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## **" The emergence of diversified models of production and diffusion of the news on the Internet"**

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### 1. Introduction

The news sector on the Internet has been developing rapidly lately, as the Web does itself. This development doesn't seem to be put into question even by the recent economic crisis in the domain of communication, as the constant augmentation of relative sites indicates. In addition to that, the number of persons having access to the World Wide Web internationally is also on a regular rise since the beginning of the 90's.

This expansion has permitted to a number of sites which offer a regular variety of contents concerning the current affairs to position themselves as competitors in the news sector. Part of these sites are created by enterprises which possess already an experience in journalism such as press editors but also TV and radio stations. Other on line news diffusers have only recently engaged themselves in the media sector.

Our principal hypothesis is that such an evolution, combined with the technical particularities of the Internet as a mode of communication, leads to a transformation of the informational model constituted by the "traditional" media. This transformation concerns the modalities of production as well as those of diffusion of the news.

The question that one might ask concerning this situation is what the consequences of an evolution of the sort might be for the public sphere. The objective of our research work is precisely to attempt to isolate the recurrent tendencies that rule the development of a new information media such as the Internet. In order to do that we envisage a detailed analysis on the conditions of emergence of differentiated economic models in the sector as well as the study of the diversified strategies that are being put into work by the economic agents of the field.

### 2. Some general considerations

The expansion of computer networks, and particularly Internet, seem to constitute an appealing issue of research because of its novelty and its immediate articulation with technological innovation. As a result, a great number of scientific works have treated different aspects of the question.

However the novelty of the research object bears at least as much difficulty as it does interest. This feature is evident in the fascination that Internet and the new technologies of

communication provokes in a great number of authors. Paradoxically this fascination expresses itself quite often by the rejection of these technologies, either for ideological or affective reasons. This is due to the fact that these technologies seem to be difficult to seize in their practical use as well as in their theoretical study.

On the other hand, the same fascination concerning the Internet generates often views that find themselves immersed in the technological and economic competition. These approaches, which try to guess the evolutions to come in the sector, are even more hard to justify if we take into account the importance of the social and economic issues that are in stake. The latter bring into every view of the sort inevitable political connotations and in some cases put into question the partiality of the person that expresses them.

One can easily presume, based on these elements, that the choice of a research topic concerning the Internet may be pertinent in terms of interest but at the same time includes inherent difficulties due to the novelty and the fluidity of the object. In consequence the question that arises from these observations is the following:

Is the researcher obliged to wait for the situation to stabilise itself ? Or does he dispose of the necessary means in order to construct a theoretical model that could help him better seize and interpret the meaning of the movements that structure the sector in question ?

Our answer, which is also the one that Bernard Miège gives to the question, is that in such an effort there is a risk of confusion between circumstantial movements and structural characteristics of the domain (MIEGE 1986). Such a confusion would inevitably lead to false conclusions. However that risk must be assumed and justified by the need to progress in a scientific field of great interest. Thus, the problem that has to be resolved is to know how one could minimise this inherent uncertainty in order to measure the importance of the phenomenon in the evolution of the contemporary society.

From our point of view the solution to this problem can only be found in the use of solid concepts and theoretical approaches that have already proven their scientific value in the field of communication. In the following we will try to present a number of such concepts that will constitute the backbone of our research and at the same time will reveal the aspects of the issue that we envisage to treat.

### 3. Theoretical axes

#### The Cultural Industries

The term of Cultural Industry was used for the first time in 1947 by Adorno and Horkheimer in an effort to seize the increasing movement of industrialization in the domain of art and culture. Since then, the concept has been put into use in different contexts and has been given a variety of definitions.

Concerning our approach we have chosen the definition given by Jean-Guy Lacroix because of its immediate interest for our research issue. According to this author "should be considered as a cultural industry any activity of production, distribution and diffusion of symbolic productions (integrating an intellectual work), organised in accordance with the

principles of separation between producer and product and between conception and execution, as well as the technical division of the tasks" (LACROIX 1986).

This definition of the Cultural Industries illustrates clearly the theoretical approach that we envisage to adopt in our research, which one could qualify as a political economy of the communication and media issues. It's the same approach that Yves de la Haye calls a materialist analysis aiming in the comprehension of the concrete and practical functioning of the media (DE LA HAYE 1984).

The central idea of this approach is that the fields of culture and communication are not independent of the context of the capitalist economy in which they develop. On the contrary, the very rules of this economy impose a structural influence on the evolution and the development of the fields in question. But at the same time the activities of communication, as those of art, embody specific forms of expression and base themselves on particular economic models which cannot be reduced to a simple industrial process of production. In consequence our analysis, as we conceive it today, will be largely concentrated on the economic factors that determine actually the evolution of the Internet. However, our priority remains the analysis of the social implications of the phenomenon.

#### - The Public Sphere

In order to evaluate the importance and study the nature of the news industry on the Internet it is convenient to refer ourselves to its complementary characteristics and above all to the organic links between the cultural industries, in particular the media, and the society as a whole. The specificity of the information medias in this case could be resumed by the concept of the public sphere that Jürgen Habermas forged in 1962. Through the use of this concept, which has been largely discussed ever since, we wish to introduce in our analysis the political dimension of the press which appears as a basic element of the public debate and the functioning of modern democracies. By the elaboration of this concept, Habermas synthesises a whole series of discussions concerning the social role of the medias and their public expression which, at least in France, finds its source in the early 19th century (BAUTIER & CAZENAVE 2000).

Treating a subject such as the diffusion of news on the Internet, leads us in a double way to the question of the public sphere. Thus, on the one hand, the study of the structures producing the news diffused on the computer networks is inevitably linked to a series of professional and deontological codes that structure the practice of journalism. These codes are not uniform neither between journalists of different countries, nor between the different kinds of journalism in the interior of the same nation. Nevertheless, their common point, as expressed in the different charts of the profession as well as in the relative legislation, is the specificity of the press as an instrument of the civic life and part of the democratic institutions.

On the other hand, the writings that put in place for the first time the ideological basis for the extension of the Internet were largely inspired by the ideal of a virtual public sphere that would renew the foundations of democracy. As Patrice Flichy puts it, the pioneers of the Internet "saw in the on line debates a process of elaboration of knowledge and more generally, shared opinions" (FLICHY 2001). In the perspective of authors such as Rheingold and Toffler, Internet should serve as a model for the mutation of the society as a whole on the

basis of the principles that govern the networks such as interactivity, participation and information.

Even if these views, whose authors are in majority essayists and journalists, have been largely criticised for their simplicity and their lack of scientific value, the reference is explicit to the ideal of the Age of Enlightenment and to the bourgeois salons and cafés of the 18th century Europe, that Habermas also describes. Thus, it is indispensable from our point of view to integrate in our analysis of the Internet the concept of public sphere.

#### - The Information Society

The second aspect of the Cultural Industries approach that moderates decisively the importance of the economic analysis is the historicity of the study. Indeed, as the majority of the researchers in the field, we believe that any analysis of the sort should be profoundly anchored in history. A history that should not be uniquely conceived as a past, but also, in accordance to Cornelius Castoriadis, as "the history to be accomplished" (CASTORIADIS 1990). In other words the study of the phenomenon should be conceived through the social, economic, technical and ideological conditions in which it takes place. This point is essential if the object in question is, like the Internet, directly influenced by the technological evolution. In such a case it is impossible to have the necessary distance for a critical analysis of the phenomenon without a reference to the social process that prepared its emergence and the actual conditions in which it develops.

As a result the concept of the Information Society and the scientific contributions that surround it, either for or against its validity, should contribute to our analysis. Nevertheless, the reflection on the concept in question as a frame of our study doesn't necessary mean the acceptance of its validity as defined by number of authors.

On the contrary such an approach is a occasion to put into question views that consider the convergence and imbrication of telecommunications and computing as a major breakthrough in human history, equivalent to the invention of the alphabet or the printing process. As Frank Webster puts it "The insistence of those who subscribe to the concept (of the information society), and their confident assertion that our time is one marked by its novelty, cries out for analysis, more urgently perhaps than those scenarios which contend that the status quo remains unchanged" (WEBSTER 1995).

Thus, our objective is not to enter in a debate which is far more complex than our proper issue of research, but essentially to integrate in our analysis a series of factors that determine western economy since the '70. Such factors as the evolution of the capitalist system towards a globalised and unified market, the concentration in the sector of communication resulting to the creation of multinational groups, the constant deregulation of the markets as well as the application of information technologies in virtually all corners of society, form the general context in which Internet appears and expands.

#### 4. Field and method of our research

Being interested in a cultural industry as defined previously, implies the study of the process of production and consumption of informational goods as well as the analysis of their specific characteristics. However in order to centre the analysis and define the limits of the research, one must choose between these two main aspects.

In our case we have decided to privilege the aspect of production and diffusion of the information on the Internet. Our choice is justified by the fact that the role of the producer is largely influent in the formation of the demand even if in such a study we cannot ignore the capacity of the users to profoundly modify and alter the use of the technologies of information that the industrial groups have predetermined.

Nevertheless, in accordance to authors like Bernard Miège and Yves de la Haye, we think that "within the contradictory relation between production and consumption the principal aspect is production" (DE LA HAYE & MIEGE 1984). In consequence we will adopt in our analysis of the information industry on the Internet conceptual tools such as the social logics (logiques sociales) in the field of communication which are defined by Gaëtan Tremblay as "an ensemble of rules that orient the framework and the functioning of an industrial sector and determine the articulation between the functions of creation, reproduction, diffusion and consumption of cultural goods". Furthermore, we will also use the concept of agents strategies (stratégies d'acteurs) that is complementary to the precedent and according to the same author "refers itself to the dynamics of the different agents who pursue their proper objectives and put in use the necessary means in order to obtain them" (TREMBLAY 1997).

Thus, our main goal is to closely study the evolutions in the field of news information on the Internet, through the interaction and correlation of the different agents of the sector. We wish to isolate and analyse the strategies of development put in place on the Internet by the different media companies, such as television networks, radio stations and press editors. At the same time we shall articulate to the precedent the offer of information coming from structures that do not belong traditionally to the sector of the media such as the different portals, the Internet Access Providers, the personalised services of information and others.

In order to develop our analysis we shall examine the financial situation of all the above. For in a period where most of the Internet sites that offer exclusively news are rarely profitable, it is interesting to look on to the development strategies they adopt and especially the economic models they seem to privilege. The activities of the Internet that are experimented as financial resources by the majority of the sites in question and that we shall examine in our study are mainly:

- the publicity on web pages.
- the subscription in order to have access to all or part of the content.
- the electronic commerce which consists essentially in selling directly or indirectly goods and services.
- the network marketing which consists in the commercial use of the information gathered on the users by techniques such as data-mining or profiling.
- and finally the content syndication, meaning the sell or exchange of informational contents.

In parallel with the economic analysis we shall compare the editorial policies of the different sites, the qualification of their employees to exercise journalist prerogatives, as well as their performance in terms of audience.

Our method of research will be primarily based on two sources. The first one is a series of interviews that we shall effectuate with number of specialists of the sector such as journalists, professionals of the Internet and persons in charge of the development strategies within the structures described above.

The second source of elements concerning our research will be a corpus of statistics, sociological surveys and studies relative to the use of the Internet that have been effectuated the last few years either by public agencies and ministries or by other institutions such as universities, research centres and associations. The corpus will be completed by a series of audience measures, interviews and articles that have appeared in the press, generalist and specialist, as well as in a number of Internet sites that treat exclusively of the new technologies of information.

Concerning the field of our research we wish to develop our analysis in the institutional and geographic space of the European Union. Nevertheless, such an attempt concerning all European countries is far more complex than a study one can accomplish during a doctoral thesis. This is due to the extraordinary cultural diversity between the different regions of Europe but also the linguistic barrier. In addition to that, despite the monetary union the social and economic conditions differ largely from one country to another.

As a result our analysis will be essentially centred on a more reduced domain that is the French Internet sites. However, our study will be enriched wherever it is necessary by elements of comparison with other European countries as well as with the United States and Canada where the Internet services are the most developed.

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