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Debates, theories and methods

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

- 1 Why this return to the media treatment of the wars in former Yugoslavia, after the contributions already published on this subject in two journals, *Mots* and *Cahiers de médiologie*¹? Obviously, both publications were shaped by the issues in the news – not only because they were capturing what was in the air, but because these Balkan wars of our time challenged our conscience as citizens, how we intervened, and our ability to deliver a discourse of scientific substance. Those with an interest in how the media operate and how individual and collective opinions are formed were faced with an intense level of output – often on a polemical note – from journalists, institutional communication agencies and propaganda sources, or from witnesses, politicians, intellectuals and experts. With such a profusion of material, the temptation was strong to separate the wheat from the chaff, or to establish “the truth”. This is what the authors of the two publications tried to avoid, each in their own way. The concern, shared by researchers publishing articles in other journals, was to construct a balanced standpoint capable of handling the possible tension between support for a cause, moral judgment and the need for distance inherent to any scientific approach. In fact, the same issue emerges with every conflict of concern to researchers and on which they want to work. This is why the idea came about of a *Questions de communication* issue that would set the debate in more general terms. Our intention, then, is to review the various analyses of discourse produced by information specialists and professionals in

the sector about the media treatment of the wars in former Yugoslavia and, further, to provide keys to an understanding of the conditions under which such analyses are produced, and to shed light on different positions on events and on the choices of theoretical and methodological foundations.

- 2 Alice Krieg maps out the field in which the main studies - primarily French - have advanced in the last ten years on the theme of the media and the wars in former Yugoslavia. The research she maps out takes in the entire range of writing on the subject, from the reputedly scholarly to the libellous. This systematic inventory is of intrinsic interest to those engaging in the current of study on war reporting in the media. But of still greater value is the author's method of analysis, based on simple but effective criteria. For example, the criterion of the production period brings out the focus on a particular moment in time, but also the need for the research to stand the test of time. Moving from a typological approach to a more analytical one, she shows an imbalance in studies of the different media. For example, French researchers have a preference for the written press and, to a lesser extent, television, as objects of study, giving much shorter shrift to photography or radio reporting, as though fixed images or words without pictures were not central to the shaping of representations and opinions - and the Internet is not even mentioned. There are undoubtedly other ways of accounting for this imbalance than those arising from the hold that some media have over the contemporary public sphere. The ability to adopt a focus that differs from common wisdom is surely the privilege of research, although the investment is considerable in terms of time, conceptual thinking and methodological reflection. Another significant remark concerning habit in studies by information and communication researchers is the lack of attention to professional practice. Despite the many voices pleading in favour of linking the semiotic and sociological approaches, the latter are rarely brought into play. While this issue of *Questions de communication* attempts to fill a number of gaps, it is nevertheless not devoid of considerations of this type, which are effectively critical.
- 3 In addressing these gaps, this issue includes [in a French translation] an article on a comparative study conducted in 2000 by three British researchers. The article, by Reiner Grundmann, Dennis Smith and Sue Wright, was first published in the *European Journal of Communication* and makes an assessment of the differences and similarities in the treatment of the war in 1999 by "Establishment" newspapers in France, Germany and the UK, and more particularly of the possible political priorities of the elites. *In fine*, the article questions the substance of transnational discourse, and the existence of a European public sphere, and thereby broadens out a classically French perspective. To do so, the analysis, which is rooted in lexicology, proceeds quantitatively and qualitatively, producing some surprising results as regards the considerable amount of attention given to German politicians in the different publications, which may be accounted for by institutional and geopolitical as well as historical factors. By drawing contrasts, the study also sheds lights on the specificities of editorial lines, whether as regards the European character of the war, the situation in the Balkans, the tensions within NATO or perceptions of what was happening in the different countries where the papers were published. Concerning the reality of the phenomenon that the authors refer to as the synchronisation of attention in public opinion *via* the written press, what stands out are differences, and the reasons for these differences. Studies of polemical and political communication have much to gain from taking a transnational

and intercultural perspective. It comes as no surprise to observe that the media by no means form a uniform whole: a point also made in the article on photographic books, which clearly brings out professional, aesthetic and ethical divisions.

- 4 In their contribution, Éric Pedon and Jacques Walter investigate one media aspect that has been little researched to date, as they analyse why many French photographic books on the wars in former Yugoslavia became a forum for critiquing their treatment in the media. After describing the editorial intentions underlying their production in a context of photojournalism in crisis – in terms of the stances taken on the wars and in relation to the debate on the relationships between history and imagery – the authors propose a typology in which they distinguish two main trends in output: documentaries (war reporters' albums, historical documents) and artistic production (photographic-cum-literary essays, exhibition catalogues). They show that it is the latter that most forcefully justify choices of subject matter and styles that contrast with those in routine media journalism. The authors then discuss the different components of the thinking that led these photographers to take a position by creating an alternative iconography. In intention, they denounced the tendency to treat the belligerent parties as two sides of the same coin, playing one off against the other and rejected spectacular, stereotyped scenes of war, even to the point of questioning the value of photographs as proof. These are the foundations the authors use to account for the twofold purpose of the photographers' work: in the case of photographic-cum-literary essays, the main interest is in scenes of daily life in the civilian population; in exhibition catalogues, it is in the explicit use of artefact in photographing the material. While noting, by way of a conclusion, the originality of the links between the photographer, the photographable and the photographic in representations of these conflicts, the authors also raise the question of the impact of these books.
- 5 This type of question is central to Éric Maigret's thinking on the relationships between audiences, media and war in western societies. He deplores, first of all, the small amount of research on reception in this context, barring various opinion surveys on perceptions of the war whose results are interpreted for political or institutional ends or to assess the effects of media propaganda on opinions. The author moves on to a review of analyses of opinion produced by social and political scientists during the Vietnam and Gulf wars. Then, given the amount of knowledge that exists on audiences in democratic contexts, he pleads in favour of a systematic study on the reception of information in times of war, taking the conflict in Kosovo as an example for a programme of research on French audiences. Through an analysis of the results of two SOFRES opinion surveys, Éric Maigret shows where studies of this type reach their limits and suggests avenues for the more qualitative research needed to better understand the complexity of interpretations in public opinion. He recommends the use of a set of analytical tools to help guide the field of research on reception towards studies of a sociological nature, focusing on the ethnography of practice in particular, while stressing the need to consider the political implications of researchers' ideological stances on war reporting in the media. These theoretical and methodological questions obviously apply to studies of all media types.
- 6 The article by Jean-Claude Soulages also focuses on an investigation of the methodological problems that arise in research on televised news discourse. He outlines the approach adopted by his research centre, based on objectifying the data and on equipping observations. The theoretical approach to objects is therefore

empirico-deductive and links up studies of two kinds: quantitative first of all, to map out the object, then semio-discursive. Thanks to the Inathèque document indexing system, researchers have been able to compile a corpus and then determine the form and content variables needed to study French television news coverage of what the author calls an “event theme”, in this case the wars in former Yugoslavia from 1990 to 1994. Initially, once processed, the results lead to three observations on the attitudes of French television in treating these conflicts. They show little difference between the thematic content of media coverage, which itself echoes perceptions of the war, and the media-driven humanitarian stance common to all the French media. The author then takes the analysis further through one of the three lines of semio-discursive study used. He offers a more in-depth analysis of the audiovisual staging of the news, seeking to understand the dynamics of effects of meaning and affects in news discourse. He particularly highlights eight types of staging that reflect a shift in the media viewpoint. By looking beyond textual or historical analyses, which are too reductive to account for the complexity of the argumentation and narrative employed in televised discourse in the treatment of war, the method used succeeds in demonstrating and explaining how news narratives are transformed into a narrative series where the horizon of expectations in the collective imagination takes on crucial importance. The collective environment and imagination of professionals also plays a major role in war reporting in the media.

- 7 Using the form of a diary in which he notes a series of reflections, Michael Palmer looks into a little known aspect of the work of (mainly English-speaking) journalists and news agency staff: the context in which “hot news” is written up. In doing so, he questions the positions of news history researchers – “seismologists” – regarding this type of hard-to-access media production. Stressing the intense competition between world news agencies and between international media, which over-determines the conditions in which journalists work, Michael Palmer raises questions on several issues: the production of text and images, how professionals see their job, and how texts are shaped into narratives for different audiences. He then draws an analogy between the journalists reporting on the wars in former Yugoslavia and Herodotus writing on the Greco-Persian wars, showing that the matter of truth and verisimilitude is a constant. He also looks into the difficulties faced by journalists in writing their papers, given the weight of expectations and editorial lines, as well as the pitfalls they face in writing up history. His analysis of the particular case of a Reuter’s correspondent whose reporting made considerable use of clichés brings out an unexpected link between news writing and the writing of ancient narratives and epics. His exploration of the representations and words employed in writing about war are also an opportunity to revisit their symbolic and mythical charge in films and special features on TV. The author points to the sometimes bizarre ways of staging news using stereotypes that stem from norms and formats. Taking matters further through an outline of past events and geopolitics in the shaping of the Balkan wars, where he refers for example to the activities of Reuters and the AFP in the World War II, he provides insights on the permanence of propaganda and disinformation. Like other contributors, Michael Palmer also notes the use of artefact, beyond the sphere of journalism, to explain the construction of factual narrative: the classic formulae used in describing the Balkans, references from fiction, stereotyped generalisations, and of course the weight of collective representations in news offices. Michael Palmer concludes his “survey” by describing the ultimate pitfall for English-speaking journalists in former Yugoslavia: the dilemma of choosing

between an emphasis on the military, political and diplomatic environment or on the human factor in their news reports. It is clear that in contemporary societies, war, its imaginary dimension and the media have become inseparable. These studies of the different configurations in media reporting on particular conflicts thus point to a need for a stronger emphasis on the anthropological approach. The debate is far from closed...

NOTES

1. Mots. *Les langages du politique*, 47, “*Les médias dans le conflit yougoslave*” [The media in the Yugoslav wars], Presses de Sciences Po, juin 1996. *Cahiers de médiologie*, 8, “*Croyances en guerre. L’effet Kosovo*” [Beliefs at war: the Kosovo effect], Gallimard, second semester 1999.