

Television

PIERRE BOURDIEU

Collège de France, 52 rue du Cardinal Lemoine, 75005 Paris, France. E-mail: riviermc@msh-paris.fr

Television claims to report reality but largely creates its own reality. There is very little autonomy, largely because the competition for ‘market share’ is so intense. The pressure to fill the space is strong; hence, it must be something for everyone. Everyone is looking over their shoulder to see what their rivals are saying; to know what to say, you need to know what everyone else is saying. This leads to homogenization and political conformity. Politics and economics lead to an internal censorship. ‘News’ is selective, favouring the extremes, blood, sex, crime, riots, not what ordinary people experience. Television calls for dramatization and the exaggeration of the importance of events. In debate, the fast, superficial thinker is favoured over the original and profound. Can you refuse to talk on television? There is a desire to be seen that is exploited.

Berkeley said that ‘to be is to be perceived’. For some of our thinkers (and our writers), to be is to be perceived on television, which means to be perceived by journalists, to be on their ‘good side’, with all the compromises and concessions that implies. And it is certainly true that, since they can hardly count on having their work last over time, they have no recourse but to appear on television as often as possible. This means churning out regularly, and as often as possible, works whose principal function is to get them on television. Consequently, the television screen today becomes a sort of mirror for Narcissus, a space for narcissistic exhibitionism.

I do not think you can refuse categorically to talk on television. In certain cases, there can even be something of a *duty* to do so, again under the right conditions. In making this choice, one must take into account the specificities of television. With television, we are dealing with an instrument that offers, theoretically, the possibility of reaching everybody. This brings up a number of questions. Is what I have to say meant to reach everybody? Am I ready to make what I say understandable by everybody? Is it worth being understood by everybody? You can go even further: should it be understood by everybody? Scholars, in particular, have an obligation – and it may be especially urgent for the social sciences – to make the advances of research available to everyone. In Europe, at least, we are, as Edmund Husserl used to say, ‘humanity’s civil servants’, paid by the government to make discoveries, either about the natural world or about the social world. Part of our responsibility is to share what we have found. I have always tried to ask myself these questions before deciding whether or not to agree

to public appearances. These are questions that I would like everyone invited to appear on television to pose, or be forced to pose, because the television audience and the television critics pose them: Do I have something to say? Can I say it in these conditions? Is what I have to say worth saying here and now?

Invisible censorship

Open access to television is offset by a powerful censorship, a loss of independence linked to the conditions imposed on those who speak on television. Time limits make it highly unlikely that anything can be said. I am undoubtedly expected to say that this television censorship is political. It is true that politics intervenes and that there is political control (particularly in the case of hiring for the top positions in those radio stations and television channels under direct government control). It is also true that, at a time such as today, when great numbers of people are looking for work and there is so little job security in television and radio, there is a greater tendency toward political conformity. Consciously or unconsciously, people censor themselves – they do not need to be called into line.

You can also consider economic censorship. It is true that, in the final analysis, you can say that the pressure on television is economic. That said, it is not enough to say that what gets on television is determined by the owners, by the companies that pay for the ads, or by the government that gives the subsidies. These factors, which are so crude that they are obvious even to the most simple-minded critique, hide other things, all the anonymous and invisible mechanisms through which the many kinds of censorship operate to make television such a formidable instrument for maintaining the symbolic order.

Sociological analysis often comes up against a misconception. Anyone involved as the object of the analysis, in this case journalists, tends to think that the work of analysis, the revelation of mechanisms, is in fact a denunciation of individuals, part of an *ad hominem* polemic. In general, people do not like to be turned into objects or objectified, and journalists least of all. They feel under fire, singled out. However, the further you get in the analysis of a given milieu, the more likely you are to let individuals off the hook. And the more you understand how things work, the more you come to understand that the people involved are manipulated as much as they manipulate. They manipulate even more effectively the more they are themselves manipulated and the more unconscious they are of this.

I stress this point even though I know that, whatever I do, anything I say will be taken as a criticism – a reaction that is also a defence against analysis. But let me stress that I even think that scandals, such as the furore over the deeds and misdeeds of one or another television news personality, or the exorbitant salaries of certain producers, divert attention from the main point. Individual corruption only masks the *structural corruption* that operates on the game as a whole through mechanisms such as competition for market share. This is what I want to examine.

So I would like to analyse a series of mechanisms that allow television to wield a particularly pernicious form of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it. The function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal that which is hidden.

In so doing, it can help minimize the symbolic violence within social relations and, in particular, within the relations of communication.

Let us start with an easy example – sensational news. This has always been the favourite food of the tabloids. Blood, sex, melodrama and crime have always been big sellers. In the early days of television, a sense of respectability modelled on the printed press kept these attention-grabbers under wraps, but the race for audience share inevitably brings it to the headlines and to the beginning of the television news. Sensationalism attracts notice, and it also diverts it, like magicians whose basic operating principle is to direct attention to something other than what they're doing. Part of the symbolic functioning of television, in the case of the news, for example, is to call attention to those elements that will engage everybody – which offer something for everyone. These are things that will not shock anyone, where nothing is at stake, that do not divide, are generally agreed on, and interest everybody without touching on anything important.

When you use up precious time to say banal things, to the extent that they cover up precious things, these banalities become, in fact, very important. If I stress this point, it is because everyone knows that a very high proportion of the population reads no newspaper at all and is dependent on television as its sole source of news. Television enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think. So much emphasis on headlines and so much filling up of precious time with empty air – with nothing or almost nothing – shunts aside relevant news, that is, the information that all citizens ought to have in order to exercise their democratic rights. We are therefore faced with a division, as far as news is concerned, between individuals in a position to read so-called 'serious' newspapers (insofar as they can remain serious in the face of competition from television) and people with access to international newspapers and foreign radio stations and, on the other hand, everyone else, who get from television news all they know about politics.

Show and hide

Paradoxically, television can hide by showing. That is, it can hide things by showing something other than what would be shown if television did what it is supposed to do, provide information. Or by showing what has to be shown, but in such a way that it is not really shown, or is turned into something insignificant; or by constructing it in such a way that it takes on a meaning that has nothing at all to do with reality.

On this point I will take two examples from Patrick Champagne's work. In his work in *La Misère du monde*, Champagne offers a detailed examination of how the media represent events in the 'inner city'. He shows how journalists are carried along by the inherent exigencies of their job, by their view of the world, by their training and orientation, and also by the reasoning intrinsic to the profession itself. They select very specific aspects of the inner city as a function of their particular perceptual categories, the particular way they see things. These categories are the product of education, history and so forth. The most common metaphor to explain this notion of category – that is, the invisible structures that organize perception and determine what we see and do not see – is eyeglasses. Journalists have special 'glasses' through which they see certain things and not others, and through which they see the things they see in the special way they see them.

The principle that determines this selection is the search for the sensational and the spectacular. Television calls for *dramatization*, in both senses of the term: it puts an event on stage, puts it in images. In doing so, it exaggerates the importance of that event, its seriousness and its dramatic, even tragic, character. For the inner city, this means riots. That's already a loaded word... And, indeed, words get the same treatment. Ordinary words impress no one, but paradoxically, the world of images is dominated by words. Photos are nothing without words – the French term for the caption is *legend* and often they should be read as just that, as legends that can show anything at all. We know that to name is to show, to create, to bring into existence. And words can do a lot of damage: Islam, Islamic, Islamicist – is the headscarf Islamic or Islamicist? And if it were really only a kerchief and *nothing more*? Sometimes I want to go back over *every* word the television newspeople use, which they use often without thinking and with no idea of the difficulty and the seriousness of the subjects they are talking about or the responsibilities they assume by talking about them in front of the thousands of people who watch the news without understanding what they see, and without understanding that they do not understand. Because these words do things, they make things – they create phantasms, fears and phobias, or simply false representations.

Journalists, on the whole, are interested in the exception, which means whatever is exceptional *for them*. Something that might be perfectly ordinary for someone else can be extraordinary for them and vice versa. They're interested in the extraordinary, in anything that breaks the routine. The daily papers are under pressure to offer a daily dose of the extra-daily, and that's not easy. This pressure explains the attention they give to extraordinary occurrences, usually unusual events like fires, floods or murders. But the extraordinary is also, and especially, what is not ordinary for other newspapers. It is what differs from the ordinary and what differs from what other newspapers say. The pressure is dreadful – the pressure to get a 'scoop'. People are ready to do almost anything to be the first to see and present something. The result is that everyone copies each other in the attempt to get ahead; everyone ends up doing the same thing. The search for exclusivity, which elsewhere leads to originality and singularity, here yields uniformity and banality.

This relentless, self-interested search for the extraordinary can have just as much political effect as direct political prescription or the self-censorship that comes from fear of being left behind or left out. With the exceptional force of the televised image at their disposal, journalists can produce effects that are literally incomparable. The monotonous, drab daily life in the inner city does not say anything to anybody and does not interest anybody, journalists least of all. There is nothing more difficult to convey than reality in all its ordinariness. Flaubert was fond of saying that it takes a lot of hard work to portray mediocrity. Sociologists run into this problem all the time: how can we make the ordinary extraordinary and evoke ordinariness in such a way that people will see just how extraordinary it is?

The political dangers inherent in the ordinary use of television have to do with the fact that images have the peculiar capacity to produce what literary critics call a *reality effect*. They show things and make people believe in what they show. This power to show is also a power to mobilize. It can give a life to ideas or images but also to groups. The news, the incidents and accidents of everyday life, can be loaded with political or ethnic significance liable to unleash strong, often negative feelings, such as racism, chauvinism or xenophobia. The simple

report, the very fact of reporting, of *putting on record* as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups.

Another example from Patrick Champagne's work is the 1986 high-school student strike. Here you see how journalists acting in all good faith and in complete innocence – merely letting themselves be guided by their interests (meaning what interests them), presuppositions, categories of perception and evaluation, and unconscious expectations – still produce reality effects and effects in reality. Journalists had in mind the political upheaval of May 1968 and were afraid of missing 'a new 1968'. Since they were dealing with teenagers who were not very politically aware and who had little idea of what to say, reporters went in search of articulate representatives or delegates (no doubt from among the most highly politicized).

Such commentators are taken seriously and take themselves seriously. 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.

At stake today, in local as well as global political struggles, is the capacity to impose a way of seeing the world, of making people wear 'glasses' that force them to see the world divided up in certain ways (the young and the old, foreigners and the French ...). These divisions create groups that can be mobilized, and that mobilization makes it possible for them to convince everyone else that they exist, to exert pressure and obtain privileges, and so forth. Television plays a determining role in all such struggles today. It is increasingly the case that you have to produce demonstrations for television so that they interest television types and fit their perceptual categories. Then, and only then, relayed and amplified by these television professionals, will your demonstration have its maximum effect.

The circular circulation of information

The journalistic world is a divided one, full of conflict, competition and rivalries. That said, my analysis remains that journalistic *products* are much more alike than is generally thought. The most obvious differences, notably the political tendencies of the newspapers – which, in any case, it has to be said, are becoming less and less evident – hide the profound similarities. These are traceable to the pressures imposed by sources and by a whole series of mechanisms, the most important of which is competition. Free market economics holds that monopoly creates uniformity and competition produces diversity.

I observe that competition homogenizes when it occurs between journalists or newspapers subject to identical pressures and opinion polls, and with the same basic cast of commentators. Just compare the weekly news-magazine covers at two-week intervals and you will find nearly identical headlines. In the case of a major network's radio or television news, at least (or at worst) the order in which the news is presented is different.

This is due partly to the fact that production is a collective enterprise. The collectivity that produces television messages cannot be understood only as the group that puts a programme together because, as we have seen, it encompasses journalists as a whole. We always want to know who the subject of a discourse is, but here no one can ever be sure of being the subject of what is said. We are a lot less original than we think we are. This is particularly true where collective pressures, and particularly competitive pressures, are so strong that one is led to do

things that one would not do if other people did not exist (in order, for example, to be first). No one reads as many newspapers as journalists, who tend to think that everybody reads all the newspapers. Unless you are in the profession, you do not often read *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération* in the same day. For journalists, a daily review of the press is an essential tool. To know what to say, you have to know what everyone else has said. This is one of the mechanisms that renders journalistic products so similar. If *Libération* gives headlines to a given event, *Le Monde* cannot remain indifferent, although, given its particular prestige, it has the option of standing a bit apart in order to mark its distance and to keep its reputation for being serious and aloof. But such tiny differences hide enormous similarities. Editorial staff spend a good deal of time talking about other newspapers, particularly about ‘what they did and we didn’t do’ and what should have been done – since the other paper did it.

This sort of game of mirrors reflecting one another, produces a formidable effect of mental closure. Another example of this becomes clear in interviews with journalists: to put together the television news at noon, you have to have seen the headlines of the eight o’clock news the previous evening as well as the daily papers; to put together the headlines for the evening news, you must have read the morning papers. These are the tacit requirements of the job – to be up on things and to set yourself apart often by tiny differences accorded fantastic importance by journalists and quite missed by the viewer. For example, journalists will say – and this is a direct quote – ‘we left TF1 in the dust’. This is a way of saying that they are competitors who direct much of their effort toward being different from one another. ‘We left TF1 in the dust’ means that these differences are meaningful: ‘they didn’t have the sound, and we did’. These differences completely bypass the average viewer, who could perceive them only by watching several networks at the same time. However, these differences, which go completely unnoticed by viewers, turn out to be very important for producers, who think that they are not only seen but boost ratings. Here is the hidden god of this universe who governs conduct and consciences. A one-point drop in audience ratings can, in certain cases, mean instant death with no appeal.

In some sense, the choices made on television are choices made by no subject. To explain this proposition, let me point simply to another of the effects of the circular circulation to which I referred above: the fact that journalists – who in any case have much in common, profession of course but also social origin and education – meet one another daily in debates that always feature the same cast of characters. All of which produces the closure that I mentioned earlier and also censorship. This censorship is as effective – more, even, because its principle remains invisible – as direct political intervention from a central administration. You can only break out of the circle by breaking and entering, so to speak. But you can only break and enter through the media. You have to grab the attention of the media, or at least one ‘medium’, so that the story can be picked up and amplified by its competitors.

If you wonder how the people in charge of giving us information get their own information, it appears that, in general, they get it from other informers. The really determining share of information, that is, the *information about information* that allows you to decide what is important and therefore worth broadcasting, comes in large part from other informers. This leads to a sort of levelling, a homogenization of standards. I remember one interview with a programme executive for whom everything was absolutely obvious. When I asked him why he scheduled one item before another, his reply was simply, ‘It’s obvious’. This is undoubtedly

the reason that he had the job he had: his way of seeing things was perfectly adapted to the objective exigencies of his position. Of course, occupying as they do different positions within journalism, different journalists are less likely to find obvious what he found so obvious. The executives who worship at the altar of audience ratings have a feeling of 'obviousness', which is not necessarily shared by the freelancer who proposes a topic only to be told that it's 'not interesting'.

Audience ratings – Nielsen ratings in the US – measure the audience share won by each network. It is now possible to pinpoint the audience by the quarter hour and even – a new development – by social group. So we know very precisely who is watching what, and who not. Even in the most independent sectors of journalism, ratings have become the journalist's Last Judgement. Aside from *Le Canard enchaîné*, *Le Monde diplomatique* and a few small avant-garde journalists supported by generous people who take their 'irresponsibilities' seriously, everyone is fixated on ratings. Wherever you look, people are thinking in terms of market success. Only 30 years ago, and since the middle of the 19th century – since Baudelaire and Flaubert and others in avant-garde milieux of writers' writers, writers acknowledged by other writers or even artists acknowledged by other artists – immediate market success was suspect. It was taken as a sign of compromise with the times, with money. Today, on the contrary, the market is accepted increasingly as a legitimate means of legitimation.

Audience ratings impose the sales model on cultural products. But it is important to know that, historically, all of the cultural productions that I consider (and I am not alone here) the highest human products – maths, poetry, literature, philosophy – were all produced against market imperatives. It is very disturbing to see this ratings mindset established even among avant-garde publishers and intellectual institutions, both of which have begun to move into marketing because it jeopardizes works that may not necessarily meet audience expectations but, in time, can create their own audience.

Working under pressure and fast-thinking

The phenomenon of audience ratings has a very particular effect on television. It appears in the pressure to get things out in a hurry. The competition among newspapers, like that between newspapers and television, shows up as competition for time – the pressure to get a scoop, to get there first. Stories are pushed on viewers because they are pushed on the producers; and they are pushed on producers by competition with other producers. This sort of cross-pressure that journalists force on each other generates a whole series of consequences that translates into programming choices, into absences and presences.

At the beginning of this article I claimed that television is not very favourable to the expression of thought and I set up a negative connection between time pressures and thought. It is an old philosophical topic – take the opposition that Plato makes between the philosopher, who has time, and people in the *agora*, in public space, who are in a hurry and under pressure. What he says, more or less, is that you cannot think when you are in a hurry. It is a perspective that is clearly aristocratic, the viewpoint of a privileged person who has time and does not ask too many questions about the privileges that bestow this time. What is certain is the connection between thought and time. And one of the major problems posed by television is that question of the relationships between time and speed. Is it possible to think fast? By giving the floor

to thinkers who are considered able to think at high speed, is television not doomed never to have anything but *fast-thinkers*, thinkers who think faster than a speeding bullet ... ?

In fact, what we have to ask is why these individuals are able to respond in these absolutely particular conditions, why and how they can think under these conditions in which nobody can think. The answer, it seems to me, is that they think in clichés, in the ‘received ideas’ that Flaubert talks about – banal, conventional, common ideas that are received generally. By the time they reach you, these ideas have already been received by everybody else, so reception is never a problem. But whether you’re talking about a speech, a book or a message on television, the major question of communication is whether the conditions for reception have been fulfilled: does the person who is listening have the tools to decode what I am saying? When you transmit a ‘received idea’, it is as if everything is set and the problem solves itself. Communication is instantaneous because, in a sense, it has not occurred; or it only seems to have taken place. The exchange of commonplaces is communication with no content other than the fact of communication itself. The ‘commonplaces’ that play such an enormous role in daily conversation work because everyone can ingest them immediately. Their very banality makes them something the speaker and the listener have in common. At the opposite end of the spectrum, thought, by definition, is subversive. It begins by taking apart ‘received ideas’ and then presents the evidence in a demonstration, a logical proof. When Descartes talks about demonstration, he is talking about a logical chain of reasoning. Making an argument like this takes time, since you have to set out a series of propositions connected by ‘therefore’, ‘consequently’, ‘that said’, ‘given the fact that ...’ Such a deployment of *thinking* thought, of thought in the process of being thought, is intrinsically dependent on time.

If television rewards a certain number of *fast-thinkers* who offer cultural ‘fast food’ – predigested and prethought culture – it is not only because those who speak regularly on television are virtually on call. The list of commentators varies little. These ‘authorities’ spare journalists the trouble of looking for people who really have something to say, in most cases younger, still-unknown people who are involved in their research and not much for talking to the media. These are the people who should be sought out. But the media mavens are always right on hand, set to churn out a paper or give an interview. And, of course, they are the special kind of thinkers who can ‘think’ in these conditions where no one can do so.

Debates truly false or falsely true

Now we must take on the question of televised debates. First of all, there are debates that are entirely bogus, and are immediately recognizable as such. The milieu of television regulars is a closed world that functions according to a model of permanent self-reinforcement. Here are people who are at odds but in an utterly conventional way: for example, who are supposed to represent the Left and the Right. Referring to someone who twists words, the Kabyles say, ‘*he put my east in the west*’. Well, these people put the Right on the Left. Is the public aware of this collusion? It is not certain. It can be seen in the wholesale rejection of Paris by people who live in the provinces (which the Fascist criticism of Parisianism tries to appropriate). People sense that something is going on but they do not see how closed in on itself this milieu is, closed to their problems and, for that matter, to them.

There are also debates that seem genuine but are falsely so. First, there is the moderator.

Viewers are always struck by just how interventionist the moderator is. He determines the subject and decides the question up for debate. He keeps debaters in line with the rules of the game, even and especially because these rules can be so variable. They are different for a union organizer and for a member of the Académie Française. The moderator decides who speaks, and he or she hands out little tokens of prestige. Some of the participants will get a curt call to order: 'Answer the question please, you haven't answered my question', or 'I'm waiting for your answer. Are you going to stay out on strike or not?' Another telling example is all the different ways to say 'thank you'. 'Thank you' can mean 'Thank you ever so much, I am really in your debt, I am awfully happy to have your thoughts on this issue'; then there is the 'thank you' that amounts to a dismissal, an effective 'OK, that's enough of that. Who's next?' All of this comes out in tiny ways, in infinitesimal nuances of tone, but the discussants are affected by it all, the hidden semantics no less than the surface syntax.

The moderator also allots time and sets the tone, respectful or disdainful, attentive or impatient. For example, a pre-emptory 'yeah, yeah, yeah' alerts the discussant to the moderator's impatience or lack of interest. An exaggerated respect for high culture can lead the moderator, as a largely self-taught person with a smattering of high culture, to admire false great personages, academicians and people with titles that compel respect. Moderators can also manipulate pressure and urgency. They can use the clock to cut someone off, to push, to interrupt. Here, they have yet another resource. All moderators turn themselves into representatives of the public at large: 'I have to interrupt you here, I don't understand what you mean'. What comes across is not that the moderator is dumb – no moderator will let that happen – but that the average viewer (dumb by definition) will not understand. The moderator appears to be interrupting an intelligent speech to speak for the 'dummies'. In fact, as I have been able to see for myself, it is the people in whose name the moderator is supposedly acting who are the most exasperated by such interference.

This poses a very serious problem for democratic practice. Obviously, all discussants in the studio are not equal. You have people who are both professional talkers and television pros and, facing them, you have the rank amateurs (the strikers might know how to talk on their home turf but ...). The inequality is patent. To re-establish some equality, the moderator would have to be inegalitarian, by helping those clearly struggling in an unfamiliar situation. When you want someone who is not a professional talker of some sort to say something (and often these people say really quite extraordinary things that individuals who are constantly called upon to speak couldn't even imagine), you have to help people talk. To put it in nobler terms, I will say that this is the Socratic mission in all its glory. You put yourself at the service of someone with something important to say, someone whose words you want to hear and whose thoughts interest you, and you work to help get the words out. But this is not at all what television moderators do: not only do they not help people unaccustomed to public platforms but they inhibit them in many ways – by not ceding the floor at the right moment, by putting people on the spot unexpectedly, by showing impatience, and so on.

However, these are still things that are up-front and visible. We must look to the second level, to the way the group appearing on a given talk show is chosen, because these choices determine what happens and how. And they are not arrived at on screen. There is a backstage process of shaping the group that ends up in the studio for the show, beginning with the preliminary decisions about who gets invited and who does not. There are people whom no

one would ever think of inviting, and others who are invited but decline. The set is there in front of viewers and what they see hides what they don't see – and what they don't see, in this constructed image, are the social conditions of its construction. So no one ever says, 'hey, so-and-so isn't there'.

The arrangement of the set is so important because it is supposed to give the image of a democratic equilibrium. Equality is ostentatiously exaggerated and the moderator comes across as the referee.

Another invisible yet absolutely decisive factor concerns the arrangements agreed upon with the participants prior to the show. This groundwork can create a sort of screenplay, more or less detailed, that the guests are obliged to follow. In certain cases, just as in certain games, preparation can almost turn into a rehearsal. This pre-scripted scenario leaves little room for improvisation, no room for an offhand, spontaneous word. This would be altogether too risky, even dangerous, both for the moderator and the programme.

The model of what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the language game is also useful here. The game about to be played has tacit rules, since television shows, like every social milieu in which discourse circulates, allow certain things to be said and proscribe others. The first, implicit assumption of this language game is rooted in the conception of democratic debates modelled on wrestling. There must be conflicts, with good guys and bad guys. Yet, at the same time, not all holds are allowed: the blows have to be clothed by the model of formal, intellectual language. Another feature of this space is the complicity between professionals that I mentioned earlier. The people I call 'fast-thinkers', specialists in throwaway thinking – are known in the industry as 'good guests'. They are the people who you can always invite because you know they will be good company and will not create problems. They will not be difficult and they are smooth talkers. There is a whole world of 'good guests' who take to the television format like fish to water – and then there are others who are like fish on dry land.

The final invisible element in play is the moderator's unconscious. It has often happened to me, even with journalists who are pretty much on my side, that I have to begin all my answers by going back over the question. Journalists, with their special 'glasses' and their peculiar categories of thought, often ask questions that do not have anything to do with the matter at hand. So, before you can even begin to respond, you have to say, very politely, 'Your question is certainly interesting, but it seems to me that there is another one that is even more important.' Otherwise, you end up answering questions that should not even be asked.

Contradictions and tensions

Television is an instrument of communication with very little autonomy, subject as it is to a whole series of pressures arising from the characteristic social relations between journalists. These include *relations of competition* (relentless and pitiless, even to the point of absurdity) and *relations of collusion*, derived from objective common interests. These interests, in turn, are a function of the journalists' position in the field of symbolic production and their shared cognitive, perceptual and evaluative structures, which they share by virtue of common social background and training (or lack thereof). It follows that this instrument of communication, as much as it appears to run free, is in fact reined in. During the 1960s, when television appeared on the cultural scene as a new phenomenon, a certain number of sociologists rushed to proclaim

that, as a 'means of mass communication', television was going to 'massify' everything. It was going to be the great leveller and turn all viewers into one big, undifferentiated mass. In fact, this assessment seriously underestimated viewers' capacity for resistance. Above all, however, it underestimated television's ability to transform its very producers and the other journalists that compete with it and, ultimately, through its irresistible fascination for some of them, the ensemble of cultural producers. The most important development, and a difficult one to foresee, was the extraordinary extension of the power of television over the whole of cultural production, including scientific and artistic production.

Today, television has carried to the extreme, to the very limit, a contradiction that haunts every sphere of cultural production. I am referring to the contradiction between the economic and social conditions necessary to produce a certain type of work and the social conditions of transmission for the products obtained under these conditions. I use maths as an obvious example but my argument also holds for avant-garde poetry, philosophy, sociology and so on – works thought to be 'pure', and which are, let us say, at least relatively independent of the market. There is a basic, fundamental contradiction between the conditions that allow one to do cutting-edge maths or avant-garde poetry and so on, and the conditions necessary to transmit these things to everybody else. Television carries this contradiction to the extreme to the extent that, through audience ratings and more than all the other milieux of cultural production, it is subject to market pressures.

By the same token, in this microcosm that is the world of journalism, tension is very high between those who would like to defend the values of independence, freedom from market demands, freedom from made-to-order programmes and from managers and so on, and those who submit to this necessity and are rewarded accordingly. Given the strength of the opposition, these tensions can hardly be expressed, at least not on screen. I am thinking here of the opposition between the big stars with big salaries who are especially visible and especially rewarded, but who are also especially subject to all these pressures, and the invisible drones who put the news together, do the reporting and who are becoming more and more critical of the system. Increasingly well-trained in the logic of the job market, they are assigned to jobs that are increasingly pedestrian, more and more insignificant – behind the microphones and the cameras you have people who are incomparably more cultivated than their counterparts in the 1960s. In other words, this tension between what the profession requires and the aspirations that people acquire in journalism school or in college is greater, even though there is also anticipatory socialization on the part of people really on the make. One journalist said recently that the midlife crisis at 40 (which is when you used to find out that your job isn't everything you thought it would be) has moved back to 30. People are discovering earlier the terrible requirements of this work and, in particular, all the pressures associated with audience ratings and other such gauges. Journalism is one of the areas where you find the greatest number of people who are anxious, dissatisfied, rebellious or cynically resigned, where very often (especially, obviously, for those on the bottom rung of the ladder) you find anger, revulsion or discouragement about work that is experienced as, or proclaimed to be, 'not like other jobs'. But we are far from a situation where this spite or these refusals could take the form of true resistance, and even further from the possibility of collective resistance.

To understand all this, we must move to the level of global mechanisms, to the structural level. Plato said that we are God's puppets. Television is a universe where you get the

impression that social actors – even when they seem to be important, free and independent, and even sometimes possessed of an extraordinary aura – are the puppets of a necessity that we must understand, of a structure that we must unearth and bring to light.

About the author

Pierre Bourdieu is a Professor at the Collège de France and Director of Studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.