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The 'Rumours' of Journalism

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Studies of the phenomenon of rumour can no longer avoid paying particular attention to recent transformations of structures in the public sphere. On the one hand, the central role of media in the classification of items of information as 'rumours' and in their subsequent publicization and dissemination has become entrenched. On the other, rumours have come to be treated not just as simple pieces of information but rather as a dimension of the political or secular interchange that goes on within larger or smaller groups. These two paradigmatic hypotheses have been recently advanced notably by Pascal Froissart (2002) and Philippe Aldrin (2005). Froissart has shown that our awareness of rumours is very largely moulded by the major place accorded to them in the media, and that many so-called rumours said to have been spontaneously generated from within the body of society in fact find their origin and their channels of propagation effectively within the media itself. For his part, Aldrin would break with the standard interpretation of rumour content as often reflective of the shifting nature of collective psychology, substituting for this, notably for rumours of a political type, a 'transactional' approach, by which the rumour is analysed as a form of information that enters circulation in the course of everyday interactions, or ones linked to potential political outcomes.

These two approaches can be brought together in the idea that the media are less the principal purveyors of rumour than they are the main 'labellers' of some of the news items they deliver as constituting 'rumours'. Now what journalists call a 'rumour' is not what is recognized as such by researchers who, in recent years, have come to a general conclusion that there is no obvious way to definitively define rumour, and that the notion that it can simply be classified as 'informal information' is unsatisfactory. One might rather surmise that what is defined as 'rumour' arises from a phenomenon of communication encompassing the circulation of discrete items of information, brief accounts of events or actualized news, and that the form that this dissemination takes as well as the form that emerges from the way what is disseminated has been used may be said to be 'rumoral' (of the nature of rumour) by virtue of its very informality. A particular media outlook tends, however, to sub-

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sume under the one general label of 'rumours' various disparate facts and reported events which do not necessarily fit that category. The consequence of this orientation is that the media give attention only to the existence of such 'rumours' and to the secondary and indeterminable question of their truth or falseness, while neglecting any interest in the processes by which these are circulating or their communicative value for the participant actors of the groups in which they are exchanged. The effect of this media labelling of information or happenings as rumours is threefold: it increases the number of 'rumours' circulating through media channels and makes media a significant vector for 'rumours' that are not always such; it gives readers and television viewers the impression that ever greater numbers of rumours abound in our societies; finally, it leads to an impoverishment of language and of analysis, cramming heterogeneous information phenomena into a single catch-all type, which in turn leads to a standardized media approach to these. Thus, in the last few years, the propagation by the media of an *untruth*, such as that known subsequently under the name of the 'bogus assault on the Paris RER line D', has sometimes attained the status of a rumour. The student-style *practical joke* alleging that a French beauty queen was really a male was circulated as a news item in a Latin American country before coming back to France labelled as a rumour. A complex *judicial affair* like the Alègre affair in Toulouse was categorized as rumour in that it suggested the involvement of certain political figures. And even after Dominique Baudis, the former mayor of Toulouse, clearly refuted on television the accusations brought against him, a communications and marketing journal still turned to an expert on rumour, and not to a jurist, to measure the effectiveness of Baudis' defence, as if it functioned in the same way as the denial of a rumour (Delcayre, 2003).

By taking as our starting point this referential expansion of the word 'rumours', which is henceforth in itself an important dimension of the whole rumour phenomenon, our intention here is to interrogate the journalistic usage of the categorization of information as 'rumours'. Less, however, to advance a normative critique of the press as to better delimit, by elimination, what rumour is not, and how it is possible to put forward a political rather than a 'rumorological' analysis of recent events if their labelling as rumours is removed. Our hypothesis is that the recourse to the label of 'rumours' is associated with what Erik Neveu has identified as a journalistic avoidance of the political (Neveu, 2003) and, as a corollary to his analysis, what these facts would nevertheless bring forth. For the frequent use of the label 'rumours' by journalists ends up suppressing the event which produces it: the rumour, initially an epiphenomenon of the event, ends up becoming the event itself.

By an examination of three recent controversies, each involving a relatively significant political content – that surrounding Thierry Meyssan's (2002) book on the 9/11 attacks, the Alègre affair (2003), and the supposed poisoning of Yasser Arafat (2004) – all of which were largely labelled as 'rumours' by the press, we will consider the associated issues that such a labelling encompasses, we will analyse the reasons that lead a certain media approach to adopt this term in relation to these affairs, and we will offer the outline of a political sociology which the use of the 'rumour' label generally prevents from giving access to.

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Issues associated with the 'rumour' categorization

An initial issue associated with the increasing usage of the 'rumour' label is the inflation in the sense of the word itself, which in turn gives the impression of an inflation of the phenomenon itself. Pascal Froissart has already demonstrated that since the 19th century the use of the word, in the sense we give it today, had become more and more frequent in the normal lexicon (Froissart, 2002: 50). Along with this inflation of the term is a familiar association of the social actors involved with what the press puts out as the rumour phenomenon. Some statistical examples, for the year 2004 alone, in four press titles revealed that the word 'rumour' was effectively being used daily. In *Le Monde*, 54 articles contained the word 'rumour(s)' in their headlines or subheads, and 500 within the body of the articles. *Libération* used the word in 26 headlines or subheads, with 378 occurrences in the text of the story (314 of which had the word in the plural). *Le Figaro* contained 10 articles headlined or subtitled with the word 'rumour', 456 where the word was used in the body of the text – a figure that increased to 927 when the word was in the plural. Readers of the printed media are thus confronted with mentions of the word 'rumour' in at least one, sometimes more than two articles per day. Qualitatively, the word has served to designate diverse realities within the social environment, extending from internet rumours to political rumours about the candidates in the American presidential campaign, or to those surrounding the death of Yasser Arafat. Surprisingly, in a newspaper like *Les Echos* that reports on the financial world, which is in itself highly generative of rumour, the figures are of the same order. Still, for the year 2004, this paper mentioned a rumour 84 times in its headlines and subtitles, and 808 times in the body of its articles, for the most part in relation to economic and stock-exchange rumours. *Mutatis mutandis*, and with a larger sample, this suggests that through its considerable usage of the term, the general press is bringing attention to a world of social interaction as much saturated with 'rumours' as the world of business, and by this means indicating a journalistic tendency towards 'rumour-mongering'. Already identified by Pascal Froissart in the research literature, this is journalists' propensity to give objective form to different social phenomena under the single concept of rumours, without stopping to question the validity of this characterization.

Such general labelling leaves the categorization of rumour uncertain and, further, ignores numerous aspects of what journalists associate with the rumour phenomenon. Those who make use of this term do not sufficiently define the criteria for identifying a phenomenon as a rumour. In relation to the 'rumour' itself, the reader receives no indication of the extent of its social penetration, of how broadly it has circulated, or of the number of individuals it may have reached before breaking out into the media. Newspapers tend not to divulge either how many of the participants in the situation may be transmitting the rumour, their socio-cultural profile or the social geography they are operating in. Finally, journalists will fail to elucidate the origin of the 'rumour' attribution, notably leaving it vague whether the participants themselves refer to the rumour as just a rumour or see it as an item of information not sourced in rumour, i.e. whether the journalist's characterization of this is endogenous or exogenous. And therein resides the second issue relating to the rumour labelling process – in the compartmentalization imposed on news items, events or

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controversies, as capable of being subsumed under the category of rumour. If the media have such frequent recourse to this categorization, it is not so as to shed light on this rumour phenomenon, about which in fact they tend to have very little information; neither is it to be able to properly assign the various associated events. It is, on the contrary, to be able to attribute a characterization, by means of a well-established discursive shorthand, to realities perceived as difficult to classify otherwise. The categorization as rumour does not so much draw attention to the fact itself, as to what you are meant to think about it as determined by the bias of the medium through which the information is mediated.

Without claiming to have been exhaustive, we can at least distinguish two broad understandings of the word 'rumours' on which it is founded. Journalists, drawing on an incomplete and largely outmoded technical terminology, call a 'rumour' any unconfirmed or, in their eyes, casual information, that is, something reaching them through unofficial information channels which is not validated by an authoritative source or by a person directly involved in the news item. Thus, the attribution of rumour will be accorded to information that circulates spontaneously within the social environment of the news media (a typical example is the rumour of the illness of Isabelle Adjani in 1987, in the absence of new information coming to light). But the rumour label will also be given, under this same rubric, to information that journalists have no means to verify, because it brings into play elements belonging to fields beyond their own. For example, in the Baudis affair, precise accusations, listed in the charge sheets, were relegated to the category of 'rumours' because getting to the bottom of them was the domain of judicial and police investigation, not part of the media function. Similarly, faced with the inability to come to a definite conclusion about the nature of Arafat's illness, journalists labelled as 'rumours' the various contradictory pieces of information that related to him. Finally, in the case of the allegations contained in Meyssan (2002), journalists on 9/11 had recourse to the term 'rumours' with respect to the difficulty of proving that there had been no internal conspiracy to organize attacks, or that an aircraft had actually crashed into the Pentagon. This is because, on the one hand, claims of plots are unfalsifiable (because they involve occult and secret elements operating on an extensive scale, whose organizational form is unknown and hence unsusceptible to examination, and especially because any claimed dismantling of them is perceived as obscuring the plot itself) and, on the other hand, because the 'official' information in this case had already been promptly made available, so all claims seeking to bring this into question *a posteriori* could only be categorized as rumour. Hence, this usage of the word 'rumour' relates to the idea that any item of information or any statement remains a 'rumour' for as long as its validation and its authorization continue to be dependent upon an exogenous process.

More often – and here we meet the second sense in which the term is employed – journalists make use of the rumour label to establish their distance from what they are reporting. Véronique Campion-Vincent notes that use of the word serves in this regard to present a simplified version of news items the media wishes to scoff at or reject (Campion-Vincent, 2005a: 115). By relegating the substance of what is presented to the domain of non-journalistic truth, the media employ the appellation of 'rumours' as a disqualifying characterization, which has the effect of severely depre-

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ciating the information, situating the provided item within the compass of falsehood or of political propaganda. 'Rumour' is information belonging to the other which the media do not wish to take up on their own account, and in which they do not recognize themselves. But 'rumour' is also the ideology of the other, which the media intend to unmask as such, and so not transform into legitimate news. To characterize a political stance as 'rumour' is at once never to allow it to reach the status of genuine information, hence to become credible, and also to marginalize the position which has sought to circulate such information. This second usage of the word 'rumour' serves not so much then to designate the reported phenomenon as to make plain the attitude of the journalist towards that which is being publicized. It functions as a rhetorical admonition to scepticism directed towards the readership, and also as a form of journalistic disclaimer of responsibility, where the information is provided but immediately dismissed to a zone of fragile or doubtful veracity, instantly subsumed within a vast body of other problematic items of information reclassified as 'rumours', which impedes it thereafter from existing on the same level as other information. Where the first usage made of the term 'rumours' refers back what is reported to an exogenous process of validation, this second usage for its part suggests an uncertainty on the part of the source or informant in relation to the information provided, which comes down to an endogenous invalidation of the news item. But to delegitimize an event or a happening by calling it a rumour is to authorize the failure to treat this event politically, so sidelining it from the field of politics that the press normally covers. Hence the categorization of something as a rumour contains in essence the refusal to subject to political analysis what is being dismissed as rumour, something which may not in fact be a rumour at all, but rather belong fully to the political space journalism is expected to respond to.

This distancing effect is perceptible in the three affairs that we are considering. Indeed, other ways of designating the facts of these cases were possible but were not taken up. When he analysed the 9/11 attacks, Meyssan did not say that he was relaying rumours. On the contrary, he inverted the process of journalistic truth validation: according to him it was precisely the fact that the information he was advancing was not confirmed that made it true, whereas the official information – by which one was to understand information put out by state sources – was nothing but rumour intended to deceive public opinion. Meyssan was not therefore spreading rumours, he was bearing witness to his *point of view*, developing his *hypothesis*, expounding his *arguments* and sharing his *political and ideological vision* of the attacks. And he did not do it simply through internet *chatter* or through the press, but in the form of a book, which was the written source of his statements. This cuts the ground from under the idea of a spontaneous birth of rumours arising from a conspiracist reading of the events.[1] Perceived as an attack on the press and a sidelining of journalistic methods, Meyssan's book, instead of being discussed point by point, was passed off by the press as a tissue of rumour, whereas it was in fact a political work, arising out of a particular political tendency that is notably hostile to media accustomed to blocking sources and conducting campaigns of disinformation, a book of political character therefore, which could have been analysed, and contested, as such.

Similarly, in the case of Dominique Baudis' involvement in vice and murder, his women accusers and the gendarmerie did not speak of 'rumours' but buttressed

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their interventions with *evidential statements* and duly recorded *affidavits* which did not emanate from society in general but from the protagonists of the affair. When one reads the different accounts of the parties concerned, it becomes apparent that the term 'rumours' doesn't derive from within the body of material, but is a label attached by the media. Thus, in his book, the detective in charge of the case speaks only on one occasion of 'rumour', preferring to direct his interest to what should legitimately concern an investigator, and what besides is the title of one of his chapters, 'truths and falsehoods'. The only mention of a 'rumour' can be sourced to a press critic, who, in search of a scoop, had seemingly elevated the rumour to the rank of established information. A 'rumour' which could not be other than an 'accusation of the utmost seriousness' levelled against Baudis, which the investigating officer had discussed a few pages earlier (Roussel, 2004: 188, 142). In his own book, Dominique Baudis uses the word rumour only infrequently, preferring it to terms such as *calumny, machination, manipulation* or *edifice of lies*. He employs the term 'rumour' to characterize what the press published about him, and here it is he who marks his distance from and his scepticism towards the media's treatment of the affair (Baudis, 2005: 33 and *passim*). Rumour became indistinguishable from the calumny which Baudis immediately transposed into terms of illegitimate political attacks directed against himself. The rumour had not existed when he was mayor of Toulouse, he noted, and it took shape only after publication of the press articles. The interpretation derived from his book is that 'rumour' relates just as much to the propagation of low political blows as to the activities of the press. This did not deter him from purchasing Edgar Morin's *La rumeur d'Orleans* (*Rumour in Orleans*) to try and get a grip on what was happening to him . . . . Two journalists who have devoted a monograph to the affair reject out of hand the use of a vocabulary of rumour, writing that 'it was not a matter of rumour: charges were laid before the courts, the gendarmes conducted an investigation, the media found it credible' (Etchegoin and Aron, 2005: 9). Instead of the qualification of 'rumour', which in their eyes made the situation unintelligible by reducing it to the level of hearsay coming out of the seamy underside of the city, they preferred words like *scandal, collective self-deception* by journalists, *defamation, calumny, accusations* or *sworn statements*.

Finally, at the time Arafat was dying, journalists labelled as 'rumours' things which, for the entourage of the leader of the Palestinian Authority, amounted to accusations of poisoning, or perhaps orchestrated political 'leaks', but were in no way rumours, which for those involved arise out of a contestable order and possess only a weak political effectiveness. Thus, the vast indigenous vocabulary available did not imply this 'rumour' label, which simply responded to journalistic imperatives. The journalistic usage of the word 'rumour' is a discursive process which inserts a piece of political information within the broad flow of information disseminated, but fails to follow it up – the news item is that a rumour is circulating, without there being any perceived need to investigate what the rumour might be delivering – just as it fails to essay a political reading of the reported content, only to then immediately withdraw this same piece of information from the news flow by lodging it in the historical archive of rumours, that is to say of items of information subject to a need for substantiation. Nevertheless, the attribution of the 'rumour' label corresponds equally to factual homologies which may well have existed

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between what was known of these three affairs and about the sphere in which the rumours were generated.

The 'rumour quality' of political affairs

If the 'rumour' label dominates the Meyssan, Baudis and Arafat affairs, it is because these events possess an undeniable 'rumour quality'. By this notion we mean a story or sequencing of events whose content and salient features stand in homologous relation to those of already existing rumours. This rumour quality is difficult to measure, but an indicator of its presence is detectable precisely in the very application of the 'rumour' label for events which do not in fact belong to it. Thus, if these three cases have been regarded as rumours, that it because they echoed well-known and signposted 'rumoral' precedents, which both allowed them to be readily labelled as such, but also permitted the situation to be interpreted, decoded and analysed. It was also this rumour quality, this parallelism with other stories, which lent credence to their characterization and granted the publicized affairs the same narrative efficacy as those rumours and urban legends that had preceded them. But it is this same quality that drives the rumour labellers themselves to no longer regard what they are dealing with as a political affair but a simple resurgence of reworked rumour motifs.

As an illustration of this, it was because it called to mind other historic conspiratorial rumours, and that it was immersed in a tide of rumour associated with 9/11, that Thierry Meyssan's hypothesis was categorized as rumour by the press. We should recall that the analysis of the 9/11 attacks put forward by Meyssan takes two directions. On the one hand, it denies that an airliner crashed into the Pentagon in Washington – Meyssan (2006) would subsequently write that the building was instead struck by a missile. On the other, it asserts that the controlling figure behind the World Trade Center attacks was not Bin Laden but an American conspiracy aimed at putting pressure on the Bush government. The rumour quality of these texts derived from their reactivation of various conspiracist theories, echoes of which are regularly detected in many rumours. Like a rumour, Meyssan's 'negatory' hypothesis proposes that an incident of history – though in fact, according to him, a simple media construction – did not take the form attributed to it, or did not take place at all. It purports as well that the known 'facts' are the fruit of a causality other than the causality declared, that is, the fruit of a plot which has come to join the cohort of other historic plots which have dispossessed peoples of their natural destiny and which rumours have relayed and actualized, via the conspiracies of the Jesuits, Freemasons, Jews, the powerful, the 'two hundred families' or the government.

Furthermore, Meyssan's assertions emerged within the context of a seething mass of rumours linked to 9/11 that ranged from the most ironic to the most tragic.[2] An item disseminated by a Middle-Eastern television channel, according to which 4000 Israeli employees working in the twin towers had supposedly been warned of the imminence of the attacks and had promptly left their workplace, reached Europe in the form of a rumour. A variant of this rumour attributed responsibility for the

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attacks to Mossad, the Israeli secret service organization, who were allegedly ensuring that thus only their own citizens were saved. Another rumour had it that a curse was embedded in the flight number of one of the aircraft, where its tragic fate was detectable *a priori*. A hoax relating to a claimed prediction of the attacks by Nostradamus circulated on the internet under the guise of an authentic premonition. In France, a rumour claimed that the pictures of Palestinians celebrating the news of the attacks in fact dated from 10 years previously, and in the United States, more localized rumours purported that members of the Arab community also celebrated these attacks.[3] A final example is that of the 'wallet rumour', which tells of a friendly terrorist who forewarned one of his relatives of the imminence of an attack.[4] In addition to these rumours, Meyssan's book *L'effroyable imposture* ('9/11: The Big Lie') came out in a context of distrust of institutionalized media and in an environment that was particularly permeable to whispers of 'megaplots' (Campion-Vincent, 2005b: 7). Permeable also, more simply, to what Daniel Dayan (2002: 272–3) calls the 'mid-range stories' ('moyens-récits'), in opposition to the now faded historical macro-stories and fit-to-purpose micro-stories. If one may not allege that all of Meyssan's readers are equally credulous, the publishing success of his book owes a lot to its rumour-like form and to its capacity to advance a 'mid-range story' whose sole claim is to give an explanation for a recent event in an attractive and appealing form. Also because the approach adopted by someone like Meyssan incorporates a thematic and a morphology common to the world of rumour, his writings, because of their similar form, are declared to be rumours and his hypotheses labelled as the habitual motifs of conspiratorial legends.

The same process is at work in the case of the Alègre–Baudis affair, in which the substance of the accusations brought against the president of the Superior Council of Audiovisual (CSA) unfailingly echoed the rumours buzzing around the city in relation to some of its leading figures. The motif of a world concealed from the uninitiated, of the shocking hidden practices of the elites, of a city of the night superimposing its terrifying face on the daytime city, is in fact a recurrent theme in many rumours. The supposedly dissolute life of politicians, the secret passages and tunnels lurking under the city of Orléans as investigated by Edgar Morin's team, the 'sons of leading citizens' taking part in the profanation of the cemetery of Carpentras, as Philippe Aldrin has been able to study it, form many interlocking strands of a grand rumour narrative into which the accusations brought against Dominique Baudis were rapidly assimilated. If some elements of the press, notably the locals, re-echoed the accusations in order to condemn Baudis, in other cases the distancing effect induced by the choice of the label 'rumours' operated, and any mention of the accusations against Baudis as being rumours served to demonstrate that these press organs would not be easily drawn to conclusions, and that the paradigm of falsity usually associated with rumours having the same content could well also apply in this case. This affair could also be seen as a mid-range story because it functioned like a miniature version of the abandoned marxist macro-story. Reduced to the dimensions of the city, the class struggle is henceforth no more than sexual in its ambit. And, just as Serge Daney (1996) had been able to demonstrate in relation to Pasolini's intention in *Saló, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, the dominant individuals of a society impose upon the dominated their deviant sexuality (in that case, sado-

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masochism), for want of understanding of the latent sexual energies of the proletariat. Thus, against the sexuality of the subordinate social orders, whether private or commercial, albeit authorized – it may be noted that the women who accused Baudis had been involved in prostitution – would be opposed the ultimate will of the social elites to leave the mark of their power on the bodies of those subjected to it via their sexual domination. This complex political web, typical of rumours that involve elites and their alleged dubious activities, could be rewoven via the accusations brought against Baudis and several other local municipal politicians, and its presence helped confuse, for the press, what belonged in the domain of judicial procedure and what lay in the realm of rumour dissemination. It was because the narrative skein of the deposed evidence referring to Baudis so resembled that of rumour narratives on this subject that indeed this came to be characterized effectively as rumour. But the 'rumour' also functioned as the 'mid-range' version of a political ideology which had not been revealed as such.

In the case of Arafat, accusations of poisoning, hinted at by the dying leader's close family circle, were reminiscent of the numerous rumours that often swirl around the deaths of heads of state, and, by virtue of this, contained a certain obvious rumour quality. The claim of a poisoning, that is, basically, of a political assassination, transmuted journalistically into a rumour, gained credence from its effective association with rumours of the same nature, and hence allowed the media coverage of the illness of a political leader to be transformed into a closet intrigue, so becoming aligned with other prestigious precedents. But the political impact of these accusations, which impinged upon both the internal political interplay of forces involving the Palestinian hierarchies as upon the Palestinian political system in general, as well as on the manoeuvrings which pitted them against the Israelis, was eclipsed by their reduction in the media to the level of mere rumours, with the consequence that the coverage of the death of Arafat subsided to a more or less infra-political dimension. Even though, when they spoke of the allegations of poisoning as a rumour, the media effectively tipped Arafat's illness into the realm of unfalsifiability of information, journalists nevertheless strove to sort out the true from the false. The press thus erected various theories about what Arafat was really suffering from on the basis of a few disparate aspects of his condition that had been brought to its awareness. A bad turn of such a sort could suggest liver disease, or a reference to 'blood anomalies' could be a circumlocutory way of avoiding mentioning leukaemia or cancer. The 'rumour' which became inflated around the illness was thus fed by the journalists themselves who, in the absence of irrefutable information, and engaged no doubt in a competitive struggle to scoop the story, filled in the gaps with their own imaginative projections.

In particular, the journalists had been caught up in the dynamics of Arafat's entourage, who were anxious to transmute a death in a hospital (thus a mid-range story) into a story of heroic proportions. The rumour quality thus won out over the political and diplomatic issues associated with the death of a head of state on French territory, and enabled Arafat's death to transcend the banality of its announcement (most people in fact die in hospitals). It avoided casting Arafat as someone suffering from an ordinary illness, enabling him to be projected as the victim of a sinister machination and to rehabilitate him as a warrior still having to battle against his

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perpetual enemies. The effect was to endow his illness and then his death with an extraordinary mythic dimension which sat better with the stature that his supporters wished conferred on him. In this way, Arafat would be associated with other great political figures whose cause of death is disputed or subject to multiple rumours, from Napoleon to Kennedy. This 'exit via the door of myth' was the effect of the cloud of rumour surrounding his final moments, but it also disturbs the political analysis, caught up as it is in its prosaic banality, with the result that this tends to become passed over.

Following this identification of issues and outcomes associated with characterizing political affairs as 'rumours', we should next explore avenues along which alleged rumours are not questioned on truthfulness of content, but taken as components or resources of the wider political engagement in which they are embedded.

Political issues around the exchange of informal information

The essence of a sociological and political analysis of information exchanges within the social body implies the relegation, to a secondary status of importance, of the question of the validation regime to which casual items of information in circulation might be subjected. As for an analysis of their substance, it can be accomplished only insofar as it reveals the political orientation of the information relayed. 'Taking rumours seriously', as Philippe Aldrin (2005: 7) proposes, or as is proposed elsewhere by those working on conspiracist theories (Vitkine, 2005), consists therefore of considering them as political incidents, as political acts expressed through communication in the discursive sphere. Such an analysis therefore invites a break with attempts to establish some form of social psychopathology of the recourse to rumour, to put aside notions of the triumph of the irrational or the archaic instinct, and also the conception of rumour as a communicational phenomenon whose morphology is accidental or random, so as better to grasp that the homologous phraseologies found between rumours, conspiracy theories and certain partisan political ideologies are assumed as such by the groups which have recourse to them. As Pierre-André Taguieff writes concerning the adoption of esoteric-conspiracist theories by the extreme right, the 'counter-experts' tasked with telling the truth behind the official version 'give a sense to it all, which then becomes transformed into psychic nourishment, into modes of legitimation or motives for action' (Taguieff, 2005: 419).

Presented in this way, the piece of information passed within a group or a society, the leak, the throwaway line, the accusation or the revelation operate as a range of political resources within the interactions, the discourse, the conversations of a social group with limited boundaries, or of a whole society. Generated by the group, the information circulating within it – that which the media will call rumour – is not only exchanged, but it takes on an exchange value in itself. For the circulation of information is never anarchic, and may be compared to the functioning of a market, whether national or limited to a group, where the items of information take on the character of goods that are bought and sold, and whose exchange value depends on their distance from the source, on what it is they reveal, on the semi-official charac-

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ter they contain or bring with them. A political analysis may then be brought to bear on these exchanges and on the political purposes they may be serving. Because the discourse of the participants of the exchanges, even though it may be perceived by them to arise explicitly from the domain of rumour (which the informant will indicate by using precautionary language, or by the expression of doubt about the information being passed on), may also arise, in their minds, from irrefutable information, from established facts or from simple argument, without having to depend on any outside categorization of this.

To undertake such an analysis therefore implies comprehending the use to which casual information is put, understanding the processes of its exchange and determining its purposes, through an interactionist approach, bringing into play the interrelated participants, but also through what Norbert Elias calls a 'configurational' approach, that is to say, one which takes account of the way the participants relate to one another within the broader configuration or 'field' in which they are involved. Hence the requirement to examine how the passed-on rumour acts as a value-source within this configuration and is understood as such by the parties to the exchange, who must henceforth situate themselves in relation to it. The truth or falsity of the information, with which commentary in the media becomes preoccupied, viewed from this perspective is less interesting than the use made of the rumour within the group itself. When those in the journalist profession characterize an item of information as rumour, they focus only on the information value that it yields – because it is only information that professionals of the information industry are interested in – without perceiving the exchange value that the 'rumour' may possess. In this regard, Philippe Aldrin establishes a distinction between 'rumour as information' and 'rumour as article of exchange' (Aldrin, 2005: 18) which is useful here. According to him, a rumour phenomenon embraces both these connotations. The former category interrogates rumour as news, the latter apprehends it within a broader network of exchange by which it is contained and given sense. The problem the journalistic characterization of rumour has is that it obliterates this distinction, in favour only of 'rumour as information'. This leads to the avoidance of assessing the political issues involved with the circulation of the 'rumour as article of exchange'.

One potential path for the political analysis of rumour exchange is to determine the morphology of the group within which the 'rumour' is being spread and the effects that this aims at producing or does in fact produce. It is thus possible to assess the context in which the rumour was formulated, the communicative platform chosen, the position, role and authority of the individual articulating it, the status of his interlocutors or adversaries, their reactions (which may potentially take the form of the emission of information that is complementary to or contradictory of the original item), the outcome of the verbal or written utterances thus exchanged, and the social or political aims that these items of information were directed towards. It is on these political ends in particular that we want to concentrate, because they are often under-estimated in the media's analysis of rumours, when journalists, caught in the trap of nominalism, try to prove the truth or otherwise of the rumour when they should rather be trying to understand why there has been recourse to a 'rumour repertoire' (Aldrin, 2005: 80) or gamut of leading information. These aims are of several different orders. The exchange of casual information within the group can

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serve to communicate within the group itself or towards the exterior. It aims at stamping a meaning on a given event, particularly if the group is in a period of crisis. To that extent its purpose is to invert the course of the crisis or to take political control of the situation. It may intend to inscribe a new element on the political agenda or scramble its order. It may therefore finally be aimed at bringing weight to bear on a public political position or on determining its outcome. Even where these aims may remain within the realm of the idea, nevertheless it is their horizon which constitutes the use that 'rumours' have as political resources at the moment when they are relayed.

Using media access as a political manœuvre

Beside the particular case of the inculpation of Dominique Baudis in the Alègre affair, which reflected more a judicial procedure than an exchange of information, the significant media prominence given to Thierry Meyssan's book can lend itself to such a political analysis. Instead of simply denouncing it as a conspiracy theory, it is possible to reflect upon the choice of event as the subject of the book, a terrorist attack of previously unheard-of proportions and an act extremely difficult to come to terms with, even several months later, when Meyssan's book came out. Meyssan puts himself up as a journalist, but he is in essence the representative of a particular political camp which has made a speciality of denouncing the powerful and the established seats of power, including that of journalism, and which has also made a speciality, via Editions Carnot which published the book, of the revelation of historic information that has been falsely presented, from the American 'lie' about landing men on the moon, to the death of Princess Di. Meyssan and the Réseau Voltaire (*Voltaire Network*) of which he is the head, enjoyed in 2002 a fairly favourable welcome among journalists since they had denounced Catholic traditionalism as well as the support of Abbé Pierre for the Holocaust-denying statements of the former Communist intellectual converted to Islam, Roger Garaudy. It was this which opened the doors of a television programme whose mission was action in the service of the public – *Tout le monde en parle*, produced and presented by Thierry Ardisson – which at the time was rated as the programme eliciting the highest number of book sales in the country. The choice of a mass communication platform and this programme in particular was part of Meyssan's strategy for the diffusion of his hypotheses. One must therefore assess the communicative capability of those invited on to the programme, their capacity for calculating potential outcomes and for co-opting the media that receive them as instruments for their cause. For Meyssan maximized his media gains when he went on this talk-show.

The logic of his media strategy defines itself thus on the one hand by the choice, among other programmes, of *Tout le monde en parle*. This programme functions in effect by a 'process of intimacy-generation': a choice of very warm ambient colours for the set, a late-evening atmosphere and scheduling time, the intimate tone of the presenter, the growing tiredness of the guests on the set as the taping of the show lasts several hours, all contribute to an environment for the intimate sharing of ideas. The tone of the programme becomes an exchange of private confidences, one reflect-

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ing the way rumours are relayed between friends. Thus, the whole objective of the way the programme is set up is to break down the distance between viewers and guests, to make the programme as it were an extension of the private space of their own living-room.[5] This abolition of the distance between viewers and guests creates three distinct effects. The first effect is to *neutralize* any prior expression of doubt about what the guest has to say. In contrast, take the case of a programme devoted to political analysis: normally the set is cold and bare so as to focus all attention on the comments of the politician invited on the show. In such programmes, the distance between the viewers and the invited political guest is maximized, and may induce as well a spontaneous disinclination to accept at face value what has been expressed. Before even the guest has so much as opened their mouth, a suspicion may already be forming that they will utter nothing but the usual opaque political cant. On the other hand, on *Tout le monde en parle*, this sceptical mood is neutralized – it is as though those who are talking are in my home, hence what they say is important to me. The second effect is the lending of a value to the comments made. The process of intimacy-generation gives weight to what is said. We are close beside the person speaking, we listen intently so as not to miss the remark uttered as an aside, because we know that it is going to be something personal. Here, the style of questioning used by the show's host is fundamental in that he alternates between banal professional questions and others which are more intimate and unexpected on personal subjects. The viewer knows in advance that during the interview there are going to be some juicy pieces of information let slip which he will not want to miss. Thirdly, there is the effect of *neutralization* of any purely political critique. The programme is essentially one of *infotainment*, a hybrid, functioning in a manner labelled by Erik Neveu as the 'informalization of information exchange' (Neveu, 2003: 102). What is heard on these programmes is more often personal than political in nature, even when a politician is being interviewed, and this acts as a block to any criticism of what is said on a purely political level. The interviewer would be obliged to attack them on a personal level, which is only possible with difficulty where the guest is speaking about their own personal life. Hence, one literally does not know what it is all about, nor can be sure what angle of criticism one can take, and in the case of Meyssan how to be critical of his own critique.

Furthermore, it is a programme which eschews the debate formula. There are no matched pairs with contrasting viewpoints or people from the same field of activity invited to objectively assess the comments and potentially to reply to what is said by the speaker, providing validation for or casting doubt upon his remarks. Those remarks can therefore exist in isolation, occupying the whole media space, without having to concede to the normal rules of a discussion forum. Whatever its substance, therefore, the proposition put forward becomes something unlike anything else, it stands out because it is not subject to any restraining counter-view. It therefore becomes authoritative, the word of truth. The programme is thereby built on the absence of opposing viewpoints, but also on control of the public's reactions. The studio audience may not express their opinions, and even when they do these are shaped by the show's producers and the studio audience monitors. The result typically is a silent audience listening to a single viewpoint being expressed. There is something overwhelming about this experience, in the sense that Herodotus meas-

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ured in the silence of the Persians their subservient status (Montiglio, 1994). The audience does not listen to a spoken commentary, they are submitted to it: thus they are totally open to absorb what is said and to be influenced by its impact.

Through the media access that he gained, Meyssan was not simply aiming at claiming that the September 11 attacks were the fruit of a plot or did not happen in the way the media reported them, he was also using it as a way of projecting his own image and that of his publishing house. And this programme presented the best publicity opportunity for a small, marginal publisher like Carnot which specializes in conspiracist writings and political tracts, has never had a regular place on the leading programmes and receives scant distribution in bookshops. The objective was therefore to compensate for the habitual low level of visibility by going straight to one of the most viewed television showcases. It was a calculated risk, because the interview could also turn out badly – which was not how things turned out. The intention was to give a minority viewpoint airspace on a programme with a broad audience. The objective was also more explicitly political in nature in that it sought to broadcast certain political viewpoints that were perceived as being largely ignored on the general media scene. The aim was to generate some political mobilization against the American intervention in Afghanistan, whose legitimacy was challenged by Meyssan's book's assertion that responsibility for the 9/11 suicide attacks was located within the United States itself. Hence, the ambition was to promote a position effectively hostile to the United States by shattering the fragile public consensus that had developed in relation to the American military reprisals.[6] If one thus positions Thierry Meyssan's writings within a broader configuration of political media programmes on offer, they are revealed not to be 'rumours', as the journalistic labelling would have them, nor the wild imaginings of an isolated individual, but more particularly political theses advanced by a press agency seeking to draw intellectual and commercial profit from their dissemination within a competitive market for political information.

The accusation as a political resource

It was also the desire to communicate a political message that animated the Palestinian operatives involved in relaying information claiming that Yasser Arafat was dying from attempted assassination by poisoning.[7] The configuration of those who were promoting this information was rather complex, since Arafat's entourage, which, like its leader had to be transported from the Middle East to France, included the historic Fatah functionaries who had followed Arafat from Beirut to Tunis, then to the Left Bank, the emerging Palestinian young guard, Palestinians who were close to France, Arafat's wife and Palestinian Christians and Muslims. The information alluding to a mysterious illness, then declaring it more precisely to be a poisoning, functioned above all as a form of communication inside this heterogeneous group, and then from this group to the outside world. The poisoning rumour' was not in fact one at all, but a message whose intention was not to communicate a true statement about Arafat's condition, but to address itself simultaneously to several groups who were at the same time both partners and opponents. On the one hand, each

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tendency within the Palestinian political spectrum was anxious to signal to members of other tendencies present in France that they had access to information the others perhaps did not, to demonstrate thereby that they were closer to Arafat, and hence that politically they were centrally involved with the crisis and therefore no doubt would also be centrally involved in the new power structure that would emerge after the possible death of the leader. But these messages were also addressed to the Palestinians in the autonomous Territories for whom it was a matter of keeping them 'informed' about what was going on in Paris, both to affirm that there was political continuity, even from provisional exile and even during illness, and also to avoid local disorders from breaking out. On the other hand, this was a message also addressed to the Israelis, under the form of an accusation – it was being given to understand that Arafat could have been poisoned by the Israeli secret service, after repeated assassination threats had been made by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon – thereby indicating that the war was continuing if only at that moment in the form of a war of words. Finally, it was a message directed at the French authorities, increasing the pressure on them to give treatment to Arafat, and wagering heavily on the card of diplomatic *rapprochement*.

The political function of the poisoning allegations was to seek a position in this expressed intention not to give up the struggle, despite the looming succession crisis. Arafat's entourage wanted to retain their customary position of contradictor or accuser of the historic enemy. The accusatory 'rumour' was thus intended to propose an immediately intelligible reading of what was at stake. It was no longer the death of the leader, but the continuation of the fight by other means, which should not mask the essential nature of the cause. Setting in motion a rumoured accusation was designed to remove the event from mere contingency by repositioning it within a familiar political reading. The rumour did not spread calm nor reduce the uncertainty relating to the situation nor the growing passions; on the contrary it fed them so that Arafat's death would not be perceived as creating a gap, a momentary power vacuum and an interruption of the struggle, something that would have been dangerous for all claimants to the succession or the principal figures involved. It was important that the death should not become an event difficult to assimilate, a too severe break in the continuity of power. The poisoning accusation therefore sanctioned the affirmation that the leader's death was not an end, but the constantly renewed initiation of the historic struggle. Mentioning poison served to focus attention on the portrait of the enemy in all its insidious dimensions and its use of non-conventional methods. It highlighted also the injustice of this death, which would not have occurred had there not been a subversive operation directed from outside. It projected, as often in conspiracy theories, the presence of an all-powerful enemy whose primary characteristic is to be able to interact anywhere and at close quarters with those whom it wishes to destroy, and which must hence be unceasingly combated.

The need to minimize the break in leadership and to give it a different meaning was all the more important in that a leader's succession is never assured, and that in the absence of leadership, opposition forces may be led to overthrow the existing order and attempt a forceful takeover. In this instance, the information put out served to manage the crisis and secure the continuity of power, despite the leader's incapacitation. To divert attention on to the causes of Arafat's death meant as well that the

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problem of his successor did not have to be faced, and that the time for doing this could be pushed back until the crisis had been brought to an end. This also allowed the leader to be accorded the reputation of meeting a distinguished death, a death worthy of a warrior, and hence avoid a sudden focus on the physical frailty of the leader, which would have brought too much attention to the fact that even he was not immune to the general effects of biological time nor to the inevitability of death. Finally, the major political application of the poisoning rumour was to transform Arafat's death into one of murder. That was the fundamental intention of the various pieces of information that were relayed at that critical moment – an intention that relied on the activation of myth structures which lent plausibility to the poisoning hypothesis. Indeed, that a crime of poisoning was responsible spoke plainly to certain intended receivers of the message, notably in the Middle East, where the rumour flourished. The poisoning accusation found ready ears in the context of a very strong reactivation of conspiracy theories within Muslim Arab countries. For a number of years now, in these countries, world events have been read against a grid that is no longer political, but simply conspiracist, claiming that these events are the work of 'secret societies' or covert agencies lurking in the shadows and that the outer fabric of their long-term machinations must be penetrated to expose these to the light.[8]

The poisoning hypothesis also reverberated with a chord very familiar in the West, and one which equally finds echo in the Middle East, that of Jews and/or Israelis as plotters, perpetrators of ritual crimes, poisoners of water, carriers of disease. The historian Franck Collard has furthermore advanced the notion that the accusations of poisoning directed against Israel are grounded in the Muslim tradition according to which Mahomet managed to escape from an attempted poisoning during a meal prepared by a Jewish woman during a halt at Khaybar. Given a fresh form in the case of Arafat, the accusations of deliberate poisoning symbolically served to 'raise the Palestinian leader to the rank of one sent by God', and so to make him into a martyr. 'They reduce Ariel Sharon to the miserable level of the Jews of Khaybar', which 'corroborates the perfidy of the ancestral enemy' (Collard, 2005: 21). The poisoning hypothesis is in particular inseminated from an anti-semitic conspiracy theory, whereby Israeli Jews are held by their very essence to be capable of reproducing the primordial act of seeking to poison Mahomet.

There is no doubt that by qualifying them as 'rumours', the press tried to mark its distance from these reports emanating from Arafat's entourage and which the French authorities had difficulty in contradicting, and to link them with the legendary macro-stories connected with the deaths of heads of state. But it also passed on the conspiracy theory, at the risk precisely of seeing itself become used as a tool by the participants themselves, who were keen on conferring a mythic status on the death of Arafat. Leila Shahid, the delegate-general for Palestine in France, had this to say to *L'Humanité* in relation to this enigmatic death: 'This will remain something which will add to the legend of President Arafat'.[9] The health of heads of state and the circumstances of their disappearance continue to be moments of intense political turmoil, when the use of the 'rumour' label provokes the hunt for an improbable truth, the search for which nourishes what then becomes a 'polemic', but to the detriment precisely of a political deconstruction of the underlying intent of those who initiated the exchange of information. Regarding the death of Arafat, the issue was less

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about clearly establishing the cause of his decease – something still not entirely clear today – as about the political contest for the control of information and the legacy of the deceased leader. Of this contest, the French press audience, on whom the problematics of the rumour had been imposed, would have caught only far-off echoes. Today, when the political manoeuvrings have died down, all that remains in public awareness is the recollection of a possible poisoning.

Applying the characterization of 'rumour' to designate transmission of unsubstantiated information or potential interpretations of events, or to designate political initiatives reflecting a particular configuration, is simply a way of indicating that certain contradictory items of information are in circulation, but does not allow these to be related back to the political circumstances determining them. The journalistic preoccupation with rumour thus leads to the media becoming blinded to the political significance implicit in such information exchanges. As a consequence, the narrative content of this type of information, whether or not it resembles that which is carried by certain forms of rumour, may effectively escape the central focus of the media treatment, which could open up a more political perception of these same exchanges. And if a political reading can become the dominant approach by avoidance of the 'rumour' label, this is because the circulation of such information – duly sourced, duly disseminated by clearly identified spokespeople, duly claimed by them, and duly refuted as being rumour by the participants involved – constitutes a political act channelled through the field of information. The choice of labelling such political information stocks as 'rumours', on the other hand, leads to skirting round the political intentions that condition them. If, by limiting itself to no more than relay 'rumours', the press thus avoids taking part in the political game which conditions these items of information, it nevertheless fails to bring out the flavour of this game and to deconstruct the focal effect sought. The 'rumours' of journalism are a political resource for the participants associated with them who are involved in a much broader political process, which cannot be reduced to the simple dimension of rumour.

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Notes

1. Jean-Bruno Renard thinks, however, that Meyssan did no more than exploit a rumour that was already nascent (see Renard, 2005: 232).
2. For an analysis of these rumours, see Taïeb (2003).
3. Janet Langlois (2005) analysed the boycott of a Lebanese restaurant in Detroit, initiated by an email message claiming that its employees had danced and clapped when viewing images of the attacks. The author argues notably for taking into account the local social demography in order to understand the rumour.
4. On these last two rumours, compare Fine and Khawaja (2005).
5. In fact, the programme on cable of the same Thierry Ardisson, *93 Faubourg St-Honoré*, takes place in the dining-room of his own apartment!
6. The on-line website of the Réseau Voltaire even today is still presenting itself as a 'non-aligned press

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network' with very anti-American articles. Readers might consult Venner (2005).
7. For some analyses around this, see Taïeb (2005).
8. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a text discredited in the West, circulates in Muslim Arab countries, occasionally even in French translation (see Taguieff, 2004).
9. 'Thèse de l'empoisonnement. La conviction de Leïla Shahid (Poisoning Hypothesis: Leila Shahid's belief)', *L'Humanité*, 15 November 2004.

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