Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EUROPEAN MEDIASPHERE

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Exploring the foundations and theoretical distancing required for a PhD thesis: an incursion into the backyard of research

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter might look like a conversation, due to the narrative style of its introduction. Two years ago I received a phone call from the editor of a professional magazine. He said: *"Mr Cabedoche? I would like to publish your comment about the recent events at France Télécom (FT). I think this would be of relevance for our audience, CEOs and top managers from private companies"*. I tried to recall what it could be that might have caught his attention: was it the company's switch from a national public service company to a private one, *France Télécom Orange*? Or was it the more recent spate of suicides among its employees? Moreover, I was wondering: what kind of expert does this journalist believe he is speaking to, to me as a scholar, or to me as a former professional communicator?

Nevertheless, I gave a positive response to his request and wrote a paper drawing on my usual analytical frameworks, developed during my time as a private advisor (Cabedoche, 2009). Later on, however, I somehow could not let the case go. Organisational communication has never been one of my scientific fields as a researcher, but the case inspired me to move on to further develop my initial analysis with the use of research skills – with epistemological, ontological, theoretical, conceptual, methodological and formal dimensions. By approaching a new area of research, I was in some ways starting off as a doctoral student again, with just a vague sense of my topic and only some scientific ideas.

This experience has provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the research process. It has offered renewed insights into the slow progress of research, how it moves, step by step, towards conclusions. It has reminded me of the trials and errors of research, its blockages and the temporary

feelings of inability. These experiences also inspire this chapter; we are now entering the backyard of a research process.

2. FIRST BRUSHES

As research supervisors we often deal with questions from students, particularly during the early stages of a research project, questions such as : *"I intend to work on the image of women in the Chinese version of Elle magazine. Is this OK? "; "Is this a good topic: how did the media cover the Algeria/Egypt football game during the last World Cup?", or "How do companies communicate about sustainable development? Is this a good question for my research?"*

As a matter of fact, no topics are good or bad in themselves. Good topics, however, tend to have one thing in common – they correspond well with both one's initial interest in a topic and with the academic field. This is particularly true for the social sciences and humanities, where there are very few taboos when it comes to research topics. A PhD project does not need to be immediately original; it may even have been extensively treated within previous research. But it is required that one redefines a problematic, which in this case means to question whether FT's presence in mainstream media – in France and abroad – qualifies for an academic study over three years. Such an endeavour, however, presupposes a number of important steps. Let us take a look at them.

3. COLLECTION OF SECONDARY DATA

Before embarking upon actual field(work), we started to collect initial data about our object of study. One way of doing this was to look into data such as various public witness statements, journalists' inquiries and grey literature (official reports, administrative documents).

Very much in the same manner as a PhD student, we immediately clarified the methodological details: the construction, implementation and treatment of our data collection. For this initial stage of data collection, we chose a very loose design. We used an internet search engine, entering just one key term – *France Télécom*. We decided to randomly select press releases concerning FT. At this stage we decided not to undertake any ontological discussions. Instead, we provisionally relied on Timothy Garton Ash's assertion that "journalists are the writers of the first version of History" (Garton Ash, 2000; Soulé, 2001).

So, from this initial factual background, we outlined a first impressionistic picture of what had happened at FT over the past decade. Among other things, this picture revealed: a) FT as an institution that was initially acting on the domestic market, as part of a public ministry (PTT); b) an economic disaster after CEO Michel Bon's bad investments and the dotcom crash; c) a transformation into a mixed (private-public) company; d) positive economic results derived from international expansion (a balance of 15bn euros between 2002-2006); e) the award of a Cultural Diversity Charter in 2004; f) suicides among employees (at least 60 between 2007 and the end of 2010).

Our question then became: what do we do with this in order to carry out a personal treatment of this secondhand material? A genuine research work must develop perspectives in order not to reduce itself to mere description.

4. Perspective

At this stage, it was time for fundamental questions. First, what do we want to find out? Comprehension can never be fully "objective" (Kuhn, 1962), based on data alone. We need theories; it is from a theory of what an insect is that an entomologist is able to sort out the insects from among the animals he meets (de Cheveigné, 2000: 123-133). Another question: our first contacts with the field confirmed what we have always known as researchers - to see is not to know. So, at what distance do we observe the statements we have collected? And how do we define our insect?

It was now time to combine inductive and deductive methods (a deductive method starts from a theoretical proposition, based on theoretically relevant, located, discounted, disciplinary and preliminary knowledge). Previous readings helped us to start out on an ontological path. After Herbert Gans (Gans, 1979), Philip Schlesinger (Schlesinger, 1989) wrote about an "*excessive media centrism*", i.e. a lack of deep thought about media sources. Meanwhile, we also remembered Bernard Miège (Miège, 1996: 144-149), and his focus on the growing process of informationalisation as a description of how contemporary societies are conquered by information. We were also inspired by his writings on a generalised public relationship: information is to a lesser and lesser extent produced by and in media devices, but rather by various actors within an increasingly fragmented public sphere (Miège, 2010).

Further, could we really consider news from media as reality, as we did from the outset? What is the relationship between reality and media? Patrick Charaudeau (1997) offers an initial answer to the question when writing about journalism as a social mirror. Charaudeau refers to journalism as a mechanism of social co-construction, not as journalistic revelations of facts (neither pure facts nor social facts) (Charaudeau, 1997). With co-construction of news as a theoretical point of departure, we decided to go back to the empirical ground.

5. A FIRST LEVEL OF COMPARISON

First, we collected public documents produced by FT's communications department (reports and summarised records of proceedings at meetings, minutes and official memoranda, press releases, public interviews, etc.). We read internal documents – publicly available – or books written by employees (Dervin, Louis, 2009; Du Roy, 2009; Moreira, Prolongeau, 2009; Talaouit, Nicolas, 2010). We also conducted semi-structured interviews with managers at FT at local branches. Then, with the help of a search engine, we explored keywords associated with FT on the internet, such as "*telecommunications market*", "*cultural diversity*"and "*suicide at work*". Finally, we also looked at media materials from 2000-2010.

This second inquiry was informative. Among other things it provided us with insights into media trends concerning FT. From 2000 to 2006, media appearances by FT staff were frequent and bore witness to great efforts and an exceptional economic success. Between 2004 and 2006 FT was often constructed as a promoter of "*cultural diversity actions*". From 2007 media appearances by FT staff became more sparing, and, during the same period of time, 2007-2010, journalists focused more and more on the suicides involving FT employees.

In order to explain this we found it necessary to expand our search beyond FT itself.

6. EXPANDING THE COLLECTION OF DATA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT BY CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

Now we investigated the communications agencies which worked with FT and other companies. We read analyses and books by experts within various research fields, such as economics, human resource management,

international law, etc. Through this sort of contextual immersion, events appeared more connected, even structured. We noted a real on-going revolution in the world of telecommunications, including a shift from the public to the private sector. First, in 1984, Margaret Thatcher launched the movement with *British Telecom*, while the US AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph] – which had previously been working as a near-monopoly from a public service concession – was dismantled and separated into seven regional companies. In January 1998, following a decision by the European Commission, Téléfonica and Deutsche Telekom lost their monopoly status. The aim was twofold, and was defended by European Commission President Jacques Delors: 1) to empower the consumer, and 2) to enhance the competitiveness of European companies in an increasingly strategic sector within the global economy. So, when he positioned himself in 2005, FT CEO Didier Lombart revealed his ambition to transform the company from "*grandpa's telephone to [an] internet livebox*". Up until the first few months of 2010, he was completely dedicated to making a success of this "*cultural revolution*", which the emerging, global organisation required: job relocation at least every three years in connection with restructuring; multi-specialisation rather than staff retraining ; the planning of voluntary retirements and departures among employees. The scale of the restructuring plan included 20 000 redundancies over three years, with another 20 000 to follow during the N.E.X.T. (*New EXperience in Telecommunication*) downsizing plan. All of this was linked to the obligation for every manager to be a "*cost killer*" [employees' own words].

Meanwhile, the award of a *Cultural diversity Montaigne charter* showed FT as a pioneer, in direct connection with the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* defined by UNESCO in 2001 as "*a common heritage of humanity to be preserved*", and to the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, signed by the General Conference of UNESCO in 2005. This is a commitment to support pluralism and openness (in recruitment, training, career management, fight against discrimination, etc.), in the interests of the harmonious development of both the company and its employees.

Finally, we also noted an increasing media focus on what appeared to be work-related suicides among employees – at least 60 at FT from 2007 to 2010. As a consequence, media coverage was becoming increasingly critical and was gradually shifting towards trying to find out what had caused the suicides. Among the causes suggested, we found explanations such as CEO Lombard and his "unprofessional" way of communicating, harass-

ment by managers, a generally inhuman management system, but also the capitalist nature of business.

Against this background it was time to develop our analysis with the help of a broadened framework of scientific references.

7. REVISITING OUR CONSTANT

Of course, Charaudeau (1997) helped us (compare above). Thanks to him, we realised that the media's final products – the journalist's messages on paper, on screen, online – are the results of a great number of negotiations: between the writer and other parts of the media company (managers, marketers, advertising agencies, technicians, etc.); between journalists in their newsrooms and their own *imaginaries* (imaginaries of the target audience's knowledge and desires); with the societal context where dominant representations are present, not least journalistic notions of truth, ethics, justice. But related to our theoretical trajectory, we also decided that we needed to complement Charaudeau's writings with other theories. As a sociolinguist, Charaudeau focuses on linguistic facts, but not enough on social facts. Hence, we needed a more extended literature review to include additional authors whose interests and ideas inspired us: Edgar Morin and his book *The spirit of time* (Morin, 1962); Nicholas Garnham's critical studies of the emerging information society (Garnham, 2000); Armand Mattelart's critical analyses of technological determinism (Mattelart, 2005; Mattelart & Neveu, 2003).

8. DEFINING OUR THEORETICAL CHOICE

Finally, we also chose an analytical framework from *French pragmatic sociology*, i.e. the *Economy of Greatness*, as developed by Luc Boltanski. We reread *The new spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) to become more aware of the six ways (*Cities*) to social recognition as a *Great,* as well as the strategies for justifying decisions and actions according to the order of *Greatness* (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1991).

Table 1: Derived from Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999

City	Roots	Ability to be Great	Ideal type
Inspired City	*City of God*, Saint-Augustine	To achieve a kind of grace of spirit	Wisdoms, creativity, artists, free men
Domestic City	*Politics Drawn*, Bossuet	To provide protection, security and respect	Elders, fathers, hierarchies, masters
Renowned City	*The Leviathan*, Hobbes	To gain confidence, credit	Stars, VIP, celebrities
Civic City	*The social contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau	To lead a membership, report and be evaluated as holder of a common will	Elected politicians
Merchant City	*Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (Hanley, 2009).	To supply according to demand	Conquerors, rich men
Industrial City	*Industrial system*, Saint-Simon	To improve one's job, define constraints and risks and organise the future	Best workers, planners, managers

9. Experimentation and results

We thought that the data we collected from the FT case study could benefit from this theoretical framework. Starting from Boltanski's and Chiapello's conclusions, our analysis of the case took on a deductive approach, finally published in 2011 (Cabedoche & Alemanno, 2011):

Table 2: An Analysis of FT. Derived from Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999.

1. Capitalism needs a spirit, first coming from a merchant city, and tries to make it dominant	From 2000 to 2006 there was congruence between FT staff communication, mainstream media and public actors. Orders were derived from both the *Merchant* and *Industrial Cities*: FT must be – and is – a conqueror within the global telecommunications marketplace.
2. Capitalism cannot completely control employees. It needs to share its spirit to engage and motivate workers for production and progress.	From 2004 to 2005, FT focuses on both the order of the *Domestic City* and the *Civic City*: actual sacrifices (restructurings including 20 000 redundancies) are a necessary tribute to win the battle against foreign telecommunications competitors.
3. Capitalism needs to manage instability among employees. Resistance occurs as one loses the prospect of a better life.	In the mid-2000s, FT became a symbol of a widespread phenomenon of exclusion with the NEXT strategy – working to reduce the number of employees in order to be competitive (*Merchant City* and *Industrial City*). But FT anticipated this with answers from the *Domestic City*: externally through the signature of a Cultural Diversity Charter; internally in that managers' training included steps to prevent suicides.
4. To stand the tests, capitalism must be able to justify itself.	In 2005, FT reported on the concrete practices involved in its cultural diversity strategy (*Civic City*) (Dameron, Joffre, 2005).
5. Critique accelerates the ongoing transformation, pointing at an injustice within a new "city". In order to respond, capitalism must change.	The cultural diversity discourse within FT is a dizzyingly polysemic one, successively inspiring: a) fusion between British Vodafone culture and French FT culture (*Industrial City*); b) non-discrimination (*Domestic City*); c) new products for new markets (*Merchant City*); d) new products for a better life (*Inspired City*); e) the pride of belonging (*Renowned City*).
6. Critique is not a main component of capitalism, but central in the construction of the spirit required by capitalism.	In 2007 the media focus on suicides made it politically incorrect for FT to have "social responsibility" (Hons & Brunner, 2000) as its communications strategy. One could consider the cultural diversity discourse to be a social embellishment (Kirby & Harter, 2003).

7. Critique may become a factor in the change of capitalism.	First, the critique against the slowness of *Postes, Téléphones et Télécommunications*, formerly part of the French civil service, was part of FT's shift into a multinational company, where the French state now is just one of the shareholders. In 2010, critical voices obliged FT's leaders to finally accept the possibility of an interconnection between suicides and work, but framed as a consequence of psychological harassment by a minority of its middle managers. This response did not affect the justification of the *Merchant City* (jobs and habits must evolve within the global marketplace), but adds the justification of the *Inspired City* to a seventh *Project-based City*.
8. Critique – particularly concerning suffering at work – functions as a factor in the change of justifications.	Increasing suicide rate in 2010. Media relates this to human action and – finally – the dynamics of capitalism. This emerging state of indignation is the origin for radical decisions at FT: CEO Lombard was replaced; his successor, Stéphane Richard, immediately announced the implementation of measures to deal with suffering at work; definition of a new social contract for employees. A combination of *Inspired City*, *Civic City*, *Domestic City*, *Industrial City*.

10. Conclusion

The long process leading to these conclusions corresponds with the rigour required for a PhD thesis (Miège & Pailliart, 2007). A research work can be initiated from a social or institutional demand, as often for ICS (Miège, 2011), as for our first report for Berlin. To become a research work, however, the request must be rewritten with the help of essential components:

1. A *problematic* which refers to a particular scientific discipline. We used (but also partially rejected) Charaudeau and adopted the model of *Cities*.

2. *Hypothesis* that reveals scientific issues. Our view of organisations as open systems leads us to evaluate its opportunities in terms of *homeostasis*, i.e. its ability to implement a self-regulating mechanism to preserve its stability.

3. An *empirical area*, built according to the founding paradigms of the chosen scientific discipline. In our case it was built around our rejection of mono-causal analysis of social actors' strategies.

4. Rigorous *methodologies*. Our choice was to start with inductive methods, then to move on to deductive ones (to validate our theoretical framework theory).

5. A logical *plan*. Empirical data can lead to a chronological plan, but good research is driven by the structure offered by a problematic and hypothesis. In our analysis the evolution of *Cities* called in discourses of justification.

6. Open instead of closed *conclusions*. In this case we conclude with a new hypothesis: could the *Greatness of Greats* now be defined by a return to the *Inspired City*, or a new kind of *Project-based City*? Another opening could also be to enlarge the reflexion abroad: to Japan, the USA? Or perhaps Taiwan, where some newspapers already refer to a "*France Telecom symptom*"?

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