

## *Decyphering media messages: the example of war in Mali*

### **Workshop of Citizen Exploration**

On Thursday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, the international space Cosmopolis welcomed a workshop of 'citizen exploration' dedicated to the mass media production around the war in Mali.

The media, how do they affect citizen perceptions? Do they depict realities or construct them? Are they, themselves, independent or biased? These were the questions to evolve during a couple of hours of the workshop, animated by journalists and international associations' members with hands-on experience in the African continent.

Followed by the presentations of [Maison des Citoyens du Monde](#) and Michèle Viau from the [Survie](#) Association, the workshop was constructed around a short series of the program directed by France 2, '[Un oeil sur la planète](#)'. Locals of Nantes and foreigners, students and professionals, the young and the experienced were given a chance to cast a critical look on the events in Mali and the media intervention.

### **Watch it Twice**

After the first view of the TV spot on the war in Mali, media experts from [Les Pieds dans l'Paf](#) turned the public thinking to the direction of a more profound and sound judgment, having divided the participants into three groups to focus on distinct aspects of the video. The second watch in three groups was to reveal the peculiarities of the TV spot, remarked by the groups concentrating on sound, image and montage respectively.

The TV spot itself was made up of periods appearing in the inversed sequence, starting with the images of relative peace at the moment, the war and the French army intervention; and the aftermath of the war with its dangerous remnants. The succession of children playing basketball under the rays of sun, the soldiers under the hail of bullets and the minesweepers under the threat of shell explosion... The second view however produced interesting observations.

The 'sound' group pointed out tragic music, starting especially after the most striking facts voiced in the video, the periods of altering noise and silence. The 'image' observations were even more evocative: with grey colours of war in its most dangerous spots, shaking 'shoulder camera' of the journalist in the center of combat and people projecting over in the endless run. Finally, the 'montage' group revealed social connotations alongside with the political meaning of the TV report overall: the first part of the video-in-peace was highly personalized, showing faces, occupations, hopes and fears and creating the feeling of reciprocity between the people of Mali and the French spectator. The second part of the war-video accentuated the contrast in means and equipment between the Malian troops and the French forces and the radical change of images with the arrival of the French, manifesting the Mali operation like a success, not the ultimate one though, as leaving the heavy legacy of danger in the very city centre.

The conclusion on the critical review was in line with the remark from the public: "It is necessary to watch the video now for the third time! Knowing however, that in reality we watch it but once!" Indeed, sometimes the media try to capture a spectator by emotion, not leaving the space and time for a more profound reflection.

## **Wise Ways for your Understanding**

To get that very 'profound reflection', we turned to the experience of Pierre Cherruau, journalist -director of the Africa section of [Courrier International](#), who was working in Mali July through September 2013. Mr Cherruau admitted the impressive effect of the French control over the Malian society during the war, not leaving aside the control of the French journalists by the French army, as well. Journalists working under conditions of permanent threat must and need to work with the army, and with the state, whether they want it or not, however unbiased they want to be. In Mali, like in other African countries at war, it is not advisable to travel by any other means than air, with only 2 airplanes available, one being the UN resource, the other – belonging to the French forces. The airplanes do not accommodate all the journalists and personnel making it more difficult to travel and get information, especially for the video journalists with heavy and visible equipment, deliberately targeted by the rebels. Likewise, it is not possible to stay more than one night in a place in order not to fall victim to war. A journalist has to resort to the forces of the army and sometimes to their information materials and videos, shot in the places out of journalist reach. Thus, Pierre Cherruau reminded the public to be ready to accept a certain degree of subjectivism, coming from circumstances, professional and personal experience of every journalist and the editorial line of every medium.

The workshop generated a lively debate and taught the citizens a simple tip on how to get a more balanced perception through the media: use different sources of information. Quite to the purpose, the [Survie](#) presented its research works based on local experience, followed by the final warning of Pierre Cherruau against the information as the goods to be consumed in an easy way. Indeed, a simple tip turning out to be not that easy.

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