

THE POWER OF JOURNALISM¹

My objective here is not "the power of journalists"—and still less of journalism as a "fourth estate"—but, rather, the hold that the *mechanisms* of a journalistic field increasingly subject to market demands (through readers and advertisers) have *first on journalists* (and on journalist-intellectuals) and then, in part through them, on the various fields of cultural production—the juridical field, the literary field, the artistic field, and the scientific field. Accordingly, we must examine how the structural pressure exerted by the journalistic field, itself dominated by market pressures, more or less profoundly modifies power relationships within other fields. This pressure affects what is done and produced in given fields, with very similar results within these otherwise very different worlds. We must avoid, however, falling into one or the other of two opposite errors: the illusion of the "never-been-seen-before" and its counterpart, "the-way-it-always-has-been."

The power exerted by the journalistic field, and through it the market, on other fields of cultural production, even the most autonomous among them, is not radically new. It wouldn't be difficult to find nineteenth-century texts describing similar effects of the market on these protected worlds.² But it is essential not to overlook the specificity of the current situation, which, while in some ways homologous to past situations, is characterized by elements that are indeed new. In their intensity and scope, the effects television produces in the journalistic field and through it, on all other fields of cultural production, are incomparably more significant than those of the rise of so-called industrial literature—with the mass press and the serial novel—which roused nineteenth-century writers to indignation or revolt and led, according to Raymond Williams, to modern definitions of "culture."³

The journalistic fields brings to bear on the different fields of

cultural production a group of effects whose form and potency are linked to its own structure, that is, to the position of the various media and journalists with respect to their autonomy vis-à-vis external forces, namely, the twin markets of readers and advertisers. The degree of autonomy of a news medium is no doubt measured by the percentage of income that it derives from advertising and state subsidies (whether indirectly through program promotion or direct subvention) and also by the degree of concentration of its advertisers. As for the autonomy of an individual journalist, it depends first of all on the degree to which press ownership is concentrated. (Concentration of the press augments job insecurity by reducing the number of potential employers.) Next, the individual journalist's autonomy depends on the position occupied by his newspaper within the larger space of newspapers, that is, its specific location between the "intellectual" and the "market" poles. Then, the journalist's own position within that newspaper or news medium (as reporter, freelancer, and so forth) determines statutory guarantees (largely a function of reputation) as well as salary (which makes the individual less vulnerable to the "soft" forms of public relations and less dependent on writing for money, potboilers and the like—both of which essentially relay the financial interests of sponsors). Finally, the journalist's own capacity for autonomous production of news must be taken into account. (Certain writers, such as popularizers of science or economic journalists, are in a state of particular dependence). It is clear that the authorities, the government in particular, influence the media not only through the economic pressure that they bring to bear but also through their monopoly on legitimate information—government sources are the most obvious example. First of all, this monopoly provides governmental authorities (juridical, scientific, and other authorities as much as the police) with weapons for manipulating the news or those in charge of transmitting it. For its part, the press attempts to manipulate these "sources" in order to get a news exclusive. And we must not ignore the exceptional sym-

bolic power given to state authorities to define, by their actions, their decisions, and their entry into the journalistic field (interviews, press conferences, and so on), the journalistic agenda and the hierarchy of importance assigned to events.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE JOURNALISTIC FIELD

The journalistic field tends to reinforce the "commercial" elements at the core of all fields to the detriment of the "pure." It favors those cultural producers most susceptible to the seductions of economic and political powers, at the expense of those intent on defending the principles and the values of their professions. To understand how this happens, it is necessary to see that the whole journalistic field is structured like other fields, and also that market weighs much more heavily on it than on other fields.

The journalistic field emerged as such during the nineteenth century around the opposition between newspapers offering "news," preferably "sensational" or better yet, capable of creating a sensation, and newspapers featuring analysis and "commentary," which marked their difference from the other group by loudly proclaiming the values of "objectivity."⁴ Hence, this field is the site of an opposition between two models, each with its own principle of legitimation: that of peer recognition, accorded individuals who internalize most completely the internal "values" or principles of the field; or that of recognition by the public at large, which is measured by numbers of readers, listeners, or viewers, and therefore, in the final analysis, by sales and profits. (Considered from this point of view, a political referendum expresses the verdict of the market.)

Like the literary field or the artistic field, then, the journalistic field is the site of a specific, and specifically cultural, model that is imposed on journalists through a system of overlapping constraints and the controls that each of these brings to bear

on the others. It is respect for these constraints and controls (sometimes termed a code of ethics) that establishes reputations of professional morality. In fact, outside perhaps the "pick-ups" (when one's work is picked up by another journalist), the value and meaning of which depend on the positions within the field of those who do the taking up and those who benefit from it, there are relatively few indisputable positive sanctions. And negative sanctions, against individuals who fail to cite their sources for example, are practically nonexistent. Consequently, there is a tendency not to cite a journalistic source, especially from a minor news medium, except when necessary to clear one's name.

But, like the political and economic fields, and much more than the scientific, artistic, literary, or juridical fields, the journalistic field is permanently subject to trial by market, whether directly, through advertisers, or indirectly, through audience ratings (even if government subsidies offer a certain independence from immediate market pressures). Furthermore, journalists are no doubt all the more inclined to adopt "audience rating" standards in the production process ("keep it simple," "keep it short") or when evaluating products and even producers ("that's just made for TV," "this will go over really well"), to the extent that those who better represent these standards occupy higher positions (as network heads or editors-in-chief) in news media more directly dependent on the market (that is, commercial television as opposed to PBS). Conversely, younger and less established journalists are more inclined to invoke the principles and values of the "profession" against the more "realistic," or more cynical, stipulations of their "elders."⁵

In the case of a field oriented toward the production of such a highly perishable good as the news, competition for consumers tends to take the form of competition for the newest news ("scoops"). This is increasingly the case, obviously, the closer one gets to the market pole. Market pressure is exercised only through the effect of the field: actually, a high proportion of the

scoops so avidly sought in the battle for customers is destined to remain unknown as such to readers or viewers. Only competitors will see them, since journalists are the only ones who read all the newspapers . . . Imprinted in the field's structure and operating mechanisms, this competition for priority calls for and favors professionals inclined to place the whole practice of journalism under the sign of speed (or haste) and permanent renewal.⁶ This inclination is continually reinforced by the temporality of journalistic practice, which assigns value to news according to how new it is (or how "catchy"). This pace favors a sort of permanent amnesia, the negative obverse of the exaltation of the new, as well as a propensity to judge producers and products according to the opposition between "new" or "out-of-date."⁷

Another effect of competition on the field, one that is completely paradoxical and utterly inimical to the assertion of either collective or individual autonomy, is the permanent surveillance (which can turn into mutual espionage) to which journalists subject their competitors' activities. The object is to profit from competitors' failures by avoiding their mistakes, and to counter their successes by trying to borrow the *supposed* instruments of that success, such as themes for special issues that "must" be taken up again, books reviewed elsewhere that "you can't not talk about," guests you "must have," subjects that "have to be covered" because others discovered them, and even big-name journalists who have to appear. This "borrowing" is a result as much of a determination to keep competitors from having these things as from any real desire to have them. So here, as in other areas, rather than automatically generating originality and diversity, competition tends to favor *uniformity*. This can easily be verified by comparing the contents of the major weekly magazines, or radio and television stations aimed at a general audience. But this very powerful mechanism also has the effect of insidiously imposing on the field as a whole the "choices" of those instruments of diffusion most directly and most completely subject

to the market, like television. This, in turn, means that all production is oriented toward preserving established values. This conservatism can be seen, for example, in the way that the periodic "hit parades"—through which journalist-intellectuals try to impose their vision of the field (and, via mutual "back-scratching," gain and confer peer recognition . . .)—almost always feature the authors of highly perishable cultural goods; these goods are nonetheless destined, with the help of the media, for the best-seller list, along with authors recognized both as a "sure value," capable of validating the good taste of those who validate them, and as best-sellers in the long run. Which is to say that even if the actors have an effect as individuals, it is the *structure* of the journalistic field that determines the intensity and orientation of its mechanisms, as well as their effects on other fields.

THE EFFECTS OF INTRUSION

In every field, the influence of the journalistic field tends to favor those actors and institutions closer to the market. This effect is all the stronger in fields that are themselves structurally more tightly subordinated to this market model, as well as wherever the journalistic field exercising this power is also more subordinated to those external pressures that have a structurally stronger effect on it than on other fields of cultural production. But we see today that internal sanctions are losing their symbolic force, and that "serious" journalists and newspapers are also losing their cachet as they suffer under the pressure to make concessions to the market, to the marketing tactics introduced by commercial television, and to the new principle of legitimacy based on ratings and "visibility." These things, marketing and media visibility, become the—seemingly more democratic—substitute for the internal standards by which specialized fields once judged cultural and even political products and their producers. Certain "analyses" of television

owe their popularity with journalists—especially those most susceptible to the effects of audience ratings—to the fact that they confer a *democratic legitimacy* to the market model by posing in *political* terms (as, for example, a referendum), what is a problem of *cultural* production and diffusion.⁸

Thus, the increased power of a journalistic field itself increasingly subject to direct or indirect domination by the market model threatens the autonomy of other fields of cultural production. It does so by supporting those actors or enterprises at the very core of these fields that are most inclined to yield to the seduction of “external” profits precisely because they are less rich in capital specific to the field (scientific, literary, or other) and therefore less assured of the specific rewards the field is in a position to guarantee in the short or longer term.

The journalistic field exercises power over other fields of cultural production (especially philosophy and the social sciences) primarily through the intervention of cultural producers located in an uncertain site between the journalistic field and the specialized fields (the literary or philosophical, and so on). These journalist-intellectuals use their dual attachments to evade the requirements specific to each of the worlds they inhabit, importing into each the capabilities they have more or less completely acquired in the other. In so doing, they exercise two major effects.⁹ On the one hand, they introduce new forms of cultural production, located in a poorly defined intermediary position between academic esotericism and journalistic “exotericism.” On the other hand, particularly through their critical assessments, they impose on cultural products evaluative principles that validate market sanctions by giving them a semblance of intellectual authority and reinforcing the spontaneous inclination of certain categories of consumers to *allo-doxia*. So that, by orienting choices (editors’ choices, for one) toward the least demanding and most commercially viable products, these journalist-intellectuals reinforce the impact of audience ratings or the best-seller list on the reception of cul-

tural products and ultimately if indirectly, on cultural production itself.¹⁰

Moreover, they can count on the support of those who equate “objectivity” with a sort of social *savoir-vivre* and an eclectic neutrality with respect to all parties concerned. This group puts middlebrow cultural products in the avant-garde or denigrates avant-garde work (and not only in art) in the name of common sense. But this group in its turn can count on the approval or even the complicity of consumers who, like them, are inclined to *allo-doxia* by their distance from the “center of cultural values” and by their self-interested propensity to hide from themselves the limits of their own capacities of appropriation—following the model of self-deception that is expressed so well by readers of popularizing journals when they assert that “this is a high-level scientific journal that anybody can understand.”

In this way, achievements made possible by the autonomy of the field and by its capacity to resist social demands can be threatened. It was with these dynamics in mind, symbolized today by audience ratings, that writers in the last century objected vehemently to the idea that art (the same could be said of science) should be subject to the judgments of universal suffrage. Against this threat there are two possible strategies, more or less frequently adopted according to the field and its degree of autonomy. One may firmly delimit the field and endeavor to restore the borders threatened by the intrusion of journalistic modes of thought and action. Alternatively, one may quit the ivory tower (following the model Émile Zola inaugurated during the Dreyfus Affair) to impose the values nurtured in that tower and to use all available means, within one’s specialized field and without, and also within the journalistic field itself, to try to impose on the outside the achievements and victories that autonomy made possible.

There are economic and cultural conditions of access to enlightened scientific judgment. There can be no recourse to universal suffrage (or opinion polls) to decide properly scien-

tific problems (even though this is sometimes done indirectly, with no one the wiser) without annihilating the very conditions of scientific production, that is, the entry barrier that protects the scientific (or artistic) world against the destructive invasion of external, therefore inappropriate and misplaced, principles of production and evaluation. But it should not be concluded that the barrier cannot be crossed *in the other direction*, or that it is intrinsically impossible to work for a democratic redistribution of the achievements made possible by autonomy—on the condition that it clearly be seen that every action aimed at disclosing the rarest achievements of the most advanced scientific or artistic work assumes a challenge to the *monopoly of the instruments of diffusion* of this scientific or artistic information, that is, to the monopoly held by the journalistic field. We must also question the representation of the general public's expectations as constructed by the market demagogy of those individuals in a position to set themselves between cultural producers (today, this applies to politicians as well) and the great mass of consumers (or voters).

The distance between professional cultural producers (or their products) and ordinary consumers (readers, listeners, or viewers, and voters as well) relates to the autonomy of the field in question and varies according to field. It will be greater or lesser, more or less difficult to cross, and more or less unacceptable from the point of view of democratic principles. And, contrary to appearances, this distance also exists in politics, whose declared principles it contradicts. Like those in the journalistic field, actors in the political field are in a competitive relationship of continual struggle. Indeed, in a certain way, the journalistic field is part of the political field on which it has such a powerful impact. Nevertheless, these two fields are both very directly and very tightly in the grip of the market and the referendum. It follows that the power wielded by the journalistic field reinforces the tendencies of political actors to accede to the expectations and the demands of the largest majority. Because these demands are sometimes highly emotional and

unreflective, their articulation by the press often turns them into claims capable of mobilizing groups.

Except when it makes use of the freedoms and critical powers assured by autonomy, the press, especially the televised (commercial) press, acts in the same way as polls (with which it, too, has to contend). While polls can serve as an instrument of rationalistic demagogy which tends to reinforce the self enclosure of the political field, their primary function is to set up a direct relationship with voters, a relationship *without mediation* which eliminates from the game all individual or collective actors (such as political parties or unions) socially mandated to elaborate and propose considered solutions to social questions. This unmediated relationship takes away from all self-styled spokesmen and delegates the claim (made in the past by all the great newspaper editors) to a monopoly on legitimate expression of "public opinion." At the same time, it deprives them of their ability to elaborate critically (and sometimes collectively, as in legislative assemblies) their constituents' actual or assumed will.

For all of these reasons, the ever-increasing power of a journalistic field itself increasingly subject to the power of the market model to influence a political field haunted by the temptation of demagogy (most particularly at a time when polls offer the means for a rationalized exercise of demagogic action) weakens the autonomy of the political field. It weakens as well the powers accorded representatives (political and other) as a function of their competence as *experts* or their authority as *guardians of collective values*.

Finally, how can one not point to the judges who, at the price of a "pious hypocrisy," are able to perpetuate the belief that their decisions are based not in external, particularly economic constraints, but in the transcendent norms of which they are the guardians? The juridical field is not what it thinks it is. It is not a pure world, free of concessions to politics or the economy. But its image of purity produces absolutely real social effects, first of all, on the very individuals whose job it is to

declare the law. But what would happen to judges, understood as the more or less sincere incarnations of a collective hypocrisy, if it became widely accepted that, far from obeying transcendent, universal verities and values, they are thoroughly subject, like all other social actors, to constraints such as those placed on them, irrespective of judicial procedures and hierarchies, by the pressures of economic necessity or the seduction of media success?

APPENDIX

*The Olympics—An Agenda for Analysis*¹

What exactly do we mean when we talk about the Olympics? The apparent referent is what “really” happens. That is to say, the gigantic spectacle of sport in which athletes from all over the world compete under the sign of universalistic ideals; as well as the markedly national, even patriotic ritual of the parades by various national teams, and the award ceremonies replete with flying flags and blaring anthems. But the hidden referent is the television show, the ensemble of representations of the first spectacle, as it is filmed and broadcast by television in selections which, since the competition is international, appear unmarked by national bias. The Olympics, then, are doubly hidden: no one sees all of it, and no one sees that they don’t see it. Every television viewer can have the illusion of seeing *the* (real) Olympics.

It may seem simply to record events as they take place, but in fact, given that each national television network gives more airplay to athletes or events that satisfy national pride, television transforms a sports competition between athletes from all over into a confrontation between champions, that is, officially selected competitors from different countries.

To understand this process of symbolic transformation, we would first have to analyze the social construction of the entire Olympic spectacle. We’d have to look at the individual events and at everything that takes place around them, such as the opening and closing parades. Then we’d have to look at the production of the televised image of this spectacle. Inasmuch as it is a prop for advertising, the televised event is a commercial, marketable product that must be designed to reach the largest audience and hold on to it the longest. Aside from the