# NEW TRENDS IN FRENCH COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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## Abstract

French communication and media research has been considerably developed during the last two decades. Its development is characterised by multidisciplinary approaches and often original directions. This particularly holds true for research into the genesis of communication as a social and political phenomenon, and the formation of social uses of mass media. Specific to French research is also the attention paid to controversies between intellectuals, politicians and the journalistic élites. Finally, communication is also the domain where historians and sociologists of the public sphere encounter philosophers interested in the problem of collective action.

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If, a little more than twenty years ago, one had wanted to present to non-French-speaking readers the most important recent French-language publications on media and communication, the only problem would have been finding five or six which warranted being spoken about. In the early sixties French publications consisted of a few essays on mass culture (Edgar Morin, Jean Baudrillard) and the autobiographies of retired journalists. The only field in which French research was cited was semiology, with Roland Barthes who was sometimes mentioned in English-language literature but also Christian Metz whose writings on the cinema — a means of expression acknowledged as an art — were among the few with international readership.

Significantly, however, during the same period none of the major English-language classics in the sociology of the media and so-called mass culture were able to find French publishers prepared to risk a translation. The only exceptions were authors such as David Riesman or Richard Hoggart whose approach seemed close enough to the traditions and intellectual preoccupations of French readers, and whose literary style was, moreover, familiar to them. Translations were to be found of the writings of Theodor W. Adorno on Wagner, Schönberg and Stravinski, but very few publications by the Frankfurt School on industrial culture existed in French. Jürgen Habermas was already well-known for his reflections on science and technology, yet his 1962 thesis *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* was published in French for the first time in 1978 only, despite it being recognised today as fundamental to an understanding of the historical evolution of the role of information in modern Western civilisation.

Since the start of the 1990s the situation has changed entirely, for over two hundred books are published annually on these subjects. Although they are not all of the same calibre, a substantial proportion of them constitute, by virtue of their theoretical ambition, an original contribution by the social sciences to the study of communication. This turnaround is all the more remarkable since, after a period of intense growth in the sixties and seventies, the market for social science publications declined drastically — with the obvious exception of the one just mentioned.

We shall not dwell here on the origins of this phenomenon which is not, moreover, specifically French. The same "information society" theme is equally fashionable in journalistic and political milieus throughout Europe, with the same proliferation of "information and communication science" courses in universities. We have mentioned it purely for the sake of justifying our way of presenting recent French publications, i.e. less as a selection limited to a few titles — something that would be difficult to do fairly, given the abundance of material — than a choice of approaches which we consider representative both of the trends currently prevailing in French communication research and of its possible originality.

## Information and Communication Science

It was in 1975 that "information and communication science" first appeared in the nomenclature of higher education courses. A few years later the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) formally recognised interdisciplinary research teams comprising scores of researchers not only from sociology but also from economics, linguistics, history, geography, political science, law and, increasingly, philosophy. The second part of this article, in particular, attempts, at least partially, to reflect that diversity. Publishers followed the trend with the creation of collections devoted to sociology, economics or the history of the media, and with several scientific journals,[1] manuals and dictionaries intended for academic use. [2]

Two decades of hindsight enable us today to identify some of the main themes in an abundant production encompassing research and publications on a wide range of subjects and approaches: philosophy, sociolinguistics, history of the telephone, ethnography of TV series audiences, sociology of journalists, culture industry economy, analysis of daily interactions, the deregulation of national and international broadcasting, the impact of new information-processing methods on the organisation of work, methodology of audience research, and many more.

From this diversity emerge a few dominant trends which, if not peculiar to French research, are at least more advanced here than elsewhere. Most importantly, we need to cite the work pertaining to the history of communication technology and the constitution of its uses.

## Genealogy of the Media and Their Uses

It was with the work of Yves Stourdzé, who left us all too soon, that French research on the social history of the modern media was given its first impetus. In a seminal work on the development of telegraphy and telephony in the nineteenth century, Stourdzé (1987) brilliantly illustrated how this development was both stimulated and limited by a complex set of political, economic and philosophical factors. He showed how these factors could be used to explain a network structure reflecting the weight of the hierarchical organisation of French society which was to hinder the development of telecommunication right up to the second half of the next century. Like him, many other researchers definitively turned their backs on the factual history of inventions, and are currently striving to reconstruct the multiplicity of mediations that link the appearance and development of communication technologies to major sociocultural trends. Their aim, in particular, is to elucidate the crucial moment at which the social uses of the media take shape.

In this field it is unquestionably the work of Patrice Flichy that has proved to be the most synthetic and the most innovative. An economist and sociologist by training, Flichy recently published two books proposing a theory of technological innovation and its application to the history of modern communication and its tools (Flichy 1991; 1995). In the latter work the author takes as a starting point the end of the eighteenth century and identifies three successive logics which were to determine the technological structure and social uses of the major innovations in the field of communication. A contemporary of the French Revolution, Claude Chappe's semaphore telegraph — of which all the lines stretched from Paris towards the country's borders — symbolised and materialised both the new State structures being established and the philosophical and political projects stemming from and inspired by the Enlightenment. Through its star-shaped structure, this first modern long-distance communication network was an analyser of a system of representations associated with the consolidation of the nation State, and of a public space which it materialised. Although the military needs of the time were not unrelated to this construction linking the centre to the periphery, Flichy sees more in it: functional equivalent of the revolutionary way of thinking, combining the celebration of national cohesion with a universalist messianism which believed that this concrete medium could be used to spread the Reason.

While this logic of State communication maintained its strength with the advent of other technologies over which it was successively to impose its monopoly (radio and

later television), the second half of the nineteenth century was also to witness the introduction of means of communication of which the characteristics and early use attest to profound sociological changes. It was a time of leisure in the private sphere, of nascent family communication which Flichy analyses by way of the example of inventions with an uncertain future: photography, the phonograph and the cinema. The most typical example was the case of Thomas Edison, the inventor of a machine capable of both recording and reproducing sound. Edison intended his phonograph to have the most respectable use, i.e. the dictation of business letters, and vehemently opposed anyone who wanted to market it in the form of a juke-box for public places. He was, however, to lose the battle against Berliner, the inventor of the gramophone, who was to market a similar device although one capable only of reproducing the sound on a record that could be mass produced. According to Flichy, Berliner achieved a "technological capture" while simultaneously shifting the use of the device, in keeping with a new sociological phenomenon: the increasingly marked separation between the home and working environments and between the public and private spheres, apparent in the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie and the rising middle classes. Berliner's invention provided them with culture at home.

The culmination of this marketing process is one of the main themes of the third and fourth parts of Flichy's book, focused on the development of electronics and the globalisation of communication in a context of increasingly individualised consumption. He shows how this new model challenged that of family consumption and tended towards the paradoxical enclosure of each individual in his or her own "communication bubble."

From this social history of the media Flichy was subsequently to draw his more theoretical reflection. In *Innovation technique* he uses his earlier detailed historical analysis to propose tracks for the interpretation of the evolution of technologies, which break with all forms of deterministic reduction, whether technological or social, and with the linear schemes of diffusionism that prioritise supply rather than demand and technology rather than its use. By focusing not on invention itself but rather on the actors of innovation in their socio-technological context, Flichy describes the stabilisation of the modes of functioning of our communication machines in a process of adjustment, negotiation and confrontation which concerns designers and users alike.

## A New History of Communication

The second field in which French research has recently won renown relates to another form of genealogy, or archaeology, the ambition of which is to provide a theoretical answer to a question common to diverse publications: when, how and why did the most ordinary of everyday social activities, communicating, become a social, political and philosophical issue. Here technologies are not overlooked -- they even play a key part, as with McLuhan —, but the main preoccupation is to define their role in the birth of modernity and to analyse the currents of ideas underlying their development even when these ideas come from the milieu of social science researchers.

From the critical viewpoint of his preceding work on the internationalisation of communication, which enabled him to make a name for himself beyond the borders of the French-speaking world, Armand Mattelart, in one of his latest books, analyses the origins of the ideas and strategies which led to the current globalisation of

communication (Mattelart 1994). As an allusion to the concept of world economy which Immanuel Wallerstein developed in the tradition of Fernand Braudel's ideas, the title of Mattelart's book clearly defines his intention: to recount the history of the globalisation of networks and information flows, and their political, economic and cultural implications. In this history war occupied a key position, particularly the Second World War. According to Mattelart, it served as a laboratory for propaganda and psychological action on a global scale, the theoreticians of which, and primarily North American academics, were subsequently to exert a huge influence, notably in international organisations such as UNESCO.

A more recent and more original book by Armand Mattelart attempts, in the form of self-criticism, to answer questions on which he himself had previously been conclusive. In the final pages of *La communication-monde*, Mattelart notes, in particular, that by focusing too intently on the topic of internationalisation, researchers risk overlooking the very notion of communication. As far as his own work is concerned, this oversight is remedied since in *L'invention de la communication* (Mattelart 1994) the author's ambition is historically to reconstruct the polysemy of a term which encompasses "the multiple channels for the flow and exchange of goods, persons and messages," a definition which "at once comprises communication channels, long-distance transmission networks, and symbolic means of exchange such as universal shows, high culture, religion, language and, of course, the media."

By talking of an "archaeology of expertise on communication" it is clearly from Michel Foucault that Mattelart draws his inspiration this time.[3] His aim here is to trace the multiple sources, both material and ideal, of the modern conception of communication. Hence, his book opens in the seventeenth century, a period when nothing resembling what we call the media, existed, yet where the roads and canals already indicated a project to control and structure space through the establishment of an effective system of communication channels. But the practitioners of that period were also scientists and philosophers. The heritage they left to us in the field of communication is also to be found, for example, in the thinking of the agricultural engineers who founded physiocracy and whose organicist view of society is reminiscent of the biological metaphors used much later by the functionalist theoreticians of social communication. After Marx, but also Habermas, Mattelart sees François Quesnay, a medical doctor specialised in blood circulation, and the leader of the physiocrats, as the main theoretician of government by Reason and the principle of publicity. For Quesnay, these were the only ways in which the free play of "natural laws" governing the economy could be guaranteed.

It is again to Foucault, the one of *Discipline and Punish* (1977), that Mattelart refers when later in his book he focuses on the history of social statistics in the nineteenth century as the basis of eminently modern thinking and anxiety, and on the question of crowd psychology posed, in particular, by Gabriel Tarde whose influence was to spread across the Atlantic to the psychosociologists of the Chicago School.

It certainly does no justice to the richness of this book to summarise it in these three points, when in fact it explores many other complex ways in which the West moved from the universalist dream of perfect social communication, during the Enlightenment, to a totally different form of universality, the one about which Mattelart spoke in his previous writings. We at least hope to have given our readers the wish to become acquainted with it and to extend their reflection by reading other works which

attest to the same interest in genealogical reconstruction, such as a recent book by Pierre Musso (1997) devoted to another great thinker of the eighteenth century, the Count Saint-Simon. Why revert to Saint-Simonianism to understand the Internet, since that is the author's project? Simply because Saint-Simon owed to his studies at the École Polytechnique and the École de Médecine de Paris his keen interest in an object destined to a brilliant future: networks, both artificial — built by engineers — and natural — observed by doctors in the human body. Here we have organicism again, but which was to lead to a philosophico-political doctrine in which Pierre Musso sees the premises of today's neo-liberalism embodied in the claim of the Internet to guarantee the free circulation of ideas, beyond all State control. For Saint-Simon, networks permitted a self-regulation which dismissed all central authority to the archaism of feudal and monarchical systems. The government, he wrote in *L'Industrie*, is no more than "a useless and often dangerous intermediary." What a strange continuity of ideas.

It is a different form of historical reconstruction that is offered to us by Régis Debray, that prolific author of philosophical and political essays, novels and sociological analyses of relations between intellectuals and the media system, not to mention his oldest writings such as *Révolution dans la révolution?* (1969), a testimony to his commitment beside the Cuban revolutionaries which led him with Che Guevara to Bolivia in 1967.

Very little allusion is made to this past — and we shall revert to this point — in the writings published by Debray after 1991, the year in which his *Cours de médiologie générale*[4] was published. Here references to McLuhan have curiously replaced those to Marx, unless we agree that there is a continuity of thought between the famous "medium is message" and the no less famous proposal formulated in *Poverty of Philosophy*: the hand-mill will give you a society with an overlord; the steam-mill will give you a society with industrial capitalism.

Unlike the books to which we have just referred, those of Régis Debray were met by contrasting reactions, to say the least, of which the most critical were not entirely foreign to the claim of their author to be founding a new discipline — *mediology* — while having virtually no knowledge whatsoever about what had been written before in the field of the history and sociology of the media and of communication in general.

What then is this new science? In his *Cours de médiologie* Debray relates in a few pages how and why, after "a fleeting participation in the guerrilla," he was sentenced by a Bolivian military court to 30 years of hard labour.[5] In the absence of proof as to his direct participation in the violent actions against the State and its representatives, the judges justified their verdict by the fact that "*Révolution dans la révolution?* was assiduously read in the guerrilla camp." Re-evaluating the episode *a posteriori*, Debray draws the conclusion that his judges shared the same illusions as the intellectual they were about to condemn, i.e. that it is ideas and ideas only which rule the world. Of the two interpretations that can be made today of that event — either the book inspired a revolutionary act or it merely served as a "convenient rallying sign" for an action that was already underway —, Debray says he now tends more towards the latter.

Here then is the project roughly defined: mediology is the study of the *symbolic effectiveness* of the words, images and speech which may modify the course of things, but based on that of the *material mediations* which enable them to be transmitted, to circulate and to last. What must be understood is the "logistics of the spirit" — culture in its materiality.

Let us move on to practical exercises. Take the following question: "how were words as simplistic as those of Jesus able to triumph over visions of the world a thousand times more elaborate and complex, such as those in circulation during the first centuries of our era?"( Debray 1991, 127). Quite simply, says Debray, because Jesus was the first mass communicator; his theoretical shortcomings made his mediatic strength. Monotheism is within everyone's reach. The story is simple, which avoids the risk of seeing the customer "zapping;" it is incarnated in a hero who is both the medium and the message; and, lastly, it is intended for all publics. But there is more to it: Christianity was the first "portable" religion. It developed as a mass movement at the time when the *codex* replaced the ancient *volumen*, the cumbersome role of papyrus. A religion which can fit into a paperback has a decisive advantage over all the others. Take a simple message together with a good medium at the right time, and the trick is done.

This demonstration, which even McLuhan would probably not have indulged in, may elicit a smile. Let's face it, Debray's work shares with the writings of the Toronto prophet the ability to irritate as much as to seduce, at least by the erudition mobilised, the abundance of stimulating intuitions proposed, and the original problems raised, even if the answers provided are hardly satisfactory because the temptation of brilliant, provocative and paradoxical formulae often triumphs over the concern for sound argumentation. But Debray (1994, 94) probably made the following "methodological" declaration of McLuhan his own: "I don't explain anything. I explore."

One must nevertheless read Debray and overlook both the irritation and the seduction which sometimes provoke him. One has to grant it to him that at a time when it was dominated by semiology, French research, as he wrote, forgot the *codex* to the entire benefit of the code, as if the latter had the monopoly over meaning. Of meaning one is also sure to find more, for better or for worse, in the project of global reconstruction which is his own, than in the growing accumulation of empirical "administrative" research or prophesies spawned by the development of so-called new information and communication technologies.

## Land Surveyors and Acrobats

The media and culture industries have, over the past two decades, been the subject of a large number of studies focused either on their economic and administrative functioning or on related professions: journalists, hosts, producers, scriptwriters, etc.:[6] the "land surveyors" and the "acrobats," as the managers and programme people of French television call themselves.

Forced to choose from among this profusion of texts, we shall start with the sociology of journalists, essentially for three reasons. First, it is a novelty in French research which does not have the same tradition as Britain or the United States in this respect. Secondly, the specific nature of the questions it raises is of particular interest. Finally, it is the field of the most internationally renowned French sociologist today, Pierre Bourdieu.

The specific nature of French sociology of information professionals lies in a dominant approach which probably owes a lot to the specific nature of its subject, i.e. the nature of relations between a journalistic élite and other élite: political, economic, scientific and intellectual. Régis Debray was one of the first, in 1979, to draw attention to the changes in the balance of power within the French élite. He showed the relationship between the decline of the intellectuals and the growth of a new

intelligentsia, together with the transfer, from the academic milieus to the media and the market, of the authority legitimising intellectual production. "By pushing back the boundaries of its audiences," he wrote, "the mass media have ... multiplied the sources of intellectual legitimacy, incorporating the narrow sphere of professional intelligentsia, the classical source of legitimacy, into larger concentric circles which are less demanding and therefore easier to attain" (Debray 1979, 96). But Debray added that the intellectuals themselves were responsible for this change. To illustrate his point, he cited an article by a philosopher who could hardly be considered "mediatic," Gilles Deleuze: "Journalism, together with radio and television, has become increasingly aware of its ability to create an event. ... Journalism discovered within itself a thinking that was independent and adequate. ... Intellectuals and writers, and even artists, are therefore invited to become journalists if they want to comply with the norms. It's a new type of thinking, the thinking-interview, thinking-on-the-spot. ... Everything started with television and the 'licking into shape' to which consenting intellectuals were subjected by interviewers" (quoted by Debray 1979, 112).

Connivance, rivalry and even conquest by the journalistic élite of a dominant position over the other élite: the subject has since been studied in depth and illustrated, notably by the work of Rémy Rieffel (1993) who devoted a voluminous study to the history of French intellectuals since the sixties. A substantial part of this volume focuses on the evolution of intellectuals' relations with the media system, and synthesises the results of previous studies on the journalistic profession (Rieffel 1984).

Rieffel relates two series of facts. First, it was initially the entry in force of cultural weeklies and television into French intellectual life after 1960 and especially 1970, which cracked the scholar's citadel and caused a breach in the national intellectual configuration. The boundaries of the latter were reshaped in terms of the strategies of other agents of mediation — namely, journalists — who henceforth took the quotation of intellectual values into their own hands."... by virtue of the renown of the press organ employing them, they authorised themselves to establish cut-and-dried verdicts on the movement of thought. Gradually certain philosophers or historians joined the ranks of the stars whose charisma strangely resembled that of the stars of the cinema or show-business whom Edgar Morin, in his time, had baptised the 'new Gods of Olympia'" (Rieffel 1993, 531).[7]

The second series of facts concerning changes in recruitment within the profession had implications of a more political nature. Whereas formerly it was socially discredited, journalism as a profession and particularly TV journalism currently attracts more and more university graduates from the higher rungs of the social scale. The vast majority of French journalists are henceforth from the upper middle classes, while the big names in the press are mostly of upper-class descent: lawyers, financiers and industrialists, high-ranking civil servants, etc. A large proportion of the journalistic élite studied at the same universities or *grandes écoles* as many of the company directors, senior officials and politicians with whom they have professional contacts on a daily basis. Thus, as products of a single educational institution and very often from the same social class, journalists share with those on whom their work is focused — those they have to interview, comment on, criticise, etc. — the same definition of situations, in other words, an immense "that goes without saying." The sphere of discussion is, under such circumstances, likely to be extremely reduced compared to the sphere of the undiscussed.

Bourdieu's book *On Television* (1996;1998) has less than a hundred small pages yet it is a best-seller, for when Pierre Bourdieu, holder of the prestigious Chair of Sociology at the Collčge de France, talks about the media it is unlikely to go unnoticed by the media. There could be no better way of paradoxically illustrating one of his theses, i.e. the growing submission of cultural production to the media logic of maxi-misation of audiences, what he calls "*l'effet d'audimat*" or "the best-seller list effect."

The first eighty pages of *Sur la télévision* are hardly likely to yield any great revelations for whoever knows what critical sociology produced well before Bourdieu added to the study of private television channels' impact in Europe (search for a scoop, TV news invaded by trivial events, depoliticisation, etc.). The article appended as an annex, entitled "L'emprise du journalisme" is, however, more original.[8] Bourdieu applies to the media and primarily to television a theoretical approach and concepts such as that of a "field" which in previous publications had enabled him to analyse the functioning of the university system or the logic of literary and artistic production. Studying a field of production means reconstructing both the network of objective relations between the positions occupied in it by different social agents, and the determinations which these positions impose on their occupants. It means analysing their current and potential situation in the structure of distribution of different forms of power peculiar to each field (political field, intellectual field, religious field, etc.).[9] It also means analysing relationships between the diverse fields of social activity as, for example, between the economic and artistic fields, the latter having been grounded in the opposite principle to the former, through the assertion of the irreducibility of art to the logic of profit.

Today, Bourdieu tells us, it is this very logic of profit which dominates the media system and, through it, the entire production, diffusion and reception of cultural products. His aim is to describe "the hold which the *mechanisms* of a journalistic field, itself increasingly subjected to the demands of the market (of readers and advertisers), has, *primarily over journalists* (and intellectual-journalists) but also — and partly through them — over the different fields of cultural production: legal, literary, artistic and scientific. He thus examines how the structural constraint exerted by this field, itself dominated by market constraints, modifies to varying degrees the balance of strength within the different fields, affecting what is done and produced there and having a very similar impact in phenomenally widely diverse spheres" (1998, 80).

What Bourdieu's critique is levelled at here is probably peculiar to the journalistic field but also to the French academic field for which the country's weeklies (the *Nouvel Observateur* in particular), literary television programmes and television debates on "social problems" afford a platform beyond the reach of any traditional peer control, a place of reciprocal legitimisation between intellectuals and journalists.

The ascendancy of the journalistic field over the fields of cultural production (philosophy and the social sciences in particular) is exerted primarily through the intervention of cultural producers who occupy an uncertain position between the journalistic field and specialised fields (literary, philosophical, etc.). These "intellectual-journalists," who use their dual belonging to evade the specific demands of both worlds and to import into each of them authority acquired to a greater or lesser degree in the other, are in a position to have two major impacts: first, to introduce new forms of cultural production situated in an ill-defined position between academic esotericism and journalistic exotericism; secondly, to impose, particularly through their critical

judgements, principles for the evaluation of cultural products. These principles, by giving the ratification of the appearance of intellectual authority to the sanctions of the market, and by enhancing the spontaneous inclination of certain categories of consumers to *allodoxia*, tend to enhance the "audimat" or best-seller-list effect on the reception of cultural products and also, indirectly and eventually, on production, by orienting choices (those of publishers, for example) towards products which are less demanding and more sellable (Bourdieu, 1998, 89-90).

Although they are not directly named here, this statement is obviously aimed at the so-called "new philosophers" or other sociologists of post-modernity, omnipresent in media debates as soon as any "new social problem" is at issue.

We note, finally and before leaving this field of the sociology of journalists, that Pierre Bourdieu's concepts may prove fertile for a broader analysis of a profession which is not limited to the few editorialists of the national press, whether daily or weekly, or to the stars of TV news and talk-shows. Largely inspired by Bourdieu, the research of Alain Accardo (1995) on the anonymous members of the profession, the freelance journalists of the regional press, shows notably how they fall under a "field effect," in the sense given above to this term. For these persons, whose ranks are swelling daily due to mergers, and who are familiar with job insecurity, the over-paid élite of the profession constitute at once a reference, an inaccessible world and a painful daily reminder of their own condition. Freelance journalists in particular — the proletariat of information, as Accardo calls them —, feel the humiliation of their situation all the more as they continue to claim membership of a profession considered as socially prestigious, because close to where the power lies, at the level of its Parisian élite. A materially more modest condition is all the more difficult to bear when attended by what Bourdieu calls *une misère de position*, that is to say, the occupation of a position controlled from within by a socially dominant field with which they nevertheless keep on identifying themselves.

With regard to the evolution of the journalistic field we have thus touched on the mechanisms of integration in the press and the appearance of commercial TV channels which have substantially changed the French mediascape over the past ten or so years. This process has been the focus of many studies, of which those of Bernard Miğge and the research group working in co-operation with him at the University of Grenoble are certainly the most systematic and original.

The theme of culture industries made a timid appearance in French sociology in the sixties, notably with the translation of a short article by Adorno (1964), before becoming the virtually exclusive domain of economists in the following decade under the influence of the public administrations, the purveyors of research budgets who were anxious to maintain a national production in the face of the powerful North-American media and entertainment industry. Bernard Miğge was originally an economist by training who had been led to sociology by his interest in a field — information and communication — of which one of the essential dimensions, symbolism, posed problems that he could not solve alone. Miğge was therefore the person most apt to reconcile the two disciplines and to surpass the opposition between the product and its production, between the *code* and the *codex*, to use an expression borrowed above from Régis Debray.

The sub-title of Miğge's most recent book (1997) — "*La communication entre l'industrie et l'espace public*" — defines its author's intention very well. While the first part of the

study looks at the strengthening of an economico-technological conception of communication and the rising industrialisation of communication activities, the second part questions the effects of that industrialisation. The latter, focused on the commercial acquisition of individual technological tools, leads to the fragmentation of cultural practices mediated by technology, and to a splitting up of the contemporary public domain, less and less oriented towards the management of the social, and towards argumentation and political debate.

It was unquestionably this latter questioning which was to appear the most innovative in the abundant literature devoted to the evolution of the culture and communication industries. Bernard Mičge poses the problem of the development of a commercial management of daily life invaded by a panoply of communication tools which recompose the territories and temporalities of social activity, pose again the question of the division between the public and private spheres and, above all, accelerate the transfer towards the economy of cultural and information activities for which the State and public organisations were formerly responsible. Hence, in all likelihood, the coming years will see the strengthening of a multitude of fragmented markets, both professional and private, at growing access and usage costs. In other words, what one has to expect is above all an increasing selection, by money, of the access to information and to culture or mediated interaction. The main risk is not that of a scarcity in the supply of products or even their systematic compliance with transnational standards; it lies in the accentuated segregation in information and culture. In both their working and their private lives, users will increasingly become consumers, forced to spend more and more in a sector which until recently had remained semi-commercial. The differences which can already be seen between categories or social classes, between countries and between economic organisations themselves, are extremely likely to increase. That is the — forever — hidden face of communication, the one which all the conceptions that consider it a factor of modernity or most-modernity refuse to take into account ... (Mičge 1997, 206-7).

Since we have just mentioned it, we shall end this inventory of work concerning the culture industries and their professionals, on the subject of the public and private spheres, by addressing the question of the analysis of television programmes.

In this respect French research has hardly innovated, whether we consider research on TV information or TV fiction. Yet it is an area in which the evolution of programmes on French television has led researchers towards an original mode of sociological questioning. We are referring here to the proliferation of programmes labelled by a term which, despite its doubtful English origins, seems to be unknown outside of France: "reality shows."

The genre appeared in the early 1980s and the titles of the programmes classified as such require no detailed explanation of the content: *Psy show, L'amour en danger, Bas les masques*, etc. The heroes of the day are televiewers invited onto the set to talk about their personal problems: marital problems, hidden homosexuality, an admission by the perpetrator of a crime or a rape or incest victim, etc. In his book *La télévision de l'intimité*, a sociologist, Dominique Mehl (1996), tries to understand why the self, the intimate or the private sphere henceforth make an exhibition of themselves in this way. He attempts to identify those social changes which might explain the commercial exploitation of psychological misery or the exhibitionism of some and the voyeurism of a few million others.

It is true that in this respect the French television channels have striven shamelessly to outdo one another, and the alibi of therapeutic effects is difficult to accept from those whose main, if not only, preoccupation was audience ratings. But the explanation cannot stop there. How can one not wonder why a guest in *Bas les masques* recognises that he finally decided to participate on the show so that his parents could discover he was seropositive; why does an adolescent reach the point of thinking that it is the only way of making his mother acknowledge what she has always refused to recognise: the sexual abuse of his father.

In order to answer these questions Dominique Mehl drew upon multiple theoretical sources: Foucault, in particular, who, in the first volume of his history on sexuality, *La volonté de savoir*, follows the steps of the secularisation of confession and its generalisation which made Western man a "beast of confession;" the philosopher Hannah Arendt who was probably the first to diagnose the common decline of the public and private spheres; and, finally, all those (sociologists, historians, psychoanalysts and social psychologists) who, for the past twenty years, have focused their analyses both on the assertion of individualism and on the void attending it, on the disappearance of aspirations, beliefs and collective referents, and on the fragility of the references on which individual identity is based, all of which make modern man an *uncertain individual*, as Alain Ehrenberg (1995) put it.

Among all the directions for analysis thus proposed, we shall choose the one which parents and teachers experience daily: the increasingly marked conflict between the assertion of a subjectivity in search of itself, and private and public institutions (family, school, church, firm, etc.) based on the authority of knowledge, the certitude of experts, the hierarchy of values, expertise and generations — everything which formerly demanded silence and which believes it can still do so. It is on this contradiction that "télé-vérité" prospers, helping, in turn, to reveal it. People are saying in public, in fact to say it to a few only, what they would never have spoken about in the family sphere, as children to parents, parents to children or father to mother.

## Philosophy, Semiotics and History

We trust that up to this point the readers of journals that have an international audience and are devoted to communication and the media — this one, of course, but also *Media, Culture & Society* or the *Journal of Communication*, for example — will have found the fields and problematiques with which they are familiar even if, as we have emphasised, these fields and problematiques sometimes have peculiarities which have justified our choices from recent French scientific production.

In the second part of this review we would like to report on research which is more often to be found in philosophical, linguistic or historical journals. While in the 1940s communication studies could claim to be an academic cross-roads in the United States, it seems that it is becoming so today in France, although to a far greater degree since the interdisciplinarity mentioned above is no longer limited to what it was essentially at the time: collaboration between experimental sociologists and psychologists.

Here again, we have had to resign ourselves to selecting only a few titles and authors. Our criteria were primarily the originality of approaches and, above all, disciplinarian openness manifested in the wish for dialogue between yesterday's academic fortresses. Today this openness allows for fertile interaction between sociologists of communication and a young French historical school essentially

concerned with the problematique of the public sphere and the very notion of *public,* on which it seemed natural for us to end our discussion.

## Action and Communication

One of the significant aspects of Pierre Livet's approach in his book written in 1994, *La communauté virtuelle — Action et communication,"* is that he draws from different research fields: from ethnomethodology, he borrows the procedures of revision and adjustment of individual actions and intentions in relation to the situation; from pragmatics, he retains the importance of the context, the inferential procedures and the effect of acts of language; from game theory in economics, he draws the strategies of co-operation and defection in relation to individual interests; finally, from analytical philosophy, he takes the work carried out on intentionality and the causes of and reasons for action. With the help of these heterogeneous disciplines he attempts to invert the classical approach consisting of idealising communication, as much from a theoretical as from a methodological viewpoint, as an abstract process of inter-comprehension. Whether in the ethical model of intersubjectivity (Habermas), in the cybernetic model of the coding and decoding of information (Shannon and Weaver) or in the functionalist model of effects (Katz, Lazarsfeld, etc.), effective processes of communication are usually evaluated against the yardstick of smooth interaction which would enable interlocutors reciprocally to transmit their intentions of meaning.

But the model which has most systematically defined the transparent exchange of mutual intentions as the condition *sine qua non* for successful communication, is that of Paul Grice.[10] According to Grice, for there to be communication as such, it is necessary for the listener to identify not only the semantic content, that is to say the literal meaning, of the utterance addressed to him/her by the speaker, but also the "pragmatic content" of the utterance, that is to say the speaker's extra-linguistic intention. In other words, for Grice the speaker's intention to communicate comprises two levels: the "informative intention" on the purely referential level of the utterance, and the "communicative intention" which relates to the effect that the intention of meaning, once recognised by the listener, may have on his/her *behaviour* (an order, a prayer) and *attitude*, that is to say his/her beliefs (advice, a promise). The criterion of successful communication proposed by Grice, that is, the listener's recognition of what the speaker *wanted* to say, implies the clause of common knowledge.[11] If the listener is to identify correctly the intention of meaning that the speaker has in mind, s/he must not only have the same representations, information and hypotheses as those which determined the utterance s/he has to interpret, but must also know *which* of these presumably shared hypotheses are effectively shared. In other words, if we follow Grice, successful communication relies on a drastic requirement, i.e. the hypotheses and information explicitly or implicitly governing the manner of enunciation have to be part of the interlocutors' *common knowledge*, that is to say, knowledge about what the other person knows, his/her attitude, his/her attitude concerning the person's own attitude, and so on. Communicative intention thus constitutes an informative intention of the second degree which is satisfied only if it manages to turn into "common knowledge" the informative intention related to a state and things *and* the speaker's attitude in relation to that same state of things. Now, the validation of this "common knowledge" necessarily involves the continual criss-crossing of messages of confirmation which must successively guarantee the meaning attributed by the listener to the preceding

level. For Livet, following Sperber and Wilson, in particular, this conception of communication as the complete and identical sharing of meaning, proves to be untenable from both the cognitive and the pragmatic points of view because it implies an infinite *regressus* of representations (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Moreover, even if the accumulated representations were indefinitely identical and could induce logically symmetrical predictions, this would in no way determine the manner in which they could be used.

Since the listener's recognition of the speaker's intention is based on embedded assumptions which can never be verified, the requirement of transparency implied by the common knowledge of intentions cannot be satisfied; and since the mutual identification of intentions remains "undecidable," that is, neither refutable nor demonstrable, it is necessary to revise "downwards" the conditions of successful communication. In this perspective, Sperber and Wilson reorganise the clause of common knowledge: the success of communication must no longer be based on what the subject knows, but on what the subject *may* know. The impossible requirement of *effective* sharing of representations and interpretations by interlocutors is thus replaced by the "mutual manifestness of cognitive environments" consisting of *possible* representations and interpretations. It is on the basis of that which is manifested in their common cognitive environment that the partners in interaction can formulate a number of "assumptions," that is to say, representations, concerning the intrinsically undetermined meaning of their reciprocal utterances. For Sperber and Wilson, the interlocutors implement "inferential mechanisms" enabling them to select and interpret the meaning which seems to them to be relevant, in relation to the particular nature of the speaker, the context of the situation and the specificity of their own experiences, beliefs and representations. Since the inferential treatment of the available information is governed and delimited by the principle of the least effort for the maximum cognitive yield, it is used to block the infinite *regressus* of mutually manifested representations before their cognitive costs become too high.

Yet for Livet the replacement of common knowledge by mutual inferences that individuals make on the basis of their own assumptions and "encyclopaedic knowledge," in no way resolves the pragmatic difficulties of communication. On the contrary, the convergence of inferences is as drastic a condition for satisfactory communication as the sharing of codes. Livet, unlike Sperber and Wilson who, he claims, are content to weaken the condition of common knowledge, abandons the idea of conceptualising communication in intentionalist and cognitive terms. According to Livet, the mechanisms that communication implements cannot be *cognitive* without reproducing, to a greater or lesser degree, the model of the ideal of the shared "code," even if it is to subject it, like Sperber and Wilson, to procedures and inferentially primitive rules. The mechanisms of communication meet requirements which are not epistemic but *pragmatic.* They allow individuals to communicate despite, or rather, owing to risky generalisations, wrong assumptions and non-demonstrative inferences which make the convergence of interpretations and the mutual identification of intentions literally impossible. For Livet, rather than postulating the intersubjective encounter as the starting point of the analysis, which inevitably leads one to treat interpretations, hesitations and contextual determinations as failings, even as empirical "betrayals" of the communication ideal, one has to accept communication as being "heuristically imperfect." Contrary to a normative approach to communication which

is content to evaluate its shortcomings when put into practice, Livet abandons the idea of treating the indeterminacy of the interlocutor's intention of meaning and the absence of a guarantee as to the receiver's correct comprehension, as mere empirical obstacles. He turns rather to ordinary practices which enable individuals to interact *even when* the success of the communication appears extremely improbable. Once the analyst, like the actor in the situation, has accepted "the limits of communication," that is to say, the impossibility for each person to identify the intention governing the enunciation or the action of the other, and to foresee whether his/her own acts of language will be recognised and hence validated in the interaction, or to predict the collective result of the common action, the establishment of a true theory of communication becomes possible.

In order to do so, Livet systematises the general principle of conversation proposed by Paul Grice, that of *co-operation* which denotes the assumption of reciprocal rationality enabling the partners in interaction to infer the meaning that is implicitly communicated to them, by taking as a basis the maxims of relevance, cognitive productivity, clarity and sincerity. This is how Livet's approach clearly differs from that of Sperber and Wilson who make the maxim of *relevance* the very basis of their theory. While the maxim of relevance links communication to cognition, thus opening the way to a "cognitive pragmatics" which weighs up utterances in relation to their informative value, the principle of co-operation enables one to apprehend communication as a type of *action.*[12] Thus, for our author, action and communication lie on the same analytical continuum because they both pose, more or less persistently, the problem of *co-ordination.* There is one difference, however, which is by no means insignificant: the action is based on a process of mutual adjustment by individuals in situations of co-presence. This adjustment is situated at the level of gestures and behaviours, whereas communication seems to demand the co-ordination of *intentions* of meaning. Now, as we have seen, if we consider the co-ordination of intentions, we need to satisfy the unworkable condition of common knowledge since the identification of representations is necessarily uncertain. Even the presumption of rationality which might allow the interlocutor-interpreter to infer, on the basis of observable traces of the interpreted person's behaviour, the intentions governing it, is fallible because confronted with countless "insanities" likely to govern an action. Moreover, intentions are not inaccessible and undetermined only for the participant-interpreter of the interaction; they are also so for the actor who, engaged in his/her action, can benefit from partial access only to his/her own intentions. Intentions, contrary to what the cognitivist approach suggests, are far from being defined prior to the action. They are always in the making "in the field," as a function of the very experience of their implementation and the reactions and interpretations to which they give rise. The determination of individual intentions, in so far as they are produced by successive adjustment, approximation and trial and error, is therefore most often *retrospective.* Consequently, co-ordination must necessarily do without knowledge on the intentions and individual representations of which the status is too unstable to provide the sound and reliable references it needs. Nevertheless, for Livet, even if co-ordination cannot be explained by an intentional principle — which allows him to impugn methodological individualism that counts only on individual representations for explaining the collective —, it should not for all that resort to its "institutionalist" extreme opposite. Unlike a holistic approach which, like Vincent Descombes (1996) in a more recent work

that caused a lot of fuss in France, relates the heterogeneity of subjective spirits to the "objective spirit" of the institutions whose rules *a priori* predetermine the interactions and ensure the complementarity of individual actions, Livet tries to explain co-ordination by starting with individual interactions.

The third alternative proposed by Livet is neither cognitive, nor holistic but *pragmatic*: in effect, in the ordinary practice of action and communication, those involved in the interaction do not tire themselves looking for common knowledge on their intentions or deciding on the ultimate meaning of their actions. Motivated by the altogether pragmatic wish to co-ordinate and co-operate, with a view to obtaining and maintaining a collective good — be it a law defending the public interest, common access to consumer goods or environmental protection —, the actors delegate to *conventions* the task of guaranteeing the convergence of their actions. For Livet, following Lewis, conventions are the implicit or explicit references, established uses, legitimate beliefs or observable objects which are theoretically accessible to all the participants of an interaction. The actors *endogenously* produce the common referents which they need to accomplish the collective action to which they aspire. Thus, for Lewis, making a fire, reaching the port in a rowing boat or preparing a meal for ten persons are all goals, and the way of attaining these goals has yet to be defined, in particular the conventions suited to the situation, to the categorical belonging of the persons and to the degree of co-ordination required by the desired result. For example, while an official interaction functions according to a pre-established protocol and impersonal and statutory relations which suffice to guarantee the success of co-ordination, an informal conversation requires precise adjustments in relation to the personality and subjective reactions of the interlocutors. The participants in interaction, by common consent, rely on the references which are mutually obvious to them, to ensure not the community of thinking or interpretation — which is too demanding given the undecidability of intentions—, but the *community of action*. Hence, the undecidability of intentions is replaced by the relative decidability of the conventions which allow individuals engaged in their action to decide on the situation, to maintain its coherence and to ensure a degree of stability in its collective result. Yet these conventions, although they make it possible to frame the action and thereby to preserve a common definition of the situation, do not, for all that, eliminate the unpredictability of individual intentions. This is because they are not rigid rules which might serve as a last resort, irrespective of the differences of situation. It is for pragmatic reasons that individuals adhere to a convention: when they have to co-ordinate with others to reach their goals, they have to choose conventional references which seem the most likely also to be selected by the other "candidates" for the co-ordination. To maximise their chances, it is in their interests to choose as a convention the regular behaviour that has already been tried and tested in the past. In so far as mutual expectations bank on the same former behaviour, it is the assumption of conformity which guides the selection of a convention and thereby helps to reduce the undecidability of the future of the co-ordination. The rationally motivated decision to conform to the rule of the preceding one, favours the emergence *in situ* of conventions which are merely the "putative references" of co-ordination practices. Their effecti-veness can be certified only at the end of a collective dynamic of revision and correction which attests *a posteriori* to the validity of individual expectations. In other words, the undecidability of the individual intention and the resulting fallibility of the collective action are neither

cancelled nor surpassed; they are simply limited by the conventions which provide the "framework-conditions," the "decidable anchorage," of the interaction. The margin of indetermination, improvisation and instability is therefore not eliminated, and for good reason. It is precisely the possibility which the agents have of revising their hypotheses in relation to the concrete forms assumed by the action underway, and of correcting their behaviour in relation to unexpected events, others' reactions or the collective effects of the situation, that allows the balance of co-ordination to be maintained. Hence, the conventions are there only to guarantee the empirical and practical convergence of the communication and actions whose situated accomplishment, contrary to its idealised version, is not undermined by the shortcomings in knowledge and the misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations which line the course of the interaction. It is, by contrast, the ability to re-orientate his or her action in relation to possible errors and uncertainties in the collective result of the situation of co-ordination which reveals the intentionality of the actor and, simultaneously, his or her intention to co-operate. In other words, if there is indeed a "mutuality" necessary for the co-ordination, it is not that of the common knowledge of intentions, but that of the "mutual tolerance" that accompanies the process of adjustment, correction and revision of individual actions.

Livet's approach thus makes it possible to account for a procedure which is omnipresent in social practice yet relatively unknown in sociological theory, i.e. individuals, while they constantly depend on the actions and interpretations of others, cannot identify, even by complex inferences, the intentions and courses of action motivating their fellow beings. Since interactions are composed of a whole series of conditional acts of which the collective result cannot be foreseen, it is in the partners' interests to co-operate in the common definition of the situation in order to surpass the mutual indeterminacy blocking them in a situation of counter-productive uncertainty. Hence, anyone is a "candidate" for the co-ordination in which it is advisable to "play the game" of the group by conforming to the observable references and behavioural norms which worked well enough in the past to serve again as conventions. In this frame of analysis, the conventions and collective results of the courses of action are not the voluntary and direct doing of individuals, but the *side effect* of their efforts to offset the failures of the interindividual communication and mutual indeterminacy of their intentions and actions. Recognition of the impossibility to satisfy the requirement of identification of others' intentions produces common strategies which bank on the "joint result" of the course of action, of which the feedback on individual intentions is considered to be a constraining externality. For Livet, the collective therefore has a virtual status: it is the fruit of the representation of the situation as imagined by the individuals who are involved in it, with each one acting *as if* the conventions were well and truly shared.

In so far as the collective is realised only by the intentions and interactions of which the "fallibility" and "undecidability" require, for co-ordination purposes, the assumption of a "*virtual community*," Livet's approach avoids a holistic approach which would make the collective an entity floating above the individuals and structuring *a priori* a meaning that the social agents would merely adopt as their own. He furthermore impugns the "eliminativist" postulates of methodological individualism, for "the presupposition of a collective that is at least virtual, one in which individuals believe, even if everyone believes something different, is necessary" (Livet 1993, 119-120). By

entering into the problematique of action and communication through the requirements and degrees of co-ordination, Livet provides for a highly interesting way of reconciling the ethnomethodological preoccupations which try to highlight the production of conventions *in situ*, and the emphasis on situational constraints that Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot have tried to systematise in their ambitious book *De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur* (1991).[13] The "economy of size" model, which could be called "situationist," tries to shift social determinants, traditionally placed within the persons themselves, towards situational devices defined by principles, reference values and "sizes" allowing for the closure of that which can be envisaged or not in the situation. The contexts of action are apprehended as "world-states" (Dodier 1991) which delimit the range of possible actions by framing the adjustments of the partners in the interaction. The individuals can take as a basis the relevant "salient features" of the situation, in particular the objects which are indispensable stabilisers of the balance of co-ordination, to evaluate and "qualify" the course of action by common accord. When a co-ordination problem arises, for example disagreement over the definition of the situation, the interactants are obliged to pass "the justification test" on the reasons for their act. However, although Livet is explicitly inspired by Thévenot and Boltanski's model when he stresses the importance of regimes of co-ordination, he endows the "forces of order," the conventions, with a different status.[14] In the model of *justification*, the conventions are the guarantors of the common accord and the basis of justifications which allow for conflict resolution by argumentation. By contrast, in Livet's model, which could be called the model "of reparation," conventions are the permanent witnesses of disagreements and divergence which separate individuals *in principle*. In other words, for Thévenot and Boltanski, accord comes first, so that it is discord, dispute and disagreement as to the definition of a situation or to the modality of a course of action that have to be explained. In this respect they are at one with the normative acceptations of communication which define, each in its own way, the ideal of the shared "code." This obliges the analyst to analyse *a posteriori* the "noises" which might have "muddled" *in situ* the normal course of action. For Livet, by contrast, conventions have an essentially *palliative* role: communication is possible only if individuals give up the idea of co-ordinating intentions, because they are too undecidable, and turn instead towards conventions which enable them to offset their reciprocal lack of understanding. This type of approach to communication, in terms of conventions, allows one to grasp the importance of situations of transaction — for example, television debates which serve above all to establish a minimum of consensus as to the stakes of a conflict — and situations of indeterminacy which favour the progressive emergence of new conventions — for example, a social event such as a strike, of which the description is subject to revision throughout the journalistic inquiry[15]. This approach, by focusing on the intrinsic indeterminacy of situations, meanings and actions, can thus be used to treat situations from which common references are absent and must be produced *hic et nunc*.

When it is a matter of the co-ordination of actions, this "emerging" conception seems to function perfectly; by contrast, with the co-ordination of intentions it proves to be far less conclusive because it tends to call into question the very idea of communication. With Livet the fact that the success of communication cannot lie in the common knowledge of transparent intentions, leads to the opposite conclusion: it

is the *opacity* of the communication which allows for the stability of social relations because it forces individuals to resort to conventions which, in so far as they embody, at least virtually, the stable, shared and common, compensate for their own undecidability. The opacity of intentions to communicate, on which Livet bases his argument, is radicalised to such an extent that the exchange of meanings and information is not only improbable, even impossible, but also threatening. That is because, by maintaining the illusion of the co-ordination of intentions, it endangers the rational recourse to external cognitive references to which common access is guaranteed. In other words, according to Livet, communication seems simply impossible, since the actors have no choice but to abandon even a partial access to the intentions of others, and to strive tirelessly to produce the collective conventions likely to compensate for the intrinsic indeterminacy of their meanings and actions. Several objections may be raised against such a conception. First, communication is not only an ideal of mutual transparency; it is also a favoured means of revising an error of interpretation, of making sure of the ordinary course of things, of trying, in a perpetual movement, to sustain the fragile balance which maintains, in a manner of speaking, the being-together. Secondly, it seems doubtful that the belief in the existence of a virtual community, which acts as a safeguard by guaranteeing the functioning of society against the errors and wanderings of individuals, is enough to maintain the convergence of actions. Finally, we may wonder whether, beyond the real advantages of an approach which inverts the peace of mind of an idealised *homo communicans,* to focus on the uncertainties of the individual in search of co-operation, intentions of meaning and behaviours are as undetermined as Livet makes them out to be. In any case that is not what Andrea Semprini (1996) suggests in his book, in which the "socio-semiotic" approach consists, on the contrary, of deploying the meanings contained *objectively* in the images, logos, press titles, advertisement or even the TV channels.

## For a Sociosemiotics

In order not to renew the ideology of communication as such, too often treated as a general and universal process, Semprini adopts an empirical approach which restores to "communicational occurrences" that which gives them their specificity *in situ.* Through this inductive perspective, it is the very term "mass" communication which is called into question, for the identity of the targets presupposed by the enunciatory level of the discourse and analysed images is far more segmented than the defenders of "massification" claim. Semprini uses the analytical tools of "sociosemiotics" here, understood as a discipline which studies the properties of discourse, their enunciatory strategies, their conditions of production and consumption, their areas of circulation and their different mediums. In so far as sociosemiotics draws upon semiotics, and notably that of Greimas (1976), it can ignore the question — moreover unsolvable — of the intentional and strategic aims of the producers of the discourse analysed. Casting aside the eternal problem of "meaning-to-say" and the intention of meaning which is said to be "behind" the operation of communication, it takes as its subject the interpretative courses that the "communiqué" itself is likely to activate.

Yet, unlike an orthodox semiotic approach which refuses to address the existence of referents, the sociosemiotic approach recommended by Semprini, notably after Eliséo Veron (1987), in no way excludes "the real world" from its analysis. The textual world, far from being a self-referent semiotic system, has constantly to be related to all the

stabilised meanings which existed before it and determined it. And that is all the more so because the textual and the 'real' worlds are not separated by a difference of nature; on the contrary, the 'real' world must itself be conceived "as the sum of all the textual worlds, manifested in the multiplicity of social discourse, which would have reached an adequate stage of objectivity and realism to *cross the semiotic threshold of representation* and slip, for a variable amount of time, *into the territory of social reality*" (Semprini 1996, 92). Since the 'real' world is defined as all the representations which are able to impose themselves as "natural facts of life," as Garfinkel would say, the differences between an analysis of the semiotic type and an approach of the sociological type have no more *raison d'*ętre (Garfinkel 1967). On the one hand the enunciatory devices which make the socio-cultural sphere intelligible, also produce "a real effect" enabling them to impose their world of meaning as objective and unquestionable. Since the nature of these social discourses is intrinsically *semiotic*, the analytical tools of the "textual worlds" can legitimately be used in their respect. On the other hand, the nature of these discourses is also and above all *social*, which justifies a sociological approach to "sociocultural devices" of which these discourses are both the witnesses and the symptoms.

Thus, unlike radical semiotics centred on the meanings present in the text itself, and contrary to a positivist approach which claims to address the 'real' world as such, the primary object of sociosemiotics is, for Semprini, the "possible world." Semprini uses this notion, borrowed from Nelson Goodman (1978), to denote the system of values, actors and situations spawned by the encounter between an image, a magazine or a TV channel, and the common meanings of the public who interprets them[16]. He is thus interested in the 'real' world "under a description," in the "version of the real world" which emerges from *the interaction* between the textual world and the 'real' world and which, by benefiting from the evidence of the shared, manages to impose itself as the only possible version. Thus, for Semprini, if the comprehension of discourse and images is *immediate*, it is because the possible worlds which they propose seem to coincide perfectly with the "contextual doxastic encyclopaedia" of the receivers. The apprehension of the discourse is thus of the order of recognition and not of knowledge, for even information is part of the system of stereotypes, both contem-porary and profoundly archetypal, with which everyone is already familiar. In this frame of analysis, the notion of *truth* and of a reality as such seems to have to make way for the notion of likelihood which emerges at the intersection of a social discourse and the normative expectations of a given community. Thus, social discourses, for example the CNN news, are true, but their "'truth' articulates a level, that of the imaginary, which is based on a different logic than that of the conditions of truth and which is taken as the only yardstick against which the truth of information is measured" (Semprini 1996, 159). It is therefore not the "referential real" but the "symbolic 'real'" that the socio-semiotician proposes to analyse in order to grasp the mechanisms through which the meaning, by resonating with the doxastic world of the receiver, seems to be taken for granted. Yet "the possible world," its internal coherence, its level of relevance or its exemplary nature in relation to the social context to which it necessarily refers, is not explicitly given. The analyst has to *infer* it, based on the meanings and characters that the discursive device displays literally. Thus, contrary to the linguist who starts with the denotation of an utterance, the sociosemiotician starts with the principle that the implicit production of meanings is "the natural state" of "the social discursivity" that has to be deciphered adequately.[17] Semprini thus

attempts to infer the "possible worlds" deployed by social discourses, by examining the traditional stereotypes underlying them, whether these are gender-related (the feminine press), technological (logo of the Parisian inter-urban transport network), action- and adventure-related (logo of a manufacturer of cellphones, CNN TV channel), nature- and culture-related (discursive treatment of the concept of 'nature') or identity- and difference-related (Benetton advertisements). These archaic stereotypes are updated in an individualistic rhetoric, itself typically modern, which reorganises them according to the "social mapping" of the space in which it is deployed. The dividing lines and principles of social and cultural grouping thus remain within the atomising dynamic which turns the individual into a "pure interiority" unattached to any socio-economic determination or geo-historical affiliation. That goes to show how complex, if not acrobatic, the work of image "manufacturers" is: they have to count on an "absolutised" individual, in line with the dominant psychologist ideology, while simultaneously inserting him/her into the community which is supposed to produce the "brand" they defend.

Nevertheless, Semprini's analysis, despite the precautions which cause him to emphasise the "preferential interpretive courses" of the receivers, tends to remain "purely" semiotic since it consists of deciphering *in general* the connotations and values deployed by a discourse. Thus, even though he emphasises, in a somewhat programmatic way, the "open work" dimension of the social discourses which demand, as Umberto Eco (1979) showed, the "interpretative co-operation" of the receiver, the concrete modalities of reception are overlooked. And yet, even if the "existential horizon of the receiver," his/her social and cultural conditions and background normative expectations — in short, that which organises the interpretative act — are neglected, the result of the analyses is no less convincing. It shows that the "objective" meanings of a text, a work or an image, the modalities of the construction of the "referential illusion" legitimising them, constitute a possible, even necessary, level of analysis. But once this level of description has been endorsed, the status of these "objective" meanings raises another fundamental question for the sociologist. With the intentions of the producer and the comprehension of the receiver eliminated — and probably rightly so — from the analysis, the explanation of the hidden meaning of the social discourses depends on the interpretative capacities of the sociosemiotician only. Those of Semprini are, of course, particularly impressive, but the multiple and undeniable qualities of the author change nothing of the fact that the analyst's skills, if they prove to be too determining in the discovery of the meaning, may undermine the "objective" dimension of the meanings that have precisely to be defended. The relevance of this critique may, however, be challenged if we take into account the ethnomethodological bias suggested numerous times in the book. From an ethnomethodological viewpoint, the author benefits, at least in principle, from the same collectivity member competence as his fellow men, which enables him to elucidate "the meaning for us" that ordinary people, like all unconscious sociologists, are content to activate tacitly. The socio-semiotician, thanks to the collectivity member competence and the semiotic tools which make him or her the living incarnation of the "Model Reader" Eco talks about, can decipher 'in his/her way' the social discourses without 'the objectivity' of meanings being threatened. On the other hand, the social inscription of receivers is well and truly written off, to the benefit of the stereotypical *topoi* narratives which govern discursive devices.

Contrary to Livet's pragmatics of reparation which starts with the *indeterminacy* of meanings, the sociosemiotic project focuses on the determination of meanings allowed by collusion — most often *a priori* — between the micro-universes constructed by political, advertising, informational or literary discourses, on the one hand, and the frames of experience that the authors "spontaneously" mobilise in their daily lives, on the other. Whereas, with Livet, the production *in situ* of conventions by individuals favours co-operation and communication, the discursive circulation of stereotypical meanings, even arranged in relation to social spaces, tends to short-circuit "the textual co-operation" of the producer and receiver that Umberto Eco talks about. Thus, the active contribution of the interpreter hardly seems necessary when the reiteration of the *same* meanings allows one to impose a socially constructed discourse, such as individualistic rhetoric, as natural. The semiotic side of the sociosemiotic approach thus allows one to rehabilitate, advisedly, the importance of meanings of which the inertia and omnipresence are sufficiently loaded to invalidate the very notion of interpretation and inference on which Livet bases his argument. The determination of certain meanings is in no way problematical for they are henceforth determined and "realised" in the real world, both in practice and in interpretative schemes.

## The Public Space Revisited

The "realising" effects of discourses like the indeterminacy of meanings is often to be found in another key debate for the sociology of communication: the theories of the public sphere. The justice of public opinion, contrary to the rhetoric of secrecy and concealment in the service of power, is based on an eminently subversive principle: the requirement of mutual transparency of intentions. Furthermore, sociocultural history was confronted, even before the term existed, with the problematique of the effects of discourse, ideas and semantic content which media analysis attempts, often in vain, to surpass. Thus, the history of ideas, like factual history but in a different way, abandons anonymous actors and ordinary uses and practices, to focus on the "gesture of kings" and the "word of princes" which impact on an influencable and passive public[18]. Contrary to an idealistic and intellectualistic conception of history which retrospectively endows the words of the intellectual and bourgeois élite with the power to promulgate a secular and democratic view of the world, at the origins of the French Revolution, Roger Chartier suggests inverting the "descending" relationship implied in the model of the diffusion of representations in the public sphere[19]. For him, even if original theories produced by Utopian intellectuals in the eighteenth century did play a pivotal role in the evolution of society under the Ancien-Regime, their interpretation in terms of "effects" does not explain their progressive translation into revolutionary *action.* For Chartier, collective representations are explanatory only in so far as they command, and are reflected in, cultural acts and activities — reading, for example. Rather than seeing the proliferation of bad discourse and seditious words as a cumulative process which diffuses, on an ever greater scale, the loss of affection for the king, we need to analyse the economic, political and cultural conditions of their emergence (Roche 1993). Hence, owing to the more widespread circulation of printed matter, reading practices were transformed: from being oral and public, they became private and silent, thus freeing writings from the religious references which made the formation of an objective and critical standpoint impossible. As Darnton (1991) shows, the seditious content of pamphlets, the exchange of daring and criminal

words on the morals of the aristocracy, attested to the loss of ordinary people's respect for a king whose majesty was falling into decay. Moreover, contrary to what one may be led to believe by the intellectualist conception which attributes the power to impose its demands for truth on people seduced by reason, "philosophical" books designated not literary works or the writings of the philosophers, but everything that was prohibited, including offensive biographies on the depraved morals of the court (Darnton 1993). If we follow Chartier, the disinvestment of the relationship with authority, the loss of affection for those in power and the loss of the king's sacred aura which led to the overthrow of the monarchic State, were not the result of the convergence of literary and popular *opinions* only, but also of the progressive convergence of cultural practices. As Hélčne Merlin (1994) shows, literary and theatrical activities played an essential role as individuals, still excluded from political debate, fought for access to *representation* hitherto monopolised by the court.

For Hélčne Merlin, the study of seventeenth century literary debates enables us to analyse changes in the semantic content of the notion of *public*, for during that century literature was the privileged medium for the problematisation of the relationship between individuals and the State. As Merlin shows, the *public* is not reducible to the literary public sphere as conceptualised by Habermas, who made it the pre-Revolutionary collective subject prefiguring the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. Moreover, contrary to the way in which classical theories of reception conceive it, the *public* cannot be reduced to the interpretative community composed of the receivers of literary works. Contrary to the Habermasian comparison of the *fictive public* with a *de facto public*, in principle literary, Hélčne Merlin (1994, 32) shows that the notion of *public* appeared well before the literary public sphere and that it is rooted well "beyond the strict frameworks of 'literature' since in the seventeenth century 'literature' did not exist, *not yet*." The relationship of engendering is thus inverted: the notion of *public* as cited by men of letters in the seventeenth century belongs to the theologico-political vocabulary peculiar to the society of orders and has no specifically literary or artistic meaning.

Historically, religious wars as well as the pragmatic and instrumental conception of government that the absolutist State established to put an end to them, separated the body politic, hitherto united and homogeneous, into two "spaces:" that of the *private individual*, to which the State had no access, and that of the *public*, institutionalised as a monopoly of the monarchical power. This progressive disen-tanglement of "the community of *private individuals* pushed out of political decision-making" was to be the object of various attempts at conciliation in "places of substitution:" the court and literature. The function of the court was, "in the absence of a lost totality," to represent the *public* as a sample of the body politic; it thus made the king's power visible and, through the representation of the unity of the *public*, displayed the accomplishment of order of which it was the official agent. In opposition to this court *public,* a virtual *public* was created, a theatrical stage that could be used to explore, in a fictive way, the meeting points and conflict between the private individual and the *public* which could no longer communicate "outside the representation." The shifting of political discourse towards fiction enabled private individuals to make use of the analogical link connecting the theatrical stage and the political arena, to test new ideas and to invent, through models that had been left vacant, a new representation of themselves. The theatre thus became a true "laboratory for experimenting" the possible relations

between individuals and the State; in other words, since direct participation was prohibited, literature established a substitute for the *public* which could act only through representation and speech. In this way, Merlin tells us, the activity of private individuals remained attached to public activity, "in a dual relationship of reflection and metonymy;" "a microcosm within the political macrocosm ... which *represents* in a complex way what is happening at the same time but far away, in space, simultaneously encompassing and separated from the body politic" (Merlin 1994, 110-111).

The regulatory authority of this microcosm was the Republic of letters, that is to say, the community of writers who hoped, in particular, to found the unity of a collective on the basis of the cultural heritage of France. Granting itself the status of moral representatives of the *public*, the Republic of letters asserted itself as the only authority entitled to regulate the form and the mode of publication of writings. It was for this reason that it would be the main protagonist in the quarrel of the *Cid*, the main theme in Hélčne Merlin's book. Corneille, by proclaiming himself a genius and claiming to have a direct and privileged link with *his public*, brought down the wrath of his peer community. By opposing the internal laws of the "citizenship" of writers with a new authority, that of the users of his work or, as we would say today, the 'audience ratings', he challenged the "contempt for vulgarity" which made popular triumph suspect and illegitimate. The stakes of the quarrel of the *Cid* lie in the very status of the representation and definition of the public, for the notion of *public* had no stable referential value; it was a relative term, a rhetorical instrument which, by the play of opposites, allowed one to think the "anti-public," that is to say, the *people*. Corneille's attempt to legitimise pleasure and popular plebiscite was ultimately to fail; the Académie Française imposed an educational and normalising conception of representation which was meant to show "the ordinary nature of things" and to force "consent prior to examination." However, even if the various models of the *public* were bled white by the Académie's intervention, experience and aesthetic conflicts made it possible to start outlining new rules of "theatricality." Thus, the "ontological conception" which conceived of the *public* as a transcending entity, made way to a "contractualist conception" which related the *public* to a practical obligation, that of "holding-together." The "ontological collapse of the *public*" is the matrix of a paradoxical and eminently modern definition of the *public*: the *public* is composed of all private individuals yet cannot be reduced to *the sum of individuals*. One of the many interesting aspects of the book is to show the emergence of this *aporia*, which is also the practical and symbolic elaboration of an original way of "being in politics," experienced in the sphere of literary representation.

*Translated from French by Liz Libbrecht*

## Notes:

1. Among others, by order of age: *Réseaux - communication, technology, society* (Centre National d'Études des Télécommunications), *Quaderni* (Paris I Sorbonne University), *Hermès - cognition, communication, politique* (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), *Les Cahiers de médiologie* (Éditions Gallimard).

2. We note, in particular, the significant *Dictionnaire critique de la communication* edited by Lucien Sfez, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, 2 volumes.

3. Michel Foucault's major work *The Order of Things* has a sub-title "An Archaeology of the Human Sciences."

4. Some of the more recent publications by the same author are *Vie et mort de l'image - une histoire du regard en Occident* (1992), *L'État séducteur - les révolutions médiologiques du poivoir* (1993), and *Manifestes médiologiques* (1994).

5. We recall that he was freed in 1970.

6. We note in this field two original studies: Sabine Chalvon-Demersay and Dominique Pasquier, *Drôles de stars - La télévision des animateurs* (1990); Dominique Pasquier, *Les scénaristes et la télévision - Approche sociologique* (1995).

7. Here Rieffel adopts a term used by Edgar Morin to qualify the heroes of mass culture: princesses, film stars and even charismatic political leaders like Kennedy (cf. Morin 1962).

8. This article was previously published in the journal edited by Pierre Bourdieu, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No 101-102, March 1994, p.3-9.

9. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu (with Loďc J.D. Wacquant), *Réponses*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1992.

10. H.P. Grice, Meaning, *The Philosophical Review* 67, 377-388; Logic and Conversation, in P. Cole, J. L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, New York, Academic Press, 41-58.

11. The notion of common knowledge was systematized notably by David Lewis (1969). It spawned the approach, currently expanding in France, of the "economy of conventions." This approach focuses on the conventions of which the unintentional emergence could explain the macro-economic consequences of micro-economic procedures such as stock market transactions. In France, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, André Orléan and Olivier Favereau are the leaders of this current, an illuminating presentation of which appeared in the issue devoted to it in March 1989, of the *Revue économique* 40 (2). That issue of the journal contains significant articles and notably those of J.-P. Dupuy A. Orléan. The reader is also referred to the special issue of the journal *Réseaux* devoted to conventions, and notably to the article by Louis Quéré (1993).

12. For further details on these questions, the reader is referred to the excellent book by Jacques Moeschler and Anne Reboul, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de pragmatique*, 1994.

13. See also the illuminating presentation of Laurent Thévenot, "L'action qui convient," *Raisons pratiques*, 1, Paris, EHESS, 1990, p.39-69.

14 Pierre Livet and Laurent Thévenot collaborated on numerous articles; cf. in particular P. Livet and L. Thévenot, "Les stratégies de l'action collective" in Orléan, ed., 1994.

15. The description of an event also enables on to define, as the example of the profanation of Jewish graves in Carpentras in France, developed by Louis Quéré - cf. L. Quéré, "L'événement sous une description, contraintes sémantiques, croyances stéréotypiques," *Protée*, spring 1994, p.14-28.

16. Yet, contrary to what many French authors seem to believe, the notion of a possible world does not come from Goodman but from Davis Lewis who uses it to denote that which has not yet been realized in the real world, but which can logically be envisaged. As Robert Salais (1993) shows, the notion of convention presented above is closely related to that of a possible world since the convention is a means of access to a possible common world which, circumstances permitting, the actors select and create.

17. On the difference between pragmatic and sociosemiotic, cf. Eliseo Veron 1997.

18. Carlo Ginzburg, *Le fromage et les vers, l'univers d'un meunier du XVIème siècle* (1980), who could be linked, like Roger Chartier, to the young generation of the École des Annales which also includes Daniel Roche and Arlette Farge.

19. Roger Chartier, *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (1990). Among the supporters of this intellectualist conception of history, according to which ideas, if not books, made the revolution by shaping the opinions of people, we note Daniel Mornet, *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française*,(1933); K.M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution.* (1990); François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (1978) and, of course, the volume by Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989).

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