



INTERVIEW WITH

Tristan Mattelart

« Global news diversity in perspective »

Tristan Mattelart is a professor of Information and Communication Sciences at the Institut Français de Presse (IFP) of the University of Paris-Panthéon-Assas and a researcher at the Center for Interdisciplinary Analysis and Research on the Media (CARISM). He began to study the implications of the internationalisation of information by examining how transnational audiovisual media circumvent censorship, first in the context of East-West relations (*Le cheval de Troie audiovisuel*, Pug, 1995), then in the context of North-South relations (*La mondialisation des médias contre les censures*, Ina-DeBoeck, 2002). He later explored these issues from the perspective of diasporas and the transnational links they forge with their countries of origin (*Médias, migrations et cultures transnationales*, Ina-DeBoeck, 2007; special issue of the journal *tic&société* on “Tic et diasporas”, 2009; *Médias et migrations dans l'espace euro-méditerranéen*, Mare et Martin, 2014). Since then, Tristan Mattelart has been conducting research on how the emergence of the web and digital platforms has transformed the conditions under which information is produced and circulated on an international scale (as demonstrated by the work conducted with Olivier Koch, in particular, the book *Géopolitique des télévisions transnationales d'information*, Mare et Martin, 2016, and the forthcoming special issue of *Questions de communication*, “La diplomatie publique à l'heure des réseaux”).

In publications in the early 2000s, Brian McNair and Axel Bruns predicted an end to the gatekeeping power of big corporate media: they foresaw a chaotic or highly participatory communication landscape, respectively

Indeed, Axel Bruns and Brian McNair are known for their enthusiastic welcome of the rise of the web in the early 2000s. In 2005, Axel Bruns stated that thanks to the web, “everyone is, or at least has the potential to be, an editor” of content, which caused the major news media’s gatekeeper role to “fade away”¹. This argument is echoed in Brian McNair’s 2006 book *Culture Chaos: Journalism, News and Power in a Globalized World*. He suggested that the production and circulation of information was no longer the privilege of a limited number of “mainstream and established channels” but now resided in the hands of “thousands of millions of online [information] producers”² “running blogs, personal websites or commenting on the news.

In the field of international information, on which I will focus, this type of thesis has been translated into equally optimistic views. For example,

John Maxwell Hamilton and Eric Jenner argued in 2003 that “with one click of a mouse, anyone abroad can become an international correspondent³”.

Interestingly, McNair’s arguments were accompanied by a call to change the theoretical frameworks through which we think about information production and circulation processes, including foreign news. In particular, he challenged the perspectives of political economy.

Since the 1970s, the latter [political economists] have been working to decipher the mechanisms that organise the production and circulation of international information. The work carried out within this framework has very actively contributed to exposing the central role played in this field by the major Western world news agencies. In his book devoted to *International News Agencies*, Oliver Boyd-Barrett thus highlighted these very large-scale companies’ powers in defining the news agenda concerning foreign countries. He showed how they are key agenda setters for the news produced worldwide, the media all over the world being extremely dependent on their dispatches⁴. This work is not without limitations, but it has pointed out the inequalities that exist in the representations of the world offered by these large agencies or the large Western media, underlining that in their supply of information, the Third World appears less and is mainly represented in moments of crisis, in a negative and sensationalist way.

These are the publications that, at a time when the old gatekeepers of information, including international information, were presumed to have disappeared, were condemned by Brian McNair. At that point in time, political economy was considered unable to account for the “complex dynamics of the 21st-century media system⁵”.

How has platformization changed this?

Before answering this question, it is necessary to point out that it is quite incorrect to consider that the rise of the web has eliminated the role of gatekeepers played by the big media and news agencies. If the web’s development has supported the emergence of a multitude of new actors, the more “traditional” big media, as they are sometimes characterised, have not lost their key role as gatekeepers, if only thanks to the extent of their online presence, as Matthew Hindman pointed out very early on⁶.

This is particularly true in the field of international information. Interestingly, research conducted on the websites of these major media highlights essential continuities with the previous period. In particular, this research underlines the dependence of these websites on the dispatches provided by the largest world press agencies⁷ and the same type of imbalanced representation of the world to the disadvantage of the countries of the South⁸ as that which was identified in the work I mentioned earlier.

To come back to the question, if the rise of the web has not eliminated the role of gatekeepers played by the big media or news agencies, it has favoured the development of a new, heterogeneous generation of gatekeepers: the big digital platforms. Despite the fact that they do not produce news and that news is only one of many sectors in which these platforms invest, these companies are nonetheless crucial intermediaries for the international flow of information.

In his book, Brian McNair described a global journalistic landscape made chaotic by the rise of the web. Out of this chaos, if this metaphor has any heuristic value, a handful of new actors are emerging with a power ex-

exercised on a global scale that is in many ways greater than what the political economy has attributed to the world's news agencies.

In one of the first publications devoted to the new role played by Google in the international circulation of news, Elad Segev refers to the search engine as one of the primary “gatekeepers of the global information network⁹”. Furthermore, ironically, this researcher mobilises once again political economy research, whose obsolescence had been proclaimed only a few years earlier, to identify the new realities of power that have emerged in this field, the rise of Google being only one among others.

Zeynep Tufekci, for her part, in a book in which she studies “network protests” and in which she details how activists from all over the world use socio-numerical networks to advance their causes, emphasises the “historically unprecedented power” that a company like Facebook has in the international circulation of information¹⁰.

This last aspect is essential. Yes, the large digital platforms offer an infrastructure of choice for obtaining and distributing information internationally without going through the large media's filter. Indeed, this is what Raphael Lupovici showed in the pre-conference (and what he shows in this issue of *About Journalism*) by identifying how the French Gilets jaunes were able to bypass “media barriers” by using the alternative information channels offered by Facebook to follow the progress of the self-proclaimed Canadian Freedom Convoy. However, emphasising this dimension should not distract us from the questions raised by the unprecedented power that a handful of Californian platforms now exert over the international flow of information.

You suggested continuities between the current news environment and the former one. Could you elaborate?

I believe that contrary to what Brian McNair postulated, continuities can be drawn between older research on the representation of the world by the world news agencies or Western media, on the one hand, and more recent research, on the other. As I have already pointed out, the research on the political economy of information carried out in the 1970s and 1980s has abundantly underlined the inequalities structuring the international geography of information flows and the imbalances in the representations of the world to which they give substance. However, these inequalities are far from having disappeared.

A fascinating study in this field conducted by a team of geographers, Mark Ballatore, Mark Graham and Shilad Sen, looked at how the world's capital cities are represented on Google. They showed that the information available on the search engine on the capital cities of the Middle East, Africa, or Southeast Asia refers to websites that are primarily domiciled in the United States or France. Furthermore, they note that this gives rise to a form of “hegemony”, with some information producers having the power, on this platform to “define what is read by others”¹¹.

In line with this research, Qun Wang, during the conference (and in his paper in this issue), highlighted that Google's video search engine, Google Video, in the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, wiped an entire subcontinent off the map. Latin America, which had many cases compared to other countries, literally disappeared from the first page of Google Video results dedicated to the pandemic (and accessed from the United States).

This allows us to measure the extent of these large platforms' power to render this or that issue, or this or that region of the world, visible or, on the contrary, invisible. Another illustration of this power is YouTube's removal of many videos documenting the civil war in Syria in 2018. As part of initiatives to combat "terrorism", the company removed no less than 33 million videos about the war that year alone. Moreover, since the content moderation operated by the platform – conducted by either human or artificial intelligence – has not been able to systematically distinguish between propaganda videos posted by terrorist groups and those filmed, in contrast, to testify about the abuses that took place during the war, thousands of videos documenting "human rights violations may now be lost forever"¹².

This example of content moderation conducted by YouTube on its platform on a global scale also brings us back, in certain respects, to themes previously explored in research on international information flows. Since the end of the 1970s, the literature has highlighted that the networks of foreign correspondents available to the world's news agencies or the major media were structured by very strong inequalities, with some US agencies having, for example, as many correspondents in a given European country as in the whole of the African continent¹³.

Digital platforms – which, once again, produce less information than they circulate the information produced by others – do not, of course, have networks of correspondents around the world. They have nevertheless set up networks of moderators trying to regulate the content circulating on the infrastructure they make available. Furthermore, these networks are structured by inequalities that echo the organised information collection circuits of the news agencies that were studied several decades ago.

The importance of the role played by these networks of moderators must be emphasised. Far from the enchanted visions of Axel Bruns or Brian McNair, the development of these large platforms has, in fact, provided a heterogeneous set of state or non-state, local, national or international actors with a variety of infrastructures from which to disseminate misinformation while also allowing them to target their audiences. Hence, it is crucial to regulate the content provided by these platforms. However, not all of the world's audiences are equal.

In any case, this is what a series of articles written during the fall of 2021, based on internal Facebook documents communicated by whistleblower Frances Haugen, allow us to think. A *New York Times* article revealed that 87% of Facebook's overall budget "spent on cataloguing misinformation" was reserved for the United States, with the remaining 13% for the rest of the world¹⁴. An Associated Press investigation revealed that "in some of the world's most volatile regions, terrorist content and hate speech are proliferating because the company [Facebook] does not have enough moderators who speak local languages and understand cultural contexts"¹⁵. In short, we were able, on this occasion, to measure the extent to which Facebook, eager to expand internationally to increase the number of its users, has, at the same time, underestimated the need to fight against the misinformation that it has facilitated, in a certain number of countries in the southern hemisphere.

Some conference presenters examined how platforms are affecting the nature of news through funding schemes for journalism start-ups, for example. Are these positive contributions to the public conversation?

Yes, indeed, as the research on the "platformization"¹⁶ of information or on "infomediation"¹⁷ has underlined, the large digital platforms are far from

being neutral intermediaries between, on the one hand, the content producers and, on the other hand, the users. Although they do not produce information, they nonetheless define, through a variety of tools, various standards to which news producers are invited to conform if they wish to see their content thrive on the infrastructure made available to them.

While these processes have already been well explored from North American and Western European perspectives, they are less well investigated from the perspective of the global South. Hence the relevance of the research that Darsana Vijay presented at the conference (and published in this issue), which focuses on seven South Indian start-ups producing information in Malayalam. She described the ambiguous relationship these start-ups have with Facebook. As the platform allows them to disseminate their content, on the one hand, it acts as a support as they strive to exist outside the circuits of the partisan, sensationalist mainstream media, which they oppose. On the other hand, in order to gain visibility on the platform, these start-ups must follow specific rules, in accordance with the algorithm's expectations, by focusing, for example, on "breaking news" and other "trending topics" that will generate the "meaningful interactions" that Facebook is hoping for, as the latter translate into more data and advertising revenue. At the risk for the start-ups to turn away from the alternative editorial line they have set and fall of the start-ups turning away from the alternative editorial line, they have set and fallen into the sensationalism they criticise in the mainstream media.

It is not only through this array of tools that Facebook and other platforms exert their power, but also, notably, through the funds they have created to finance journalism internationally. Charis Papaevangelou's presentation at the pre-conference (and the paper he drew from it) illustrated this well. Studying the Google News Initiative and the Facebook Journalism Project, he showed how these funds constitute a lever through which these two companies are trying to impose technological solutions or business models intended to influence journalistic practices in such a way that they better serve their monetisation imperatives by multiplying interactions between users. So much so that he went as far as to speak of strategies developed by Google and Facebook to "capture journalism"¹⁸.

The focus on deciphering the strategies developed by these platforms to put journalism at the service of their interests should not, however, lead to neglecting the study of the resistance these initiatives encounter from the media or newsrooms. In this respect, Darsana Vijay described well in her presentation the degree to which journalists from the South-Indian start-ups are critical of Facebook's operations and how they try not to sacrifice their alternative journalistic line on the altar of the constraints posed by the platform.

Her argument echoes other pieces of research. I am particularly thinking of a study by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Federica Cherubini on a dozen traditional media outlets from the South. They underline the "pragmatism" that their managers show towards the big digital platforms, using their services, sometimes reluctantly, but trying to protect themselves from the risks they take by doing so¹⁹.

You have cautioned that we be aware of the limitations of research into platformisation - what are these?

I won't try to identify the limits of the work on platformization. What is quite exciting, I must say, is that we are witnessing the development of theoretical frameworks designed to account for the relatively new role played by digital platforms, in particular, in the production and circulation of infor-

mation. What strikes me in the research on the platformization of information, however, is that there is interest neither in the way in which the rise of these platforms has contributed to transforming specifically the realities of the production and circulation of *international* information nor the realities of the production and circulation of news about *foreign countries*. To put it another way, there is an apparent discrepancy between the importance of the global presence of these large platforms and the lack of studies that specifically address this central dimension. In this respect, there is a great contrast between the intense debates about the inequalities in the media representation of the world in the 1970s and 1980s and the lack of attention paid to these issues nowadays. Furthermore, as I have tried to suggest, digital platforms exercise power in the international circulation of information similar to the one that the big news agencies still have.

To be more precise, there is, for example, little to no research on the representation of the world offered by the media born from the rise of social-digital networks or on the way, they report on the world. What means do media outlets such as Vox.com or Brut – to mention only those that Facebook has set up as models of good journalism adapted to social-digital networks²⁰ – have at their disposal to cover foreign news, what place do they give it, and how do they represent it? These would have been common research questions in the 1970s or early 1980s. Today, they have largely disappeared from the agenda. However, they have lost none of their importance.

Furthermore, as has already been said, the research on the platformization of information certainly suffers from being too focused on North American and Western European realities and from not taking the rest of the world sufficiently into account. More specifically, as I did in this interview, they tend to focus on the role played by the prominent Silicon Valley platforms in this geographical area and no doubt neglect to consider non-US players. This prism is not new. In her literature review of research on news agencies worldwide, Terhi Rantanen criticised the negligence of the study of non-Western news agencies²¹. Her appeal to research them further can also be applied to digital platforms. It is indeed necessary to undertake more research on non-Western digital platforms and better understand their role in the production and international circulation of information, including better assessing the role of Western platforms in this field. However, it is true that this call seems to have already been partly heard by different media around the world, as shown, for example, by the development of research on the use of TikTok²² or the news content platform Toutiao²³, two companies owned by the Chinese corporation ByteDance.

*Comments collected and annotated by
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