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**Political Journalism:
New Challenges, New practices**

**The Four Generations of
Political Journalism**



Plantu, in « Le Monde » 20/03/1988.

Left politician
(Jospin)
looking for something
to say about the Right

Right politician
(Chirac)
looking for something
to say about the Left

Right politician
(Barre)
looking for something
to say about all the others

Journalist looking
for something original
to write for the readership

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Political journalism is a paradoxical research subject. No other kind of journalistic activity has triggered more studies ⁽¹⁾. And simultaneously, this huge literature has surprising blanks concerning comparative and historical approaches. Three points may clarify the nature of these blind-spots.

One should first mention the scarcity of historical analyses in a long-term perspective. Remarkable studies on journalism exist concerning the 1900s or 1960s, but there are very few books which - like Chalaby's (1998) - give a broad perspective on the evolution of this kind of journalism. There is no more research trying to focus the peculiarities of political journalism in relation to other specialised journalism, such as sports, social or crime reporting. Finally there are few studies developing a reflection concerning the very nature of the questions covered in the "Politics" section of papers. Many studies have emphasised the shift of political news towards a growing personalisation, the inexorable shift from parliamentary reporting towards using the executive or party headquarters as the main source of political information (Negrine, 1998). But few contributions offer an historical analysis of the changes in the content of the political pages, on the possible move away from the "frontier" between political journalism and other news-sections, as was done for "social" journalism (Levêque, 2000).

Those blanks create several biases. They lead researchers to focus their analysis of the coverage of politics mainly on the periods of intense political mobilisation (campaigns and crises) and to neglect the renewal in the ways of covering politics which can come from other news sections or other journalists than those explicitly dedicated to politics. This analytical trap is reinforced by the "legitimacy" reflex of researchers. This concept of legitimacy comes from Bourdieu and Passeron. It suggests the adherence of researchers to a dominant and often implicit vision of politics, that they share with politicians and journalists. Scholars in political communication usually share, for academic and/or biographical reasons, a strong interest in politics which they may consider as normal and universal behaviour ⁽²⁾. They value a concept of political debate as a rational exchange of ideas, inherited from the Enlightenment. They tend to limit the realm of politics to parties and elections, paying less attention to questions such as policies, social

¹ /- A survey of French-speaking research on political communication mentioned several hundreds of books and articles (Cayrol et Mercier, 1998). The English speaking bibliography is much bigger and includes journals and reviews dedicated to this research (Journalism, Newspaper Research Journal, Press/Politics, Political Communication, etc.).

² /- This question is theorised by Bernard Lacroix (1984), who coins the word 'politism' as the expression of this academic disease.

movements and lobbying. The expression of such a *legitimism* is a strong trend towards behaving as if a golden age of politics had existed before, to use normative concepts such as “tabloidisation”, “populism”, “trivialisation” where description and judgement melt together (3).

The aim of this paper is to understand the nature of the changes in political journalism (4), especially since the sixties. It develops threefold, searching to capture the changes in the networks of interdependencies which structures journalistic practice. A first part tries to make sense of some peculiarities and structural constraints of political journalism, in order to identify its basic logic. The two other parts try to identify ideal-types of “generation” (5), defined as institutionalised practices of political journalism, explainable by historical configurations or interdependencies between journalists, politicians, press and media companies, audiences and other actors in political communication. The second part of the text typifies three of these generations, from the “publicist” of the early 19th century to the “critical expert” of the sixties. A third part wonders about the possible rise of a fourth generation in very recent years. As these analyses mobilise material from several national press systems (Mainly France, the U.K, the U.S.A. and Italy), the conclusion would try to explain the distinctions and variables needed to prevent a naïve comparative approach and make sense of the lasting differences in the evolution of political journalism from one country to another.

³ /- Conversely the contributions of Frank Esser (1999) on the notion of tabloidisation, of Kees Brandt on the question of Infotainment (1999) give useful examples of efforts which try to give an objective meaning to such notions.

⁴ /- This analytical framework deals mainly with political journalism in the national press and media. The study of the local press should probably lead to complexify our conclusions.

⁵ /- On the use of this notion, see Rieffel (1984).

1/- Managing the peculiarities of political journalism.

1.1 Three features of political journalism.

Even if such a description risks crushing national peculiarities, three features may allow us to identify the peculiarities of Western political journalism. It is a “noble” journalism, a journalism which deals with questions requiring a specific stock of knowledge; it also is a journalism facing the challenge of a specific tension in its relationship to sources.

A “noble” journalism

Among the hierarchies of functions and newsbeats which structures the journalistic field, and specially in the press and media dedicated to “general” news, political journalists occupy usually dominant positions. The causes of this prominent status are multiple. Some come from history, as in numerous countries, the struggle of a politically oriented press has won the freedom of speech ⁽⁶⁾. Thorbjörn Broddason (1994) suggested the existence of a “sacred side of journalism”. Parodying Bagehot, one may add that political journalism is the most *sacred part* of journalism, as it speaks of power, and makes sense of an activity considered as equipped to radically change the life of society. As Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) emphasise, political journalists often mobilise such references to sacrosanctity, develop a “sacerdotal” vision of their activity when they invoke notions such as democracy, popular will, opinion and the-right-to-know. Edwy Plenel, Director of *Le Monde*’s newsroom expresses such a belief when he writes: *“What political and intellectual powers have been constantly unable to admit, is that it is this role of journalism as an element of democratic conflict, as a symbol of a democratic responsibility, which cannot be identified with state responsibility. As citizens, to know and act in full conscience we need the news which upsets the apple cart, and those bringers of bad news which force us to think. When he is the medium of information uncontrolled by official powers, of course the journalist rocks the boat. But here is his role, and its limit”*. The prestige of the political newsbeat also contributes, especially in France, to transforming this specialisation into a fast track towards power in the newsroom. This dominant position is also visible in the process of “promotion” of the news. As soon as information focuses the public debate, it is caught in a process of transfer which grabs it from the hands of specialised journalists to be put under the

⁶ /- As Jurgen Habermas shows in “Structural transformations of the public sphere” (1962. Eng. Trans. 1989)

responsibility of political journalists who own a pre-emptive right on the hottest news.

An esoteric journalism

A second peculiarity of political journalism concerns the acuteness of the problems of transmission and intelligibility of the news that it has to face. Other specialities (scientific and economic information) confront similar challenges. At least three reasons suggest that this difficulty is at its highest level for politics. Firstly the direct experience of political activities (especially elections) is more transient than the experience of social roles such as consumer-issues, movie reviews or the use of the weather forecast. Secondly a lot of classical studies in political science (Memmi, 1984; Gaxie, 1978; Eliasoph, 1999) suggest that a majority of citizens do not pay great attention to politics. The percentage of "active" and politically involved citizens rarely passes 15%. The nature of institutional rules, the vocabulary of politics, the political significance of the oppositions and classifications between parties and candidates often remain blurred or mysterious for a significant number of citizens. Finally, a last difficulty comes from the continuous process of professionalisation of political activities which develops an isolation of the political professionals into their "small world", and which reinforces its institutionalisation and gives the first place importance to esoteric stakes and games over problems corresponding to stronger social claims (Bourdieu, 2000). All these facts combine to give strength to a perception of political news as something often indecipherable or boring, as suggests the lack of interest, visible in polls, for the broadcast of political debates and programmes (Le Grignou & Neveu, 1988). This situation puts an educational challenge at the heart of political journalism... a challenge which is not simplified by the very nature of the relationship between journalists and their sources.

Journalism trapped in an ambiguous relationship to its sources

The intensity and steadiness of interactions between politicians and journalists, who share the same timetables, agendas and places (party conventions, parliamentary sessions, buses and planes during campaigns) creates an intimate relationship which has few equivalents, except in the case of sports reporters. This situation creates a strong integration of political journalists into a world that Martin Linski (1983, p 6) depicts as a "*family*" of "*political junkies*" speaking in codes that only "*the politicians, their team, the consultants and political journalists can completely decipher*". The effect of this closeness is such that a former political reporter from

NBC, from now on an ordinary consumer of political news, can admit his trouble to understand some reports (Linsky, p 52). In his study of parliamentary journalism in Quebec, Jean Charron express this relationship in the metaphors of an incestuous relationship, of the link between nurse and patient. Such a situation increases the problems created by the esoteric nature of politics (7). The peculiarity of political journalism also concerns the very nature of the competitor-colleague relationship between politicians and journalists. The challenge here is autonomy. The history of political journalism can be deciphered as an escape from a situation of supporters, rather early on in the USA's case, rather later in France or Italy. And even the tend towards a real emancipation from party-connection does not eliminate the structural ambiguity of political journalism. The temptation to behave like a political actor, to develop a normative discourse on politics can take many more subtle forms than visible political commitment, as the constant temptation of many journalists to behave like referees or pundits of the "modern", "moral" or "serious" ways to practice politics shows. But the challenge is clear. Journalists never only report or interpret facts. They have the power, sometimes the desire, to produce effects on other social fields (Jeambar, 199; Mace-Scarron, 199)

1.2 The invariant of political journalism.

The peculiarities of political journalism also suggest a space of constraints in which journalists are caught. The parameters and interdependencies which structure it can deeply change in time and space. The basic data remains. Three challenges, which are linked to the three peculiarities highlighted here can be considered as near opposite poles.

The first question is **autonomy**. In its simplest form, it refers to the alternative between distance and political commitment. But autonomy suggests many more questions. How does one preserve it when facing the professionalisation of sources, the activities of spin-doctors able to create media-events, how can one anticipate the journalists' practices and media-templates? How does one resist the political linkages sometimes visible in the strategies of press and media companies (Hersant or Bouygues in France, Murdoch in the U.K., Berlusconi in Italy)? Even the most adversarial styles of reporting meet this challenge: when behaving as critics of politicians in the name of ideals such as democracy, morality or the struggle against populism, journalists can become independent political entrepreneurs and full

⁷ /- A good part of the books written by journalists can be read as an effort to produce what Goffman calls "des-identifiers". The critical style, the description of politicians as "cut from reality", sometimes the cruelty of their portrayals works as a claim for distance, the proof of an outsider-status facing the small world of politics (For France see Alexandre, 1988, July, 1989, for the U.K. see Coleman, 1987)

actors of the political game, through priming-effects (Iyengar & Kinder, 1998) or the use of their criticisms by the outsiders of the political field, such as Ross Perrot in the USA or the politicians who claim to speak in the name of "civil society" in France or Italy.

A second challenge concerns the blurred notion of the "**democratic role**" of the press and media (Le Bohec, 1997), its "demopedic" function ⁽⁸⁾. Michael Schudson (1995, Chapter 1) remarkably highlighted the contradictory imperatives linked to the contribution of political journalism to democracy. Journalists are invited to act as public watchdogs in front of rulers, to give objective information, but also to make sense of politics and of the problems met by different social groups... thus to interpret politics by leaving out objectivity ! Journalists must also give complete information, pay attention to the desires of different audiences and so take the risk of being accused both of being boring and of trivialising politics. This ambiguity, explainable by the differences in the notion of the democratic role of the press, can be expressed in three basic questions. To **whom** shall journalists speak of politics ? To a universal and abstract audience of "citizens", or to those concerned enough with politics to understand its stakes and rituals? **How** should they speak about politics? By taking for granted a certain degree of knowledge of this social field, or by paying attention to the huge differences in the degrees of familiarity and interest for politics? And if so, how ? By lowering the complexity of the news or by trying to raise the reception abilities of the audiences? This second set of questions lead to a third one. According to the answers given to these two first questions how does one define **the nature of the news** which is allotted for a political news-section? Should the journalists focus on the statements of politicians and parties? Should they value less esoteric dimensions such as impressive characters or human interest stories? Should they value a kind of "downstream" look at politics by covering the impact of policies and political choices on the everyday lives of citizens? The answers to these questions are never found in the free choice of journalists. They depend strongly on a network of interdependencies where audience strategies of media companies, professional cultures and political systems weigh heavily into the scheme of things.

The answers to these questions are themselves inseparable from a third parameter: **the situation of the political journalist on the news-desks and in press companies**. Are political journalists the aristocracy of the newsroom? Do they have the power to monopolise, against other news-sections, any problem as soon as

⁸ /- I borrow this word from the French 'utopic' socialist Proudhon, who said that "democracy is demopedy", is a pedagogy, a process of teaching politics.

it enters the political agenda? Can they then frame it in political interpretative schemes which decipher it as a struggle between parties or candidates? Conversely, do they have to bargain and share subjects and coverage with other specialised journalists? These questions are also linked to the power balance between the commercial and managerial logic and the imperative of newsgathering and processing, analysed by Tunstall in the coupling: “media organisation” vs “news organisation” (1971, p 25)

Autonomy, demopedy, position in the journalistic field. It is in this triangle of tensions and challenges that the patterns and generations of political journalism have developed.

2/- A tale of three generations

The aim of this part is to suggest an analytical scheme of political journalism based on three generations. Let's immediately point out two limits of this model. First, it belongs to the logic of the Weberian ideal-type as a “*utopian rationalisation*” (Aron, 1981, p 87). A combined activity of selection and elimination substitutes “*a coherent and rational ensemble for the confusion and lack of coherence of reality*”. Our ideal-types of journalistic generations are not faithful snapshots of the detail of journalistic practices, but a tool to investigate them. Secondly, the notion of generation must not be understood as referring to a rigid chronology. If these generations follow one another, they overlap too. They institute patterns and repertoires of professional practices which may have a lasting influence, and which may structure a professional culture.

2.1 Political journalism before political journalism: The age of publicists.

As Jean Chalaby showed in a seminal contribution - or Jean Joana (1999) for the French case - to speak about political journalism before the middle of the 19th century would be a fallacy. The use of the press as an instrument of intervention and commentary on political activities was initially inseparable from political action itself. That's why, following in the steps of Chalaby, we will use the word “publicist” (1998; p 9) to speak of this proto-journalism.

How does one define the publicist? Basically in a negative way compared to contemporary patterns of journalism. The publicist is a political actor: a politician, a supporter of a parliamentary group, a representative of the rising working-class

movement. He/she writes in order to take part in political debates, to mobilise support. Even if he/she earns his money by writing, the publicist does not consider his activity as a career or a profession. He/she is the servant of a cause, rather than the slave of news. To write in the press is a temporary career, a kind of activism, a means to prime oneself for the position of MP ⁽⁹⁾.

He/she speaks in the name of a class, of an ideology ⁽¹⁰⁾. The targets are the supporters of a cause, the members of a class, but not a universal audience. The rhetoric of publicism, its order of discourse has no autonomy compared to political discourse. Mobilising, denouncing, lampooning, the publicist's speech is a militant one using the press. As Chalaby shows, modern journalism has institutionalised as an order of discourse. And the bases of its rhetoric and patterns (objectivity, the rule of the five 'W's) have been established against the model of militant rhetoric.

Behind these common features, publicism has various forms. One can identify a "highbrow" publicism, visible in France (Balzac, 1843) or in Britain, in a press dedicated to social elites, and a popular publicism, often linked to working-class movements, expressed in the British "Unstamped" or the French Almanacs or in the revolutionary press of 1848. One also should mention that the social positioning of the publicist cannot be understood only in its relationship to the political field. In France, both the writing of actors (Balzac, Vallés) and academic studies show that this kind of participation in the press, in its elite variant, is also a means to wait for a consecration in the literary field.

The publicist era has an intimate relationship with the constitution of a public sphere from the 18th century ⁽¹¹⁾. Publicism remained the basic pattern of journalism until the mid-nineteenth century, then to be restricted (and hybridised) in an "opinionative press" whose weight weakened constantly during the 20th century. However, chronologies are quite different from one country to another. In France and Italy (Mancini, 1994), what Colin Seymour-Ure has coined as a "*political parallelism*" between the structures of political and journalistic fields remained until the years 1960/1980, providing publicism with an unusual longevity.

2.2 The birth of political journalism

⁹ /- Especially during the 19th century when the age of eligibility was 30, sometimes 40 under the French Restauration. See the case of Remusat studied by Joana (1999)

¹⁰ /- Until the beginning of the 20th century many French dailies had an arms room to train journalists to the duels which remained rather frequent against their political adversaries. (Delporte, 1999)

¹¹ /- The historians' most recent studies suggest that the birth of publicism has to be located in the 17th century in England (Cf Zarett in Calhoun, 1992; On the French case see Popkin in Baker, 1991).

2.2 The birth of political journalism

The appearance of political journalism required the institutionalisation of journalism as a true profession. A u-turn via five types of changes in the mid-nineteenth century press is an imperative to understand this process of role re-definition.

A first change concerns the guarantee of the **freedom of the press**. As Habermas shows, as long as this freedom was not organised by laws, the very fact of printing a newspaper is a commitment to the struggle for rights and freedom. It is only when legal and tax restrictions to press diffusion disappeared that its development could be managed in line with rational economic logic. Such a condition was realised in the USA in 1791 (First amendment), in 1836 in the UK with the end of the taxes on knowledge and in France in 1881 with the Republican law on the press. Secondly, the new opportunity to build a press market required the action of **entrepreneurs** who thought of the press in an economic and not only a political game. The Anglo-American "press barons" (Pearson, Northcliff, W Hearst) could be classed as those Schumpeterians, able to imagine press both through the constitution of powerful companies and the invention of goods and discourses tailored to conquer audiences (Chalaby, 1997). The reference to audiences suggests a third central change: the **constitution of audiences**. The rise in literacy, urbanisation and the extension of voting rights and of politicisation combined to spatially concentrate and create a potential readership concerned by politics. Technical progress (railways, rotary press) and the growth of advertising formed another important change. They lowered the costs of production and diffusion of the press and created the economic conditions of a **broader circulation**. The four changes identified here trigger a fifth one. The population of journalists began to grow, the social division of their jobs creates specialisation. Journalism became a **profession**, clearly different from political or literary activities. Schudson (1978) sums up these changes when he writes: "*Until 1830 newspapers were useful to politicians and to people who invested in trade; with the penny press a newspaper sells goods to the global audience and sells readers to advertisers*".

In this new situation political journalism is firstly the simple application of the rules and practices which structure the young profession of journalist to political news: the importance of the news-gathering, institutionalisation of a specific order of discourse (Schudson 1978, Chalaby 1999). The shift also concerns the definition of newsworthiness which from now on lies in the ability of the news to make sense to a large audience while it was for publicist the importance of news

in political struggles (Balasty in McChesnay & Solomon). The dominant pattern of political journalism became based on a rhetoric of objectivity (Tuchman, 1972, Padioleau, 1976) where the *“good journalist was someone who emphasised the accuracy of facts, earned the respect of his or her peers and refused scoops and sensationalism”* (Benson, 1998 p 470).

Political journalism developed by severing with publicism. The first development refers to **autonomy**. The journalist is no longer the herald of a party. He/She reports facts and statements that he creates himself by techniques such as the interview (Schudson, 1994). He/she offers the readership not only the verbatim of parliamentary debates, but also the bargains and discussion happening backstage in the corridors of power, a speciality for parliamentary reporters. Secondly, if journalists work for an audience, it is no longer an audience defined politically (the working-class, the monarchists) but a global **“public opinion”** that he/she aims to inform and enlighten, whose reactions he/she analyses. The publicist was an actor in political struggles. The journalist is **above** all this. This “panoptic” position has been highlighted by Schudson's case-study on the coverage of the presidential speech on the “State of the Union” (1982). Restricted until 1850 to the president's speech, the reports at this time gave more space to the Congress ritual, and after 1870 to the reactions of the congressmen, to the comparison between presidential speeches. The growing importance taken after 1930 by an activity of interpretation of the presidential message can also suggest how the rise of an interpretative journalism would be more a consequence rather than a betrayal of the search for a neutral reporting of facts. The higher the panoptic position, the more details it allows us to see, the more this complexity requires interpretation to make sense.

If the shift from publicist to political journalism is a clear international trend from the second half of the nineteenth century, the process perhaps seeing strong differences between and inside countries. France and Italy appear as “backward” countries in this process. The economic weakness of press groups, the various links of connivance and corruption between politicians and the press, the strength of political rivalries and the late institutionalisation of journalism as a profession (Ruellan, 1997, Delporte, 1999) combine for a lasting survival of the publicist pattern. The launching of *Le Matin* in 1885 gives a superb illustration of this situation. Perceived as the Trojan horse of a Penny press journalism à l'américaine, the first issue of this newspaper announces: *“Le Matin will be a journal without any political opinion, who will not be infeoffed to any bank...it will be a journal of telegraphic, universal and true news”*. The proof of this political neutrality is in the recruitment of four famous columnists with political opinion notoriously

different, a strange strategy of recruiting publicists to produce objective political journalism indeed ! But even in countries where political journalism succeeds, it takes various forms. Schudson has studied the U.S. coupling: Information vs Story. *The New York Times* symbolises the first style and offers an educated readership the serious, controlled and useful news which is the core of objective journalism. The New York world and the Yellow press express information through the story pattern, a more narrative pattern, paying more attention to human interest as a strategy to seduce working class readers. This emphasis on characters and scandals also carries an early challenge for the central position of political journalism, competing with crime, sport, people and society news. A similar opposition is visible as soon as 1880 in Britain with the social polarisation of the press and its readership.

2.3 The generation of critical expertise and the widening of political news.

From the 1920's and even more from the 1960's political journalism faced new changes and challenges which modified the balance of social interdependencies that had contributed to its birth.

The first change comes from the process of **professionalisation of political communication**. Despite a taken-for-granted vision, this change is visible long before the sixties. As early as the twenties, American journalists, such as Walter Lippmann, take conscience of the growing power of public relations officers and of the weight of 'ready to publish' news produced by more and more efficient sources (Schudson, 1978, Chapter 4). In the U.K., in 1938, the public sector employed more than 200 PR Officers (Tulloch, 1993). In France, a real state propaganda developed at the end of the thirties (Georgakakis, 1997). The changes of the sixties and seventies, with the systematic use of opinion polls, the role of spin-doctors expressed a new stage in this evolution. They make highly visible the scientific dimensions of the process of rationalisation and 'scientification' of politics, the importance of 'source professionalisation' (Schlesinger in Ferguson, 1990).

A second change becomes very visible in the years 1960-1980. It comes from **the journalistic field**. Media journalists, and especially those from TV channels occupied a dominated position in this field. Considered by their colleagues from the press as mere dispatches readers, unable to create the depth of analysis belonging to press journalists, they slowly began to reverse the power balance. Their rising strength came from the central position taken by television in the political field. It is from now on in front of cameras that leaders and candidates

make their major statements. It is also the rule of 'live' news that gave the media the power of speed. It was finally the weight of the audience which gave the legitimacy of the ratings to the media journalists and anchormen, and which gave birth to a new regime of legitimacy based on audience, instantaneity and scoop. The mimetic style of reporting selected by press journalists as a reply to this new power relationship would paradoxically reinforce this leadership of the media.

Changes in the journalistic field must also be considered from its **recruitment** angle. The morphological changes are visible in the weight of more educated journalists, trained to practice a more reflexive journalism, open to the legacy of social sciences. This change allows the journalists to mobilise the same weapons as spin-doctors, and especially opinion polls. This rationalisation of political journalism is visible under the Roosevelt presidency in the States, thirty years later in France (Blondiaux, 1998). It dramatically changes the relationship with politicians, allowing journalists too to mobilise a *vox populi* unerringly fresh thanks to the endless flow of polls.

A fourth evolution takes a considerable importance in Western Europe, especially in the countries with a long tradition of public monopoly on media. It is the double process **of creation of private networks and of loosening of direct governmental control on the media**. Combined with the growing weight of advertising, even in the funding of public networks, these changes reinforce the movement towards a competition for audience, even in the noble genre of political news. One should also focus on the ambiguity of these changes which confronts media journalists with the burden of rise in importance of commercial imperatives but simultaneously gives them an autonomy that they had never experienced in their relationship to politicians.

Those changes create - with different temporalities between countries - a dramatic change in the practice of political journalism. The word 'rupture' may seem accurate. We would perhaps prefer to speak of a change in the structures of interdependencies which makes us think 'relationally' about the changes, while 'rupture' risks hiding important elements of continuity. Change does not catch journalism off guard. It also amplifies older trends, and firstly the shift towards an interpretative journalism or the re-evaluation of commentary, both of which were visible in the thirties in the USA (¹²).

The results of these changes have been analysed by a rich academic literature (Crewe & Harrop, 1989; Darras, 1998; Halin, 1994, Chapter 1; Kavanagh,

¹² /- Schudson shows, for instance, in the American press the growing number of articles with a signature, the change in the title of McDougall's classical textbook which shifts from "Reporting for beginners" (1932) into "Interpretative Reporting" (1938).

1995; Kerbel, 1995, Chapter 3; Nimmo, & Combs, 1990; Poirmeur in CURAPP, 1991) whose results are globally convergent. We would not try to sum-up these research, but simply suggest the peculiarities of this third generation of political journalism by paying special attention to the French case. One should say, to put it in a nutshell, that using the French peculiarity is shifting suddenly from the first to the third generation. Such a situation makes France somewhat the spotlight of a sociological *in vivo* experiment of the changes identified in this section.

We will borrow to Padioleau (1976) the concept of '*Critical expertise*' to label and describe the main trend of political journalism in the period 1970-1980. This style of journalism keeps from the objective pattern the distance to political commitment. It values the claim of an expert and reflexive knowledge of the social world covered by journalists, and of the variety of the point of views expressed there. It is in the name of this expertise, not of political commitment, that journalists can develop a critical analysis. Critical expertise allows judgement and comment on the basis of facts and data supposed to convince a rational reader, not to mobilise ideological connivance. This critical dimension - also visible in the American 'News Analysis' - takes a special importance among political journalists, whose *habitus* has embodied a kind of hyper-sensitivity to the attempts of manipulation, to the practice of media-hijacking by politicians and spin-doctors. It translates itself into a style of reporting whose practitioners are neither partisans, neither clerks of the court. They analyse politics. They spot blunders in strategy, mistakes in governing, from an in-depth knowledge of issues. They question politicians in the name of public opinion and its requests - identified 'objectively' by polls - or in the name of suprapolitical values such as morality, modernity, or the European spirit.

The most visible expression of this critical expertise is the use of an overhanging position, adversarial or judicial, before politicians. The political journalist is both an insider, knowing the codes and secrets of the tribe, and a critic whose point of honour is - in the limits of an epistémé shared with politicians - to decipher for its audience the secrets of his/her competitors-colleagues from politics. Four dimensions of this behaviour can be suggested here.

The **first** one is linked to an activity of selection and 'packaging' of the news. This is a traditional ingredient of journalistic practice. It takes however, in the case of political journalism, a prominent importance due to the double-bind logic created on the one hand by the pressure for shorter and shorter formats of articles and soundbites and, on the other hand, by the growing flow of media-

events and institutional communication produced by political sources. An extreme case of this last trend is given by the Japanese press-clubs (de Lange, 1998) or by the E.U. Public Relation services. Here, the political sources produce a Niagara Falls of official information of which the simple reading would waste enough time to block any opportunity of investigative reporting. More than ever, political journalists must select and reselect political information and wrap it in attractive or aesthetic packaging (Halin, in Iyengar & Reeves, 1998). The development of this know-how leads to a kind of **'meta-journalism'**. The skills of political journalists are more and more made in the ability to decipher and divulge to the audience the tricks and hidden tactics of politicians. In this way the interpretative turn of journalism reaches a new stage, visible in the great number of articles and reports whose goal is to decipher beyond the assessment of a leader or a project of law, and to thus spot a tactical move against rivals or a photo-opportunity. The assessments realised in February 2000 in Israel by the French Prime-Minister Jospin about the *'terrorists'* from the Lebanese Hezbollah have thus been covered by political journalists as a tactical positioning, with the presidential election of 2002 in mind, much more than by reports on the situation in south Lebanon written by correspondents in the Middle-East.

A **second** dimension of these new skills can be compared to the **know-how of the political bookmaker**. Journalistic commentaries, even when they deal with policies, tend to function as an endless evaluation of the positions of competitors (within parties, between parties), from the viewpoint of a race for popularity or responsibilities. Often interpreted as a form of professional cynicism, this trend must be understood as the result of the interdependencies in which journalists are trapped. The trend towards a multiplication of electoral rendezvous (Primaries in the USA, European elections in the EU, Regional elections in France, referenda in Italy) combined with the opportunity given by polls of a continuous measurement of public opinion have broken the old tempo of politics. Yesterday's rhythm was the succession of the hot moments of campaigning and of the cold sequences between General Elections. The tempo is from now on made up of a permanent competitive frenzy, triggering a constraining media-activism from politicians (Lacroix, 1999; Neveu, 2000a). In such a context, the horse race coverage of politics reflects more a reactive than a pro-active behaviour from political journalists.

The new expertise of political journalism cannot be separated from a **third trend: the use of polls by journalists**. It has become difficult to read a journalistic

paper or article without reference to an opinion-poll ⁽¹³⁾. This fact does not only reflect the importance of polls in political struggles. In a country like France, with a heavy tradition of relationships dominated by politicians, journalists have found in polls a longly awaited tool; to mobilise a kind *vox populi* legitimacy before elected politicians. Polls allow them to use a continually fresh and 'scientific' version of 'public opinion' against politicians. The ritual of the TV programme 'L'heure de vérité' on the public channel France 2 gave a wonderful example. The instant consultation of a 'representative' panel of French viewers allowed the journalist to quote several times in each broadcast the audience's verdict on the assessments of its guest. As the journalist-organiser of these debates admits: "*You need that public opinion to become an active part of the debate, and it must be live... mainly to give the journalists in the studio this popular legitimacy that they lack.*" (De Virieu, 1989, p 57).

The analysis of the critical expertise cannot forget a parameter which weighs heavily on its forms: the growing importance of the **quest for audiences**. It gives back all its importance to one of the basic strains of political journalism: how to grab an large audience with an esoteric activity for which many citizens feel neither interest, nor competence? A **fourth trend** of critical expertise is a strained marriage between this expertise and entertainment in order to gain substantial audience. The translation of politics into a horse race was an answer to this challenge. It requires perhaps an audience interested enough in politics to feel the desire to pay attention to the race. Media journalists have thus invented repertoires of discussion designed to lower the costs of reception of political speeches by using less formal interactions. The interview with a politician may focus on their characters. Politicians can be mixed with others guests. To give only a few examples, the French TV channels have shown politicians invited to speak of their favourite novels in literary programmes; when he was 'only' a socialist leader Lionel Jospin sang "Les Feuilles Mortes" during a show, and a Minister came with his wife to compete on "The Wheel of Fortune". During its last series the current affairs magazine "Sept sur Sept" on channel TF1 used to invite together on the same stage a politician and an artist or sportsman.

But the most common answer to the challenge of making political journalism reach a large audience has been **to widen the journalistic definition of politics** to include elements linked to privacy, to the character of political

¹³ /- Nimmo and Combs quote an editor from the *Washington Post* who mentions: "*We have trained a group of political analysts who cannot write a story without an opinion-poll*" (p 175). Eric Dupin, former head of the political newsdesk of the French newspaper *Libération* also notices the experiment of covering politics without using polls that he introduced briefly at *Libération* was in fact a painful challenge.

actors, to extend the topics on which it is legitimate to question a politician. The attention to the private lives of public leaders is not a recent invention. It has long been an element of the commercial strategies from the popular press (Halin, 1994; Chalaby, 1998), of the dirty tricks of political struggle. One could however argue that new uses of this approach do develop. In the Anglo-American world, it is expressed in a conservative reversal of the 'movement' motto "the personal is political". It allows the tabloids to free a highly profitable *hubris* of denunciation, (Tunstall, 1996), also triggered by careless speeches on a morality *going "Back to Basics"* (Jones, 1998). In the USA, this conversion of private behaviour into a criterion of political judgement comes in great part from its strategic use by the conservative fighters of the "moral majority", succeeding on this point to influence the media agenda. The French case suggests another side of these processes or re-definitions of politics. In France, the politicians' intimacy remains protected by journalists' self restraint ⁽¹⁴⁾. The redrawing of the borders of political news has taken other directions. The first one can be identified in the rising importance of the psychological approaches of the politicians. Often promoted by female journalists, the investigation of the politician's psychology and character appears in reports and articles as the key to understanding his/her behaviour and tactics ⁽¹⁵⁾. Another tactic - more specific to media journalists - has been to widen the nature of the questions asked to politicians: comments on the week's current events in "Sept sur Sept", biographical investigations in "Qu'avez vous fait de vos vingt ans?", questions on the lifestyle and cultural tastes in "Questions à domicile", a programme broadcast live from the home of political leaders ⁽¹⁶⁾.

¹⁴ /- One should remember for instance that President Mitterrand had an adulterant daughter. The fact was known by the elite of political journalists and remained secret for fifteen years. The choice of *Paris-Match* to publish a report on Mazarine in 1994 triggered a fierce debate on press ethics.

¹⁵ /- The 'literary' style of French journalism is also visible here in the fact that these political journalists develop their psychological investigations and portrayals of politicians in books which can be best-sellers, such as Catherine Nay's biography of Mitterrand "Le Noir et le Rouge".

¹⁶ /- One should find similar styles of coverage of the politicians in the Dutch gossip press (Van Zoonen, 1998)

3/- Towards a fourth generation?

The strain between the development of critical expertise and the compromises with audience imperatives may seem to give an interpretative framework allowing the investigation of the differences between the national styles of political journalism. Unfortunately, the degree of stability and strength of this third generation model must be questioned. Any researcher, facing a case study today confronts facts that suggest new moves and changes in the practice of political journalism. The speed and variety of innovations, the turnover of political programmes on television, sometimes the gloomy mood of self-criticism ⁽¹⁷⁾ among journalists, all suggest a lasting situation of crisis and instability. The reflection developed in this section is thus twofold. It focuses on the limits of critical expertise which reveal themselves in powerful changes in the interdependencies networks. It then argues that we are witnesses of a crisis in political journalism, which nowadays tries to invent new professional practices that may announce a fourth generation.

3.1/- Limits and crisis of the 'Critical expertise'.

At least three kinds of reasons suggest that, after having been a 'solution' to manage the interdependencies between the political field and commercial imperatives, critical expertise is becoming a problematic factor. This style of political journalism has only found a partial and insufficient solution to the challenge of making sense of an esoteric activity for a large audience. It is more and more slanting towards a new structure of interdependencies between fields. It is based on a journalistic *epistémé* which reveals more and more of its weakness and maladjustment to new political behaviour. These points have an important theoretical consequence for research. The analysis of contemporary political journalism cannot be developed as the simple need to adapt the frameworks of interpretation born since the seventies. The change in the structures of interdependencies between fields, between politicians and citizens requires a new approach.

The **first** limit of the practices of political journalism born in the seventies and eighties concerns their **practical results** evaluated both by audience ratings and power balance in the newsrooms and within television station staff. The

¹⁷ /- One of the most recent (February 2000) is given by the self-criticism of the *Washington Post* on its coverage of the primary elections, characterised by blunders in the use of panels and comment on polls.

French broadcast of political programmes gives a remarkable illustration of this situation. The eighties have allowed, on all networks, an innovative move of renewal and invention. A great variety of new styles of political programmes has emerged. In the mid-nineties, all these programmes were cancelled or exiled to late-night slots, most of the time because of ratings considered as too low for prime time (Neveu, 1995). Conversely, the broadcasts concerning politics or receiving political guests which reach good ratings have common peculiarities: they marginalise political hard news or put it under the responsibility of professionals ('*animateurs*' in French, hosts) who are not political journalists. The success of the Donahue or the Larry King shows and the invitation of candidates by MTV in 1996 in the States express the same trend (Cunningham, 1995). Wrapped up in a few words, the situation of the media's political journalists is rather lugubrious. Either they play the entertainment card, a choice where they have good chance to be beaten by hosts or non-specialist journalists, or they stay in a position of critical expert and must therefore wait for late night broadcasting or the return of a major electoral campaign. The limits of critical expertise are visible in the press too. As Padioleau notices, it often appears as "*an intellectuals' journalism for intellectuals*", and it seldom mesmerises huge readerships. Because it focuses on the dismantling of spin-doctoring and tactics, it is threatened by the risk of being "*a journalism of reports, interviews, comments and gloss. A journalism with its necessity, of course, but more and more caught up in the trap of communication, mirroring in real time, without distance or research, and seeing only what the powers are ready to let it see.*" (Plenel, 1994, p 98) One should even wonder if the very success of this journalism does not work as a boomerang, its dimension of intellectual criticism of politics backlashing on political journalism. The process is quite simple in its principle. The journalistic criticism - of corruption (Uriarte, 1998), or of a "crisis of representation" (Neveu, 1993) - triggers a disenchanted perception of politics. Often perceived as members of the small world of politics, journalists rarely have to wait a long time to endure the same kind of disparaging perception ⁽¹⁸⁾.

The crisis also comes from the speed of **the changes which strike the interdependencies structuring political journalism**. The change comes firstly from the rising power of the imperatives of audience and profit maximisation. They stimulate a market-driven journalism (McManus, 199), an organised rationalisation of journalistic rhetoric and formats (Barbier-Bouvet, 1994). The Chairman of the French association Reporters sans Frontières (Guillebaud, 1991) described the

¹⁸ /- In France, polls evenly reveal that journalists are - with politicians, prostitutes and ushers - one of the least popular groups. Cf the "Barometer", published each year in January by the magazine *Télérama*.

"triumph of the market" as the key to understand a new collapse of good journalism. As Champagne (2000, also see Dupin, 1998) strongly showed, even in prestige broadsheets like *Le Monde* the commercial logic means more shorter articles, more space for service and soft, "colourful" news. All these trends contradict the pattern of critical expertise. The impact of profit maximisation on the journalistic field is also visible in the growing percentage of insecure jobs and freelance "journos" (Tunstall, 1996; Accardo 1998). Such a status and career uncertainty can hardly strengthen the ability of journalists to stay on powerful and overhanging critical positions ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The changes also come from **inside the journalistic field**. Coming from television (and mainly from the information channels such as CNN, Euronews, Sky News, BBC World or LCI), a pattern of professional achievement based on speed and live coverage makes the distance and time for analysis that requires critical expertise more and more difficult. Even in the press, one of the impacts of the race for audiences is to value in each and every news section the culture of the scoops and affairs which allows an original combination of investigative reporting and sensationalism. This new journalistic culture sharpens the competition for news slots to the detriment of political journalists. Its result is also to give the coverage of events which may have important political dimensions to journalists from the science, social or medicine news sections (i.e.: the "tainted blood affair" in France, the "mad cow" affair, the recent wreck of tanker Erika in Brittany). The secretary of the newsroom of the best selling French daily noticed: "*There have been changes in the profession. Politics is losing ground. The weeklies give it less space. There is a surge away from it. For a journalist, it's better to cover the tainted blood affair than the Socialist Party congress. It's more interesting. Today the "Society" news section is considered as more status enhancing. Politics has been brought back to the rank and file, its fair rank. It's a noble matter, but less valued than it was yesterday.*" ⁽²⁰⁾

The new landscape of interdependencies in contemporary political journalism is also modified by the presence of **new actors**. In France and Italy, judges investigating scandals and corruption affairs have established, through organised leaks or the action of barristers and lawyers, a tactical alliance with investigative journalists against politicians (Roussel, 1998; Pujas & Rhodes, 1999). The ability of American fundamentalist religious groups to introduce standards of

¹⁹ /- One should however precise that political journalism is not among the specialisations where career-uncertainty is at its maximum level. (A situation much more visible for the rank and file journalists from the TV and specialised magazines in the French case).

²⁰ /- Interview, 8th July 1993. In France newspapers such as *Le Parisien* and *Le Monde* have also tried to soften the borders and to encourage cooperation between specialists from different news sections. (Plenel, 1996, p 172).

private morality and behaviour into the journalistic criterion of political coverage belongs to the same process where new actors enter in the interdependency structure.

Finally, one of the most important changes of the recent period is the visible growth of a **disenchanted or unconcerned relationship with politics**. This trend is old in the USA. It is more and more visible in several European countries. It creates a new challenge for political journalism since, except for a few broadsheets aimed at highly educated groups, its skills and knowledge suit less and less any significant social demand.

Last but not least, the flaws of critical expertise also come from what could be called its taken-for-granted aspect, from a journalistic *epistémé* concerning the definition of politics and the ways to speak of it. This *epistémé* of political journalism can be summarised in few landmarks (Bennet in Iyengar & Reeves, 1998). The first one comes from the basics of journalism: news is an event more than a problem, dramas and spectacular facts much more than the heavy trend and slow changes of society. A second element of this hidden credo is the identification of politics as the cogs of representative democracy (elections, institutions) (21). A third element is the reduction of politics to its most visible institutional figures, the submission to its timetables and rites. The newsdesks and news sections are often built on the basis of an homology with the institutions that they cover. A French political journalists 'owns' a party or an institution. The nature of his/her belonging is an indicator of his/her power and importance. *"If I consider my case, I have grown fatter and more important when shifting from the coverage of the Communist Party to the Socialists,"* said a reporter from *Libération*. (RSF, 1991). The journalistic *epistémé* is also structured by an often naïve vision of the democratic function of the press, elucidated by Gans (1999). The line of reasoning is simple: political journalists contribute to the production of citizens; well-informed citizens are enlightened and active; they strengthen democracy. All this evidence prevents us from wondering if it is not a preliminary interest for politics which brings the reader to the political pages? It stops us from reflecting on the social conditions required for efficient circulation and reception of political information (22), to wonder if being informed is enough to be active and powerful when facing organised social powers?

21 /- We should be particularly precise on 'national' institutions, as the coverage of the E.U institutions is often biased by its reaction to intergovernmental bargaining...

22 /- Many studies show among journalists a double trend to consider audiences (especially on television) as not intellectually very bright and, simultaneously, to format messages for receptors close to the cultural universe of journalists. (Tunstall 1971, Cayrol 1997, pp 84-85).

The *epistémé* of the political journalists is also made up of taken-for-granted interpretative frames. In the French case, the powerful links of social and cultural closeness, a shared education of the élite of politicians and journalists in the same 'power schools' (IEP de Paris) have contributed to legitimise a neo-liberal vision (more or less blended with 'social' concerns) as an inescapable thought horizon (Halimi, 1997). From this consensual interpretative frame, any criticism of the rules of the political and economic system is promptly labelled as belonging to the darkness of 'populism'.

Both native reflections and academic studies have often highlighted the constraints created by managerial imperatives - shrinking the formats and rewarding the logic of entertainment - on the journalists' ambition to develop in-depth analysis and explanations. But political science also should focus on how this commercial logic and the dominant journalistic *epistémé* work together towards a hidden convergence. Beyond their contradictions (to value the private and the emotional Vs covering the 'serious' institutions and actors) these two types of logic work like an invisible filter which eliminate a whole set of social facts from the very definition of politics and from its coverage and news section. As Tim Cook suggests: "*We must look at the newsbeat system not only for the news it makes possible but for the news it discourages.*" (1998, p 93). Without being complete, one should mention among those facts, rarely considered as worthy of belonging to politics, the impact of policies on ordinary lives, the action of lobbies, the decision-making process in international organisations such as the E.U., social movements as long as they don't shake the foundations of the state, and many forms of political participation (in the Social Movements Organisations and other associations) where social problems are expressed. Broadly speaking, all the slow changes of social life and their impact on political behaviour (such as the rise of new forms of militantism, of disenchanting relationships with politics) are ignored or exiled in other news sections, only reappearing in the political pages as a scoop or a discovery when a poll or an extraordinary lack of voters, for example, "reveals" an evolution often well identified a long time before by researchers and experts.

3.2 The components of a renewal

The contradictions and failures of the political journalism from the 'third generation' do not imply its quick disappearance. Its space of expression threatens to shrink or to limit itself to late-night slots on television, due to the weakness of audiences. But conversely, in its most expert forms, the press dedicated to educated audiences safeguards a space of expression especially for it. On television

and in the tabloids the various blends of critical expertise and (mainly) entertainment, valuing the private dimensions of public characters, will also remain present. But aren't even these continuities threatening for political journalists? Does one really need journalists for 'people-framings' of politics? And if politicians are invited to speak first of their lifestyles and tastes, and to comment on current news, can we not think that movie-actors, artists or sportsmen/women would be funnier or more moving - and audience-seducing - in such a kind of interaction?

The Nineties have opened a crisis of political journalism: There is a crisis in the vision of its democratic function, trapped between explanations for the happy few and the transformation of politics into a show or soap-opera made up of affairs, inappropriate to make sense of for broad audiences. There also is a crisis of autonomy as the political independence of journalists does not free them from the ambiguities of the competitor-colleague position. They are prisoners of political timetables and agendas, condemned to an endless game of dismantling of the politicians' communication tricks. And finally, there is a crisis of positioning in the journalistic field and the media world, as journalists are facing the invasion of their space of expression by hosts, marketing services and journalists from other news sections, who became more offensive and legitimate through investigative reporting and affairs-building. This nexus of uncertainty has however triggered various journalistic innovations which suggest the blurred outlines of a 'fourth generation' of political journalism. Three of its federate components are already visible...

A new relationship to audiences/citizens

A first dimension of change is expressed in the attempts of part of political journalism to mobilise an intervention of the laymen, of the 'ordinary citizens' less abstract, more active than what was allowed at the previous stage by the exclusive use of polls. The expressions of this move are varied. Their common element is to give journalists the function of the relay loudspeaker of an approach of politics which tries to pay more attention to the ordinary worries and interests of the rank and file citizens. This style of journalism has at least three different expressions. The first one is a kind of consumerist translation of political journalism ⁽²³⁾ strongly highlighted by Eide (1997) in his case study of the Norwegian daily *Verdens Gang*. Eide notes "*an expansion of the service journalism into the domain of political journalism. The journalistic assessment is clear and simple: in the domain of politics, too, the reader is in need of guidance and clarity, in need of political consumer*

²³ /- See also Halin's analysis (199) of the morning news programming on TV networks and Eide & Knight (1999).

information, to be able to pursue his or her interests. The cultivated conception of the role of journalism is that the journalist is on your side, pushing the politicians to come up with clear arguments and effective solutions." (p 178) In other cases the changes consist in making political journalism the medium of expression of a bottom-up political agenda, valuing the assumed demands and questions of citizens. Such a treatment of politics is specifically visible on television. It values the direct intervention of ordinary citizens in programmes very close to the talk show pattern. The goal here, minimally, is to withdraw the debate's agenda from the politician's control by challenging them with the questions from ordinary citizens. The target can also be more ambitious, as in the efforts to change the very nature of the themes debated, using the questions from the audience to give more weight to the everyday impacts and stakes of political choices (unemployment, welfare, public health), and less room to esoteric discussions (S Coleman, 1998; Neveu, 1999; Blumler 1999). In its last form, this approach tends towards the transformation of the political journalists into the spokesperson of the community. This trend is especially visible in the American 'Civic journalism' movement (Eksterowicz 1998, Charity, 1998). Even if many of its actors deny it, this kind of journalism can give a function of interest aggregation to its practitioners which was traditionally considered as a peculiarity of political parties. Mostly carried by local newspapers, this style of reporting cannot be separated from American peculiarities (a unitary vision of the local community, parties transformed into mere campaign machines). This radical type of audience-citizenship mobilisation gives high visibility to the ambiguities of the journalist as political entrepreneur. If one can reflect on the threat of a journalistic 'populism' (Blumler, 1999), this debate should not mean that we forget that the new relationship to audiences can really trigger changes in the nature of the issues discussed, that it can bring more closeness to the way ordinary citizens experience politics (Neveu, 1999).

A new journalistic definition of politics.

The importance given to the expression and 'demands' of ordinary citizens is linked to a second change, concerning the very definition of political news. They give an increasing amount of space to a vision of politics no longer restricted to the cogs of representative democracy. Three examples can highlight the nature of this change. One can first notice the importance taken by the coverage of social movements (Neveu 1999b). Such reports can even, as happened at *Le Parisien* or *Le Monde* during the great strikes of December 1995 in France, be guided by the explicit will to prevent a 'politicking' coverage of the social movement, but to value reports on the real life experiences and claims of the people involved in the dispute (Levêque, 1999). The rise of what we have proposed to label 'ethnographic

reporting' (Neveu, 2000b) also gives more importance to the publishing of articles offering snapshots of ordinary lives, statements and reactions of ordinary citizens, taken here as the beneficiaries, the targets of policies, experiencing here and now the effects of political choices. These reports can concern civil servants facing the crisis of public services, truck-drivers on strike, disabled people speaking about the welfare system. Their common logic is to rest on the witnessing and speech of ordinary people facing the everyday impact of political choices that were usually covered only through the analysis of the decision-making process, the parliamentary debates, the positioning of party leaders. This style of journalism, still practised by the minority, also contributes to the widening the definition of 'politics', to reinforce a bottom-up approach. Let's also add that the importance taken by questions of environment, public health and urban problems contributes to such a redefinition of politics and the way to cover it as well. As a provisional remark, coming from our own research on the French case, we should mention that many of the new experiments and frontier moves in the journalistic approach of politics come from journalists who do not belong to the politics newsbeat. The professional stake is clear: if they don't want to lose the control of 'their' territory and if they want to keep their central position in the power-balance between services, political journalists must themselves integrate this new definition of politics and the ways of covering it into their work.

Towards new repertoires of professional expertise?

The two previous trends of renewal are closely linked to the rise of new professional skills. Some are particular to television where the importance given to the participation of laymen requires an ability to manage a greater number of participants from the organisers of debate, to pay attention to guests less accustomed to public speech, an ability to stimulate the expression of real life experience of social problems. This shift of professional skills is also visible in the press. To put together a good story after a discussion with nurses striking against the cuts in hospital budgets, to make sense of the *malaise des banlieues* ⁽²⁴⁾ does not mobilise exactly the same know-how required for the interview of a party leader. For all political journalists such changes imply a restructuring of their cognitive maps and schemes. The shift of debate themes beyond the agenda of the small world of insiders will require something more than a subtle expertise in the political field: a more in-depth knowledge of issues, figures and facts concerning policy. The variety of knowledge useful to map and understand political stakes and

²⁴ /- Something like the "inner city crisis", but for the fact that in France the poor, the unemployed and the immigrants are usually exiled in the suburbs, the inner city remaining a dwelling place for well-off people.

the data of a broadened vision of politics may drive journalists toward a new kind of newsgathering, as they mobilise the abilities and studies of social scientists (sociologists, political scientists...), beyond the usual circle of pollsters and pundits. This co-operation, where the new generations trained in social sciences will have a strong asset, can also give a new boost to a 'precision journalism' (Meyer, 1972). Based on the processing of surveys and statistical data - the construction of which is also an object of reflection - this approach to journalism can afford an in-depth analysis of issues and social changes, with or without the peg of a spectacular event to trigger attention. Electoral sociology analysis has for a long time allowed this precision journalism to develop within the political sphere⁽²⁵⁾. It is clear however that an increased amount of attention to the dimension of policies, of slow changes in political behaviours, creates a window of opportunity for the renewal of this journalism and its combination with investigative reporting, as, for instance, a set of articles published in 1988 by the Spanish daily *El País*⁽²⁶⁾ shows. The articles focus on the linkages between members of the *Cortes* and Spanish economic interests, using the results of a questionnaire sent to MPs by the journalists (Dader, 1991)

Conclusion

Political journalism is in crisis. The practices of the 1970s and 1980s have shown their limits when facing the structural changes in which journalism is embedded. The 1990s have given many examples and tracks for a professional renewal. It is too soon to theorise the peculiarities of a 'Fourth Generation' in *status nascendi*. However, beyond the mosaic of innovations three trends are visible. The very notion of political news widens. A growing importance is given to the voice of the layperson, to a bottom-up approach of politics analysing it from its impacts on everyday life, from what could be called a citizen-based agenda (and the citizen can also be confused here with the customer...). These changes trigger a move in the cognitive landmarks and professional skills of political journalists.

Powerful influences can stimulate and institutionalise such changes. Market-logic and the quest for larger audiences produce an enormous pressure towards innovations able to increase readership and ratings. A framing of politics which emphasises its impacts on everyday life, more attention to the demands of citizens and to new forms of political participation can also be marketable

²⁵ /- For instance: *Le Monde*, 15/1/2000 pp 16 et 17 "Un décalage sociologique croissant entre les partis de gauche et la société" (A growing sociological gap between left wing parties and society)

²⁶ /- 23-25 April 1988.

strategies. In many countries (U.K., France) the weight of new generations of more educated and more 'feminised' journalists, and the struggle for jobs push the newcomers into the field of subversive strategies or renewal. The influence of actors coming from other fields (intellectuals, researchers, judges) or of spokespeople, such as community leaders willing to take part to public debates, can also support these changes, which could also be used by newcomers to the political field, trying to use "civil society" or "what ordinary people say" to challenge those established in the field.

But conversely, the institutionalisation of a new style of political journalism also faces enormous resistance. The clearest lies in the strength of the routines and professional habits. The old generation of fifty-somethings who still rule the political and journalistic fields has no strong incentive to support changes which threaten its legitimacy. The old recipes of entertainment and privatisation are not close to end their career. Most politicians have few advantages in waiting for changes which would give journalists or laypeople more control over the agenda, more experience or knowledge on the issues debated. Liesbet Van Zoonen (1996, 1998) has developed illuminating analysis on how the innovative potential of female journalists was hijacked by the strength of marketing strategies and often pushed towards emotional and often superficial coverage. Because new types of newsgathering from non-institutional partners require more investigation, the new forms of journalism are also costly and time-consuming while the great goal of managers is to reduce costs. Finally, if the audience of political journalism can be increased, no sociological reason can suggest that this kind of news could be as audience-seducing as topics like sports, crime and consumer affairs. More than by a clear process of 'succession', it is probably by the invention and occupation of niches and slots among the traditional news sections that a fourth generation of political journalism will rise.

If the ideal-type of the four generations offers a framework for the analysis of political journalism, it does not claim to explain the national differences both in the variants of the fourth generation, nor in the survival of the previous generations journalistic style. Following the remarks of Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), I conclude by suggesting four landmarks for such systematic comparisons.

The first task would be to analyse the **peculiarities of each national journalistic field**. What are the power balances between media and press, between genres of press, generations of journalists and newsbeats inside each title or channel? What is the morphology of the profession? What is the degree of organisation and autonomous expression of journalists (trade unions, share-

holding inside companies, professional forums of debate)? What are the representations of the journalists' missions and qualities?

A second approach would deal with the **relationship between journalism and media companies**, with the question: how do commercial imperatives weigh on journalistic practices and beliefs (Beam, 1998)? Such research should try to build various indicators on questions such as the existence of services able to theorise and transform into figures the behaviour of audience, the compared importance of sales by subscription and direct sales, the percentage of advertising revenues and so on.

One more set of variable concerns **the interdependencies between the journalistic field and other fields**, and most importantly the political one. It can be measured by the weight of a partisan press, the legal framework of regulations and public funding concerning the media, but also from the nature of the strategies or attitude of political actors toward the media, the strength of political sources' professionalisation. Do they favour stakes-management behind closed doors of institutional arenas, or do they prefer 'going public'? Do political outsiders invoke 'civil society' against the 'professionals' of politics? The relationship of journalists to other social forces is also important with the intellectual and judicial fields, with representatives from social movements.

A comparative approach should finally study **audiences and citizens** and their behaviour. What are the forms of media-literacy of a particular country? How do media companies institutionalise feedback from the audiences (inquiries, polls, letters) and who is in charge of drawing conclusions from such data? What is the strength and nature of the different contributions of citizens to politics? What is the comparative importance of the mediators (party leaders, independent political entrepreneurs, journalists, social movement organisations, intellectuals) able to aggregate the political demands, to push the process of "naming, claiming, blaming", to transform situations into social problems?

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