DISCOURSE APPROACHES TO POLITICS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Editorials and the Power of Media

Elisabeth Le

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Editorials and the Power of Media

Interweaving of socio-cultural identities

Elisabeth Le
University of Alberta

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Foreword

This book completes and concludes almost a decade of work on editorials. Editorials depict how media perceive and react to the world around them. Each editorial defines at a given time how media construct their socio-cultural environment and where they position themselves in it. In this sense, they are snapshots of media socio-cultural identities.

Editorials present many advantages for discourse analysts interested in media and politics: they are short, easily obtainable, and particularly interesting for their persuasive strategies. These advantages, however, do not make their study less labour-intensive or less time-consuming. To be properly understood they need on the one hand, to be submitted to a linguistic, bottom-up analysis that some would (rightly) qualify as "microscopic" and, on the other hand, the complex socio-political context in which they appear requires the analyst to delve into numerous archives of all sorts for the "macroscopic", top-down analysis. Nevertheless, all of this work is certainly justified by the results it produces.

Editorials and the Power of Media stems from the conclusion of *The Spiral of Anti-Other Rhetoric* (Le 2006) in which the question of a daily newspaper's status on the international stage was raised. Media have been the object of numerous studies for the manner in which they present news, but the question of their identity(ies) has not attracted as much attention, although it is crucial for the understanding of media's actions and interactions on the political stage. *Editorials and Media Power*'s conclusion combines the results of the presented original research with the results of my previous work on Europe (2002) and Russia (2006) in particular. From the linguistic point of view, the methodological unity in my work on editorials results from the use of the coherence analysis model presented in Appendix 3 (reproduced from Le, 2006: 197-209). The results of the coherence analysis serve as a structure to which other types of analysis, depending on the purpose of the specific study, are then added and combined. Differences of corpora, methodologies (completing the coherence analysis) and purposes between the different studies allow them to complement each other. However, since almost all of my work has been done on the same newspaper's editorials from 1999 to 2001, there are necessarily some similarities. This explains why section 1.2 is slightly adapted from Le (2006: 42-44), section 6.2 is slightly adapted from Le (2006: 107-111), and section 6.4 is slightly adapted from Le (2006: 111-112). Furthermore, partial linguistic results of this study (most of chapter 2) have already been published,

partly in *RAEL* (2007) and partly in the *Journal of Pragmatics* (2009). From the political communication perspective, both *The Spiral of Anti-Other Rhetoric* and *Editorials and the Power of Media* use Entman's Cascading Activation model (2004) that has been adapted to correspond to each study's specificities.

The main purpose of this book is dual: to contribute to the study of media roles in politics with a methodological "discursive communication identity framework", and to show how media can be political actors on their own. It has been known for a long time that media and politics are intertwined. However, from the media perspective, it was mostly only seen as a "side-effect" of their news-provider role through agenda-setting and news framing. What I am trying to demonstrate here is that media can play a much more autonomous role in politics thanks to a very adroit interweaving of their socio-cultural identities in their editorials. Thus, this book is intended for all of those who are interested in the role of media in politics, be they specialists of media, communication, political science, or other disciplines.

To achieve this main purpose, this book engages in a study of editorials' genre from a linguistic perspective. Linguists, in particular discourse analysts, are therefore another part of the intended audience.

Finally, a study of media political roles cannot be conducted in the abstract. It needs to be carefully grounded on empirical data within their specific socio-cultural context. Two approaches are possible. A broad one would take examples from various media in different socio-cultural contexts in a large time frame. While this would allow examination of the generality of the phenomenon, practical reasons would mean that the analysis could not go very far beyond the surface. For an in-depth analysis, a specific case (i.e. one media / a limited time period) would have to be chosen. This is the approach that was selected for this study as a first attempt to look at the phenomenon with the idea that once the point is firmly made in one case, it could be reinforced (or not) by other in-depth studies with the same methodological framework, or further studies could take a broader perspective. This case study bears on *Le Monde*'s editorials from 1999 to 2001. As such, this book also addresses all those interested in the French political sphere during this period, as well as all those interested in the French daily, *Le Monde*.

Thus, in the pursuit of a very general goal, i.e. the study of media as political actors, this book looks in depth at specific political debates in France from 1999 to 2001. The problem that thereby arises is the difficulty of addressing a very diverse audience. Some might be mostly interested in the linguistic analyses and find the political side a necessary evil, but still an evil to be endured; others might be deterred by the dry technicality and minutiae of the linguistic analyses; and a number might find the detailed description of the French political sphere from

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1999 to 2001 simply "boring". Furthermore, one part of the book is quantitative while the other is qualitative; proponents of one type of analysis may not find the other type especially "readable". Unfortunately, all sides of the analysis are necessary to arrive at the results. In an attempt to reconcile these differences, this book is structured so as to allow for several reading paths.

- Chapter 1 situates the research question, presents the specifics of the case study, and exposes the methodological "discursive communication identity framework". Readers interested in the details of the framework will find them in Appendix 5 (methodology tables).
- Chapter 2 presents the quantitative linguistic analysis. Its conclusion offers a provisional definition of editorials' genre that focuses on the "action" part of *Le Monde*'s "inter-actions". Readers particularly interested in the linguistic methodology should read Appendix 2 (complex speech acts), Appendix 3 (coherence model), and Appendix 4 (style analysis).
- Chapters 3, 4 and 5 describe the socio-political context in which the editorials operate thanks to a communicative qualitative analysis, and thereby focus on the "inter-" part of *Le Monde*'s "inter-actions". Readers not particularly interested in the detailed description of the French political sphere at the time can after each introduction skip the demonstration and go directly to the conclusion where they will find enough information to follow the book's general argumentation.
- Chapter 6 concludes the genre analysis by integrating the quantitative linguistic and qualitative communicative analyses. The definition of editorials' genre that is reached leads to a discussion on the interweaving of socio-cultural identities. This interweaving of socio-cultural identities contributes to the editorials' political nature and raises the question of media power in democracy. Finally, the benefits and limitations of the "discursive communication identity framework" are assessed.

Furthermore, while all efforts have been made to provide enough contextual information in each chapter, readers not familiar with the French political system will find more information in Appendix 6.

No book is the result of one individual's work only. I have benefited from the help of many and I thank them all very warmly, in particular:

- the graduate students who worked as my research assistants: Jean-Jacques Defert, Christina Keppie, and Ksenia Svechnikova;
- political news journalists without whose work there would not be much democracy;

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CHAPTER 1

A framework for the study of media socio-cultural identities through their editorials

Editorials are fascinating objects of study. They offer reasoned views of the world in slices of no more than 500 words each. Some of them are also superb pieces of writing. Like "*romans à thèse*",[1] though in only four to five paragraphs, they vividly circumscribe a scene in which real-life characters convincingly deliver their own lines but with the resulting effect that leaves readers with the newspaper's own position. More than fascinating objects and beyond the literary pleasure they may provide, editorials are not without influence in politics and thus one naturally wonders what they really represent and how they function. This book investigates political roles played by media through their editorials. To do so, it looks at media socio-cultural identities through the analysis of editorials' genre from the mostly dual perspective of (linguistic) discourse analysis and political communication.

The first part of this chapter (1.1) exposes the relevance of studying editorials, and the second part (1.2) presents a methodological discursive communication identity framework. The chapter concludes with the definition of the corpus for this specific study (1.3).

1.1 Why study editorials?

Newspapers' editorials look at different domains of life from a political perspective. To contextualize their investigation, it appears useful to look first at studies on media and politics (1.1.1), secondly at the newspaper(s) in which they appear (1.1.2), and thirdly at the political context at their time of publication (1.1.3). This allows for the research question to be defined (1.1.4).

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1. i.e. novels expounding a social thesis.

1.1.1 Media and politics

The connection between media and politics has been the object of numerous studies for several decades (e.g. Bennett, 1996; Curran, 2002; Gans, 2003; Gunther & Mughan, 2000; Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; McLeod *et al.* 2002; McNair, 2006; Schudson, 1995; Servaes & Lie, 1997; Siebert *et al.* 1956). It has been recognized that media, as news providers, have an impact on the political stage (e.g. Walgrave, 2008). In the numerous studies on the why, how, what, and extent of that impact, the question of media being more than "instances of transmission" of what is happening and of what others say and think has not attracted much scholarly attention. In other words, different facets of media identities have been tackled here and there, but the question has not been approached in a comprehensive manner.

Most of media research still tends to be conducted in the framework of a revised positivist (sender-receiver) transmission model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) that focuses on issues such as: the content of the message to be transmitted, its coding, the noise occurring on the transmission channel and the resulting distortion of the sent message, the content of the received message and its effects on the sender (Mucchielli & Guivarch, 1998: 19). There is thus a large amount of literature on media organizational structure, content, audiences and effects as reflected in Potter's *Arguing for a General Framework for Mass Media Scholarship* (2009) that "attempts to provide an integrated explanation of the mass media as an industry, the messages that are produced and marketed, the audiences for those messages, and the effects of those messages on individuals and larger social structures" (2009: xxi). In these different aspects of media, on the basis of which he wants to build a general framework, Potter does not mention the question of media's identities *per se* while they would be both the source and the consequence of media's autonomy. Neither does McQuail in his *Mass Communication Theory* (2000, 2005) although he recognizes in the fourth edition of this fundamental and comprehensive image of media research that "the media constitute a separate 'social institution' within society, with its own rules and practices" (2000: 5). In the fifth edition (2005), however, he states that the theme of identity recurs throughout the book. Indeed, research on media organizational structure and media content, among others, does tackle aspects of the question of identity, each from a very specific angle, for example studies on agenda setting, priming and framing (e.g. Reese *et al.* 2003; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2007). "Agenda setting refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues (e.g. based on the relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audience. [...] Priming occurs when news content suggests to news audience that they ought to use specific issues to make political evaluations. [...] [Framing] is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by

audiences" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007: 11). Unfortunately, there has been very little research on the origins of these phenomena (Gandy, 2001: 357).

Studies on framing, agenda setting, and priming focus on news reports (including or not commentaries) and may include editorials. Indeed, editorials certainly participate in the actualization of framing, agenda setting (McCombs, 1997), and priming. Actually, they might even be one of their most obvious, most overt manifestations and, in this quality, they would warrant being studied by themselves.

Unsigned editorials, as official expressions of a media position on an issue they choose to highlight over all others in a given context, appear one of the most relevant means of investigating media socio-cultural identities. Approaching the question of media socio-cultural identities through the study of editorials would give insights into the sources of framing, agenda setting and priming.

In this book, the media whose socio-cultural identities are investigated with the study of its editorials is the French elite daily, *Le Monde*.

1.1.2 Le Monde

Le Monde was founded in 1944 by Hubert Beuve-Méry on the instigation of General de Gaulle to replace *Le Temps* that had been the reference daily under the Third Republic. *Le Temps* had voluntarily suspended its publication on 29 November 1942, but two of its directors had been supporters of Marshall Pétain, and thus the newspaper was not allowed to re-appear after the Liberation. The goal pursued by *Le Monde* was to provide France with a reliable and internationally respected newspaper. Thanks to Beuve-Méry, *Le Monde* succeeded in keeping its distance from the government and in this differed from the officious *Le Temps*. The main ideas behind *Le Monde*'s positions could be summarized as a type of humanism that linked defence of freedom and democratic values with social justice and a suspicious attitude towards money because of its corrupting effects. Thus, *Le Monde* appeared fundamentally anticommunist but also in a way anti-American, and it presented itself as a defender of the oppressed. It took a position in favour of decolonization (from 1957 to 1961, *Le Monde* was seized twenty times because of its publication of reports on torture practised by the French army in Algeria). Audience studies starting in 1955 showed that *Le Monde* was read by right-wing and left-wing people, by business leaders and by union members. In 1962, when General de Gaulle, President of the French Republic since 1958, called for a referendum to amend the 1958 Constitution and have the President elected on the principle of direct universal suffrage, Beuve-Méry under the pen name of "Sirius" took anti-Gaullist positions, and *Le Monde* began to lean towards the leftist opposition. By the end of the 1960s when Beuve-Méry retired, *Le Monde* had become the most influential French daily. In the 1980s, because of its leftist orientation, it started losing some of its audience, and was

hit by successive crises that brought it close to bankruptcy in 1982, 1985, 1991 and 1994. However, *Le Monde* remained a reference newspaper. In 1994, because of his tense relationship with the daily's director, President Mitterrand decided to reduce the number of subscriptions by the Élysée (i.e. the Presidential Palace) from 110 to twenty. In spite of this, the President was reportedly still reading *Le Monde*, and his aides went outside the Presidential Palace to buy it (La Balme, 2000: 269).

Le Monde as it appeared from 1999 to 2001 was the product of a number of structural modifications (Le Monde, 2002). In 1985, *Le Monde* established a "Society of readers" (*Société des lecteurs*) composed of readers-shareholders in order to augment the newspaper's capital. The president of the *Société des lecteurs* is *de jure* a member of the Supervisory Committee (*Comité de surveillance*), which has the last say about any investment by the newspaper, and has the right to propose a candidate for the position of Chairman of the newspaper's Executive Board. In 2000, the "Society of the editorial staff" (*Société des rédacteurs*) lost its right to propose candidates for this position but kept its right to veto the nomination. (Poulet, 2003: 119)

In 1968, *Le Monde* was 40% owned by its editorial staff, 5% by its senior executives, 4% by its employees, 40% by its founders and associates, and 11% by its managers. Facing acute financial difficulties, the newspaper augmented its capital, and on September 1st, 2001, it became 52.61% owned by internal shareholders and 47.39% by external shareholders. Among the internal shareholders, the editorial staff represented 30.092% of all shareholders, and was by far the single most important group of owners; it held 33.3% of the voting rights.

In 1999–2000,[2] 33% of *Le Monde*'s audience was less than 35 years old and 66% had a higher education (vs. 26% for the entire population); 39% lived in a household whose head was a senior executive (vs. 16% for the entire population). *Le Monde* was the national daily that was the most read by teachers and students. In 2000 it printed an average of 402,444 issues per day; 50% of them were sold in Paris and surrounding-areas, 38.9% in the provinces, and 11.1% outside France (Le Monde, 2002: 29). Since 1997, *Le Monde* has also been available on the internet (www.lemonde.fr).

In the 2002 brochure, *Le style du Monde*, *Le Monde* published its code of ethics (see Appendix 7). In its principles (pp. 6–7), it claims its independence and its pluralism; it affirms not to impose any editorial line on its journalists and to respect the diversity of their opinions provided they do not go against the newspaper's values. Regarding its values, it champions those contained in the French Republic's motto, "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*", and it particularly emphasizes its contributions towards justice and solidarity and against racism and exclusion. It is in favour of openness and international cooperation, and against nationalism and isolationism.

2. 1999–2000 EuroPQN. Sofres poll on a population sample representative of all people living in France (N = 21,472). *Le style du Monde*, 2002: 29.

Le Monde considers itself to be an international newspaper, and it states that most events cannot be understood solely in a national framework: they have to be placed in their international setting. *Le Monde* informs but does not claim to be neutral: it takes positions in its editorials and also in the analyses and comments of its journalists. The articles must present a solid argumentation and avoid a polemical and sarcastic attitude as well as personal attacks. Furthermore, they must not be written in a peremptory tone and they must avoid "giving lessons". A mediator, nominated by the newspaper's director ("*directeur de la publication*"), is responsible for the respect of the journalistic rules as exposed in *Le style du Monde*. They constitute a reading contract with *Le Monde*'s audience.

Because of *Le Monde*'s prominent place in French media and intellectual life, the scandal that the journalists Pierre Péan and Philippe Cohen provoked in February 2003 with the publication of *La face cachée du Monde – Du contre-pouvoir aux abus de pouvoir* was particularly virulent. Indeed, *Le Monde* as the French reference daily, i.e. the newspaper that must be read even if one does not like it, was publicly attacked (albeit not for the first time in its history): Péan and Cohen accused *Le Monde* of having gone from a position of counter-power to a position where it abused its power.[3] These accusations were particularly directed against the Chair of the newspaper's Executive Board, Jean-Marie Colombani, the Head of editorial staff, Edwy Plenel,[4] and the President of the "Readers' Society" and member of the newspaper's Supervisory Committee, Alain Minc. Whatever elements of truth Péan's and Cohen's work contains, it is also a good example of "bad journalism" with factual errors, lack of references, very unclear use of quotations, no separation between comments and facts. It appears that the interest of Péan's and Cohen's book lies not so much in its detailed content but rather in the fact that it exposed a (not unknown) problem within *Le Monde*. *Le Monde* does not leave one indifferent. Patrick Éveno, who wrote *Le Monde*'s history, *Le journal* Le Monde – *Une histoire d'indépendance* (2001),[5] takes sides with Jean-Marie Colombani, Edwy Plenel and Alain Minc. A less polemical criticism than Péan's and Cohen's but a more balanced evaluation of the newspaper than Éveno's is presented by journalist Bernard Poulet in *Le pouvoir du Monde – Quand un journal veut changer la France* (2003), that

3. The publication of this book had the effects of a bomb explosion in the media milieu. Mediation put an end to the judicial side of the affair in June 2004. "*Une médiation judiciaire met un terme à l'affaire de 'La face cachée du Monde'*"; *Le Monde*, 8 June 2004.

4. Edwy Plenel resigned from this position on 29 November 2004. "*Edwy Plenel quitte ses fonctions de directeur de la rédaction du 'Monde'*", *Le Monde*, 1 December 2004.

5. See also by the same author: Le Monde, *Histoire d'une entreprise de presse, 1944–1995*. Le Monde Éditions, 1996. Unless otherwise indicated, information on the history of *Le Monde* is taken from Éveno's 2001 book.

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