

Listeners talk

Michel Meyer, Director of France Bleu, Radio France



My new ride is sicka! Hey doggs, let's bounce to the mall!*

Have young people's radio stations that teenagers call and listen to under the bedcovers become appalling places of licentiousness and verbal pornography? Are the free antennas of the FM music stations a space for sin?

Freedom of speech is the 'mistress' of the airwaves both in the bourgeois neighbourhoods and in the working class areas.

The rumour is going round and is worrying parents and teachers, and troubling political and religious circles.

But one thing is certain, however: the listener – previously a passive player in the equation – has now become the protagonist.

Paroles d'auditeurs, (Listeners talk) a new book by Michel Meyer, is an original survey, in which the radio mirrors our society as illustrated by the accounts of a large number of listeners.

Interview

As a man of radio and television, to what do you attribute the verbal and visual violence found on youth-orientated radio stations and certain television channels?

The well-known radio stations appear to be just so many festive campfires – or warning bonfires – for youth without direction. These stations have become spaces of transgression in a society that no longer has any resistance; a society in which traditional figureheads disappeared in May 1968.

Why has this sacred 'interactivity' become so widespread over the past 10 years that it now affects teenagers from 13 to 19 years old, regardless of their social background? If middle-class teenagers from the suburbs and the working class youths from the housing estates are so in need of spaces where crude free speech sometimes reaches unexpected

heights, it could be that these are the last refuges where they can burn effigies of their models and 'kill their own fathers', which is a common factor in growing up, although what has changed is that the role models are saying less and less.

Would you talk of a modern ordeal in which young people are putting the figures of authority to the test?

They aren't put to the test, they are ridiculed without mercy. The problem is that this caricature approach is taken for the truth because, as everyone knows, 'we're not told anything'. We should however acknowledge that 'trash' programmes, from real TV to the freest of the 'free radio', have a cathartic value that has always been extolled in the most controlled societies. But we should remember that the student riots of May 1968 only started because the boys wanted access to the girls' halls of residence! The political wing of the movement was, to a certain extent, merely the extension of this hormonal upsurge that the presenters of trash media are so good at exploiting. We should nevertheless acknowledge – despite the crudeness of the terms used – that they have an educational,

* *My new car is great! Hey guys, let's go to the mall!*

Listening

Michel Meyer

Director of France Bleu, Radio France

public service function, in that some key presenters punctuate their programmes with messages about AIDS prevention, risk behaviour in general, and safety measures. And that is important too. Which means that, apart from this ideology of verbal violence and crude sex – that very often enable young people to let off steam – there is still a certain degree of vigilance that surely serves a purpose. If these radio stations didn't exist, perhaps we would have to invent them?

Does this mean that the presenters of listeners' programmes now fulfil the role previously played by the traditional guardians of our societies.

Society no longer expects anything from its upper echelons. This defiance of the elite can be seen at all levels, including political ones. And during the last century the very structure of our democracy underwent deep changes. The representative democracy – an ancient model as archaic as the steam train – was replaced by democracy of opinion, distorted by the gurus from the sixties who have defected to the side of the communicators. The latest meta-

morphosis of democracy to date? Democracy of emotion, based in its entirety on provocation marketing. Everything goes on in real time, without any hindsight or weighing-up of undifferentiated emotion. We are living under a regime that approves of and excuses those who give way to their immediate impulses.

Are you saying that our media society, completely taken over by the cult of emotions that it is unable to control, is obeying very childish laws?

The fact that the discourse of reason, moderation and the rules established by society's various elites are no longer



A radio and television professional, Michel Meyer is director of the France Bleu network, comprising the 43 local stations of Radio France. His recent book (Un rebeu n'peut pas mater une meuf de cheri, paroles d'auditeurs, Éditions des Syrtes) examines the success of libre antenne among teenagers.*

**French "verlan" slang for Un arabe ne peut pas regarder une fille de riches.*

ers talk

**Michel
Meyer**

UN REBEU

N'PEUT PAS MATER

UNE MEUF DE CHERI

**PAROLES
d'auditeurs**



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ÉDITIONS DES SYRTES

heeded and hardly ever followed is a sign of the decay of the basis of common values. This new cult of the emotions, this new religion of liberated speech, has forged its own rules and generated its own inquisition, with a whole panoply of master censors. This is a very narcissistic posture that does not allow anyone outside the elite to judge them.

Our TV screens and radio aerials therefore act like parallel courts?

That's right. Parallel courts that claim the biased right to sully people's names without the slightest proof or to make them into stars for a brief moment only to forget them totally a minute later. We are experiencing an extraordinary reversal of ideology: nowadays it is society that thinks and judges politics and no longer the political elite who are paid to do so. As in the theatre of our youth, the *Guignols de l'Info*, puppet impersonators on Canal+, have become successful by making a mockery of the powers that be, which are no longer the policeman of Punch and Judy, but the politicians, the intellectuals, people of the cloth and civil servants.

It is in the very essence of democracy to be based on the population itself...

Of course the problem is that the population appears to have stopped wanting the common good. And what is the result of this attitude? Nowadays, in this world of free-to-air speech and commentary without reflection, everything has the same value. And this permanent background noise stifles and leaves no room for the words of those who know. On this subject, I believe like Bourdieu that 'no, not everyone is competent'. What is the cause of this lack of differentiation? We have allowed ourselves to be surreptitiously colonized by nonsense from the English-speaking world practised *ad nauseam* in the gutter media and, what is more, coupled in our country

with the confusion of minds and the loss of direction. This provocation marketing, in which communication has taken over from information, no longer has any of that spirit of satire, the typical French contestation of our satirical singers who, although appealing to the most plebeian side of our nature, at least had the humour to carry it off.

Is the fact that the elite are drowned out by popular culture the result of their 'social nihilism'? Does it mean that trash TV or listeners' radio is merely collateral damage of the social divide?

The attitude of the elite, as they are cut off from the world, has given rise to indignation among the social outcasts, who are far removed from the grotesque intellectual debates about a hypothetical decline of France. These programmes function like a – temporary – safety valve for social peace for a part of the population exasperated by the discourse of an elite that is void of projects and solutions.

Is the media silence of the elite a reflection of a political crisis?

Faced with the bragging of the likes of Le Pen and Besancenot*, our well-read elite no longer know what to say and react with a terrible total silence. Our poor moderate politicians held up to public ridicule by the media agitprop have no better defence against this dreadful nonsense than their disintegrated reputation. Moreover, every day spent under the reign of the media, offers us the spectacle of their debasement, humiliated by their own tacit consent. The 'real people' exhibited in these reality shows and other entertainment programmes that exploit humiliation are the gladiators of our present-day arenas, sacrificed to the cruelty of the view in a typically sadomasochistic relationship. What shocks me is that those in charge of this type of

programme are the paragons of journalistic virtue for upcoming generations who admire their audacity, their fighting spirit and their ability to rub-shoulders with the powerful.

How do you analyse the success of this type of programme?

We need to consider the reasons of the success of media technocrats who are experts in mixing styles and using audience lynchings, who subject everyone to their schoolboy derision, exacerbated by this totalitarian tropism of 'they're all rotten' with regard to the powers that be, i.e. the refrain of an extremist political leader. In this sense, Karl Zéro's *Vrai Journal* is a terrifying machine for relegating people to the trash heap, because the politicians invited to appear on the programme, forced to accept the familiarity of first-name terms, find themselves once again ejected from an era devoted to the most immature 'youthism'. In the fearful world of trash media, the person who has just spoken a moment earlier is immediately out of date.

So, you feel that 'real time' is a formidable weapon against democracy?

Previously it took a whole generation for something to be classed as old-fashioned. Nowadays it takes just a few seconds, an imperceptible delay in making the right off-the-cuff remark and you're finished. We might add that this curse of an allegiance to the here-and-now is easily combined with defamation. We can no longer tolerate the frustration linked to waiting. Like children we want it all and we want it now. And that has been perfectly well understood by the pirates of the provocation trade.

* leaders of the *Front national* and *La ligue communiste révolutionnaire*.