

THE ELECTORAL DISCOURSE INSTITUTED IN 2023 IN BENIN: WHAT ABOUT CONSUMER INTEGRATION?

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ABSTRACT

More than a meeting, the established moments of electoral propaganda in Benin seem to take on the appearance of a republican convention and the populations scrutinize the public media while burning to be informed. There is therefore programming of reception, integration of the consumer for the construction of a democratic event. This contribution looks at this space of confrontation created and organized during the legislative elections of 2023 to understand the constructs in terms of identity for the public consumer. Where is it in reality between the organizing institution of the space, moderation (the media) and the speaking authorities (the representatives of competing groups, competitors). This semiotic study, supported by semi-automated processing (Google and ChatGPT-4), ventures into the critical sociology of media content and media economics to reveal the altered consumer-public shaped by this space.

Key words: constructed electoral event, media space, reception programming, manufactured consumer, identity otherness, media economics.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1991 in Benin, the media have been creating a democratic event that contributes to popular excitement during election periods: the argumentative media space. Through the media regulatory institution, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC), the candidates vying for votes to govern and represent are presented to the public. Although no study has yet addressed this institutionalized¹ electoral marketplace of words², one only needs

¹ Because it is imposed by the fundamental law in its provisions 4 and 5 ('the people exercise their sovereignty through their elected representatives (...)'), 'political parties contribute to the expression of the vote (...)', which establish the electoral marketplace of words, political marketing, and the enjoyment of the right to pursue power. This is reinforced by the electoral code, which institutionalizes the electoral marketplace along with that of words ('the electoral campaign encompasses all propaganda operations (...) aimed at encouraging voters to support the competing candidates. Before the official opening of the electoral campaign, political parties continue to (...) animate political life ...' (Art. 44), 'During this period, any candidate or list of candidates is entitled to equitable access to public and private information and communication channels to present their program to voters, in compliance with the procedures and modalities determined by the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC)' (Art. 45); 'The electoral campaign is declared open by the president of CENA. It lasts fifteen (15) days' (Art. 46). We are thus in contexts where the matter is acknowledged, its manifestation is exposed, and the legitimacy of the actors in the space is recognized. There is a right, and there is an obligation, as the law establishing the Beninese State reveals.

² Since it complies with regulatory provisions, the regulatory institution, HAAC, has created and organized, according to its own understanding, access to public and private media in line with the aforementioned provisions. Thus, since 1995, from "Party Message" to "Me, President"—a new

to recall the scenes at TV set vendors' stands, neighborhood restaurants and bars, household courtyards, and even the living rooms of middle-class families to understand how public media outlets, particularly the Office of Radiodiffusion and Television of Benin (ORTB), drew large audiences during these times. However, this is no longer the case today, and the reason is clear: digital social networks have now stolen the spotlight. The question is: is this a marketed construction of the public during these electoral campaign moments for political communication or for informing citizens?

This study focuses on the 2023 legislative election, organized by the same institution and newly named: *The Debate*³. While in the past, it was an open platform⁴ for each political party with a set duration (often 15 minutes) without moderation, allowing participants to say whatever they wished, the 2023 version has a completely different format. From the title to the stage setup (scripting)⁵, and from the topics to the probing questions, the regulator adopts postures and positions itself as the event's creator and information producer⁶. Media outlets and political parties are invited to a scene with a more *eso-exo/diegetic* tone, not for a friendly match, but rather for the confrontation of ideas, as the journalistic genre suggests (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2012; Lokonon, 2020). Thus, the marketplace of words carries multiple facets within it.

This refers to the summoning of the space; the nodal systems to be analyzed in this constructed media program, "The Debate" for a logic of "being" of the public as a consumer rather than "doing" consumer consumer in a context of powers (media industry, institutional lobbying, political power) (Badillo, 2015; Forest, 2003). "Make you be" and "Act to/for being", somehow, it must be difference!

formula introduced in 2016 by ORTB—not forgetting "The Floor to Parties," "Word to Parties," and "Word to Candidates," the public has witnessed a parade of activists from various competing political formations, all aiming to sell their projects and garner support (Art. 44 of the electoral code).

³ A total of 7 productions were aired between December 23, 2023, and January 4, 2024, on national television, starting at 9:30 p.m., for the presentation of projects and the quest for voter support.

⁴ The participants were chosen (as the institution allowed each political party the freedom to send whoever they wanted), and the format of the presentation varied (from monologues to brief interviews or even sketches). The only requirements were to respect the allocated time and avoid violations of free speech, such as verbal violence, insults, or the promotion of hateful or discriminatory remarks, among others. It is also worth mentioning that every political party had the right to veto the broadcast of its segment, deciding whether or not to allow its appearance. Importantly, every party was entitled to an equal number of slots, so rejecting a broadcast did not cancel their scheduled appearance.

⁵ An innovation, in reality, from 2016, between *Moi President* which is only the candidate's word and *Le face à face*, the confrontation between the first two winners from the 1st round of the presidential election.

⁶ The media are under a regime of *farm-out* (Lokonon, C., 2022), that is to say, giving in and becoming executors of their own status: *archi-acting* subjects (Gbaguidi, K J. & Lokonon, C. , 2022) from producers of information to passive subjects acting on a denying order, or denying the function. However, let us at least observe that this brings an innovation in scripting: the choice of moderation or not is no longer left to political groups - it is essential for a reconstitution of scripting [we will come back to this in the development].

Thus, discursive productions are analyzed for how the public is represented within the space, and from this representation, the quality of the programming is assessed. Therefore, we assert that the integrated electoral marketplace turns the public into consumers; moreover, the elements used to construct this electoral program involve the public only to the extent of making them consumers. This representation of the public is dependent on the hosts of the space.

Before any further analysis, it is necessary to outline the historiography of the constructed democratic event: the argumentative electoral space (i), to highlight the organizing components that reveal the constraints of emergence and functioning to shed light on the fabrication of the consumer in a reception through programming (ii), not to say in downloading.

1. THE CONSTRUCTED DEMOCRATIC EVENT: FROM EFFACEMENT TO ENUNCIATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Result of an injunction of authority⁷ and a generational national conference⁸, the people savor the lifting of control offered by the political leaders of the 1990s. In fact, the spread of electoral masses, for some represents the erasure choices of leaders from the same and unique political formation by people and denounced for dictatorship⁹; and among others, a blissful formalism¹⁰ even though the situational context remains the same with one nuance: no denunciation. Thus, diversity and plurality of opinions are essential for argumentative construction. Each construction is established not within a social heritage but, more importantly, reflects the evolution in enunciative construction—another socio-cultural activity

⁷ That is to say from the La Baule speech at a France-Africa summit, the leader will teach the African heads of state that aid will henceforth be subordinated to the respective impulses towards freedom and democracy. Authoritarians will witness the scarcity of support from France for their various development efforts. Then, François Mitterrand outlines some ideas: "when it comes to democracy, a diagram is ready: representative system, free elections, multipartyism, freedom of the press, independence of the judiciary, refusal of censorship..." while taking be careful to warn: the wind, after Eastern Europe, will "circle the planet".

⁸ This is what François Mitterrand said in Biarritz: "If we take stock, (...), speaking only of Francophone Africa, out of the twenty-two countries represented in La Baule, all have introduced multiparty systems. (...). Seventeen of you have adopted new constitutions. In four years, there have been around fifty general elections—referendums, legislative elections, presidential elections. France has provided its support and does not forget that these gains must be consolidated." (Speech by François Mitterrand, President of France, at the 18th Conference of Heads of State of Africa, November 4, 1994).

⁹ The result of the Cold War, which polarized the world into two ideologies—Marxist and liberal, both highly antagonistic. Benin found itself under the grip of socialism. As a consequence, it was classified among dictatorial states and had nothing democratic about it..

¹⁰ The difference here is that liberalism, under the influence of the other bloc, claims to be democratic. Thus, everything is considered democratic; even though, here too, there is a faction, a small group united by a common interest, also serving a single man: the sole master in charge. Monarchies such as Morocco, the Central African Republic, and countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Togo belong to this capitalist bloc. Can we refrain from saying that, at every level, we are witnessing a mere semblance of democracy?

that bridges linguistic competencies, endogenous knowledge, and civilizational blending.

1.1. SOCIAL ANCHORING AS A CONSTRAINT ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARGUMENTATIVE ELECTORAL SPACE

Everything converges toward a situation of heritage regarding political connections, consumerist behaviors, and the orchestration of a semblance of being without truly appearing.

Regarding the *socio-political heritage*, it is the sum of the encounter of black Africa with the outside world, accompanied by denial of an existential identity, conditioning for an existence of non-belonging to a species. Thus, the restrictive elements of emergence and functioning specific to an environment have been put under wraps with a view to promoting the dominance of the host with cleverly orchestrated internal support. So, certain rights, certain obligations become inappropriate for black Africa which deserves to be civilized since it does not possess either a culture or knowledge (Face, 1980; Lokonon & Gbaguidi, 2022; Sala-Molins, 2002). Social classes take root and create a society conducive to unequal policies. Which explains the fertile ground for the establishment of a disorderly order. So when François Mitterrand speaks on June 20, 1990 on the occasion of the 16th conference of heads of state of Africa and France, we understand why the wish becomes a diktat. Thus, a wind of rectification and not of overhaul, clumsily called “democratic wind¹¹” is blowing across the continent.

Furthermore, the fruits of the school also facilitate the shaping of a type of human product for black Africa. Copying and pasting takes hold and the subject people, who have become independent, happily repeat the socio-political and economic pattern of the master as noted by Du Bois (1904), Nkrumah (1970), Mvé Ondo (2004), and others. We need only to consider, for example, the socio-political choice of representatives. If this side (with the master), isn't it both a great mass of simulacrum of “good and beautiful” and a celebration of illumination? But in the other side (the enslaved), it is simply the reproduction of the fact without particular nuances. So, instead of the exhibition of ideas, of thought, men are exhibited; in place of the socially correct, the socially manipulated is implanted; and, instead of what is socially correct, what is socially manipulated is implanted; and instead of defending “correctness”, “incorrectness” is championed, borrowing this term from pioneers in another field where the ailments are not dissimilar to those denounced elsewhere.

As Anders (1956: 15) emphasizes, it is the reign of “consumption”. The media reinforce and root the folklore in its seeds: a location is praised, populations are

¹¹ Did not the master say to his collaborators, “We need to talk about democracy. It is a universal principle that has just emerged for the peoples of Central Europe...?” It is important to note here the actual manifestation of the value of information: the benevolence (Charaudeau, 2011) that calls for sharing the information one has with others; then, the evaluative judgment is not in favor of the one being discussed, using the verbs “comes” and “appears”, finally, it invites discussion of what is uncomfortable with the verbs “need” and “talk” and the subjective deictic “we,” which is not inclusive at all.

invited, and a person designated as a political authority says whatever comes to mind. The content of the message may be deceitful: where is the problem? -this is also part of the success of the staging and the "expected correctness". Then, human ingenuity invents a media space and organizes a parade of speech, even if it is hollow; this is what happens. "Ghosts of consumers", akin to "machines and equipment", have become an "obligation" (Anders, 1956: 16-17), proliferating and constructing a "world" for all. From the social field to the legal one, the foundations of following and consumerism are laid. Colonial nations conduct a 15-day campaign, and African countries must do the same for their populations despite their inability to produce a balanced budget of expenses and revenues. One must not skimp on resources in the face of populations where, despite everything, children still sit on bricks to study, where schools lack libraries, and where there are not enough teachers to impart knowledge, etc. The path is well-defined, and no one can dedicate themselves to it. When then will there be a construction of the argumentative space reflecting the African context-an Africa that reacts to itself in terms of what it is (being), what it has (state and perception), and what it aspires to be (essence)?

The result of the first two observations justifies the 3rd, namely "being without appearing", a sign of self-isolation from reality. However, we must be able to « choisir de se détourner avec grandiloquence du contingent du "mundus sensibilis" pour se tourner vers l' "essentiel", le "mundus intelligibilis" »¹² (Anders, 1956: 25). The intelligible world implies that being and having should be in harmony; that the "copied" should be adapted and not "pasted"; that "appearance" should fade in favor of "being." This would lead toward the plausible. However, the constraints of emergence already show obstacles that prevent extending toward the plausible, much less the "true" or "truth." What the political world seems to hold as true is only in terms of speech (Charaudeau, 2014; Ferrand, 1998; Fonseca, 2013)¹³; and extrapolating Sala-Molins (2002) to assert that "philosophy and political science choose their side: lying is legitimate". So, is the electoral argumentative space merely an organized space for discourse, or should the discourse contribute to satisfying the right to be informed and the effectiveness of enjoying that right?

1.2. ENUNCIATIVE CONSTRUCTION IN SERVICE OF FUNCTIONING CONSTRAINTS

At this level, we will present an analysis of the textual enunciation of the titles or names of the programs broadcast since 1995 to describe this space. Indeed, the

¹² Translation « choose to grandiloquently turn away from the contingent of the 'mundus sensibilium' to turn toward the 'essential,' the 'mundus intelligibilis' »

¹³ Is it not "the cathedral which stands before us and against which we can do nothing" (Fonseca); therefore impossible not to have it in political discourse; if only through "oblivion, vagueness, denial and state secrecy," Charaudeau teaches us, and Ferrand confirms, according to whom, "the distortion of the truth, a truncated imagination formed around the self for a presentation in the speech. The question is: when it becomes institutional, in what forms should it be recognized? And who bears, in this case, the responsibility for the lie? The political body or the media body?"

first argumentative electoral market took place in 1991 for the presidential election following the conference¹⁴, with the legislative power vested in the High Council of the Republic, presided over by the elected president of the national conference, the prelate, Monseigneur Isidore de Souza. While the constitution institutionalized and assigned to a state institution the moments of sharing and meeting between structures or individuals seeking a share of power for the governance of the country and the populations, the oversight institution not yet being established¹⁵, the media had to play this role while ensuring media coverage during the campaign period. Was it equitable? It is difficult to say, considering the opening of the 8 PM news edition with a prayer dedicated to the ailing candidate, Nicéphore Dieudonné Soglo—who is none other than the Prime Minister during the one-year transitional period declared by the national conference—for his swift recovery¹⁶. And what about the other candidates? Who granted them the same right to benefit from the opening of a news edition, the same edition, in fact, with a (necessarily favorable) text about them? This is, in fact, the abuse of media power that the legislator aims to prevent. It is therefore understandable why it was only in 1995 (one year before the end of the presidential term) that the populations witnessed the establishment of the regulatory institution¹⁷, which created an argumentative space not only to ensure equitable access but also for political advertising with a certain number of appearances in the news editions (both radio and television, as well as the public newspaper)¹⁸.

This is what the exploration of the field gives, that is to say, of public media spaces (national television-Ortb¹⁹ and the public daily newspaper-La Nation).

¹⁴ The first president of this so-called democratic era after the National Conference of the Living Forces of the Nation held from February 19 to 28, 1990. He was elected in 1991 and took the oath of office on April 5, 1991.

¹⁵ It is important to remember that this institution among many others created in the Constitution, was the last to be put in place; and this after more than two (2) years of exercise of power by the executive power, that is to say in 1994, more precisely on July 11.

¹⁶ It was an initiative put in the public space by the news presenter, Francis Zossou. Own initiative or under instigation? The tone betrays the bearer of the message who, for us, becomes “an aphorizer” (Maingueneau, 2012: 23); because not only does he read and say the text but he shows that he says.

¹⁷ Which, with foresight, established at his level a regulatory framework for the press (public or private) for the emergence and functioning of the argumentative space through Decision No. 95-062/HAAC of November 3, 1995, concerning the organization of equitable access for political parties, associations, and citizens to public service media.

¹⁸ In an optional format consisting of declarations, interviews, or third-party question-and-answer sessions for ORTB, and in terms of pages for the print media. Three 15-minute slots in public audiovisual communication services and one page in the public daily newspaper. This action arises from decisions that are often modified for all elections. Notable examples include Decision No. 2019 of January 24, 2019, regulating media activities during the pre-campaign period; Decision No. 15-009/HAAC of February 10, regulating the activities of public service media and the private sector from February 10, 2015, until the eve of the official campaign opening for the legislative and municipal or local elections of 2015; as well as those from 1995 and 1999 concerning the organization of equitable access for political parties, associations, and citizens to public service media.

¹⁹ We specify here that the organizational system is identical for both television and radio, that is to say, the public audiovisual communication service of Benin. We choose to study only the

Figure No. 1: Capture of the titular statements of the Beninese electoral media markets of words.



- For the legislative election of 1995, there are two elements: the use of the partitive determiner "du" (of the) and the nominal "message." Indeed, it is important to observe that the statement naming the television production is: "Législatives 1995. Message du Parti," with the political formation that occupies the space created and made available to it as a subtitle. Here, it is the Fard-Alafia party. From this statement, three pieces of information can be derived: a reminder of the election in question and the year it took place, the name of the program, and the political formation using the space. Hence, the partitive "du" can be broken down here into the preposition "de" + the generic article "le" + the nominal "parti" (Gross, 1977); it also "updates" the nominal "parti" for a realization in the statement (Grevisse & Goosse, 2008: 148). From this realization, we observe a dual modality in this context: a modalizer of the acting subject and of the evolving space (Lokonon & Gbaguidi, 2022), thus indicating a nomination of the object being discussed and a sort of "over-enunciation" for the political formation using the space to the detriment of the convocator of the space. This leads us to speak of under-enunciation, meaning the erasure of the convocator speaker of the space (Maingueneau, 2012).
- Regarding the one from 1999, elements have disappeared in favor of others. Thus, the linguistic unit "message" gives way to "parole" (speech), but preceded by the definite article "la" (the), with the year of the election omitted. This clears the space for the sharing of the status of under or over enunciator. For while the linguistic unit "message" in its definitions means "the charge to say, to transmit something," This refers to "fulfilling a message" or "information, speech transmitted" with references such as "announcement, notice, communication" or even "the content of what is revealed, transmitted to the public," meaning it suggests "the message of..." (Le Robert Dictionary online). With "parole" (speech)

television discursive productions for the semiotic-interactional diversity that this medium offers (text, image, sound, icons).

preceded by “la” (the), there is no longer any revelation of oneself or of any entity through an address in the form of an announcement; instead, there is an imperative to transmit. Thus, the boundaries are drawn between the convocator and the user of the space. The over-enunciator (aphorizer) remains the regulatory institution, not the political formation. It is true that “de” (of) accompanying “message” indeed specifies the entity “de” (the bearer of the discourse or third party acting on behalf of...), thereby excluding any confusion of posture; however, “aux” (to the) in “la parole aux partis” (the speech to the parties) reinforces the posture and confirms that without a convocator of the space, there cannot be an electoral word²⁰ market space. Therefore, we can deduce that the one who has “the charge to say,” “to announce,” “to reveal,” “to address” is certainly not the other—the one who allows saying, who provides the opportunity to say. There is necessarily one who speaks and demonstrates that he speaks.

As for the public daily newspaper, *La Nation*, the choice was made to designate this moment of the electoral word market established by the HAAC with the linguistic unit “message” accompanied by the determiner “de” (of), as demonstrated by the images below.

Figure No. 2: Screenshot of the dedicated page for the electoral campaign for various legislative elections in *La Nation*



Source : News 'Paper *La Nation*

It is noted that the enunciative construction matches the analysis of the 1995 statement made above. However, everyday life, while stating space in its columns, allows the archi-acting subject of space to be read (Lokonon & Gbaguidi, 2022). However, of the various constructions relating to it until 2023, the enunciative construction remains unchanged. The standardization in terms of title nevertheless calls into question on these points: the erasure for the convener of the space or the public? and where is this public-consumer?

²⁰ Indeed, if Article 54 of the electoral code states that "no one may, by any means or in any form, campaign outside the designated period...", the regulatory institution opens up another political phenomenon that eventually becomes institutionalized: "the pre-campaign period" through its integration into a law of the Republic concerning the press. This action thus offers recognition that ultimately celebrates the acting subject.

2. THE ELECTORAL MARKET FOR AN ALTERED CONSTRUCT OF THE PUBLIC?

While it is possible to note the abandonment of the consumer to the goodwill of “political parties”, one must still be interrogative about the manifestations. For when the institution, while over-announcing, absolves itself of the responsibility of speech, this inevitably raises the issue of protecting the citizen against the “political lies” accepted in politics, and sharply calls the media into question. However, here we are in 2023 with the new initiative “The Debate”, which seems to say the opposite. Does this option make the apprehensions effective?

2.1. THE MESSAGE FOR A BLURRED ARGUMENTATIVE CONTEXT

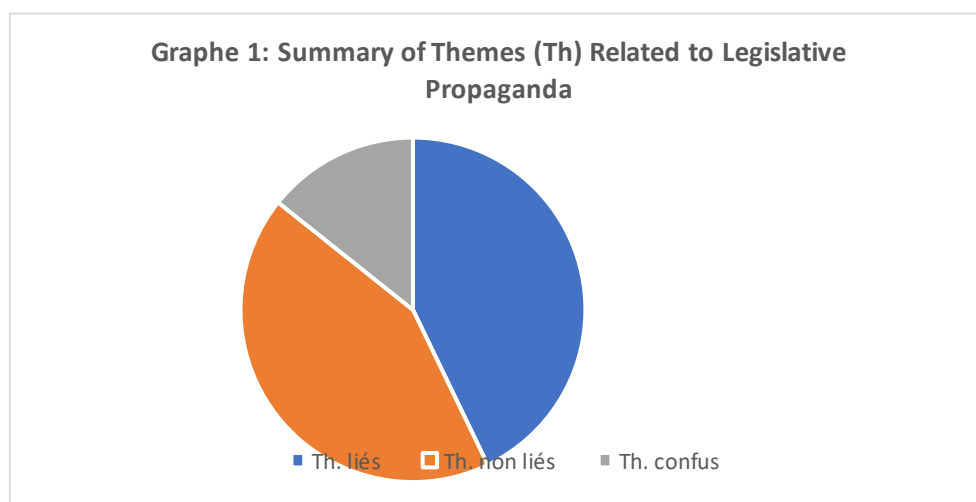
Certain linguistic units: “legality,” “legitimacy,” “illegality,” and “illegitimacy” impose themselves in this research, much to the chagrin of skeptics. We find ourselves obliged to question “the argumentative legality or the arguments” in these media products, which, while being carried out in accordance with regulations, nevertheless present problems of construction in terms of rules and principles. As for the principle, these are constitutional rights expressed in the argumentative space: the right to communicate and the right to be informed. The question is: on what? The answer remains biased; we will witness a balancing act of one at the expense of the other, to actually emphasize practices rather than presuppositions (Forest, 2015: 3); which is detrimental to morality in any action, as highlighted by Dworking, cited by Alexy (2012: 467). So, are we communicating about the party seeking legislative power, or are we communicating about the legislative power sought by the speaker?

We are in the 9th legislature where the institutional framework mandates the renewal of the rights holders to representation. What could be the argumentative narrative to be promoted by the media instance in which, given past experiences (Lokonon, 2020), we must include the media regulatory institution? If Macé (1994: 43-44) does not fail to recall the public's submission to manipulations for its dominance through signs in a specific framework of “service programs” and “not commercial programs”, what does “The Debate” with its public constructs actually resemble?

Emerging as a series of seven (7) episodes, the work of a programmer²¹ and information producer seems to organize the spectacle²² around the following

²¹ Moreover, it is emphasized in all the productions by the actors of the space: “You accepted ... this honors you (ep. 5),” “We are organizing this debate on decision n° 22-046/HAAC of December 8, 2022 (...)” (ep. 3); a precision also shared by the political instance: “We risk wasting the golden opportunity you have offered us, which HAAC provides us (...)”. For this edition, it is worth noting that six parties, namely, according to the random draw for the interventions on the set: the party Les Démocrates, the party FCBE (Force Cauris pour un Bénin Émergent), the party Moele Bénin (Mouvement des Élités Engagés pour L’émancipation du Bénin), the party MPL (Mouvement Pour la Libération), UP-Le Renouveau (l’Union Progressiste-Le Renouveau), the party UDBN (Union Démocratique pour un Bénin Nouveau), and the BR (Bloc Républicain -

themes: “the counter-power function of the executive through the control of government action”, “security and defense”, “the rooting of democracy”, “education: the legislative framework for realizing Benin's ambitions”, “the economy”, “regional and sub-regional cooperation: parliamentary diplomacy” and “promotion and protection of people's health: legislative solutions”. From these themes, however, there is a distancing from the reality to be constructed: propaganda for the search for people's representation. Do the themes of episode n°3: “security and defense”, n°4: “the rooting of democracy”, n°5: “the economy”, and to a lesser extent n°6: “regional and sub-regional cooperation: parliamentary diplomacy”, not symbolize more elements related to execution? Thus, as shown in the graph below, it is an unbalanced organization of speech for the persuasion of the electorate.



Lokonon, 2024 May

It is then read that the balance of elements linked to another sphere of power with the legislative power is at stake; while “parliamentary diplomacy” plays more into the confusing argumentation since it constructs more the self (the notoriety of the legislative power) than the other (the interest of the populations), especially with the cession of the legislative oversight before the execution of all agreements in the new constitution. How can one then tell the people to move on if nothing is said about what, even if just one of the missions (legislation, skillfully used), allows practices that undermine the general interest? Here it should be emphasized that it is neither a practice of concealment nor of obfuscation

absent) responded to the call of this debate organized by the HAAC" (ep. 1). The programmer and producer, visibly satisfied with his repetitive nomination by the media, thus seized their positions.

²² In terms of the construction of the instances and their staging, themes and the number of resulting questions and their position, random draw for the organization of the speaking turn, and the durations of intervention.

(Lemieux, 2007) but one of constructing confused argumentation. One of Badillo's (2015) arguments confronts the expression of power, which also strips media users of the reductive representation of the consumer as merely "the expression of demand in the market". The space no longer responds to what the citizen, the user, wants or wishes to hear; rather, it reflects what "the powers that be" wish or want them to hear. Thus, on this television program, nothing is kept under wraps regarding what is done, and nothing is exposed either; nevertheless, everything is done to avoid echoing the critical argumentation in the current debates. This is the organizational mechanism established that undermines a constitutional principle: the right to inform and the right to enjoy this right (Lokonon, 2020), while promoting what the same author develops under the concept of "functional paradigm under the regime of leasing" (Lokonon, 2022). Who can respond to this? It may still be premature to reach such a conclusion! We return to the discourse of the hosts of the first episode to understand the stakes. Indeed, they state:

"All of these questions are broken down into 5 formulations that we will ask the representatives of the seven political parties in competition" (main host), "The debate will last 90 minutes, with the 5 questions formulated and displayed respectively, the speaking time is 12 minutes and 30 seconds per party representative, with 2 minutes and 30 seconds per question. (...). The same questions will be posed to each debater" (the co-host)".

Does this correct the deficiencies noted in the formulation of the themes? The table below situates this.

Table 1: Summary of the 5 Questions from Two Episodes of "Le Débat"

Questions ²³	Related Theme (Episode 1)	Unrelated Theme (Episode 2)
1	Quelle est l'importance à vos yeux de cette fonction fondamentale qu'est le contrôle de l'action gouvernementale par le parlement ? Comment l'appréhendez-vous ?	Les questions liées à la sécurité et à la défense occupent quelle place euh dans le programme de législature
2	Les moyens, la qualité et la force des moyens prêtés à l'assemblée, aux députés pour exercer cette fonction de contrôle parlementaire, le contrôle parlementaire de l'action gouvernementale ?	Vous le savez le domaine de la sécurité et de la défense a été marqué au Bénin par des réformes ; exemple : la police républicaine qui a nécessité dont la création a nécessité le vote d'une loi au Parlement. Allons-nous dans la bonne direction avec cette réforme ?

²³ It should be noted that at our level, we have removed the invitation for the party to take the floor from the questions.

3	De façon concrète, pour vous, une fois à l'assemblée nationale que changeriez-vous à ce dispositif	Vous le savez la lutte contre le terrorisme, c'est un sujet de grande actualité. (...). Que préconise le parti (...) pour enrayer le phénomène ?
4	Sur ce plateau, tout le monde fait appel au peuple. Alors si on considère que, euh, il y avait un déficit de formation des militants, si on considère que les écoles politiques étaient, étaient en panne, je pense que tout le monde était d'accord là-dessus, comment pensez-vous aujourd'hui démontrer à ce même peuple que bien que ce gap ait existé, que vous allez réussir parce que vous êtes au parlement, vous allez arriver tout d'un coup, peut-être un coup de baguette magique renouer avec ce peuple et l'associer comme tout le monde ici le dit à toutes les actions, on a même parlé de lois faites par le peuple. On voudrait vous entendre concrètement là-dessus. Entre ce peuple que tout le monde appelle, tout le monde associe à son œuvre et la réalité de la pratique politicienne telle qu'on le connaît dans ce pays et qui a justifié toutes les réformes qu'on a implémenté depuis 2019. ²⁴	Nous allons poursuivre la course avec les trois partis politiques qui ont encore quelques secondes à glaner. Nous avons les Démocrates, qui ont encore quelques secondes, le Bloc Républicain et l'UDBN. Hermann On va les écouter sur le mot de la fin
5	-	-

Lokonon, 2024 May

From the table, we note the construction of an equal posture among the debaters. A semblance of equality since, in reality, the representatives of the political parties, as participants, share everything to separate—benefits of mandates for some and no benefits for others. This is the case for the representative of UP-Le Renouveau (from the outgoing mandate) and Les Démocrates (from the previous mandate) for both (2) broadcasts as well as for the 4th with UP-Le Renouveau and the 6th with Les Démocrates²⁵. Furthermore, the neutral tone intended for the questions struggles to be established as it is confronted with the existential factors

²⁴ We summarize this long discourse as follows: [on this platform, everyone calls upon the people; how do you plan to reconnect with this people?]

²⁵ However, the programming and information-producing institution could have genuinely demanded an equal posture by offering two types of debates: a contradictory debate without a report and a contradictory debate with a report. It would be up to the parties in power in the National Assembly to make a choice: to send sitting or former representatives, or not, to be accountable for the record of their time in office or not.

of experiences, whether social or cultural. This is the case for the questions occupying position 2 in both broadcasts, as well as those in positions 1²⁶ for broadcast n°4 and 3²⁷ for broadcast n°7. Why prefer nothingness instead of investigations to enrich the discursivity?

Just as one might ask: what drives this desire to scrutinize the spaces intended to enable electoral interaction between politicians and the populace? A closer look at the regulatory framework reveals that the citizen, in a logic akin to that of Forest, is reduced to a status of a ‘subject-object undergoing’ -forced to watch, listen to, and read those who seek their trust for the right to representation in designated, institutionally organized media spaces. Why? And to what end? Decision No. 22-047 / HAAC of December 22, 2022, which established the selection of radio broadcasts, television stations, print media, and online outlets for participation in the media campaign for the legislative elections on January 8, 2023, raises several questions: does this regulatory body act to protect freedom of expression, the foundation of press freedom, or to manufacture a so-called freedom of the press? Certain linguistic units offer questioning responses on: the citizen as a media product user in Benin, usage within institutional power contexts, and power within usage. We note the following words: “selection”, “media campaign”, “legislative elections”, “radio broadcasts”, “television stations”, “print media”, and “online media”, which demonstrate, first, the enrollment of all media types; second, an organizational policy of exclusion; and third, a controlled discourse shaping the citizen’s decision on whom they wish to entrust with their destiny. In reality, aside from the citizen elected as President of the Republic- who might allow his ego to overshadow him, confusing his self-centered desires with those of the State- who better than the legislator to remind him of his real status: a servant of the people, not a dominator of the people? Who, then, will remind him that he is akin to an administrator hired by shareholders of a company (The Nation) to lead the society (the Republic) according to their ambitions and not according to a policy that appeared as if by magic, with no prior approval from those represented? So, when the regulatory body says, “x, y, and z are chosen” and reinforces this directive act with “must” and “participate”, an implicit warning looms: “others must not”. And thus, exclusion legitimizes itself, as the regulatory body adds in the decision: “the HAAC may retain any other media (...) for the mission’s success”. As long as this regulator, an authority within the electoral sphere, perceives the social electoral interaction as unrestrained or binding, it will keep this space closed. However, those selected from the media industrial power will receive taxpayers’ (Beninese citizens) money for the completed mission. All powers (the competing political, the regulatory institutional, and the media industrial) benefit at the expense of the reception’s illusory independence and free will. The pleasures of self-interest, to the detriment of public satisfaction, unite some (the strongest, the dominant) against others (the weakest, the dominated).

²⁶ “What is the current status of the various laws regarding the education system in Benin?”

²⁷ “Still on the issue of financing health infrastructure, as well as monitoring investments made for reference centers such as the CNHU Hubert Koutoukou Maga for the benefit of regional hospitals and district health centers, how do you plan to ensure government oversight and thus drive improvements in the management of hospitals and services for users?”

From these data, we can assert that this hypothesis: ‘*the elements of fabrication of this electoral program only integrate the public to make them consumers*’ is confirmed. The question is: ‘does defining the modalities’ as regulated imply an omnipresence²⁸ at all levels? The discursive modality promoted here is therefore: the erasure of 'what has been done' in favor of 'what will be done'?

2.2. WHEN SIGNS, IN TURN, REINFORCE CONFUSED ARGUMENTATION

The statement "Le Débat," welcoming the consumer from the moment they make contact with the screen, signifies a phenomenon with multiple meanings. It represents a journalistic genre that indicates a specific type of site, participants, and discourse, ultimately leading to a singular meaning: contradiction, where the site is expected to register a winner and a loser, sometimes resulting in a verbal knock-out (Lokonon, 2020). However, the visual arrangement, where the political instance presents both sides on the same line, even if curved, creates a balance where ‘one holds the other’, reminiscent of a physical law. This gives the impression that with just one blow, everything could tip, similar to suspended balls on a string. Thus, this tacit agreement resembles a friendly match, presenting an illusion of aggression. Yet, we are discussing counter-power here.

When continuing with this same visual layout as a builder of argumentation, one notices, as shown in the figure below, that the image of the building refers to a signifier: the physical representation symbolizing legislative power, namely, the colonial building in the country’s capital, an informational message of political power. This is the governor’s workplace, the manager of the territory for the French colonizer, and, with the intermittent revolution, the heart of the real counter-power to the executive: the National Assembly. Similarly, the symbolism of what constitutes the Republic-the three colors of the flag, whether vivid or toned down to ensure a welcoming visual appeal and to avoid eye strain- is carefully maintained. This demonstrates, indeed, the integration of the citizen-user as a ‘consum-actor’, for whom the other speaker, the media professional utilizing the device and technology, ‘brings out his preferences and motivations’ (Badillo, 2015: para. 11).

²⁸ A posture that threatens the faces of the regulatory institution (Lokonon, 2020) in terms of interaction.

Figure 3: Screenshot of the overall layout of the Le Débat set.

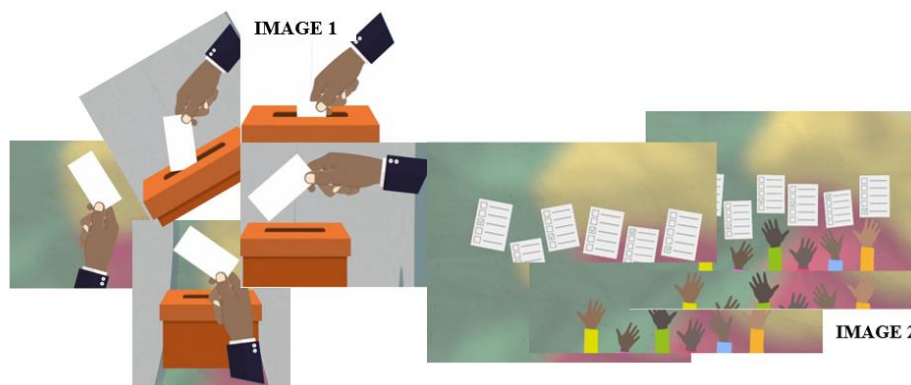


Source: YouTube

The description of this image, majestically presented and displayed to the eye²⁹ upon contact with the screen, contributes to the construction of an evolving audience; it also conveys the intentions of the space's convocator. Initially, the image refers to three entities, but as the journalist's discourse bursts forth and fills the screen, this informative intention transforms into a communicative one, revealing the constructed nature of the candidates: they are equal but not equitable in terms of ideas. This is certainly reminiscent of the curve, which, when extended on both sides, closes into a desired shape: a false circle. This reiterates the moderation that will determine the constructs. However, the argumentation becomes muddled by the message; the signs as presented seem to support this manifestation: the citizen is not merely an audience but is made public for the consumption of the media product placed on the electoral market of words. Furthermore, it should be noted that the analysis of the opening sequence reveals a dual posture constructed for the citizen-user, the 'consum-actor' of this electoral program, namely, using Badillo (2015) and Bernays' terminology: a 'consum-actor' under the illusion of decision-making and a 'consum-actor' under decision-making influence.

²⁹ In terms of the positioning of the statements (the central upper part for the statement "Debate," and the upper right and left for "The Election in Question: Legislative 2023"), the background decor featuring branding in national colors—green, yellow, and red—has been adjusted to reduce brightness. Additionally, the arrangement of the participants in the decor reflects a structured hierarchy: the political representatives are positioned along a curved line, while the media representatives face them in a confrontational manner in front of this curved line.

Figure No. 4: Summary of indexical traces in the opening sequence



Source: Lokonon Clémentine / Opening Sequence of *Le Débat* (YouTube)

Already, these two images construct the “consum-actor”. With *Image 1*, his role as an active agent is maintained- not only making demands in the marketplace but acting; thus, he believes he will pick the ballot he wants, approach the ballot box, take his time deciding to let the ballot slip into the box, hesitating to let it go, before finally releasing it to settle as a counted vote for his selected choice. This reflects, in a Tardean logic, the citizen as a “product of print media” and, in our view, a “product of mass information propaganda”. An informational manipulation that grants him independence only in belief, not in practice. The decision-making “self” takes over”. However, the informational cues in the opening sequence pull him out of this illusion of decision-making, leading him to seek ballots (by stretching or folding his hand) under a shower of ballots falling from the sky, inviting his hands to act (to run after and catch them in motion). So, a question arises: does he truly still have the choice of what he catches among everything falling on him? The answer is no; by reaching out to catch, he will only catch what some external force (a person, the wind, energy) has sent his way. It is hard not to see here an “influence on decision-making”.

Thus, between the “consum-actor” under the illusion of decision-making and the one under decision-making influence, one thing binds them: humans, as products of society, will always encounter products that are the outcomes of their own actions

Thus, it can be noted that this hypothesis- “the representation of the public is contingent upon the facilitators of the space” - is validated. This directs the research towards questioning the political entity in its constructs to express itself and articulate the space.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, the observable visual semiotics and the confusing argumentative construction contribute to institutional and established political lies. While it fosters an accepted ambiguity in political discourse, providing a breeding ground for deception (Charaudeau, 2014; Fonseca, 2013), it also contributes to constraints on emergence and functioning, such as information retention, manipulated

participation postures, toxic visual arrangements, and the denaturation of journalistic genres. This explains why, today, worldwide and in parliamentary spheres, laws that are not useful are passed, as Lemieux (2007: 10) aptly illustrated. Perhaps we are witnessing a conspiracy of media and political entities against the citizenry, obscuring the truth, which is not singular but rather a simulacrum of truth! Thus, if the following hypotheses: “the elements of this electoral program's construction only integrate the public to make them consumers” and “this representation of the public is contingent upon the facilitators of the space” are validated, then the overarching hypothesis “the integrated electoral market turns the public into consumers”, holds true.

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