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Afterword: Broadcast Talk and Journalism

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Talk is cheap for news broadcasters, or certainly less expensive to produce than original reportage, and consistently popular with audiences. Not surprisingly, then, when pressures to reduce financial expenditure are realigning journalistic priorities and resources apace, conversational spaces for views on the news are becoming ever more important for sustaining the attention economy. Clashes of claim with counterclaim make for lively broadcasting, generating heat for ratings, if not always light on issues. The public interest seldom aligns neatly with what interests the public, however, or so it may seem when the serious news interview gives way to dramatic – and frequently dramatized – exchanges intended to provoke, even enflame. Timeworn conventions presupposing a strict differentiation of facts from editorial values, typically conveyed within the codified strictures of impartiality, risk unravelling in excitable talk. This is particularly so when the ideological unruliness of newsworthiness requires containment within advertiser-friendly limits, such are the incessant demands of a business model underwriting normative appeals to 'neutrality,' 'balance' and 'fairness' to corporate advantage.

Current scholarship concerned with elucidating broadcast talk's claim on the journalistic field necessarily builds on earlier efforts to think through questions of mediation, such as by comparing and contrasting the language of politics with the politics of language. In France almost three decades ago, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) intervened in a wide-ranging debate over the state of the country's journalism, condemning what he perceived to be its obsession with entertaining the viewer to the extent serious public discourse was becoming little more than cultural 'fast-food' (see also Benson, 1998; Deciu, 1999; Marlière, 1998). In-depth current affairs interviews on television, he argued in the bestselling *Sur la Télévision*, were being transformed into 'mindless talk show chatter' between 'approved' (that is to say, 'safe') interlocutors. A relentless search for the sensational and the spectacular, he maintained, all but ensures undue emphasis is placed on certain types of issues and events over and above those risking entanglement in 'the quagmire of intellectual complexity' (1998: 3). As Bourdieu proceeded to elaborate:

To justify this policy of demagogic simplification (which is absolutely and utterly contrary to the democratic goal of informing or educating people by interesting them), journalists point to the public's expectations. But in fact they are projecting onto the public their own inclinations and their own views. Because they're so afraid of being boring, they opt for confrontations over debates, prefer polemics over rigorous argument, and in general, do whatever they can to promote conflict (Bourdieu 1998: 3–4).

It follows that individuals seeking to secure access to what he terms ‘public space’, particularly politicians, have little choice but to adapt to the journalistic field’s preferred vision of politics. Journalists, together with their editors and producers, effectively control who can be recognised as a public figure, a process shaped by perceptions regarding who or what is ‘interesting’, ‘exceptional’ or ‘catchy’ for them, that is, from the position they occupy in this space. ‘In short,’ Bourdieu surmised, ‘the focus is on those things which are apt to arouse curiosity but require no analysis, especially in the political sphere’ (1998: 51).

In contending that the journalistic field possesses a relative degree of autonomy from other fields of cultural production, such as the juridical, literary, artistic or scientific fields, Bourdieu moved beyond any explanation of its characteristics reliant on economic factors alone. As imperative as these factors are in shaping what is reported, how and why, his aim was to render apparent the social conditions underpinning journalism as a collective activity that ‘smooths over things, brings them into line, and depoliticizes them’ to the ‘level of anecdote and scandal’ (1998: 51). If ‘sensational news’ equals ‘market success,’ then adherences to professional standards cannot help but be subject to ‘shameful compromises’ by a compulsive quest for exclusivity (or ‘scoops’), thereby yielding news and current affairs coverage widely perceived to be contributing to public disenchantment with politics (1998: 58-60). Surveys of public opinion in one country after the next recurrently revealed a marked decline in public trust in the media around the globe, not least with respect to the responsibility to provide news and information of the quality necessary for democratic cultures to thrive within increasingly polarised societies.

A further reason I have dwelt on Bourdieu’s intervention here is because it also serves to throw into sharper relief – with the benefit of hindsight – the important ways it set in motion fresh lines of investigation in journalism studies. While the broad sweep of Bourdieuan arguments about the ‘distribution of power and privilege in the journalistic field’ made for compelling critique, the hard grind of discerning precisely how such processes of politicisation were inscribed, legitimated or challenged at the level of broadcast talk required further analytical resources. In disciplinary terms, journalism studies became progressively open to scholarship intent on explicating the performative interactions made possible in and by talk, a largely underdeveloped realm of exploration at the time of *Sur la Télévision*’s publication (one exception being the pioneering work of the Glasgow University Media Group). The conceptual vocabulary and methodological frameworks of broadcast talk research enriched journalism studies’ efforts to fashion practical ‘tool kits’ to delve beneath the surface of words to grapple with uses, that is, speech actions and reactions.

Formative forays charted the way forward, drawing upon the procedures and techniques of critical linguistics, conversation analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis, amongst cognate approaches. Interdisciplinarity invited new ways of thinking about how best to extend the evaluative categories of journalism studies to configure talk-centred questions otherwise being glossed over by more expansive enquiries, such as those concerned with the preferred meanings of textual representation or the decodings of audience interpretation. Questions, that is, revolving around the vocalisation of journalistic norms and conventions in tone, tenor, register and repertoire, including sociable modes of address instantiated within generic constraints (Hutchby, 2006; Montgomery, 2007), interactive negotiations of immediacy or liveness in relation to newsworthiness (Scannell, 2004; Tolson, 2006), the cultivation of interpersonal relations of co-presence for the benefit of the ‘overhearing audience’ (Heritage, 1985; see also Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Thornborrow, 2007; Ekström and Kroon Lundell, 2010), or locutionary tensions in the said engendered by the unsaid (see also Cameron, 2000; Fairclough, 2001), amongst numerous others.

Today, as apprehensions mount that we are edging closer to a ‘post-epistemic world’ of ‘disinformation,’ ‘alternative facts’ and ‘algorithmic outrage,’ these types of questions

continue to reverberate on research agendas for those striving to better understand the lived contingencies of broadcast talk and the possible implications for reportage. Regardless of whether or not one believes journalism is beset by a crisis of purpose and connection, there is little doubt it is in a state of definitional flux, the familiar tenets of its guiding ethos for legacy news organisations undergoing re-inflection across a myriad of broadcast, video and social media platforms. Longstanding allegations made about the relative ‘objectivity’ or ‘bias’ of radio or televisual news coping with ‘soundbites’ and ‘spin’ may sound almost anachronistic when compared with the weaponised discourses of ‘fake news’ being mobilised and amplified by social media ‘engines of polarisation.’ In this climate of disputation, every broadcast interview becomes a site of contestation, and thereby an occasion not only for partisan point scoring, but to proactively frame truth-claims within politicised narratives. To the extent polarisation is driven by misperceptions, it is vital to recognise how ways of talking can enact or subvert adjudications over what is reasonable, credible or trustworthy – and, by the same logics, what is illegitimate, trivial or conspirative.

The contributors to this excellent Special Issue have brought to the fore for careful examination inchoate, uneven dynamics forging communicative relationships, however ephemeral or precarious, via broadcast talk within wider news ecologies. Each of them provides a productive vantage point for its chosen research problematic, showing why its interrogation matters. Taken together, the contributions enhance the journal’s commitment to reinvigorate modes of enquiry by opening up new trajectories. Here we might nevertheless pause to ask, how might a Bourdieu-like perspective disrupt the premises of broadcast talk scholarship today? I find myself wondering about the decline of certain concepts, for example, ostensibly due to lost explanatory purchase. Rather paradoxically, while evidence of ideology emerges in each of these impressive articles to varying degrees, ideology itself eludes sustained attention. In this lacuna, the articles highlight alternative synergies, such as ‘normalization,’ ‘boundary-making,’ ‘neutrality,’ ‘accountability,’ ‘strategic uses of ambiguity,’ ‘hybridisation,’ ‘discursive features of expertise,’ or the ‘mechanisms’ of ‘emphasis frames,’ amongst other elaborations, each signalling its theory-building prospects. Ideology, once the formative linchpin, has been recast in the pursuit of other priorities, for better or otherwise. Fair enough perhaps, but precisely why this is so invites disciplinary self-reflexivity in its own right, I would suggest, as well as a close consideration of the heuristic opportunities for theory development that recalibrated approaches to ideology may inspire.

This Afterword represents a provocation of sorts. Broadcast talk researchers need to be encouraged to revisit the relevance of ideology in their work on news reports, interviews, talk shows, panel discussions, podcasts, online commentary, live streaming, and the like. To the extent critical perspectives on ideology are contained or compartmentalised elsewhere, we risk losing sight of pressing social concerns as well as analytical ones, such as the power differentials, divisive positionings and affectivities of othering promoted in and through broadcast talk, and with them possibilities for related scholarship to inform wider civic cultures of political engagement. In the hope of strengthening journalism for our democracies, the time is now to reassess what approaches alert to ideology have to offer, particularly those crafted to make good the promise of empirical findings and theoretical insights to improve the quality, inclusiveness and diversity of broadcast talk for tomorrow.

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