

How journalists see “the suburbs”: lifting the veil on a cliché

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Reviewed: Jérôme Berthaut, *La Banlieue du « 20 heures »*. *Ethnographie de la production d'un lieu commun journalistique*, Marseille, Agone, 2013, 430 pages.

“La banlieue”: in France, few terms convey such a clear and constant image: high-rise social housing, young men “of immigrant background” without work, a culture of violence... Why is it that such stereotypical and stigmatising representations of what is in fact a highly diverse reality are so enduring? Following fieldwork in the France 2 newsroom, Jérôme Berthaut offers a certain number of explanations. Here, Julie Sedel, author of *Les Médias et la Banlieue*, reviews his findings.

In *La Banlieue du « 20 heures »*. *Ethnographie de la production d'un lieu commun journalistique*, Jérôme Berthaut’s point of departure is the following paradox: although students of journalism and political science in France often tend to move to the left of the political spectrum, and despite public awareness-raising campaigns on the issue of discrimination, the French media continues to perpetuate “reporting in formats considered ‘simplistic’ or even ‘reactionary’ by activists and residents of the neighbourhoods concerned” (p. 12).

The author suggests that the way journalists address subjects relating to “*la banlieue*” – literally “the suburbs”, but most often used to refer to disadvantaged inner suburbs surrounding the rich urban core – is so entrenched that they no longer reflect upon the meaning and impact of their work. Indeed, “the ethnic categories or stigmatising classifications that pervade newsrooms [...] have a practical social use by reducing the unpredictability of journalists’ work” (p. 125). They satisfy several constraints at the same time (deadline constraints, economic constraints, editorial constraints) by offering “cognitive shortcuts that are accessible to reporters” (p. 125). With this in mind, Jérôme Berthaut decided to undertake an ethnographic observation of the news team at France’s leading national public television channel, France 2, in order to gain a better understanding of the “practicality of journalists”, which is to say “how routine methods for approaching issues such as ‘*la banlieue*’ and ‘immigration’ are integrated into journalistic practices” (p. 11).

Addressing *banlieue*-related issues: the impact of professional norms and career-oriented attitudes

The central thesis of Jérôme Berthaut’s book is that caricatured visions of France’s *banlieues* can be explained to a large extent by the influence of professional norms that are reinforced by the hierarchical organisation of TV journalism, recruitment methods and career-oriented attitudes.

More specifically, “for those entering the profession, “*la banlieue*” is a subject that speaks to them, in that it simultaneously denotes a variety of ‘issues’, ‘angles’, practices and models for success to be emulated (‘if you want to make it big in the profession one day...’)” (p. 94). Through these “issues”, the author analyses the way in which fledgling journalists internalise professional

norms and the expectations of their superiors. In parallel, he uses contrasting cases of mismatches and conformity in this regard to show the way in which these norms dominate life in the newsroom.

His observations of editorial meetings shed light on how this “common sense” approach regarding the *banlieues* is collectively constructed: these meetings, far from being “democratic” spaces, are essentially attended by heads of department and represent an “asymmetric forum for exchanging ideas on possible subjects” (p. 101). The author analyses them as place where “editors assert their power” (p. 101). The impression of being in a self-segregating “closed circle” that emanates from these observations is linked to the fact that these editors are themselves the product of “recruitment, promotion and relegation processes that take place whenever the leadership team changes” (p. 100). Furthermore, the fact that the professional journalists who are promoted to senior roles find themselves “in agreement with the new editorial priorities” (p. 100) helps explain the lack of debate on how television journalism covers the *banlieues*.

“La banlieue” at the heart of changes in audiovisual journalism

For Jérôme Berthaut, the way the *banlieues* are viewed and presented is telling, as it shows that certain norms and attitudes present in private audiovisual groups have been “exported” to public audiovisual stations too. The arrival of new management at France 2 between 1992 and 2003 – “defectors” from commercial station TF1, France’s most watched TV channel (p. 31) – has resulted in the introduction of “excellence criteria”, such as the importance of “being the first” to break with a story and the ability to maintain good relations with strategic sources (the police and the judiciary), both of which have had “long-lasting effects on the homogenisation of professional habitus”, in that the new values instilled have continued to influence the news team even after the departure of the managers in question (p. 60).

Editorial changes, symbolised by the rising prominence of what the French call *faits divers* – reports of crimes and accidents – are reflected in the creation, in 2001, of an informal team of four journalists, whose role it is to regularly address questions relating to the *banlieues*. These journalists are observed in Jérôme Berthaut’s study, although it would have been germane to draw comparisons between this team and their counterparts in other newsrooms (Sedel 2013; Macé and Peralva 2002; Champagne 1991). The author also observes the implementation of a new “tactic”, based on the recruitment of “fixers” who act as intermediaries between the *banlieues* and the news team, while cannily avoiding any evaluations of the effectiveness of this strategy. These auxiliary journalists are recruited for their social capital, often the result of growing up on inner-city housing estates, and are emblematic of reporters’ loss of independence in the production process (p. 183). Ultimately, the reporters act as supervisors for this new category of personnel that is now responsible for laying the groundwork for news reports of this kind. The author adopts a critical view with regard to the intermediaries themselves: instead of imposing their own visions of the *banlieues*, they select interviewees and sources who conform to editors’ expectations and thus help perpetuate “stereotypes”. Jérôme Berthaut points out that while using the services of these fixers “reduces unpredictability, it reinforces the effect of social closure”.

The contributions and limitations of the ethnographic survey

Jérôme Berthaut’s work shows that the numerous studies conducted since the 1980s on journalists’ approaches to the social problems of the *banlieues* have not yet exhausted the subject. The book first confirms the results of previous research (albeit without always citing the studies in question): the rise of news teams specialised in *faits divers*; the weight given to police sources in the development of stories; the influence of these sources’ perceptions and world views on news teams; the increasing dominance of general-interest, multipurpose journalism over expert or specialist journalism; the “typecasting” of *banlieues* as a result of “staging” processes; systematically giving

preference to “fieldwork” and the “authentic” opinions of residents over institutional stakeholders; the influence of senior editors in determining the angle adopted in reports; and the unequal relationship between journalists and their contacts in working-class neighbourhoods.

The ethnographic survey, which is the truly original aspect of this research, is based primarily on three two-week periods of observation within the news team for France 2’s main 8 p.m. news programme,¹ in March 2003, December 2006 and January 2007, as well as on 30 interviews. This method, imported to France from the US in the 1970s, has already given rise to two older studies on the France 2 news team (Joinet 2000; Siracusa 2001). However, the way it has been used here by Jérôme Berthaut does have its limitations. First, it is a pity that the author’s methodological considerations regarding the production of results are not presented in the book: how did the sociologist define his role during the observation periods, and how was he perceived by his respondents? We might also raise the question of the extent to which his methodological choices may have over-influenced the results of the survey: we already know, for instance, that journalists often merely reuse categories produced outside the newsroom, which are then adapted to the specific purpose at hand (Sedel 2013). Lastly, readers might regret that the author has not defined the categories he uses in sociological terms – first and foremost the category of the “*la banlieue*” itself.

These remarks aside, Jérôme Berthaut’s book offers rich source material and a detailed analysis of the way journalists consider these urban spaces. By observing this profession from the perspective of interactions and attitudes vis-à-vis professional norms, the role of the journalist, careers, forms of reward and recognition, chains of command and social “realities”, the author provides us with a better understanding of how television news concerning dominated groups is produced. Finally, this work calls out for a comparative approach including other field surveys, in order to move away from a single-case-study analysis – as, indeed, can be found in Jérôme Berthaut’s PhD thesis, which included fieldwork at Toulouse-based regional newspaper *La Dépêche du Midi*.

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¹ Translator’s note: in France, the main daily TV news programmes go out between 7.00 and 8.30 p.m., which is when most people tend to eat their evening meal. On certain channels, there is also a late news bulletin at around 11 p.m.

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