

Media in Belgium: two separate public opinions

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For political science, the organization of a society rests in a determining way on lines of demarcation based on principles defined by the Constitution of a State or its particular political organization. The sociologist will rather look for convergences between social actors or groups sharing the same values to identify more or less homogeneous entities, and distinct from neighbouring entities. The analyst of the media will tend to observe which newspapers, which television channels are consumed massively by a given public, and will infer that the users of identical media form a community having a strong coherence. We can mention globalisation, we can celebrate these pseudo-worldwide media such as CNN or TV5, the consumption of the media remains, for most of the population, very local. For two simple reasons: each citizen reads the newspaper, looks at the TV news in his native or usual language, with some rare exceptions; each user privileges information of nearness (and more than ever) to know what happened “close to home”. Everywhere in the world, the share reserved for international information decreases. The daily newspaper most read in France is *Ouest-France* and not *Le Monde*; the VRT and VTM together represent more than 60% of the audience in Flanders; the 100 broadcasts most watched in French-speaking Switzerland were all seen on the public channel TSR which always accounts for 30,6% of the market share, far ahead of the other Swiss, German or French channels. In short, tell me which media you consume, I will tell you which community you belong to.

Each one, of course, according to its speciality, will consider that the latter’s framework of reference is most crucial in order to distinguish these collective memberships, and will judge that the criteria developed by researchers of a different discipline are overestimated in the analysis of social realities. Consider the reflections of Nenad Stojanovic on the benefit of the Swiss voting procedures for the sake of guaranteeing a common political base, constitutive of a Swiss identity shared beyond the cantonal or linguistic variations. They can induce some perplexity as to the causal links which it seems assert between this initiative of local democracy established historically and the creation of a national identity which transcends regional cleavages.

If instead of adopting the perspective of the political scientist or the sociologist we adopt that of the arts, this beautiful Swiss national identity seems less anchored than it seems. Indeed, inter-regional differences exist for the analysts of Swiss literature. An important research effort was undertaken, about twenty years ago, in order to try to determine the specific features of Swiss identity, as they can be gathered from the regional popular literatures. The authors recognized obviously that there is a narrative heritage common to the European literatures, but also that there are characteristics peculiar to Switzerland, because “more than everywhere, the happy middle position, moderation is preached there, in short all that supports this astonishing image of a country out of history. (...) In French-speaking Switzerland, nothing of all that [such “national defects” as the pride of the Spanish or the avarice of the Scot, which further strengthen group identity], which could tarnish the moral integrity and lend itself to criticism: the middle state, the *aurea mediocritas* remain the privileged values²⁶”. But while these characteristics (the cogency of which we shall not discuss

²⁶ R. Francillon, D. Jakubec et alii, *Littérature populaire et identité suisse. Récits populaires et romans littéraires : évolution des mentalités en Suisse romande au cours des cent dernières années*, Lausanne, L’Âge d’Homme, coll. “Pluralisme culturel et identité nationale”, 1991, p. 164.

here, in so far as it does nothing but consolidate some national stereotypes probably constructed upstream of this literary corpus) are identified by their difference with French and German literary texts, it is interesting to see that they are also compared with samples of the Italian and German-speaking Swiss literature. The “suissitude”, to take again the neologism forged in the study, rely on « qualities — “mediocre”, for all that — “of reason”, of order, of measure, linked to a certain kind of individual conformism, to “a private” life hardly turned towards society and the institutions, (...) [which] support more a fusion with nature²⁷ ». But this *suissitude*, it is claimed, is not entirely shared by the literatures in Italian or German. The literature of Ticino thus expresses another relationship with history and society, testifying « to a greater potentiality of opening²⁸ », whereas the texts from German-speaking Switzerland allegedly show a less constraining family frame and more torn society.

These differences, founded on stereotypes conveyed by popular literary productions well equipped to recover commonplaces (but is this not precisely the reason why their study is significant?), are more than debatable. It could be easily demonstrated, by analyzing works of the Walloon tradition, for example the series devoted by Arthur Masson to Toine Culot, “obese of the Ardennes”, that these regionalistic stereotypes are characteristic of a certain literary tradition, i.e., the *roman du terroir* attached to the ancestral values, more than the expression of a particular national or regional identity. But what is interesting in this research is the prior assumption that takes explicit account of the presumably observable differences between the Swiss sub-identities, according to their linguistic membership. In contrast to what Nenad Stojanovic claims, there is supposed to be an “us versus them” within the Swiss Confederation. The Swiss literary texts are the tangible traces of these identity variations, or are responsible for it (according to whether one conjectures that the media are the reflection of society or they take part in the creation of our collective identities).

It is interesting, furthermore, to reconsider this “us versus them” rhetoric, insofar as it can produce more than debatable effects, further strengthened by the accumulation of consultations, and the electoral campaigning and vote-catching that necessarily accompanies them. Let us accept Stojanovic’s point of view on the positive impact of these voting procedures as regards Switzerland’s “common *demos*”. But there is then a risk of shifting the stigmatization of the other rather than removing it. Take the question of the access of Switzerland to the European Union, or indeed that of the reception of foreign residents and illegal immigrants in Switzerland for the last twenty years or so. There has been a significant rise of exclusionary policies, jointly with the rise of the UDC and its populist leader Christoph Blocher. Its electoral posters, during the 2007 consultation on asylum laws, showed white sheep well at the core of the Swiss flag and black sheep outside. This is a perfect example of a policy that preaches the “us versus them”, not between German-speaking Switzerland and French-speaking people, but between the honest Swiss citizens and the malicious foreigners, robbers and instigators of all disorders. In the end, all that was done is replace a model of intra-national exclusion by a model of exclusion between nationals and immigrants.

This simply allows us to show that identity questions are complex, and that they are, like all social phenomena, related to multiple factors, which historically generate them or result from them, according to logics that vary historically, culturally, sociologically. Logics of political organization have certainly important effects, but other factors are also constitutive of identity memberships. And the media form part of it, even if one needs to beware of mediacentrism.

During decades, daily newspapers like *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir* sold each day several tens of thousands of copies in Flanders, where French was still usually practised (so much so that there also existed French-language regional newspapers in Flanders, such as *La Métropole* in Antwerp or *Le courrier du littoral*). No symmetric phenomenon existed, because French-speaking people always had a more limited knowledge of Dutch. Little by little, this

²⁷. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

²⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

pattern disappeared. French-speaking newspapers initially maintained regional pages devoted to Flanders, written by some local correspondents. Later, these regional pages those disappeared, thereby making the Flemish area vanish from the media and mental map of the French-speaking population, except in situations of renewed strong political tension with the Flemish government or between the two linguistic wings of the federal government. One could say that since Guido Fonteyn retired from the daily newspaper *De Standaard*, there is not a single Flemish journalist left with a strong knowledge of the Walloon political scene.

Recent studies, both on the French-speaking side and the Flemish side, show that the TV news of the North of the country very seldom calls on French-speaking politicians (among other things because their command of Dutch is insufficient), and that 90% of those are Ministers in the federal government. French-speaking public television covers Flemish politics slightly more, but in a proportion that remains small compared to the total of information. All in all, only 3% of the TV news is devoted to subjects relating to the other language community. While the federal government is composed equally of Dutch and French speakers, television channels allocate 80% of the speaking time to federal ministers from their own community²⁹. Flanders is foreign territory for the French-speaking people, and the reverse is also true. Consequently, when a subject is covered, it is as if it were about foreign politics, with many simplifications and stereotypes. Some simplified images are retained on both sides: Wallonia is inhabited by unemployed persons who are held in a logic of assistantship by an omnipotent and clientelist Socialist party; Flanders is filled up by excited nationalists, pushed by the extreme right to always claim more autonomy, until independence. This shows even in the rhetoric used, which privileges the warlike metaphors (“the Flemish front”, “the French-speaking riposte”...), as Dave Sinardet has demonstrated. And since politicians are elected in distinct electoral districts, they may not find it beneficial to take part in broadcasts on the other side of the linguistic border, where they will not reach any potential voter. The gap thus continues to widen; henceforth the two communities live in different worlds.

Thus less than 5% of the Flemish television viewers watch Dutch chains (owing to linguistic proximity). They are even fewer to watch the Belgian French-speaking channels. And while the French channels attract the French-speaking Belgians more strongly (over 30%, owing to greater cultural proximity between France and Wallonia-Brussels than between Flanders and the Netherlands), the Flemish channels do not form part of their ordinary media consumption. Consequently, if one accepts that a groups’ collective identity is constructed to a significant extent by a shared consumption of the same media (it is because I am Belgian Francophone that I read *Le Soir* and not *Le Monde*; or alternatively, I read *Le Soir*, therefore I am a Belgian Francophone), we can only deduce from it that the media systems of the two Belgian communities (even of the three since the 72,000 inhabitants of the German-speaking area strongly identify with *Grenz Echo*, sold daily in 10000 copies, with the radio and TV station BRFB) are henceforth completely distinct, both in their supply of information and in the logic of their consumption.

Consequently, when the French-speaking public television decides to start a debate on the possible end of Belgium, it can do so only by playing on the stereotypes and a form of destabilizing catastrophism. On December 13th, 2006, around 20:20, the magazine traditionally broadcast every Wednesday on RTBF, was suddenly stopped. After a few seconds, the anchorman of the TV news appears in the studio of the new programme (JT) in order to announce that an event both important as unexpected is occurring: Flanders is in the process of voting for its autonomy, which would involve *de facto* the break up of the Kingdom of Belgium. This broadcast, with the (English) title “Bye Bye Belgium”, which exploits the effect of surprise, will have a worldwide impact³⁰. “Panic in Belgium” was the lead

²⁹. D. SINARDET, *Wederzijdse mediarepresentaties van de nationale “andere”: Vlamingen, Franstaligen en het Belgische federale samenlevingsmodel*, Universiteit Antwerpen, Faculteit Politieke en Sociale Wetenschappen, 2007.

³⁰. Cf. Ph. Dutilleul (sous la dir. de), *Bye-bye Belgium (Opération BBB). L'événement télévisuel*, Loverval, Labor, coll. « Quartier libre », 2006 ; M. Lits (sous la dir. de), *Le vrai-faux journal de la RTBF. Les réalités de l'information*, Charleroi, Ed. Couleur livres, 2007.

title in *The Times* December 15th. The same day, a photograph of the broadcast is a headline in *Le Monde* with this title “Hoax. The death of Belgium live on the news”.

The impact of the broadcast was considerable, to the point of exceeding the intentions of its organizers who had not anticipated such an anxious reaction of the viewers. The RTBF received 31,368 calls on the paying number set up especially for the operation. The shock was so hard for some viewers that they felt the immediate need to share it with close relatives and to discuss it while looking at the broadcast (and the debate that followed): the audience reached 534,100 viewers, whereas only 350,937 viewers were present at the beginning. The surveys published at the end of the broadcast revealed that 89% of the viewers had believed for quite a while in the truth of what they saw, against 5% which had not believed it at all. A smaller part of the audience (5%) believed in it until the end, even when a permanent text indicated “This is a fiction”, a warning also repeated by the journalist on air during the last minutes of the broadcast.

Beyond the journalistic and ethical issues that arise in connection with framework discontinuities or the evolution of TV genres, this broadcast left a mark on the minds, because it served to reveal a situation of interethnic and intercultural coexistence which is more and more at the edge of a breaking point. The media testify to this situation, in a way that has become increasingly radical since the creation of two public television systems, French-speaking and Flemish, back in 1953.

Belgium is a federal state in which all competences regarding culture, information, press and audio-visual matters have been allocated to the Communities since 1970. Consequently, there is no more Belgian radio and television system, no more broadcasting for the whole of the nation, but two distinct public agencies, the RTBF for the French Community and the VRT for the Flemish Community. As of October 31st, 1953, the legislator created two distinct public channels of television, a French-speaking and Dutch-speaking, which chose very different logics of programming at once. The French-speaking channel gave priority to the broadcasting of programs from France, including TV news, until in October 1956. Flanders from the start made a different choice, because of its commitment to a political project of conquest of its cultural and political autonomy within a Belgian State inside which Flanders felt, rightly, dominated by its Francophone part which controlled until this moment all the political institutions, army, justice, education and the economy. It therefore gave priority to its own productions, which were meant to establish a Flemish identity and to support its emancipation from central power.

Political and linguistic divisions, reinforced by the dispersion of TV consumption make the assertion of a Belgian national identity more problematic than ever. Since there is no national public channel, the channels, public as well as private, give priority to supplying information that relates to the Community to which their audience belongs, with a quasi-total ignorance of the events occurring in the other Community. French-speaking television, for example, locates more room to public events in France (elections, sport, culture...) than in Flanders.

The broadcasting shock proposed by the RTBF on December 13th, 2006 was significant of this frame of mind. It is significant to find there a particularly caricatural picture of Flanders. It is depicted as an arrogant entity, scorning the French-speaking people, deaf for any attempt at negotiation, sitting on its numerical superiority and its economic power. Besides, the reactions of the political officials and of the Flemish editors was very hard. They denounced a broadcast that could only reinforce the fears, the tensions and lack of mutual understanding. In any case, this broadcast served the purpose of showing how much the TV programs carry identity values, here very explicit but often more implicit, which feed the political and cultural affiliations, generally by exciting a national (or nationalist) identity based on the refusal of the other and the return to oneself.

In this context of inter-community cleavages, the TV systems of federal Belgium reveal the identity crisis of a country approaching separatism more than the construction a strong (be it second-best) identity that could replace the model of a State which was never a nation by an emphatically regional vision. It is an *identité en creux* which transpires from the statutory texts that govern the public medias, from the organization of the program timetables and from the scattering of the audiovisual landscape.

These differences relating to the notion of membership explain, partly, the current conflicts which emerged with greater intensity at the time of the federal elections of June 2007. The cleavage on the splitting of the electoral districts or the protection of the linguistic minorities along the language border reveals inclinations towards confederalism, or even independence. And in these tensions, the media clearly functioned like relays of their respective public opinions, even if some centripetal movements, pleading for a revival of united Belgium, were also constantly present. But there is deep malaise, because the Belgian model founded on a culture of compromise is under attack, and because nationalist temptations gain ground. The stakes are clear: are communities which have less and less shared values, since they do not speak the same language and since they have different economic and social developments, able to find any interest in cohabiting, or must they choose to separate through an amicable agreement? Can cultural diversity persist within one State whose role reduces to some general arbitration, or will it be constructed between neighbouring States through cooperation agreements? Can we live together, while remaining married for better or for worse, or is divorce the most reasonable solution?

Daily newspapers like *Le Soir* and *De Standaard* have since tried joint initiatives. One of them consisted in sending journalists for a month to “the other” area, for the purpose of bringing back home reports that could shed light on realities badly known. But that still reinforced the feeling of an irreducible difference, which was the opposite of the aim. Even the tone of the journalists looked like the tone of reporters sent to remote and dangerous regions from which they brought back exceptional reports realized at the cost of risking their lives. Here, they had just gone 30 km from home, on the other side of the linguistic border, and hence in a different continent. Next, the two daily newspapers organized several public debates in the two languages, in order to try to bring closer together viewpoints regarded as being so distant. By doing so, they reckoned they were playing their role as citizens, in an attempt to inflect the separatist discourse and to contribute to the emergence of a shared national conscience. While the initiative is praiseworthy (even though one can wonder whether it is the role of a newspaper to take a stance in favour of a particular political option, now that our media are no longer dependent on political parties, whether in the North or in the South of the country), it looks somewhat hopeless. But do not worry, no other daily newspaper spoke about it, and it did not have any echo in the TV news bulletins.