Book review

Charaudeau, Patrick. *Les médias et l'information: l'impossible transparence du discours.* 2nd éd. rev. et augm. Brussels: Editions De Boeck; Paris: Institut national de l'audiovisuel, 2011. 255 pp.

It is fascinating to see revised editions of books that in a relatively short period of time document the evolution of a theory or the authors' efforts in establishing a field of studies as a discipline. This new revised second edition of *Les médias et l'information* by Patrick Charaudeau makes an exemplar case for both.

Since the 1980s Charaudeau has built up his theory of media communication upon an extensive scholarly and pedagogical experience in the field of linguistics, rooted in a semiotic pathway shaped by Umberto Eco (1975). He is professeur émérite of Sciences du langage at l'Université de Paris 13, where he founded the Centre d'analyse du discours, but also researcher at the CNRS's (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) Laboratoire de communication et politique and member of the Collège Iconique, a strategic think tank started by l'INA (Institut national de l'audiovisuel) in 1993 to deal with the political, cultural and social challenges in the visual communication industry.

The book's structure is adamantine. The first part introduces the readers to plain definitions of the notion of information as an act of communication, drawn by the media through multiple discourses that compete for the attention of diverse audience groups in the space of public opinion. The concepts of these first chapters give the reader confidence with the fundamental idea of 'contextuality', i.e. the evidence (or property of any discourse) that one can understand the meaning of an action and/or an act of expression only with grounded references to the context in which such action or act of expression occurs.

Part two displays the core of Charaudeau's structural approach to content analysis describing what a media information contract consists of. The notion of 'contrat de communication' is central to understand not only the type of processes existing in the media industry but also its political implications. An important dimension of this concept is the temporal one: the time in which any contract of communication occurs has relevant consequences on its meanings, especially with regard to what the author calls 'événementialisation' (gaining momentum) of facts, the obsession for the present of the media and the absence of perspective discussed in part four and five. Hence the notion of 'media machine' is explained. It is central to understand the two basic rules of Charaudeau's theory: firstly, any media event must be considered as a social mirror of some real world and secondly, there is no possibility to analyze meanings and narratives of the media without referring to the peculiar technicalities of the media itself. Radio, TV, books, printed media are presented to the reader as technical 'dispositifs' in which the magic of the voice, the shock of the images or the mighty words of the press create those unique spaces in the public opinion that allow precise, distinctive acts of communication.

The strategic and operational aspects of the diverse 'mises en scène' are considered in the third part of the book, perhaps the most didactic, which offers a good but rigid syllabus for media literacy courses: production, reporting, commenting and debating events and news are considered with the lens of the critical gatekeeper. However, this part encourages the reader to consider political and editorial dimensions of the 'media machine', the existence of filters, rhetorical and distortion mechanisms, roles and type of actors in the increasingly popular, pervasive (and not very well documented so far) world of reality formats – also known as factual or light entertainment. The last words are currently used with a positive connotation only in British media literature (Boyle & Kelly, 2012) whereas Charaudeau uses the French 'événement provoqué', an expression which points out the problem of producing, understanding and interpreting discourses plagued with misrepresentations.

The last two parts of the book are more argumentative and open to critical and controversial readings. Genres and typologies of media narratives and role of the media in democratic societies are discussed here without hiding the pessimistic point of view anticipated by the title, concerned with ethical issues like manipulation and distortion of information, hybridization of genres and consequent blurring boundaries between facts and fiction,

reliability of information sources, deontology of authors and responsibility of media owners. In these conclusive chapters the author highlights the evidence that the assumptions of linguistic approach to the analysis of media discourses, like other theories grounded in the cybernetic model of information, do not longer fit consistently with the way in which diverse communication acts take place through the media. The plurality of multiple discourses is no longer organized around the existence of predictable, controlled asymmetries, managed by professional mediators. Instead, the expected polyphony of the linked data in the semantic web (where anybody can say anything about anything) could end in ungoverned cacophonies. If you are familiar with relational indexing (Farradane, 1977) or with other theories and techniques of indexing, such a conclusion may sound like a déjà vu. The history of subject approach to information is full of failures and unfinished theories and techniques. But it is unlikely that information retrieval and subject indexing theories had any influence at all on Charaudeau. Instead, chances are he might have been influenced by the apocalyptic trend pervading French media and cultural studies. For the last ten years, in fact, French media researchers have become disillusioned about the potential of television to lead social innovation (Wolton, 2009, 2012) or to foster science education (Desmurget, 2011).

I read in the author's increased diffidence towards the 'media machine' an interesting ethical evolution of his own theoretical work. The first edition of *Les médias et l'information,* which was published in 1997, had a slightly more optimistic title, evocative of a positive role of the media in our society (*Discours d'information médiatique: la construction du miroir social*). Charaudeau's book introduced a new theory of media communication derived from a structural and semiotic approach to European experts, practitioners, academics and policy makers. The linguistic analysis of the information transmitted by the media was already known within some professional and political European circles because it had been applied since the late 1980s and early 1990s to the construction of the powerful '*mediatique machine'* of Silvio Berlusconi and his political party in Italy.

For the second edition of the book, published in 2005, the author changed the title, revealing a more pessimistic view about the social role of the media. But he was still defining the media communication process as a 'linguistic activity'. Conversely, in this revised second edition, Charaudeau defines it as an 'engaging activity'. I interpreted the change of the qualifier adjective, from *linguistic* to *engaging*, as a sort of self-referential divertissement: the

author has acknowledged the possibility that his own theoretical castle might have relied for more than two decades on the sand of multiple, mutable and extremely porous linguistic uses of the media. He could not have expressed such change of signified without changing the signifier.

Along with other Spanish, French and Italian authors Charaudeau is still rarely cited by English, American or Canadian scholars who in turn are less known by their European counterparts. This fragmented field of studies is more easily mapped by tracking the influence of media moguls and their institutional relationships with single intellectuals and researchers than by analyzing bibliographies.

However, a stroll in the narrative woods of any library collection may disclose how transparent could be the view on media and information disciplines through the eye of classified or semantic catalogues, where the almost impenetrable boundaries existing among authors, disciplines and theories can be sought and seen as variations, rules and properties of a controlled indexing language system. In this respect, I believe there are ample theoretical possibilities for national and international cataloguing agencies to set the scene and to document how the 'impossible transparence' of the media discourses can be proved to be just another facet of any possible subject, where changing a word can open up infinite interpretations in the world of universal knowledge.

All in all, *Les médias et l'information* offers an overview about a methodological approach to media contents analysis that is likely to have increasing influence on commercial exploitations of social media contents, in spite of the weaknesses noted above, because it is easily complemented with justifications granted by the two minds hypothesis (Evans, 2010) dominant in social and cognitive psychology (anybody can legitimately say anything through social media and semantic web because this is the way in which the human brain works).

I have never found the book quoted with other works about media and information literacy, whereas I believe it should be surely considered a companion of Berger's *Media Analysis Techniques (2012)*, Eisenberg and Berkowitz's *Big Six Skills* and other classical texts of that interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary field we (provisionally) call media and information lit-

eracy that still has to find a proper place both in academic and practitioners practices.

References

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