

Extrait du MARSOUIN.ORG

<http://marsouin.telecom-bretagne.eu/spip.php?article185>

Rapport de synthèse.

Public service information. Results.

- Publications / Projets de recherche - Anciens projets - L'information de service public. -

Date de mise en ligne : Tuesday 16 May 2006

MARSOUIN.ORG

This study on public information focused on the realization of a panorama of Breton city councils and the selection of some council's websites, more precisely those of Rennes, Saint-Brieuc, Brest and Lorient. The content of these four websites has been analyzed using the methodology developed by Roselyne Ringoot (2004) on editorial identity. The author considers this editorial line as the combination of enunciative strategies that creates the editorial identity, thus, on the one hand, as a discursive creation that differentiates one newspaper from the other (centre of interest, tone, style, ideology...) and, on the other hand, as a discursive precreation of the journal: policies in terms of heading, styles, quotations... the editorial line also embodies what is established throughout the discourse of the journal.

Framework of the study

Studies about media and journalism are often exclusively devoted to journalists employed by renowned general-interest media or working on national and international political news, rarely local. Quite recently, researches have been extended to specialists of culture, economics, sport, education ...columns which also give rise to a process implying an original intellectual work and in which the professional who excels is the one showing an agile critical sense towards his/her subject and sources. At the same time, the research was keeping at a distance, if not discrediting, the advertising characteristic of information, whether it was commercial or propagandist; a double paradoxical attitude since the subject of the study (the media) are intrinsically bound to this informational dimension: political propaganda were behind the emergence of journalism, particularly at the threshold of democracies; and commercial advertising represents a financing resource sometimes the main one, if not the exclusive one (in the case of free media, written as well as audiovisual), often claimed as one of the assets enabling the journalist's critical writing.

This preference given to the critical aspect and this indifference for the advertising aspect are in perfect harmony with the representation that the professional groups of journalists wanted to display since one century, in search of a social legitimacy which they pretended to place in the intellectual field (competitors of professors, scientists, artists), with a distinguished role (the "fourth estate") and in a good distance of the real competitors in their professional field: the advertising agents; blood brothers with whom they were born 400 years ago and from whom they had to free themselves to carve out a place to evolve.

Researches came to their limitation at this point, what is normal they often proved to be incapable of perceiving one form of information - important, often majority (in terms of volume, number of professionals and medias), even exclusive (for some supports) - which concerned journalists as well as other professionals, that some call "public information" or "public communication" (the hesitation is very meaningful) to what we have likewise started to refer in our work by the term "public service information". This term of 'public service information' enables us to specify the performance aim of the notion towards the public, this type of information intending to 'do a service', by giving back a part of its institutional character to the transmitter of the message, since the term links the action of informing with the public service authorities. At the same time, this term enables to specify the type of observed information which is situated at the boundary between information and communication, borrowing certain traits from one or the other sphere and to grant it some of the journalistic characteristics on which it prides itself and lets show through, while staying anchored in the domain of institutional, even political communication.

This form of journalism has to be studied, itself and relatively to other forms, just as much ignored. The study of

"public service information" conducts us to consider the relationships of co production between information and communication and particularly the interactions between journalists and communicators, which can be useful for the society in certain cases, even if they remain sometimes conflicting. We have to consider the field of information as an immense space of competition and cooperation in which the "players" intend at times to possess or manipulate the others, sometimes they search for convergence and, hence, cooperation as they are all aiming at the same objective: access to the public. General media are often the scene of these competitions/cooperations, although increasingly we observe the appearance of what some call "sources media" (media organized by sources) (Sant'Anna 2006). Therefore, this "public information" appears as an immense field of competition/cooperation in which the intention of "public service" is at the principles of everything, even though we cannot ignore that more self-interested intentions coexist as well.

We have to observe the media content to better perceive the reality of the phenomenon; nevertheless a socio-discursive ambition is necessary, that is to say an approach that could put into correlation discourses and practices, products and production processes. It is a colossal project which conducts to study the organizations that owns media companies, editorial projects, resources, productive continuums, players, products, reception and general market in terms of relationships between the discourses and their production.

Methodology

The principal methodology rested upon an analysis of a selection of municipal websites. The analysis was focused on the criteria of elaboration of the websites'editorial identity, suggested by the researcher Roselyne Ringoot (CRAPE).

Ringoot recommends, thus, crossing the two discourses: discourse on the journal and discourse of the journal.

She suggests three study approaches (Ringoot, 2004: 88-89)

- Study of the creation of sense, related to the journal morphology: format, segmentation, distribution of the surface;
- Study of enunciative journalistic identities: name of the journal, authors, sectional function of the columns and external pages, characteristics of styles, angle and titles;
- The journalistic polyphony: who is made speaking, how and why - reported discourse.

These three dimensions of research, adjusted to our specific research subject, have been applied to the websites of Breton city councils and enabled to realize four particular monographs which have been fed later by qualitative interviews carried out with some representatives and people in charge of the cities' websites. The analysis of the websites was carried out by Florence Le Cam (CRAPE).

Mariannig Le Béhec (IRUTIC) travelled to the selected cities (Brest, Lorient, Saint-Brieuc and Rennes) to meet the respondents.

Obtained results

The main result concerns the interest city councils let perceive in the creation of a specific relation to the public, consequently, in the implementation of methods that could eventually revolutionize the image that citizens have of their institution.

The idea of considering the process of municipal information diffusion online as a process similar to the one of public journalism is tempting. However, it flouts the fundamental dimension of this form of journalism which has as main task to respond to issues of public interest, to get the actors and to put these questions at the apron of media in order to impact institutional and political decisions.

This analysis of the municipal websites of Breton cities hardly displays this approach. It places the practices rather on the side of political communication having adopted certain practices and figures of journalism to create a specific relation with the public.

However, it is not so much with the imitation or creation of specific journalism practices that the editorial identity of the websites seems to be settled as with the elaboration of a particular relation with the public.

As well as the municipal bulletin constitutes an essential tool for building up a community of readers, the website also offers this potential. Aiming at net surfers, users, taxpayers and voters, the website superimposes, just as the bulletins, reading contracts to address all these figures simultaneously in order to, finally, provoke a role of citizen on the part of the internet surfer (Le Bart, 2000: 180).

This notion of reading contract becomes essential when relating to municipal websites. It is Élièse Veron (1985) in his paper "Analysis of the reading contract: a new method for the study of positioning press supports" that has defined reading contract that defines the relation between a support and its readership. In Veron's views, the success of a written press support is measured by its abilities to propose a contract in relation with the expectations, motivations, interests and contents of the imaginative universe of the target group.

The interest in the reading contract leads us to set down a central hypothesis which assumes that the re-using of certain journalistic 'techniques' by the municipal websites producers does not aim neither to broaden the territory of municipal information, nor to replace whomsoever or create new styles, but rather to construct, preserve and nourish the relation with the public by providing it, 'for immediate use', with all traditional methods of its relation with a traditional media information diffusion. The objective of the contract is obviously to "preserve the consumption habit" (Veron 1991: 168).

It is every characteristic of format, content, and enunciation, defined throughout this study on websites editorial identity by using the methodology of Ringoot (2004) that establish this reading contract. It is basically through it that the editorial identity seems to make real sense. And this editorial identity has been stated by several specific traits: the specific image of the territory, the construction of a specific relationship with time, the publication of descriptive information stemmed from the temporal, thematic, if not even functional, hierarchical organisation of information. The website directs the role of the city council; it acts as an activity guide as a schedule, but also as an entry door towards the websites of principal territorial actors. City councils are scarcely oriented towards the production of original content; however, they offer interesting and sometimes innovative functionalities like e-administration. They tend to strengthen the relation with the net surfer by paving the way for him/her and offering him/her particular services: chats and forums. Although these exchanges are most often unilateral, they yet encourage another relation with administration. All the more so since websites intend to put at distance political figures and to laud a certain neutrality, if not even a depersonalization of the websites. This list of traits of the editorial identity of municipal websites enables us to set up its specificity. Albeit the majority of city councils seem to be in a phase of appropriation of the Internet, they seem to have created new means of interaction with the public. The importance of updates, mentioning dates, logics of online services and withdrawal of political figures are many indices establishing the

particular contract municipal websites offer. This contract is different from the one of other media; it is not exactly the one of municipal bulletins either and is not confined to the 'politicized' political communication.

Producing a website is not an insignificant approach; it forms part of municipal communication, however, the action seems to conduct to a reactivation of certain intentions of political communication as well, whether they are service-oriented, elective, incentive or experimental; through the organisation of a style finally appearing as specific since it combines three types of particular discourse: administrative, of 'social service', hence more focused on public service through a logic of political action but devoid of its partisan and militant character, and at last a type of journalistic discourse - this style then is the combined product of diffusion means (Ruellan, 2001), textual forms (Lochard, 1996) and enunciative strategies to place the speaker in context (Ringoot and Rochard, 2004). By blending these types of discourse, municipal websites succeed to set up a style, to offer a mixed product, build up in congruence with the image they form of their readership's expectations, but above all to offer a specific relation with the internet surfer. As a matter of fact, this one can identify characteristics and benchmarks of the discourse types s/he knows and recognizes, altogether by finding himself/herself confronted to a form, subsequently to an editorial identity, that juxtaposes them.

Perspectives in terms of research and applications

This research, focused on the editorial identity of websites, has enabled to highlight the importance of creating a relation with the public and a reading contract for the process of online publication. This research area opens up some interesting and still little explored perspectives. Thereby, various perspectives emerge in terms of research on public service information, notably from the public viewpoint.

On the public point of view:

An entire sector of research remains to be exploited on the area of uses and especially representations of public service information by citizens-internet surfers. Research could be conducted with net surfers who consult municipal websites. On the one hand, they are little studied; their browsing habits and route, their impressions, opinions and frustrations are scarcely studied. Consequently, research could be carried out on the reception and 'incidental' construction of a 'reading contract' by the internet using public. This research could start up with users consulting municipal websites. It could, in addition, be conjugated with a study concerning the more traditional reading contract of municipal magazines. Then, it is in question to reverse the perspectives and rather than focusing on the information producers thinking about their public, study the net surfers consulting this information production.

On the point of view of public service information:

Within this research, public service information has been studied on the point of view of the general composition of editorial identity. We have even suggested a specific elaboration of the type of information offered, which combines three particular types of discourse: administrative, of 'social service' hence focused on public service through a logic of political action but devoid of its partisan and militant character, and at last a type of journalistic discourse. This conception of public service information should be refined from an in-depth study of traces of political discourse in the public service information. We pointed out that the figures of politics and of the writer tend to withdraw from the website and contribute to a certain form of depersonalization of the website. However, the websites are sound oriented by political conceptions carrying them. Research then could focus in a more detailed way on the conception of public service information by representatives, in order to reveal what is sometimes hidden by the information

layout.

On the point of view of potential applications:

The concern for public is still made by city councils through established representations and conveyed internally within the public authorities. It could be fruitful to organize focus groups, that is to say groups of collective face to face discussion between webmasters, representatives and representatives of the public. It may enable them to share their points of view on the methods of online broadcasting of public service information.

A second approach could lie within the often distended relationships between the municipal website and the municipal journal concerning the production of information. A consulting work concerning the two supports, on and off line, could be done in order to enable a productive synergy in the publication process.