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Politics on French Television

Towards a Renewal of Political Journalism and Debate Frames?

■ Erik Neveu

ABSTRACT

■ This article develops an analysis of the political programmes broadcast by the French channels during the presidential election of 1995. The study uses a theoretical framework based on Elias's notion of 'figuration' and offers a brief description of the French 'media landscape', profoundly changed in the late 1980s by the dual process of privatization and the birth of new television channels. The analysis then focuses on the study of the programming of the French channels, with a strong emphasis on the strategies pursued by the public channel France 2 and the private channel TF1, whose respective programming choices were completely different. Finally, a last point suggests some reflections on the necessary and uncertain rise of a new kind of political journalism in the media. Beyond the French case, this article offers some reflections both on the concept of 'frame repertoires' for political broadcasting on television and about the international trends concerning the organization of political debates in the media. ■

Key Words election campaign, framing, political debates, political journalism, talk show television

Summarized in a television image, the French presidential election of 1995 may have been reduced, for many foreign tele-spectators, to snapshots of a strange pursuit: Jacques Chirac riding his Citroën car through Paris one hour after his election, followed by a pack of journalists

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This study is developed in four parts. First, I suggest a theoretical framework based on Elias's notion of 'figuration'. Second, I offer a brief description of what is called in France the 'media landscape', a landscape which profoundly changed — as in many other European countries — in the late 1980s. Third, I focus on the study of the programmes offered by French channels during the presidential campaign of 1995, with special attention dedicated to the struggle between TF1 and France 2. Finally, a last point suggests some reflections on the perspectives and what is at stake for a new kind of political journalism in the media.

Theoretical framework: the figurational model

The understanding of political programmes on television requires breaking down the power relations between their actors, an in-depth analysis of the processes and actors involved in programme making. The conceptualization of the social interdependencies which explain the production of political programmes on television implies the identification of a network of actors, of a 'figuration' to use Norbert Elias's term. Elias (1991: Ch. 3) uses it 'as a more processual and dynamic term, in contrast with expressions like "social system" and "social structure" which in common sociological usage are not only very static but also give the impression of something separate from, beyond and outside individuals' (Mennel, 1992: 251). In a deliberately simple approach, I start with the image of such a network of interactions as structured by three poles (Neveu, 1989), considering perhaps that each of these poles is itself a new micro-figuration, with its own struggles, its own shifting interdependencies.

As the great organizers of the scenery of politics on television, political journalists are the main constituents of the first pole. The position of the political journalist on television has its own peculiarities. First is their relationship with journalists from the press: television journalists have long been dominated by the latter, even patronized, and considered as miserable dispatches readers, incapable of rivaling the analytical depth and literary elegance so dear to written journalism *à la française*. The following quote from *Télérama* gives an example of this relationship. The journalist from this magazine writes about his colleagues from television, and their report of Chirac's car ride:

It's not enough to say that this spectacle was painful. We were ashamed that night to belong to a profession capable of exaltation for so little, to offer such a pitiful image of itself and to feel proud and glorious of it. (*Télérama*, No. 2366, 20 May 1995: 12)

and television camera operators on motorcycles. Images more like a report of the Tour de France than the pomp of the election of a state ruler. This reporting was at the heart of a discussion about the work of television journalists during the election night. For the majority of television journalism professionals, this report was the climax of the election coverage. Its purchase by 40 foreign networks, its live broadcasting on CNN were, according to television's indigenous standards, the very proof of its excellence. Conversely, a section of the press, and in particular the 'intellectual' magazines, would go on to claim that these images were a symbol of the trivialization of information.

This 'masterpiece' of live coverage can offer us a starting point to think about the status of politics on television. It encapsulates most of the dilemmas of political journalism on television. How to attract good ratings with a subject many viewers consider as boring? How can journalists face the double-bind of succeeding in both the mobilization of large audiences and also the organization of serious debate on political issues? And if broadcast politics is just a show, does it need the contribution of specialized journalists, or simply the gimmicks of its hosts and communication pundits? All these questions were at the centre of discussions and innovations in every French network during the 1995 presidential election. The answers given by French channels to this challenge were quite different. The clearest cleavage in broadcasting policy could be seen between the leading private channel TF1 and the public service channel France 2. If one also includes the programmes broadcast by the smaller channels, the coverage of this presidential campaign can be considered as a kind of sociological experiment, the 'supply structure' of political programmes broadcast by the six national channels, employing a very wide range of framing devices of political debate. Beyond the French peculiarities, this situation allows us to develop some hypotheses on the present and future situation — and crisis — of politics on television.

This analysis is based on an in-depth study of the political programmes broadcast between the end of January 1995 and the first round of the election, 23 April. We used a television weekly (*Télérama*) and daily newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Libération*) to compile a list of approximately 80 political programmes, to which candidates and politicians were invited by the different channels (this figure does not include the numerous invitations of politicians onto daily news bulletins). This press survey also allowed us to collect comments from journalists and the networks' representatives concerning their strategies and behaviour. Then we worked on approximately 20 programmes recorded on videotape.¹

Journalists are also prisoners of the balance of power in the television companies that employ them. Their autonomy depends here on the technical resources and wealth of their network, on the pressure of ratings and on budget regulations. The balance of power inside each network is also determined by the struggle between 'true' journalists and hosts and talk show organizers (*animateurs* in French). The *animateurs* argue that the growing importance of good ratings, and their skill in drawing audiences, affords them new responsibilities in the coverage of politics, for instance the opportunity to invite politicians on to talk shows.

The second pole of this figuration is, of course, constituted by the professionals of politics. A sociological approach requires, here again, that we break down this massive category, to think of it as a 'field' whose structure cannot be understood solely through partisanship. Parameters such as the modes of socialization to politics, age, the position of an outsider or an individual's dominance also affect the abilities and tactics of politicians in front of journalists. A brief example may illustrate this complex relationship. Comments on the crisis of representation, on the widening gap between parties and citizens, have been basic ingredients of journalistic speeches on or against politicians since the 1980s (Lacroix, 1993). Such speeches usually trigger strong critical reactions from candidates. However, invited to comment in the studio of TF1 at the very moment when he failed to be chosen as the socialist candidate (26 January 1995), former Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, actually outdid the journalists' usual barrage of criticism against the political parties. His failure to win the struggle within his own party induced him to employ the tactical manoeuvre of joining — against his socialist colleagues — the journalist's chorus of celebration of 'civil society' against the archaism of the political parties.

The notion of 'political professionals' now includes public relations officers, consultants and various 'pundits', representing various combinations of authority, depending on their technical skills and their emotional and political access to politicians. The position of these other political professionals, and their contribution to the strategy and tactics of politicians, cannot always be reduced to a relationship of subordination (Jones, 1995).

The triangular figuration is completed by 'public opinion'. The positioning of this pole is very specific. Public opinion is instrumentalized by the occupants of the other poles of the figuration, who use it to strengthen their position against their competitors. They behave as ventriloquists, invoking poll data and percentages to mobilize the legitimacy symbolized by a good poll result, a good rating, or an electoral

success. For instance, a member of the political team from France 2 referred to the wishes of the viewers themselves to justify the lengthy broadcast of Jacques Chirac's drive from the town hall to his headquarters: 'On an election night, the real star is the elected President, not the commentators, not the other politicians. It's the President who creates the event. It's him that French people want to see, whose reaction and emotions they want to feel' (interview, 23 February 1995). But — and the importance of this point will soon become clear — 'public opinion' can break away from its position as objectified and abstract statistical data. It can be much more than politicians' or journalists' *representation* of what people think or wish. On television one could say that public opinion is ruled by the law of inverse proportionality. The more it is embodied in individual characters, the less it is seen as statistically serious, and vice versa. On the one hand, opinion polls, presented as perfectly 'representative' and scientific, but created from abstract data, are only brought to 'life' by the interpretations and comments of journalists and politicians. On the other hand, 'subjective public opinion', that coming from witnesses, ordinary people, vox-pops and so forth, is weakly 'representative', but actual, colourful and able to introduce life and emotion, and improve the visual impact of broadcasting.

The French media landscape from the 1980s to 1995

Shifting actor relationships

Like Italy, Spain and many other European countries, during the late 1980s France witnessed considerable changes in the position of television channels and television journalists. Two such changes deserve special mention here.

A first change concerns the links between political power and journalists from the media. The creation, under Mitterrand's presidency, of an independent control authority is a landmark, a legal turn in the slow process of emancipation (Cotta, 1986) of public television (a pleonasm until 1983) in its relation to executive power — against a vision of television as 'The voice of France' as President Pompidou had claimed. The end of a tradition of public monopoly also had a profound effect on the position of journalists. Until the beginning of the 1980s, the French television system comprised three public channels. The left-wing government allowed the creation of the subscription channel Canal Plus and, in 1985, the launch of the Berlusconi-operated private channel, La Cinq. The privatization of the first public channel (TF1), by the Chirac

government in 1986, and the creation of the private channel M6 moved the private sector into the heart of the television system. In this new audiovisual landscape, interdependencies between politicians and journalists developed quickly. The control of six networks, including four private ones, is a much more difficult task than the old Gaullist practice of nominating political friends to sit at the board table and the desks of a unique public structure (Bourdon, 1994). The economic logic of competition and the struggle for ratings also induces profound changes in all programming, including political programmes. Initially, the effects of the legal emancipation of the networks were reinforced. Ratings became the key to acquiring financial resources, of professional legitimacy, and such a quest cannot stand a style of journalism which echoes his 'master's voice'.

Second, there was the growing importance of 'public opinion' — mainly through polls — as a central constituent of politics on television. The use of polls in French politics dates from the 1965 presidential election. Since 1970, political debates broadcast on television have more and more frequently started with the presentation of a poll (for an historical approach, see Nel, 1986). This was taken a stage further in 1985 with the addition of a computerized system, giving an 'instant' poll in the studio of the programme *L'Heure de vérité*. A sample of French viewers were now able to create 'public opinion' instantly through their reactions to the speeches of politicians and by their being given the opportunity to state their point of view. Among these various changes, the modernization of techniques to measure 'public opinion' and the construction of a social belief in their scientific ability to read the feelings of the nation (Blondiaux, 1998) are certainly influential on the relations between journalists and politicians. Previously, faced with the symbolic authority of electoral verdicts and the guest politician's ritual speeches about the (always favourable) opinion of his or her constituents, journalists were in a structural position of inferiority in front of politicians, who spoke from a 'representative position'. Constructing another kind of 'public opinion' — characterized by the strength of science, the accuracy of results which can be constantly updated, the polls and the panel consultations — has deeply changed the balance of power between politicians and journalists. In the complex figuration which constructs the broadcast political debate, politicians in fact lost a two-fold monopoly during the 1980s. The governing parties lost their control over television. Political journalists and politicians as a whole definitely lost what one could call their monopoly to behave as the legitimate mouthpieces of

public opinion, as poll results could from now on be successfully opposed to electoral results by journalists.

The double-bind challenge: searching for an audience ... desperately

If the competition between public channels and the pressure to maximize audiences (and advertising funding) was visible since the reforms initiated under Giscard d'Estaing's presidency, this trend was strongly reinforced during the 1980s. The struggle for high ratings had an important effect on the scheduling of political programmes. The quest for maximum ratings bore down on a type of programme for which audience interest was already low. This strain compelled journalists to employ innovation, sometimes entertainment, to discover framings, gimmicks and devices able to focus the attention of large audiences on a poor 'commercial' slot, namely the invitation of politicians to the studio. Such a constraint combined with the general trend of television scheduling towards a mix of different kinds of programmes, generated what Italian researchers have termed 'neo-television' (Eco, 1983; Casetti and Odin, 1990). This quest for audiences was complicated by a contradiction typical of double-bind situations: television political journalists had at one and the same time to optimize their audiences and preserve a level of 'high-brow', serious debate on political issues for fear of being considered as mere entertainers by their competitors/colleagues of the press.

While not presenting a complete analysis of the innovation emerging at the beginning of the 1980s (see Neveu, 1995), one can indicate the most important ones, as these 10 years of (unsuccessful) attempts were to weigh strongly on the coverage strategies of the presidential election of 1995.

The first innovation has already been mentioned: the use of 'inter-activity'. It was the central element of the leading programme *L'Heure de vérité*, created by the state-owned Channel France 2 in 1982. The programme's principle was simple. It rested on a studio debate with a politician, led by three journalists. The peculiarity of the programme was its progressive sophistication in the use of 'public opinion', as the third participant in these interviews. First, 'public opinion' expressed itself by phone-ins to the studio. It was soon improved by the introduction of a representative panel of the 'French', reacting to the politicians' speeches and with the programme concluding with 'public opinion's' verdict on the politicians' ability to convince, ranking the best performances in a kind of Top 40 chart. As the years went by, these interactions with 'public opinion' introduced new improvements including questions sent

via a computer network (Minitel), and an experiment to bring in videotaped questions from 'ordinary people' recorded on the street. The significance of these various representations of 'public opinion' was explained by the editor of the programme: 'to add some rhythm, to strengthen the spectacular dimension, but also and mainly to bring to the journalists in the studio the popular legitimacy they lack' (De Vitieu, 1989: 57).

A second trend in the framing of political programmes can be described as a kind of psychologization, in the disclosure of details about the private lives of the politicians. This trend started in 1986 with the programme *Questions à domicile* on the privatized channel TF1. What is new here is that the television team were transposed into the homes of political leaders. The first moments of the programme were dedicated to a discussion about the host's personality, lifestyle and moral values. Another part of the programme offered a visit around their home, the camera showing the rooms, books, pictures and furniture of the politician, who was also invited to choose music for the programme's soundtrack. The core of the discussion may have stayed on the traditional topics of political journalism, but the broadcast also tried to reveal the psychological, cultural and moral make-up of the person. Even for laypeople, such an approach allows the use of schemes of perception of everyday life, what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'Class ethos', and to judge the politicians by criteria that help identify him or her as a 'good neighbour' or a 'sympathetic colleague'. This kind of show also allowed viewers to peep into the leader's private life, similar to readers of the 'people sections' in some magazines.

Anne Sinclair, the journalist responsible for *Questions à domicile*, also contributed to another change in the framing of politics on television with her weekly programme *Sept sur sept*. This third innovation can be called 'watering down', with reference to the homeopathic process by which something lethal (here, politics considered as a catastrophe for good ratings) may become a remedy when diluted. In *Sept sur sept* this 'watering down' was visible at three levels. It concerns the guests, who still included politicians but also, and more often, singers, sportsmen and women, actors, intellectuals and a whole set of famous media personalities. The 'watering down' also concerned the agenda, determined by the events of the previous week. This gave the journalist the power to ignore for the most part the insiders' views of politics, and to suggest the topics for conversation herself. The illustration of the week's events by a series of short films also gave the programme an important visual dynamic, designed to prevent lengthy monologues (called 'tunnels' by journalists).

This new device also served to lighten the very nature of the questions: for example, on one occasion Anne Sinclair asked Minister Jack Lang: 'Do you sometimes sing under the shower?'

The most audacious of these new framing devices was certainly the one elaborated by the journalist Guillaume Durand on the private channel La Cinq. In *Les Absents ont toujours tort*, created in 1991, more than a hundred guests (politicians, but also artists and 'ordinary people') were brought together against a backdrop inspired by the House of Commons. The matters discussed were a mixture of political issues and current affairs ('Is the Left dead?', 'The return of Puritanism?'). Including emotional outbursts, often provocative and mixing musical interludes with discussion, this programme generated passionate verbal fights, creating unusual scenes of guests losing their control and becoming very emotional. This innovation generated fierce debate on the media, and even a parliamentary debate on the programme's negative effects on the image of politics, just a few weeks after its launch.

But by the beginning of the 1990s, on balance these initiatives appeared rather disappointing for their instigators. With the exception of the success of *L'Heure de vérité* until 1990 and the consistently good ratings of *Sept sur sept* (which also owed its success to its scheduling on Sundays at 7 p.m.), none of these new programmes was able to secure high ratings. This failure was sanctioned by moves to late night slots, or even by the complete disappearance of some programmes (*Questions à domicile*, *Les Absents ont toujours tort*). As many political journalists claim to be the guardians and teachers of democracy, one may wonder if they achieved what they had hoped through the innovations described here. Does the ability of a politician to react with warmth or emotion to a report on an earthquake, or to answer humorously to a 'light' question, add anything important to civic education and information? Is it likely that by disclosing the private life of a politician, by emphasizing a psychological or moral line of questioning, that the less aware of viewers are in any way provided with what they lack: i.e. knowledge of the objective mechanisms at the heart of the political field and the political schemes of perception?

The presidential campaign of 1995: a transitional period?

The 1990s can therefore be described as a period of uncertainty in the search for framing devices able to amass large audiences for political debate on television. While *Sept sur sept* remained the legacy of the experiments of the 1980s, the trend now was dominated by a return to

classical forms of interaction between journalists and politicians and the restoration of debates on esoteric issues requiring from viewers a real interest in politics. This crisis of political programming on television was visible in the behaviour of the politicians themselves, who showed a clear preference for invitations to appear on the evening news bulletins at 8 p.m., which were more likely to guarantee good ratings than the now rather stigmatized political programmes. Only extraordinary political events, such as the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, returned to prime-time the mighty machinery of the long political debate — in this particular case, in the great amphitheatre of the Sorbonne.

The presidential election of 1995 thus appears to be a key moment. Television cannot for long stay out of the forum of French political life. To be the top channel for election coverage became *the* goal in the competition between networks. It brought symbolic prestige and attracted politicians to special election programmes and news bulletins; it was important to be known as *the* election channel, where important statements were released. For the leading channel TF1, a specific constraint was added. Considered as politically biased and behaving unfairly, its political desk was being severely criticized. Many commentators judged its coverage of politics as biased towards the current Prime Minister and candidate, Balladur. The anchorman Poivre d'Arvor, a living symbol of the network, was accused of faking an interview with Castro and was tried for receiving illicit gifts from a private society.

This key moment condenses all the contradictions illustrated by our survey of the 1980s. Does a channel want to concentrate election coverage exclusively to its news bulletins? If so, does it not risk being accused of not giving sufficient air time to the presidential ritual and public discussion? Should a network decide to come back to classical and serious/esoteric political discussions? But the risk then is a switch by the viewers to other networks. Should the journalists try to invent more interesting framing devices, to pay attention to the characters in the contest, as it was often said that this presidential election was a fight between '30-year-old friends' from the same party? But such a choice encounters one more risk: being accused of 'trivializing' the campaign and behaving like a tabloid.

As I try to show, though these hundred days of debates did not reveal a magic formula, linking good ratings and the ideal of a pedagogy of democracy, they do offer, perhaps, important evidence to consider sociologically the contradictions inherent in the mediatization of politics on television.

Framing strategies

How did the six French channels cover the presidential campaign? To answer this question I first offer a brief presentation of the six French networks and their choices. The analysis then focuses on the opposing strategies of the two biggest channels, the private TF1 and the public France 2. Finally, I pay attention to the programming of the smaller channels, which, despite their much poorer ratings, sometimes played a significant role in the campaign coverage, as illustrated by the success of Canal Plus's daily satirical programme, *Les Guignols de l'info*.

The actors

Privatized in 1986, TF1 secured a leading position in the market over the next decade, even if its programming is criticized as too 'commercial' by some. TF1 consistently takes about 40 percent of the market share in the ratings. Its evening news achieves the same ratings, way ahead of the biggest of the two state-owned stations, France 2 (25 percent). This dominant position means that nearly all the important statements made by political leaders are made on this channel.

The main rival of TF1 for information are the two state-owned networks, France 2 and France 3. France 2 is the public service flagship. France 3 has lower ratings, despite the success of its regional news at 7 p.m. The public service channel experiences a specific double-bind. It must show its ability to reach the same audience share as the private channel TF1, and must at the same time prove the ability of public service broadcasting — a hazy and often criticized notion — to broadcast a more ambitious kind of civic debate.

Three smaller networks also took part in the campaign's coverage. The two private networks, M6 and Canal Plus, have low market shares (approximately 5 percent and 10 percent respectively) and do not really compete with the other channels in terms of their information programmes. M6 invested the least in the coverage of the campaign, with only three special issues of its magazine programme *Zone interdite*. The subscription channel, Canal Plus, broadcast a daily satirical show, inspired by the British *Spitting Image*. This mock news bulletin ridiculed political and media professionals. The show worked as the network's shop-window (and was for this reason not scrambled); it was most popular among viewers under 30 years of age and among educated groups. It also obtained important coverage in the written press. Over four months, the main issue on this programme was the campaign and its progress, to such an extent that a controversy broke out after the victory of Jacques Chirac.

Was the image of Chirac's puppet (presented as a loser, a crazy but good guy, betrayed by all his friends) one of the keys to his victory, provoking a kind of underdog effect? Finally, there was the Franco-German public channel Arte, often criticized as the intellectuals' television, which gave very little air time to the campaign, inviting candidates on only twice.

TF1: the 'minimum strategy'

TF1's strategy was the result of its dominant position. Politicians automatically come on to this channel. Briefly summarized, the channel's strategy rests on two factors: to keep any innovation and extension of the time dedicated to politics to a *minimum*, and to achieve *maximum* audiences for its special campaign programmes.

This strategy made use of the existing political programmes on the channel, and can be illustrated by the choice of guests in *Sept sur sept*. Usually, politicians make up no more than 47 percent of the guests (Le Roux, 1993: 124). From January to April, this weekly show only invited politicians on. This allowed, without any change in the programme's usual format, to put up 10 guests in an interactive situation, resisting the risk of broadcasting soap-box-style speeches. As already noted, the agenda of this programme was based on commentary of the previous week's events, illustrated by video clips. This allowed the journalist Anne Sinclair to keep control of the issues and to escape from the routine of the political 'canned speech'. To illustrate how the staff at TF1 managed to strike a balance between the imperatives of the campaign coverage and the priority given to ratings, on two Sundays the choice was either to broadcast a Grand Prix or to keep the timing of *Sept sur sept* unchanged. On both occasions, the programme was cancelled to ensure high ratings for motorsport.

The efforts of TF1 were not limited to the mobilization of existing programmes. The channel created a special programme, *Face à la une*, broadcast just after the evening news bulletin. As its title suggests, the programme is based on a discussion, a sober scenario, between the political team (the anchor and three or four journalists, one of whom follows the guest's campaign) and a politician. With more than 20 editions, *Face à la une* was the most frequently broadcast of all television programmes. It also enjoyed high ratings, with figures sometimes exceeding 11 million viewers and a 40 percent market share. These figures illustrate the success of TF1's audience maximization strategy. The data also, at first sight, seem to contradict our analysis relating to the channel's strategy to limit broadcasting time for politics, but one should first note that the length of

this programme varied between only 14 and 23 minutes! Such brevity confirms our analysis about the minimal time investment in politics by this network. In fact, the total time for the long *Face à la une* series amounted to half the total time of the ten *La France en direct* broadcasts on the rival channel France 2. Journalist at TF1 Robert Narnias betrayed this little secret when he explained that in this kind of short programme politicians 'can speak during prime-time without having to compete with a movie, and most of all without enough time to become boring' (*Télérama*, No. 2360, 8 April 1995). One may add that what is described as good fortune for the guest is simultaneously at least as profitable for the network — it was able to broadcast its usual programmes and advertisement slots as early as 9 p.m., with a short delay of 10 minutes, without loss of audience. With the programme sandwiched between an abridged news bulletin and the main movie or show of the night, such scheduling also suggests we reconsider the meaning of ratings. Do most viewers choose to watch a political interview? Or are they just keeping the television on, waiting for the film or washing the dishes? The answer would need an ethnographic approach. However, the framing of the interactions in the studio invites reflection on the possible receptions, to discern between ratings and the real degree of intellectual involvement on the part of the viewers.

We made a complete list of the questions asked during the seven issues of our *Face à la une* sample,² and tried to classify them, according to topic. This classification is weakened by the difficulty of finding unambiguous themes for some of the journalist's interventions. It is further complicated by the fact that the politician's answer may shift to a topic different from the one suggested by the journalist. A question like 'What would you do during the first six months, if you are elected?' could elicit a speech on institutions, unemployment or economics. So, the figures indicated in Table 1 must not be considered as a perfect reflection of the conversations, though they do give reliable indications on the ranking of different issues.

Whatever the weaknesses of our classification, the main result is clear. A majority of questions dealt with 'horse-race politics'. This term includes questions about campaign tactics, poll results, prognostics, alliances, statements about other candidates, internal party splits, sound bites against rivals and speculations on who would form members of the cabinet after the election. It includes an enjoyable dimension (Who's going to win? How will the guest react to a rival's provocation?) and is able to entertain large audiences. Many of these questions, however, dealt with the insiders' visions and stakes concerning politics. A real under-

France 2: the 'maximin effect'?

The main public network, France 2, used the same simple method as TF1: mobilizing its traditional political programmes for coverage of the campaign. *L'Heure de vérité*, broadcast on Sundays at noon, welcomed candidates in a style rather similar to *Face à la une*, with a specialized guest journalist among the interviewers, informed on economic or cultural issues, who could enlarge on the topics discussed. A Saturday morning programme, organizing a debate between political journalists, also dealt with the campaign. Its title changed from *Revue de presse* to *Revue de campagne*.

But the key to the France 2 strategy rested on its use of prime-time. The tactic here was very different to that of TF1, by the choice of a (comparatively) maximum time investment in special political programmes, suggesting what J.G. Blumler calls a 'sacerdotal attitude'; thinking of 'an election as an intrinsically important event which entitled it to substantial coverage as of right' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 118) with the risk of attracting a poorer audience. A first innovation is the broadcasting, every other Tuesday, of *Carnets de campagne* (Campaign's Flyer), which had a style rather like that of *Face à la une*. But the strategic weapon was a new programme, *La France en direct*, 90 minutes long, broadcast over 10 weeks, between 9 p.m. and 10.30 p.m. Therefore *La France en direct* alone accounted for 15 hours of political programmes during prime-time. Because of its ambition and its new style, this show deserves special attention.

The structure of the show was as follows. A series of dialogues with experts³ in the studio; a straight debate between the guest and an opponent, lasting 20 minutes; and finally another series of questions from political journalists. In fact, a more precise description would be to speak of a succession of between 12 and 15 different moments. This programme included an initial presentation by journalist Bruno Masure, who coordinated; one or two videotaped reports; a description of the guest by two friends; and dialogue between various experts and with 'ordinary French citizens', gathered in a cafe in some big city. *La France en direct* presented itself as a controlled patchwork. It offered nearly all the sorts of interactions tested in political television shows since the 1980s: questions from journalists, from experts, from 'ordinary people', sometimes debate between politicians, portraiture, analysis and comments on reports. The guests were required to answer questions in many different ways: personal questions from Bruno Masure, political questions from the journalists, thematic interrogations from the experts, whose selection allowed the

Table 1 Topics covered on *Face à la une*

	N	%
1. Horse-race politics	114	58
2. Institutions (constitution, 'impartiality' of the state apparatus)	20	10
3. Personality, tastes, lifestyle of the politician	13	7
4. Unemployment policies	6	7
5. Economics, taxes	6	7
6. The welfare state (social security, wages, AIDS, exclusion)	6	7
7. International problems	2	
8. The EU, European policies	1	
9. Culture	0	
10. Education	0	
11. Various and not classified	28	

standing of these debates required the knowledge of the rules, the actors, sometimes even recent political history. Such knowledge — and even the simple fact of being interested in such discussions — is, of course, quite unequally spread among citizens (Gaxie, 1978). For example, the subject of 'institutions' dealt with questions on the duration of the presidential mandate, the 'impartiality' of the state and the power of technocrats, issues that all opinion polls revealed as poorly valued by most of the electorate. In actual fact, approximately only one-quarter of the questions (i.e. 'welfare', 'unemployment', 'economics') concerned problems which appeared in the polls as the most pressing in the minds of voters, and especially among the working class, those considered least interested in politics.

Such an orientation of questions reflects a very classical representation of political journalism, inherited from the press, which assumes a familiarity with (and an interest in) the actors, issues and rules of political life, and is strongly dependent upon the hierarchy of problems within the political field. This orientation also reflects the situation of the political desk of TF1, which, in the face of its critics, was keen to emphasize the professional qualities of its journalists. The team's director, Gerard Carreyrou, expressed it succinctly, in a statement that was also an implicit criticism of the strategy employed by the rival network, France 2:

It's the journalist's job to question politicians. Give this job over to the caretaker or the baker, and it's a betrayal of our profession. We have had experience with panels. People content themselves by repeating what journalists have said . . . and they often panic when having to ask their own questions. (*Télérama*, No. 2366)

team to highlight particular matters (questions on AIDS from a doctor, culture from a film producer, urban policies from an architect and so on). All these voices seemed to be ascribed to an implicit division of work.

One must emphasize the channels' intention to bring people not specialized in political affairs into the political debate. One of the instigators of the programme, Guy Birenbaum, said:

We wanted to create a direct relationship between politicians and citizens ... this is the vocation, the difference of public service. The problem of the ratings was not very important. Our first aim was to answer the question: where can people debate with the candidates?

The opening of the dialogue was effected through the presence of 'experts'. Among the 40 who spoke in the studio, one could identify 10 'intellectuals', 10 artists, five journalists (from areas other than politics), four trade union leaders, four employers and three specialists on opinion polls and political communication. The list of speakers would also include 45 people speaking from cafes around the country. The professions of these 'ordinary people' were mixed: students, teachers, unemployed and retired people, rural workers and employers. On this point, the factual observation is clear. France 2's innovation was a redistribution of the 'right to speak' rarely realized in the history of political programmes on French television. And these changes in the identity of speakers generate a clear change in the framing of questions. Table 2, following the same topic classifications as Table 1, tries to understand this, and to suggest some comparisons.⁴

It shows first a clear decrease in the percentage of 'horse-race' questions asked; this is explained mainly by the contribution of experts and citizens in the cafes, since the behaviour of political journalists was, in this respect, still very similar to what happened on TF1. A second difference is visible in the ascendance of topics absent on TF1. The problems of culture, education, Europe and of the ethics of politics, briefly dealt with on TF1, make up 17 percent of the questions on this programme, mainly due to the questions of the experts in the studio. A third difference concerns — thanks to the questions tabled from the cafes and experts — the strengthening of 'concrete' questions on economics, unemployment and its effects, and on AIDS and social security. The total is close to 30 percent, compared to a little over 20 percent on TF1. Finally, if the emphasis on questions about the politician's character, tastes and so on is higher than on TF1 (14 percent vs 7 percent), such a difference is largely explained by the humorous style of questioning characteristic of host Bruno Masure and by the inclusion of two experts in

	Political journalists (total time: 94 minutes)	B. Masure (total time: 72 minutes)	Debate: politician vs guest (total time: 72 minutes)	Experts in the studio (total time: 120 minutes)	Ordinary people in the cafes (total time: 77 minutes)	Total
Horse-race politics (polls, tactics, alliances)	53 (56%)	14 (28%)	5 (15%)	6 (10%)	4 (14%)	82 (52%)
Questions about personality, tastes, lifestyles	9 (10%)	17 (34%)	0	11 (17%)	0	37 (14%)
Unemployment	2 (2%)	2 (4%)	10 (30%)	8 (13%)	12 (43%)	34 (13%)
Economics, taxes	6 (7%)	1 (2%)	7 (21%)	9 (14%)	1 (3%)	24 (9%)
Welfare (social security, wages, AIDS, exclusion)	1 (1%)	5 (10%)	2 (6%)	4 (6%)	6 (21%)	18 (7%)
Politics and ethics	7 (8%)	3 (6%)	2 (6%)	6 (10%)	0	18 (7%)
Educational policies	0	0	0	9 (14%)	3 (11%)	12 (5%)
European Union and policies	0	1 (2%)	3 (9%)	1 (1.5%)	1 (3%)	6 (3%)
Institutions	2 (2%)	2 (4%)	0	2 (3%)	0	6 (3%)
Culture	0	0	0	5 (8%)	0	5 (2%)
International	1 (1%)	1 (2%)	0	1 (1.5%)	0	3 (1%)
Various: defence, immigration, law and order	5 (5.5%)	4 (8%)	4 (12%)	1 (1.5%)	1 (3%)	13 (5%)
Total	84 (100%)	50 (100%)	33 (100%)	63 (100%)	28 (100%)	258 (100%)

Table 2 Who asked what on *Le France en direct* (France 2)

our sample both asking 'personal' questions.⁵ This variance must also be seen in relation to the need for pauses and lighter moments during a programme lasting an hour and a half, without any commercial break.

The result of this scheduling suggests the notion of the 'maximin effect'. The staff of France 2 chose to broadcast politics during prime-time, to raise awareness of the political debate, in a bid to gain satisfactory ratings. This choice was risky compared to broadcasting a movie. Finally, if the ratings were not a failure, they still remained much lower than those of TF1. The highest was achieved by Le Pen (19 percent of the market share, more than 4 million viewers), the lowest by Communist candidate Hue (10 percent). These were half the ratings achieved by *Fare à la une*, even if it is possible to think, on a qualitative level, that the audience of France 2 was showing a higher investment in the programme, by choosing it over the possibility of watching an entertainment programme on another channel.

The smaller channels

On the other networks the supply of political programmes was much lower than that of TF1 and France 2. On the public network France 3, the current affairs magazine *La Marche du siècle*, considered as 'high-brow' and serious, changed the majority of its guests to politicians. The organization of the debate was quite classic. The journalist Jean Marie Cavada (more a generalist than a political specialist) spoke with a candidate facing him, in the presence of a silent studio audience. Lasting a hundred minutes, the conversation was only interrupted by two videotaped reports. During the first 20 minutes, the questions were mainly structured around issues about the guest's personality. Prime Minister Balladur was asked, for instance, 'A presidential election is an affective story at least as a project for the country... a love story... Did the campaign change your personality, make you less reserved?' (*La Marche du siècle*, 5 April 1995). Then the discussion dealt with the candidate's manifesto for half an hour. The last part of the discussion concerned international politics, and the conception of the presidential role. The framing of *La Marche du siècle* used a rather deferential approach to politics. It treated politics as something noble and important as shown by the decision to speak specifically about the institution of the presidency and foreign policy, virtually ignored elsewhere. The programme was also characterized by its ostentatious rejection of the format of ordinary television magazine shows. No 'gimmicks' here, just two reports and a poll about the attributes and weaknesses of the politician. Predictably, the

ratings of *La Marche du siècle* were poor, its audience largely made up of educated people and members of the upper classes.

The Franco-German channel, Arte, limited its coverage of the campaign to five programmes. The candidates were invited on two Monday nights. Each had to make a random choice from a set of photographs and then use them to speak about culture and Europe. Finally, on another three Mondays, *Paroles de citoyens* (Citizens' Speech) tried to go further than *La France en direct*, letting 'ordinary citizens' talk about the state, culture, Europe and so forth, in the absence of any politicians.

M6 offered the least amount of coverage, inviting the most important candidates, on only three occasions, on its Sunday night current affairs programme, *Zone interdite*. The programme was altered to focus on the personal and psychological portraits of the candidates. The framing was completely structured by an investigation into personal tastes and psychology (which were ingredients in the trends of the 1980s). E. Balladur understood the logic of this framing very well when he said to his interviewer, 'I have realized that we are not here to talk about politics' (*Zone interdite*, 26 March 1995). The aim is to reveal a 'man', more than a candidate. Opinions were sought from his friends, neighbours and even from Balladur's pork-butcher in Deauville, who had revealed the Prime Minister had a taste for pork galantine! Such framing owes a lot to the position of M6, with no big news desk, unable to compete with the big machinery of the leading networks, and so forced to heretic (and cheap) strategies to find an original slot.

The Canal Plus strategy was, like its rivals, two-sided. The network made use of its Saturday evening unscrambled current affairs magazine, *L'Hédo*. Hosted by the (generalist) journalist Michel Field (previously professor of philosophy), *L'Hédo* had begun to invite politicians by the end of 1994. Several themes were prepared during the campaign to interview the candidates on. For the duration of an hour, the guest was subjected to questions from an audience of young people, in a relaxed atmosphere, sometimes close to that of a students' general assembly. The exchanges followed a very particular style. On the one hand, the discussion was very direct: questions were asked with emotion, sometimes anger, and the style of Michel Field was quite irreverent (for instance he once asked Chirac whether he had to say on immigration was not a 'total mess'). At the same time, the atmosphere was unusually relaxed for this kind of programme: the vocabulary was less formal, there was laughter, jokes and frequent interruptions from the host. Let us also remember the importance of the satirical programme on Canal Plus, *Les Guignols de l'Info*. Paying great attention to the tiniest events of the

campaign, the puppets of the *Les Guignols* attracted 3 million viewers each evening, and 4 million during the Sunday repeat. This programme ridiculed the demagogy, the psychological flaws of the politicians, their career-lust, and constantly tried to dismantle their efforts to gain good media coverage and to reveal the obsequious behaviour of journalists (those at TF1 were especially at the receiving end). Despite its marginality, *Les Guignols* was the programme attracting the most attention in much of the print media. It could even be said that the puppet-characters had been 'hijacked' by some of the candidates and their supporters (especially Chirac's) as a campaign weapon, or used by journalists from the press as an interpretative tool to make sense of Chirac's unexpected success (Collovald and Neveu, 1996).

Towards a repertoire of symbolic interactions?

The variety of the programmes broadcast by the French channels during these hundred days of campaigning was like a kaleidoscope, because of the huge differences in the framing of the political debate. However, it seems possible to introduce some order, to make sense of these differences thanks to the notion of 'framing'. This notion is a legacy of interactionist sociology (Goffman, 1991) brought to media studies by authors such as Iyengar and Kinder (1987) or Gansson (1995) and Gansson and Modigliani (1989). I use it here in a different way, more to suggest ways of organizing a political debate on television than to analyse the coverage of a specific topic among the political stakes. Four elements can help to define our notion of 'framing': the political debate on television.

The first is a spatial element. Where is the programme recorded (studio, private or public place)? How is this space designed? One can suggest three possible situations. The studio as a place of 'professional' interaction where specialists, with special knowledge of politics, question politicians: the studio very often takes on a clinical aspect, the aesthetics of an operating theatre (sober decoration, numerous screens). The studio (or the politician's home in *Questions à domicile*) may also be constructed as a less formal, more sociable place. The French programme *Droit de réponse* in the early 1980s was broadcast from a studio designed like a French café, with small tables full of glasses and a smoky atmosphere. The studio may also be structured to create the impression of a forum, a space organized for a large debate: a semicircle in *La France en direct*, or a mock House of Commons in *Les Absents*.

A second dimension of framing refers to the type of relationship between the participants. This can vary, from the strain of the judicial-

style cross-questioning by 'a court of distinguished journalists' (as Minister Lang said), to a kind of competition, symbolized by various types of debates, or even to a friendly or intimate conversation with journalists.

Third, framing must be considered through the identity, number and variety of the participants. Is the debate organized by one or several journalists? Which kind of journalist will appear (generalist, political specialist, other)? Will the programme mobilize the presence of experts? Will it allow 'public opinion' to express itself? And how — by statistical devices (polls) or by direct interview? The television producer can choose interactions mobilizing this whole range of participants, or just some of them. A genre called in France *revue de presse* (press review) is simply a discussion between different political journalists.

Finally, a fourth level of framing is, to borrow a photographic metaphor, focal length. The framing may be compared with a 'close-up' when it focuses for instance on a psychological investigation of the guest's personality. It may take a 'wide angle' shot in discussing political positions, or even move to a wider, 'panoramic' discussion with the integration of a number of current events.

The combinations between these elements make an almost endless repertoire — to borrow this notion from Charles Tilly (1976) — of debate frames possible. But, in fact, three kinds of constraints led producers and journalists to use a rather limited range of debate frames. A first parameter is what we call the 'media grammar'. This refers to the coherence between the show and its scenery (one does not organize a forum in a living-room), and the expectations that television viewers associate with a particular kind of framing. A second factor is audience strategies within a particular competitive situation. We have suggested their influence on the process of innovation in the 1980s. A last set of variables relates to the balance of power inside the figuration (and in each of its components) described earlier. A good example is given by the words of TF1 political editor-in-chief Carreyrou, when he considers giving too much room to ordinary people as a threat to the journalist's job. He also explains the growing scarcity of direct debate between politicians as due to the reluctance of older journalists, who are haunted by the memory of the 1960s where their only role in such debates was to control for equal access to air time between politicians.

Applied to our material, the concept of framing suggests four main genres. A first set of programmes illustrates the 'classical political journalism' frame: a studio with 'clinical' scenery, the interaction structured by the interview of a politician by several journalists, questions centred on horse-race politics. This frame can be seen in *Faire à la une*

(TF1), and also in *Carnets de campagne* (France 2). A second frame, 'current affairs', is based on the interview of the politician in a studio by a journalist (who is not necessarily a political specialist). It differs from the previous genre by the extension of the discussion to a wide range of news topics, by the use of film reports and of polls taken for the programme. This frame is used by *Sépt sur sept* (TF1), *La Marche du siècle* (France 3) and, to a lesser degree, in *L'Heure de vérité* (France 2). *Zone interdite* (M6) illustrates the third frame, 'psychological investigation'. This approach, which was an ingredient in some programmes of the 1980s, becomes the centre-piece of the whole show. A generalist journalist conducts a portrait-style interview with the politician, making use of polls, reports and interviews. The most classic political issues are almost completely absent. *La France en direct* (France 2) and *L'Hédo* (Canal Plus) are both examples of the last frame, which we refer to as 'forum'. This model reuses many fragments from older frames (reports, polls, witnessing, face-to-face debate), but it is more than a mixed genre. The studio is designed to suggest a gutsy confrontation between the politician and a whole set of interviewers. It borrows from the 'current affairs' frame the strategy of trying to deal with more issues, but profoundly changes the structure of the questioning, by the importance given to new actors, experts and ordinary people, whose involvement shifts the definition of the legitimate protagonist to the public sphere. This last frame, giving the role of protagonist to the 'ordinary people', and employed in *La France en direct*, leads us on to essential questions about the definition of the actors and their roles in television political programmes, about the very nature of political journalism in television.

The crisis of television political journalism

A. figuration revisited: 'ordinary citizens', experts and political journalists

The legitimacy given to new actors (experts, laypersons) brings about a strong shift in the type of questions and framing of the political debate on television, and in the role of the political journalist. One of the most important effects of the changes visible in a programme like *La France en direct* is to allow the delegitimation of political journalists by new expressions of 'public opinion'. The mobilization of 'public opinion' by polls, phone-ins or computer networks is no longer a revolution. But the France 2 programme takes a leap beyond previous developments. When questions are asked by 'ordinary French people' in cafes, 'public opinion' is embodied, endowing the statistical abstractions with faces, names

and occupations. These individuals express, through their questions and comments, emotions, worries, anger and hope. The mode of expression of public opinion radically changes. It is no longer a statistical aggregate (56 percent of French voters think that . . .), or a speech passed on by a journalist (Mrs X from Bordeaux called us to ask if . . .). Public opinion is embodied in real people, able to express themselves through their questions and beliefs. The fact that these interviewers constantly change within and between each edition also serves to embody the diversity of society.⁶ The very symbolism of the cafe, as a place to meet friends, of rest and leisure, also serves to transport ordinary life to the studio. These changes lead us to wonder if the traditional notion of 'public opinion' is accurate. The various journalists from France 2 who speak in the studio or in the cafes never use the term itself. Most of the time phrases such as 'French people', 'French interested in politics', 'who feel concerned about the debate' are used. The vocabulary can also be related to occupation, age, places of habitation: 'Workers', 'youths', 'students', 'business people', 'people from Le Havre'. The use of these vague terms is a way of not giving these people a 'statistical' representation (as would be the case in a poll). It also refers to a recent shift in the presentation of opinion in the media, which adds a new representation to the scientific model of 'public opinion' (polls): it becomes more emotional, more individualized, more adapted to the style of 'neo-television' and to the beliefs of television professionals concerning the primacy of emotion over rationality in this medium. The vocabulary used reflects this gradual restructuring of the journalistic representation of social concerns from the abstract and scientific model of the public opinion derived from polls to the embodied representation which is closer to 'life', more expressive, linked more to the logic of the direct witness ('what people say' as soft public opinion).

One should take care, however, before describing these comments from the 'ordinary French person' as a pure expression from the heart of society. As Guy Birenbaum of France 2 explains: 'The idea was to create an open space of expression . . . but a televisual space, still kept under control'. This control first involves casting. A few days before the broadcast, journalists go to a city and recruit candidates from public places who want to ask questions. They are videotaped. The team selects the 'best', those most able to talk about topics considered interesting and the most 'typical'. The social structure of the population make-up of the 'ordinary French people' speaking from the cafes is very significant: 18 students (40 percent), nine community leaders (20 percent), five senior citizens, three teachers, three unemployed people and three peasants. The make-up

overrepresents the young, the educated, the urban citizen, and underrepresents the worker, the senior citizen, the non-professional. Control of events is also present in the fact that the journalist in the studio knows what questions are to come ('Mr X is about to speak to us about...'). A colleague in the cafe also maintains control by choosing who is going to speak. With only a few exceptions, the interviewees are not allowed to respond to the politician's answer. So, obviously, it is very easy to react to questions from a prerecorded speech; and of the total 77 minutes of debate from the cafes, more than two-thirds are dedicated to answers.

In this triangular figuration, how does one classify the 'experts' present in the studio? As the embodiment of 'soft public opinion'? Or rather as examples of a voice of 'the people'? Should we say, on the other hand, that they must be amassed into one large group of specialists in the questioning of politicians, thanks to their expert status? The diversity of occupations, statuses and performances of these guests precludes one, single answer. For a few of these experts, identification as the simple witness, as the voices of public opinion, seems the most logical. Such is the situation when some of them are not able to present themselves very coherently or seem mesmerized by the cameras (like skiing champion Carole Merle). Such is the case when some guests express their feelings, views and emotions clumsily, for instance when the film-maker Mathieu Kassowitz angrily commented to Alain Juppé that he could not trust politicians anyway. But a majority of these experts should be considered as belonging to the 'pole' of the figuration occupied by the journalists. As specialist political journalists, these experts speak with authority. The legitimacy of their speech rests on a specialized knowledge (or practical experience) of the social world. Such is the situation of members of the scientific community (sociologists, economists, etc.), or economic leaders, or a large proportion of people from the arts when they are debating questions linked to their occupations (like the interview between filmmaker Jean Jacques Annaud and Minister Sarkozy on quotas of EU-produced programmes on European television channels).

Finally, one should note there is a paradox here, evident also in the process of selection of the 'ordinary people' from the cafes. The presence of these experts in the studio is supposed to enlarge the scope of speakers, to bring variety and spontaneity. Now, observation of these programmes shows that the 'good' performances (the ability to ask clear questions, to argue, to contradict the politician) are often made by 'professionals' in public speaking (trade union representatives, academics and so on). This suggests how the logic of the televised spectacle still requires a kind of

professionalism, even for those whose presence is supposed to deny a media professionalism, normally just associated with journalists.

The clearest result of this embodiment of public opinion and the integration of experts among the questioners is the creation of a very uncomfortable situation for political journalists. They are pushed back to the end of the programme, when the audience ratings tend to fall. According to the kind of questions asked by 'French people' and experts, which often deal with very concrete problems, or issues neglected by journalists (e.g. education and culture), the esoteric dimension of what anchor Masure calls 'political questions asked by political journalists' becomes very obvious. Journalists become inextricably linked to insider issues, issues reserved for the professionals of politics. This weakens their pretensions to be the translators of the public's worries and concerns. It also effects the balance of power between journalists and politicians. Most of the time, 'public opinion' derived from polls can be a weapon in journalists' hands. They can challenge what a guest is saying through reference to some new poll, contradicting the guest or showing that her or his policies are not popular. But this changes with the embodiment of 'public opinion'. Four out of the 10 politicians invited to *La France en direct* cite the questions and comments of 'ordinary people' to reply to the journalists' questions. For instance, when a magazine journalist questioned him about the existence of a 'Balladur state', Chirac answered:

The questions of the people [in the cafes] are those that I am asked every day in the street. We are entering into a new kind of discussion... here is a set of questions that I have never heard, I certainly never heard during the campaign. There is something wrong. We have a great media which can reach all French people. They hope that through this media they will get concrete answers to the problems, to the questions they think of... The questions you are talking about here are questions which they never think of. (6 April 1995)

Inventing one more 'new journalism'?

An analysis of the coverage of the 1995 campaign brings us to question the professional identity and role of political journalism on television. Let us consider first the classical political journalism frame used by TF1 in *Face à la une*. This strategic choice of broadcasting may seem very clever. It minimizes the risk of low ratings. It guarantees politicians large audiences. It is also very comfortable for political journalists, whose professional practice strays rooted in a traditional definition, allowing them to give a demonstration of their status as both insiders and experts

in politics. But since the end of the presidential campaign, politics has been largely withdrawn from this channel's screens, at least on prime-time. Of course, politicians and ministers are still guests on the daily news bulletins. Anne Sinclair was still inviting leading politicians to her weekly *Sept sur sept* until the first term of 1997. But none of the network's other political journalists has had access to a specific slot for political programming. The 'classical' frame, efficient in maximizing the ratings of politics in a campaign period, works also like a trap. Beyond a campaign or moments of crisis, it can no longer offer the thrills, or cock-fight, of political rivalries. Its audience is limited to the enlightened happy few. This framing entails a double restriction in time (election periods, crises) and space in the television coverage of politics. Political journalists are seeing their territory slowly shrinking to the few minutes of news they can still grasp, after a struggle, on the news desk.

Considered from journalists' point of view, the 'current affairs' framing seems a reasonable compromise between the imperatives of ratings and the preservation of a professional identity. The extension of the discussion topics and a bit of 'tabloidization' (through the increasing use of images from outside the studio) seem a reasonable price to pay to keep a large audience. But led by the kaleidoscope of events to speak of unfamiliar issues, sometimes to behave like a generalist, the political journalist is weakening his or her expert position. The increasing importance of this frame offers generalist journalists, even hosts or commenters as well, the opportunity to claim control of these debates. Michel Field, editor of *L'Hebdo*, sees the very existence of specialized political journalists as 'abhorrent': 'it means that politics has lost its reason for organizing the polity'. He suggested that his own programme created 'a place where political speech is endangered . . . one must revisit all the stereotypes of television information' (*Le Monde*, 9-10 October 1994). It is highly significant that since 1997 the Sunday programme *Sept sur sept* from TF1, which had made political journalist Anne Sinclair famous, has been replaced by a new programme, *Public*, hosted by Michel Field.

There is no real need to argue about the 'psychological investigation' frame as the skills of a political journalist are not very useful in a discussion about a politician's musical tastes, hobbies and lifestyle. And with respect to the 'forum' frame, we have already discussed how the very nature of the questions and debates introduced by laypersons and experts has served to threaten and devalue political journalists' roles.

It would be foolhardy to prophesize the imminent disappearance of political journalism from our television screens. More reasonably, one can say that broadcast political journalism is in a state of crisis. On the one

hand journalists can go on with the 'classical' framing of political debates. Here, political journalism on television focuses on horse-race politics and insider debates. Its target is a minority audience, profoundly interested in politics. The price for this conservative strategy would probably be a restriction of the programmes to campaign periods, or exile to late night slots. It may therefore mean a drastic cutback among political journalist staff. On the other hand, political journalism on television may take the risk and tow the line of the forum frame, 'talk show-style', in order to bring back larger audiences to political debates on television and to give new forms of political participation and socialization a chance. But such a change requires a new breed of journalists, and once more threatens the old guard of 'classical' political journalists. Such a dilemma is visible in most western countries. Its management will vary from one country to another and scholars will need comparative approaches. The French case emphasizes two points (Neveu, 1997).

The first point suggests that the obvious development of the 'forum' frame in many countries does not mean the end of political journalism, but a new definition of the professional identities and know-how of journalists dealing with politics. To put it in a nutshell, a 'new' political journalism, operating in a 'forum logic', requires from journalists a better knowledge of a larger set of issues (e.g. immigration, welfare, education), far beyond the insider stories of the political class. This new political journalism will also require the ability to identify experts and to cooperate with them. It also requires an adaptation of the journalist's language to be able to interact with citizens who are not professionals of representation, whose questions come from their everyday experiences more than from a strategic analysis of the subtleties of politics. This new definition of the job reduces the importance of a technical and esoteric knowledge of political struggle. It also calls for a style of political journalism which would be both more investigative, more linked to a sociological view of social problems. It would need highly educated journalists, able to work on a variety of issues and skilled in coordinating complex interactions between the various participants in the television studio.

The second point suggests the fruitfulness of our figuration scheme, as both the possible forms and the chances of success of the forum scenario are directly linked to the balance of powers between the network of actors in the figuration. The fact is crystal clear when considering the struggles between media professionals. In the French case, the struggle for and against the forum model is directly linked to both a professional conflict (*animateurs/hosts vs journalists*) and a generational shift, opposing

the growing army of young graduate journalists to the old guard of the 50-something political journalists, who are very reluctant to hand the microphone over to the baker or 'caretaker', as Carreyrou said.

The cleavages in the political field and the strategies employed by candidates also found their expression in the behaviour of politicians faced with this new kind of debate. Some of them (as Chirac did in 1995) may find in the 'populist' mood of some forums and talk shows, a space of expression perfectly fitted to their own discourse. Other politicians cannot hide their reluctance in front of what they feel to be a threat to the deferential tone of the old-style debate. The experts and intellectuals will also be considered by journalists both as valuable spokespersons and as unfair rivals, pedants, amateurs when facing media imperatives. Their contribution to these debate programmes will also depend on the ability of media professionals to give to (and teach) intellectuals opportunities of expression and discussion which do not give them the feeling of being trapped or manipulated, and to manage the difficult relationship between experts and laypersons in the same debate (Livingstone and Lundt, 1994).

Conclusion

The questions dealt with in this analysis of politics on French television are not specifically French. The questions posed by many American journalists after the presidential election of 1988 were very similar to those of their French colleagues. How does one escape horse-race politics? How does one frame political journalism to deal with issues effectively, beyond the insider debates between candidates' staff members (Cunningham, 1995; Eksterowicz, Roberts and Clark, 1998)? Changes in the mediatization of politics in the USA include the invitation of political leaders onto talk show programmes — such as *Larry King Live* on CNN — which is something rather different from the classical political interview. As Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch emphasize about recent trends in the UK and USA:

Two key features, however, can be welcomed. One is restoration of the ordinary citizen as a significant point of reference for political commentators and as properly an active participant in public discussion. . . . Another boon is the restoration of substance as a centrepiece of political communication. (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 219)

A comparative approach should try to identify the 'figurations' and structures of interdependencies specific to each national system, to understand how the balance of power between actors and how the cultural and

historical peculiarities lead to the success of particular frames and repertoires.

As Michael Schudson (1995) showed, the critique of the degeneration of political debate too often supposes the existence of an imaginary golden age of mass enlightenment. The evolution of politics on television has certainly done a lot of damage to what can be called, in the words of Baghehot and Durkheim, the 'sacred' dimension of politics. The debate frames which appeared in the 1980s gave considerable importance to a privatization of public figures (Sennet, 1974) and to a psychological investigation of politicians. The television coverage of politics has also generated strange mixtures of information and entertainment (Brandt, 1998) and given an increasing importance to the strength of emotion as opposed to a normative ideal of rational discussion. It is important to analyse and discuss this. But the researcher must also wonder if a polity ruled by the pure comparison of rational arguments ever existed anywhere else other than in Habermas's early works or in Neil Postman's enchanted tales of 'before television'?

If we agree with Blumler's invitation, concerning talk shows, 'to temper enthusiasm for this genre' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 219), whatever the biases of 'French people' and experts invited onto *La France en direct*, the new organization of debate induces an objective shift in the nature of the questions put to politicians. Heretic innovations and the inclusion of professionals other than the representatives of a high-brow political journalism are also able to invent a treatment of politics in the public sphere which will enlarge the circle of those interested by the understanding of collective issues.

Notes

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1. The sample comprises five (out of 10) *La France en direct* editions, seven (out of 24) *Face à la une*, two *La Marche du siècle*, two *L'Hebdo*, two *Zone interdite* and one *Carnets de campagne*. For another piece of research, I also analysed four weeks of *Les Guignols de l'Info*. The material for this study also includes the complete collection of the tapescripts from *La France en direct*.
2. The guests were R. Barre, J. Chéménade, V. Giscard d'Estaing, R. Hue, E. Léotard, J. Lang and P. Seguin.
3. From now on I use the English word 'expert' to translate the French word *personnalité* used by journalists. The word *personnalité* is very polysemic. It

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means both to be famous and to have an original personality. Here, it refers to guests who are selected for their skills or expertise (sociologists, physicians, business people), to guests considered as 'representative' (i.e. a trade union leader), or simply famous. These different kinds of experts are present in the studio with the politician. 'Ordinary French citizens' speak from cafes, outside the studio.

4. The sample is made up of five programmes (guests: M. Aubry, J. Chirac, L. Jospin, N. Sarkozy and P. de Villiers).

5. The novelist Irène Frain asked Jacques Chirac: 'The night of May the seventh, France may fall in your arms, are you going to behave with her like a lover or a husband? ... You seem, in this love, to have suffered a lot. Your face show the scars of a man who has suffered a lot and who finally holds the woman he loves in his arms. Isn't he going to be a little sleepy, to purr?' This situation is very different from the panel experiences where the same group of people come back regularly, a situation that often creates the paradox by which those who had been chosen as ordinary French citizens soon behave as if they were the representatives of the 'average French person' or 'average worker'. In a programme on the fifth channel, the man supposed to be 'the professional' on the television panel became so notorious that he was asked for his autograph when he took the plane to Paris to record the programme.

7. Even the cafes can be selected for their ability to contribute to 'good' television. Such was the case in the first broadcast of *La France en direct*, at Cavaillon, setting the debate in an old café listed as an historical monument!

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