

# The relation between mediation and use in the research field of information and communication in France

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## Abstract

The “mediation” and “use” notions are frequently employed in researches in the field of information science and communication in France. The main purpose of this article is to reflect on these two notions, so as to reveal, in the absence of its “natural” evidence, some problems, resources and risks. The idea of mediation is originated in anthropo-social sciences and provides means to describe with a certain precision, information-communication processes; it allows socially requalifying the dynamics and regimes of culture and leads the researcher to question one’s own place in the circulation of social knowledge. The idea of use keeps a historical link with the media reception studies carried out by the North-American “administrative” sociology and relates to functionality, even if not reducing it to technology. The mediation (mediations) and the use do not differ because of their respective objects, but because of the perspective effect they produce and the very different ways they glimpse at the place of communication in informational practices. It can therefore be asserted that in a communicational perspective, the notions of mediation, practice and use operate together. However, this does not take place without tensions and paradoxes.

## Keywords

use; mediation; writing; writing traces, information; communication

This paper will focus on two points which are very frequently referred to in many different research works about informational and communicational processes. In French, they are called « médiation » et « usage »: which can be approximatively (but not exactly in fact) translated into English as *mediation* and *use*. I should like to grasp those notions in a problematic way, in order to deconstruct, if possible, their apparent naturality. The interest of such an examination is to point out some

resources and also some risks such terminology deals with. I will address this question in a limited way. I belong to the research community of people who try to understand some particular communicational practices: the ones which aim the sharing of knowledge and cultural objects in society. What I call, beyond any pejorative sense, « triviality ».

The main advantage of this field of research is to be unclassifiable. When one examines the development

of popularization books or the display of literary texts in the walls of the tube, for instance, it is impossible to say if the point is about information or communication. I must say the institutional situation of the french field of social sciences stresses strongly this situation. It has indeed the particularity of joining in an unique discipline several topics that are elsewhere commonly divided in separate sciences, especially in english speaking countries: information science, communication science, media studies, cultural studies, etc. It is by grounding on that particularity that I have the opportunity here to question the couple of notions I mentioned above. My purpose is to introduce some hypotheses about the way both notions work in such an info-communicational space.

First, I have to point out that the notions of mediation and use do not play an equivalent role in the analysis of information and communication processes. So, it will be necessary to ask if they can work together and how they could, in a synergical mode or in a conflictual one. Finally, we shall be able to consider the way all those questions occur in a more limited field, that of writing practices, a field in which the relation between mediation and use has a particularly decisive impact.

## Mediation/mediations

The french word “*médiation*” is as frequently used in the singular (*médiation*) as in the plural (*médiations*). The research indeed has both to question the social sense of the act of mediation in itself and to make an accurate inventory of the multiple kinds of mediations and of the different types of mediators. The concept of mediation has been upholding the french discipline of information and communication science for two decades. It was not created by this discipline, but this discipline has attracted fellows who apply themselves to reveal nothing is transparent. People who point out nothing is really immediate and who highlight the role played by go-betweens, middlemen, in social realities. People who demonstrate knowledge and sense are never simply given to us, but have to get worked out. In other ways, the french discipline of information and communication science feeds on a certain form of negativity: it deliberately refuses an immediate, transparent or absolute approach of cultural facts: what Barthes called « *naturalization* » of cultural practices. But such a negativity deals to a corresponding positivity: the way the same searchers commit themselves for revealing and distinguishing and describing all the intermediate objects and beings in communication. The determination they show not to take anything for granted.

Such a stance is easier to take in some social areas than in other ones. In consequence, the discipline tends to split in different apprehensions of the question of the mediation, according to the dominant attitudes which come to prevail in close scientific domains. For instance, the sociologists of culture have a long-established experience in the study of mediations and mediators: it is a very usual job for them to try to repopulate art worlds. On the contrary, political science very reluctantly agrees

to the idea itself of mediation, which is usually supposed to eclipse the reality of power relations.

It is the reason why the notion itself came to deep discussion among researchers. As an anthropologic category, the idea of mediation conveys a conception of culture; as a professional item, it is applied to a wide range of devices, acts and jobs; as a conceptual tool, it bases the possibility to describe the different components of any communicational process (DAVALLON, 2004). The information and communication science feeds on such a circulation between the different dimensions of that complex notion. For times, various mediation acts have been carried out by several actors; more recently, different mediation devices (of different nature) were developed, as well as educational programs, procedures and artefacts, so that the idea of mediation became a professional reality, and, in a certain way, a political one. Anyhow, there is no one of those gestures, should they relate to amateurishness or to entrepreneurship or to expertise, which should not convey a symbolic dimension to social acts (DUFRENE & GELLEREAU, 2001). They proceed by designing objects, by defining relations to culture, by fostering postures, by legitimating norms.

I can take here one example among thousands, that of the initiative various associations carry out in order to foster the ability of underprivileged people to read (BO-NACCORSI, 2009). By the only fact they exist, those projects contribute to fuel a discourse formation about the social necessity of a « duty of reading »: a cultural value which the idea of mediation is constantly reviving and renewing. But as you move from the normative frame of the project to the elaboration of the actions and then to their publicizations, you can discover a network of actors, each of them using scripts, programs, means to become visible. Lastly, in order to understand the effective operativity of the whole process mentioned above, you need to use the mediation as an analytic category, in order to describe accurately the material context, the semiotic productions, as well as the forms of interactions. The way the status of reading gets worked out in a society is grounded on such a web of values, of social roles and of symbolic forms.

Such an example shows the triple ground on which the notion of mediation works in a discipline like information and communication science. It provides some tools to an accurate description of communicational processes; it enables to socially qualify the dynamics and regimes of culture; it urges the searchers to question their own place in the social process of circulation of knowledge.

The first figure of the notion of mediation is a *pre-ecidural one*. The distinctions it makes possible empowers the analysis of communicational processes: as, for instance, the distinction between social, pragmatic, semiotic, technical mediations, etc. For instance, if we accept without examination to believe network technologies are able to create immaterial communication – what the discursive formula of « information society » encourages – we shall incline to oppose the real and the virtual, for example

the real city and the virtual one. On the contrary, if we do examine the way such a discourse spreads in various spaces, the means it uses to become visible and legitimate, we become able to point out a complex activity which is displayed in order to link together different spaces of communication, using material artefacts, people movements, discourse procedures (LABELLE, 2007). The so-called digital city is no separate town but a set of projects, of codes, of devices that embody and spatialize the utopy of a possible reality-free life. Sociologists have suggested us a track to understand that, as they evoked inscriptions which move from place to place (what they call *immutable mobiles*) and invite us to travel all over the chains of subjects and objects in order to understand how social realities get set (LATOURE, 1996). However, we, searchers in information and communication science, have something to add to such a model, especially because we don't assimilate the mediation process to a chain: we try to distinguish between material devices, writing supports, documents, textual forms, communicational places. To make a long story short, we do not only postulate something like the mediation, but we try to identify several types of mediations and to understand the way each one requires activity, as well as gesture and interpretation and expression. If you can identify documentary realities (as the list), semiotic forms (as the quality label) and rhetoric figures (as the emblematic narrative), you become able, not only to identify the way different people act, but to question the way action itself has to be defined.

Actually, the aim to describe information processes needs the study of a complex of objects through which are constantly exchanged the social, symbolic and technical dimensions of communication. In that first sense, the notion of mediation fights against the illusion of transparency.

Second comes the *social figure* of mediation. The above example shows that by linking social, semiotic and technical forms one leads to a particular comprehension of social and political issues. Instead of making only obvious several collusions between actors, it is possible to describe a new relation between the obligation of doing and the ability to say. The first result of an examination of mediations is to give existence to some actors which an academic approach of culture systematically neglects, as, for instance, those who popularize science or summarize a field of knowledge. But, more deeply, the idea of mediation leads to an elucidation of what makes communicational devices and situations operative, what we call in french « *opérativité symbolique* » (QUERE, 1982). I mean the way they generate representation of our world, viewpoints on it, roles in front of it. In the same way, we call « *social operativity* » (DAVALLON, 1999) the way those systems and contexts imply institutional involvements, appeal audiences, recognize authorities. A text, a picture, an information retrieval interface, for instance, generate representation, i.e. provide a mediation to our experience. They are representation apparatus (« *dispositifs de représentation* », MARIN: 1981): they give existence both to a conception of social realities (« *effet de sujet* ») and

to a stance to perceive them. The book gives existence to the reader, the photography to the witness, the collaborative platforms to the social engineer.

In that second sense, the notion of mediation draws its productive virtue from the fact it fights against the topic of the great gap, between reality and virtuality, between tradition and cyberculture, between « web 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 4.0... ».

The last figure I want to mention is that of *reflexivity*. Being conscient of the mediations, the searcher, the expert and the actor have to take into consideration the procedures by which they produce their own knowledge. Research in anthropo-social sciences is by no means an isolated discourse. It gets ahead interacting with social discourse. It captures it, analyzes it, makes it visible and gives it publicity. What leads to a major requirement: to take into account the fact knowledge about information and communication spread in several social contexts, where they get elaborated, transformed, used. As a searcher, no one is entirely free to decide what sense has to be given to a determined practice. We had to cope with that constraint during a fieldwork about reading on the internet (SOUCHIER et al., 2003). Some of the users of informatic networks watch a website as they would a document: they look for an author, a text, a warrant. Other people, on the contrary, see the Internet as a kind of tanker where is stocked a collection of punctual data, without any link between them. It is what I call « *semi-otic predilection* »: any user is in state to define what is to be interpreted and, furthermore, to decide whether the point is to interpret a text or to handle an object. In such a reflexive style of research, one can understand we are far from the ability to make peremptory, even if vague, statements about the fact, for instance, « nobody reads on the Internet »... Such a proposition as indeed no sense if we don't make the effort to explicit and test our own hypotheses about what people consider as readable, and more widely, as interpretable. Because the searchers don't face the process of social sharing of knowledge in a pure external way, as a simple observer of it. Political actors, as well as technical and financial ones, play a role in the choice between different semi-otic predilections, fostering some of them and avoiding some others.

When it is turned back to scientific community as a reflexive interrogation, the mediation fights against the classical ideology of popularization (in french « *vulgarisation* », with a rather pejorative connotation): a conception of communication as a transfer of information contents from educated people to ignorant ones. The socio-cognitive mediations of information processes has the consequence that the social realities research tries to analyze are constantly elaborated by actors and that they could not exist without their intervention. They can even vanish if people stop supporting them.

## Use (« usage »)

The notion of use has a rather different status in french information-communication science from the one of mediation, for a set of reasons I shall mention first.

Even if the idea of use is a very traditional one in documentation sciences, its present legitimacy (a very strong one) doesn't come from information and communication science. The notion of use is historically linked with the sociology of media, especially the inquiries about mediatic audiences, in the field of the american « administrative » research. The scientific trend known as « use and gratification research » has played a major role in the affirmation of the freedom of the « receiver » coping with the mediatic messages. In France, the terms « *usage* » and « *usager* », which are possible translation, among others, of the english words « use » and « user », have a very rich scientific history. They were notably elaborated, in a rather different way, by the critical approach of cultural powers, with the enquiries about reading, consumption, technical culture, the purpose of which was to make visible the invisible part of ordinary cultures (DE CERTEAU: 1990; PERRIAULT: 1989). Finally, the notion found a renewed status as it was embedded in the major projects of technical innovations, as telecommunication devices and computer mediated communication. In France, the creation of an industrial research and development laboratory about the uses of technical objects (CNET) generated a particular style of work and, inevitably, produced a whole intellectual preconstruction of the notion.

I, those conditions, it is not abusive to say that the notion of use plays frequently the part of that of mediation, and more widely of all a range of notions used in social sciences, as soon as the matter is about management or funding of research activities. As a searcher who studied in the 1970's, I am amazed by the way the idea of use eclipsed recently the notion of practice.

Another difference between the notions of mediation and use holds to the fact the second one has been developed straightaway in a multilingual scientific space, which was largely dominated by english-speaking people, the field of innovation in technical processes. But the difference is not small between the resource each language offers to the expression of the ideas that underly the use of such terms. The english can use both the verb and the noun: use/to use. The french has to choose between two different verbs (« *user* » or « *utiliser* ») et two different nouns (« *usage* » and « *utilisation* »). It is the reason why the french lexical resources lead to a kind of semantic nebula. When one uses the word « use », he can always be understood as speaking in a functional issue (how do you operate ?) or in a symbolic one (what is the issue ?), and that sort of ambiguous status was very precious to help the sociological project to survive in industrial contexts. But in compensation such an ambiguity doesn't avoid producing a permanent epistemological fading. Indeed, as the fact to declare you will pay attention to social uses of artefacts has the property to activate research funding, no research teams forgets to protest they are experts in use studies. The result is the growing number of projects and reports which, with the title of use studies, do not include any document analysis nor any ethnographic fieldwork worthy of this name.

In other words, the notion of use, unlike that of mediation, doesn't fit easily with the idea of communication. The idea of use tends to lead to that of functionality, even if we try not to reduce it to technique. In our visual imagery, a study on use and user suggests the scene of a person facing an apparatus he manages to operate or not. Anybody can verify, in the big R&D programs, in the discourse of industrial managers, as in public politics about the equipement of cultural and information institutions, a privilege is systematically attached to what the french sociologist Flichy calls « frame of functioning » (FLICHY, 1995), compared with the symbolic, affective, esthetic or ideologic part of practices. So that a great deal of research studies in information and communication science about social uses of communicational devices are funded as a sort of extension of exclusively technical projects, unlike the long drawn-out inquiries on cultural uses led by De Certeau thirty years ago. By slipping from the field of cultural practices to that of more or less easy appropriation of innovative technical objects, the word « use » lost in precision what it gained in popularity.

The community of sociologists of use had to resist to that logic. They proposed a phrase to express the complexity of the problem, the « socio-technical » (*socio-technique*) approach of uses. But such a formula is not sufficient to avoid the paradox. If you put on the one hand technique and on the other society – even if you decline the opposition itself – you don't manage to come to understand the way mediation refers to symbols, speech or representation. Using a book, a computer or a mobile phone is not reducible to a pure combination of social logics and technical properties. Objects of that sort are *media*, i.e. objects which do not only join social realities, but generate them. For us, searchers in information and communication science, it is impossible to liken the technical objects of communication to other ones. What semioticians agree (BADIR, 2007). Those objects are media: of course, they are artefacts, but particular artefacts which do not only shape the way human being master natural forces, but the means of the representation. So we are led back to mediation. It is a sensible point in our discipline itself, in which some research trends, which are not keen on informational problems, content themselves with the concept of « technology ». But, where they computerized or not, media are not only simple tools. Their use is not only reliable to *ergonomy*. Or, more exactly, it relies to an *ergonomy* of a very special nature. The point is a major one for those who analyze or manage information processes. For the symbolic production of information and knowledge is very often portrayed under the form of the practical use of several tools, through the way those tools provide access to commodities and fit to the different expectations of « final users ».

In other words, to make the problem of use scientifically fruitful within the field of information and communication science, it is necessary to reword it. If you accept a strong concept of information and communication, you have to understand how ideas, knowledges and representations can be worked out. In my opinion,

a condition for that is not to take the term « use » as being simply equivalent to that of « practice », but to foster a confrontation between both notions. For me, the social uses are only a component of cultural practices, referring to the situations in which people have to cope with objects other people designed. From that point of view, we should not mention uses of information, rather informational practices which lead social actors to face artefacts produced by other people: i.e. specialists of information, engineers, amateurs, marketers, etc.

Insofar as our approach is based on that simple idea, we have to wonder which conception of cultural and informational practices we resort to each time we plan to analyze the use of cultural objects, information devices, works or texts.

The considerations above raise the question of the viewpoint and scale we choose to observe the social uses of objects. Of course, the main strength of the uses studies (the fact they really do fieldwork) cannot be distinguished from their weakness, the potential risk of taking the visible part of the practices for the entire reality. An inquiry which is focused on one specific mediatic technology (for example the uses of the photographs on the mobile) doesn't bring the same kind of knowledge as an inquiry which starts from cultural practices: for instance, from musical practices, from personal relations to science, from sentimental lives. The first one lies on the hypothesis that cultural practices depend on the functionalities of an object, whereas the second one distances oneself from the objects, with the risk to be unable to see what happens in them. One might consider an ideal point of view would be to combine both perspectives, but there is no total point of view on any practice.

So we come up once again against the political dimension of our question. Use studies are not only ways to investigate on cultural practices, they take part to the production of a representation of society, both on cognitive and political senses. For instance, if an use study jumps to the conclusion « people » do hope something, it creates a collective entity which is more or less grounded on the inquiry methodology, but never simply reflects the persons who have been interviewed or observed. Such a moral person will thus acquire, regardless of any political procedure, the status of a representation of a community. So does the use study produce values and representations, so to embody these constructions in some apparatus with are destined to modify the very frame of our cultural and informational lives and to open onto an info-communicational ecosystem.

## A complex dialectic

It becomes obvious, at this stage of the short summary we gave of the scientific life of two notions, that mediation(s) and use(s) do not differ one other as much by the objects they refer to than by the effect of perspective they produce and by the very different way they consider the role played by communication in the informational practices. We may conclude that in a communicational perspective, the three notions of

mediation, practice and use do interact, but not without tensions and paradoxes.

In this respect, reading the works of historians of books seems to be particularly explanatory. For in certain circumstances of its development, that field of research had to produce a theory of communicational processes. The problem indeed soon arised of the relation between books and reading, i.e. between the mediation objects and their uses. In a field that had been dominated by bibliologic methods, focused on the examination of the objects and quantitative inventories, the scholars who were aware of the problematics of mentalities history stressed the question of the nature of the practices linked to the uses of the book. They wanted to understand the way objects, in their material form itself, contribute to the shaping of cultural attitudes toward reading: « the history of books, wrote for instance Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin, can no longer sidestep the ways of reading, partly registered in the object itself, which defines the possibilities of an appropriation, but also partly supported by the culture of those who read and give sense, our sense, to what they read » (1982, p.11). Which was to point out « a central question, that of the uses and handlings, that of the ways to appropriate and read printed matters » (CHARTIER, 1993, p.80). But such a slip in the stance to examine reading practices don't mean historian detached themselves from the materiality of books or from the symbolic forms books are able to institute. Even if the actual behaviour of any community in reading define a regime of norm and sense, it « is situated at the junction between ways of reading (which are both individual and collective ones, inherited and innovative ones, intimate and public ones) and protocols of reading registered in the object which is read, not only by the author, who indicates the right understanding of his text, but also by the printer, who makes up the typographic form of it, either in purpose, or unintentionally, according to the prevailing routines » (p.81). The difficulties historians had to face, insofar as they could not resort to a direct observation of practices, obliged them to point out with a very particular shrillness the dialectic between the material and semiotic dimension of the mediational objects and the cultural and anthropologic dimension of the ways of doing things.

It is something which is very clearly manifested by the wide inquiry coordinated by Christian Jacob on well-read worlds (« *mondes lettrés* »), devoted to the analysis of the work out of the text as an object (GIARD & JACOB, 2001) and to the metamorphosies of the reader (JACOB, 2003). The triple dimension (social, technical and semiotic) of the mediational process is omnipresent in that study and it is the reason why the problems of the different approaches of mediation, of the mediational objects and of the social practices can be formulated altogether. The creation of objects contribute to record forms of practice within forms of language. What has the consequence to confer a durability to cultural disciplines, to relations between actors and to the values of a culture. The mediational object, as the catalog or the map, gives existence to go-betweenes inside institutions

and contributes to represent ways of doing that pretend to govern the norms of a culture. However, the historical life of social practices is constantly undermining those configurations. As Christian Jacob writes, « practices fit in certain places, call up certain actors, handle certain artefacts, spread inside traditions. [...] Mediations, heuristic procedures, research routines, ways of archiving and exploiting knowledge, ideas and informations that were picked up in books: all those practices have been long concealed by intellectual and cultural history works, which are interested in doctrinal contents and intellectual trends rather than in the forms that convey them and the gestures which produce them. Those forms and gestures are yet decisive, for they anchor knowledge in time and space and involve it in learned communities in which differently statuted actors cooperate in the most humble tasks as well as in the most decisive productions » (GIARD & JACOB, 2001, p.31).

The texts I quoted above belong in my opinion to an intellectual trend that steps over disciplinary boundaries, being able to structure an approach of the info-communicational mediations in themselves. It is totally different from creating a hybrid of social and technique. One could say the analysis of mediations do reveal all what the categories of social and technique don't enable us to see.

Such a statement is clearly illustrated in two areas of our discipline, popularization of knowledge, on the one hand, and media studies, on the other hand. The social scientists were very late to pay attention to the social circulation of cultural objects. Popularization, which played a major role in the development of our society, was most recently considered worthy of interest. In the early scientific examinations which were devoted to it, the notion of mediation turned out to be a central one. The popularizer was endowed with the role to be the go-between (« the third man ») who was supposed to reconcile a society cut in two parts, learned persons and ignorant ones. With the development of the analyses based on info-communicational concepts (media, apparatus, communication situation, document) things reveal to be more complex. First, far from reducing popularization to a translation of existing knowledge, it was recongnized that it constituted a form of mediation having its own sense. It was then necessary to clear up the confusion between popularization discourses and practices, as when you make the supposition a text which is addressed to the average man should actually reach a popular audience. By this way, popularization productions became able to endow a proper status, not as reflecting social practices, but as conditioning them. The multiple uses of those productions (what I call *polychresis*) fully contribute to their real sense. Finally, by accurately considering the social, technical and semiotic dimensions of the mediation, we could question the link between that specialized communication and the whole economy of the exchanges in society. Instead of taking for granted popularization is a simple variant of education, people understood that it was necessary to link it to the various apparatus that organize the communication about sciences in social

contexts and to place it in the perspective of the relation between politics, science and industry. So that the project of popularizing science as it was worked out in the 19th century became to appear, not as a model to study science communication, but as a certain stage, and a naturalized one, of social discourse about knowledge.

Popularization papers, scientific documentaries, exhibitions in science museums are mediatic productions. They insert certain objects, often complex ones, between social actors. I mentioned above that the analysis of uses could contribute to information and communication research at the condition the notion of technical objects should be precised in the terms of mediatic devices. But how to define what is a media? The history I just resumed above shows a direction to answer that question. In our discipline, in France, the notion of media is strongly influenced by political sociology. The point is often expressed in terms of « media power » on « public opinion », opposed to « freedom of audiences ». Even if not incorrect, this way to set the question is too vague to help us in the approach of information and knowledge issues. I take to examples, the notions of « reception » and « contract », which are both much used in the media approaches in France. The way sociologists gave priority to « reception studies » had the interest to highlight the practices of social actors. In this respect, they have plain relevance for libraries or websites as for TV programs, which concentrate the attention of sociological inquirers. However, the fact to build the question as an alternative between « media » and « reception » leads to introduce a gap between objects and practices: what is shown by the fact many of those studies lie on what people *say* of mediatic productions, apart from any actual observation of mediatic programs or devices. In reality, the notion of reception itself is a very problematic one. It mixes the logistic dimension of the mediational process with the symbolic one. It is sure that people have to face mediatic productions they « receive » in a certain way, on a material level. But such a material transmission does not give access to questions as interpretation, value, cultural attitudes. The mistake should be so to consider reception as an interpretative and symbolic category, as it is only a logistic one. Some info-communicational processes are based on direct interaction (as discussing a point in a conversation) whereas other ones are shaped by mediatic forms, in the sense they require the creation of material objects which are also texts, such as a booklet, a movie or a book. In the last case, the real point is to know what the conditions of expression and interpretation are. So, the idea people should receive a message (and not only an object) or, on the contrary, that they should be absolutely free, misses the communicational interaction and its informational stake.

It is clearly demonstrated by another frequently used notion, that of « contract ». A frequent statement says communication is like a contractual relation: interacting people are supposed to implicitly agree on a set of rules for exchange. Such an idea misses the complexity of the relation between mediation as a process and media as communicational devices. When people read a book,

they didn't contract with the author nor did people who visit an exhibition with the designer. Both are confronted to a mediatic production, created by the means of diverse apparatus, which requires from them a participation. First, it involves him on both intellectual and physical levels; second, it offers a range of signs to interpret. What happens then cannot be completely predicted. What is to occur in a mediatic situation is largely uncertain, even if it does depend from what the communicational devices and situations allow. So there is not in a proper sense a contract, because neither before exchanges happen nor after them the communicational process can be closed on any guaranteed cross-understanding. Communication mediated by objects is characterized by a structural discontinuity. Some people intend to communicate, the same or other people embody that purpose in a act of writing, other ones contribute to the production of devices, other practice those devices and give them life and sense. All that stages are obviously linked together, because each mediation anticipates and condition the following ones, but the whole process is inevitably full of heterogeneity and uncertainty. According to the phrase of Davallon, « the guidance of the reception process remains probabilist » (DAVALLON, 1999, p.78).

## A renewed economy of writing

I have been setting until now the reflection at a rather general level; I should like finally to evoke the way such a complex dialectic between mediation, practice and use works in the particular universe of writing. The domain of written texts has indeed the particularity to allow the material inscription of cultural postures and it draws from that capacity a particular strength in programming practices. As Jacques Fontanille notices, the object of writing « carries, in its morphology itself, modalities that condition what the user can do » (2005, p.198), with the consequence « it configures provisionally and locally wider forms of life » (p.199). It is the reason why the domain of writing practices is a particularly interesting case to study the relation between mediation and use, for we deal with mediational devices that carry an information and express a meaning by their semiotic dimension, and in the same time impose a constraint and shape a practice by their physical action. As microcomputers, word processors, networks were invented, we could see new forms of writing coming out. Computer mediated communication is a powerful engine for writing forms. As it makes possible a large scale industrialized mediation of written texts, it appeals and exploits in a particular and powerful way the development of social uses. How to get the ideas straight about all those changes?

I want to stress first the necessity of an accurate semiotic approach of writing. Writing, as many usual mediations, is often badly understood. It is supposed to be the servant of speech. Yet, even if it can make language visible (CHRISTIN, 1995), it possesses its own organization. Written texts are not only made of words, they need material supports, with their symbolic values and they use spatial codes. They come out as images and

play with frame structures and typography (SOUCHIER, 1998; BEGUIN-VERBRUGGE, 2006). In this respect, the alphabetic writing we use in the transcription of our languages is only one of the possible forms of writing, which exploits many other means to express thought. Moreover, even in our civilizations, the alphabetic features interact constantly with figurative forms of writing, as pictographic and ideographic ones (what is often called approximately « icons »).

This must encourage us to stress the importance of one particular form of mediation, the memorial one. It is not totally exact to present the informatic networks as a radically new world, able to institute a different logic of communication, called for instance « computational logic » (BACHIMONT, 2000). We must not deny computer science to have created new supports for writing, based on digital codes which enable us to command machines. But the digital code defines only the deeper level of the media. This one works by exploiting very old forms of expression. Of course, it makes possible new forms of mediation; but such innovative processes lie constantly on the social memory of users, i.e. on the most extensive set of forms the whole history of societies has been progressively constituting. For computer science must not be reduced to software engineering. It derives its incredible success to the ability it shows to adopt and adapt the existing mediations of culture, to the capacity to industrialize knowhows inherited from the book, the page, the guide, etc. If we plan to understand in what measure media condition uses, we must keep in mind that permanent activity of transposition and transfer of a huge background of acquired knowledge about the forms of mediation. It is not abusive to say that computer science has become an industry of recycling mediations. With only two limits: on the one hand, the fact that picking up a mediational object doesn't automatically imply to master the meaning of the act of mediation, on the other hand the fact softwares constantly spread in various domains intellectual disciplines which had been elaborated and conceived in circumscribed contexts.

On the base of such precautions, we may consider the question of track and tracking. Writing does depend on tracks. It proceeds inscribing on various supports messages which are at the same time ways of organizing knowledge. The page, the table of contents, the catalog are informational disciplines embodied in material objects. But the notion of track is very ambiguous and can mislead us. We have indeed the impression written text to carry the track of uses, so that it seems to be easy to collect those tracks and so to reach social life in itself. But things are more complex, for all the levels of mediation mentioned above are involved in the analysis of written objects. Written tracks are not pure reflections of reality. They are enunciations, that is to say ways of taking a stance in the world and shaping sense. They are conceived in order to enable reading, so that they must be referred to certain conditions of transmission, publicity and interpretation. It is very obvious when somebody takes a text that has been written in a private context and disseminates it widely or cuts in pieces a structured discourse: two forms of violence,

often unthinkingly done, the « cut and paste » process makes easy. Written text are the product of an editorial enunciation, a way to afford reading, on a support, in a context, according to an universe of publicity. The fact a written object contains material tracks and is able to transport them does not signify it should be in itself a pure track (a pure index) of the social. One cannot deny that, as far as written text produce tracks, they can be used, exploited, transferred to other contexts, collected, combined and that computer science gives a renewed power to such an industrial ingeneering of tracks.

The considerations above enable us to reconsider in info-communicational terms the relation between mediation and use in network writing. What brings us back once more to the political issue of the notion of use. In the discussion he had with Foucault, De Certeau agreed the importance of the apparatus that constraint our practices; but, instead of assimilating the apparatus to a subjection (« *assujettissement* »), he wanted to make visible the creativity of social practices. The use is the way people who don not have the power manage to develop their own universe: what the theorician of the invention of everyday life expressed by an antithesis between strategy, the strength of strong people, and tactics, the strength of weak people, who have learned to play with constraints. For him, to read is to poach, an activity which shows the intelligence of the ones who cope with the domination in order to invent a space for their expression. That idea is called « economy of writing », « *économie scripturaire* » (DE CERTEAU, 1990, p.195-224). I believe that idea can today be revitalized by the means of an analysis of the mediations that are properly linked to the processus of information and communication, as I could evoke them above.

The notion of economy of writing seems to be both confirmed and deeply transformed by the development of computer-mediated communication. It is now admitted that the opposition between writing and creen is nothing but relevant, because what chatacterizes networks communication is the way it operates a continuous transfer of activities which previously did not concern written productions to written forms (COTTE et al., 2007). In other words, computerized media do not stop leading to a writing of practices themselves, by the way they procced to the inscription of the tracks of uses. They call upon the written contributions and make treatments on them. Therefore, the economy of writing is not only based on a gap between writing and reading but, more and more, on a gap between differents levels of writing, dividing the actors who shape the formats of writing and those who fill in those forms. For instance, a participative platform, a blog, a website collecting travel notebooks make a wide range of different written productions possible, from people whose status is most heterogeneous. But such a contributive process is only possible inside forms which were elaborated by software designers and which are more and more standardized.

I proposed with Emmanuël Souchier (1999) the notion of *software architext* to designate such a phenomenon.

Architextual softwares are a kind of writing of writing. When you write in one of them, somebody has yet written upstream of you the forms in which you can compose a text. From the moment we created the term, architexts have been constantly proliferating in an amazing way so to demonstrate their extraordinary power. Architexts shape the forms (word processors, presenters), the exchange of correspondence (mail, chat), the information retrieval (search engines), the intertextual relations (RSS readers), etc. To make a long story short, architexts are software objects that go on industrializing the capacity of written forms to shape practices, as explained above, leading in those conditions on a renewed economy of writing. An economy which can be summarized in a paradox. A constantly growing set of means of expression which in the past were reserved to professionals becomes usable for amateurs, making visible a mass of cultural uses. But such a collective expression is more and more formatted by tools which support certain forms of mediation to the detriment of others, so to have consequences in the symbolic economy, not only of such individual practice, but of culture in a whole.

I shall finally illustrate those phenomenon with an example I draw from a current collective research project, which can show to such an extend the relations between mediation, practice and use are today redefining.

This research projects is about the analysis of the tracks of editorial mediation in the wide text aggregates in the web<sup>1</sup>. One of the major trends of so-called « web 2.0 » consists in collecting use tracks and producing « cartographies » and « mappings » which are supposed to represent social networks, collective activities and communities of practice. For us, researchers in information and communicaton science, those representation devices are a particular form of mediation, but they are not always presented so by people who designed them. Some of these designers, among the most popular ones, present the web as a strongly heuristic space of knowledge upon social uses, because they refer to a notion of tracks which assimilate written productions to a sort of package of practices. They go so far as to herald an *ethnography* of the web based on such a collection of tracks.

The processes implied by those projects are actually very complex and different. Sometimes, the production of templates for writing has the function to stimulate the production of texts, sometimes software operations are automatically treated, as for instance the out and in links on sites, sometimes different texts which have been produced for different purposes are melted in a unique corpus, sometimes ordinary users are involved in the production of keywords, sometimes different computational and statistical treatments are made on written tracks, etc. All those operations lead to formal productions, both technical and semiotic, which take the form of lists, « clouds », « cartographies », icons, but also to navigation signs giving access to different disseminated texts or, conversely, to the reproduction of external texts inside clustered sites. Behind the appearance of an immediate grasping on the practices, the analysis points out a complex and dense set of mediations. But such practices, which gradu-

ally spread over any area of information, from the most commercial one to the most activist, are interpreted into discourse by their authors: we are told the matter would be community, authority, popularity. It is a spontaneous and ideologic informational qualification of a practice consisting in the manipulation of textual fragments. And yet it is to notice that such practices gradually reach the field of applied research in social sciences, since they are supposed to enable a new form of implemented sociology – which does not fail to be criticized by the fellows who have been for a long time alerting people about the complexity of statistical conclusions. In reality, it is the prestige of mediatic processes – and also the fact the media, instead of being considered as a media, is regarded as an « information technology » – which legitimate those practices and diverts from making, as we should for any statistical analysis, a critic of the way texts and data are produced and so being able to proportion correctly their interpretation.

For searchers in communication sciences, those operations are interesting ones, but as a kind of editorial mediations that are made on certain texts of different status. So it is necessary to understand the process they require, to analyze the mediatic and textual forms which make them possible and to understand the semiotic transformations which are worked out on written objects. In sum, to analyze the economy of writing which is in action in those different operations. Finally, we go once more to the politics. The effort to distance oneself from the metaphores of the network, of the map or of the social indexing is necessary in order to empower information and communication science to bring a specific contribution to the analysis of those renewed relations between mediations and uses. It is very different from another choice, which should be the one of supporting a savage sociology, based on the fact of putting in equivalence all the kinds of writing and the justification of the idea it should be possible to make an informational tracking of any practice by the Internet.

## Note

1. ANR Project *Tramedweb* managed by Jean Davallon with a research team from Avignon (LCC), Lille 3 (Geriico) Paris 4 Celsa (Gripic) and Paris 10 (MoDyCo).

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