« Bourdieu, Pierre »

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Abstract

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, autonomy, homology, cultural capital, habitus, doxa, reflexivity, and symbolic violence provide powerful tools for communication theorizing. In works such as *Distinction*, *The* *Rules of Art*, and *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu offers new insights on the production of culture, audience reception, media change, and research epistemology and methodology.

**Main text**

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French sociologist trained in philosophy, the founder and director of the Center for European Sociology and the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, and professor at the prestigious Collège de France, where he served as the elected chair in sociology from 1981 until his death. As a theorist and researcher, his international influence continues to be widely felt across the social sciences and humanities. Bourdieu’s concepts of field, autonomy, homology, capital, habitus, doxa, reflexivity, and symbolic violence provide powerful tools for understanding communication and power in contemporary societies. His key works directly relevant to communication and media scholarship are *Distinction* (1984), *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), *The Rules of Art* (1996), *On Television* (1998), *Language and Symbolic Power* (1999), and *The Weight of the World* (2000). Bourdieu’s ideas are especially relevant to research on the production of culture, audience reception, media change, and broader questions of structure and agency, epistemology, and methodology.

Building on Max Weber’s sociology of religion and the work of Kurt Lewin, Bourdieu conceptualized modern industrial societies as differentiated into multiple, semi-autonomous, mezzo-level social spaces or *fields* (cultural production, religion, politics, economics, etc.), each with its own particular “rules of the game” yet governed by parallel (*homologous*) social structures. Bourdieu shows how the real is always relational: specific dispositions, tastes, beliefs, and attitudes are produced through their relation to other dispositions, tastes, and so on. Contra Saussure, however, for Bourdieu this is not a purely discursive process: There is a systematic homologous relationship between discursive and social systems.

Social agents, whether individual or collective, possess varying amounts and forms of resources, or *capital*. Although there are in principle many distinct types of capital, it is the dynamic tension between *economic* and *cultural capital* that undergirds the architecture of power. The social space is thus organized along both a vertical and horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension distinguishes agents according to their amount of capital; the horizontal dimension opposes those with relatively high proportions of cultural versus economic capital, and vice versa. But this is not a purely Lévi-Straussian structuralist argument: historical trajectory (of agents, and fields) is also crucial in explaining outcomes. This theoretical framework, supported by Bourdieu’s extensive ethnographic, interview, and survey-based research, has a number of implications for communication and media research.

First, cultural production is understood neither as an act of individual creative genius (the “uncreated creator”) nor as a reflection of society writ large (in the latter case, avoiding what Bourdieu calls the *short-circuit fallacy*). Any creative act is the coming together of an individual *habitus—*with its unique biographical experience of class-based socialization—and a field within which this habitus finds its particular place in relation to that of other agents. In *The Rules of Art* and *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu uses this mode of analysis to explain the historically unprecedented formation of an *autonomous* artistic field governed by “art for art’s sake” as exemplified and embodied by the influential impressionist painter Edouard Manet and the social realist novelist Gustave Flaubert. For Bourdieu, autonomy is a collective rather than individual property: autonomy means that cultural production is governed by rules established internally within the field, rather than externally (e.g., by political or economic pressures).

Cultural fields thus always *refract* rather than reflect external pressures, though they can vary substantially in their degree of autonomy. In *On Television*, Bourdieu argued that during the 1990s the journalistic field in France had become decreasingly autonomous due to its increasing proximity (compared to fields like poetry or mathematics) to the *heteronomous* (external) pole of the field of power. Because of its mediating role in circulating information and bestowing recognition to agents across fields, a heteronomous journalistic field posed the danger of reducing the autonomy of other fields of cultural production. For Bourdieu, this is a significant problem to the extent that aesthetic and intellectual excellence requires such autonomy.

Second, cultural production and reception are seen as closely linked in homologous circuits. Audiences tend to seek out media that accord with their class-based predispositions, and media, in turn, tend to produce with such audiences in mind. In this scenario, the classic media studies notion of audience “resistance” makes little sense. With the contemporary shift away from omnibus media aimed at large, heterogeneous audiences toward increasingly fragmented, specialized media, the relevance and potential explanatory power of Bourdieu’s approach has only increased. In this conception, the power of media lies largely in reinforcing class-based differentiation rather than in changing minds. In a similar vein, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu argues against J.L. Austin and other linguistic theorists that the efficacy of speech acts lies not so much in the utterance but in the socially *consecrated* authority of the speaker.

Third, Bourdieu highlights the difficulties in achieving substantive societal or media transformation, while not ruling out the possibility. Relatively rare societal crises—whether economic, political, morphological (as in large population increases or migrations), technological, or environmental—create openings for change. During such periods, new fields may be formed or pre-existing fields transformed, and the particular historical circumstances of such formation processes will have long-lasting path dependent effects. Agents who achieve dominance in a field have material and symbolic interests in maintaining the status quo. Given the relational character of fields, new entrants have to differentiate themselves in order find a place inside—and some may attempt to do so by transforming the field—but most will succeed by skillfully playing according to the preexisting rules of the game. Fields produce more churn than change. For example, despite dramatic economic and technological transformations during the early twenty-first century, numerous studies have shown remarkable continuity in the dominant professional norms of U.S. journalism, even among new entrants and challengers to the field.

Finally, Bourdieu’s conception of structure and agency has notable consequences for any general understanding of social action as well as the epistemology and methodology of communications research practice. Via the *habitus*, individual agents internalize over time their experiences of social structure; at the same time, similar to Giddens’ structuration theory, habitus-endowed agents constitute and reconstitute the fields of which they are a part. Habitus generally operates at the unconscious level of taken-for-granted assumptions, tastes, and bodily hexis (embodied practice or ways of using one’s body). All dispositions, including the disposition to write philosophy and critical theory, arise from the meeting of a particular historically formed habitus and a position in a field. In drawing such a conclusion, Bourdieu might seem to share the radical relativism of Derrida or other poststructuralists. Yet Bourdieu remains committed to an emancipatory project of *constructing* scientific knowledge, via the use of *reflexivity*.

Deeply influenced by the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, science for Bourdieu is less about the use of systematic procedures than about the careful epistemological construction of the object of study. The first step is to challenge via an *epistemological break* the tacit presuppositions or common sense categories of knowledge (*doxa*) that effectively veil the actual workings of power. Tacking back and forth between moments of *objectivist* (mapping the social, based on statistical data) and *subjectivist* (seeking to understand a given field from the perspective of the actors inside it) research, one attempts to denaturalize the social world and its “taken-for-granted” assumptions and reveal it as the result of a process of social construction governed by relations of power. For Bourdieu, scientific inquiry thus must involve the following interrelated steps: (1) specification of the location of a field in the larger field of power; (2) analysis of the internal structure of the field; and (3) research on the historical “genesis” of the habitus of occupants of dominant positions in the field (*The Rules of Art*, p. 214). Central to the emancipatory success of such a project is the effort of the researcher to reflexively take into account his/her own habitus-shaped position (social class and scholarly) vis-à-vis the object of analysis; thus, even if the scholar’s perspective also is effectively “a disposition from a position,” he or she attempts to control for any distorting effects on the production of knowledge.

Guided by such epistemological concerns, Bourdieu-influenced research is free to draw on a range of qualitative and quantitative data. Along with other closely related varieties of field theory (new institutionalism, institutional logics, etc.), Bourdieu’s comprehensive ambition to map the social meshes well with the growing interest in cross-national research of media systems. His sensitivity to unconscious researcher biases also provides useful guidelines for ethnographic and interview-based research (Bourdieu, 2000) as well as for communications research beyond the Western world. Conversely, Bourdieu has been highly critical of large-scale surveys for their tendency toward *symbolic violence—*that is, imposing the researchers’ problematic (their questions and assumptions) onto the people being studied rather than letting the actual worldviews of their subjects emerge from the research.

At the same time, Bourdieu’s prominence means that he has been a target, a pole against which many other theorists define their own approaches. Bourdieu has been challenged from a number of directions, in some cases resulting in important improvements to his model, in other cases raising questions that continue to motivate ongoing research. Scholars have sought to further specify the social conditions that support autonomy, whether through state subsidies, civil society sponsorships, or particular organizational forms or market configurations (Benson, 2013). *Distinction* has generated a virtual industry testing the extent to which tastes and attitudes correlate with social class positions—both updating and adding cross-national variation to Bourdieu’s 1960s-1970s French data. Some scholars such as Tony Bennett (2007) have provided evidence showing that individual cultural preferences and tastes are now more fluid, heterogeneous, and unpredictable than as described by Bourdieu. Another important modification (pioneered by Richard Peterson) is the finding that dominant classes distinguish themselves from dominated classes not so much by their greater preference for high culture as for their more “omnivorous” repertoire of both high and low culture tastes.

Cultural studies scholars have criticized Bourdieu for not paying enough attention and respect to the creative and politically radical potential of popular and mass cultures. Cultural sociologists such as Jeffrey Alexander dispute Bourdieu’s Marxist-style emphasis on the dominance of economic power (though Bourdieu always took pains to differentiate his approach from Marx). Ethnographer Howard Becker insists that Bourdieu’s analytical framework overemphasizes conflict over cooperation and is too rigid, effectively predetermining his findings. Bruno Latour explicitly constructs his actor-network theory as a fluid “associational” alternative to Bourdieu’s “sociology of the social,” in an attempt to replicate French sociology’s founding debates between Gabriel Tarde and Emile Durkheim. Whatever one’s position in these lively and intense exchanges, one sees the usefulness for theory building of thinking with—or against—Bourdieu.

In the final years of his life, Bourdieu linked his theories more explicitly to a political agenda. In *On Television* (1998) and other polemical writings, he argued for the need to build institutional barriers to defend the autonomy of cultural producers against the encroachment of the market, and allied himself with broader worker movements opposed to neoliberal globalization.

SEE ALSO: Action and Agency; Audience; Creativity; Cultural Policy; Epistemology; Levi-Strauss, Claude; Lewin, Kurt; Media Sociology; Sociology of Culture; Structure; Weber, Max

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Author Biography

Rodney Benson is associate professor of media studies and sociology at New York University, United States. His research interests are social theory, comparative media systems, journalism studies, media ownership and policy, and political communication. He is the author of *Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison* (Cambridge, 2013) and co-editor (with Erik Neveu) of *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Polity, 2005). His articles on Bourdieu, Habermas, and other theorists have appeared in journals such as *Theory and Society*, *Political Communication*, and *The American Sociologist*.