

Twenty Years After *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*: A Conversation with Erik Neveu

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Among the scholars who have most significantly contributed to the international circulation and development of Pierre Bourdieu's work in media and journalism studies, Erik Neveu occupies a distinctive position. His name is closely associated with *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (2005)¹, the influential volume co-edited with Rodney Benson that played a pivotal role in introducing and consolidating Bourdieusian perspectives within journalism research across different national contexts. He claims a position of “nomad” of research, moving from political communication to social movement studies, from gender studies to the construction of public problems. One of his most recent books, *Des Soixante-Huitards Ordinaires* (2023)² explores the trajectories of a group of activists of the 68's in western France, challenging the mythologies which describe this generation as moving from Mao to Sarkozy, from revolution to liberalism. Neveu suggests that this book – as *Sociologie politiques des problèmes publics* (2021)³ that he mostly wrote as invited professor at the university of Torino – was influenced by the frequentation of his Italian colleagues, especially by the reading of Luisa Passerini's *Autoritratto di Gruppo* (1988)⁴. But beyond this nomadism, his work can be defined as an effort to connect journalism, cultural studies, political communication, social movement and the emergence of public problems... something close to a lifelong exploration of the complexities of the public sphere, as reflected in influential books such as *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux* (1996), *Sociologie du journalisme* (2001), *Introduction aux Cultural Studies* (with Armand Mattelart, 2003), and

¹ *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005.

² *Des soixante-huitards ordinaires*, Gallimard, Paris, 2023.

³ *Sociologie politiques des problèmes publics*, Armand Colin, Paris, 2021.

⁴ *Autoritratto di Gruppo*, Giunti, Firenze, 1988.

Qu'est ce que l'Opinion Publique? (with Pierre Karila-Cohen & Thomas Frinault, 2023)⁵.

Twenty years after the publication of *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, and in the context of this special issue, it seemed particularly valuable to invite Erik Neveu to reflect on the legacy of Bourdieu's work for contemporary media research. In the following conversation, he revisits his intellectual relationship with Bourdieu, discusses the international reception of Bourdieusian media studies, and reflects on some of the key debates surrounding journalism, public communication, and social theory. The interview offers both a personal testimony and a critical assessment of a research tradition that continues to inform contemporary scholarship while remaining open to dialogue, revision, and empirical scrutiny.

You have contributed significantly to the international reception and development of Pierre Bourdieu's approach within media and journalism studies. To begin with, I would like to ask about your relationship with Bourdieu on two levels: a personal one – whether you had the opportunity to meet him, and in what context – and an intellectual one, in relation to his research activities. How did your engagement with Bourdieu and his work evolve over time, and how did it shape the way you think about and construct your objects of research?

I cannot claim to have been a member of the “first” or even the “second” circles of researchers with the most intense working relationship with Bourdieu. Until the mid-1980s, I was provincial with few connections to the Parisian academic and intellectual scene. I was also caught up in bureaucratic activities at a young age (I became dean at 35). In the mid-nineties, Bourdieu invited me twice to be a member of the jury for Ph.D. viva voce examinations. He considered me a serious enough social scientist to be elected to the editorial board of *Actes de la Recherche* in 1998. I also had the opportunity to work with him at the *Association de Réflexion sur l'Enseignement Supérieur et la Recherche* (ARESER), a space for the critical analysis of changes in the French university system. I contributed to the collective

⁵ *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*, La Découverte, Paris, 1996; *Sociologie du journalisme*, La Découverte, Paris, 2001; *Introduction aux Cultural Studies*, La Découverte, Paris, 2003; *Qu'est ce que l'Opinion Publique?*, Gallimard, Paris, 2023.

booklet *Some Diagnoses and Urgent Remedies for a Threatened University*⁶, to which he gave its final form and structure.

My personal connections were stronger with members of the “first circle”, such as Patrick Champagne and Gérard Mauger, as well as members of the younger generation of Bourdieu’s students, including Marchetti and Duval. Both Marchetti and Duval had their first jobs as CNRS researchers in the research team that I was chairing in Rennes. Together with these colleagues and Eric Darras, as well as US partners such as Rod Benson, Loïc Wacquant, Michael Schudson, and Neil Fligstein, we organized the 2000 meeting at Berkeley, which gave birth to *Bourdieu and the journalistic field* (2005).

My intellectual connection to Bourdieu is another story. I read *Les Héritiers* probably around 1971, as did many students of my generation and the generation before. As I came from a middle-class background (but my parents never attended university), I had more cultural resources than my fellow students from working-class or peasant families. However, the situation of the “boursier”⁷ facing the ease and sometimes arrogance of the “héritiers” in a law faculty resonated with me. Beyond its contribution to my understanding of my student experience, however, I can’t say that the book was a significant read for me. The connection came later while writing my Ph.D. thesis on the ideology in French spy novels⁸. This research topic was considered as strange by many colleagues: this kind of books – mostly sold in tobacconists’ shops or railway stations, not bookshops – was then considered contemptible by intellectuals and read only by those who didn’t read books. I began thus searching for conceptual tools on cultural practices.

I read *Distinction* at the time of its publication. Calling it an epiphany would be an overstatement, but it was a “salvation reading”, to use a term coined by colleagues studying the sociology of reading⁹: a book that not only provided tools for my academic research but also spoke to me, spoke of my tastes and aversions, of my feelings of illegitimacy as an “assistant” and outsider in a conservative law faculty, and of my aspirations to become an intellectual (something akin to Dario Ferrari’s

⁶ ARESER, *Quelques diagnostics et remèdes urgents pour une université en péril*, Liber, Paris, 1997.

⁷ “Boursier” refers to a student receiving a state scholarship on the basis of limited family financial resources.

⁸ *L’idéologie dans le roman d’espionnage*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 1985.

⁹ C. Poliak, G. Mauger & B. Pudal, *Histoires de lecteurs*, Nathan, Paris, 1999.

Marcello complexes in *La ricreazione è finita*). *Distinction* helped me feel more comfortable with myself. From that point on, I became a reader of *Actes*, and each new Bourdieu book was a source of intellectual stimulation and emotional pleasure for me. I read them as both resources for my research and for understanding the world and as moments of exchange with a familiar, friendly voice. I realize that writing this may give the impression of a fan or a faithful and perhaps dogmatic disciple. But I don't think I ever was. First, not being in the inner circle was a loss, but also maybe a stroke of luck, as it spared me from living in the shadow of a giant. Second, having a relationship with Bourdieu that is more sophisticated than mere fan club membership means realizing, through reading his books (and those published in his collection *Le Sens social*), the enormous variety of his readings and references. It also means recognizing his ability to borrow from sociologists and historians who were not located in his own theoretical space, such as Goffman, Panofsky, Hirschmann, Finley, Hoggart, and Labov. Seriously reading his books also reveals how his concepts are open to change when fieldwork challenges them. For instance, as his work progresses, he pays more and more attention to contradictory dimensions and the effects of successive socializations on the habitus, which is not a straitjacket. Forty years later, I can say that I still think with Bourdieu and his concepts, but they have never been my only tools. I have also found resources in the sociology of Elias and the Chicago School, concerning journalism in the works of Barnhurst, Bennett, Schlesinger, Schudson, Tunstall, and Waisboard and many others. Spending one's academic life working on the same topic with the same authors just makes one stupid.

In light of this trajectory, I would like to ask you to reflect on the book “Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field”, which you co-edited with Rodney Benson in 2005 and which has had wide international resonance. Twenty years after its publication, to what extent do you think it has contributed to transforming the way research on media and journalism is conducted? How would you assess its impact, both in theoretical and empirical terms, and what kinds of developments do you see as most significant?

It is naive and pretentious to believe that a book alone can change the intellectual balance of power in an academic subfield. Yes, our book was successful, and we can probably claim that it significantly contributed to the acceptance of Bourdieusian concepts as a central toolkit in many areas of journalism studies in the global academic community. The Maares and Hanusch study¹⁰ is convincing on this point: the book was read and used – even translated into Chinese. It probably produced an “swarming effect”: more researchers using Bourdieu – or, more precisely, part of his toolkit – were giving the concepts more visibility and encouraging more young colleagues to do the same. However, the times were also favourable for the reception of this research program due to the need for a more global and comprehensive toolkit, the shift of many researchers’ training from the humanities and literary studies to the social sciences, and the fact that journalistic practice increasingly appeared to be embedded in economic or bureaucratic structures larger than the newsroom in the new media economy.

Considering the book’s impact means thinking about what he could have promoted, but also prevented. If I may digress briefly, television is a strange object that triggers passions, misunderstandings, and biased receptions. Talented researchers have written books about this subject that should be removed from their bibliographies. I think of Popper¹¹ and even your great political scientist, Sartori¹². There were also problems with *On Television*. It certainly wasn’t a bad book. This small “public sociology” booklet was extremely useful in making visible the growing power of television in more and more cultural production fields, such as the press and publishing, arts and lifestyles. It sparked conversation among journalists and received significant attention in the public sphere much beyond the small world of academics, at least in France. However, it was not a book comparable to *Distinction* or *Homo Academicus*. Its title has never been “The field of Television” or “Sociology of Television” as Bourdieu clearly did not know of the extensive literature on the subject. The book gave rise to two misconceptions. Its combative

¹⁰ P. Maares & F. Hanusch (2002), “Interpretations of the journalistic field: A systematic analysis of how journalism scholarship appropriates Bourdieusian thought”, *Journalism*, 23(4), pp. 736-754.

¹¹ *La television un danger pour la démocratie*, Paris, Éditions 10/18, 1999.

¹² *Homo Videns, Televisione e post Pensiero*, Laterza, Bari, 1999.

tone and style, sometimes bordering on a pamphlet, could have wrongly led young activists or apprentice sociologists to believe that sociology was nothing more than an activist art of denunciation. The book enabled researchers who were not even specialists in media studies¹³ to lecture Bourdieu on writing beyond his competence and on being a lightweight sociologist of media. They failed to see – or refused to see – that this was a book targeting public debate, not an esoteric monograph of a social field. The action of the public intellectual became an alibi to suggest the weakness of the sociologist. It is also against these types of misunderstandings, whether from good faith or not, that our book aimed to struggle. To put it tongue in cheek, our message was also “If you want to study media and journalism with Bourdieu, the best way is not to start with *On Television*. And before criticizing the politics of a particular media outlet, you must first undertake the difficult task of its sociological analysis”. I will connect this to a detail of the book. We had to choose a cover. I suggested using a nice snapshot of Bourdieu speaking with a megaphone to strikers during the 1995 social movement at Gare de Lyon in Paris. However, Rod Benson instantly objected, saying that our goal in editing this book was to move away from the idea of Bourdieu as an activist rather than a sociologist. Our aim was to provide readers with concepts and analytical tools, not a vision of Bourdieu as a leftist leader or heir to Jean-Paul Sartre. He was right. And productive concepts that open the door to a good understanding of the social world serve those who wish to change it more than mottos and rage without an intellectual backbone!

In recent years – particularly in the wake of the so-called “hybrid turn” associated with digital transformations and the growing entropic dynamics of contemporary societies – media studies seem to oscillate between an increasing attention to the complexity of phenomena and the risk of a loss of theoretical depth. How can Bourdieu’s approach help address this tension? Do you see it as a “self-sufficient theoretical framework”, or as a perspective that needs to be combined with other approaches? In this sense, do you still consider field theory

¹³ P. Marlière (1998), “The rules of the journalistic field: Pierre Bourdieu’s contribution to the sociology of the media”, *European Journal of Communication*, 13(2), pp. 219-234.

to be an evolving research programme, as you suggested in the introduction to the volume with Benson? If so, what kinds of productive combinations have you found particularly fruitful in your own research?

First, I must admit that I don't have a clear, comprehensive view of the current state of media studies for at least two reasons. First, the publish-or-perish system has led to an explosion of books and journals. Simply reading *Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, and the *International Journal of Press Politics* plus a national journal could be a full-time job, not to mention the Niagara of books. Second, my research interests are diverse¹⁴. While I'm currently returning to journalism, most of my research activity over the last fifteen years has focused on social movements and the construction of public problems, which means I've been less in touch with innovations in media studies.

I fear that the idea of a "self-sufficient theoretical framework" could lead to a dead end. Field theory is an extremely powerful and useful analytical framework that is efficient in many social spaces... but. But one should use the complete toolkit. The Maeres-Hanush study shows that if field is intensively used, capitals and habitus are a bit less studied and "illusio" rarely used. This selective use leaves many dimensions of the subjective commitments and experiences of journalists in the dark. This is something that is well studied, for instance, in Powers and Vera-Zambrano's *The Journalism Predicament*¹⁵. But... secondly, although field theory is very encompassing, it has its limits. For example, typifying a social agent by a portfolio of capitals (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) is possible and illuminating for an academic, a CEO, or a politician. But what about those who are precisely resourceless, such as industrial workers, migrants, and journalists of the precariat with contracts lasting a few weeks or less? The point is not that they lack of any kind of capital; one could even identify capitals specific to working-class milieus, such as "autochthony capital", which is linked to a long familial presence

¹⁴ E. Neveu (2021), "In hope that scientific nomadism may turn out to be meaningful after all". *La fabrique de mes recherches/The design of my work*", *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 151, p. 38-52

¹⁵ M. Powers & S. Vera-Zambrano, *The Journalist's Predicament: Difficult Choices in a Declining Profession*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2023.

in a local space. However, this analytical tool works better for those who “have” than for those who “don’t”.

Finally, in answer to the last part of your question, I think that whenever we study communication, we should try to combine three approaches. One is an **analysis of the field of production**. However, we should also pay close attention to the **forms and grammars of messages**, such as news sections, journalistic styles, literary genres, and online formats. This means being open to scholars developing a sociology and psychology of attention and attention management. It means reading sociolinguists or semiologists, not because words themselves have power, but because they can trigger emotional responses, common sense, and experiences. This brings us to a third dimension: the question of **receptions and interpretations**, as well as ignorance and misinterpretation of media messages. Bourdieu addresses this issue in *Ce que parler veut dire* and its case studies, as well as in one of his earliest edited books on students’ perceptions of teaching¹⁶. On these issues, we must also read anglophone reception studies and the contributions of historians on cognitive tools and cultures in reception processes. To suggest two illustrations, we should consider Baxandall’s brilliant study of how paintings were perceived during the Quattrocento¹⁷, as well as Salvatore Settis’ work on the cryptic meaning of Giorgione’s painting, *The Storm*¹⁸. Against the illusion of a communism of perception and understanding, we should always question what the merchants of Genoa or the aristocrats of Venice yesterday, the viewers of RAI or TF1 today were and are really perceiving.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, public communication is shaped by specific social conditions and relations of power rather than being a neutral space of exchange. At the same time, this form of critique does not impose normative closures, nor does it reduce communication to structural determination, but instead draws attention to the dynamic interplay between structures, practices,

¹⁶ P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron et M. de Saint Martin, *Rapport Pédagogique et communication*, Mouton, La Haye, 1964.

¹⁷ *Pittura ed esperienze sociali nell’Italia del Quattrocento*, Einaudi, Torino, 2001.

¹⁸ *La “Tempesta” interpretata. Giorgione, i committenti, il soggetto*, Einaudi, Torino, 2005.

and forms of agency. How can this approach help identify what makes more autonomous and reflexive forms of public discourse possible? And, in this context, what role can – or should – sociologists play in the public sphere?

You are absolutely right to highlight that Bourdieu's sociology does not reduce social life to "structural determination". His work has often been labelled a "sociology of domination," a "deterministic" approach in which humans are puppets of structures. A French sociologist even referred to it as a "totalitarian sociology". Bourdieu's concepts, such as habitus and capitals, have two sides. They suggest limits, what is lacking in a social agent, and what is likely to happen socially. Yes, there is determinism. However, all habitus and portfolios of capitals are also composed of skills, resources, and abilities that serve as springboards for action and invention. Determinisms and prohibitions can also serve as incentives for innovation and subversion. Until the 1980s, the basic style of reporting in French political journalism was very deferential. In the "serious" newspapers, it was difficult to speak of politicians' privileges, the ridiculous length of their canned speeches, or their pompous behaviour. Some journalists, whose trajectories and habitus were not a carbon copy of their colleagues', had the idea to take on the TV program news section, which was then the lowest of the low in the newspaper hierarchy. By commenting on politicians' screen appearances, they invented a mixed genre that was humorous and critical. Sometimes they found sophisticated inspiration in the style of chronicles of Roland Barthes or Umberto Eco. This changed the way politics were covered.

What can we do? Patrick Champagne, a close colleague of Bourdieu, used to say, "The challenge is to intellectualize political life, not to politicize intellectual life". The difficulty here stems from the vast difference between the potential plans of action and the actual opportunities offered by the media system. Having our own media is probably a pipe dream, but let's not forget that Bourdieu devoted for years a lot of energy to *Liber*¹⁹, a small journal in which researchers from many countries selected and promoted the best of their research with the support of major European

¹⁹ C. Charles (2025), "Une revue peut en cacher une autre, *Liber*, supplément d'Actes : Brève histoire d'une utopie", *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, n° 258-9, pp. 72-93.

newspapers such as *Le Monde* and *El País*. Researchers should consider that they have a dual responsibility. We must be proactive in the press, media, and internet, as well as in forums opened by associations and organized citizens. We must limit our interventions to issues on which we have conducted research and fieldwork. If our goal is to bring more rationality and deeper knowledge of causes and processes to public discussion, we cannot behave like “tuttologi”, who are like an occupation army in TV studios.

Another difficulty is that common sense has a reasonable chance of being clearer and more convincing to audiences than academic discourse when you have three minutes to explain a Ph.D.-level point. I suggest that the academic world provide its members with media training tools to learn how to adapt to media formats – at least when they don’t prevent serious reflection. A good intervention is one that is understood by most of the audience and that makes you feel comfortable if colleagues are listening. If we were proactive, there would be many opportunities to promote our knowledge in the media landscape, from off-the-record discussions with journalists seeking understanding and background knowledge to more formal collaborations. I remember publishing a questionnaire built with a political journalist in *Ouest-France*, the powerful regional daily from western France, before general elections. We received an impressive response of nearly 10,000 answers, many of which were accompanied by letters providing valuable insights into the growing disengagement of voters from politics. Television programs or “hybrid forums” triggered by a large-scale project (e.g., the TAV in Piemonte) combining the presence of rank-and-file citizens, politicians, stakeholders, and researchers can be catalysts for reflexivity, at least if the organizers seek to produce mutual understanding rather than buzz or clashes. Public discussion is ruled by the quality of the speech, explanations, but also by the abilities of the audience. We should work to improve reception levels. In France today (only in France?), a young man or woman can earn a “Baccalauréat” without ever having listened to an hour of social science instruction, except for history. This means ignoring the basics of economics. This means never having been exposed to sociological reasoning, which involves paying attention to the variety of logics and experiences that govern the behaviours of “others”, mapping the networks of complex causal determinisms that

influence social processes. As long as this style of reasoning is not important in all school curricula, animist reasoning (“the markets” rule the economy and “Islam” rules all behaviours of all Muslims) and conspiracy theories will continue to thrive. Once again, one of Bourdieu’s first initiatives when he was elected to the *Collège de France* was to collaborate with his colleagues, from biology to history, on a project called *Propositions pour l’enseignement de l’avenir*²⁰, which was sent to President Mitterrand in March 1985. The spirit of these proposals was to build bridges between different types of knowledge, increase equality and self-esteem among all types of young people, and promote reflexivity rather than amassing abstract knowledges .

In light of the recent passing of Jürgen Habermas, I would like to ask you to reflect on the relationship between his concept of the public sphere and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of field. Both can be seen as major theorists of modernity, yet they develop distinct theories of action – Habermas through communicative action, and Bourdieu through a theory of practice. How do you see the relationship between these two frameworks, and what are their implications for understanding contemporary forms of public communication? Can they be brought into a productive dialogue, or do they rest on fundamentally different conceptions of the social?

I must admit that I am no expert on Jürgen Habermas’s most philosophical contributions. However, his “Public Sphere” is a must-read for me. As a young professor in the 1980s, I dedicated an entire course to this book for several years in the Media Studies department at Rennes II University. I admired – and still do – the intellectual ambition of this investigation and its invitation to think of democracy not just as a system of legal rules (human rights, checks and balances), but also as a communicative space that requires specific socialization to transform members of society into reflective citizens. Habermas was one of the first scholars to focus on

²⁰See:

<https://acireph.org/nos-recherches/regards-historiques/documents-relatifs-a-la-guerre-des-programmes/article/propositions-pour-l-enseignement-de-l-avenir-par-pierre-bourdieu>.

how “private” lives and education produce (or do not produce) a skill for rational discussion or a “habitus” of citizenship, to use a concept from Bourdieu. The strength of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is its extraordinary ability to bridge issues and topics belonging to different academic disciplines, such as political philosophy, history, sociology, and media studies. This was unusual in the early sixties.

While *The Public Sphere* is a great book, it also has many flaws. To mention some of its most visible limits, the historical approach is deeply biased. The first part of the book explores the emergence and structuring of the bourgeois public sphere and often flirts with an idealized vision of bourgeois citizenship and its commitment to political participation. However, many historical contributions from England, France, and the United States suggest that the upper classes were much more passive and less reflective. Guizot, a major statesman and “organic intellectual” of the French bourgeoisie, expressed in his letters a sense of despair regarding the lack of political motivation and active reflexivity of his class. Michael Schudson, considering the low participation in the mythical “town meetings” of New England, even questions whether a public sphere existed before the 19th century²¹. This historical bias is more evident in the stark contrast between the rise of the bourgeois public sphere and the growing crisis of its decline amid the working class’s emergence during the democratization process. The lives, habits, and cultures of the majority of the population, which were almost completely invisible in the first part of the study, suddenly occupy the stage, suggesting – oh, surprise! – a dramatic decline in cultural practices and theoretical skills. But what different result could be possible when comparing the cultural and intellectual styles of the upper crust of society in Paris, Turin or London between 1815 and 1870 with those of the French or Italian working class of 1910 or 2010? A real comparison should have considered in the two time-sequences the practices of the wealthy and commoners. These flaws trigger another realm of misunderstandings, which are probably as much explainable by the use of Habermas as by its own contribution. The idea of the decline of the public sphere has fuelled a constant flow of boring, masochistic

²¹ *Was there ever a public sphere? If so, when? Reflections on the American case*, in C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public Sphere*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1992.

horror stories for intellectuals. Television, comic strips, and, more recently, social networks and the omnipresence of screens supposedly turn people into morons or amplifying cognitive biases (if any examples are needed: Alan Bloom, Gerald Bronner, Michel Henry, Neil Postman). In a modern version of Dante's *Inferno*, the story of the public sphere can be summarized as an endless descent into the depths of vulgarity, where reflexivity disappears. One more reason to respect Habermas is that he agreed with many of these criticisms at the conference in the US organized for the translation into English of his masterpiece²².

Can we combine the concepts of field, public sphere, and communicative action? If I were a good little soldier of Bourdieusian theory, I would say no, as Bourdieu mentioned during his lectures at the Collège de France that the “public space – detestable concept that comes from Germany – is used by ideologues who speak a lot, without reflecting, about democracy and the state”²³. And it is true that, in France at least, journalists and media intellectuals loosely use “public sphere” as shorthand to suggest, without any critical perspective, the obvious existence of a healthy space for public discussion, open, pluralistic and well protected by laws. However, my position differs slightly from Bourdieu's. The use of the concept was debated during a three-day roundtable discussion of the *French Political Science Association* in 1996 and our majoritarian conclusion was that “public sphere” could be a useful concept if very cautiously mobilised.

Firstly, we shouldn't think of it as an open forum where all issues and frames, interests and groups have equal opportunities for expression. The public sphere is a space of conflict and unequal resources. Habermas himself is probably much more lucid on this point than most of his epigones, when he shows for instance how the visions of the “private”, and of the respective role of law and contracts during the rise of the bourgeois public sphere were preventing and disqualifying political debates and regulations about work relationships or wages. Beyond the naïve celebration of the public sphere as a forum, we must think of it as a space of democratic opportunities for debate but also as a space where groups and ideas are “democratically” silenced. Secondly, we should be careful with the “Jacobin”

²² Habermas and the Public Sphere, Op. Cit.

²³ P. Bourdieu, *Sur l'Etat*, Seuil, Paris 2012, p. 482 (cours du 21 novembre 1991).

vision of a public sphere with capital letters and consider a mosaic of large and small public spheres, loosely connected, linked to professions, territories, hobbies or ideological links. The book we edited after this roundtable was precisely titled *Mosaic Public Spheres*²⁴. Combining concepts, the idea that fields often have their own micro public spheres is fruitful. For example, I think of Aeron Davies's research on the world of finance and business in the UK. This does not mean that there is an equivalence of one field to one micro public sphere, but exploring how they overlap may be stimulating. The current trend in media practices is probably the crumbling down of the impact of large audience, omnibus media (e.g., TV networks and press) and the multiplication of micro-communities on social networks... even if they can connect and grow like the four millions participants to the network of Facebook groups of French Yellow vests. But this example also suggests that something closer to a unified, polarizing public sphere, closer to the Habermasian vision is often linked to situations of crisis and exceptional events. Concerning the ambiguous concept of communicative action, it is logically clear but practically difficult to use, as are many philosophical conceptualizations. The quest for a communication aiming to produce mutual understanding, to explore truth, and seek agreement rather than manipulate or play power games is clear, and such communication should rule political and social deliberation. However, it is a sad reality of social life that convincing someone with deep beliefs or interests on a particular issue is often an exercise in futility. This does not mean that public discussion is pointless by definition. Rather, shifting from philosophical to sociological question, it is worth asking: under what conditions can deeply rooted beliefs and opinions be changed? Sometimes, crises (moments of great social change or individual turning points and biographical ruptures) trigger a suspension of the "taken for granted" or create the feeling of having been fooled. Other times, it is through the institutionalization of rules and conditions of debate that can bracket the routines and constraints of ordinary life. This is the principle behind the rules of scientific fields... although one could question whether a discussion during a conference between doctoral students and powerful professors are solely and

²⁴ B. François & E. Neveu (Eds.), *Espaces publics Mosaïques. Acteurs, Arènes et rhétoriques des débats publics contemporains*. PUR, Rennes, 1999.

always governed by the purity of communicative action. This could be the experience of a “citizens’ committee” or “deliberative poll” when laypeople share long moments of exposure to contradictory expertise far from their homes or offices and have the opportunity to calmly confront their visions, often gaining access to high-quality reflexivity.

In recent years, the transformations brought about by digital media seem to have renewed interest in McLuhan and, more broadly, in media-centred approaches inspired by his work. Do you think that contemporary media environments call for a reassessment of this tradition? More specifically, do you see any productive dialogue or possible points of interaction between such approaches and Bourdieusian sociology, or do they remain fundamentally distinct ways of understanding communication and social life?

It’s impossible to make sense of all the dimensions of social life, or even of a specific field, with one author or paradigm. Bourdieu is not a sociologist who focuses strongly on science and technology, unlike Latour, for instance. More precisely, he has written about science – his last book is titled “*Science de la science et réflexivité*”²⁵ – but from an epistemological point of view, questioning the social conditions of production of scientific knowledge about the physical and social worlds. Your question makes me realize that, when I browse the covers and themes of the entire “*Actes de la recherche*” collection, science and technology are rather marginal topics.

So, should we rehabilitate McLuhan? Surely we are not in such a deep epistemological crisis! First, if we want to do some intellectual shopping in these quarters, it is better to read Harold Innis, the real Canadian founder of an innovative reflection on the effects and “biases”²⁶ of media technologies. The fascination produced by McLuhan – as we are speaking more of seduction than the strength of a coherent conceptual system – comes from the fact that he is *brillant*, to use a French adjective. Reading McLuhan is like drinking a few glasses of good

²⁵ *Raisons d’agir*, Paris, 2001.

²⁶ *The bias of communication*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1951.

champagne or *spumante*: he is a magician with words and mottos that make you feel clever. Like a Steven Spielberg of communication theory, he sets the stage for small armies of heterogeneous objects – from credit cards and typewriters to televisions and Mad Magazine – marching toward the global village. All of this is wrapped in a soft concept and illuminated by rhetorical pyrotechnics. He had an extraordinary flair for identifying clues of social change, and his invitation to pay attention to the impact of communication technologies remains worth listening to. However, while he elegantly pontificates, his concepts – if one can use this term – are vague, and his judgments are often crippled by many shortcuts²⁷.

Drinking too many bubbles may make one realize, the next day, with a hangover, that he or she has made a fool of himself. Yes, McLuhan is brilliant, but can you follow him when he explains that radio produced Hitler and that his success would not have occurred in a TV-dominated media landscape? There's no doubt that radio boosted Hitler's power, but was Nazism just a byproduct of radio waves? Would Hitler have been perceived as a shrieking madman with a ridiculous mustache on TV? Don't we currently have a dangerous orange haired clown performing quite well on TV from the White House? McLuhan also wisely suggests that there was a connection between the telephone and the rise of call girls. At such a level of vagueness, it's not even wrong. But one would better follow Elizabeth Bernstein's lead when she explores how changes in "sex work" propelled by the internet must be connected to changes in the profile and expectations of its workers and customers and the authorities' policing strategies²⁸. The risk of many approaches inspired by McLuhan is falling into the trap of technological determinism. It was very visible in France, with Régis Debray short-lived attempt to promote a "médiologie" in the 1990's France. His science of "facts of transmission" and "logistics of spirit" being based on technological determinism. The slippery slope from technological attention to simplistic determinism was evident again during the Arab Spring. These revolutions were attributed to the magical power of social networks without raising

²⁷ One of the most stimulating critical readings of McLuhan is supplied by Marjorie Ferguson's "McLuhan Revisited: 1960s Zeitgeist victim of pioneer postmodernist?", *Media, Culture and Society*, 13(1), 1991, pp. 71-90.

²⁸ *Temporarily Yours. Intimacy, Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2007.

questions about the social logic of connecting to these networks, the existence of previous mobilizations and organizations, or the fact that in Aleppo or Cairo -where one can be shot or tortured for demonstrating- a cell phone connection may not fully explain commitments.

However, there is no doubt that technologies involving the internet, computers, social networks, and artificial intelligence have an enormous impact on a wide range of activities, from interpersonal communication to journalism, from politics to publishing. But prophets are not the best guides for making sense of these changes. Even the need for a new science can be questioned: the risk here is reinventing the wheel. The social sciences have a legacy of serious empirical and theoretical reflections on such issues. Consider Jack Goody's *Domestication of the Savage Mind*²⁹ or Elisabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*³⁰. We need to understand the effects of new communication tools by paying attention to how technologies are opened (or not) to different appropriations, and to the "poaching" imagination of users. The concept of technologies' "affordance" is very pertinent to understanding these possible spaces of play, misuse, and invention. To prevent too much technological determinism, we must consider audiences, journalists, and politicians as capable of actively engaging with and sometimes hijacking these technologies. It also means paying attention to the institutions and regulations that channel the development and use of these technologies. From France, I would mention the contributions of sociologists and political scientists, such as Patrick Flichy³¹ and Dominique Cardon³², but I should also express my admiration for the richness of Anglophone research on political campaigns on social networks and the use of these networks by journalists³³. The contributions of Science and Technology Studies is worth mentioning too. I don't see them as a "new" science, but rather as one of these hubs of disciplines and knowledge that needed to understand contemporary societies. So, let's improve the journalism's field approach by mobilizing researchers and research that pay more attention to

²⁹ Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977.

³⁰ Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979.

³¹ *Dynamics of Modern Communication*, London, Sage, 1995.

³² *La démocratie Internet*, Paris, Seuil, 2010

³³ *New Media and Society* is a reliable source on such issues.

the impact of technologies. There is surely a weakness in the Bourdieusian approach in this regard. Let's also keep McLuhan and Le Bon among the mothballs, in their little display-cases, in the museum of outdated communication theories.

If you were to identify a priority direction for renewing media and journalism studies today, which objects, practices, or research problems deserve the most urgent attention?

As I mentioned earlier, my recent research was far from journalism, so I don't feel entitled to suggest the right research topics to my colleagues. I would only offer brief suggestions. First, there is no good research in any subfield of "studies" without a strong sociological foundation. I'm always stunned when young colleagues demonstrate an encyclopaedic knowledge of all the publications in their sub-subfield and much less familiarity with the founders of sociology or neighbouring subfields, such as the sociology of professions and the sociology of intellectuals. Although we may have different theoretical references, I feel like sharing a common perspective when an Italian "Manuale di base" like Splendore's³⁴ has strong references to general sociology.

If I were to identify research problems, it would be because they align with my own inquiries rather than because they require "the most urgent attention". A first suggestion brings us back to your fourth question. What journalistic genres would produce the best combination of reader- and viewer-friendly content with sociological insight into the world we live in? At its best, journalism can compete with social science in making sense of subjective experiences and depicting scenes and characters. Conversely, mapping causal nexuses is more challenging for him. I'm currently working on immersion and interpretive journalisms to understand how, where and why "they" do things better (or not) than "we" do. Questioning the space between journalism, literature, and social science is an exciting topic.

Finally, I would like to express how infuriated I am by the resurgence of the most absurd, outdated, and contemptuous clichés about crowd psychology, which were

³⁴ S. Splendore, *Sociologia del Giornalismo*, Laterza, Bari, 2023.

popularized by Gustave Le Bon. One of the most powerful impacts of social networks is probably their potential for triggering moral panics among... intellectuals and researchers, persuading them that the digital public sphere is populated by gullible, irrational, and dangerous citizens. A major area of research should be mapping and understanding the current state of this public sphere while keeping naïve technophile enthusiasms and moral panics at bay. This requires acknowledging the negative potential of social networks and the internet, including the spread of irrationality, manipulation, and hate speeches. However, it should also entail questioning what a new style of citizenship could be, one that is less deferential to institutions, politicians, experts, and academics. It should entail exploring how an educated population learns to navigate a new sea of news and media by trial and error, inventing new forms of autonomous reflexivity. The most inspiring text I've read on these issues is not from a Bourdieusian sociologist but from an Eliasian one inspired by the theories of "informalization"³⁵. If proof were needed, it would be that one should never have only one reference author!

³⁵ D. Malcolm, "Post-Truth Society? An Eliasian Sociological Analysis of Knowledge in the 21st Century", *Sociology*, 55(6), 2021, pp. 1063-1079.