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Sub-fields of specialized journalism

Dominique Marchetti

The notion of field allows us to draw out both that which unifies and divides the journalistic space of cultural production. Previous research has emphasized the tensions among leading newspapers, or between television and the print press. But another important organizing distinction in an increasingly fragmented media environment is thematic specialization, what in the American context one usually calls a 'beat'. As with other field characteristics, however, the role that specialization plays in structuring journalistic production may only be grasped relationally. This essay offers a systematic categorization of the variable features of the 'sub-fields' of specialized journalism, with the hope that this model might be adapted for use in identifying and analyzing other properties of cultural fields.

An analysis of this type begins with the discovery that the journalistic field is structured around an opposition between a 'generalist' pole and a 'specialized' pole, and that the degree of specialization varies depending on the media outlet and the journalist. In this regard, recent transformations in recruitment and the consequent effects on the struggle to define journalistic

excellence are shown to demonstrate the growing weight of the specialized pole.

The specialized pole is far from uniform, however. Six variables help account for differences among the specialized sub-fields: (1) position occupied in the journalistic field, (2) structure of the relationship of internal forces to explain how the weight of different media in the production of specialized information varies from one specialty to another, (3) degree and forms of competition and collaboration, (4) circulation of specialized journalists within the journalistic employment market, (5) journalistic demographic characteristics and (6) mechanisms of professional socialization.

Shifting then to an outward focus, four additional variables help account for different relations between journalistic specializations and those social spaces which they mediatize: (1) degree of interrelation between their respective economies, (2) degree of political control of their activities, (3) degree to which one or the other imposes its problematic and its principals of hierarchization, as well as (4) social characteristics of both the journalists and their interlocutors.

From Generalists to Specialists

The articulation of the journalistic field around the two poles 'generalist/specialist' reflects, on the one hand, the characteristics of the publics to whom media outlets are addressed, and, on the other hand, those of the outlets and of the journalists themselves. Though only the second aspect is

the focus here, it is linked to the first, that is to say, to the transformations of the public and their styles of life.¹

Degree of specialization varies strongly, at least according to the type of media outlet (generalist/specialized, audiovisual/print press, small/large outlet), the specialties, and the position that the latter occupy in the internal hierarchy of the media outlet. Thus, to take an example from the mainstream news media, in going from the numerous media outlets of the daily national or regional press toward audiovisual or small general media outlets, specialized departments or journalists become increasingly rare. Very often one finds profiles of journalists who become specialists after a certain number of years, after having started as generalist reporters, or just as often, specialists who are only moderately so, since they do not stay long with the same topic. In the specialized media, paradoxically, the higher one goes in the internal hierarchy, the more likely one is to be a generalist. To understand even more specifically the degree of specialization of departments and journalists, one can study the mobility of professionals within the journalistic field. While some of them have internal mobility in the sense that they remain either in the same department or in departments of the same specialty (sciences, sport, etc.), others circulate between employment markets, going from specialized media to generalist media, or the inverse.

¹Bourdieu insists that one must simultaneously take into account the 'objective orchestration' of the 'logic of the field of production, and also of the field of consumption'. A complete analysis of any field or sub-field clearly ought to include both aspects. See Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction* (Minuit, Paris, 1979), p. 255.

Recruitment as Revealing the Structure

The massive arrival of young journalists in France during the 1980s and 1990s is marked by two trends that correspond to the restructuring of the business market. On the one hand, there is an increase in the number of journalists whom one might qualify as multi-competent generalists, in the sense that they are capable of working for different media and/or of carrying out very different tasks, or of covering different sectors of activity. On the other hand, there is a more significant phenomenon of the ascendancy of journalists who are more and more specialized, and of non-journalist experts having undergone post-secondary studies that are sometimes long and very specialized.

This trend of relative professionalization may be traced via the requirements sought by employers from very different media.² The most generalized media seek, first, journalists who are immediately 'operational', that is, who have training in a certain number of practices and techniques. The increase in the number of graduates of France's eight accredited journalism schools within the media outlets of generalist media is a good indicator. Though such graduates only represent 12 percent of the total number of professional journalist cardholders,³ their numbers are growing among the personnel

²V. Devillard, M.-F. Lafosse, C. Leteinturier, and R. Rieffel, *Les journalistes français à l'aube de l'an 2000: Profils et parcours* (Panthéon, Paris, 2001); D. Marchetti and D. Ruellan, *Devenir journalistes: Sociologie de l'entrée dans le marché du travail* (Documentation française, Paris, 2001).

³In France, a specialized commission composed of news executives and journalists provides a professional identity card to journalists under certain conditions, chiefly that at least fifty percent of the applicant's income

of the most prestigious national newspapers and television channels. A multi-competent generalist should also possess sufficient general cultural knowledge and analytic ability acquired through a relatively long education (three or four years after the ‘high school’ *baccalauréat* examination). In France, a degree from a university (history, law, literature) or, especially, the Paris-based Institute of Political Studies (*Institut d'études politiques*), is considered an essential guarantee of such general competence. Put another way, knowledge of the specific area to be covered is in some cases perceived as less important than the certified ability to deal with all subjects.

But this development should not obscure another that is much more significant, that is, the reinforcement of the specialized pole of the journalistic field, as shown by the ceaseless growth of the specialized magazine press (public, technical, professional) which now employs 32.7 percent of cardholding professional journalists.⁴ Some specialized media outlets seek experts with journalistic skills, rather than generalist or even (relatively) specialized journalists, simply because such outlets are addressed to a professional or specialized public. What is sought then, is thus not only a capital of specialized knowledge but also a ‘proximity to the readership’, as the editor-in-chief of one professional magazine

derives from work performed for a media enterprise. This card functions in some ways like membership in the U.S. House and Senate Press Galleries, easing access to cover government activities ; unlike any comparable journalistic status in the United States, it also guarantees special tax abatements. The French ‘carte’ is not mandatory, however, and many French journalists exercise their profession without having the card.

⁴Devillard et al., *Les journalistes français à l'aube de l'an 2000*, pp. 56-7.

specified.⁵ Within the generalist media, the fastest growing area of recruitment has been for specialized professionals to write about business, science, health and other topics. Both university communications programs and the post-graduate journalism schools have established thematic options in science, agriculture, sports, business and European affairs, to name a few. In the specialized press, and for certain specialized subjects, it is not unusual to find journalists who have begun or completed a Ph.D., or have on-the-job experience as engineers, lawyers or medical doctors.

Media organizations recruit specialists for both professional and commercial reasons. ‘Knowledge of the issue’ is crucial to establishing journalistic credibility both before specialized (source) and generalized (reader) publics, as Jean Padioleau’s study of French educational reporters showed.⁶ Such knowledge is perceived as particularly important by publishers and owners when it comes to politically sensitive topics. Even so, most specialist journalists are only ‘relatively’ specialized. Even journalists with medical degrees or MBAs can only have a limited knowledge of the many highly-specialized sub-fields of medicine or business finance. But it is precisely this type of limited journalistic specialization that complements the advertising-driven growth of back-of-the-book sections on personal investing, health, science, and a variety of practical news (‘news that you can use’).

⁵All quotations from journalists in this chapter, unless otherwise specified, are from interviews conducted by the author in France between 1998 and 2002.

⁶J.-G. Padioleau, ‘Systèmes d’interaction et rhétoriques journalistiques’, *Sociologie du travail*, 3 (1976), pp. 256-282, esp. p. 267.

Split Identities

Such morphologic transformations do not occur without exacerbating recurring identity debates over the definitions of journalistic excellence. Specialized journalists are often stigmatized as having been captured by their sources or even of serving as de-facto spokespersons for the organizations they cover: political journalists or those that write about social issues like immigration are sometimes characterized as ‘activists’, sports journalists are seen as ‘fans’. Specialists are thus portrayed as having a narrow, incomplete vision, too partial and technical, that is to say, more inclined to underline continuity rather than the latest news.

From the generalists’ point of view, in short, journalists simply do not need *a priori* knowledge of the topics that they cover. What really counts is mastery of journalistic techniques: resourcefulness, rapidity, brashness, ability to get there first, independence vis-à-vis sources. With these abilities, the best journalists are seen as those capable of handling any topic, on short notice, and of writing about it in a way that the general public can easily understand. This widely-shared professional standard places specialized journalists working for omnibus media (oriented toward large, heterogeneous audiences, especially television) in a particularly difficult position. They need to acquire credibility before their peers as a specialist in a field, particularly before the editor-in-chief of the media outlet for which they work, yet also to demonstrate the qualities demanded of journalists in general. Likewise, they seek to address a broad audience without being discredited before a more limited specialized audience. This is the dilemma faced by all but the most specialized journalists working for the most

specialized publications: they are specialists who nevertheless want to be recognized as journalists ‘like the others’.

Variable Characteristics of Journalistic Sub-Fields

Having drawn out the model of a general structuring of the journalistic field and its recent transformations, one can imagine a second, more refined level of analysis, that is to say, a comparative study of the different specialized sub-spaces. The latter enjoy very little autonomy with respect to the journalistic field if one compares them, for example, to their equivalent in the scientific field, the various disciplines.⁷ Journalistic specialization is obviously not comparable to academic disciplines, not least because there are no formal entry requirements such as possession of a diploma. Even so, as with the disciplines, one finds significant differences as one moves from one specialized journalistic space to another. Tunstall’s pioneering study of specialized journalists in major British media showed significant variations in the constraints, the careers and the earlier experiences, the status accorded a specialty and the manner in which journalists conceive their role.⁸ Taking relational sociology further, I have thus sought to compare different specialties in order to better understand their own logics and their specific properties, identifying in the process six major variables.

⁷Pierre Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité* (Editions Raisons d’Agir, Paris, 2001), pp. 123-40.

⁸Jeremy Tunstall, *Journalists at Work* (Constable, London, 1971).

Position of specialization in the professional hierarchy

A specialization's position in the journalistic field can be measured through at least two sets of indicators: biographical trajectories of journalists and general economic/professional indicators. For example, a study of the professional trajectories of managing editors of nationally distributed newspapers in France would probably demonstrate the primacy of the political specialization, since most of them come from this beat. In the same way, reconstructing the pyramid of the ages of specialized journalists for a topic in order to compare it to journalists as a whole would probably show the dominated position of certain specialists connected to national 'general news' or 'social issues' (immigration, poverty, racism), generally younger than their colleagues in the more prestigious domestic or foreign political beats.

A second set of indicators is at once economic and professional. Space allocated to the topic, whether for audiovisual time or for written pages, the place in the distribution hierarchy or in the publication of subjects (notably, presence on page one or in newspaper headlines), the budget allocated, the salaries and status of the journalists (portion of permanent full-time, full-time temporary, freelancers, etc.) are some of the elements permitting understanding of the position of a specialty. But it would be wrong to consider these aspects from an exclusively economic aspect. In fact, one should combine in the analysis internal hierarchies, which reflect professional prestige, and external hierarchies, which are linked to social, economic or even political logics. Thus, certain specialties which are relatively low with respect to professional reputation, such as sports or entertainment, can be strategic because they contribute strongly to the revenue (distribution,

advertising, classified ads) of the media outlet, or because they reach a large audience or a targeted public (e.g., individuals with strong purchasing power, youth). From this, one can better understand the importance of the number of sports journalists in France (about 2,600 in 2001) who represent more than 8 percent of all cardholding journalists.

In contrast, foreign and domestic politics, which tend to bring in less advertising than other topics, nevertheless occupy a high status position in the journalistic field. Specializations do not all fulfill the same objectives, and one must distinguish those which attract the audience ('circulation goal'), from those that attract ads ('advertising goal'), or both at the same time ('mixed goal'), or those that bring more prestige ('non-revenue' or 'prestige goal').⁹ The importance of internal hierarchies is particularly visible during major news events which create, by their breadth, competition between beats and departments. In a work on the mediatization of the 'contaminated blood' issue in France (see chapter six in this volume), it was shown that the more important an event becomes, the more medical specialists tended to be deprived of its handling in favor of 'generalists', legal specialists, and particularly political journalists and political editorialists. Obviously, these hierarchies have very concrete effects on the production of news. Thus, one is left thinking that the less strategic a beat is determined to be within the internal hierarchy, then the more autonomous it is with respect to news management control in its choice of subjects, hierarchies, 'angles', even mode of writing. For example, one could

⁹ibid.; see also J. Tunstall, *Newspaper Power: The New National Press in Britain* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996), pp. 156-161.

hypothesize that the forms of writing are less standardized in the cultural beats¹⁰ than in the political or legal beats. Because specialized journalists have different characteristics and thus different categories of perception for the same event, the handling of news will sometimes be noticeably different according to the specialty mobilized.

But the comparison of the two sets of indicators (biographical and economic/professional) seeking to specify the position of a specialty in the professional hierarchy has a limited interest if it does not take into account the variations of the position over time and according to media outlet. In fact, positions are not fixed, and the creation of new specializations can upset old hierarchies. Researchers have documented the progressive decline since the 1970s of the social or labor news specializations, but one could also show how these issues (to the extent that they were taken up at all) came to be increasingly covered by business or political reporters.¹¹ Likewise, beginning in the 1980s, investigative journalism contributed to the devaluation of the legal column in France, previously considered one of the most distinguished beats in

¹⁰ Concerning music journalism, see, for example, Eamonn Forde “From polyglottism to branding. On the decline of personality journalism in the British music press », *Journalism*, 2001, vol. 2, n°1, p. 23-43.

¹¹ Since the 1980s, labor and other social movements have been covered increasingly in a more distant manner by journalists with an expertise (rather than a political engagement) in the topic. At the same time, a special ‘social issues’ section has been progressively dismantled at most French newspapers and newsweeklies, generally subsumed within the ‘politics’ or ‘economics’ pages, with the exception of the communist daily *L’Humanité*. See Sandrine Lévêque, *Les journalistes sociaux: Histoire et sociologie d’une spécialité journalistique* (PUR, Rennes, 2000).

French journalism.¹² Other specialties such as religion, theatre and literary criticism, or international news, today occupy lower positions than in the journalistic field of 1950s through 1970s, as demonstrated by the generalist media’s decreased interest in these topics. In contrast, the business beat, which has the advantage of attracting new, more strategic audiences and advertisers, has steadily increased in power, as attested to by indicators as diverse as the elevated salaries of business journalists, the existence of specialized degrees or training in this area, or the increasing prevalence of former business reporters among the ranks of top news executives.

In addition, each media outlet is at once a field of forces and of struggle between specializations and journalists. In other words, the same specialty does not necessarily occupy the same place in different outlets. For example, only at a regional newspaper with a large farming readership, such as the Normandy-based *Ouest-France* would the agricultural beat be among the most prominent.¹³ The relative weight of each specialty (and of its sub-specialties) is linked to the types of public of the media outlet.

Position of Media Outlet

In addition to the position of the specialties in the internal hierarchies, the structuring of the specialized sub-spaces constitutes a second indispensable variable in comparative work. These are articulated more or less around

¹² Rémi Lenoir, ‘La parole est aux juges: Crise de la magistrature et champ journalistique’, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 101-102 (1994), pp. 77-84.

¹³ A. Carof, *La production de l’information agricole: L’exemple d’Ouest-France* (Centre de sociologie rurale, Paris, 1972).

two oppositions that have already been referenced: intellectual v. commercial and specialist v. generalist. In the case of the specialization ‘media and communication’ one sees clearly the opposition between those media closest to the intellectual pole (*Le Monde* or *Télérama* in France, the *New York Times* in the United States, *The Guardian* in Great Britain, etc.) and those which embody the more commercial pole (*Le Parisien-Aujourd’hui*, *USA Today*, or *The Mirror*). In the same way, the treatment of news differs when one goes from the pole of generalist media toward that of the specialized press. The relationship of forces among media outlets near different poles also varies according to the specialized sub-universe. For example, with business news, the relative weight of certain specialized dailies (the *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Les Echos*) tends to be equal or superior to those of generalist dailies. In contrast, in the case of medical journalism, the specialized press occupies a dominated position and often arouses irony or even disparagement from specialists employed at the major national news media. In this domain, as in others (politics, education and culture, especially), the daily *Le Monde* occupies the dominant position in France.

Journalistic capital, the functional influence within the field of the various press outlets, can be measured by indicators linked to the production of the news itself: the number of ‘exclusives’, rate of articles ‘picked up’ by other media outlets, size of the staff of specialized journalists, editorial space allocated to the topic. It is also based, in part, on dissemination, taking into account factors both quantitative (raw size of audience) and qualitative (not only high consumption households, but various economic and political opinion leaders).

Degree and Type of Competition or Collaboration

Competition to be first, to bring out ‘exclusive news’, tends to be relatively weak in the social issues or educational beats. As leading French and British scholars have shown, this great collegiality can have non-negligible professional advantages, particularly in responding to the criticism of managing editors regarding getting scooped.¹⁴ In contrast, competition characterizes the French sub-space of investigative and medical journalism. While such differences can be explained by variations in the perceived economic, political or professional importance of the specialization, they may also be linked to the history of the specialization and its evolving relationship with the social space(s) ‘covered’.

Not only the degree but also the form of competition may vary across different specialized microcosms. With sporting events or music, for example, this is resolved, at least in the case of television channels, through economic transactions in the strict sense: the organizers of events regularly require payment for the exclusivity of images of the most important events. Likewise, celebrity interviews may be only granted after the formal or informal negotiation of topics to be discussed. In short, economic capital of media outlet is determinative in the competitive game, which explains the weight of big groups in the production of such news. In other strategic areas (crime, scandals, politics more broadly) or when the competition concerns the print press or radio, competition is not, or rarely, the subject of economic transactions in the

¹⁴Padioleau, ‘Systèmes d’interaction et rhétoriques journalistiques’, pp. 261-2; Tunstall, *Newspaper Power*, pp. 158-9.

strict sense; it is more symbolic. In order to obtain exclusives or otherwise scoop the competition, what is crucial above all is the professional reputation of the press organization or the journalists and/or their capital of relationships in the journalistic field.

Circulation of Journalists in the Employment Market

Degree of turnover provides an indicator of the specialization's level of professionalization. More professionalized sub-fields will generally have less turnover. The rate of rotation will also likely vary according to the type of company and its policies in this regard. Studies on scientific, medical, business and sports journalism show the relatively closed nature of these markets. In contrast, journalists specializing in immigration or other social issues generally do not stay long in the same specialty and thus become 'successive specialists', in the words of a managing editor of a Parisian daily.¹⁵

¹⁵Immigration reporting in the United States is largely delegated to generalists, though in some cases facility with the Spanish language (given the predominance of Mexican and other South and Central American immigrants) is considered a requirement for the job. One of the rare reporters who had covered immigration almost exclusively for many years observed nevertheless that "specialization or knowledge of a subject is not that highly regarded". From Rodney Benson, 'Generalist and specialized journalism: The case of American immigration reporting', Paper presented to Research Seminar on Specialized Journalism, Institut Français de Presse, Univ. Paris 2, June 2001.

Journalist Characteristics

Relevant characteristics could include social origins and trajectories (how one arrived at one's current position), volume and structure of cultural capital, age, gender, and employment status (intern, freelancer, temporary employee, full-time employee)

Effects from social origins and trajectory could take a number of forms. For example, as one moves from columnists (editorialists, cinema critics, etc.) toward 'behind-the-scenes' reporters, or in general, from critical reflection toward purely informational journalism, class background is likely to be lower.¹⁶ Data on journalists' origins and trajectories could be compared to those of the social agents they write about, thus providing another means to assess the journalistic sub-field's relative position in the larger field of power. In France, some former left-activists, in particular, have found in investigative journalism, especially in the uncovering of political financial scandals, a manner of practicing politics by other means. Moreover, these journalists' criticisms of the socialist government which came to power in 1981 were probably even sharper to the extent that they were so disappointed in its

¹⁶Tunstall, *Journalists at Work*, p. 74; Sandrine Anglade, 'Des journalistes au théâtre: Identité professionnelle et espace parisien (1880-1930)', in *Médias et villes (XVIIIe-Xxe siècle), Actes du colloque des 5 et 6 décembre 1997 tenu à l'Université François-Rabelais* (CEHVI-l'Université François-Rabelais, Tours, 1999). Anglade's study of the French theatre at the turn of the twentieth century contrasts a journalism of pure information, which she calls terms the criticism of information, 'often menaced by the mercantile aspect of theatre and which tended sometimes to become an agent of publicity', with a journalism of 'criticism-reflection, closer to the creative side of theatre'.

policies. In the same way, certain social (and geographic) trajectories of journalists' spouses help explain who tends to occupy the position of foreign correspondent. Comparing correspondents specialized in geographic areas¹⁷ and generalist journalists of the major American media, one recent study showed the likelihood of being married to a person from the region, or of having maintained in the past a relationship with the region, and of possessing specific language competence, is stronger for the former than the latter.¹⁸

Volume and structure of cultural capital is also clearly important, although at least in France this factor has generally only been measured in terms of education level. Especially in fields demanding scholarly over practical knowledge, such as medical or legal journalism, level of education has risen sharply, far more than that of the population as a whole.¹⁹ And in these specialized realms, the arrival of new generations of more highly credentialed journalists has, at least in part, contributed to the ascendancy of a journalism that is more critical than that practiced in the past.

¹⁷ See Ulf Hannerz, *Foreign News. Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004. Lars Willnat, "Through their eyes. The work of foreign correspondents in the United States », *Journalism*, vol. 4, n°4, 2003, p. 403, 422. Mark Pedelty, *War Stories. The Culture of Foreign Correspondents*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995.

¹⁸ Stephen Hess, 'The Culture of Foreign Correspondents', in *Media Occupations and Professions: A Reader*, ed. J. Tunstall (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), pp. 162-9.

¹⁹ In a study of 250 French scientific journalists, Françoise Tristani-Potteaux showed that 47 percent of them had a post-graduate degree. See F. Tristani-Potteaux, *Les journalistes scientifiques, médiateurs des savoirs* (Economica, Paris, 1997), p. 27.

Age, or more broadly, longevity in the specialty is a third essential characteristic. Perhaps more than any other factor, the massive arrival of new generations of journalists has contributed to the transformation of specializations, especially those sub-fields in their formative stages. Whether it is coverage of social issues, business, medicine or European affairs in Brussels, new entrants tend to implement subversive strategies designed to put in place criteria of journalistic excellence that are more 'professional' and less 'activist' compared with those of prior generations. Age may also be deployed as a commercial and professional strategy (thus potentially either expanding news coverage, or undermining critical distance), as British sociologist Jeremy Tunstall recounts for the case of youthful sports journalists hired to get closer to their equally youthful sources.²⁰

Between 1981 and 1999, the percentage of French journalists who are women has increased from 24.5 percent to 45 percent.²¹ Certain expanding news beats, such as health, constitute a field of choice for these new entrants because health tends to be a subject that is more 'feminine' than 'masculine', in contrast to science, religion, sports, business or politics, for example. The gender division of specialties reflects in large part that of news consumers (the more

²⁰ "Sometimes "experience" is deliberately planned and cultivated in advance; for instance the youngest football specialist may be assigned to cover the England Under 23 team -- in the expectation that some of these players will later be in the full England team". See Jeremy Tunstall, 'Correspondents and Individual News Sources', in *Media Occupations and Professions: A Reader*, ed. J. Tunstall (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001), p. 148.

²¹ Source : Commission de la carte d'identité des journalistes professionnels.

masculine specialties tend to be read by men, and the same goes for more feminine specialties) or the social sector covered. The increase since the 1980s in the development of the specialized magazine press, whether institutional or in certain topics, has thus participated in the feminization of French journalists. Next, the overrepresentation of women in certain functional specialties (for example, 58.7 percent of copy editors in France are women²²) or in certain subject areas is linked to the fact that they correspond to low positions in the social hierarchy of journalistic specialties. Lastly, the analysis of the gender variable of the producers of specialized news should be linked to other variables, such as type of media. The massive recent feminization of audiovisual media, especially anchor positions, can thus also be explained because aesthetic criteria have become determinative in recruitment, even if it is never stated very explicitly.

Forms of Professional Socialization

Socialization processes may vary sharply across the journalistic specializations, playing a potentially significant role in accounting for differences in the form and content of information produced. At the same time, since it involves a myriad of formal and informal interactions over a long period of time, and in its deepest forms almost by definition excludes outside observation, socialization is among the 'least visible' variables examined by researchers. As a starting point, we may suppose that type of socialization varies according to type of primary workplace (main newsroom, bureau, office subsumed within the institution covered, or freelance work at

home) and type of informal meeting place (headquarters of associations, cafes, homes of colleagues or even primary sources, etc.).

Professional socialization in the newsroom is the classic case. To the extent that specialists work side by side and meet with other kinds of specialists, as well as generalist journalists, this broad newsroom culture may overwhelm any particular values upheld by the specialization.

As news outlets rely increasingly on freelancers who often work at home, informal and intermittent socialization assumes an ever increasing role. Investigative journalists, critics and columnists also are more likely to rarely come into the main office. Lacking the same regular contact with other journalists, solitary work practices may in some cases facilitate more 'independent' or 'alternative' journalism. Yet one could also hypothesize that the lack of regular reinforcement of professional norms would expose the solitary journalist even more strongly to the raw power of the marketplace or a range of non-journalistic cultural influences.

Other journalists who live and work in close proximity to their sources are exposed to a different kind of heteronomous pressure. For journalists who cover the regular activities of political institutions (the European Parliament, the United Nations, the national parliament), the principal workplace is usually not the newsroom but rather the headquarters of the institution where they are often provided with an office. Legal columnists who cover the Paris city courthouse function as a 'little family' accredited by the institution, often seeing each other in the same places, whether in the hallways or the cafeteria of the courthouse, the hearing rooms, or even in hotels and restaurants when they cover a trial

²²Devillard et al., *Les journalistes français à l'aube de l'an 2000*, p. 47

outside the Paris area. In these situations, socialization vis-à-vis both their colleagues and their sources, which is at least as important as the former, operates through formal and informal means (e.g., mentoring of ‘newcomers’ by ‘old timers’).

Finally, there is socialization via professional associations that transcend one’s employer or usual workplace, as for example the prestigious Association of Legal Press created in 1885.²³

Taking into account these very different modes of socialization allows a more refined description of the process of producing news, as well as competing conceptions of the profession.

The Journalistic Field in Relation to Other Social Spaces

Because of the widespread belief in the media’s immense power, researchers may be misled into believing that the production of news can be understood solely via an ‘internal’ analysis. Yet news is never just the product of the specific logic of the journalistic field. To avoid this kind of ‘media-centric’ bias,²⁴ comparative research should always examine journalism in its complex relations with the other social spaces with which it relates.

²³Other associations of specialized journalists in France include: L’Union syndicale des journalistes sportifs français, l’Association française des journalistes agricoles, l’Association des journalistes économiques et financiers, l’Association des journalistes parlementaires, and l’Association de la presse présidentielle.

²⁴Philip Schlesinger, ‘Rethinking the Sociology of Journalism: Source Strategies and the Limits of Media-Centrism’, in *Public Communication: The New Imperatives*, ed. M. Ferguson (Sage, London, 1990), pp. 61-83.

Comparative research also brings to light the need to break away from homogenizing expressions about the ‘general’ relationships between ‘journalists and their sources of information’. In such expressions, not only is the notion of source not thought of in relational terms, presupposing that the information only circulates in one direction from the source to the journalist, but the relationship between journalists and their informants is conceptualized in a too narrowly interactionist form. That is, these interactions are described as if one could find, in the interactions themselves, the theory of the actions or of the discourse of the individuals. Ignoring ‘the structures (or the objective relationships) and the dispositions (most often correlated with the position occupied in these structures)’,²⁵ this type of method tends to forget that the interactions between journalists and their interlocutors are meetings between different habitus and different positions in the field. To take a schematic example, one can easily see the difference that may exist between, on the one hand, certain specialized journalists, who as ‘locals’ have very frequent and regular contact with the same interlocutors and, on the other hand, journalists ‘parachuted’ abroad or generalist journalists who cover a subject only occasionally.

For these reasons, research on specialized journalism is most complete when it offers a joint genesis of the journalistic sub-spaces, of the field of activity at issue and also of their inter-relations – as for example a study of agricultural news covered by *Ouest-France* showing the successive stages in the

²⁵Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité*, p. 46.

joint history of agricultural labor organizing and agricultural journalism.²⁶

Variable Aspects of Journalistic Relations with other fields

One can advance four variables, a list which is obviously not exhaustive, to analyze these relationships, and in particular the degree of autonomy between these different spaces. The first, probably the most obvious and often the most visible, is economic. The degree of autonomy of a specialized sub-field can be measured by the interdependence of its economy with that of the space of activity being covered. Indicators could include proportion of funding for media outlet originating in state aid, sales, and advertising, and the degree of concentration of advertisers. The interpenetration of journalism and various other sectors of cultural production (publishing, music, film) is especially deep. Journalism sometimes participates very directly in the economy of these fields of production, not only because news can help create a market for other cultural products, but because increasingly a few major economic groups control both the production of news and the cultural realms that journalists cover. Sports also operate increasingly this way, with television channels involved both in the original broadcast of events (for which they pay dearly) and the subsequent news coverage.

The degree of autonomy of a specialized sub-field can likewise be measured with the help of a second variable that could be deemed political, in the broad sense of the word. Though all of the social universes covered by specialized

journalists are fields of contestation, it is still true that certain institutions control to a greater or lesser extent the process of their mediatization.²⁷ Some fields, such as the legal, scientific, medical or political fields (the latter, especially in the military arena), historically exercise a relatively strong control in several ways: access to the location is prohibited or subject to authorization (prison, hospitals, battlefield in times of war) or official comments by its agents are tightly restricted, as is often the case with judges.²⁸ The most autonomous universes such as the legal and scientific fields have come to take into account more and more the manner in which journalists cover their activities, since the media images thus created have effects both real and imagined on the public as well as on the functioning of these fields.

A third measure of a specialized journalistic sub-space's autonomy is the degree to which it does or does not impose its own logic and internal hierarchies upon the field it is covering. Agenda-setting and framing studies have shown how media participate in the hierarchization and definition of 'social problems'. In politics, however, any purely journalistic imposition is difficult to disentangle. Journalists come to share a number of beliefs in common with their interlocutors, and thus as they consecrate political actors they tend to consecrate themselves at the same time. Thus French political journalists, who generally share with politicians a view of politics that is relatively strategic, or even cynical, used these particular

²⁶Carof, *La production de l'information agricole*.

²⁷R. V. Ericson, P.M. Baranek, and J.B.L. Chan, *Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1989).

²⁸Lenoir, 'La parole est aux juges'.

‘glasses’ to understand the struggle between ‘intellectuals’ during the French social movements of December 1995.²⁹

In fact, it is probably more accurate to say that the journalistic field through its different specialized sub-spaces tends less to impose its own logic than an external logic, especially economic-political logic, on the social fields of which it speaks. In a study of a ‘hit parade’ of intellectuals offered by the French magazine *Lire* (Read), Bourdieu has shown how much the journalistic space attempts to impose on a limited field of production, a place of production for producers, the norms of production and consumption of the cultural products *against* which it is constructed.³⁰ This transfer of the technique of ‘hit parade’, winner’s lists, prizes, or best-sellers, once reserved for food or cars, operates today across the fields of cultural and scientific production and tends to introduce by ricochet new forms of consecration and hierarchization. It remains true that this ‘power’ is very uneven and varies according to the social universe and even within the same universe. Countering the usual assumptions, field studies have shown that journalists largely tend to consecrate those who are already consecrated, particularly in the political arena where the weight of ‘official sources’ predominates (see Eric Darras, chapter eight in this volume). In contrast, in more heteronomous universes, journalists contribute to imposing other forms of consecration.

Finally, the relations that the specialized journalistic sub-universes maintain with the different social spaces that

they mediatize should take into account a fourth variable, the social characteristics of social actors. In some social spaces, there may be a strong proximity, as was the case for theatre critics from the turn of the century until the 1930s, who were both journalists and playwrights and were engaged in activities related to the administration of theatres. Another example is the political-journalist turned politician, or vice versa (Pat Buchanan or George Stephanopoulos, in the U.S.) which if not the norm, certainly occurs in both France and the United States. Demographic research conducted during the 1990s shows particularly close relations (and ‘revolving doors’) between French journalists and such cultural fields as public relations, publishing, radio, television and other entertainment fields. Sometime, the social actors circulate from one space to another or are in an in-between space. More broadly, one could investigate how this practical knowledge (or lack thereof) of certain activities effects relationships between the journalists in certain specialties and those of their privileged interlocutors in regard to the handling of news.

Put another way, it is not only the professional trajectories but also the educational and social trajectories that must be understood if one wants to compare how the differences (or similarities) of the characteristics allow one to understand the relationship between these universes and the production of news. The lifestyle of some journalists, who frequent social worlds to which they do not belong, is often higher than their salary allows.³¹ The study of these inequalities in the type and amount of economic, political or cultural capital would probably allow a better understanding of the phenomena

²⁹J. Duval, C. Gaubert, F. Lebaron, D. Marchetti, and F. Pavis. *Le ‘décembre’ des intellectuels français* (Liber-Raisons d’agir, Paris, 1998).

³⁰Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Minuit, Paris, 1984).

³¹Tunstall, *Journalists at Work*.

of fascination-revulsion of journalists with respect to politicians or CEOs, or even sports figures³², whose incomes are much greater than their own.

Effects of External Transformations

Changes in news coverage of any particular issue is always necessarily a result of both internal transformations of the journalistic field and transformations external to that field.

Beyond these structural transformations, which can have effects on the creation and development of specialties, the positions of these specialties in the journalistic space may be very sensitive to the characteristics of the era. Because journalism, as with other fields of cultural production 'is situated in the short term of symbolic, perishable goods', that is to say, it plays 'regularly with temporal differences, thus with change',³³ certain events sometimes contribute to transform, temporarily or permanently, the position of certain subjects or simply their content. For this reason, the creation and/or development of new institutions and changes in legislation could explain the ascendancy to power of legal affairs correspondents in the British media.³⁴ A journalist from the Agence France Presse also recounts how immigration emerged

essentially as a 'social problem' as a result of dramatic events. 'For years, we tried to publish articles on immigrants. They were not accepted anywhere and we were told "This isn't worth anything. . . Can't you see?" [But] since the day where some immigrants set fire to a shanty town, everything has changed. Now, immigration is considered a 'good' topic.'"³⁵ In the social issues and general news departments, specialties are frequently redefined and new themes often emerge in accordance with the latest events.

A comparative analysis of specialized sub-spaces making up the journalistic field thus appears even more indispensable today since what is blithely called "journalism," "press," or "media," reflects logics that are increasingly diverse in terms of production and consumption. Nevertheless, it would be an error to construct a study of specialized sub-fields of news production as a completely independent object of research. As indicated here, in each case it would be necessary to cross the specific logic of the sub-field with the various external logics: the logic of the media outlets or of the type of media which constitute, themselves, relational spaces, those of the journalistic field as a whole, and finally those of the social spaces that are mediatized.

³² For a study of sports journalism in Australia, New-Zealand and United Kingdom, see David Rowe, *Sport, Culture, and the Media* (Open University Press, Buckingham-Philadelphia, 1999).

³³ Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut, 'Le couturier et sa griffe: contribution à une théorie de la magie', *Actes de la recherche en science sociales*, 1 (January 1975), p. 16.

³⁴ Philip Schlesinger and Howard Tumber, *Reporting Crime: The Media Politics of Criminal Justice* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1995), pp. 147-8.

³⁵ Edouard Boutros and Henri Tincq, *L'information sociale et ses publics*, Colloque de l'AJIS (Thema Edition, Paris, 1974).