

Media and identities:

Actors or instruments in the construction of community, ethnic and national belongings?

Conference organized in collaboration with the Department of Information Science and Communication of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, the Department of Political Science of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the Université libre de Bruxelles, ReSIC, CEVIPOL, and the Faculty of Economic, Social, Political and Communication Sciences of the Catholic University of Louvain.

The conference will be held at the Université libre de Bruxelles on 16 and 17 December 2013.

Call for Papers

There is only one newspaper, as Tocqueville already said in 1840, which could put in a thousand minds the same thought at the same time (626). Media have always played the role of actors, sometimes of instruments, in the process of shaping community, ethnic and national identities as well as in shaping "imagined communities" usually induced by political actors in particular historical developments (Anderson, 1983). In the 19th and 20th centuries mass media have among other things contributed to the linguistic unification of nation-states that were being created. They have also been mobilized as part of strategies of conquering and/or maintaining the power of political elites exploiting identities (Gazibo et Thiriot, 2009: 116 ; Brass, 1991 ; Breuille, 1994). It can be said consequently that media can influence greatly the formation, crystallization or strengthening of identities.

Nevertheless, in order to understand these processes, it is important to place the content of the media in its production context. This facilitates an understanding of the whole picture, the "system" which governs its emergence. If "fourth power" is often used to describe the media and "independence" to qualify the profession of journalist, it has to be mentioned that journalists are involved in networks of interdependencies that affect their way of working, and therefore the information produced (Chupin and Nollet, 2006 : 16). What is the role of the journalists and the media in the creation, renewal and maintenance of community, ethnic or national identities? The "power" that is often attributed to journalists is more a "power" exercised by a network of actors that cannot be reduced in any way to those holding a press card (Neveu, 2004: 80). Exploring the world of information production leads to a better understanding of the relationship between journalism, on the one hand, and the economic and political spheres in particular, on the other hand (Maigret, 2003).

Media discourse on the community, the ethnic group or the nationⁱ is never autonomous. It can be considered a collective production pertaining to one or another network of actors. This systemic process can be seen in particular in the formation of "murderous identities", constructed out of fear of an 'other' which is demonized. Thus, an inclusive "we" is created for cementing the community against an "other" which seems necessarily excluded (Spencer, 1998: 255-274). Benefiting from the hatred of an 'other', vaguely or on the contrary very accurately defined, media discourse allows the interests of some leaders or groups seeking legitimacy or profit to be served. One easily understands the devastating effects that media can have by considering the infamous examples of the Serbian National Television and the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines in Rwanda (Chrétien, 1995). Provocations relayed by the media led to the allegedly national or ethnic clashes.

Even though the direct effects of the media are difficult to observe (Van Dijk, 1991: 226-227), the content of the messages is often the main object of analysis. Therefore, unveiling the relations of interdependencies between the journalists and their "environment" is usually not examined. In any case, journalists get information, select it and arrange it in order to transmit it to their readers. They exert a decisive influence on the availability of information. Even though traditional media are nowadays often preceded or skirted by alternative channels such as social networks, they still function as a moral authority speaking on behalf of society and deciding which subjects will be put forward in the public arena. In this way, media define the terms of the public debate: its internal structure, its key aspects as well as the ideological limits of social

representations. Journalists then offer models, facts and opinions, which are used by readers (*Ibid.*: 244). Hence the importance of identifying underlying actors-sources and relationships of influence that motivate journalists to reinforce a certain interpretation of social realities (Pollak, 2007:2-12).

On the basis of these initial theoretical guidelines, the conference organizers offer to facilitate a discussion about the role of media in the construction of political identities, in four major areas:

- The study of media discourse, especially in its contribution to the inclusion or exclusion of members of the community, ethnic group or nation (especially the continuities or resonances between media discourse and other discourses from the world of politics and civil society which are circulating in the public sphere and can be identified);
- The analysis of the links between media and political strategies, between media actors (journalists, editors, bosses) and political actors (parties, attorneys), especially in cases where community membership is brought into play;
- The analysis of the internal functioning of the media organization that contributes to configuring media discourse around these identity issues (collection methods and selection of information, internal hierarchies, use of expert discourse, use of social networks, ...)
- The analysis of the economic dynamics of the media which influences how the different actors are involved in the construction of identities (shareholders, advertisers, ...).

The organizers invite the submission of any proposal for setting out the contribution of media (traditional and new media) to the political construction of community, ethnic and national identities in one of these four areas. Papers, which can be comparative or not, focusing on a particular geographical area or not can give a theoretical or empirical answer to the question: "media: actors or instruments in the construction of community, ethnic and national identities?"

As the conference is organized jointly by a Research Center for Political Science and a Research Center for Information and Communication Science, it will also serve to encourage a cross-fertilization of themes, methods and concepts used in these two disciplines that intersect less often than one might think or hope. The approaches from linguistics, social psychology, history and sociology of the media are welcome as the conference will be inherently interdisciplinary.

Proposals, including a title and an abstract of 500 words, in English or French, should be sent to bellarminus.kakpovi@ulb.ac.be and jdaneiroi@ulb.ac.be by 30 June 2013. The authors of selected proposals will be notified in August. The papers should be sent by 15 October. Please note that transport and accommodation costs are the responsibility of the participants.

Organizing committee :

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ⁱ A community mobilization can be defined as focusing on a group and emphasizing cohesion, solidarity between group members who identify themselves as belonging to this particular community. Individuals feel subjectively that they share common traits with the members of their own community. An ethnic mobilization, in turn, can be defined as an organized political action that is used to identify symbols to exert pressure on the authorities and obtain from them concessions on some issues. An ethnic mobilization does not refer directly to a state. Finally, a nationalist mobilization is a struggle for the acquisition or the strengthening of political and economic sovereignty of a community. Nationalists claim the right for their community to control its political and economic destiny and to defend its own interests. They define their slogans in reference to a state which can already be in existence, which can be only in need of being strengthened, or which can be sometimes only a project pending completion.
See: Luque, Fidel Molina, « Entre l'identité et l'identification : un problème complexe de la recherche sociologique dans le domaine de l'interculturalité », *Sociétés*, 2002/2 n° 76, p. 59-70 ; Weber, Max, *Economie et société*, Paris, Agora, 1995 et Roger, Antoine, *Les grandes théories du nationalisme*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2001, p. 2.