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Making TV.
Social Science Perspective on Television and the Media
Issue edited by Muriel Mille and Séverine Sofio

Television is paradoxical: located at the bottom of the prestige hierarchy in terms of cultural practice, it nevertheless has such resonance in the social world that it helps to polarize all other spaces of cultural production, forcing all within to position themselves in relation to it ‘according to whether [they] accept or refuse an alliance with this dominant medium and whether they resign themselves to accepting its rules.’ (Brigaud-Robert 2011, p. 6). It receives special attention from the state, which continues to regulate it at various levels, and is equally at the forefront of commercial strategies (Eveno 2006). Finally, while it is, for some, a platform of relatively ephemeral visibility and celebrity, it remains a professional space whose workings are little known. The production of its programmes involves the daily collaboration of multiple different trades in a long chain that – from the sets up to the channel managers via screenwriters, administrative staff, and production companies – remains obscure (Pasquier 2008).

Since the end of the 1990s, television has experienced continual upheaval precipitated by the development of satellite channels, the digitization of content, international audiovisual markets, and the almost-total triumph of the economic and organizational model of commercial American channels over that of public service television, which was dominant in Europe until the 1980s (Chaniac & Jezequel 2007; Born 2011). Television audiences are also slowly on the decline, threatened by new forms of consumption of films and shows owing to the multiplication of screens or the development of platforms such as Netflix, video on demand, and catch-up TV: it is thereby television viewing, rather than its programmes, that is losing steam, as television series continue to attract large audiences on various formats.

In France, for example, in view of these changes, concern for the material conditions of making television programmes has on the whole developed very little. Over the past twenty years, television has often been studied either from the perspective of *those who watch it* (analysis of the reception of certain programmes or of the construction of the concept of ‘ratings’ - cf. Le Grignou 2003; Meadel 2010) or of *what is watched* (narratology and analysis of content). However, the methods of making television programmes in the wider sense – production, broadcast, distribution, etc. – remain an under-researched area in social science. Indeed, besides television’s a priori lack of legitimacy and the traditional mutual mistrust between the academic world and media industries (Darras 2003), the main reason for the small amount of work on television production is undoubtedly that the spaces of



TV and media production (whether pre- or post-filming) remain particularly difficult for researchers to access. Thus Vicki Mayer in the United States (2008), and Georgina Born in the UK (2011), Dominique Pasquier (2008) or Jérôme Berthaut (2013) in France – confronted by the same issue in their respective fields (reality TV castings, the internal functioning of the BBC, teen series, television news) – all underline the need to carry out long ethnographic studies.

There are four possible themes for consideration concerning articles in this issue:

1) *Television Through Research Practices*

From visual sociology (Flocco & Valley 2012) to life history (Banks 2014) via participant observation (Grindstaff 2009), archive research (Tsikounas 2013), and discourse analysis (Caldwell 2007), there are multiple methods with which to approach television production. This focus therefore consists of a return to the construction of television as object of inquiry, and to the advantages and limits of the use of a particular methodology according to the fields approached.

2) *Television: Constrained Production*

Audiovisual creation is subject to a multiplicity of constraints relating to time pressures, budgetary restrictions, respecting the reputation economy, audience constraints, the format chosen, and even political pressure (Buxton 2010). From the point of view of creating television, we can thereby investigate the impact of the historical, social, and material conditions of production on programmes' content, such as the constraints imposed by certain sets (Chalvon-Demersay 2012) or formats (Altheide 1976). Similarly, it is possible to focus on the way various trades involved in producing news programmes (at the stages of writing, filming, editing, etc.) function in a state of constant urgency (Siracusa 2001).

One of the main constraints governing the production of these programmes is that of audience in the commercial context of the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2002). Several surveys carried out observe that television professionals do not know how their work will be received (Gitlin 2000; Pasquier 1995). Uncertain what audiences might like, they produce work that anticipates expectations (Champagne 1971). One path of investigation could therefore be to understand how this constraint is manifested and to analyse its consequences on the content produced. Producing drama (which involves screenwriting proposals, budgets, and filming conditions) in fact often depends on shifting power relations between writers, producers, and audience, as analysed by Julie D'Acci (1994) regarding the series *Cagney & Lacey* in the US, or by Muriel Mille for the French soap opera *Plus Belle La Vie* (Mille 2013).

3) *Television: Work, Trades, Professions*

Since it requires constant collaboration between many different professions, the production of television programmes is a prime example of collective creation, as has been analysed for the case of cinema (Rot & de Verdalle 2013). We could thus consider television production from the angle of the different professional cultures involved and the ways in which they coexist (Pasquier 1995), or of the competition surrounding artistic control of a work (Mille 2016). It could thus be interesting to analyse the careers of audiovisual professionals, or the



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challenges regarding legitimacy and recognition, and how these are structured by social relations of class and gender. We might likewise consider discrimination in terms of career opportunities or wage disparity (Bielby & Bielby 1999; Rannou, Roharik, Cardon 2015).

In general terms, television remains a significant source of employment and an extremely dynamic labour market that is subject to wider changes in the contemporary economy (Mayer 2011), the contradictory rules of New Public Management (Born & Prosser 2001), the consequences of capitalist concentration of the media (Bouquillion et al. 2006), and the effects of tax reforms (Coles 2010) or of social movements (Henderson 2010). We could also look at the major upheavals that new developments in TV and the media can cause to professional structures, work patterns, and internal management structures: for instance, the popularity of television series in the 2000s that led to the creation of a new role – that of the showrunner (Ashton 2015) – and a significant change in the balance of power with regards to cinema (Caldwell 2005). How do professions in the audiovisual industry evolve when confronted with big changes, whether morphological (Lebel & Lavallée 1996), technological (Le Guern 2010), or political (Hesmondhalg & Baker 2008)? Addressing the issue of professional training in the industry (Laborde 2015) or the role of intermediaries such as talent agencies or casting directors in these job markets (Roussel 2017) may also be a way of understanding these changes taking place.

4) *Television Productions: Transnational Objects*

Television programmes (whether in the form of entertainment shows, documentaries, dramas – either one-off or series – or simple ‘concepts’) are objects of international exchange that circulate and thereby form a truly transnational cultural and economic space. In this regard, we might take an interest in global television markets (Bielby & Harrington 2008; Kuipers 2012; Lecler 2017), and the reasons for the international success (or failure) of different content (Havens 2000). In this regard, we could specifically ask what effects the European promotion of international co-production (Chalaby 2002; Bondebjerg et al. 2008) have on the working conditions of staff, on profit distribution, or on the content itself. We might thus investigate the notion of cultural globalization in light of TV productions, and ask whether it is possible to create a ‘transnational history of television’ (Bourdon 2008).

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