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Christian Bonah, Joël Danet

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“FIGHTING THE UNCERTAINTY OF TOMORROW”

EXPLAINING AND PORTRAYING THE SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM ON FRENCH TELEVISION FOR SCHOOLS

Christian Bonah
Université de Strasbourg
bonah@unistra.fr

Joël Danet
Université de Strasbourg
danet@unistra.fr

Abstract: This contribution analyses in detail a series of instructional television programmes for schools produced between the 1950s and the 1980s on national health insurance and the French social welfare system (known as *Sécurité sociale*). We consider the televisualization of health issues from two alternative perspectives: school television as a type of public health service and access as a matter of social welfare and public health. We investigate how these television programmes, which focus closely on social welfare administration, sought both to educate captive school audiences as future citizens and to shape and form their attitudes towards it.

Keywords: welfare system, France, school television, public health, *Sécurité sociale*, health insurance, instructional television, social welfare administration

1 Introduction

If you were at school in France sometime between the 1950s and the 1980s, you might have experienced a common phenomenon, namely a teacher turning on a television set in front of the class. This was television for schools (*la télévision scolaire*). It was believed that television would enhance specific teaching goals by transmitting facts or critical viewing skills. Since the 1950s, television for schools had been seen as a modern medium “born of the communication revolution which can be used for instructional purposes alongside the teacher, textbook and blackboard”.¹ Otherwise known as instructional television, it was hailed as revolutionary by its advocates in the 1960s and 1970s, but later dismissed as an illusion² and a failed medium³ by critics in the 1980s. Some research on the subject has been conducted in the field of media studies on instruction and forms of educational telecommunications,⁴

while other studies have tackled it from the point of view of the history of television, where it is still a widely understudied subject.⁵

If you had to seek healthcare in France between the 1950s and the 1980s, for a check-up or appendicitis, for example, you might have subsequently gone to the local health insurance office (*Caisse primaire d'assurance maladie*) to claim for reimbursement of the medical fees or operation costs. In parallel with the rise of television after the Second World War, European nation states undertook the construction or reconstruction of national health services and welfare systems as a response to social unrest, which was believed to be a key factor causing radicalization in formerly war-stricken countries and related military intervention. Social security (*La Sécurité sociale*), which was created and implemented in October 1945, is the French system of compulsory national insurance, covering all areas of welfare. It is organized into four areas or funds (*caisses*), covering healthcare, work accidents and occupational illness, family allowance and old age pension.⁶ It is financed by employers and employees, governed by private law and managed by the social partners (trade union and employer representatives). Despite its underlying philosophy, the unified social security system (*Régime général*) did not initially cover all sectors, some of which maintained their previous system, but it was gradually extended to them, i.e. civil servants (1947), military personnel (1949), farmers (1961) and small business owners (1966).⁷

The French state television, state education and national health sectors were all founded upon the public service ideal of the Fourth and Fifth Republics.⁸ There was a strong degree of state governance, influence and control in French television and education until the privatizations of television channels of the 1980s.⁹ This contrasted with the situation in Germany, where television was a regionalized service and the United Kingdom, where commercial television provided competition to public television services as early as 1955. A strong connection between state television and school television emerged early on in French television history. Schoolteachers had become involved in independent audiovisual production service in the 1950s, which led to the creation of the independent school radio and television service, the RTS (*Radio-télévision scolaire*) in 1962. In contrast to the United Kingdom for example, television programmes for schools in France offered much more than literary plays and historical dramatizations of how people lived, or children's perspectives on religion and tradition.¹⁰ When their teacher turned on the television set between the 1950s and the 1980s, what did schoolchildren and adolescents in France watch? How were these instructional television programmes used in school classrooms? And how did they complement the provision of information? Could school television complement the provision of information in a pedagogical approach that would develop critical thinking? In a systematic approach to French public television archives, we have identified and chosen three school television programmes concerned with the theme of social security exclusively. For reasons of comparisons we have limited our corpus to documentary. In terms of audience the three broadcasts were used to provide civic instruction for adolescents. *Sécurité sociale* by Henri Nozet and Bernard Bachelart (1957);¹¹ *La sécurité sociale* by Pierre Buquet (1969);¹² and *Questions de solidarité* by Micheline Paintault (1982)¹³ cover a period spanning twenty-five years and explain the principles of the social security system, how it works and the issues surrounding its financing and organization.

In the first part of this article we will briefly describe the place of French television for schools in national broadcasting. We will then argue that the content and structure of the three programmes cited above illustrate the role they play in providing civic instruction. In the third and fourth parts, we will examine instructional television programmes “against the grain”, focusing on their sequences shot as visual field reports in order to show how they combined the transmission of theoretical ideas with users' real experiences with state administration.

If they could have selected a television programme themselves, students would probably not have opted for one on social security. Admittedly, for television, social security was unattractive and dull. But this was a captive audience; students could not walk away or change the channel and they had little choice in the subjects dealt with. Our corpus of instructional programmes was produced for schools between the 1950s and the 1980s to present, explain and promote social security as a system, service and institution. The gradual increase in the coverage of the social security system necessitated continuous education in order to teach generations of schoolchildren how to use their social insurance. This was before national health services and welfare systems became a target for criticism, largely due to their size and inefficiency, in the 1980s. Later, in the late 2000s, the economic crisis and hospital budget cuts and closures caused civic movements throughout Europe in defence of national health services and welfare systems.

Our set of instructional school television programmes provides an opportunity to undertake an anthropological visual analysis of the portrayal and civic promotion of an institution at the interface of welfare and healthcare designed to “fight the uncertainty of tomorrow”.¹⁴ We suggest that the specific design and production characteristics of these three programmes portray more than state controlled information. Examining these programmes against the grain, while paying specific attention to the everyday scenes depicted, allows us to analyse social relations specific to users in their interaction with the health insurance offices and personnel. Shot as documentaries in the increasingly popular French New Wave [*Nouvelle vague*] and direct cinema styles, they borrow from these two currents the principles of filming without reconstruction, dynamic editing, interest in objects and significant places of ordinary life analyzing the spirit of a time. The three programmes report on social matters in an almost anthropological way, documenting users’ difficulties in adapting to institutional requirements, their apprehensions about the deadlines they have to meet and their difficulties in communicating with officials.¹⁵ In sharp contrast to state-controlled information and communication campaigns, school television programmes engaged critically with the everyday life of an administration and its users. Produced and used in class by them, they reflect schoolteachers’ involvement in the independent school radio and television service, the RTS (*Radio-television scolaire*).

2 School Television in France and Showing Films on Social Security in the Classroom

In France, school television programmes were included in general public television schedules, thereby enhancing the public education mission of state broadcasting. Given the development of television across the whole country, the inclusion of school television meant its audience were perceived as a group of citizens.

2.1 State Television and School Television in France

The advent and development of television in France was influenced by specific cultural and political factors. Controlled by the state and run by pioneering and ambitious journalists, it provided both a vehicle for propaganda and a field for formal and editorial experimentation. The resulting tensions were commensurate with the rapidly growing popularity of the new medium which, relayed in every home, brought live images and sounds to the nation, instantly creating its national imagery.

Launched in France at the end of the Second World War, television was established as a mass medium by the end of the 1950s. Its success continued to grow during the following decade: there were one million television sets in 1958 and 9.25 million in 1968. The impact of the “television bubble” forged a new relationship with information and culture, especially as the sector’s capacity to produce content rapidly expanded.¹⁶ It totalled 2,450 hours of programming in 1958, 5,580 hours in 1968 and more than 8,000 hours in 1974. This increase can be explained in particular by the launch of the second channel in 1964 and the third channel at the end of 1972, all of which were aimed at structuring and segmenting its programme offer in line with the social and territorial circumstances of the population.¹⁷

Taking for granted the fact that television is usually viewed in domestic settings, it needs to be emphasized that in the early days when this medium was new, it inspired diverse modes of reception, offering an active relationship with content. At the beginning of the 1950s, the development of popular education networks encouraged teachers, community leaders and clergy to set up television clubs offering collective programme discovery sessions. Similarly, television was welcomed in schools as a means of modernizing education.

In the tradition of educational film production and the promotion of popular education by the French National Museum of Education (*Musée pédagogique*), a centre for documentation established in 1879 and which became the National

Pedagogical Institute in 1956,¹⁸ the production of French school television programmes began from 1945 through the state-run public broadcasting service (*Radiodiffusion française*, RDF), which established a specific school television service in 1947.¹⁹ The replacement of the RDF by the RTF (*Radiodiffusion-télévision française*) in 1949 and the establishment of the National Centre for Educational Documentation (*Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique*, CNDP) in 1950, which was brought under the Ministry of Education (*Ministère de l'Éducation nationale*) in 1951, led to the regular production of school broadcasts with the establishment in 1952 of the school radio and television service (*Radio-Télévision Scolaire*, RTS), under the direction of Henri Dieuzeide who theorized the use of audiovisual techniques for teaching.²⁰ Programmes were produced not just to accompany classroom teaching, but also to open students' minds up to the real world, such as with *Les hommes dans leur temps* (People in their time) and *Études du milieu* (Studying people's environment). It was felt that the "programme topics should as often as possible be determined by daily life or current events, so as to promote in the classroom a method of research and an approach to the real world based on investigations."²¹

From 1952, this school television was principally produced at the *Centre audiovisuel de l'École normale supérieure* in Saint-Cloud in the Paris suburbs.²² Continuous efforts were made to create a setup for independent school programme production. Skilled cameramen, sound engineers and production teams were hired and suitable equipment was acquired. In 1962, the state-run RTS became independent from national broadcasting services. In 1952, the RTS had 1.5 hours of airtime per week on national television. By the end of the 1960s, this had increased to about 20 hours a week,²³ which represented around a fifth of overall public broadcasting airtime.²⁴ From 1963, the Ministry of Education promoted school broadcasting by systematically equipping schools with television sets; this has been described as the RTS's prolific period (1963 to 1978).²⁵ This was followed by a period of decline and transformation.

School television programmes in their standard format were 20 to 30 minutes in length; teachers would have the same amount of time to develop on the themes and to ensure they had been understood. Programmes could be initiated by teachers who were motivated to take this on. Television reports produced for schools (as opposed to the format of a filmed lesson) involved two to three months' work, which included the writing of scripts, the organization of shooting locations, the actual shooting, narration and post-production. At the end of this process, the teacher who initiated the programme would write accompanying texts for other teachers, who could use the specified objectives, content and suggestions in their classroom. From 1964 to 1969, the *Bulletin de la Radio-Télévision Scolaire*, which was both a newsletter and an educational magazine, assisted teachers in their use of these programmes. Another publication *Dossiers de la Radio-Télévision Scolaire*, was launched in 1967 to provide further advice for school television users. It was replaced by *Media, Techniques et moyens d'enseignement* in 1969.

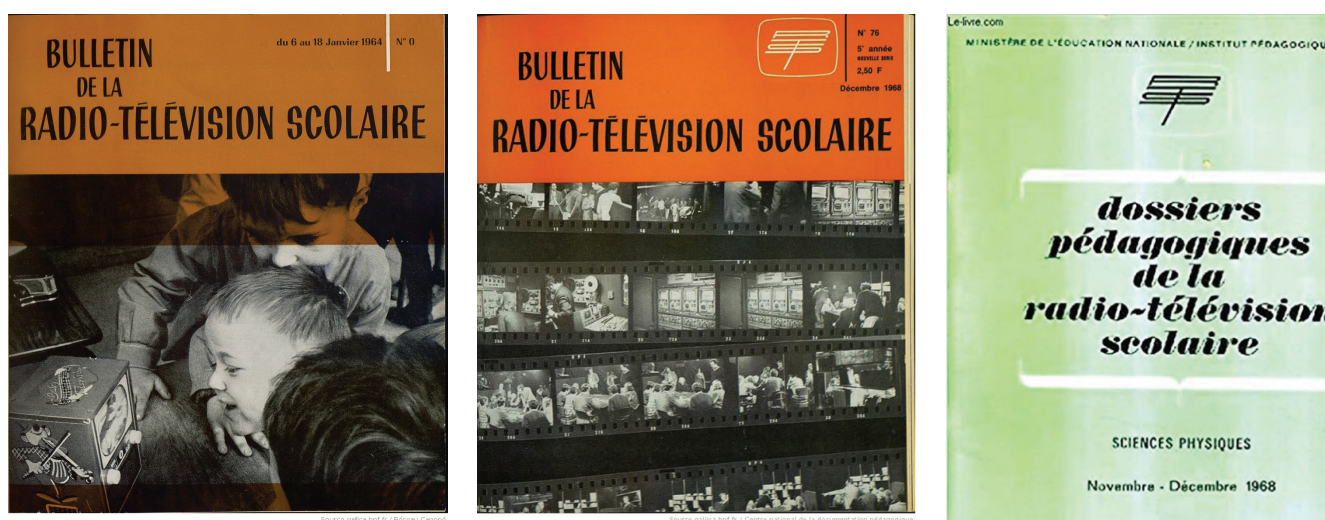


Figure 1 (a, b, c). *Bulletin* (1964-1969) et *Dossiers* (1967-1969) de la Radio-Télévision Scolaire, a national school television newsletter and educational magazine.

The purpose of school television was to provide teachers with informative content and representations of the subjects they dealt with. It was their responsibility to assemble students in front of the television at the time when the programme of interest was to be broadcast and once it was over, to elaborate with the material they had read and the ideas suggested in the article of the corresponding bulletin (see Image 1). In order to achieve this pioneering experience with educational media, it was necessary to convince members of the teaching staff that it would not replace their own teaching. Aware of this challenge, Henri Dieuzeide, dedicated the first editorial of the bulletin to teachers:

“Radio and television can only exist – and this bulletin can only exist – as part of a constant exchange of professional experience, invention and enthusiasm between teachers who produce the programmes and those who, on the other side of the screen, incorporate them into their daily work.”²⁶

Henri Dieuzeide was directing his comments specifically at teachers here and he was referring to the teachers in charge of the production of programmes. He deliberately omitted the major contribution made by professional television directors, some of whom worked for the RTS, such as Jacqueline Margueritte and Marc Terzieff, and others from the film industry, such as Nestor Almendros and even Eric Rohmer.

Considered an innovative didactic tool in the 1960s, an increasing number of guides to instructional television were published.²⁷ Instructional or educational television was thus defined as a medium that produced television programmes for in-school use within the formal classroom context at any educational level. Donald N. Wood and Donald G. Wylie have described eight levels of school television: “single-classroom applications, school-level projects, district administration, metropolitan ITV [instructional television] associations, state-wide operations, regional activities, national programmes, and international developments”.²⁸ School-level projects have recently received attention from historians,²⁹ as have national programmes, at least in the French context.³⁰ Specific television productions for schools concerned with specific themes have received very little attention.

2.2 Portraying Social Security in School Television

Since the 1950s, over 2000 school television programmes have been produced on health and life sciences in France. They are held by France’s largest educational audiovisual archive, the Canopé Network (*Réseau Canopé*),³¹ a public institution under the supervision of the French Ministry of Education. This is also the branch of the French Ministry of Education that undertakes the editing, production, publication and dissemination of educational and administrative resources for schools, including the television programmes produced since the 1950s. It holds the archives of programmes produced and aired by the RTS, discussed in this article.

In addition to producing television programmes in line with the standard educational curriculum, one of the early objectives of the RTS was to raise awareness among secondary school students, especially those in their final year, of contemporary social issues in order to train them as citizens. This effort focused on the field of health in particular, including health professionals and their role, biomedical equipment and the administration of public health services, as analysed here. For example, the figure of the general practitioner (GP) and the functioning of hospitals have been regular subjects in programmes since 1958. However, these programmes were not limited to describing the modalities of particular practices. They constantly emphasized the values upon which public health services are based and described the context in which they are provided. This made good subject matter for documentary television and is one of its distinguishing characteristics.³² Take for example *La journée d’un médecin* (A day in the life of a GP) produced by Madeleine Hartmann in 1968.³³ The corresponding description in the RTS bulletin written by the author of the film emphasized how the transformation of medicine was determined at that time by a public system of reimbursement for the cost of care. It suggested that the teacher ask students “how the introduction of social security changed the relationship between doctors and patients” and suggested that students be asked “to obtain and fill out a health insurance card” as a practical exercise.³⁴ Unfortunately,

similar accompanying material has not been archived for the films studied here, but these educational recommendations expressed similar concern with familiarizing students with the administrative procedures necessary for routine healthcare.



Video 1. *La journée d'un médecin* (RTS, Madeleine Hartmann, 1968).

French television for schools devoted several films to social security, explaining its principles, financing and organization and other such issues. For our analysis, we have identified three broadcasts, each belonging to a different decade in RTS history. The first one is from the period in which the RTS was launched (1957), the second from its most prolific period (1969) and the third one from its transitional period (1982). They are all representative of the period in which they were produced. The three decades between 1950 and 1980 corresponded to the golden period of national health insurance systems and their expansion under favourable conditions of full employment prior to the economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, when more emphasis was placed on costs and efficiency in the management of health insurance systems.³⁵



Video 2. *Sécurité sociale* (RTS, Henri Nozet and Bernard Bachelart, 1957).

Sécurité sociale (Social security) was directed in 1957 by Henri Nozet and Bernard Bachelart. It features a small town in the Eure et Loire region and shows how its population regularly talks about the local social security office. *La sécurité*

sociale, produced by Pierre Buquet in 1969 is part of a series of five films on employment legislation. It adopts a more general approach, explaining the types of risks covered, how to register, who is protected and how coverage is financed. *Questions de solidarité* (It's all about solidarity) was produced in 1982 by Micheline Paintault. It explains the general functioning of the French social security system and focuses in particular on how people are covered when they have to stop working due to illness, illustrated by actual testimonies in the wine production sector in the Hérault region.



Video 3. *La sécurité sociale* (RTS, Pierre Buquet, 1969).



Video 4. *Questions de solidarité* (RTS, Micheline Paintault, 1982).

The three programmes reflect the particular importance the RTS attached to combining theoretical instruction with people's real experience with social security. They all include purely informative sequences on national health insurance. The 1957 film *Sécurité sociale* uses maps to show that all areas of the country are covered by the system. This film, as well as its 1969 counterpart, use animated tables and diagrams to explain types of risks covered and the different health services provided. In *Questions de solidarité*, an assortment of press articles from the *L'Humanité* and *Le Figaro* newspapers from 1945 provide a reminder that the social security system was set up immediately after the Second World War.



Figure 2 (a, b). Maps and tables providing instructive information in *Sécurité sociale*, 1957 (2a) and *La sécurité sociale*, 1969 (2b).

All three films feature interviews with political figures. As representatives of the state they set out to explain the civic principles on which national health insurance is based. The 1969 version of *La sécurité sociale* features Pierre Laroque, the President of the National Social Security Fund from 1953 to 1967. *Questions de solidarité* (1982) includes two interviews with Nicole Questiaux, the Minister of National Solidarity between 1981 and 1982. In order to legitimize the social security system, they both refer to a time when it did not exist: a past era, in which families from the less well-off classes confronted with unexpected health problems did not know how to cope with them financially. Both films stress the importance of solidarity as a mechanism structuring social relationships in society and as a condition for enhancing a nation's economic development and prosperity.



Figure 3 (a, b). Interviews with ministers of health legitimizing social achievements in *La sécurité sociale*, 1969 (3a) and *Questions de solidarité*, 1982 (3b).

These school television programmes fulfil their educational function by presenting facts and explaining the system's logic. But each in its own way tries to go beyond this by providing information about the social issues raised by the subject. They occasionally highlight the difficulties users have in adapting to the system, their worries about imminent deadlines and their difficulties in communicating with officials at the service counter. Furthermore, by focusing on particular geographical areas, these school television programmes reveal the social vulnerabilities of local people, who manifest their precarious situations and feelings of abandonment. Filming and showing the implementation of social security protection brings these vulnerabilities and tensions to the surface.

3 Reception Desks, Office Counters and Back Offices: Reports from the Heart of an Administration

To portray the social security system, the three films had to report on the implementation of a complex process in which officials in charge of the system encounter registered users. To do so in the least theoretical way possible, all three programmes adopt an immersive format, depicting real social security offices in France.³⁶ They portray the social security system in its urban context, detailing the spaces and rituals.³⁷ Underpinned by informative content, they provide an anthropological insight into the daily routine of the institution.

3.1 Placing Offices in their Urban Context

Both *Sécurité sociale* (1957) and *Questions de solidarité* (1982) firmly place social security offices in the urban context. *Sécurité sociale* (1957) shows Mrs Langlois going in to receive reimbursement for “expenses incurred” for her son Charles' appendicitis operation. We first see her in the street, heading towards the building. Through an external-internal connection, she enters the hall, pushes the glass doors and moves confidently towards a counter, guided by the clear organization of the office space.³⁸



Figure 4 (a, b). Scenes of users entering social security offices in *Sécurité sociale*, 1957 (4a) and in *Questions de solidarité*, 1982 (4b).

Similarly, in *Questions de solidarité*, the second film sequence begins inside public transport. In the foreground, an elderly woman sits by the window. Through the bus window, the camera follows the building façades, stopping at one with the inscription “*Sécurité sociale – Caisse primaire d’assurance maladie*” on the front of the building, suggesting that the sequence is following the woman's thoughts. The bus stops in front of a bus shelter marked “*Arrêt Sécurité*”

sociale". We then see the woman getting out of the bus and heading towards the building.³⁹ The following scenes show that she came to get information about her pension. These scenes indicate how both these films connect the interior of welfare and health insurance offices to their outside urban surroundings through a character's journey to reach them. These travel scenes reduce the anonymity of the offices, remind us of their presence within the public space and stress their accessibility. The inscription "Sécurité sociale" on the façade of the building and the bus shelter firmly places the institution in the urban context where it constitutes a geographical reference point for inhabitants who make regular use of it.

3.2 At the Reception Desk: Itineraries and Modes of Encounter

Following the scenes introducing us to the premises, the two films feature encounters at the reception desk where social security officials and end-users meet. This is where the modalities of an administrative process are explained and demonstrated.

In *Sécurité sociale* (1957), with a slow-moving camera accompaniment, we see Mrs Langlois going into an office to be reimbursed for her son's healthcare expenses. The narrator states an appendicitis operation is fully reimbursed.⁴⁰ A live sound recording enables us to witness the encounter as the official tells Mrs Langlois how she can be reimbursed. Explanations are recorded in full. The programme's informative content is given priority, but this detracts from the rhythm of the cinematic narrative, which would have normally taken an elliptical form in cinema, leaving out the long verbal exchange.



Figure 5 (a, b). Reception desk scenes of encounters between social security officials and users in *Sécurité sociale*, 1957 (5a) and in *La sécurité sociale*, 1969 (5b).

The film *Questions de solidarité* portrays a functional institutional rationalization: the number call system. The sequence at the reception desk begins with a close-up of an electronic display indicating a number, over which we hear the sound of a signal. A young man, whom students can identify with, looks at the number, gets up and walks to the counter. He tells the official that he has been unemployed for a year, but has just had an accident and wants to know if health insurance still covers him. We hear the manager at the counter reassuringly reply that there is no problem as he is indeed still covered by unemployment health insurance. Such meticulously arranged sequences of official encounters at the desk stresses the ordinariness of the institution as well as its users. These day-to-day experiences of the social security office and its standard procedures are fascinating anthropological studies of the institution and are much more than purely theoretical school television programmes.⁴¹



Figure 6 (a, b, c). Reception desk innovation and scenes of encounters between social security officials and users in *Questions de solidarité*, 1982.

In *La sécurité sociale* (1969), the interview given by Pierre Laroque is shown alongside an office scene in which an elderly man tries to find out how to be reimbursed for his recent hospitalization (Image 5). After the official's explanations, the man puts his papers away, adding: "Now I have something else to ask you..."⁴² The sequence ends there without the conversation going any further. Even though it is limited, *La sécurité sociale* (1969), like the other two films, immerses students in the atmosphere of health insurance offices. It enables them to witness conversations between users and officials and familiarizes them with the workings of the institution, with requests for information being made on one side of the reception desks and service counters and instructions to follow being given on the other.

3.3 The Offices Behind the Counters: Behind the Scenes of the System

The three films are not just instructional television and practical guides. They continue their visit beyond the reception desk area, moving into the offices where appointments take place and the back offices reserved for administrative staff. A sequence from *Sécurité sociale* (1957) shows the accounting department, a vast room occupied by desks and filing cabinets and the meeting room for the board of directors responsible for overseeing payments.⁴³ The film also shows several modern electronic accounting machines and rotary presses producing perforated cards.⁴⁴ Through its meticulous staging, which consists of long and flexible camera movements through space, the film brings to mind *Toute la mémoire du monde* (All the world's memory), a documentary short film that Alain Resnais had made a year earlier in 1956 on the French National Library.⁴⁵ The two films testify to the same concern with a precise description of the logistics of organizing space and determining gestures and to present the everyday fulfilment of public service as a ritual.⁴⁶ Similarly, with its portrayal of machines and cybernetics that increasingly govern human activity, *La sécurité sociale* demonstrates a fascination that is comparable to the 1956 film *La machine et l'homme* (Man and Machine) directed by Jean Mitry.⁴⁷

Accordingly, *Questions de solidarité* shows the spaces behind office counters by staging an appointment in the back office where retirement pensions are administered. Here, the connection between the front and back offices is made within the same shot, with a depth of focus that allows the office to be seen from the reception area.⁴⁸ The following shot connects these two spaces by zooming in on the glass partition separating them.⁴⁹ This passage from one space to another is linked by subsequent shots within the camera field and testifies to a model of administrative architecture that avoids the pitfalls of labyrinths and separation. The same scene, however, entails a surprise. The appointment in this office is interrupted by the arrival of a disgruntled user. Although the manager asks him to wait his turn, he remains in the doorway expressing his grievances.⁵⁰ This dissonance is not the only one in the three broadcasts. It may even be deemed characteristic of these instructional films on social security, just as much as their stated intention to guide students through administrative spaces and to explain necessary procedures.

4 A Critical Look, a Lucid Testimony

Scenes of dissonance and tension are intended to highlight a fundamental sense of unease. They pursue two goals: to criticize the functioning of social security as an organization and to reflect that the system of state welfare and health insurance is not able to fully protect citizens against “the uncertainty of tomorrow”, to use Pierre Laroque’s expression in *La sécurité sociale* (1969). Revealing their approach to the subject, these critical scenes question the effectiveness and relevance of the social protection model at the same as they present it. They urge students and today’s viewers, to critically debate the matter.

4.1 Conflicts and Misunderstandings

As mentioned above, in *Questions de solidarité*, a man comes in to the social security office and complains to an official. He protests strongly against the decision made by the administration to withdraw money from his mother’s account.⁵¹ What is the purpose of this scene? Undoubtedly it illustrates the misunderstandings and concerns that the system gave rise to among users, as well as problems that social security officials had to deal with on a daily basis. The same film opens with a scene where a young woman calls social security offices from a phone booth. The scene is tense and the shot is a close-up composition with the glass walls and roof of the booth framing the young woman.



Figure 7 (a, b). Complainant user at the reception desk and difficult reception over the telephone in *Questions de solidarité*, 1982.

Behind the booth and its glass partition, the young woman is constrained by the straight lines of the building cornerstones and window frame in the background. She explains that she has been on sick leave for three weeks and that she “has not yet received her money”.⁵² The voice on the phone asks her insistently for her 15-digit identification number. The young woman wrests her card from her purse, starts reading, is interrupted by a sudden change of interlocutor and has to repeat her explanations over again. The film no longer depicts an official being assailed by untimely requests but rather the difficulty users encounter in trying to be heard. Faced with financial difficulties, the young woman has problems simply having her question heard. She struggles with an anonymous switchboard and with the administrative protocol. The film reveals here a third educational value. Aside from explaining the theory and providing a practical guide for future citizens, the film opens an avenue for critical thinking and debate on the social security system as a political and social institution.

4.2 Vulnerable Users

Through a subtle documentary construction, *La sécurité sociale* (1969) captures the feeling of vulnerability that users are likely to experience in the face of a system upon which they are increasingly dependent. Shots taken in a waiting room capture the tense facial expressions of users awaiting their turn, betraying uncertainty about the outcome of their visit to the office.



Figure 8 (a, b, c). Worried users portrayed in *La sécurité sociale*, 1969.

Shots of users alternate with those of Pierre Laroque, who reminds the viewer that all citizens, especially the most disadvantaged, are likely to face “unforeseen burdens” that increase their “need for security, which is a fundamental human need”.⁵³ Such insights about the human condition calls for a second interpretation of the shots of users’ facial expressions. They express not only a momentary worry, but also reflect more fundamental long-term social concerns linked to the lasting precariousness of their existence. These close-ups of faces correspond to what Gilles Deleuze refers to as “affection-image”. Combining a “reflexive and an intensive face”, Deleuze’s “affection-image”, aims to capture “the emotion or purity expressed in the state of things” beyond the singular reaction to an isolated situation.⁵⁴ It uncovers the underlying psychological state behind an immediate reaction. Deleuze focuses on fictional cinema, but his analysis can be extended to documentary cinema. Frederick Wiseman, a documentary filmmaker dedicated to analysing American institutions, repeatedly uses shots of faces carefully isolated in the camera field, be this in *Hospital* produced in 1969, or *Welfare* produced six years later in New York welfare offices. Wiseman refers to the same register of interpretation,⁵⁵ which might also be transferred to instructive television programmes. In *La sécurité sociale* (1969), Pierre Buquet mounts shots of facial expressions that embody Pierre Laroque’s words. The former President of the National Social Security Fund (CNSS) stresses that social security is fundamentally concerned with national solidarity, which had previously been a matter for families and not just health insurance. The images of worried faces underscore and question the statement that solidarity has shifted from private family ties to a national organization that at times can be characterized by its obscure mechanisms and uncertain answers.

4.3 Anxiety of Parents, Tensions of Couples

The three films studied here also manage to escape the closed spaces of the waiting rooms and offices to penetrate into the personal spaces of the users. This takes the form of small fictional scenes inserted into the general film narrative. No longer concerned with pinpointing the dysfunctions of the social security system, these sequences address wider aspects of people’s precarious or maladjusted lives. They embed office encounters in the wider dimension of social being. In *Sécurité sociale* (1957), Mr Langlois, the father of the child treated for appendicitis, expresses his worries to a colleague at work. The latter reassures him that hospital costs are covered by social security, but the father replies, “Oh yes, but for a kid an operation is an operation”.⁵⁶

After parental anxiety, *Sécurité sociale* (1957) focuses on tensions in lower class marital life. In the middle of the film, the camera enters a dark room in a modest apartment. In the foreground, an elderly woman is sewing. In the background a door opens and an older man appears. Her call “Is that you?” is greeted morosely with “Who do you want it to be?”; the terse exchange suggesting the social solitude of the couple. Financial hardship contributes to this when he explains that his visit to the pharmacy has “cost him 500 francs” and the situation only eases with the arrival of the postman. The woman’s face illuminates at being told that her old-age pension mandate has arrived. “We’d like to see you more often”,⁵⁷ she calls after him as he leaves. The same film includes another marital scene, this time involving a young couple. In a worker’s home, a husband, who had recently fallen from a scaffold, is forced to remain at home. His wife turns to him, sighs and grumbles. Again, the film depicts a lower-class home morally afflicted by material difficulties. Again, the bell rings, the postman comes to deliver the expected postal order. This time the wife continues nevertheless to complain in her corner. Unlike the previous scene, this time the intervention of the social security system does not fix everything. The woman remains irritated by her husband’s idleness at home. The story illustrates the limits of the system and extends its focus to the social conditions of the working class and unemployment. The husband’s forced inactivity and his permanent presence disrupts his wife’s routine in their home. As we see from this example, the critical stance of school television programmes become an inquiry into the social conditions of the lower class and the intertwined social, economic and sanitary determinants of health.

4.4 The Vulnerability of Rural Areas

While *Sécurité sociale* (1957) connects welfare and health, twenty-five years later, *Questions de solidarité* places more emphasis on working conditions. It is more centred on the social category of small business owners, self-employed workers and farmers. It has several sequences on small employers in the winegrowing and clothing sectors. While inspecting a vineyard, a young winegrower calls out to a worker. “Why are you alone?” The worker replies that his colleague had a pain in his stomach. The employer shrugs and laments “Well, he’s going to have surgery, it’s going to be two months off work, once again!”⁵⁸ *Questions de solidarité* also addresses other types of societal issues specific to rural areas, such as tensions between generations and the rural exodus by the younger generation. A manager of the farmers’ mutual health insurance fund (*Mutualité Sociale des Agriculteurs*) explains that “it is normal that the general regime should help our mutual fund, as there are no longer any young people in our countryside”.⁵⁹



Figure 9 (a, b). User portrayed in the rural working environment in *Questions de solidarité*, 1982.

By producing fictional scenes and documentary portraits on issues such as on the rural exodus, the precarious situation of pensioners and the economic pressures on the rural working world, the films made over two decades testify to a continuity of concerns and in turn seek to raise awareness about the vulnerability of certain social categories and sectors, represented by individuals through their physical presence and clothes, the style of their interiors and their voices. These films bring to mind specific types of lifestyle and appearance as much as they describe the reality of the cases dealt with.

5 Conclusion

Television for schools from the 1950s to 1980s is a somewhat forgotten and often neglected part of television history. However, it accounted for up to a fifth of national television airtime in France in the 1960s. Notwithstanding its educational success or failure, over several decades school television produced programmes that were far more than filmed classroom lessons. Hundreds of 20 to 30-minute reports were produced in France by a specific radio-television service for schools. They were often ambitious and in tune with the documentary film movements of their time.

At the interface between public television, state education and public health, when school television programmes treated work-related economic and social issues, one of the themes regularly dealt with was the French social security and health insurance system. Programmes deal with the rather unattractive subject of the function and organization of social welfare, portraying it as a political and public health-oriented instrument of public policy for students as future citizens and users, thus combining theoretical instruction with practical user guidance and advice. These non-classroom visual reports often took two to three months to produce. They investigated critical social situations and firmly placed recurring debates on public policies in the service of the community and social solidarity in the intimate framework of everyday life. They provide social portraits of users' difficulties in adapting to the system, their worries about imminent deadlines and the difficulties they encounter in communicating with officials at counters inside the offices. Also, the immersion of the characters in given geographical areas reveal the wider context of social realities and societal change outside the social security institution. We see vulnerable citizens in different states of precarity, experiencing feelings of abandonment.

The school television programmes analysed here depict French society as much as they explain social security, insofar as they are portraits of a society and its social conditions. They interweave the social, economic and sanitary determinants of health. The three programmes also tend to show more than the subject requires. The weather, the architecture of particular buildings, the clothing style of the characters and even the reactions, gestures and silences say something about the individuals and the circumstances portrayed. This depiction of ontological reality in cinema is in line with a documentary film movement and tradition, opening avenues for historical visual anthropological analysis.⁶⁰ These programmes appear to be less interested in entertaining viewers and they investigate and chronicle a society that has to adapt to the implementation of an egalitarian model, to the situations of each of its members and to the diversity of its regions. The tensions between instruction and social reality and principles and reality show that school television productions were (and remain) much more than boring instructional television. They were factual and fascinating, socially engaged and investigative and deeply influenced by classical documentary film making traditions.

Authors' note

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Notes

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Biographies

Christian Bonah is professor for history of health and life sciences at the University of Strasbourg. He has worked on the comparative history of medical education, the history of medicaments, human experimentation and more recently the history of medical film. He is principle investigator of the ERC advanced grant *The Healthy Self as Body Capital*.

Joël Danet is researcher at the Department for History of Medical and Health Sciences at the University of Strasbourg. He has worked in the field of visual education and documentary film history and as a film programme curator for the documentary film association Vidéo les Beaux Jours in Strasbourg.