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***A PUBLIC PROBLEMS APPROACH TO
DISSONANT VOICES IN THE PUBLIC
DEBATE ON CLIMATES CHANGES IN
FRANCE***

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Purposes of the presentation

- 1) To explain how climate changes have been framed as a public problem since the early 2000's in French mass media.
- 2) To provide with some elements which help to understand this media framing where « controversies » remain at the margins.
- 3) To formulate some remarks about how a public problems' sociology and a constructivist approach can contribute to the study of controversies' media coverage.

Methodologies & core data (1)

From 1996 to 2007:

- *70 in-depth interviews* with actors who have taken part to the political work of promotion and definition of climate changes as a main issue in the French public debate
- *Content analysis* (thanks to the database of National Audiovisual Institute) of 663 TV reports broadcasted on the two main TV channels' evening news (TF1 + France 2 – daily audience: around 13 millions people each evening) – This corpus claims with a form of exhaustiveness
- Analysis of: French public policies, official statistics, State and ONG campaigns, but also of vulgarisation books, documentaries or TV debates.

Methodologies & core data (2)

From 2007 to 2011:

- *Content analysis of*
 - 633 TV reports broadcasted on *TF1* & *France 2* evening news
 - 173 articles published in the weekly newsmagazine *L'Express*
 - 1423 articles published in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* (2009-2011)
- *These corpus also claim with a form of exhaustiveness*
- *These data have been produced thanks to a grant from the research consortium « Climat, environnement et Société ». Six students of the French Press Institute have done the main part of the research's operations.*

Before 1996: some data produced by Stefan Aykut about two newspapers *Le Monde* and *L'Express* (1990 to 2007)

Some theoretical principles

- Situations, facts, or behaviors do not become problematic only because they generate more damages or because they are better understood by scientists.
- What makes a situation or a way of behaving become problematic - this is multi-level social transformations.
- In such a perspective, Bourdieu's concept of *field* and Elias' one of *configuration* are highly heuristic.
- A long term approach to grasp the public *career* (Becker) of a problem (i.e.: avoiding biased readings in terms of public problems' « natural life cycle »).

I) Three main sequences for one general tendency: a media framing quite impermeable to controversies

Sequence 1: *Before the early 2000's*

Climates changes's issue is **not yet conceived as a full-fledged public problem.**

Its media framing is not stabilized yet.

Journalists pay some attention to dissonant voices

⇒ *Controversies concerning the interrogation « is there a problem due to anthropogenic climates changes ? » are part of the « rare » media coverage of the issue.*

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Sequence 2: 2003-2004 to 2007

Four main social transformations come together to give rise to a specific configuration that allows the inscription of climate changes at the top of the public problems' hierarchy in France.

All the cause's « owners » (Gusfield), *i.e.* agents who frame it in the media (scientifics/experts, NGO, civil servants, specialised journalists), put the focus mainly (not only but mainly) on individual responsibilities.

It means that the issue's media framing is widely oriented towards the "awareness" of the largest audience and cannot really support controversies.

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Sequence 2: 2003-2004 to 2007

Journalists who cover climate news consider that scientists working in the bosom of the IPCC, embody the most legitimate « source ».

Between 1996 and 2007, in TV news, **none of the 663 reports** I analysed did not give any air time to dissonant voices but even or any of their claims.

For more details about sequences 1 & 2: please report to our article:
Aykut Stefan, Comby Jean-Baptiste, Hélène Guillemot, « Climate Change Controversies in French Mass Media 1990-2010 », *Journalism Studies*, 13(2), 2012, p. 157-174
In newspapers and some TV or radio talk shows, dissonant voices were occasionally given time, but this visibility was 1) extremely rare and 2) always contested by « owners » of the climate cause (including specialised journalists)

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Sequence 3: 2007-2011

- A political and media climax in 2007: climate change gains *a new symbolic status*.
- Some consequences regarding the social configuration of actors framing the issue:
 - Diversification
 - Media are less central for « owners » of the climate cause
 - Different « dissonant voices » catch the opportunity of the COP 15 's (and the « Climategate ») high mediatization to promote their arguments.
- Between summer 2009 and 2010, *dissonant voices enjoy an unusual media visibility*.
- But, as revealed by the following data, this visibility remains largely marginal and circumscribed.

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Sequence 3: 2007-2011

In the Press

- Of the 1,473 papers we analysed from *Le Monde*, only 35 give an opposing view
- Of the 173 articles we analysed from *L'Express*, only 8 give an opposing view

By the way:

- These articles are not always « pro sceptics »
- Most of them are located in opinions columns
- Most of the time, articles written by « pro sceptics » are set alongside articles contesting their points

On TV

- Between 2007 and 2011, as from 1996, *TF1*'s journalists have not covered dissonant voices who are present in any of the 311 reports we analysed

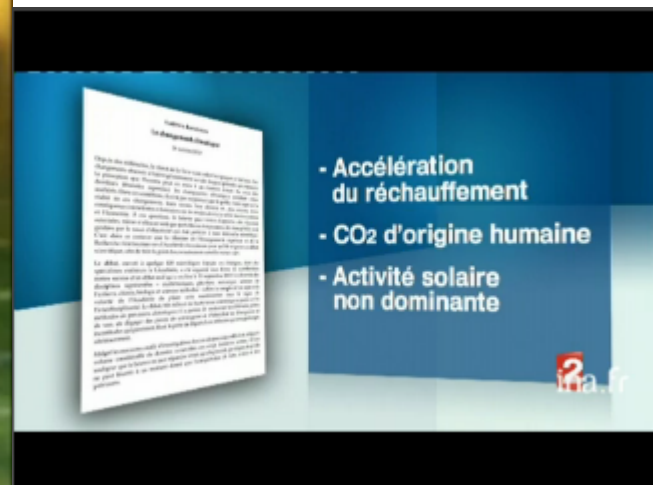
However, between 2009 to 2012, a French energy expert was invited every month to a TV journal in order to inform the French public about greenhouse gas emissions and to explain the need to reduce them

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Sequence 3: 2007-2011

On France 2, two reports out of the 321 we collected dealt with the « controversy » which would have « forced a debate in the scientific community »

France 2, 29/11/2010, 20h20, duration: 2 min 36
Report entitled: « Réchauffement climatique : bataille d'experts » (« Climate change: battle of experts »)



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Sequence 3: 2007-2011

In the end, media visibility of dissonant voices was indeed unusual from 2009.

However: 1) it remains *quantitatively marginal*. 2) This unusual visibility lasted barely more than one year and 3) was *qualitatively circumscribed* to specific audiences

We had not enough resources to analyse radio and TV debates, or coverage in the more conservative press e.g. *Le Figaro* or *Les Echos*. Perhaps these media outlets, also mainly with upper-class audiences, would have provided dissonant voices with a higher visibility (in terms of proportions).

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Sequence 3: 2007-2011

Quick remarks about the Internet:

Two points

- 1) we should first wonder how much climate skeptics are present on the web *compared to* the numeric surface occupied by all pro-environmental organisations which support the climate consensus
- 2) it might be a good idea to read the following works to understand why, in general, arguments which appear (mainly) on the Internet don't affect the structure of a public debate:

Maratea Ray (2008), « The e-Rise and fall of social problems : the blogosphere as a public arena », *Social Problems*, vol.55, n°1.

Cardon Dominique (2010), *La démocratie internet. Promesses et limites*, Paris, Seuil.

I) Three main sequences for one general tendency: a media framing quite impermeable to controversies

To conclude on sequence 3: 2007-2011

Our data show that climate skeptics have not won the « opinion war ».

Media coverage of the climate change issue in France is still conceived by most of the journalists as a consensual and accurate matter of concern.

Further analysis that I wish I could have more time to expose, reveals that in 2011 as in 2004, climate scientists are considered the most legitimate source in French mass media.

For more details & data :

Comby Jean-Baptiste et Romanet Vincent, *Un problème réchauffé ? Les changements climatiques dans les médias généralistes 2007-2011*, Rapport de recherche, Institut Français de Presse de l'Université Paris 2 & GIS « Climat, environnement et société », Paris, 2012

Available on the GIS website: <http://www.gisclimat.fr/>

II) Weakly organised « skeptics », mobilisations of the problem's « owners », and media erosion

At least, three main social logics explain the dissonant voices's low visibility in French mass media.

First, French « skeptics » don't mobilised themselves as a organised and co-ordinated movement.

As we noticed, the main type of actions these « skeptics » have used to promote their views consist of publishing books (we have counted at least ten books between 2008 and 2010). Although sometimes this can be effective, it cannot be considered as collective action.

Moreover, our analysis shows that they have never implemented a mobilisation which would transcend their social inscriptions in order to put together their points, agreements and arguments

II) Weakly organised « skeptics », mobilisations of the problem's « owners », and media erosion

On the other hand, climate change claim makers have cooperated for more than 10 years. They are used to mobilising together. Most of the time this is to increase people's awareness of the issue, and when needed, they can act together to devalue « dissonant voices ».

These relationships which routinely take place in a context of real and long-term collective action to shape the climate issue as a high-profile public problem, is a **second factor explaining** why « sceptics » are excluded from the media framing on climate change.

II) Weakly organised « skeptics », mobilisations of the problem's « owners », and media erosion

What characterizes the climate problem media coverage since 2007, this is actually its erosion.

The third reason of « skeptics' » weak media visibility is then due to this loss of newsworthiness on the climate changes issue.

Last but not the most robust, we could also argue that French and European public policies to fight greenhouse gas emissions, which are highly compatible with market principles and neoliberalism logics (Desrosières, 2008, p.54), do not affect economic interests enough to motivate a lobby to contest the whole climate change issue.

As a conclusion: inputs of relational analysis

Dealing with climates changes' controversies, dissonant voices have then to be analysed *in relation to* the social structuration of those who back a consensual framing.

Such a perspective reveals that it takes time to frame a public problem differently. It supposes that outsiders are able to gather a large amount of social and symbolic resources.

At this stage, this is not the case for French « skeptics » and it explains why the climate issue remains covered by most of the journalists as non controversial affair.

I thank you for your attention

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