant, not merely a subsidiary, feature of the media landscape? As yet we do not know (cf. Neuman, 1991). Certainly, in relation to the internet, for example, we need to distinguish the open-ended complexity of internet practices from the forces which are already consolidating '*the* Internet' (Miller and Slater, 2000: 16).

Finally, and in case we are tempted to dismiss this whole area of research as simply repeating a banal truth that the media are central to our lives, it is worth emphasizing that it is precisely the *banality* of this truth that makes it difficult for us to see it clearly, and still more difficult for us to contest. The banality of media power, and our beliefs which sustain it, have recently been reflected, if only in reverse, by a striking case where they were contested. People have recently begun to contest the media-enhanced elision

173

of political space with consumption space (Giroux, 1999, 2000) in surprising ways. Think of the wide resonance which Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000) has had, even if that book oversimplifies the politics of today's consumption landscape (Hanspal and McRobbie, 2000). As Alberto Melucci, a leading analyst of the changing forms of symbolic conflict (Melucci, 1989, 1996), has put it, only partly exaggerating: 'the real domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming' (1996: 179), that is, naming social reality in words, and of course images, which command attention. Such domination cannot simply pass without being contested at some level and Melucci's insight, far from being banal, may be exactly the incitement we need to grasp the world of media consumption, and consumption more generally, not just as playful surface, but as a true landscape of power whose contours and fissures we have yet to track.

Notes

1. On 'symbolic power' as the 'power of constructing reality', see Bourdieu (1991: 163–70); see also Bourdieu's recent (1998) controversial analysis of television itself. For earlier and fundamental perspectives on 'media power' in this sense, see Debord (1983), Carey (1989), Hall (1973), Scannell (1996) and Silverstone (1988).
2. I say 'largely' to allow for the multiplication of channels on cable and satellite, and now digital, television. I come back to this complication in the conclusion.
3. Crucial in grasping that gap was the work of Guy Debord (1983), itself influenced by Henri Lefebvre.
4. For example, Callon and Latour (1981), Foucault (1979), Giddens (1984) and Knorr-Cetina (1981).
5. '(. . .)' indicates material omitted by the author, '. . .' indicates a pause by the interviewee.
6. See, for more detail, Benton and Redfearn (1996) and Couldry (2000: ch. 7).
7. A colloquial English term for a woman who is employed to stop the traffic to allow children to cross the road.
8. A phrase used by an interviewee of Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 119).
9. Thanks to Roger Silverstone (personal conversation) for suggesting this interpretation of such easily maligned actions (see also Couldry, 2000: 107–8 on playing at transgression).

Acknowledgements

174

References

Abercrombie, Nicholas (1996) *Television and Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Baudrillard, Jean (1981) 'Requiem for the Media', in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St Louis, MO: Telos Press.

Baudrillard, Jean (1993) 'Hyperreal America', *Economy and Society* 22(2): 243–52.

Benjamin, Walter (1968) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.

Benton, Ted and Redfearn, Simon (1996) 'The Politics of Animal Rights – Where is the Left?', *New Left Review* 215: 43–58.

Billig, Michael (1997) 'From Codes to Utterances: Cultural Studies, Discourse and Psychology', in Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (eds) *Cultural Studies in Question*, pp. 205–26. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1998) *On Television and Journalism*. London: Pluto.

Callon, Michel and Latour, Bruno (1981) 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So', in K. Knorr-Cetina and A. Cicourel (eds) *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-sociologies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Carey, James (1989) *Communications as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Castells, Manuel (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Corner, John (1997) 'Television in Theory', *Media Culture & Society* 19(2): 247–62.

Couldry, Nick (2000) *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*. London: Routledge.

Couldry, Nick (2001) 'The Umbrella Man: Crossing a Landscape of Speech and Silence', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4(2): 131–52.

Couldry, Nick (forthcoming) 'Playing for Celebrity: *Big Brother* as Ritual Event', *Television and New Media*.

Davis, Susan (1996) 'The Theme Park: Global Industry and Cultural Form', *Media Culture & Society* 18(3): 399–422.

Dayan, Daniel and Katz, Elihu (1992) *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Debord, Guy (1983) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red.

Durkheim, Emile (1995[1912]) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

Eco, Umberto (1987) *Faith in Fakes*. London: Secker and Warburg.

Foucault, Michel (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Gamson, Joshua (1998) *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Garfinkel, Harold (1984[1967]) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Giddens, Anthony (1984) *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity.

Giroux, Henry (1999) *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Giroux, Henry (2000) *Stealing Innocence: Youth, Corporate Power and the Politics of Culture*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Gottdiener, Mark (1997) *The Theming of America: Dreams, Visions and Commercial Spaces*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Hall, Stuart (1973) 'The "Structured Communication" of Events', Occasional Paper No. 5. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

Hanspal, Vrajesh and McRobbie, Angela (2000) 'Logo Love and its Critics', *Media Culture & Society* 22(6): 841–5.

Hopkins, Jeffrey (1990) 'West Edmonton Mall: Landscape of Myths and Elsewhereness', *Canadian Geographer* 34(1): 2–18.

Jackson, John Brinckerhoff (1994) *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*. West Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Klein, Naomi (2000) *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. London: Flamingo Press.

Knorr-Cetina, Karin (1981) 'The Micro-sociological Challenge of Macro-sociology: Towards a Reconstruction of Social Theory and Methodology', in K. Knorr-Cetina and A. Cicourel (eds) *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-sociologies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Kowinski, William (1985) *The Malling of America: An Inside Look at the Great Consumer Paradise*. New York: William Morrow.

Langman, Lauren (1992) 'Neon Cages: Shopping for Subjectivity', in R. Shields (ed.) *Lifestyle Shopping*. London: Routledge.

Lazarsfeld, Paul and Merton, Robert (1969[1948]) 'Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organised Social Action', in W. Schramm (ed.) *Mass Communications*, 2nd edn. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Ley, David and Olds, Kris (1992) 'World's Fairs and the Culture of Consumption in the Contemporary City', in K. Anderson and F. Gale (eds) *Inventing Cultures: Studies in Cultural Geography*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Livingstone, Sonia and Lunt, Peter (1994) *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*. London: Routledge.

McCarthy, Anna (2001) *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Meinig, D.W. (1979) 'Symbolic Landscapes: Some Idealizations of American Communities', in D.W. Meinig (ed.) *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Melucci, Alberto (1989) *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. London: Hutchinson Radius.

Melucci, Alberto (1996) *Challenging Codes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meyrowitz, Joshua (1992) 'The Power of Television News', *The World and I*, June.

Miller, Daniel and Slater, Don (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

Morley, David (1999) 'Finding Out About the World from Television: Some Problems', in J. Gripsrud (ed.) *Television and Common Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Neuman, W. Russell (1991) *The Future of the Mass Media*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Priest, Patricia (1995) *Public Intimacies: Talk Show Participants and Tell-All TV*. Cresskill, NJ: The Hampton Press.

Priest, Patricia (1996) '"Gilt by Association": Talk Show Participants' Televisually Enhanced Status and Self-Esteem', in Debra Grodin and Thomas Lindlof (eds) *Constructing the Self in a Mediated World*. London: Sage.

Rodaway, Paul (1994) *Sensuous Geographies*. London: Routledge.

Rojek, Chris (1993) *Ways of Escape*. London: Routledge.

Sack, Robert (1992) *Place, Modernity and the Consumer's World: A Relational Framework for Geographical Analysis*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Scannell, Paddy (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Life*. Blackwell: Oxford.

Sennett, Richard and Cobb, Jonathan (1972) *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silverstone, Roger (1983) 'The Right to Speak: On a Poetic for Television Documentary', *Media Culture & Society* 5: 137–54.

Silverstone, Roger (1988) 'Television Myth and Culture', in J. Carey (ed.) *Media, Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Stivers, Richard (1994) *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline*. New York: Blackwell.

Tichi, Cecelia (1991) *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.

Zukin, Sharon (1991) *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nick Couldry is Lecturer in Media and Communications in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His main research interests are in the cross-disciplinary areas where media theory meets work on ritual, citizenship and space. His recent publications include *The Place of Media Power* (Routledge, 2000), *Inside Culture* (Sage, 2000) and 'The Umbrella Man: Crossing a Landscape of Speech and Silence', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4(2), 2001. *Address*: Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. [email: n.couldry@lse.ac.uk]

177