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How the Quality Press Defines the World for Us: A Comparative Study of News Reporting on the Environment and Unemployment.

Abstract

To keep informed about political, economic or social events people will, in Western countries, turn to quality papers. The role played by those papers and mass media in general is crucial in the process of transmission of knowledge about the world. Particularly in a context marked by increasing uncertainty. Conditions of employment, the way we look at the environment has completely changed over the last decades creating a certain vagueness as to how to treat those issues. Media in such a context has the power to cut through uncertainties by setting up terms of the possible. But possibilities as expressed by the quality press are very much a function of values held by newspapers themselves. When newspapers belong to large media corporations those values are marked by priorities held by a corporate world, which are then presented as the only rational options possible.

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How the Quality Press Defines the World for Us: A Comparative Study of News Reporting on the Environment and Unemployment.

Introduction

This paper presents the result of a study of the reporting on the environment and unemployment in 8 quality papers published in Australia, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom. The significance of this study lies in the important role attributed to mass media in Western democracies. It is via mass media that people learn what is happening in their own country and in rest of the world. This is a crucial knowledge when it comes to participating in society and take on the political responsibilities inherent to living in a democracy. Media are also part of the field in which any public debate, not only will be held, but also its terms defined.

Why choose unemployment and the environment as an object of study? This choice is determined by a variety of reasons. First these issues have been named as major issues in election polls held in Europe as well as in Australia. Unemployment and the environment are also issues implying a choice about the type of society we want to live in. The increasing uncertainty surrounding issues such as the environment or unemployment makes them particularly important to study. In such periods of uncertainty, when elements are being redefined, the media play a crucial role by cutting through uncertainties (Murdoch and Golding, 1989)

This uncertainty followed a sudden decrease in economic growth in the seventies and the significant increase of

unemployment in all Western countries. This brought forward a rethinking about conditions of employment. It is also in those years of economic uncertainty that the environment became a major issue.

This paper examines what, within this context of uncertainty, are the options proposed by the quality press. Quality papers were chosen as object of analysis, because they are par excellence the papers seen as providing a service indispensable in a democracy, by supplying informed discussion. They also "attract journalists of high skill and intellectual integrity" (Hirsch and Gordon, 1975: 15). People who want to read about one country's overall political, social and economic issues turn to quality papers. *The Australian* and *The Age* from Australia, *Le Soir* and *De Standaard* from Belgium, *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* from France, *The Times* and *The Guardian* from England were chosen as objects of analysis. Those papers are considered as national quality papers, or major quality dailies in their respective countries.

The choice of countries made is justified by the fact that each of those countries has very specific press traditions. In Australia the press is concentrated in only a few hands. Belgium and France still recognise and publicly support (through a system of subsidies) a model of opinion press. The English press tradition served as a model for the press in Anglo Saxon countries and is still held somehow as THE model in democratic

countries. It is based on an intimate relationship between the media and economic powers and a continuous tension with the state (Charon, 1991). The notion of fourth estate fits into this model according to which the media has the power to control and limit excesses of the executive, legislative and judicial powers. By the same token the power obtained by some large media corporation is not really seen as menacing. In countries like France and Belgium, the role played by the press as fourth estate does not go unrecognised, but the state is also attributed a role in the development and the constitution of media. Not just because of the political role they play, but also because they are considered as cultural assets worth protecting (Murschetz, 1998). The usefulness of state aid to counter anti-democratic market tendencies is deeply entrenched in the continental European press. The subsidy system in place in Belgium and France thus aims to maintain press diversity, in an attempt to counteract the constant reduction of media outlets in a competitive market environment. The market environment has brought forth contradictions between the principle of freedom of the press and the realities of a difficult access to media. But despite this, the concept of freedom of the press is still the argument used by big media corporations to avoid interference in media issues.

Methodology

The findings of this research are based on a sample of two constructed weeks, in 1998, of news published in 8 quality papers (*The Age, The Australian, De Standard, Le Soir, Le Figaro, Le Monde, The Guardian, and The Times*), from 4 different countries (respectively Australia, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom). From this two-week sample, two sub-samples containing all articles on unemployment and on the environment were constituted. For this purpose, articles on unemployment were defined as all articles containing at least a couple of sentences on the idea of unemployment or on employment when reported as a movement (people becoming unemployed or employed). Articles on the environment were defined as articles relating to the natural

environment - as having as main subjects, the air, the soil, the water, wildlife or vegetation.

The samples thus obtained were submitted to a framing analysis. Basically, the facts on which the news is based have no intrinsic meaning, but only take on meaning by being embedded in a frame that organises them and gives them coherence, selecting certain interpretations to emphasise while ignoring others. The process of framing involves the selection of "some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993: 60). Because presented frames largely depend on the source of news or sponsors of frames (Entman, 1991: 7), this paper looks at sources of information, who they are, how they are used by newspapers, how specific sources of information lead to specific ways of framing of information? Together with the journalist who wrote the story, the sources of news used for the story can indeed be regarded as sponsors of particular frames (Gamson, 1989).

Findings

The findings presented here are a summarised version of a thesis. More explanations on where the findings have been derived from can always be obtained from the author. This paper limits itself to setting out briefly a few of the more important findings. They involve the overwhelmingly economic framing of news, the dominance of a few themes and an analysis on how the 'culture' of each newspaper and the sources of information used contribute to the framing of news.

Unemployment and the Environment Presented Through an Economic Frame

Newspapers all have their own priorities and this research has clearly emphasised that. Those priorities are clearly spelt out

in the case of opinion papers. *Le Figaro* is openly conservative, *Le Monde* advocates sympathies for social ideas, *De Standaard* is a pro-Flemish Christian and conservative newspaper, *The Guardian* advocates a more progressive liberal position. *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Times* and *Le Soir* call themselves 'neutral'. But as this research shows clearly there is no such thing as a neutral newspaper. And what's more, despite the possibility for diversity that those different newspapers might offer, in reality the news presented is confined to a few dominating interpretations.

Reporting on unemployment, as well as on the environment is based on the assumption that economics rule the world. While unemployment can be covered as a social, a political or an economic issue, our research shows that newspapers all clearly present unemployment as an economic issue. Unemployment is thus mainly reflected on as if it were an important economic variable, an economic measure. Reporting about unemployment is largely based on statistics, business reports, national or regional budgets. In this type of reporting the unemployed become abstract numbers, which overlook the existence of real individuals.

Solutions to unemployment proposed are also economic. They all rest on one basic assumption: that economic growth is essential to reduce unemployment, and poses that there are two ways of doing things: an old way, which goes with state intervention and job security, but cannot be afforded any more; and a new more flexible and more competitive way, which allows business create wealth (and thereby jobs). Following this way of thinking unemployment becomes a problem of maladjustment, of not having been able to keep in pace with changing times. It is based on the idea propagated by the press that the world is rapidly changing and that countries which are not able to participate in those changes will be left out.

To what extent the state should intervene to promote or sometimes to complement economic growth forms the basis of

discussions. It rests on the assumption that any state organisation can by definition not be effective. Unemployment articles are also framed as political issues, when the government (or the opposition) releases (or proposes) new unemployment policies, or makes public how much will be spent to fight unemployment. Those political articles are framed as "unemployment can be solved by political intervention", which coexists with the frame "the government cannot do anything good when it comes to unemployment". Depending on the priorities held by each newspaper, they support or condemn governments as possible managers of unemployment. Conservative newspapers reject the possibility for government to play any other role than supporting business to allow it to be competitive (presented as the key to participate in the changing world) and let the market rule solve unemployment. Managing unemployment is by all papers presented as part of a more general economic management.

Environment is similarly largely viewed in economic terms. The idea that taking care of the environment is part of ensuring a better life quality is almost inexistent, unless life quality is viewed in economic terms. For other papers the environment is seen in economic terms: the financial cost of taking care of the environment has to be carefully considered. Not putting the economic priorities first is presented as irrational. The environment is on very few occasions presented as a political issue. This is reflective of the influence of political agendas on media reporting. Reporting indeed shows that taking care of the environment only becomes a political issue when green politicians are in government, and providing that newspapers are willing to use them as sources of information. In France, green politicians are in government, but while *Le Monde* uses them as sources of information, *Le Figaro* never does.

This summary represents the overwhelmingly dominating view presented by all newspapers. Only a few newspapers in

our sample also offer contradictory information, introducing some form of conflicting frames. While media have been presented as "battleground for contesting forces" (Curran, 1991, 29), our research shows that within the quality press there is very little scope for a real battleground. Only the more independent (in the sense that they do not belong to a major press group) *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* introduce the idea that taking care of the environment is making a choice for a more harmonious way of life, and that unemployment also has social implications. Similarly *The Age* and *Le Soir*, which are two more local newspapers also offer interpretations which take on board the social aspect of unemployment. This can be explained by the closer links those newspapers have developed with local organisations. The fact that those two newspapers use those local organisations as sources of information, allows for information with a different emphasis to enter the news.

Recurrent Themes

There are also a few themes that dominate the reporting on unemployment and the environment. Simplified and entertaining news for instance dominates news on the environment. Environmental issues as well as unemployment are also presented as depending on the responsibility of individuals. But by the same token, the unemployed themselves rarely make it in the news, whether as source of news or as news actor. There is also the strong idea, that the world is a rapidly changing place. Within this context unemployment is presented as a problem of maladjustment to those changes. Another recurrent theme is the idea that business exists almost only to provide employment.

- Articles on the environment are marked by the existence of a very large amount of articles on animals, plants and the countryside. The information provided is non controversial and carries little risk in terms of alienating any sympathies. The entertaining rather than the informative, investigative factor is emphasised. There is also a large amount of articles covering

exceptional weather conditions. They are generally just entertaining or catastrophic (which is another way to be entertaining) and not placed in any broader background questioning the management of the environment.

- Unemployment is framed as a problem of adaptation, of maladjustment to a modern way of living, whether individually or globally. This follows the idea that we live in a world changing rapidly and to which we have to adapt, if we do not want to be left out. What we could be left out of is never clearly spelt out.

- The unemployed simply rarely make it into the news. Most of the time they are abstractions, numbers. News about unemployment does not tell stories about the unemployed, but success stories, positive examples, stories about those employed who used to be unemployed. They are stories of people who made it despite adversity. Thus the unemployed become news, when they are employed against all odds, when they managed the adaptation process and individually transform adversity into success. This type of stories emphasises the importance of taking individual responsibility and by the same token promote a new attitude to employment, which is based on more flexibility.

The notion of individual responsibility can also be found in the reporting on the environment, in which private citizens are portrayed as main responsible for pollution. The main pollution thus reported by newspapers is city pollution. There are only few accounts of industrial pollution and when such accounts are given, articles tend to reassure citizen. Industrial pollution will come in the news, when there has been some major environmental accident, or when the news is consonant with a previously occurred big accident. This is the case of nuclear accidents in Europe. But when nuclear mishaps are reported, newspapers try to reassure citizens. This is certainly the case of *The Figaro*, *De Standaard*, *The Times*, which are clearly very supportive of nuclear energy. Only *Le Monde* and *The Guardian*

question the use of nuclear energy, thereby introducing some form of debate.

- The industry, business is pictured in the news as if their main task was to create employment. That businesses are generally created for profit making purposes is often whisked away. It is therefore not surprising that support for the development of industry is presented as a major component in the creation of jobs. The state is often accused of preventing business to do its job, as preventing competitiveness and therefore of being a main cause of unemployment.

This theme also has its equivalent in environment reporting, where business is presented as doing its best for the environment, by making environmentally friendly innovations and using environmentally friendly techniques. According to the press they do this within the limits of rationality - rationality which consists of not putting in jeopardy the competitiveness of enterprises. Indeed competitiveness is seen as the main weapon through which a business and countries will not be left out of a rapidly changing world.

Newspaper "Cultures" and Framing Mechanisms

While there is a dominating frame according to which news is framed in economic terms, while there are recurrent themes, the emphasis put by each newspaper on a particular interpretation clearly depends from each newspaper's own individual 'culture'.

Priorities held by each newspaper are made clear when one compares the reporting in newspapers from a same country. Considering the existence of general news values, one might assume that, in a same country, the same events would be chosen as news. But this is far from true. From one newspaper to another, the reporting is quite different. And the differences reflect the priorities and values defended by each newspaper. Thus, *Le Figaro*'s news supports a conservative and no state intervention policy. *Le Monde* acknowledges global economic

structures, but also the need for social solidarity. Similar differences exist between *The Times* and *The Guardian*. The first one supports conservative policies, while *The Guardian* has a more social focus.

Differences also exist between *The Australian* and *The Age*, but in this case a lot of it is due to the fact that *The Age* is a more local paper, while *The Australian* has more of a national focus. Similarly *Le Soir* and *De Standaard* cover different local, and also cultural areas.

Different mechanisms contribute to the framing of news. First there is the choice of what to report, the selection of specific items of an event also contributes to the framing, then there is also the use of particular sources of information rather than others, finally the frames put in place are reinforced in opinion articles.

The larger journalistic features, and the way in which each of them has been analysed, easily reveal newspapers' priorities. The features in *The Age* clearly promote the importance of taking on new, faster, innovative more flexible ways of doing things, underlining the vulnerability of those industries which cannot keep in pace with changing times. The changing world forms the basic theme of the reports published in *The Australian*. Journalistic reports in *Le Figaro* set the example by presenting initiatives of countries promoting low business taxes, a lowering of social welfare, the importance of a flexible workforce. This is according to *Le Figaro*, the way to solve unemployment. Those same priorities are defended by *The Times* in its journalistic features.

Selecting specific elements of information also contributes to framing. Newspapers, even when reporting the same story, each have their own way of reporting events. *The Guardian* for instance puts the accent on how new measures might benefit the poor, while *The Times* accents that enterprises will be rewarded while many people will leave the welfare system. When new

unemployment figures are published, *The Times* accents that business circles react positively to the figures while *The Guardian* stipulates that jobs are still a problem.

Not only the choice of events as news participates in the framing of news, but also who is chosen to comment on a particular information. The use of one particular frame instead of another is very dependent on the use of sources of information, which can be regarded as sponsors of particular frames (Gamson, 1989, 158). The excessive use of government sources, business sources or economic experts compared to other sources is capital to the domination of the frames 'let the market sort it out' and 'we have to adapt to a new, more flexible, more competitive way of life'. Community organisations do not promote those frames, but they very rarely appear in the news as sources of information. Judging by the media coverage on unemployment, there are also few, if no, organisations specifically defending the unemployed.

The preference given to certain news sources is partly due to news practices. But there is also a clear tendency, particularly in the European newspapers, to go out and interview sources with which the newspaper has build up a closer relationship, because of a similarity in viewpoints. *Le Monde* favours political sources coming from the socialist party, while *Le Figaro* favours conservative political sources. *De Standaard* tends to favour political sources linked with catholic political sources. It has to be underlined here the Belgian parliamentary system is one of proportional representation, which allows for the existence in parliament of a wider variety of parties. As a result of this, more political parties get to be used as sources of news. *Le Soir* publishes a variety of government/politicians initiatives. No political party seems to be getting specific attention in *Le Soir*, but the paper does include local politicians as sources, which other newspapers do not do. This clearly follows the more local focus of the newspaper.

When it comes to environmental news, *The Age* and *Le Soir* stand out for the quantity of information coming from local city councils. They are often presented as in opposition with national governments and this therefore provides for conflicting interpretations.

After government and other political sources, the business world is the most important source of news in news on unemployment - and an important source of news in news on the environment. The sort of news coming from business sources is quite different to that coming from political sources. The majority of it is made up of articles in which businesses announce job cuts or the creation of new jobs. Information on companies laying off or taking on more staff is important for the business world. This type of information functions as a barometer of how well companies are doing, how they are dealing with market challenges, which is important for how they are perceived on the stock market. As Halimi (1997: 54) underlined, prices on the stock market tend to go up when a company announces plans to lay off people. It is seen as a sign of effective management. In the same way, the fact that companies are doing well and taking on more staff, also influences the stock market positively. The environment also becomes part of larger financial or business issue. The cost of protecting the environment is always underlined, as is willingness of companies to cover those costs. Mishaps can be fixed with money. All newspapers frequently report environmental friendly inventions made by companies.

But there are differences between newspapers. Clear differences can be seen in the way *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* treat business. *Le Monde* is much more critical of the business sector than *Le Figaro*. *Le Monde* also publishes quite a few articles on the necessity for business to take on social responsibilities. At the same time, *Le Monde* does develop the idea that the state has a role to play in providing the necessary structures to encourage business. Those articles again coexist with other articles in

which the state is seen as preventing economic development and thereby contributing to unemployment. These are all very contradicting ideas and it is mainly the use of a variety of news sources, which account for those different ideas. Nor are they in *The Times*, which also pushes for less state intervention as in the article "Blair's soundbite strategy keeps us on the sidelines" (5/1/98, 46) which states that "People in Western Europe would like more jobs, higher wages, more holidays and lower taxes. What they are being offered instead is more government, more laws, few jobs and higher taxes", wondering why Blair signed the Social chapter "if he really wants more flexible labour markets". A call for more social responsibilities from the business sector is made in *The Guardian*. The same happens in the coverage of environmental issues. *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* take a much tougher stand on business than the other papers.

Private citizen rarely make it into the news. In general news articles, private citizen used as emotional props to illustrate news provided. They are quoted for their emotive reactions, but not conferred the legitimacy to participate in any debate in another way. In the Anglo-Saxon press, 'letters to the editor' columns allow them to have a word. But in practice, those letters tend to be rather entertaining. The more serious letters come from organisations and not individual people. This underlines the importance of lobby groups, which are given more credibility than individual people. When the unemployed are sources of news, their messages are emotional rather than political, economic or social. The legitimacy to comment on a situation they live in every day is not conferred upon them. There are also no lobby groups to defend the interests of the unemployed. Individually, they sometimes appear in the news via the "letters to the editor" page. Only in France, when the unemployed organised large protest marches and occupations did they become major actors and even sources of news. In his speech to the unemployed Bourdieu (1998: 102) qualified the movement as a social miracle, a unique opportunity fought for by individuals and associations to pull the unemployed out of

oblivion. But despite this, the coverage of the protest, in our sample, largely minimises the movement.

When it comes to the environment, there are many lobby groups. Environmental organisations are prominent news sources. An analysis of those environmental sources uses, shows that only those defending non-controversial issues are portrayed as legitimate sources of information. Organisations going against business interests are rarely used as main source of information and often portrayed negatively, particularly in papers such as *Le Figaro*, *De Standaard*, *The Australian*.

The use of specific vocabulary also participates in the framing of news and can be directly linked back to particular news sources. Thus 'flexibility in the work place' is also called 'lack of job security', 'excessive work flexibility' or 'job precariousness' in *Le Monde*, *Le Soir* and *The Guardian*. Unions, community sources, politicians from left parties talk about 'precariousness' and 'lack of job security', other sources promote the notion of 'flexibility' and propose short time employment as a good dynamic solution. 'Flexibility' is readily used by employers. Clearly having a workforce at hand, which can be used at will is in their advantage.

Opinion articles also certainly play a big role in the construction of news frames, particularly in those officially 'neutral' newspapers, such as *The Age*, *The Australian* and *The Times*. Together with the letters published, opinion articles are the place in which comments are made openly.

Editorials in *The Australian* newspapers are all very critical of government and political action. This reinforces the positions made in general articles. Government and politicians generally are presented as self interested, uncaring and not capable of handling issues such as unemployment. The European newspapers analysed do not have the same quality of criticism in their opinion articles. They do not necessarily comment on government action, but tend to offer broader reflections on

society, on the economy. When they do comment on government action, they are able to welcome what they think the government has done well. The degree to which they do so is clearly dependent on how much each newspaper's own ideological attitude matches that of the government and its initiatives. The level of criticism in the English newspapers thus seems to reflect the attitude of each newspaper towards policies of state intervention as opposed to letting the market rule.

Conclusions

This study has pointed at the existence of different newspaper 'cultures'. They can be traced back to openly declared opinions or priorities held by individual newspapers. Commercial newspapers do not define themselves as opinion papers and, while when it comes to politics, they adhere to the concept of balancing sources, in reality they come up with very clear positions. *The Times* and *The Australian* are just as conservative as the openly conservative *Le Figaro*. Those newspapers, which all belong to big media corporations, defend the interests of corporations generally. In this sense the commercialisation of newspapers, which eliminates any opposing view on the world, is clearly a worrying trend

The existence of newspaper 'cultures' thus does not imply diversity of news. Differences are clearly within boundaries. There are clearly dominating frames. Within newspapers themselves there is very little discursive struggle. The only papers that allow for competing information are *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, *The Age* and *Le Soir*. All those papers carry the most social information, presenting unemployment as also a social problem. In *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* this is due to the more social orientation of the paper. When it comes to *Le Soir* and *The Age*, one might wonder to what extent the more local focus of both newspapers does contribute to the social input. The study on environment in the press also showed that *The Age* and *Le Soir* displayed more interest for local environmental issues than the other papers analysed.

There is a difference in attitudes adopted by the press towards government. The Australian press distinguishes itself from the European press by its very cynical attitude towards politicians generally. While there is hardly any criticism of business, government is dismissed as an instrument capable of dealing with unemployment, managing the environment. The strong 'let the market sort it out' view held by these newspapers further points towards a dismissal of the state apparatus. But when it comes to issues like unemployment who else than the state has the capacity (providing of course there is a political will) to issues policies that might benefit whole of the population in the long term. Dismissing government like this is playing in the hands of big corporations. Solutions to debate are left in hands of big corporations. Particularly if unemployed are left out of debate and disfavoured cannot even have government to represent their interests.

Private citizen have no voice in the quality press. Any debate held is almost exclusively held by business (as business or newspapers themselves) and politicians. By the same token, responsibility for unemployment, for the environment is largely conferred to each individual. Private citizen are held responsible, but not given a chance to participate in any form of debate.

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New Information Technologies as "Innovations": The Case of Turkey

Abstract

This paper is organized around the critique of "expectations" and "indications" associated with new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The notions of "expectation" and "indication" reflect a divided attitude endemic in the theory and research on ICTs. The social impact (of ICTs) research focuses on new technologies as entities inherent in the structural properties of social systems while the so-called intercultural research locate ICTs as elements external to the social systems. The former approach loads the signifier of ICTs with expectations while the latter registers them as mere indicators of modernity. Through this division, communication theory fails to see the content of communication that the new technologies enable subjects of the non-Western countries. With reference to C. Wright Mills' "controversial" argument regarding the use of history, the paper concludes with the proposition that there is nothing "new" about the new technologies for countries like Turkey as they might very well be considered "novelties" for the advanced capitalist countries.

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