

PENSER L'HISTOIRE DES MÉDIAS. REVIEW

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P*enser l'histoire des Medias*¹ is the title of the latest co-authored (collective) monograph under the direction of Claire Blandin, Emmanuelle Fantin, François Robinet and Valerie Schafer. It is devoted to the study of media history in the West, specifically, «the historiographic and academic path it went through, but also its actuality and its perspectives». 50 contributions² to this collective French monograph advance their approaches to media history in the Western «mediascape». They originated during the First International Congress of the Society of History of Media (La Société pour l'Histoire des Médias (SPHM))³ held at the University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines in May 2016⁴. The three-day international conference of collective reflection on emerging research field – media history resulted in this ambitious but rather concise collective monograph.

Those four axes are (as indicated in the introduction to the book): methodological objectives (i.e., questions, problems and challenges pertaining to the methodological apparatus/methodology of research in studying diverse and complex aspects of history of media) and diversity of approaches employed by researchers who study different types of media in retrospective dimension; singular reports realized by historian with its source-

¹ *Penser l'Histoire des Médias* / sous la direction de Claire Blandin, Emmanuelle Fantin, François Robinet, Valérie Schafer; avec la collaboration d'Emmanuelle Fantin. Paris: CNRS, 2019. 276 p.

² This collective book featured contributions of renowned Western scholars in media studies, specifically: Jade Almeida; Marine Beccarelli; Delphine Benoit; Laurent Bihl; Claire Blandin; Alexandre Borrell; Jérôme Bourdon; Josette Brun; Virginie Cerdeira; Delphine Chedaleux; Jean-Jacques Cheval; Emmanuelle Chevy Pébayle; Frédéric Clavert; Évelyne Cohen; Ross F. Collins; Diana Cooper-Richet; Mario Cuxac; Étienne Damome; Simon Dawes; Simona De Iulio; Christian Delporte; Mehdi Derfoufi; Emmanuelle Fantin; Andreas Fickers; Claire-Lise Gaillard; Isabelle Garcin-Marrou; Alexie Geers; Éric George; Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset; Pascal Griset; Guylaine Gueraud-Pinet; Pierre-Emmanuel Guigo; Zdravka Konstantinova; Pascal Laborderie; Benoit Lafon; Thibault Le Hégarat; Fabiola Leone; Sylvain Lesage; Cécile Méadel; Mike Meißner; Michael Palmer; Félix Patiès; Léa Pawelski; Géraldine Poels; François Robinet; Raphaëlle Ruppen Coutaz; Aránzazu Sarría Buil; Valérie Schafer; Claire Sécail; Michel Sénécal; Philomen Schönhagen; Céline Ségur; Mélodie Simard-Houde; Evan Spritzer; Beatriz Tadeo Fuica; Sonia Temimi; Philippe Tétart; Marie-Ève Thérenty; Dominique Trudel; François Vallotton; Nelly Valsangiacomo; Isabelle Veyrat-Masson; Graziela Mello Vianna; Anne-Katrin Weber.

³ It is a leading international organization based in France (the Society was founded back in 2000) coordinating and directing the academic studies dealing with media history (specifically, press history, propaganda studies, foreign-language press (in the framework of the international project Transfopress) and other related research avenues. Its research is communicated mainly in the international peer-reviewed journal «Le Temps des Médias» (published since 2003) and biennial congresses of the SPHM. – See more on this: Claire Blandin, François Robinet, Valérie Schafer. «Introduction: *Penser l'histoire des medias* Paris», In *Penser l'Histoire des Médias*. CNRS, 2019. Pp. 9–14, as well as individual chapter of Christian Delporte. SPHM, *archéologie d'une communauté scientifique*, In *Penser l'Histoire des Médias*. Paris, 2019. Pp. 17–20.

⁴ The very same year, in May 2016, the international conference 'Tracing entanglements in media history' held at the Lund University (Sweden) explored the theoretical and methodological implications for «an integrated media history». We see in this overlapping a growing importance and interest of the historians and media researchers to media history research field transcending temporal and spatial boundaries.

es; the spectrum of the research objects of media history (i.e., different types of media of communication (radio, TV, newspapers, and magazines⁵ as well as different types of media in terms of their thematic-problematic determinants); and finally expediency, purposefulness and social utility of knowledge produced by historian of media. These four dimensions unfold in the framework of the synthesis, case studies and «ego-history»⁶ narratives dealing with media history.

Thus, basically, this collective monograph revolves over these four mentioned axes in the heterogeneous academic contributions. The apparent positive aspects of this collective book are, first of all, it fills in the lacunas existing in the new, emerging, field of media history⁷.

Second, it bridges the gaps among different academic disciplines, specifically, history, cultural history, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, media studies, and digital humanities. Thus, basically, in etymological and epistemological terms, media history both derives from and contributes to the mentioned academic areas. To put in terms of the renowned media researcher, Wolfgang Ernst, media history is «the media-archaeological exercise» for media studies researchers⁸. It is a mode of attention isolating the technological components of media focusing predominantly on media temporalities and materialities⁹. One of the arguments of Ernst's original approach to exploring media archaeology is that he proposes to consider media themselves as «archaeologists»¹⁰.

Contrary to Ernst's materialistic approach (characteristic for the German media studies' school and legacy), the book «*Penser l'Histoire des Médias*» is rather a «collective reflection»¹¹. It dwells mainly on Cartesian ontological foundations of the French intellectual traditions (i.e., rationalism and speculative philosophical legacy). It is well



⁵ See in this context an interesting contribution of Claire Blandin. «La presse magazine, source et objet d'histoire» [speculating on the magazine press origins, its source base and object of history in France], pp. 59–66.

⁶ Specifically, at the intersection of history of media studies, see more on this subject contributions of British-French media historian Michael Palmer «Histoire et médias: un pied dedans, un pied dehors», pp. 27–31 [reflecting on his personal background of engagement with media studies, specifically, with cross-national studies of the British and French press, international news agencies and his fieldwork in the French archives pertaining to media history]; Josette Brun. «Devenir historienne des médias: un parcours hybride et anime par le genre», pp. 33–39 [retracing her personal background of media historian and engagement with feminist media in Quebec (Canada)]; Francois Valloton. «L'histoire des médias en Suisse: context institutionnel et parcours personnel», pp. 41–45 [devoted to the emerging field of media history in Switzerland, institutional context of media history education (specifically, at the University of Lausanne) and his personal background as professor specializing in media history];

⁷ The latter field was constituted in France back in 1996 by a pioneering groundbreaking book of Jean-Noel Jeanneney entitled «*Une histoire des médias: des origins à nos jours*», Paris: Seuil, 1996.

⁸ Ernst Wolfgang, Thibault Ghislain, «Ce que nous appelions «l'histoire des médias»: l'exercice de l'archéologie médiatique», *Communiquer*, 13, 2015: 91–106.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ As stated in the introduction, self-characteristics, to this book.

reflected and grounded in a number of authorial contributions to this collective monograph speculating on various aspects of media archaeology in a transnational comparative perspective. Thus it gives a positive answer to M. Palmer’s question concerning the feasibility of the comparative history of media and the rightfulness of comparison in such studies¹². It proves a validity of the F. Robinet’s observations that «the history of media «à la française» is today in full reconfiguration, for a long time French-centric, privileging an approach by [techno-material] support (TV, radio, press...) and little-interested in minorities, she has seen in last years emerging new objects of study and new approaches (sound studies, gender studies, study of public and so on)...» and tending to «comparativism», «transnational inquiries» and «reinforcing its interest for inter/transdisciplinary practices»¹³. This book proves cultural and historical appropriations of media history researchers with an educational and professional background in history, cultural studies, media studies and so on. Thus, as one of the authors, Josette Brun, correctly notes, a media historian is «hybrid» in terms of his complex background¹⁴.

Additionally, it partially fits into the emerging concept of *entangled media histories*. In this context, it is worth citing the excerpt from the recent co-authored article «Tracing entanglements in media history» published in the influential *Media History* journal: «While media history has often been studied as the history of one specific medium in one specific national context, the transnational and transmedial dimensions activated by concepts such as entangled media history opens up past communication patterns, practices, and phenomena, and lift their complexity, interrelatedness and variability. In the historical sciences, concepts such as *histoire croisee/Verflechtungsgeschichte* or *Transfert culturel/Kulturtransfer* have prominently pointed to the value of understanding such interlace. Taking their ideas into account for studying the history of mediated communication is of key importance for promoting an integrated media history»¹⁵.

The «integrated media history» is particularly well represented in individual contributions of D. Benoit¹⁶, T. le Hégarat¹⁷ and Francois Robinet¹⁸. They provide insights into how interconnected fields of media history, cultural history, medical history, literary studies and postcolonial studies can collaborate and contribute to each other by transferring or adapting approaches and methodological apparatuses. Thus the research field of media history attests to a diffusion trend in contemporary humanities or interdisciplinary studies. At the same time, as T. le Hégarat correctly points at, the point of «marking a frontier between, specifically, cultural history and media history is a way to reaffirm characteristics of each field of study»¹⁹.

However, despite the overall positive contribution to the study of the field of media history, the book «*Penser l’Histoire des Médias*» lacks empirical criticism and methodological novelty (specifically, in terms of new methods characteristic for this academic discipline). The deficit of authentic research methodology related to the media history in this collective monograph is particularly salient when compared to another collective monograph entitled «*The Handbook of the European Communication History*»²⁰. The

¹² Palmer M. L’histoire comparée des médias: la comparaison peut-elle être raison?, *Le Temps des Médias*, Paris, 2011, № 1 (16), pp. 257–266.

¹³ Robinet F. «Histoire des Médias et postcolonial studies: tensions, évitements et dialogues», p. 261.

¹⁴ Brun J., «Devenir historienne des médias: un parcours hybride et anime par le genre», pp. 33.

¹⁵ Christoph Hilgert, Marie Cronqvist & Hugh Chignell (2019): Introduction: ‘Tracing entanglements in media history’, *Media History*, 4, p. 1 DOI: 10.1080/13688804.2019.1688142.

¹⁶ D. Benoit. «Analyser des revues de l’entre-deux-guerres: apports de l’histoire de la médecine à l’histoire des revues» [Analyzing interwar reviews: a contributions of medical history to history of reviews], pp. 71–72.

¹⁷ Thibault le Hégarat. L’Histoire des médias, un sous-champ de l’histoire culturelle?, pp. 131–137.

¹⁸ Francois Robinet, «Histoire des Médias et postcolonial studies: tensions, évitements et dialogues», pp. 255–262.

¹⁹ Thibault le Hégarat. L’Histoire des médias, un sous-champ de l’histoire culturelle?, p. 137.

²⁰ See more on this subject: *The Handbook of European Communication History* / edited by Klaus Arnold, Paschal Preston, and Susanne Kinnebrock. London: Wiley Blackwell, 2020. 520 p.

latter title is more comprehensive, well-researched in terms of geographical, historical, epistemological, empirical and methodological aspects.

Second, the size and volume of this collective monograph are insufficient for the comprehensive study of media history in all its complexity, comprehensiveness, interconnectedness, diversity and divergent dimensions. In this regard, individual chapters²¹ don't fully open up retrospective «communication patterns, practices and phenomena, and lift their complexity, interrelatedness and variability».

Third, in chronological terms, it is unclear why the research field of media history is limited only to 40 years of study?²² Moreover, the very contributors to this book in their individual chapters point out at the longitudinal character of press history²³. Thus there arises a contradiction between media history and press studies history. By limiting the media history to only four decades of academic studies, this collective monograph, on the one hand, excludes the field of press history from its subfield, and on the other, sets geographical limits of media archaeological pursuits to francophone regions of the world²⁴. In this regard, in our viewpoint, the book could have benefited from enlarging its geographical scope to exploring media history in Eastern Europe and more broadly – in the East. Moreover, as we argue, East European press history works²⁵ provide a valuable contribution to media archaeological studies in integrated media history²⁶.

Additionally, in our opinion, media history should be seen not only in terms of M. MacLuhan's «media» ontology but also taking into account its communicative nature. Its main determinants and dominants are medialities, modalities and temporalities. The media history methodology is instrumental in retracing and reconstructing past media patterns, practices, products (artifacts), political communication²⁷ and ideologies (specifically, its origins). In this context, an excerpt from this book is worth citing here: «In the contemporary context, this knowledge [provided by media history methodology] appears precious for the functioning of our democracies, fundamental transformation of whole life and the struggle against certain ideologies»²⁸.

These two major breakthrough collective monographs – «*Penser L'Histoire des Médias*» and «*Handbook of European Communication History*» provide a great insight into media techniques, performances, «force lines» and trajectories of media transformation in a retrospective. Moreover, they develop new avenues for shaping a concept of «integrated media history» encompassing not only the Western approaches to media archaeology but also the Eastern media experiences in the past. They are invaluable and indispensable must-read books for the academicians, lecturers, students and all people specializing or interested in the emerging field of media history and more broadly – media studies, cultural history, cultural studies, historical sciences and political communication.

²¹ Actually, in terms of size of authored contributions (2–5 pages) and the overall volume of this book (276 pp.), it is more expedient to describe them (with a few notable exceptions) as classical entries in encyclopedia works.

²² As indicated in the first part of the book entitled «40 ans d'histoire des médias: parcours individuels et collectifs» [40 years of media history: individual and collective backgrounds], pp. 17–56.

²³ Spanning about 150 years.

²⁴ Specifically, France, Switzerland, Quebec, Luxembourg.

²⁵ Both bibliographical guides and academic literature studies, specifically, those spanning the Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, Belarusian press history of the 19–20th centuries.

²⁶ Specifically, by providing insights into mutually enriching fields of media history and postcolonial studies, more specifically, in a retrospective of the interwar period (1918–1939s) and post-Soviet era (1991–onwards).

²⁷ See in this regard an interesting contribution on history of political communication of...

²⁸ Claire Blandin, François Robinet, Valérie Schafer. «Introduction: Penser l'histoire des médias», p. 14.