

Bush Versus Kerry in French Cyberspace

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The Internet functions as a political forum--a space in which conflicting ideas about policy, governance, ideology and personal identity are discussed and debated. This paper considers the way the virtual space defined by the Internet was appropriated by French citizens to discuss and debate the US presidential election of 2004, and how French users of cyberspace engaged with each other's ideas in several online virtual spaces. I demonstrate the ability of the Internet to promote the diffusion of certain constructions of the United States, American society and American leadership in particular. I also demonstrate contested perspectives on French society, culture, policies and leadership.

This task reflects the firm belief that America's greatest weakness is its inward orientation, a stance which coexists with military expansionism, bravado and opportunism. By publicizing and in effect amplifying foreign perspectives of the US, by "looking at them looking at us," it may be possible to postpone the clashes that are inevitable between what Hubert Védrine calls the *hyperpuissance* (hyperpower), meaning the US in the Post-Soviet era, and the rest of the world.

Like a physical gathering place, the Internet brought people together in a social situation with a collectively recognized purpose--the interpretation of a historic event. Also like a physical gathering place, the Internet shaped the interactions between its "occupants" in certain ways, facilitating certain types of exchanges and discouraging others, lending some participants a kind of authority while affording little authority to others. The Internet therefore acted as a kind of *structure*, shaping the social interactions occurring within it by enabling certain kinds of interactions and discouraging others. The "occupants" of the online debate were able to present themselves in certain ways, taking on particular roles and identities in an ephemeral community, or rather communities. What is indicated by the Internet as a context for political communication is a function not unlike that of a physical environment such as a meeting room, lecture hall, or town square, but Internet-based virtual places are short-lived and constantly under construction.

A range of virtual gathering places on the Internet facilitated the formation of a kind of public sphere (Habermas 1989) where groups of participants (mainly but not exclusively French) worked toward fleeting and contingent forms of consensus. While most of the participants in the online discussions considered here could not directly influence the outcome of the election by voting in the US,¹ they could regain a sense of control in the face of distant and potentially quite important political processes through participation in the *symbolic framing* of the election. This framing took place in somewhat different ways in different online forums. On the surface their discussions manifested irony and passion most evidently, yet behind the rhetorical surface were structures of thought defining various identities, each with its spatial or geographical character. What is an American? A French person? A European? Answers to these questions drove the

production of political discourses online as indicated by the constant drawing and redrawing of the boundaries between us and them, here and there.

This sort of discourse occurs in various contexts, both physical (like cities and neighborhoods) and virtual (like mass media and the Internet). Social interaction on the Internet is somewhat peculiar, if not entirely unique, because of the irrelevance of distance per se. In physical contexts of interaction, distance translates into time, money, or labor that must be expended to maintain communication. Once one is “in” the social context of the internet these distance-related communication costs are minimized, although the initial access costs of a computer and Internet access remain. Once one has crossed the barriers to Internet access, it is relatively easy to cross between radically different kinds of online “places.”

Virtual spaces have their own geographies, slightly reminiscent of physical spaces in that regard. The spaces of print media and Internet are linked through Internet news sites, among other things. These sites carry over many of the traits of a conventional newspaper to the online context. In this and many other ways media refer to each other, in a process called “intertextuality.” French online discussion forums about the US election contained references to magazine articles, films, and television programs, adding onto a worldview that already included other forms of mediated experience. One interpretation of the geography of Internet communication would consist of a kind of island linked by many bridges to other islands--the first island being Internet and the other islands being other media. The bridges constitute links to other media, which although numerous are vastly outnumbered by “internal” links to other websites.

¹ Some of the participants in online discussions were immigrants to the US from France while others were Americans with some knowledge of French.

Another kind of geographical model of the Internet would look at the Internet's internal segmentation according to interest groups. Spheres for French political debate are separated by only a single door or gateway from spheres for the promulgation of anti-France sentiments. For example, www.lemonde.fr, Le Monde's online presence, is only two links from the despicable www.fuckfrance.com, since both sites can be reached directly from the miquelon.org website, run by a watchdog group that documents French-Bashing and Anti-French activity by monitoring the news and entertainment media. Similarly, the hate site www.francesucks.com is two clicks away from the official US information site on France in the CIA World Factbook (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/fr.html>), since both sites can be reached by a single mouse click from the site www.information-on-france.com.

That such shortcuts between French and anti-French sites exist at all is a demonstration of the peculiar quality of cyberspace as a highly interconnected social context. They are, however, relatively rare in comparison to links between sites with similar (or at least non-contradictory) perspectives. The idea of nearness or proximity translates into network connectivity. Shortcuts between opposing sectors of the Internet (like the contrasts described above) are greatly outnumbered by links between sites that cater to people with similar worldviews. So there are *more ways* to get from one anti-France site to another anti-France site. This connectivity pattern is both cause and consequence of a sorting out by political stance and belief system. On sites that support debate, such as online forums and blogs, the debates usually take place among persons who generally share the same worldview. People who are generally in agreement may still find plenty of questions to debate, but such debates most often rest upon a taken-for-granted foundation of belief that varies from one online context to another.

Thus it is possible to speak of distinct “zones” of political debate on the Internet as well as the idea of intertextual links or bridges between the Internet spaces and virtual spaces in other media. This paper concentrates on zones of discussion and debate where the French (and a sprinkling of Francophones from outside France) could construct and reconstruct their symbolic representations of the US presidential election. Our interest is in how the discussions in these zones symbolically constructed the election and, more generally, American society, culture, and leadership. Intertextual links are interesting insofar as they indicate a set of resources for the cultivation and enrichment of a particular set of worldviews. Before we enter this virtual space, and undertake to analyze “them looking at us,” we must pass through an opposing space dedicated to looking at France from America.

France Bashing on the Web

Conservatives in the US saw Kerry and France as natural allies. This association was based on a kind of symbolic fusion whereby two things that are hated become linked to each other in an intimate way. The sense of hatred can thereby nourish itself on disgust, as well, by the intimacy of horrible things. France was seen as the natural enemy of the US since it opposed US plans to violate the Geneva Convention and invade Iraq. France’s support of the Afghanistan invasion only two years earlier was forgotten. Kerry was, by definition, the main domestic opponent of the Republican Party as the Democratic nominee for President. Therefore, France and Kerry must be in league with each other and Republicans devoted a perverse creative energy to reinforcing this symbolic association in the mind of the public. Digital images were crafted and posted on websites showing Kerry striking various poses in a beret, superimposed on a French flag, and in one case flanked by images of a frog and the Eiffel Tower (Fig. 1-3). A

bumper sticker that was advertised online bore the image of a jubilant Jacques Chirac and the inscription “Make the French Happy! Vote for John Kerry” (Fig. 4). These images reached not only their intended audience (American conservatives) but also broke through the thin and surprisingly permeable boundary between online political zones. On March 26, 2004, the “blog” of Pascal Riché, a reporter for the French newspaper Libération, exposed copies of these anti-Kerry images and a link to Rush Limbaugh’s website where one could find a mocking reference to “Jean Chéri.”



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The association between France and Kerry was not merely a convenient trope for the conservative forces in America, however. While derisive representations of both Kerry and the French stoked the flames of party pride and loyalty, the association reflected a more general

threat to the resurgent nationalism of the Republican Party. Expressed most impressively in the unilateral policies of the Bush administration, this nationalism circulated with Republican Party circles and within the Right in general as a response to the perceived cosmopolitanism and internationalism of the Clinton administration. Clinton-era policies were painted as pandering to foreign interests and weakening the US while the Bush era had reasserted American leadership in the world through war.

As the leader of opposition to the US's preemptive strike in Iraq, France became the symbol of opposition to US interests pure and simple. In a further move of conflation, xenophobia linked Kerry and France. In the words of Francoise Meltzer, Professor of Romance Languages at the University of Chicago, "Not only does Kerry speak French. He speaks English well. In addition his wife is foreign—she speaks with an accent and she speaks her mind... That further contaminates Kerry. He's part Jewish, he grew up Catholic, he studied in Switzerland and he speaks French—this all combines to make him 'French,' not really American" (Maler 2004). The link was based, in short, on the collapse of symbolic categories into a single us/them opposition. George Bush employed this powerful symbolic maneuver in a campaign speech at Allentown, Pennsylvania: "The use of troops to defend America must never be subject to a veto by countries like France" (Bush, 2004). This rhetorical device caught the attention of the French government, which responded through the French ambassador, Jean-David Levitte, called Dan Fried of the National Security Council, "He explained with all necessary tact that the Republican candidate could no doubt attain his electoral objectives without mixing France up in the campaign..." (Le Figaro 2004a)

Statistics help shed light on the degree of support for Kerry in France. International survey results presented in *Le Monde* showed that among 10 countries--France, South Korea,

Canada, Spain, Mexico, Australia, Japan, United Kingdom, Russia, Israel--Kerry had the highest approval rating among the French people. Likewise, France registered extremely weak support for Bush (with only Spain posting a lower score on this measure) (see Table 1).

COUNTRY	KERRY	BUSH
France	72	16
South Korea	68	18
Canada	60	20
Spain	58	13
Mexico	55	20
Australia	54	28
Japan	51	30
United Kingdom	50	22
Russia	48	52
Israel	24	50

Table 1.

Four and a half times as many French respondents to this survey supported Kerry as supported Bush. A strong antipathy towards Bush or preference for Kerry is certainly present. Jacques Chirac responded to this sentiment in deciding to wait one week before he called to congratulate Bush on his reelection (Bumiller 2004, A-14). What is not clear, however, is the degree to which these numbers indicate sincere support for Kerry or alternatively an “anyone but Bush” stance. The numbers alone can not tell us this, nor can they tell how people arrived at their preferences or exactly what kind of negative and positive feelings were involved. Fear of Bush and dislike of Bush might both produce similarly low support numbers. For this reason, it is essential to engage with discourses that reflect these sentiments and as they circulate in society. The virtual space of the Internet not only provides a context for such discourses, it also

records and preserves them (for a frustratingly short period, but nonetheless for some period). Online communication contexts permitting discussion and debate take two basic forms: *discussion forums* in which members (who have provided a user name and password) are free to start a discussion or add their comments to a discussion that has been started by another member; and *blogs*, in which a single individual initiates each discussion by posting a short essay, observation, or question on his or her website. These posts are usually related to current events and are often linked to other websites related to the event. Readers of the blog can send replies which may be attached by the blogger to the original message so others can see them. The term “weblog” was coined in 1997 by Jorn Barger, and shortened to “blog” in 1999 (Blood 2000). Bloggers originally functioned somewhat like tour guides, discovering online news and websites and providing readers with both links to, and comments (frequently ironic) about these other sites. In comparison to the online forums, blogs have a more personal character and generally preserve a slightly greater level of civility or “netiquette.”

The Election on Discussion Forums

Two discussion forums are considered here, one hosted by France’s leading newspaper, *Le Monde*, and the other hosted by Wanadoo, the French equivalent of AOL (American Online). Wanadoo is in essence an Internet portal providing various services to its members and some services to nonmembers, as well (such as the opportunity to read but not contribute to the discussion forum). One hundred and ninety two discussions were collected from *Le Monde’s* forum between October 1 and November 8. Only twenty five discussions were downloaded from Wanadoo, but these were particularly long discussions including a total of over 1000 individual comments. These discourses reveal themes in the construction of self and other, Us

and Them. These themes draw on shared images of national history, national identity, morality, notions of progress, notions of civilization, etc.

A particularly long exchange on Wanadoo (115 comments over a two week period) was initiated by an observation about the decline of the United States from a participant using the name ceroxon: “Ten years from now, the way things are going, China will pass up the US in many ways, most notably the economy. The Americans will then have other worries than terrorism. What’s more, I never have understood why they want to fight terrorism which only took 3000 lives on September 11 and they do nothing about gangs, which cause more than 12,000 shooting deaths each year in the same country...one time there were only 8 police officers available in the state of Oregon, so why send 120,000 soldiers to Iraq?” (Quand la Chine supplantera les U.S.A.) The responses to this observation ranged from simple affirmation, to a suggestion that Japan, not China, would overtake the US, to sarcastic ridicule of the idea that the US is vulnerable, to a passionate defense of the US’s right to defend itself against “islamo-fascists,” to an articulate pronouncement of the link between poverty and terrorism. The most active participant in the online forum accounted for an impressive 20 percent of all contributions to the discussion, more than half again as many comments than the next most vociferous participant. Furthermore, she staunchly defended American culture, policy, and leadership, a position that she shared with only four others among the 32 persons who participated in the forum. This situation demonstrates the general principle that the most vociferous participants in online discussion tend to be far from the consensus perspective. The “overactive” participant, Mouinette, peppered her contributions with shouted words (typed in upper case letters), exclamation marks, glowing compliments of the United States, and derisive comments about Europe. Four other participants expressed support of the US, but three of these only contributed

once to the discussion. In contrast, 17 participants critiqued the US on various grounds or pointed out signs of American vulnerability. Typical of Mouinette's comments is:

“When China replaces the US (if it happens it won't be in 10 years) you will regret the loss. Why so much emotion in France around the AZF explosion [a terrorist attack on a chemical factory in Toulouse, September 2001] which caused an absolutely NEGLIGIBLE number of deaths relative to people who die on the road??? Same thing for Madrid [terrorist attack on Spanish trains, May 2004]: 400 deaths, that's nothing at all!” (mouinette moqueuse, October 20, 2004)

The importance of such comments for our analysis does not lie in their self-evident message content, since it fails to capture the mainstream perspective, but rather in their demonstration of the message context, in particular a kind of litmus test revealing what kinds of ideas seem so outrageous that they must be shouted (or capitalized) for the speak to believe he or she has been heard. Here we also are dealing with sarcasm, so the main point we can gather is that French public discourses like those in the US tend to exaggerate the threat of terrorism and underreport more common everyday threats, but what makes Mouinette “shout” is the sense that events in the US are taken for signs of the unjust exercise of US power or the ominous indication of cracks in that power.

Removing Mouinette's contributions reveals a kind of consensus among the quieter voices: the number of comments critical of the US then outnumbers pro-US comments by a ratio more than 5 to 1. This consensus emerged against a double backdrop of angry comments by Mouinette and spurious remarks. In fact, forty-eight percent of the total discussion consisted of tangential comments, for example a volley of remarks about China's treatment of Tibet and numerous speculative remarks relating to the identity and mental competence of other

participants in the forum. The critique that emerged from the “noise” of spurious comments and a noisy outlier combined an image of the US as dangerously strong with an ominous sense that behind this strength lie some crucial points of weakness that could lead to catastrophic failure. The flavor of these critical comments is captured by three postings necessarily lifted out of the context of the discussion but still largely comprehensible.

Dear mouinette (moqueuse?!) I think that what cenoxon wanted to say is that for 3,000 deaths the Americans did not hesitate to go to war against a country that had nothing to do with the famous 3,000 deaths, thereby adding 1,087 (soldiers killed, not counting the seriously injured handicapped for life...) A war that caused through bombardment hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties... While the American state protects the bearers of weapons that cause 12,000 deaths a year. For the deaths of AZF or Madrid, there was no such stupid vengeance. Compare what is comparable. In regard to China, all that is necessary is that tomorrow, for reason X, they decide to sell part or all of the US treasury bonds they hold, then the dollar is a dead loss! In effect the American economy is in the hands of Far East markets: China, and also India and Japan. (nonna, October 25, 2004).

Best to stop closing our eyes in every way everyone knows bush waited for this in order to attack iraq and his goal was not to defend the united states but above all to gain control of petroleum just one question in your opinion with all the means the united states possessed how is it possible they have not located bin laden??? i'l simply say that everything is false the united states manipulates their citizens and us too reflect seriously on it (romane Nov. 11, 2004)

The federal budget deficit [of the US] is greater than that of France, it's approaching 5% but it's not the most important thing because as you argue it can be controlled. What is more disturbing is the trade deficit, 54 billion for the month of September. I remind you that only a few years ago the announcement of a billion per month made the markets collapse on Wall Street, today we're at more than a billion and a half per day and the figure is taking off... These cumulative deficits and the blatant autism of the United-States government represent the most serious dangers facing the planet. We don't know it, but the Iraqis become conscious of it a bit more each day. Best Wishes. (Agitprop, October 28, 2004)

Each of these contributions reveals the paradoxical connection between weakness and strength. We could perhaps dub this the "falling giant" motif, keeping in mind that when a giant falls it invariably does damage to those unfortunates who are caught underneath; and this is the logic of the connection between strength (or size) and weakness. Stated more technically, the motif in these comments combines two forms of critique. On the one hand the US is weak--at the point of eminent collapse. On the other hand, the US is aggressive and inward-turned, "autistic" to use the terminology of Agitprop. In this motif, weakness and the aggression go hand in hand, because the fundamental (economic) weakness of the US is masked from US citizens through a pointless show of military force. Two of the three contributors quoted above were one-time participants in this discussion, while Agitprop contributed ten times. The convergence among views of one-time participants is particularly striking because it suggests a vast body of "lurkers" in this discussion forum who do not contribute at all but who are generally sympathetic to the

“falling giant” perspective. Conversely, the view of the US as a “friendly giant,” that is, a defender of freedom without apparent weaknesses, either moral or social, is a minority view in the online forum. When one feels oneself among like-minded persons, it becomes less compelling to reiterate one’s point of view; if one cannot hear an echo one keeps shouting (at least if one has the garrulous personality of a Mouinette).

Blogging the election

Weblogs or “blogs” can be as conflictual as discussion forums like the Wanadoo forum, but this was not the case with the French blogs that covered the US election. These blogs were associated with French media (three newspapers and a television station) a factor that narrowed the range of opinions “voiced” online, making for somewhat tame discussions. The most prolific blog (in part due to the blogger and in part due to the participants) was maintained by Fabrice Rousselot, a foreign correspondent for the leftist newspaper, *Libération*. His post of September 28 generated seventeen responses. It was a particularly interesting exchange that revealed the dynamics that drive online debate. The exchange is interesting with regard to what was not argued--no one advocated Bush--and with regard to what was argued: some saw Kerry as a potential source of change in the US-France relationship and others chose to minimize the difference between Bush and Kerry. Most of this exchange is reproduced here (author’s translations):

“So are you ready? General lunacy here waiting for the historic debate. Alan Schroeder, professor at Northeastern University and expert in such things, tells me this should be a good one. I’m dreaming of finally seeing these two punch it out face to face since they’ve battled each other from afar at each step of this campaign. Joking aside, it’s a

crucial moment for Kerry. If he manages to nail Iraq to Bush's boot anything could happen. And yes I have said that this campaign would hinge on Iraq and I did bet that Kerry will win with less than a five point lead." (Rousselot, September 28)

By this point in the campaign, Rousselot had attended the Democratic and the Republican conventions and had attested to being singled out for condemnation as a French person at the Republican convention. His preference for the Democratic party and candidate was clear and his prediction of a Kerry win was therefore an optimistic one. Despite *Libération's* leftist politics, support of Kerry by the newspapers readers and reporters is not automatic, as the first two replies to his posting indicate.

I think so too (I've even bet a bottle of Chateau Lafitte). I think the manipulation of the system goes clear to altering the results of opinion polls. People manipulate voting machines, why not opinion polls? My American friends tell me that Kerry is not much better. There's as much difference as between Pepsi and Coke. They're just the representatives of two lobbies (indeed the same one). Your opinion? (Laurent Bervas, September 28)

Mainly in agreement with you. The French cry "Kerry! Kerry!" while jumping around like goats... But I'm persuaded he'll follow the same policy as preachy Bush, maybe with a bit of Vaseline... (marabbeh, September 29)

These posts minimizing the difference between the candidates most likely reflect the past century of US-France relations during which the French have most often perceived the Americans as acting out of self-interest regardless of the political climate in the US (Roger 2002,

178-212, 392-438). Yet the proliferation of communication complicates this picture, as the next post indicates.

Is it general lunacy that pushes this one to redefine American patriotism? [link to an Op Ed piece by Daniel Ellsberg in the New York Times] (gimik, September 29)

The Op Ed piece that gimik links to advocates that anyone with access to the US's war plans should leak them to the press in order to make US attacks difficult and therefore to preserve lives. If Americans advocate acting in the interest of universal values, even in the face of grave personal costs and a loss of face for the US, then surely the two ends of the political spectrum in the US must not be the same. Bush's belligerence and unilateralism may not be the only path the US can take. The next two posts express support for Kerry, although their argument tactics are hardly convincing.

“Ah, finally someone who refuses to retract their predictions. Thanks Mr. Rousselot. Yes, Kerry will win. And why not? Let's not prepare ourselves for his fall, despite the crushing majority opinion on the media... What does this mean? It only means there was a gigantic campaign (including in France) against Kerry. Nothing else. If Kerry wins, the world will win, and we will win... Do we have any interest in losing? No. And the Americans, are they ready to lose? No. Conclusion: in order for Bush to win the results at the voting booth will have to be incredibly manipulated. I bet also that Kerry will win with a several point margin.” (Fernand Lechien, September 29)

“as much difference as between Pepsi and Coke” And who designated a chain of countries as the “axis of evil”? Who preaches that we battle them one by one on a pretext

of a “war on terrorism”? Oh, maybe there’s a little difference, eh? A serious difference!

(Méléis, September 29)

The intensity of the debate between those who see a difference between the two US presidential candidates and those who do not suggests a dynamic that is not typically found in overseas discourses about a political campaign. Instead of being “out there,” the American campaign had become provocatively part of the here and now in France, since the outcome might have grave implications. Because it might matter who the Americans put into the White House, the opposite point of view, that it did not matter, had to be defended. The presence of the debate reflected the dilemma of a democratic society living in the shadow of a hyperpower capable of acting without consultation or support. The awareness of weakness generated both movements--towards a kind of virtual involvement by supporting Kerry from afar, and away from involvement by reaffirming what is normally taken for granted, that a distant political contest makes little difference. The next three posts deal with how to access coverage of the presidential debate in France and with the tightly scripted nature of the debates. Following this is a long post from a French expatriate living in the US, who impressed subsequent participants with his insight, a judgment borne out by election itself.

A fair number of people think that the debate itself won’t be so decisive... but that in contrast the post-debate will determine the winner. In 2000, just after the Bush-Gore debate, surveyors gave a 14 point lead to Gore. For 2004 the Democratic commentators who talk just after the debate won’t have as much weight as the conservatives (Giuliani and McCain) and the latter won’t cease to hammer in with eloquence that Bush was the winner of the debate... leader... clear positions... war against terrorism... and that Kerry was not convincing... flip-flopper... weak... The cable channels in the United States are

strongly conservative... they demonstrate it shamelessly and without respite. Le Figaro, L'Express on the right? Here they would be models of neutrality. These channels don't miss the chance to reflect constantly on the worst moments for Kerry (sweat..., hesitation...) and will take for fact the opinions of the commentators mentioned above. Unfortunately this is what people will remember. ...

Therefore, if Kerry is to draw some kind of benefit from this debate he must perform exceptionally. And even if he does, I doubt the benefit will be significant. The subject of the debate Thursday will be the international situation (Iraq, terrorism), precisely the subject where Bush excels in the opinion polls. Bush's position is hard to refute because he has taken the moral stand that the war in Iraq is a matter of liberty and democracy versus oppression and what is needed is time for the country to stabilize, then the jackpot: stability in the Middle East, end of terrorism, in short, a "wonderful world." The amalgamation of the war against terrorism and the occupation of Iraq has taken hold. That's the source of my pessimism. I just hope the debate allows Kerry to address the disastrous flip-flopper image his detractors have given him. [Links to sites of the New York Times, Washington Post, and two American blogs.] (Pierre, Maryland, September 29)

The next post, from another expatriate (not included here), commended the "Beautiful analysis from Pierre," but optimistically maintained that Kerry would win. The following post echoed these sentiments but added intertextual references to film (Fahrenheit 9-11) and television (news coverage of American hostages).

"Very nice analysis from Pierre :) Propaganda is at its height. I think nonetheless that this lie is so big it will end by "exploding" in the face of GB and his pals. I'm thinking of

the lie about the absence of American deaths in Iraq, maintained by the lack of images. There have been enough images of Americans getting their throats slit to reveal this lie with a rare violence. This much said, it may take some time. In passing, I can only congratulate Mr. Moor [sic] who has been criticized by certain kind souls for the “trivial” side of his attacks. When you’re in a war, you have to be ready to get your sleeves dirty. In addition I’d say that if I were an American I’d vote for Kerry while remaining cautious and aware that he’s also at the mercy of the system. Let’s hope there’s enough disgust to provoke (at least among the enlightened class) a desire for change. In any case, that’s what I believe.” (laurent bervas, September 30)

On this cue, the next participant expands on the intertextual quality of meaning construction, drawing a parallel with mediated sports experiences.

“It’s strange this excitement and this pressure, it recalls the long hours of July 1998. I know, I know, drawing a parallel with soccer might seem stupid or incongruous, but taking a step back, we’re talking about two events which attract quite a few people to the small screen. And quite a few people ready to yell ‘Go Blue/Go Red/Go Yellow.’ And if the intensity of the risks and the antagonisms were after all a drug? We live as an “instant partisan” deep and dense where the tension is clearly palpable here and elsewhere. This story pleases me so much that I’ve decided to leave for the United States next week to cross the country during the month of October and remain fifteen days after the election to see ‘live’ this strange moment in the ‘democratic history of nations.’ [link to webcast of debate] Good night and good debate.” (greg gendre, September 30)

This contributor is so intrigued by the election that he has decided to see it first hand. It is not clear how his previous communications in cyberspace might have inspired this decision to travel,

but clearly mobility and communication are being cast as interrelated aspects of engagement with the historical event, and possibly as frameworks in which the event *becomes* historical. This participant not only announces his immanent departure, but also provides another kind of voyage for his audience by adding the link to his page so others can watch the webcast. Few French observers were able to detach themselves so thoroughly as to achieve this level of delight in the historicity of the election, but his user name, greg gendre, provides a clue that he may be of mixed French and English or French and American background. Our last glimpse of this exchange is intertextual in character and reasserts the anti-Bush theme, which unites the faction that supports Kerry and the faction that sees Bush and Kerry as similarly unpromising.

“Thursday night’s debate will be broadcast on France 2 at midnight Friday. I hope that the release of Moore’s DVD (slated for October 5 on amazon.com) will nail Bush a bit more.” (???)

The intertextual links in this short note are fascinating: a film, released on DVD, is advertised on one website and that advertisement is, in turn, announced on the Blog. Through such intertextual links various foreign audiences participate in the American political process: by sharing media, sharing information about media, and sharing reactions to the intertextual constructions of reality. All that is missing is a direct participation in the vote, yet such discursive construction in France works to build a kind of tentative and provisional consensus. This, in turn, can shape electoral politics in France, lending support to candidates who are willing to openly oppose the United States. These “hidden transcripts” of resistance are not confined to hedgerows and saloons (Scott 1990), but rather circulate through heterogeneous communication networks that replace the familiar geography of nations with a new geography of link topographies and areas of interest. These mediascapes (Appadurai 1996) link between local and global scales, and

disregard national boundaries. Despite the blending of physical and virtual space, reality itself still seems self-evident to at least one participant.

“Wow!!! It’s getting wild on the TV and on the blog!!! I agree with Pierre on the influence of ideological discourse on the vote. One has the impression that many Americans dream of an America like the one Bush describes. How can they be drawn out of this dream of omnipotence and attain reality? The Europeans and the French, with a discussion closer to reality cannot make themselves understood, and vice versa.” (jm, September 30)

This participant continues with comments that set US, French and European culture in a three-way relationship and hint at the idea that European unity might offer a means of opposing US expansionism:

“Kerry won’t be able to draw them out of their dream vision of America, but we can at least hope for an end to the incredible behavior of the Bush administration which consists of systematically increasing the tension until there is a confrontation, denunciation (*that part’s French, isn’t it*), threats and a power drive (like in basketball). However, like you see in matters of commerce, it’s far from really paying off. What’s more, in this kind of confrontation, you can notice that the Europeans make a united front, if only for their common economic interest. It must be really hard to work and make plans with the people in this administration. (jm, September 30)

The earnestness of this post contrasts with the irony in the next post, but both are, in a sense advocating disentanglement from the US.

“A few hours before the debate, the Iraqi terrorists say “peek a boo!” by blowing up several cars... and Schwarzie shows the way to his pal Bush: he’s prohibiting the forced

feeding of ducks and geese... Shi-(!)...from now until 2012! It's screwy!" (gimik, September 30)

The exchange continues with speculation about the veracity and significance of opinion polls and advice on how Kerry could sway the undecided voters. Again, alternation between advocacy (of Kerry) and ironic detachment from the election defines the character of the forum. In the next section, we return to the idea that European unity might offer a means of opposing US expansionism, but shift our virtual site from Rousselot's blog to the discussion forum of *Le Monde*.

The World of Le Monde

Le Monde hosted a very active discussion forum about the election during the month of October, 2004. True to its title, *Le Monde* captured an international discussion, involving participants in France and elsewhere, and more strikingly, it foregrounded a geopolitical vision linking the future of the US to the future of Europe. This vision was surge of "Europeanist" sentiment in response to the perception of a new wave of US expansion. Ironically it justified internationalism as a means of defending sovereignty: alone, France can do little to check the free reign of the US; as part of Europe France may be able to intervene when it is necessary in the eyes of most Europeans to intervene. The following was the first posting in a discussion thread started the day after the elections. (All translations by author)

"Four more years of Bush. It's a unique chance for Europe--if Europe takes it. If Kerry had won, he would have pursued exactly the same political program, with the only difference being a "please" and a "thank you." And the European leaders, who have said so much in his favor, would show bad form not to support him in his efforts which would

have no purpose, in any case, but to affirm the supremacy of the USA over the rest of the world and to defend the interests of his country against Europe.” (D-520, November 3, 2004)

The same day, another participant expressed almost the exact same interpretation of events, starting a different discussion thread.

“You might think the election of Bush is harmful for France and Europe. It’s true that the majority of French and Europeans were rather favorable towards Kerry. But it is necessary to offer a number of reservations to the idea that the election of Bush is not good for us. ... [the election of Bush] will reinforce the positions of France and Germany [against US policy] whereas the election of Kerry would have posed a problem from the moment it was necessary to take a position for or against participation in the war in Iraq. We would certainly have seen a divorce relating to Iraq, the Germans being seduced for sure by the propositions of a Kerry. With Bush we will continue our policies with the hope that even more countries will follow the lead of Spain and join us. From there the alliance, the transatlantic partnership, will shatter into bits and lose nearly all of its meaning. Bush, without intending to do so, cuts the grass from under the feet of the European Atlanticists whereas Kerry would have given them grist for their mill. This is all good for the emergence of a political Europe because it’s exactly this partnership that poses problems for us, that prevents Europe freeing itself from the United States, that contributes to making us a political dwarf.” (milord 3, November 3, 2004)

Responses to these two posts were generally positive, including: “the election ... of Bush is a benediction for Europe,” (Tatanka, November 3, 2004). Each of the original posters responded to the others’ post: “I’m also of this opinion, but I can’t help having a bitter taste in my mouth

when thinking of the many sorrows to come for certain ones in this world ... Project for a New American Century... FORWARD MARCH ...EVERYONE!!!!” (D-520, November 3, 2004); “It’s a secular and multicultural Europe that the Bush administration opposes much more than merely France” (milord3, November 3, 2004). This is a novel line of reasoning that is gathering strength in France and so far has not generated significant countercurrents. A conservative participant whose position in other discussion threads was markedly pro-US, restricted herself in this case to defending Poland and China when the former was slandered and the latter was slighted in the ensuing discussion.

The idea of mobilizing not nationalist but internationalist (i.e. regional coalition) sentiments as a defense against the US is not a common motif in French discourses on the US. It arose for a brief moment between the world wars, led by Georges Duhamel, Gustave Le Rouge, and Henri de Beaumont. The shared insight was that having a common enemy might be the best way to end the antagonisms that had shattered Europe (Roger 2002, 370).

Americans pre-conditioned by the condescending rhetoric of the Bush administration in regard to Europe (and some European conservatives) will see this thinly veiled attempt to resuscitate old nationalist dreams of European countries in a new, transnational bottle. Most striking was the concluding remark in the thread started by milord3. The contributor’s screen name was listed as “AnAmericanOpinion” and the contribution was provided in both French and English:

“In France. In Europe. Geo-Political Intrigue. No mention of the UN. Demands for more military spending. Strong diplomatic pressure. Ecomonic reprecussions [sic]. Military action? Why do the French and Europe do this? For Vanity? No. For Conquest and Treasure. No. They do because their conscience dictates that they must

do. So Strong, their passion, their beliefs. It wont be easy but their conscience demands they act! I must shed a tear of joy, for deep down inside they truly are...Americans!

God Bless Amer...Europa” (November 4, 2004).

The American perception of a European desire for military balance is to see that desire as exactly the same as the US's desire to occupy Iraq. Although the combined military strength of Europe is less than 1/4 that of the US, and Europe's political position remains weak compared to that of the US, the American feels threatened and launches a volley of bitter sarcasm. The need for a politically and militarily strong Europe is unlikely to be appreciated more than this by the average American observer. From the American perspective, the ambition of building a stronger Europe seems at best irrelevant or ridiculous, at worst a threat to global stability. This participant injects this perception into the discussion effectively extinguishing it, or rather driving it into other virtual and physical spaces.

Conclusion

For the French, the Internet provided a virtual gathering space in which to discuss and debate the 2004 American presidential election. The debate mobilized various themes of US-France relations, some old and others rather new. The US was seen rather ambivalently as overwhelmingly powerful and seriously vulnerable, in the motif I have called the “falling giant.” When this image was evoked another giant came to mind--China--and insofar as China had more people and a healthy export economy, it appeared to have a more promising future than the US. The US was not only incurring a massive debt, but it was violently aggressive and inward turned at the same time, “autistic” in the words of one observer. In French eyes, this character made the US both threatening and fragile.

In regard to the two presidential candidates, the near consensus despite a few detractors was that George Bush was completely antithetical to the values of the French people and of French civilization. Debate raged concerning whether Kerry would be better than Bush. The level of passion and interest of this debate indicated a break from “business as usual” which entails a low level of interest or emotional investment in foreign elections. The US election mattered to enough people in France that in effect it had to matter to everyone; those who felt that the outcome would not make any difference were nonetheless obliged to defend their position, and thereby afford some importance to the debate itself.

One of the most intriguing motifs to emerge in the virtual space of the Internet was the idea of a stronger Europe, called by some theorists *Europuissance*. Although an interest in a strong, unified Europe as counterbalance to the US can be found as early as the 1930s, the interest emerged at this time in a viable framework for European stability and cooperation, the EU, and during a time of relative prosperity rather than during a period of profound European disruption and instability. Bush’s election was necessary (though not sufficient) for this plan to be carried to fruition. The Bush reelection was seen as providing four more years during which US arrogance would have the effect of solidifying European coherence and ultimately paving the way for a major European challenge to US supremacy.

While the discourses that circulate online are not official discourses, sanctioned by editors or authorities, they nonetheless have some social importance. They indicate grassroots construction of a sense of place, embedded in various scales: local, national, regional and global. This sense of place may take on political potency when it is seen as the basis for collective action or resistance. While online spaces are permeable and therefore hardly “secluded” like the spaces where James Scott (1990) chronicled his “hidden transcripts,” they nonetheless serve the same

purpose of preserving and developing resistant frameworks of thought that may provide support for public policy, when the two are in alignment, or if not, it may emerge at a future time in the form of spontaneous uprisings or new national programs.

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