

Issues in Media and Culture Essay
March 1998

*What can the TV journalist learn from Bourdieu's
concept of participant objectivation?*

*By Gunilla Lundstedt, MA in Radio,
tutors: Tim Crook and Harold Fricker*

Goldsmiths College, London

What can the TV journalist learn from Bourdieu's concept of participant objectivation?

'People look down on you, like you're no longer a human being. Particularly, it seems, if those people are journalists. Let's face it. These people earn good money. And their papers pay their expenses. But they come down here and they want to pay us a pittance for using our stories and exploiting us. They think we're stupid. One man came down here holding his video camera all casual like and started talking ridiculous money, asking what we might talk about. Then one of the girls noticed that the camera was on. He kept denying it but you could see the red light on the front, we could see ourselves moving around in the viewfinder. They just think we're all thick.'¹

Introduction

Having the position and facilities of news making implies having a considerable amount of power. Power in the sense of a privilege of choosing and formulating the questions of the mass media public debate. This is generally not sufficiently recognised.

In this essay I want to put forward a few questions regarding the role and responsibility we have as journalists. 'How do we perceive our position when reporting reality?' 'Am I as a journalist consciously thinking of what I am doing and showing?' 'What alternative ways are there in how to go about reporting news and make documentaries?'

These questions I will try to get some answers to here but of course there might be many more and different answers to them. I am more concerned though about the posing of these questions than that we find any fixed answers.

The power that comes with being a media person became very obvious to me when I was interviewing immigrant children as part of an audience research for Utbildningsradion (the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company). In relation to the children I had already an authoritative position just from being a grown up. By using a microphone and recording what they said this position was even more emphasised.

Television is a medium which has got a lot of attention from theorists for several reasons. Why I have chosen to concentrate on the TV journalist is because this medium is a very obvious one and for that reason easy to use as an example of what I want to put forward here.

My intention is to focus on the factor of the journalist's own influence over her documentation. There are obviously many factors that you can not do much about as reporter or editor, but self criticism and making an effort to be as conscious as possible of what you actually are doing is a major responsibility of every journalist as I see it.

I shall take a summered look at what I perceive as a common way amongst many journalists to portray and address their interviewees. And also make a few suggestions of how we can think and what we can do to avoid just to 'carry on regardless'.

To find a framework in which to put these questions I want to apply some of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories to the discussion about the *how* of the journalist. This because he has done a lot of studies concerning self reflection on the part of the scholar or academic which can be related closely to the attitude (or non-attitude) of the journalist towards his work. The 'scholarly gaze' which Bourdieu talks about in regard to academics and intellectuals is in many ways comparable to the gaze of the journalist, and especially so the TV

¹ From an article about homeless people by Tony Thompson, Time Out.

journalist as the camera lense no doubt play a very central role for how the TV news come about. This shall be exemplified by a news report discussed by James Curran.

It must be said here that Piere Bourdieu has written a book on TV - *Sur la Television* (1996)² - which I have not been able to get hold of . An english translation will be published in June 1998. This is of course unfortunate, but I still belive that a fruitful analysis can be made considering his work within other areas.

The field of news production

There is no doubt a vast majority of journalists working very hard to show to the public a nuanced and thorough picture of events and matters in society. Never the less a certain point of view in the news evaluation and the form is inevitable. The consciousness of this fact both amongst journalists, editors and other people is not as high as it deserves.

Many different factors play a part in how the 'reality' is shown to the audience. There are political, economical, organisational as well as career competition and mere coincidence that matter for *what* becomes news and documentary, but also *how*.

This is shown by Phillip Schlesinger in his book '*Putting Reality Together*'³ where he has carried out an extensive ethnological research within broadcast journalism, based on interviews and observations. Schlesinger did his field work mostly at the BBC (but also ITN) why the journalistic culture he describes is mainly the one of this company/corporation. He points out that BBC's supposed political neutrality is in fact thoroughly attached to the policy of the British government. He also describes how the hierarchical organisation of staff (from bottom to top: technicians, camera- and sound crew, reporters, sub editors, editor of the day and Chief editor) play a significant part in the news evaluation . The constant time pressure as well as competition from other stations and news papers also have implications on the news production process.

In an article⁴ about ways of showing and conducting interviews with 'ordinary' (my italics) people James Curran takes an example of a TV news feature showing the unemployment amongst men in a town in Wales. I want to take this program, produced for BBC *2s Newsnight* and with the reporter Olenka Frenkiel, as a concrete example of what in my opinion is a quite common way of presenting news.

How aware is the, in this case, TV-journalist of her or his position in the news gathering moment, where she conducts the interview with a person found or chosen by her or the producer? How does she or he look at her or his 'putting together' of news?

The news report which James Curran refers to as an example of an alternative news interpretation and re-presentation, I would like to argue is a very good example of journalists/producers doing their job without questioning their position. In his article Curran compares the forms and styles of this news feature with another one with a similar message. The first one done in 1991 and the second one in 1994. His opinion is that the second feature was a much more unconventional one in that it took into account what the people discussed, actually thought themselves in comparison to the 1991 features 'talking heads' concept. To describe the news feature produced by Jessica Cecil (1994)I will quote from Currans article:

² *Sur la Television*, Pierre Bourdieu (1996), Edition Libre.

³ *Putting Reality Together*, Phillip Schlesinger

⁴ *Television and the public sphere*, James Curran (in *The Television Handbook*, Patricia Holland)

“The documentary showed that many of the new jobs in the Welsh valleys were part-time, low-paid and filled by women. One in three men was out of work, their brawn no longer needed following the collapse of the steel and mining industries. In a series of revealing interviews the *Newsnight* reporter Olenka Frenkiel, showed how different men adjusted to irrelevance. One sequence switched from a mechanical robot working in a factory to men working out in a gym, building their bodies into “temples of masculinity”. “If I didn’t have this”, said one unemployed man in the weights room, “I would have nothing”. Another man, out of work, a former miner with a bristling moustache, was featured at home clinging to the traditional male role. - I do everything, he said, which turned out to mean that he took charge of paying the bills while his wife went out to work and also did most of the housework.”⁵

I do not want to question the fact that this was in many ways a different news report which aimed to go a bit further in to the problems of unemployed working class men. And in relief to the debate going on at the time (1994) about going back to ‘basics’ - as in clinging to the conventional nuclear family- it was effective. As James Curran describes it “It was a powerful example of bottom-up communication: of people speaking for themselves rather than being spoken for or at.”⁶

What struck me though, when I was shown this news report, was how the reporter (and producer) distanced themselves from the people they were portraying. I saw the peeking into the ‘misery’ of these men as in many ways a patronising chauvinism.

In a foot note Curran adds what would actually demand a much more prominent consideration, namely:

“Ordinary people were being represented, however, through the medium of a journalist. This program was in fact a relatively closed rather than open text in which the comments of the interviewees were often interpreted explicitly by the reporter.”⁷

Here James Curran hits the head on the nail. It is very much the case that speaking to people reveals more than talking of them, but the way in which this is done is as important (if not even more important) for the character of the news feature.

And this is what I think is the key-problem in news and documentary journalism. The political intentions of reporting from ‘the streets and the kitchens’ are often very idealistic and with an urge to give a voice to people in the society which are marginalised. But it is often done with little self criticism. The fact that we journalists are telling the stories from an upper position makes it very probable that the reports are quite angled and not as neutral as they might appear. The journalist is on many occasions not part (or does not intend to take part) of that particular reality which she wants to portrait.

With the TV medium there is a chain of transforming the ‘reality’ before it becomes a neat news package or documentary to be seen on the television set. John Corner, in his book *Television Form and Public Address* shows this process divided in three stages⁸. The first is the scripting and organising of the news feature. This involves finding what to film (place), which person to interview and sounds and speeches to be used.

The second stage is the shooting of the feature on the spot. This involves a certain amount of directing. One of Corners examples is ‘ the timing and movements involved in a trip to the post-box with a job application letter’. “The people being filmed are thereby positioned as ‘actors of themselves’ within these adjustments, designed to fine-tune reality for photographic or electronic ‘capture’.”⁹

⁵ Ibid. p. 196

⁶ Ibid. p. 199

⁷ Ibid. p. 200

⁸ *Television Form and Public Address*, John Corner, pp 79-81

⁹ Ibid. p. 80

The third phase is the editing. Here the recorded sequences are chosen from the lot, cut down and organised in a certain combination. As well as synchronised with sound - including recorded speech -, voice-over and maybe music. The whole process of packaging the news involves a considerable amount of work, thinking, planning and composing. And of course, without this process we would have no news reports on the TV. The radio and newspaper journalists are equally transforming reality in their news creation, but the difference from TV journalists is that their news is bound to have less direct impact on it's audience.

I would like to take another example of addressing people with an attitude of an upper position, from the British history of radio. In the late 1930s Archie Harding working for the BBC, who was a radical left-winger, took the step out from the studio down to the streets. He interviewed people from a small town which he for some reason nicknamed "Worktown". The program was called 'They speak for themselves'. Harding wanted to show the big gap between the ordinary citizen, - i.e. worker, and the rhetoric of the politicians. In the program Harding explains what he is doing: - We observed the people in church, at pubs and community meetings. We tested the words from the politicians speeches on the people from "Worktown".¹⁰ And Archie Harding found -quite predictably - that the "Worktown people" did not understand or listened to the politicians speeches. This we can imagine, was a quite progressive program in its time. And no doubt did Harding open up the eyes of some people of the views of ordinary people. But the laboratory-vocabulary that he uses (*observed* and *tested*) reveals the distance he feels to the people he has interviewed.

All kinds of journalism does involve the 'putting together' and commenting of news. It is self evident that whatever the message from a human being it is interpreted in one or the other way. And because this is so, the consciousness and self criticism of the reporter is crucial.

Bourdieu and the scholarly gaze

Without forgetting that news journalism is a day to day hunting activity with considerable time pressure and sociology is a research faculty within the University, the work of the journalist can still be compared to that of the sociologist as it wants to describe a reality and within that reality the social positions and lives of human beings.

Pierre Bourdieus discussion of how the sociologist (or other academics) are describing one part of the world with objectifying spectacles which not necessarily are scientific in the meaning of being unbiased is applicable in this context. Bourdieu (like many of the so called post-modernists) turn against the positivistic view that knowledge is something definitive that can be discovered and gathered so as to compose an absolute science. On the contrary, the gaze of the theoreticians are very likely to be different to the interpretations of those who are being described as the very act of describing often implies taking a step away from one's 'object'.

"[...]the most essential bias, whose principle lies neither in the social (class) location, nor in the specific position of the sociologist in the field of cultural production[...] but in the invisible determinations inherent in the intellectual posture itself, in the scholarly gaze that he or she casts upon the social world. [...]This *theoretical* or *intellectual bias* consists in forgetting to

¹⁰ This radio program I heard from an exclusive personal recording belonging to Bennett Maxwell, former journalist at the BBC.

inscribe into the theory we build of the social world the fact that it is the product of a theoretical gaze, a “contemplative eye”.¹¹

Pierre Bourdieu has been working with a method using what he calls *non narcissistic-reflexivity* when carrying out his research. As an example, after studying people in villages in Algeria he went back to his own French town to do a similar study in the environment which he himself knew the very best.¹²

Bourdieu has also done a major study of professors at many different universities in France, not leaving out the sociology professors.¹³

Bourdieu claims that in order to understand things more profoundly you need to turn the gaze back at yourself. This is to discover the position you have as observer and put yourself into the whole context of the sociological studies. It is not as much a reflection of your own personality and psychology as the very social one. What is my social (and hierarchical) position?, From which stand point do I carry out my studies?, Why did I choose this subject?

He says that what he wants the sociologist to do is to develop her or his knowledge and look deeper into the complex patterns of social life and society. Not to step out from and observe yourself exclusively.¹⁴

“Objectivation has a chance to succeed only when it involves the objectivation of the point of view from which it proceeds. In short, only the ordinary alternatives of ‘participant observation’, [...] and the objectivism of the absolute gaze prevent us from grasping the possibility and the necessity of *participant objectivation* [...] The most critical sociology is that which presupposes and implies the most radical self-criticism, and the objectivation of him or her who objectivizes is both a precondition for, and a product of, a full objectivation [...]”¹⁵

Bourdieu means that in the *cultural field*, dominant groups exercise power and reproduce power through, among other means, the educational system. If you belong to the bourgeois group you will automatically learn through school and family the values and acquire the social capital that is equivalent of this class position. For instance you will learn how to evaluate and appreciate art or literature.¹⁶

Bourdieu’s theory of *cultural fields* - being an exclusive domain for dominant groups within dominating classes - and the very way of keeping and exercising power through *symbolic violence*, have been criticised by many. One of them criticising him on several points is Nicholas Garnham. In his essay *Bourdieu, the Cultural Arbitrary, and Television*¹⁷ he points out that important aspects of cultural production will be lost when you focus on the power struggles that are being fought in this domain. The cultural content risks to disappear. Garnham takes the arguments for freedom of press as an example of an issue which you can either reduce to just being another tool of power for a dominant group - journalists and press proprietors - or see it as something that can be used in a wider context by subordinated groups.

¹¹ An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, Pierre Bourdieu, p. 69

¹² “*Reproduction interdite. La dimension symbolique de la domination économique.*”, in *Etudes Rurales* 113/114

¹³ *Homo Academicus*, Pierre Bourdieu

¹⁴ *IRS*, Bourdieu, pp. 69-73

¹⁵ “*Sur l’objectivation participante. Réponses à quelques objections.*” in *Actes de la recherche en science* 20/21, p. 67-68

¹⁶ *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu

¹⁷ *Bourdieu, the Cultural Arbitrary and Television*, Nicholas Garnham, in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, Ed. Craig Calhoun et Al.

“[Free press arguments] have been used, as has the related idea of creative freedom, to bolster the status and autonomy of journalists and media producers as a quasi-professional group [...] and to shield from social questioning a specific set of cultural practices of which the journalists are mystical guardians - the concept of news values, for instance - practices that give journalists power over the symbolic representation of other social groups. However, to discard the concept and the writings on the field as merely expressing those ideologies is to cut off oppositional groups from the possibility of using such ideas for their own ends by utilising the very legitimacy of the concept as the basis for a critique of current press practice and the realisation of a more extended concept of press freedom.”¹⁸

But as Garnham himself says (and also criticise him for) Pierre Bourdieu does not apply his theories to journalism or - which should be relevant - television ¹⁹. For which reason you can not accuse him of reducing the concept of press freedom to merely something that is used for exercising power over subordinated groups. Never the less is Garnham’s argument important as the media play a significant role in producing social values and setting agendas. Nicholas Garnham is not the only one to criticise Bourdieu of putting the dominated groups in a passive position where they are unable to change the power they are submitted to. This though, is something that Bourdieu rejects. The domination of some groups does not exclude the resistance of others.

“[...] I do not see how relations of domination, whether material or symbolic, could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance.” ²⁰

Garnham points out that Bourdieu has made a big mistake when not including the implications of television in his theory ‘because of televisions’ sheer centrality as a contemporary cultural practice’.²¹

This could very well be true, (Though by now Bourdieu has taken this critique seriously and treated Television as a field in need of its own analysis.)²² but at the same time there are many fields in which you can apply Bourdieu’s theories because, although they are pointing specifically at the bourgeois and educational institutions in France in the 60s and 70s, they are also general. This is why it is possible to relate the gaze of the sociologist to the gaze of the journalist. They are both objectifying someone or something else in their *cultural practices*. Bourdieu has made studies in the field of photography²³ and here the position is the similar (with the camera in front of you) to that of the TV journalist.

“To be content with “recording” means to overlook the question of the construction or the delimiting (decoupage) of reality (think of photography). It entails accepting a preconstructed concrete which does not necessarily contain within itself the principles of its own interpretation.”^{24 25}

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 185-186

¹⁹ At the time (1993) Bourdieu had not yet written anything explicite on the Television.

²⁰ IRS, Bourdieu, p. 80

²¹ BCAT, Garnham, p. 187

²² Sur la Television, P. Bourdieu 1996.

²³ Photography; a middle-brow art, Bourdieu with Luc Boltanski

²⁴ IRS, Bourdieu, p. 73

²⁵ This is a major difference (or used to be) between art and documentation, the art photoragphy is ‘freed’ from showing an objective reality compared to news photography which aspire to give ‘evidence’. But this can not be discussed further here although it’s an interesting question.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's proposed method of *participant objectivation* as well as self-reflection and consciousness can with success be practised by the TV-journalist (and other media practitioners) in the very moment of putting a news package together. By thoroughly thinking about what you are doing and how you actually do it, the news or documentary product will most probably become more relevant, realistic and last but not least appealing.

In our portrayal of the social world we, the journalists should as being the "gazers" take care to be quite conscious of our means and purposes and our position.

To take a close look at how you are actually performing your re-presentation of reality and of the different people in society is a way to start changing the patterns of privileged documentation.

When considering in what ways we can change our news creation, we can look at the three phases of putting together news features, which John Corner speaks of. The first one being the choice of the interviewee and the place for the interview. Maybe the minister can be interviewed in his garage and the unemployed miner can be invited to the studio.²⁶

When it comes to the second phase - the actual shooting; why not hand over the camera to the interviewee and tell her to tell her own story? This was successfully done in a Swedish youth program called Elbyl. A young woman who had come to Sweden as a child and had a toddler together with her boyfriend - also a young immigrant without a job - and who lived in a small town in Sweden, told about their day to day life by walking around with a video camera on her shoulder. This was very exciting to watch each week because the documentary, being biographical, had a much more genuine touch to it than is usual. Without the camera crew and the microphone in front of her the young woman could be relaxed and use the camera whenever it suited her.

Finally when it comes to the phase of editing the journalist/editor should take care not to alter to any greater degree what the interviewee is actually saying by cutting away crucial parts. Or changing the meaning in any other way. Above all it is the responsibility of the journalist/editor to take away anything said confidentially, or for that matter deny filming someone when that's what you are doing. Certainly the editing has to obey to several factors like time limits, composing decisions, the impact of other features and so on, but this should not excuse an irresponsible use of recorded material.

When applying a humble attitude to the persons that you interview the report is likely to be taken more seriously by the audience.

Journalists are also audience and should therefore be able to judge what is a nuanced report, where an as equal as possible relation is maintained between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Maybe the TV journalists re-presentation of unemployed miners will be something much more revealing and thereby appealing if she questioned her position, attitude and goals?

Maybe we as journalists can reinterpret our job and its meaning by thinking about Bourdieu's concept of *participant objectivation*?

I will try.

²⁶ This, it should be said, is something that the Newsnight crew did, invite "ordinary people" to the studio, and which James Curran points out in his article.

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