
H-France Review Vol. 17 (March 2017), No. 49

Jérôme Bourdon, *Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle*. 2nd edition. Paris: Presses des Mines, 2014. 356 pp. Tables, bibliography, and abbreviations. 32.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-3567-1080-2.

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Television has been an object of scholarly interest almost since its inception. And yet, while studies of the technology emerged virtually in tandem with the popularization of the new medium in the 1950s and 1960s, historians were late to the table. In part, as Jérôme Bourdon observes in his *avant-propos* to a new 2014 edition of his 1990 monograph, *Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle* (a study of the history of television in France between May 1958 and April 1969), this reticence reflected scholarly prejudices that discounted “low” culture as a legitimate object of historical inquiry. It is lucky for historians that Jean-Noël Jeanneney and Monique Sauvage broke with this stance in 1976 when they began offering at the Institut d’études politiques in Paris the first seminar on French TV history, which ran until 1982. The young Bourdon both attended the seminar and contributed to the edited collection that emerged from it.[1] Bourdon went on to produce a doctoral dissertation under Jeanneney’s direction. In 1988, this work became the first incarnation of the monograph examined here. The book that resulted remains as important now as it was when first published. Since its contributions are best understood in context, let me begin with a brief sketch of the larger historical landscape.

Television was first broadcast in France in 1935, but the war interrupted French control over the nascent technology. In its aftermath, the government established a monopoly over radio and television broadcasting, known after 1949 as Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (RTF). By 1950, there were still fewer than 4000 sets on French soil. The two decades that followed had quite different historical profiles. In the 1950s, despite its attractions as an exciting new technology for the dissemination of education and culture, television broadcasting on a single channel was understood to have negligible political import. However, this changed during the Fifth Republic once TV’s reach had begun to expand exponentially. In 1958, only 5 percent of French households owned sets. But by 1968 there were two channels (the second was added in 1964), and over 62 percent of French homes contained a television. Not surprisingly, once firmly ensconced as a mass medium and a major provider of national news, television came under increasing government scrutiny. De Gaulle’s desire to control political coverage during the early Fifth Republic—especially reporting on the controversial conflict in Algeria—was a key factor in this development. His oft-described charismatic mastery of the medium also enabled him to exploit its potential as a means of both communication and propaganda.

Popular memory and subsequent scholarship like that of Jean K. Chalaby regularly depicts the Gaullist state’s relationship towards the state broadcaster as interventionist and riddled by censorship, epitomized by the power exerted by de Gaulle’s Ministers of Information over programming content (especially that of Alain Peyrefitte, in power from 1962 to 1966).[2] The history of television under de Gaulle is thus generally told as a tale of ever-increasing state pressure, sanction, and interference that culminates in the events of May 1968, a historic uprising that was virtually absent from the small screen. The Gaullist crackdown that followed—which saw multiple reprisals against striking personnel—

further undermined public faith in state TV, ultimately leading in 1974 under Giscard d'Estaing to the dissolution of what was by then called the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (ORTF). It is this monolithic story that Bourdon's work so effectively addresses, not by dismissing it, but rather by critically complicating its narrative arc.

Significantly, when Bourdon began his research for *Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle* in the 1980s, he was working almost exclusively from a combination of texts and oral interviews. Expanded access to audiovisual sources in the French TV archives (the result of technological advances like digitalization and of legal imperatives—in particular, a 1992 French ruling on audiovisual legal deposit) has since revolutionized the scholarship. However, as Bourdon observes, such sources have given rise to a wealth of new research on the history of TV programs themselves—to which my first book, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers On Television* contributes—while work on the French television industry, TV professionals, and the TV public has remained more limited.^[3] It is to some degree because Bourdon's book is still among the few to investigate the industry and its personnel in depth that *Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle* continues to be so pertinent today.

The 2014 re-edition of *Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle* opens with an overview of historical scholarship on French TV produced since the book's initial publication. Bourdon claims that there are five factors “qui ont bouleversé l'historiographie de la télévision” in the intervening quarter century. In addition to the “ouverture des archives” and “le déclin de l'élitisme” noted above, he identifies these as: “le renouveau de la télévision” (because TV's accrual of vast public power demands analysis); “la fin (apparente) de la télévision” (a paradoxical proclamation that ironically reassures researchers of TV's legitimacy); and “le web” (which has altered both what TV is and how we watch it) (p. 8). Bourdon also maintains that the internationalization of TV history has now enabled work on France to be placed in a comparative perspective, revealing both similarities to and differences from its European neighbors. For instance, early French TV more closely resembled the Italian model—both were monopolies—than it did the British, to which it is more often compared, but which was far more open to opposition.

When it comes to the period under examination, the overall result, Bourdon suggests, is that we've left “Manichean” analyses behind—analyses that tended, for example, to frame French public TV as either uniformly positive (a cultural and social good) or uniformly negative (because state-censored and hence a menace to freedom of the press and information). Instead, Bourdon asserts that recent scholarship has led to “*la fin des dichotomies*” and favors increasingly nuanced visions of the French televisual past (p. 21). In this, it builds implicitly on the central argument of his own book (i.e., the claim that, especially in the de Gaulle years, French TV must *not* be uniformly and singularly understood as the tightly controlled instrument of the state).

Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle addresses an especially vital period in French TV history. Bourdon's chapters introduce us to the myriad stakeholders, including administrators and directors both institutional and artistic, as well as producers, hosts, editors, scriptwriters, engineers, technicians, journalists, public/private companies, and, to a lesser extent, celebrities, whose diverse interests all jockeyed with the state during the de Gaulle years for control over the televisual field. These varied bodies, as he shows, each had their own arenas of maneuver and their own interests, which could be united by a common vision such as an ethical commitment to and enthusiasm for the public service mission or divided via either competing goals (for job security, artistic control, working conditions, salaries) or politics (many important directors disdained Gaullism, identifying rather as Communists, Socialists, or Christian Democrats). One of the book's great accomplishments is that it counters the obsession with government intervention that has blinded much historical scholarship both before and since by providing a richly detailed and painstakingly researched narrative of these complex and intersecting people and strategies.

Structured both thematically and chronologically, the book investigates three main topics: politics (comprised of legal statutes, reports, reforms, strikes, news, and the events of May 1968); personnel (outlined above); and programs (from news magazines and *dramatiques* to game shows, variety shows, and cinematic co-productions). Let me elaborate briefly on a few of its key arguments.

In the introduction and chapter one, Bourdon submits that if there is anything exceptional about French television, it is that since its beginnings it has been considered an industry in crisis. It quickly becomes clear, however, that this crisis is not always of the same magnitude. Indeed, Bourdon asserts that the new stability of the Fifth Republic undercut institutional freedoms made possible by the fragility of the previous regime. (There were no less than twenty Ministers of Information in the period between 1946 and 1958.) Excepting in the sector of news, Bourdon also insists that the Gaullists lacked a unified agenda for the state broadcaster; their decisions often resulted, he suggests, from improvisation rather than from a “*doctrine systématiquement appliquée*” (p. 43). Bourdon also demonstrates that if Fifth Republic politicians had high hopes for TV, it was similarly of concern to every other institution with a stake in representation, from the press to the world of cinema (a realm particularly hard hit by the rise of television). None were satisfied with how access to the small screen was organized.

Unlike many early studies of French television, which were primarily interested in calibrating the effects of the new technology on the French public, Bourdon turns his attention to the question of *how* television was made during the de Gaulle presidency. The French public service monopoly was unusual in that it produced some 75 percent of all television programming. Supporting this volume of output required geographic expansion, not only in Paris, with the construction of the Maison de la Radio and the enlargement of production studios at Cognac-Jay and Buttes-Chaumont, but also regionally. Bourdon not only explains this process, he also (in chapters two, four, and eight), describes the arguments over industrial policy connected to it. These include debates over the retention of the high definition 819-line system for the second channel, which was abandoned in favor of the 625-line European standard, and the choice of color technology, which arrived in 1967 and adopted SECAM, over PAL and NTSC. Bourdon’s text is thus unique in that, in addition to providing a history of television’s political and cultural dimensions, it describes the technological developments that made French television available on a truly national scale, to 82 percent of the population, by the end of the 1960s.

As a powerful medium under a Gaullist government monopoly, TV was repeatedly the object of legal statutes, reforms, and ordinances. In chapter two, Bourdon argues that we should study these, not because they necessarily transformed the state broadcaster, but because their texts—and the debates over them—distilled the ideas and positions of those in power. One might further contend that it was via the enactment of such rulings that the state established its structural links to the industry, links that rendered television systemically inextricable from the government and instantiated a series of enduring conflicts between the direction and its personnel. In chapters six, seven, and eight, Bourdon pays substantive attention to battles over the launching of a second channel: should it be public or private? If it is public, should it be complementary or competitive? Other central foci addressed throughout the text include the role of publicity (brand-name publicity was not legalized on French TV until 1968) and the effects of the 1964 reform known as *la réforme Peyrefitte*, which was the major legislative text on broadcasting during de Gaulle’s tenure. The 1964 statute renamed the state broadcaster and reconfirmed its commitment to public service. As Bourdon is quick to point out, however, while purportedly providing greater autonomy (since the ORTF now had its own board of government-appointed directors and somewhat more financial authority), little changed. The government retained control over news and made few allowances for the representation of opposing political views.

Chapters three and four turn our attention to personnel and their unions—principally artistic vs. technical—as well as to what has been termed the “hypersyndicalization” of the ORTF. Bourdon describes how the much vilified Service des liaisons interministérielles pour l’information, which had

been established in 1963 and charged with controlling how news was presented to the public, became a scapegoat for censorship. Bourdon maintains, instead, that both ministers and journalists frequently disobeyed its directives, though sometimes at their own peril. He also offers portraits of the ORTF's general directors, men who often had little to no experience in the world of performance or the press, but who nevertheless had to face off against both politicians and a professionalizing, highly unionized, industrial body.

Much of the meat of Bourdon's larger claims emerges in his discussion of the competing interests of the groups comprising the industry at that time. In 1964, the ORTF consisted of some 10,100 members: 55 percent of whom were technicians, 11 percent artistic professionals, and 34 percent administrative support--a highly feminized, largely secretarial field with considerably less power. While more attention to gender dynamics would have been welcome here and throughout the book, Bourdon is especially strong in sketching out how and why these bodies differed and in delineating their capacities to negotiate against the state. The technicians and engineers, for example, discussed at length in chapter eight, tended to enter the profession young, were trained on the job and often spent their whole careers in TV. This is not necessarily the case for artistic professionals (scriptwriters, camera operators, editors, not to mention directors--the object of chapter five), who were frequently trained in cinema and often had strained relationships with this more illustrious field. The conflicts that resulted from their various initiatives and aims meant, Bourdon concludes, that the ORTF basically became *une machine à grèves* in which personal relationships remained crucial to greasing the wheels of production and power. Yet even when individuals smoothed conversations and the direction and unions agreed, the exigencies of financing and control over programming and information could still lead to discord.

Chapters five, six, and seven discuss programs and co-productions. Until the mid-1960s, TV's *réalisateur*s were king, particularly those who shot dramas (Marcel Bluwal and Stelio Lorenzi), news magazines (Pierre Sabbagh), or documentaries (Jean-Claude Bringuier). They wielded their power, Bourdon imparts, thanks to the protection of directors of programming like Albert Ollivier. A man of culture, it was Ollivier who supported "Le règne de la dramatique" during which televised versions of either classical theatre (like Jean Prat's celebrated 1961 production of Aeschylus' *Les Perses*) or nineteenth-century novels (think Balzac) epitomized the best of French TV (p. 156). In contrast, game shows, variety shows, and sitcoms quickly won accolades from a public eager for distraction. Although these latter genres represented only a small percentage of what was on offer (11 percent by 1968), audience pressure eventually forced the newly launched second channel towards entertainment and a politics of competition, rather than complementarity.

Bourdon's book closes with two chapters on television and the events of May 1968, which, we are told, began later and lasted longer at the ORTF than they did in the rest of the country. Unlike most of this narrative, the history of '68 and the media, and especially of the government sanctions taken against striking TV journalists, had already been covered by others when Bourdon first began his research.^[4] Bourdon contends that these sanctions should be understood, however, not as a Gaullist chastisement of the political left, but rather as a reprisal against disrespectful behavior. It was the flaunting of authority, not politics, that was at cause. To some extent this relates to Bourdon's final claim, expressed in his conclusion: the subjugation of television to politics during the de Gaulle years was less the effect of a political ideology than it was "l'effet quasi-mécanique d'un rapport de forces défavorable entre les politiques et les professionnels," where politicians had as much blind faith in the potential of TV as they did distrust for journalists (p. 316). He concludes with a plea, asking that we not cede to the "goût de la dispute si caractéristique de l'époque" and remember that between opposing camps, there are "beaucoup de possibilités intermédiaires, beaucoup de façons de gérer, de produire, et de programmer" (p. 329). What, then, changes over the course of these years of constant turbulence? Perhaps it is the growing power of the viewing public, a public whose desire for entertainment and distraction gradually takes precedence over the cultural and political aspirations of the state broadcaster and whose purchasing

power will be the invisible hand directing the shape of French television as it privatizes in the decades to come.

Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle remains a mammoth achievement, whose breadth and depth of scholarship have yet to be paralleled. If I have any quibbles, they would be that in the mass of scholarly detail and careful discussion of successive statutes, strikes, changing personnel and union initiatives, one sometimes fails to see the forest for the trees--and in this case, readers can risk losing sight of Bourdon's central arguments. On the other hand, his specificity provides an invaluable service, for nowhere else in the scholarship on French TV history are these debates covered with such intricate care. Historians of contemporary France, communications, and the history of television would all do well to read this book.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Noël Jeanneney and Monique Sauvage, eds., *Télévision, Nouvel mémoire. Les magazines de grand reportage, 1959-1968* (Paris: Seuil and INA, 1982).

[2] Jean K. Chalaby, *The de Gaulle Presidency and the Media: Statism and Public Communications* (Houndmills, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[3] Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[4] See, for example, the edited collection, *Mai '68 à l'ORTF* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1987) produced by the Comité d'histoire de la télévision.

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