MEDIA LSE

No.2
Media, Symbolic Power and the Limits of Bourdieu's Field Theory

Dr Nick Couldry, Lecturer in Media and Communications,
Media@lse, London School of Economics and Political Science

Nick Couldry lectures in media communications and the sociology of culture at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he is Director of the Masters in Media and Communications Regulation (and Policy) and (from Autumn 2003) joint director of a new Masters in Culture and Society. He is the author of three books: The Place of Media Power (Routledge, 2000), Inside culture (Sage, 2000) and Media Rituals: A Critical Approach (Routledge, 2003).

Contact address:
Dr Nick Couldry
Media@lse
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
LONDON
WC2A 2AE
UK
Tel: +44 (0)207 955 6243
Email: n.couldry@lse.ac.uk

MEDIA, SYMBOLIC POWER AND THE LIMITS OF BOURDIEU'S FIELD THEORY

Nick Couldry

Abstract

Social theory (even when most concerned with media: ideological analysis, postmodern theory, systems theory) has failed to clarify how media affect its key concepts. The best starting-point is a modified version of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. While analysing media production as a particular field (or sub-fields) is not new, field theory as normally practised is less comfortable with the idea that media representations impact on all social space simultaneously – precisely the issue in understanding media power. The solution is to draw on Bourdieu's less well known work on symbolic power and the state's prescriptive authority, drawing an analogy between contemporary media's social centrality and Bourdieu's account of the French state's 'meta-capital' across and between all fields. The resulting empirical research agenda is outlined and (in conclusion) a related theoretical issue (how do media affect Bourdieu's notion of habitus?) is anticipated, which the author intends to treat in a separate article.

Introduction

As Niklas Luhmann's recently translated book reminds us (Luhmann, 2000), media raise significant ontological and epistemological questions about the nature of the social world. How should we conceptualise the contribution of society's central media to social reality and how, in particular, are we to model the long-term impacts of the complex feedback loop they represent? The starting-point for this article is that none of social theory's obvious candidates for modelling those processes are radical enough, but the best way forward lies in a version (albeit significantly modified) of Bourdieu's theory of the social world. In particular, I want to argue that, although Bourdieu's theory of fields by itself cannot encompass the complexity of media processes (in spite of various suggestions by Bourdieu and others that it might), it can, if modified in the light of Bourdieu's separate theory of the state, be an important first step towards that wider model.

We cannot study media in isolation, as if they were a detachable part of the wider social process. The connections work in more than one direction. Media processes are part of the material world, yet we must also capture the force of the mystifications that media generate or, less pejoratively, their contribution to the 'social construction of reality' (Berger and Luckmann, 1968). Media, like the education system, are both mechanism (of representation) and source (of taken-for-granted frameworks for understanding the reality they represent).

An influential British and American tradition of media sociology has approached the media's contribution to social reality through the concept of ideology (for example, Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980, 1992; Kellner,

1995), arguing that the media reproduce ideological contents originally generated elsewhere (in essence, a Gramscian model of hegemony, as the mediator between base and superstructure). But the causal relationship between specific media contents and people's beliefs has proved elusive (Couldry, 2000: 8-10), and in any case such work tells us little about the status of media institutions themselves in society, the consequences of that status and how it is sustained.[1] Postmodernist social theory (Baudrillard, 1983; Virilio, 1986; compare Lash, 1990; Bauman, 1992), by contrast, does seek to address the impacts of media institutions on social structure, but through suggestive pronouncements, rather than empirically grounded detail. From a third perspective, Niklas Luhmann's (2000) systems model of 'the reality of the mass media' offers (in its own terms at least) a rigorous account of how the media work within social reality, but one which excludes discussion of ideological effects in any sense of the term. Not only is the truth or falsity of specific media representations irrelevant according to Luhmann (2000: 7, 75), but his concentration on the broad functional interrelations between media system and wider social system obscures the contingencies underlying the media process that are most 'ideological': the tendency for this type of person or thing, rather than that, to be heard or seen. What gets omitted, in other words, is power and social differentiation, precisely the dimension of the media process that poses the most interesting and far-reaching causal questions.

We need a middle-range theory of the media's impacts on social reality, and the particular power of media institutions to constitute, not merely reflect, our sense of the social which – and this is the crucial qualification – still addresses the questions of power and inequality that motivated earlier work on media ideology. We need a theory of the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions, seen as a significant dimension of power and mediated social reality in its own right (Melucci, 1996). This is what I shall mean by an account of 'media power', to which this article hopes to contribute. Such an account must, however, reflect the important reconceptualisation of power (Foucault, 1979, Callon and Latour, 1981, and Actor Network Theory generally) as a dispersed, emergent process, rather than something possessed by a person or institution, and held at a particular place. There is an underlying sense of the complexity of social space here that is, in broad terms, common to Bourdieu's field theory as well, the social theory on which most of this article will focus.

By 'media' I will mean the media which, until recently, have been assumed to be society's 'central' media – television, radio and the press – that is, our central means of access to society's reality and its 'centre'.[2] This limitation is tactical: we must be clear first about how to theorise these media's centrality, before approaching the issues relating to specific media, for example, the increasingly important issue of whether new media developments (particularly the Internet and media digitalization) will undermine the social centrality currently attributed to television, radio and the press (cf Neuman, 1991).

Although the study of media in social theory has been a relatively neglected area (excepting Thompson, 1995), this article's aim of exploring theoretically how to model the social impact of the existence of media institutions (the most fundamental question of media 'effects', as Lazarsfeld and Merton long ago pointed out: (1969) [1948]) fits with what Bourdieu called the goal of all sociology: 'to uncover the most deeply buried structures of the different social worlds that make up the social universe, as well as the "mechanisms" that tend to ensure their reproduction or transformation' (1996a: 1). I examine here the limitations of one candidate for understanding media power, Bourdieu's field theory, which claims that every social action is understandable only in terms of the field where it is situated (from which a notion of the 'journalistic' or 'media field' springs quite naturally). Although *prima facie* straightforward, how can this model cope with the distinctive ambiguity of media processes as both localised processes of production (part of the wider, structured space of economic and cultural production) and the generator of representations of the social world as a whole (cf Debord, 1983).

We encounter here, in a specific form, one difficulty with Bourdieu's field theory in general: its concentration on the relationships between producers of goods, and its relative neglect of consumers, and particularly the relationships between producers and consumers of the same goods (cf Fabiani, 1999: 85 on the literary field).[3] The way forward, both for field theory in general and for the analysis of the media's social impacts, lies, I will argue, in drawing on Bourdieu's less well-known, and in some senses less developed, theory of the wider social space in which fields are situated,[4] and the influence on that space of institutions like the state (Bourdieu, 1996a); there are crucial analogies between the French state (in Bourdieu's account) and the media in my account, in terms of the way they influence how the social world is categorised. The account offered here remains, it is true, at the level of structural exploration, and avoids one other key dimension of media's consequences for social theory – media representations – which would require another and quite different article. For now, however, given the confusion that an unmodified field theory generates for an analysis of media power, some clearing of the theoretical ground is in order.

Symbolic Power: From a Weak to a Strong Notion

To get this conceptual exploration under way, I want to discuss the concept of 'symbolic power', for two reasons: first, because Bourdieu's insistence on a strong notion of 'symbolic power' is a vital aid in grasping the pervasive nature of media institutions' social impacts; second, because the very generality of this strong notion of symbolic power is difficult to reconcile with Bourdieu's field theory, raising the potential contradiction explored further below that a Bourdieu-influenced theory of the media's social impacts must overcome.

What is the difference between a weak and a strong concept of symbolic power? The weak concept might be exemplified by John Thompson's work (1995). Drawing on Bourdieu but also Michael Mann's work, Thompson's work valuably insists on the symbolic as an important dimension of power alongside the political and the economic. Thompson defines 'symbolic power' as the 'capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms' (1995: 17). This definition helpfully captures in general terms the power of a number of social institutions over symbolic production: the media, the church, educational institutions. But it is a weak concept of symbolic power, because it does not allow for the possibility that certain types of concentration of symbolic power (and I will focus here only on the symbolic power of media institutions) require a special analysis. In particular, Thompson (1995: 269 n8) rules out a possibility, suggested by Bourdieu's work, that certain forms of symbolic power are necessarily misrecognised.

A strong concept of symbolic power, by contrast, suggests that some concentrations of symbolic power are so great that they dominate the whole social landscape; as a result, they seem so natural that they are misrecognised, and their underlying arbitrariness becomes difficult to see. In this way, symbolic power moves from being a merely local power (the power to construct this statement, or make this work of art) to being a general power, what Bourdieu once called a 'power of constructing [social] reality' (1990a: 166). This strong concept of symbolic power is an important theme in Bourdieu's work, and indeed a theme that distinguishes him from other major social theorists. But, in its very general scope, it sits oddly with Bourdieu's well-known insistence that all his other key sociological concepts (habitus, capital) are comprehensible only in the context of a specific field: a field of action in which particular types of capital are at stake and particular types of disposition (or habitus) are fitted for success. Thus the concept of 'symbolic capital' in Bourdieu is almost always specific and local, meaning any type of capital (economic, cultural, and so on) that happens to be legitimated or prestigious in a particular field (1986: 132, 133; 1990a: 230; 1990c: 134-135). Much less often does Bourdieu refer to symbolic capital, more generally, as the symbolic resources for making representations or constructions of social reality (1977: 165; 1990c:

137). As a result, it is difficult to make a link from his field theory to his discussion elsewhere of television's 'symbolic power' (*poids symbolique*) (1996b: 58; 1998a: 50) in the strong sense already noted. But it is just such a strong concept of symbolic power that we need, in order to grasp the media's broader social impacts.

How then can Bourdieu's strong concept of symbolic power – strong precisely because it recognises the pervasive impacts of media institutions' production of representations on the construction of social reality tout court – be reconciled with Bourdieu's insistence that his sociological concepts make sense only in the context of specific fields?[5]

From Journalistic Field to Media 'Meta-Capital'

The only starting-point lies within field theory itself, since there is little doubt that, as a sphere of cultural production, the media can, at least *prima facie*, be seen as a single field, or a collection of fields, (each) with a distinctive pattern of prestige and status, its own values, and a distinctive and increasingly troubled relationship to economic pressures (compare Bourdieu's well-known concern with the relative autonomy or heteronomy of particular fields vis-à-vis the 'economic pole').

1. The Media as Field(s)?

Bourdieu himself frequently used the term 'journalistic field' (*champ journalistique*): this notion dominates Bourdieu's only two published reflections on media, the two television addresses collected under the title *On Television and Journalism* (1998a), which have become highly controversial in French public life and in the field of media sociology. Sometimes we also find the term 'media field' (*champ médiatique*) (Bourdieu, 1996b: 47; cf Champagne, 2000). In this field (whether we call it 'journalistic' or 'media'), like all others, distinctive forms of capital are at stake. Both Bourdieu and Champagne discuss how far success in that field is increasingly defined by purely economic criteria, reducing its relative autonomy. There are no problems of principle with this notion of the journalistic field, although there are numerous issues of detail, such as whether there is one such field or many, and, if many, how are they interrelated (Benson, 1998; Chalaby, 1998; Marlière, 1998). A recent issue of *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* – particularly Champagne (2000), Balbastre (2000) and Joinet (2000) – provides useful empirical explorations of this model, although none of its essays interrogated the assumption that the media process can be fully and satisfactorily theorised as operations within a specialist, if highly influential, field of production.

Important though an understanding of the 'journalistic field' in this sense is, it tells us little about media power as normally understood: that is, the impact of media representations on social reality, including on the operations within fields other than the media field(s). Journalists in their field compete with each other against the background of media power (in this broader sense), but their competition is not 'about' that power, the analysis of which therefore falls outside the analysis of the journalistic field.

The potential difficulty here is confirmed when we turn to Bourdieu's analysis of one key influence on the operations of the media field(s): the state. Bourdieu (1996a, 1998b) takes over and extends Weber's notion of the state, conceptualising the state as a monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence. In this context he is required to make an important distinction: between (a) the level at which the state's own power (its symbolic power) is established and (b) the field in which agents (civil servants, politicians, and all those passing through the élite schools which, under the French system, control access to state positions) compete for the 'monopoly over the advantages attached to [the state's] monopoly' (1998b:

58-59). This distinction sounds something like the one we have just made concerning the journalistic field and media power. Can we draw a parallel distinction between (c) the level at which the media's symbolic power (media power) is established and (d) the field(s) in which agents (journalists, regular media performers, and many others) compete for the benefits that derive from, or are indirectly associated with, media power? If so, then we have discovered (in (c)) a dimension to media which is not, and cannot be, encapsulated within the operations of a media 'field of production', and yet one inextricably tied to the media's power to represent the world.

In an early lecture on 'symbolic power' (1990a: ch. 7 [originally published 1977]) Bourdieu used the term 'symbolic system' to describe both the university system and much earlier religious systems which each had authority to classify social space as a whole, over and above the details of particular fields. Bourdieu, in his account of the state, talks similarly about the 'field of power' focussed on the state (1996a: 264; 1998b: 42). But we can ask here: is 'field' the right term for the space in which a power such as the state's emerges? A field is a specific delimited space where agents compete for certain specific types of capital. But the state (at least on Bourdieu's account) does not compete for – it already has preeminence over - the definitions, for example, of legal and educational status (Bourdieu, 1998b: 40-45; cf 1990a: 239-241); and the state's influence as a reference-point in social life works not in one field only, but across all fields (Bourdieu, 1990a: 229). The state's 'field of power' is not therefore, I suggest, a field in Bourdieu's normal sense. Rather it is a general space where the state acts upon the interrelations between all specific fields (in the usual sense),[6] indeed, we might say, acts upon social space in general.

Having pushed the argument this far (using Bourdieu's own account of the state), it is only a small step to suggest that 'field' is not the right term to characterise the level at which media power (as opposed to the detailed operations of the journalistic field) operates and is established. Media power requires us to think about a society-wide dominance which the term 'field' does not capture. I turn later to address how more precisely this dominance can be formulated within Bourdieu's social theory, drawing again on his analysis of the state, but for now it is worth emphasising that all this is quite consistent with retaining the notion of the media field(s) (including the journalistic field) as sub-spaces within the wider social space of cultural production; indeed, as we see below, an important dimension of media power cannot be understood without retaining that aspect of Bourdieu's social theory.

2. Specific Problem Cases for a Field Theory of Media

To bring out the importance of this issue, I want to mention some cases where holding fast to field theory as the exclusive framework of explanation creates something like an impasse in Bourdieu's account of the media and those of his followers.

First, if we turn to Bourdieu's only explicit treatment of the media (1998a), there is not so much an impasse as a lacuna in the theoretical model with which he appears to operate. This book has been heavily criticised for some of its more sweeping generalisations about the way media represent the social world (their 'trivialisation' of it) and its assumption that the impacts on people's experience and their potential for critical awareness are equally sweeping, and damaging. Since, as already explained, I am not looking to discuss the issue of media contents in this article, these criticisms are not relevant to my argument. More important is the gap, nowhere filled, between Bourdieu's detailed discussion of how the media field(s) operate as fields of production, on the one hand, and his reference to the special 'symbolic power' of television, on the other. The interrelations between media fields are, Bourdieu argues quite plausibly, undergoing major change: television journalism is becoming increasingly influential in setting the agenda for the whole journalistic field and, because of the increasing economic pressures on television journalism (analysed mainly in terms of corporate influence over journalists' agendas, but the point could be made more subtly in terms of declining journalistic resources)[7] the whole journalistic field is becoming more susceptible to economic pressures. In turn, as protagonists in many non-media fields increasingly want media representation in order to further their success in those other fields (because of the media's general power to define what 'matters' in society), the factors structuring media field(s) are increasingly influencing the whole space of cultural production (including, most controversially for many of Bourdieu's readers, the field of academic production).

Stripped of some of its more incautious comments, this is, I would argue, a powerful, if shorthand, account of some of the ways in which the media are affecting the social world. While the details of its account of the internal dynamics of the media field(s) can no doubt be debated (Marlière, 1998), its linking of media to the transformed internal dynamics of all fields of cultural production is very provocative. My concern here is that Bourdieu's claim is theoretically underdeveloped. It depends on a notion that television's 'symbolic power' somehow influences what actors in particular non-media fields do (because they think media attention helps them compete against their fellow academics, artists, cooks, and so on). I think Bourdieu is right to see media's influence working in this way across all fields, but nowhere does he integrate this type of effect into his wider social theory. There is a lacuna between Bourdieu's 'field' theory Bourdieu that works to explain the details of media production (and who can object to Bourdieu's insistence on theory that works closely with grounded empirical detail?) and his wider conceptual framework; nothing in other words is there to underwrite the intuitive leap he wants to make to capture the media's influence on social space as a whole.

The same problem emerges more explicitly, not as lacuna but as genuine impasse, in the work of the one colleague of Bourdieu who has specialised in media analysis: Patrick Champagne. Champagne in his book *Faire L'Opinion* (1990) attempts to analyse the media's impacts on contemporary politics entirely through

an account of the complex operations of the journalistic field. The journalistic field has a relationship with the political field so close that Champagne is tempted to refer to it as 'a journalistic-political field' or 'space' (1990: 261, 277). (Bourdieu is more cautious, saying simply that the journalistic field may 'in a certain way' be seen as part of the political field (Bourdieu, 1998a: 76).) That relationship, argues Champagne, has transformed the definition of politics (1990: 264), but not for the good. The political field has become increasingly insulated from external influences and conflicts (i.e. from those that politicians are meant to represent). By a 'circular logic' (1990: 39), both journalists and politicians 'react' to a version of public opinion which they have largely constructed, through the framing of questions for opinion polls, the reported reactions to those polls' results, and through the influence of journalists' accounts of politics. (This is very similar to the notion of 'spin', that, rightly or wrongly, is so controversial at present in British politics.) The same circular logic constrains those outside the political hierarchy who might otherwise break through it; following Baudrillard (1981) but with much greater sociological authority, Champagne (1990: 204-222) argues that demonstrations are often created for the media, as a means of communicating through, and therefore on the terms of, the media (1990: 232).

Once again, there is much that is interesting here, but my concern is with its theoretical coherence. First, there is something like a theoretical sleight of hand in the idea that the previously separate journalistic and political fields have merged. This enables Champagne to talk of the influence of journalists' definitions of 'events' on politicians' definitions of events, without needing to address a crucial difficulty: that Bourdieu's field theory, by itself, has no way of accounting for how representations made by actors in one field can influence the actions and thoughts of across in another field. Elsewhere, Champagne attempts to harness the question of media influence on non-media actors back into field theory by claiming that people's ability to work with the media somehow reflects a mysterious interrelationship between the workings of the media field and the workings of the quite different fields in which those actors are players:

> Everything happens as if the journalistic event was a transposed form, in the relatively autonomous logic of the journalistic field, of the economic, institutional, cultural or symbolic capital which social groups [wanting to be represented in the media] have at their disposal [i.e. for application in their own fields]. (Champagne, 1990: 239)[8]

But this account obscures more than it clarifies. Most interestingly, Champagne introduces the notion of a new specific type of capital – 'media capital' (capital médiatique) (1990: 237, 243) – to capture people's relative ability to influence journalistic events based on the capital they have already acquired elsewhere (1990: 239). But there is only the briefest explanation of this new term,[9] even though it implies an effect (of capital acquired for use in one field on actions in another) that field theory cannot easily encompass.

Champagne's empirical point is that people, through their sense of what performances, or images, work in the media and their own capacity to deliver them, are increasingly drawn into, and influenced by, the specific constraints of the journalistic field: 'different social groups, taking account of their own media capital, conform more or less rapidly to this [media] space and to its specific profits' (Champagne, 1990: 243-44). What is needed, however, to provide some theoretical coherence, is a model that (a) allows for the fact that one field (media field) can influence the workings of another (the political field), perhaps even (although this is speculative and controversial) to the extent of inducing the other to merge with it; and (b) shows the mechanisms (by definition, not specific to either of those individual fields) through which that influence can occur. It is interesting that even one of the most sophisticated recent exponents of Bourdieu's field theory for media analysis, Rodney Benson, is also drawn to a similar problem when he claims that journalism is a 'crucial mediator among all fields' (Benson, 1998: 471) but, no more than Champagne or Bourdieu, does he integrate this into the overall field theory.

There is an underlying problem here, not soluble within a theory of fields (and therefore not soluble using Bourdieu's well-known range of sociological concepts, provided they are regarded as tied to a specific field context): the problem of how to account for the dynamic interrelationships between fields across social space. If the representations of the social world produced by actors in one field (media) influence the actions of actors in another field (for example, politics), or (perhaps less problematic) the capital acquired by actors in one field (the political field) influences actions of those in another (the media field),[10] such influences – particularly the former – cannot be explained in terms of the capital or habitus obtaining in the second field. Which invites us to break Bourdieu's prohibition, and argue that both 'capital' and 'habitus' are usable as concepts (and partly determined as qualities) outside the context of specific fields of action. The concept of habitus deserves a separate article, but I now want to turn to how, in accordance with some clues provided in Bourdieu's treatment of the state, we can think about the external influences on what counts as capital in a particular field.[11] This has major implications for the scope of field theory, and enables us to find a way beyond its impasses in the media case.

3. The Media's 'Meta-Capital'

There is an issue, as Craig Calhoun pointed out in a very perceptive discussion (1995: 139), of how to understand the increasing 'convertibility' of different types of capital across the whole range of fields. Interestingly, this was an issue addressed by Bourdieu himself in his less well-known work on the state (on the importance of which I have touched in 1. above); it was also, we saw, raised implicitly in Bourdieu's and Champagne's separate accounts of television.

In his late 1980s and early 1990s work (summarised in Bourdieu, 1996a) in the no the French state's increasing influence over the educational field (and through that the key entry-points into all or most fields of power in France), Bourdieu addressed a power that was not limited to any specific field, yet indirectly influenced the terms of play in all of them. The idea of such a wider form of power was a consistent, if relatively minor, theme in his work throughout his career. It goes back to his Durkheimian notion that religious institutions exercise a 'monopoly of the legitimate exercise of the power to modify . . . the practice and world-view of lay people' (Bourdieu, 1987: 126); it pervades his whole sociology of education (and remember how at the beginning of *The State Nobility* he reemphasises that the 'sociology of education [lies] at the foundation of a general anthropology of power and legitimacy' (1996a: 5)); it is present also in his interesting essays on 'rites of institution' and 'symbolic power' (1990a); and then, most explicitly, it is central to his work on the state. What is most striking, however, is that Bourdieu never connected in any formal, developed way this broad notion of (effectively) 'symbolic power' in the strong sense to his comments on the media; on the contrary, the media are entirely absent from his work until *On Television and Journalism*, where there is no link back to his theory of religion or the state. Once again, a lacuna or at least an issue that needs to be pursued.

In the discussions that form *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Bourdieu was asked whether the state is a sort of 'meta-field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 111). His answer strikingly used the notion not of field, but of capital:

> The concentration of . . . different types of capital goes hand in hand with the rise and consolidation of the various fields [i.e. the specific fields which historically have contributed to the power of the state]. The result of this process is the emergence of a specific capital, properly statist capital, born of their cumulation, which allows the state to wield a power over the different fields and over the various forms of capital that circulate in them. This kind of meta-capital capable of exercising a power over other species of power, and particularly over their rate of exchange . . . defines the specific power of the state. It follows that the constitution of the state goes hand in hand with the constitution of the field of power understood as the space of play in which holders of various forms of capital struggle in particular for power over the state, that is, over the state's capital over the different species of capital and over their reproduction (via the school system in particular). (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 114-115, added emphasis)

I have already queried the consistency of this 'field of power' with Bourdieu's normal concept of 'field'. But that does not undermine the usefulness of the notion of 'meta-capital' that Bourdieu introduces, for this new concept differs from 'capital' in Bourdieu's normal usage, precisely in functioning not by reference to a particular field (contrast Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 101), but over and above specific fields. The state acts directly on the infrastructure of all fields: it is 'the site of struggles, whose stake is the setting of the rules that govern the different social games (fields) and in particular, the rules of reproduction of those games' (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1993a: 42). This works through the state's influence on the hierarchical

relationship or 'exchange rate' (1996a: 265) between the fundamental types of capital at stake in each individual field (for example, economic versus cultural capital) (in Wacquant, 1993a: 23).

For the first time, Bourdieu introduces a concept for grasping how the workings of all fields can be changed by what goes on elsewhere, that is, in what we must imagine as an overarching space based in the state's central role in the social infrastructure. This power of the state is, crucially, not derived from the workings of any specific field, even if it is quite possible to think of the immediate space of competition between civil servants as a 'field' in its own right.

Similarly, I want to suggest, we should understand media power as a form of 'meta-capital' which enables the media to exercise power over other forms of power. This gives clearer theoretical shape to Bourdieu's own most interesting insights about the media. When Bourdieu discusses the increasing pressure of television on, say, the academic field (1998a), there is of course a direct economic dimension (a large television audience means more books sold), but television exerts also, he suggests, an indirect pressure by distorting the '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, thereby distorting the academic field's position relative to other fields, including the media field and (because of its influence on the media field) the economic field.

More general issues are also at stake here about the impact of media on the 'exchange rate' between the capital competed for in different fields, and therefore on the relationship between the various fields in social space. None of this, however, is inconsistent with Bourdieu's point that capital is only realised by agents in specific fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98). For that reason, it is not surprising that the symbolic capital (among chefs) that comes from being a successful television chef is unlikely to be convertible into symbolic capital in a very different field, such as the academic field, since the former need not involve few, if any, of the specific attributes valued by media in representatives of the latter. On the other hand, the relationship between the media production field itself and all other fields is transformed, because being a player in the former brings with it (or at least has a significant chance of bringing with it) influence over the terms on which people can acquire symbolic capital in a range of other fields, from politics to the visual arts to cookery to sport to gardening. In this way, 'media power' can be seen to operate in a differentiated, quite concrete, but at the same time increasingly pervasive, way across social space.

Every day the media sustain their status as the legitimate controller of access to public existence (cf Couldry, 2000: chapter 3), not just for politicians but for many other types of social actor. By so doing, they maintain the value of their 'meta-capital' over the various fields where those actors operate. When the media intensively cover an area of life for the first time (as in the past decade in the fields of gardening

or cooking), they alter the internal workings of that sub-field and, at the same time, both increase both the ambit of the media's meta-capital across the social terrain and further legitimate the long-term concentration of symbolic power in the media. This, I suggest, is one important way in which over time media institutions have come to benefit from a truly dominant concentration of symbolic power (symbolic power in the strong sense of a power over the construction of social reality) – not through fiat, but through the increasingly complex interconnections between a mass of specialist fields and a 'central' media field.

Ways forward for Empirical Research

This article has proceeded by way of theoretical discussion, aiming to clarify how, and to what extent, Bourdieu's existing field theory can be modified so as to capture at least one way in which media power might work. Theory, of course, has no independent value, unless it can be confirmed by, and made to work effectively within, detailed empirical research; however, the picture so far has sought to build on other aspects of Bourdieu's social theory and (as its implicit support) some recent media theory (for the general argument on media's symbolic power developed here, cf Couldry, 2000, especially chapters 1 and 3, which in turn draws on its own body of empirical research). My justification for not offering the results of new empirical research in this article is that, as argued earlier, the empirical work done on media using Bourdieu's social theory (i.e. using field theory) involves deep-seated problems – hence the need to adjust the theory before proceeding to further empirical work. In this section, however, I want to review some key directions for empirical work implied by my theoretical argument, linking where possible to research already done on the media's social impacts.

If the modification of Bourdieu's field theory proposed here is accepted, then at least one dimension of media power (not the only one: see conclusion) can be mapped very effectively through studying in detail how the media's meta-capital is, or is not, progressively altering the operating conditions in a range of individual fields of production. This can be broken down into a number of specific questions to be asked of particular fields and sub-fields:

1. Is media exposure regarded as a significant, or even a predominant, form of symbolic capital in that field? (Clearly, for every (sub-)field there are detailed questions about what sort of media exposure counts there, and these are answerable only in terms of the categorisations operating in that (sub-)field, but the importance of the general question remains.)

2. If the answer to (1) is yes, to what extent is this fact changing that field's relationship to other fields where media exposure is also regarded as a significant component of symbolic capital, by allowing successful players in the former to exchange their success there for symbolic capital in the latter? (In other words, to what extent is the media's meta-capital increasing the convertibility of media-related symbolic capital across the whole space of fields: in one earlier example of interrelations between the sub-fields of cooking and academic production, I emphasised that we cannot assume this, but it remains an issue to be explored empirically – more on this below.)

3. If (1) and (2) are accepted as important questions, then it becomes increasingly urgent to ask what now are the conditions of entry into the media field itself (and all its sub-fields), and how are those conditions changing as 'media capital' (in champagne's term) is being held increasingly widely across the whole range of fields?

In effect, (3) continues the field-based research into media production already undertaken under Bourdieu's aegis (see above) and encompasses questions about the changing external influences, especially economic pressures, on the media field. Only (1) and (2) are new areas that arise from the theoretical argument made above. They in turn raise a further important issue for social theory: will the increasing influence of media over what counts as symbolic capital across all fields lead, in the longer-term, to the increasing convertibility of symbolic capital derived from media exposure or media access across social space as a whole? If so, it would be worth exploring whether a new form of capital (a specialised form of symbolic capital, that we might, following Champagne, call 'media capital') is beginning to emerge. Uppermost here would be the sense of capital as a facilitator of exchange or 'mediation' between fields, rather than an asset for use in a particular field (Calhoun, 1995: 155; 1994: 69). We might, in the long term, see 'media capital' in its own right as a new 'fundamental species of capital', in Bourdieu's phrase, that works as a 'trump card' in all fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98) – just as economic capital is, and for the same reason: because of its high degree of exchangeability or liquidity (Lash, 1994: 201, discussing Bourdieu, 1990c: 92-93) – even if the means by which 'media capital' could be accumulated or exchanged would distinguish it sharply from economic capital. For now, this must remain speculative, but it suggests one further way in which media analysis may in the future require revisions to general social theory.

This agenda of empirical research intersects with existing work on the media's on particular fields. The idea that the political field is being transformed fundamentally by politicians' need for media exposure has been familiar for some time, which does not mean that its workings don't require a considerable amount of unpicking (Street, 2001, chapter 9; Meyer, 2002; Scammell,1995). Bourdieu's own strictures on television's distortion of the proper values of the academic field (Bourdieu, 1998a) (self-serving or brave, depending on your viewpoint) offer at least a provocation to serious empirical research in that area: how is symbolic capital in the academic field being changed through media? Ironically, this is an area where few academics, barring Bourdieu himself with the formidable store of symbolic capital he commanded as Professor of Sociology at the Collège de France, have dared to tread. An interesting area is the visual arts, where (as Julian Stallabrass (2000) has argued) media exposure has increasingly become the stuff of artistic success, even as (at the same time) it has been the subject of artistic reflection, as in the work of Tracey Emin and Gavin Turk to name just two UK artists. Particularly difficult, if potentially also the most far-reaching in its consequences, would be research on the economic field: to what extent is media exposure becoming not only a sign of prestige among business players, but an asset that can be directly converted into economic capital? In limited forms such as 'stars' or 'brands', this has of course long been the case and under quite specific and well-known terms of production (Rojek, 2001), but there is a more general question about how far the possibility or likelihood of media exposure as a token for anticipated economic success makes something like 'media capital' increasingly integral to business at all levels.

Inevitably, more work is required to make these field-specific research questions more concrete, especially in the last, economic, case. However, a further broader question is implied within them. Since, as Bourdieu always insisted, field analysis involves not just the study of abstract structures but the micro-details of action and thought in specific locales (what Bourdieu called 'the production of belief', 1986), none of this empirical work can get far without a great deal of attention to how players in fields think about the media and the media's relevance to what they do. We need to study the categories through which an increasingly pervasive 'mediatization'[12] of public and private life may be becoming normalised, even legitimated. Here our consideration of the media's social effects inevitably spills out beyond the contexts of specific fields, since (as Bernard Lahire (1999) has persuasively argued) there is a large portion of social space that does not belong to any field. This is a point I want to pursue briefly in my conclusion.

Conclusion

One of the boldest and most sweeping remarks in On Television and Journalism is the following:

> One thing leads to another, and, ultimately television, which claims to record reality, creates it instead. We are getting closer and closer to the point where the social world is primarily described – and in a sense prescribed – by television. (1998a: 22, cf Champagne, 1999)

The French version is more vivid:

> *On va de plus en plus vers des univers ou le monde social est décrit-prescrit par la télévision. La télévision devient l'arbitre de l'accès à l'existence sociale et politique.* (1996b: 21)

The hybrid word *'décrit-prescrit'* captures, if only polemically, the naturalising effect of an institutional sector which generates the very categories through which the social world is perceived: this, of course, is a classic Durkheimian point. It is true of course that (as Bourdieu argued forcibly elsewhere) the state, not the media, acts as the formal reference-point for many categories of social existence: academic qualification, working status, married status, adulthood, corporate existence, trading licences (Bourdieu, 1990a: 239-40). Indeed the state in many territories still has direct influence on the economic terms under which the media themselves operate (the most obvious example, paradoxically, being the state-authorised media deregulations from 1990s onwards). But how, on the other hand, do we take account of the media's own role in constructing the social landscape within which politicians (the agents of the state) understand the world? And how do we assess the fact that media fictions are increasingly part of the public space in which politicians think they must intervene on behalf of the state (Fiske, 1996; Hamburger, 2000)?

There is a major question, in other words, about the long-term impacts of the representations of the social world that media institutions circulate. In my introduction, I insisted that I would bracket this issue, because it can only be properly addressed by rethinking (but certainly not replacing) Bourdieu's most fundamental sociological concept, the 'habitus': in mediated societies can Bourdieu's original understanding of the habitus as mechanism still hold? Bourdieu's sociology of education studied how in modern differentiated societies habitus came to be influenced not by traditional structures such as the organisation of domestic space (Bourdieu, 1990b), but by a separate institutional sector (schools) whose shaping, in turn, by the state was developed in later work (Bourdieu, 1996a). A parallel question arises for media in all contemporary societies: how significant is the influence of media institutions on habitus, and how can we understand that influence? We saw earlier the dangers of reifying field theory as the only context for studying 'capital', and the same point applies to 'habitus'. Since media precisely have

17

effects across the whole of social space at once, any account of the long-term impacts of media representations on the formation of 'habitus' in contemporary societies must surely take us beyond the context of specific fields.

To develop that argument would require (at least) a further article. Instead let me close with a final question that suggests how the theoretical position argued for here might be refined further. In the quotation just given, Bourdieu writes almost as if the state (about whose prescriptive powers over social and political reality he had written so eloquently in *The State Nobility*) did not exist. Are we to assume that television is simply part of the state? Clearly not, since the increasing impact of broad market pressures on the whole television sub-field is part of Bourdieu's argument. If so, how are we to understand the relationship between the 'meta-capital' of the state and the 'meta-capital' of media institutions (and through the latter, corporate authority)? This is an issue that, like all the others raised in this article, needs to be considered on a global, comparative basis. Bourdieu provides no answer, and indeed no answer is possible until much more empirical work of the sort just outlined on the workings of the media's meta-capital has been done. Note however that such a question could not even have been formulated if media analysis were confined to operations within specific fields of media production. To this extent, at least, this article has helped open up some new questions about how to theorise the media's impacts on the social world.

Acknowledgements

References

Alexander, Jeffrey (1995) Fin de Siècle Social Theory: *Relativism Reduction and the Problem of Reason*. London: Verso.

Balbastre, Gilles (2000) 'Une information précaire', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 131-132: 76-85.

Baudrillard (1981) [1969] 'Requiem for the Media' in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St. Louis: Telos Press, 164-184.
--- (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Bauman, Zygmunt (1992) *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.

Benson, Rodney (1998) 'Field Theory in Comparative Context: a new paradigm for media studies', *Theory and Society*, 48: 463-498.

Berger, Peter and Luckmann, Thomas (1968) *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
--- (1986) 'The Production of Belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods' in R. Collins et al. (eds) *Media Culture and Society: A Cricial Reader*. London: Sage, 131-163.
--- (1987) 'Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber's Sociology of Religion' in S. Whimster and S. Lash (eds) *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*. London: Allen and Unwin, 119-136.
--- (1990a) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
--- (1990b) *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
--- (1990c) *In Other Words*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
--- (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
--- (1996a) *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
--- (1996b) *Sur La Télévision*. Paris: Liber.
--- (1998a) *On Television and Journalism*. London: Pluto.
--- (1998b) *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu. Pierre and Wacquant, Loic (1992) *Introduction to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Boyd-Barrett, Oliver and Rantanen, Terhi (eds) (1998) *The Globalisation of News*. London: Sage.

Calhoun, Craig (1995) *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History and the Challenge of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Callon, Michel and Latour, Bruno (1981) 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan' in K. Knorr-Cetina and A. Cicourel (eds) *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Chalaby, Jean (1998) *The Invention of Journalism*. London: Macmillan.

Champagne, Patrick (1990) *Faire L'Opinion*, Paris: Editions Minuit.
--- (1999) 'The View from the Media' in P. Bourdieu et al. *The Weight of the World*. Cambridge: Polity, 46-59.
--- (2000) 'Le médiateur entre deux Monde' in Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales, 131-132: 8-29

Couldry, Nick (2000) *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*. London: Routledge.
--- (2002, forthcoming) *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.

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

Fabiani, Jean-Louis (1999) 'Les Règles du Champ' in B. Lahire (ed) *Le Travail Sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu – Dettes et Critiques*. Paris: La Découverte/ Poche, 75-91.

Feuer, Jane (1983) 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology' in E. A. Kaplan (ed) *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches*. Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 12-22.

Fiske, John (1996) *Media Matters*. New York: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel (1979) *Discipline and Punish*. Penguin: Harmondsworth.

Garnham, Nicholas (1994) 'Bourdieu, the Cultural Arbitrary and Television' in C. Calhoun, E. Lipuma, and M. Postone (eds) *Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Polity, 178-92.
--- (2000) *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hall, Stuart (1973) 'The "Structured Communication" of Events', Stencilled Occasional Paper no. 5. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
--- (1980) 'Encoding/Decoding' in S. Hall et al (eds) *Culture Media Language*. London: Hutchinson.

Hamburger, Esther (2000) 'Politics and Intimacy: The Agrarian Reform in a Brazilian Telenovela', *Television and New Media*, 1(2): 159-178.

Joinet, Beatrice (2000) 'Le "Plateau" et le "Terrain"', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 131-132: 86-91.

Kellner, Douglas (1995) *Media Cultures*. New York: Routledge.

Martucelli, Danila (1999) *Sociologies de la Modernité*. Paris: Folio.

Lahire, Bernard (1999) 'Champ, Hors-champ, Contre-champ' in B. Lahire (ed) *Le Travail Sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu – Dettes et Critiques*. Paris: La Découverte/ Poche, 23-58.

Lash, Scott (1990) *Sociology of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.

--- (1994) 'Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural Economy and Social Change' in C. Calhoun, E. Lipuma, and M. Postone (eds) *Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Polity, 193-211.

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

Luhmann, Niklas (2000) *The Reality of the Mass Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Marlière, Philippe (1998) 'The Rules of the Journalistic Field: Pierre Bourdieu's Contribution to the Sociology of the Media', *European Journal of Communication*, 13(2): 219-234.

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

Meyer, Thomas (2002) *Media Democracy: How The Media Colonise Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Morley, David (1980) *The Nationwide Audience*. London: BFI

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

Rojek, Chris (2001) *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.

Scammell, Margaret (1995) *Designer Politics: How Elections are Won*. London: Palgrave.

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

Silverstone Roger (1988) 'Television Myth and Culture' in J. Carey (ed) *Media Myths and Narratives*. Newbury Park: Sage.
--- (forthcoming) 'Mediation and Communication' in C. Calhoun, C. Rojek and B. Turner (eds) *The International Handbook of Sociology*. London: Sage.

Stallabrass, Julian (2000) *High Art Lite*. London: Verso.

Street, John (2001) *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy*. London: Palgrave.

Thompson, John (1995) *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Virilio, Paul (1986) *Speed and Politics*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Wacquant, Loic (1993a) 'From Ruling Class to Field of Power: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu on *La Noblesse d'Etat'*, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10(3): 19-44.

--- (1993b) 'On The Tracks of Symbolic Power: Prefatory Notes to Bourdieu's "State Nobility"', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10(3): 1-17.

Weber, Max (1968) *Economy and Society Volume 3*. New York: Bedminster Press.

Notes

[1] For an exception see Hall (1973)

[2] Cf Couldry (2002, chapters 3 and 4).

[3] A complication is that Bourdieu argues that, for example in the artistic field, it is 'the objective structure of the field of production that gives rise to categories of perception which structure the perception and appreciation of its products', presumably by consumers as well as producers (1986: 148). I do not find this plausible, but, as explained shortly, I would in any case like to defer the issue of media consumption raised here to a separate article, as it raises quite a different set of issues.

[4] In this way, the approach offered here avoids the powerful attack by Bernard Lahire (1999) on Bourdieu's field theory as a partial theory of certain special forms of production that has been falsely generalised to social space as a whole.

[5] For a good discussion of the deeper roots of Bourdieu's notion of fields of action in the legacy of Durkheim and Weber, see Lahire (1999: 24-32).

[6] Cf Bourdieu's own comment (in Wacquant, 1993a: 21). He also refers to the field of power there as 'a system of positions' (20) between holders of different types of capital.

[7] See for example Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen (1998).

[8] There is a similar attempt at field-based explanation in Champagne's contribution to *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu, 1999: 55)

[9] 'Un capital de mobilisation et de sympathie parfois patiemment accumulé, (Champagne, 1900: 246)

[10] I say 'perhaps less problematic' since the very idea of 'capital' (certainly economic or cultural capital) implies some transferability across fields. the questions, in a sense, are: (a) does this transferability extend to 'symbolic capital' of the sort *prima facie* deriving from the media process and (b) (regardless of (b)) does the transferability of economic and cultural capital explain the types of cross-field effects Champagne wants to explain?

[11] As Fabiani (1999: 87-91) points out, Bourdieu does have a range of mechanisms for explaining some such external influences (for example, the changing population of the field), but they are long-term historical factors and none of them would cover the type of direct influence I am discussing here.

[12] Rojek (2001) and cf for the media's ritual 'categories' Couldry (2002).

Electronic Working Papers

Media@lse EWPs will:
- present high quality research and writing (including research in progress) to a wide audience of academics, policy makers and commercial/media organisations
- set the agenda in the broad field of media studies, and
- stimulate and inform debate and policy.

All papers will be peer reviewed and will be given an ISSN. Electronic publication will be supplemented by a small print-run of hard copies. A particular advantage of the series will be the quick turnaround between submission and publication. Authors will retain copyright, and publication here does not preclude the subsequent development of the paper for publication elsewhere.

Contributors are encouraged to submit papers that address the social, political, economic and cultural context of media forms, institutions, audiences and experiences, as well as their global, national, regional and local manifestation.

The editors of the series are **Rosalind Gill (r.c.gill@lse.ac.uk), Andy Pratt (a.c.pratt@lse.ac.uk), Nick Couldry (n.couldry@lse.ac.uk)** and **Terhi Rantanen (t.rantanen@lse.ac.uk),** all based on Media@lse, and the editorial board is made up of other LSE academics with a wide range of interests in information and communication technologies from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (including law, sociology, social psychology, information systems, politics and cultural studies).

Notes for contributors
Contributions are welcomed from academics and research students. Contributors should bear in mind when they are preparing their paper that it will be read on line.

Papers should conform to the following format:
- 4,000 – 10,000 words length
- 150 – 200 word abstract
- footnotes are discouraged
- headings and sub-headings are encouraged
- the Harvard system of referencing should be used.

Papers should be prepared as a PC-compatible Microsoft Word document. Graphs, pictures and tables should be saved as separate files.

4 hard copies and one digital copy (on a PC format disk) of the paper should be sent to:

Andy C Pratt
Media@lse
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
a.c.pratt@lse.ac.uk