

Sympathy for the devil

French media and online journalism's innovations:
from defiance to convergence

Ludivine Balland & Olivier Baisnée



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
European Research Area



Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities

MediaAcT Working Paper series on 'Media Accountability Practices on the Internet'

MediaAcT Working Paper 3/2011

Editors: Heikki Heikkilä & David Domingo

English Language Editor: Marcus Denton of OU Derettens

Journalism Research and Development Centre, University of Tampere, Finland 2011

This study is part of a collection of country reports on media accountability practices on the Internet. You can find more reports and a general introduction to the methodology and concepts of the reports at: <http://www.mediaact.eu/online.html>

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n°244147. The information in this document is the outcome of the EU project Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe (MediaAcT). The research reflects only the authors' views and the European Union is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein. The user thereof uses the information at their sole risk and liability.

Sympathy for the devil

French media and online journalism's innovations: from defiance to convergence

Ludivine Balland & Olivier Baisnée

Summary

Although frequent debates about the impact of the Internet on news production and journalism have occurred in France, legal or institutional devices specific to online journalism have not been set up. The lack of regulation of online practices is just a continuation of the French history of media accounting systems (MAS), since very few instruments have ever existed for 'traditional' media. Practices of online journalists are not regulated any further than their offline colleagues. Since no formal regulation bodies or sets of rules exist, we focused on the actual practices of French online journalists in order to give an account of the unwritten rules and mechanisms that frame their daily work and, actually, prevent (most of the time) journalistic misbehaviours. The lack of institutionalised online MAS has not turned the French online media world into a journalistic 'wild west'. Indeed, by studying the practices of these journalists, the aspects that appeared were: 1) opposing positions both in terms of practices and of legitimacy structuring the world of French online journalism; 2) continuity between offline and online journalistic practices; but also 3) changes that the Internet has introduced to journalism.

1. Context factors in the development of MA online practices

1.1. Media legitimacy and existing MA institutions

The relationship between online journalism and accountability is close if one considers that the recent development of the online environment provides both problems and also solutions in matter of regulation. An indication could be the last (and 4th) 2010 symposium of journalism (*Assises du journalisme*) which was mainly dedicated to online news media and practices. Of the 30 workshops and activities proposed, 9 were about online journalism or the web, which is considerable considering the weight of web journalism in the journalistic space). More generally, this statistic suggests the influence of online journalism on the debate over the need of regulating institutions.

‘Things will never be the same’ could summarize the French debates about online journalism. The pessimistic (or crisis) side of these debates underlines the dangers that go with online news: end of the democratic role of the press, end of (professional) journalism, the tyranny of the ‘buzz’ (see Box 2). By contrast, the optimistic side of these debates insists that the Internet might represent an opportunity to renew and refresh journalistic practices by enabling a new ear consisting of: ‘transparency’ in journalistic practices, the advent of online democracy and responsibility. To sum up the form taken by these debates, the main critics point out the multiplicity of actors that operate on the Internet and the impossibility to control and check the flow of news circulating on the web. In this perspective, the web journalist is sometimes presented as a mostly irresponsible geek or as a dominated journalist under the pressure of infernal work rhythms. However, the scale and the apparent multiplicity of the discourses on the Internet’s effects on online news production reveal that this debate: 1) does not really concern online journalists (the scepticism mostly comes from contributors who are not journalists...) and 2) is essentially an internal preoccupation of the journalistic field. The debate does not necessarily oppose the ‘ancient’ and the ‘moderns’, as online journalists tend to say¹, but reflects the struggle between journalists heavily influenced by their positions in the journalistic field. This struggle in turn reflects the traditional opposition between the intellectual and economic poles being reinforced by the opposition between the generalist press and the specialized press (Marchetti, 2002).

So far, the debate over the need for a regulation of online news media has not had any legal or institutional effects on organizing the practices of actors (journalists or citizens). Repeated attempts to regulate journalistic practices launched by media activist associations, such as

¹ <http://owni.fr/2011/01/10/jeunes-journalistes-quest-ce-quon-attend-pour-ne-plus-suivre-les-regles-du-jeu/>

Acrimed: (<http://www.acrimed.org/>) and by unions of journalists have never succeeded. The only 'regulation' of journalism that exists relies on media journalism and mediawatch blogs or TV shows.

France still does not have a Press council and remains at the stage of an association (Association de Préfiguration d'un Conseil de la Presse, APCP: <http://apcp.unblog.fr/>) of professionals and academics, which advocates the creation of an institution like a press council. During 2010, it appears (and partly due to the debate about online journalism developments) this initiative has been supported by the French Federation of news agencies (comprising 124 of the 230 French press agencies).

Yet, as things are now, and except for legislature that applies to journalism, the actual regulation relies on internal control systems that are more or less formalised (editorial charts, declaration of principles, peer regulation). This situation probably represents a French specificity.

The public image of legitimacy of media

It is quite difficult to evaluate the confidence of people toward media. At best, polls highlight trends about general beliefs. For instance, confidence toward media has grown in the last years, as 71 per cent of French people declare they are "very or quite" interested in media news (and 81 per cent for educated people). In this perspective, the radio remains the most accountable media (60per cent trust in Radio compared to 58per cent in 2009), precisely 61per cent of 18-24 year olds and 64per cent of 25-34 years old people), ahead of newspapers (55 per cent compared to less than 50per cent the last years), and television (48 per cent trust in TV compared to 49per cent really dubitative, *cf.*, TNS Sofres/Logica *La Croix*, January 2010). Despite of these ratings, 66 per cent of the population still do not believe in journalistic independence, mostly because journalists are supposed to be reliant on politics and power. The public beliefs are that media are reliant on economic power (60 per cent), they are complacent (27per cent), and that journalists are competent (31per cent) (TNS Sofres/Logica *La croix*, January 2010). The dominant media for news is TV (80 per cent of the population), which is more socially oriented towards lower classes (89 per cent) than high classes (61 per cent). The three other main news media are: radio (48 per cent), newspapers (37 per cent) and the Internet (23 per cent) (TNS Sofres/Logica *La Croix*, January 2010).

In the context of the usage of news websites, it should be noticed that their audiences heavily depend on the hierarchy of offline media, suggesting the strong relationship between traditional newspapers and online media. Indeed, the most visited news websites (including Google news

or Yahoo.fr²) are the online versions of France's broadsheet newspapers: *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* (about 3 millions unique visitors per day).

Yet it should also be stressed that while the national press dominates the online news market, the regional press dominates the print media market, which suggests online readerships differ for the two groups: young and urban for online news, older and rural for the regional print press³. The only regional outlet with a website amongst the 15 most visited news website, is *L'Ouest-France*, (at rank 15, which also has the largest daily circulation of any French paper (approximately 750,000). The most visited of French owned online-only news websites are: i) 'Arrêt sur images', which significantly is dedicated to media criticism and analysis and is the online successor of a now defunct TV show⁴ii) Lepost.fr that provides a flow of news originating from the web iii) Rue89.com is a general news website; iv) Mediapart.fr is a subscription based news website specializing in investigative journalism; v) Slate.fr is the French version of Slate.com and vi) Backchich.info is a satirical and investigative website. Although the sixth went bankrupt on January 26 2011 the content is still available.

1.2. The Internet user culture

Despite a slow penetration of the Internet during the 1990s (see Section e) Online journalism development), the current penetration rate of 69 per cent and daily users of 50 per cent are comparable to the rest of Europe (Eurostat, December 2009)⁵. This rate tends to be higher among young people with 69 per cent of the 16-24 year olds being daily users of the Internet. This percentage declines with increasing age to 57 per cent of the 25-54 year olds and only 28 per cent of the 54-74 year olds (Eurostat, December 2009). To a lesser extent, Internet usage of adults aged 16-74 years is gender related: 52 per cent of men and 48 per cent of women (Eurostat, December 2009). However, a more specific analysis (which currently does not exist) would probably demonstrate a differentiation in the ways each gender uses the Internet, (i.e. aims of use, types of websites visited, etc.); this type of a gender differentiation has been documented in other cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1979). Finally, differences among Internet users must be understood in relation with the level of education because 76 per cent of the well-

² We'll see later that these news aggregators are central for online journalists and online media working as the aim of any piece of news is to be ranked (the sooner the better) by these aggregators, as they will consequently attract visitors. This is called the 'Buzz' tyranny, in which journalists, under pressure to produce news that will "buzz", use search engine analytics, for example Google's, to design titles with keywords that will ensure them to be top-ranked by Google news and Yahoo.fr.

³ One journalist we interviewed (V. Glad, Slate.fr) told us the readership of online news was rather young and urban and that that enables somehow different writing practices : humour, understatement, "cool attitude".

⁴ <http://www.arretsimages.net/index.php>

⁵ This percentage increases to 72,3% of French people using frequently the Internet (IFOP, 2010).

educated people are daily users, while only 68per cent amongst medium-educated and 33per cent amongst low educated people (Eurostat, December 2009). The percentage of citizens contributing content is estimated at 17per cent (Eurostat, December, 2009). These trends have been confirmed in the most recent surveys about the uses of the Internet in France, even if the proportion of the Internet users is still increasing. For 2010, the average French Internet user is a well-educated man younger than 35 years old.

Additional indicators of the Internet users' culture are the uses of social networks. Registered accounts on Facebook have increased exponentially from 4 million in October 2008 (when Facebook started in France) to 12 million at the start of 2009 (Médiamétrie) to 15.2 million by the end of 2009(Eurostat, December 2009) and 20 million (Facebakers.com, January 2011) equating to almost a third of the population of metropolitan France.

The use of Twitter is not widespread in France, approaching 130 000 users in 2009 (Sysomos, December 2009). When compared with the aggregate of Twitter accounts (145 million), France ranks 13th, with only 0.98 per cent of the accounts, against 33 per cent for the US and 8.2per cent for India. It should also be stressed that 21 per cent of those who are registered on Twitter never actually published anything and that 75 per cent of Twitter's French content is produced by 5 per cent of the French registered users. The most recent indication about the use of Twitter (we'll see later the use made by journalists) that 16per cent of the tweeted contents are about news (links to news articles, blogs, comments about current affairs). The profile of the average French Twitter user is quite specific, quite young (17 per cent are 18-24 years old), working in independent professions (13 per cent), from the upper socio-professional categories (12 per cent) and living in Ile de France (11 per cent) (Observatoire IFOP, 14 october, 2010).

An interesting survey indicates the Internet is also used as a political tool: indeed, 25per cent of the French declare they have signed, at least once, an online petition, 21per cent have visited a political party website, 17 per cent have sent political information to a friend or a colleague email address and 16 per cent have visited the website of a political personality⁶ (The barometer of political and social uses of the Internet, *Temps reel/TNS Sofres*, 2010).

1.3. Professionalism in journalism

As already suggested, journalism regulation practices are not established firmly and heavily rely on newsrooms and journalists' routines. The consequence being that this is far from homogeneous. Consequently, journalists' attitudes and definitions of accountability greatly vary from one place to another (Baisnée, Balland, 2010). What should be emphasized is that online

⁶ <http://www.tns-sofres.com/assets/files/2010.03.17-baro-web-pol.pdf>

journalism has led numerous newsrooms to introduce, at least in a formal way, transparency practices that were less compulsory in offline media (see Case 1).

Case 1: Academics and journalists and the question of accountability

Mediapart.fr is an online-only news media based on subscription and privilege investigative journalism and a quite high standard in terms of what is published. They offer a lot of space to academics not only as sources but also as contributors through their blogs, which they host.

As Tunisia's revolution was happening *Mediapart.fr* interviewed one of the foremost specialists of Tunisia, -Béatrice Hibou. The text of the interview was heavily cut so as, according to other specialists of the region, to better fit with the general discourse about the events (transition towards democracy) or, according to journalists, to meet the journalism standards of the publication.

Jean-François Bayart, a specialist of the region and blogger on *Mediapart.fr* decided to publish the original interview and to underline the sentences that were cut-out by *Mediapart.fr*. See: <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/jean-francois-bayart/250111/chercheurs-et-journalistes-face-la-tunisie>

Thus a debate between the academic community and the newsroom occurred on the difficulties of saying anything complicated about complex events... even on *Mediapart.fr*

Among these practices, are journalists' blogs that they host (for example : <http://www.lemonde.fr/blogs/>; <http://www.liberation.fr/blogs,26>; <http://rtl.fr/blogs>). In major media, links to sources are provided systematically. Readers' participation varies but remains globally weak (when compared with the numbers of visitors). Some innovative practices have also appeared: *Lepost.fr* publishes readers' articles (with the name of the author and the status of the information: "checked/not checked"), so does *Rue89.com* but in a less systematic manner. *Rue89.com* offers the possibility of 'attending' the newsroom morning conference and giving one's opinion (<http://www.rue89.com/participez-a-la-conference-de-redaction-en-ligne>). *Rue89.com* like all the online-only and most online news media authorizes comments and reactions to articles. Most online news media provide editorial charts or declaration of principles (<http://www.mediapart.fr/charte-editoriale>; <http://www.lepost.fr/charte-du-post.html>). Lastly, most online news media provide their readers with their journalists' profiles and biographies and, even links to their personal blogs and/or Twitter account or Facebook page.

1.4. Online journalism development

Contrary to other countries, the rise and development of online journalism has been rather late in France. The very first experiences date back to 1995 but until the turn of the millennium nothing significant appeared.

The reason for this delay has to be found in a French peculiarity: the Minitel.



Photo by believekevin (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/believekevin/5432031875>)

This very French invention was supported by successive governments and enjoyed a large diffusion among the population. Due to the (huge) incomes generated by Minitel, France Telecom and the French government were not very supportive of the development of the Internet. While this experience has, no doubt, made the rise of the Internet (and subsequently of online journalism and online media) slower in France it has also had the virtue of acclimatizing the French people to go 'online' (in the Minitel system) to get information.

The first French media that decided to 'go online' was the regional newspaper *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace* in 1995. Then a competition, between *Libération* and *Le Monde*, arose during 1995 to be the first to provide an online version of their print media. *Libération* launched its website in September 1995 and presented it as the "first website of electronic news". In the context of growing economic difficulties, 'going online' appeared at the time as a way of preserving their dominant position by appearing as modern, following the march of History. Between 1995 and 2000, most French media would develop an online version. As Yannick Estienne explains: "the goal of the main dailies was then to secure their image of modern newspapers open to new technologies, media and 'tomorrow's' news (Estienne, 2007: 73). Yet in terms of content and functioning, nothing changed since it was just an online version of the printed newspaper. There was no specific content, no specific newsrooms, no online journalism *per se*.

Real online newsrooms appeared in the beginning of the 2000s. Yet the purely technical origin of French online media strategies has had consequences on the professional image of online journalists.

Considered primarily as a purely technical issue, those in charge of online versions of media were mostly non-journalistic staff (with a technical, engineers' background⁷). Thus, when journalists (whether they came from traditional newsrooms or had a degree in journalism) started to colonize online newsrooms their image was blurred if not contaminated by their purely technical origins. That might explain the long lasting images of 'geeks', 'technophiles' and more generally 'half-journalists' or 'not even journalists' of online journalists within the profession in France (Champagne, 1995 ; Neveu, 2007)⁸.

Some media (e.g. *Libération*, *Télérama*) integrated an online newsroom within (geographically speaking) the traditional ones. Such changes created tensions, especially in newsrooms very much attached to their professional excellence image. In *Le Monde* for example the arrival of the pre-existing online newsroom (lemonde.fr) in the building of the newspaper created fierce debates and tensions (see Box 1). The rise of online newsrooms and, more generally, of online practices (growing pressure towards convergence) in French journalism is linked with the growing economic constraints and difficulties French media have encountered. The Internet appeared has a potential new source of income for newspapers facing a dramatic drop in their advertising revenue (and the rise of audiovisual media) and a shrinking readership. Yet the uncertainty about the economic model of online media (and of the online versions of traditional media) has also produced a form of 'cheap journalism' practiced by young, underpaid, precarious journalists (see Box 1).

Box 1: The 'seven commandments' of online journalism

- 1) generalist you shall be
 - 2) news agencies reports processor you shall be
 - 3) your peers, you shall copy
 - 4) and from your work never you shall get a byline
 - 5) you shall make the most (and the best) of the less
 - 6) from facts checking procedure, sometimes, you shall get rid
 - 7) from your office you shall never get out
- Source: Trainee report (journalism student, Toulouse, 2010).

⁷ Some of these technical staff became journalists afterwards using their engineers' background to get into newsrooms and, late to prove they were capable of ensuring editorial work.

⁸ For example, Erwan Cario former computer scientist for *Libération* who is now editor-in-chief of the new technologies desk and section (Ecrans.fr).

Processing news agencies reports appears (at least for the 'lumpen' proletariat of online newsrooms) as the main (repetitive) activity. The task is then to identify in the flow of news from AFP, Reuters, etc. those which are relevant for the media, to process them the-quicker-the-better in order to be the first to report it (or at least not the last). This also enables the news story to be referenced mainly by the news aggregators Google news and Yahoo! news. This activity is called: 'bâtonnage de dépêches' (beating news reports).

Box 2: The "buzz tyranny"

"From the very first days in the newsroom one soon understood that the links that work and that are quoted on Yahoo! are those that deal with 1) sex; 2) drugs; 3) conspiracies. Journalists and managers don't hide themselves [...] these type of subjects are those that enable [the stories] to attract enough readers from Yahoo! and thus hope to keep them on a longer term" (Trainee report, journalism student, Toulouse, 2010).

"Yeah, the buzz... the Internet you have to click [...] The more it's about sex, the trashier, the most violent, the more clicks you'll get... This is it. The problem is that we need these clicks... The guy who comes 30 times, he's a real reader. The guy who comes just once, that's for Zahia [underaged prostitute who had some major football players among her clients]. Myself, I've been through a small nervous breakdown because of that, I've been really disturbed by that story: to see that, in fact, we've all done our traffic with Zahia." (Vincent Glad, quoted by Audrey Minart, MA dissertation, 2010)

Parallel to online journalism development (*Libération's* website had 7000 visits per day in 1997, but in 2011 has 750,000 unique visitors per day) economic constraints have been growing. The Internet bubble burst in March 2000 and led to a decrease in advertising incomes (Estienne, 2007 : 81), no viable economic model, cuts in staffs, and technical difficulties that limited the development and innovation in the online media sector (see Box 3).

Box 3: The technical conditions of online journalism

"To put a video (in 2001) with a text online, that used to be real pain in the ass. Yet it was just one page. Today it would take just 3 minutes! At the time it would have taken half a day. There were no ultra simple tools, with a 'title' field, a 'text' field, a 'video' field and a 'byline' field... you would have to do it all by yourself! When you were putting content online, you would have to be confident in what you just did!" (Alice Antheaume, Responsible for prospective and international development, journalism school of Sciences Po Paris, former deputy editor in chief of 20minutes.fr, quoted in Fradin (2010/2: 31)).

More significantly, despite the relative autonomization of online journalism (with its own hierarchies and to some extent own practices, specific media and own 'media stars'), this growing importance has not challenged the general hierarchies of professional excellence in French journalism. Online journalists (which, as we'll see, represent a rather 'diverse' category just as journalism in general) are still criticized for their obsession with 'real time' news and the

'buzz' tyranny they endure. The opposition between 'paper' journalists and 'net' journalists follows the historical (yet evolving) divide between 'good' journalists (checking their information, seriousness, deontology) and the 'bad' journalists (desk journalism, geeks, buzz journalism, mercenaries). The testimonies we collected among online journalists who are currently renowned in the profession, confirm that when they graduated from journalism schools (mid-2000s) working on the Internet still represented a devaluated professional choice. At best they considered the Internet as a way to get into journalism not a place where they could build their career.

More generally, convergence between traditional and online newsrooms has been slow. Most journalists appear to be reluctant to the idea of working for the online version of their media. The pressure (from managers of media) has increased to 'go online', to produce specific content, to adapt existing content to the online version and to accept that publishing first on the Internet is the preserve of an exclusive. Yet, there are still a lot of conflicts within newsrooms between the older generation and the journalists who have been hired for online purposes. The best example is probably *Le Monde* which faces a real 'schizophrenic' situation. The group owns Lepost.fr which is a website designed solely for publishing 'the-sooner-the-better' information on any topic. Students who have been trainees at Lepost.fr relate that some journalists are really ill at ease with this ownership. Moreover, the arrival of the online newsroom from *Lemonde.fr* in 'their' (Lepost.fr) building has horrified some journalists who would have preferred having nothing to do with these "20 something [year old] geeks and probably junkies". Yet the trend is there. Increasingly, editors-in-chief ask journalists to bear in mind the online versions when designing their articles. In addition, there is an increasing tendency to ask for multimedia content and consequently the border between printed and audio-visual journalism is shrinking.

Most of the interviewees emphasized that the real start for French online journalism dates back to the middle of 2000's with the arrival of a generation of young journalists more used to new technologies who participated in (and benefited from) the institutionalisation of online journalism. The Presidential election of 2007 appears as to be a turning point, as candidates used intensively the Internet for campaigning via social networks (Facebook and Second life). Furthermore, some news events of the 2007 campaign were specific to the Internet and online journalists were in the best position to deal with them⁹. The period 2006-2007 was also the moment the online-only media first appeared, some of them being launched by prestigious journalists such as Mediapart.fr (created by Edwy Plenel who previously was editor-in-chief of

⁹ For example, a video of Segolène Royal was spread on the Internet and a lot of debates were linked to it. As one of the journalists we interviewed said, it was a perfect occasion to demonstrate that: 1) there were exclusives on the Internet; and 2) that they had specific abilities to perform as journalists with this kind of material, as they knew how to search for its origins.

Le Monde), Rue89.fr (created by journalists from *Libération*), Slate.fr (created by Jean-Marie Colombani who was previously the director of *Le Monde*).

In a profession that is described as in crisis, where unemployment is high and the instability of positions is extremely entrenched, some journalists have benefited from an historical opportunity. Being in a position of inventing online journalism, they reached professional status that would have been only possible after 15 or 20 years as journalists. Journalists who are considered to be the major French online journalists are 25 years old and consider themselves as old in the business. This pioneer generation claims both a journalistic identity (we are journalists) and a web specialists identity (what we do, the others cannot do). This has been a collective process partially based on a defence strategy (they were attacked by *Le Monde* as they organized themselves¹⁰) and the help of Twitter (see section 2.1.1). This, informal, organisation of the professional milieu is structured by mailing lists, editorials (on the website, now inactive, of the *Djiin*) but also by informal meetings at a bar¹¹ that are both sociable as well as recruitment events. The growing (but still contested) recognition of online journalism (as a place where there is also quality journalism and seriousness and not just rumours and sensational news) in the French media landscape might contribute to the evolution of a balance of power with the printed press. Yet the practices remain very diverse.

Ten years after the start of online journalism the actual situation and the future of this media sector remains unclear and uncertain to both the actors and the external audiences (including researchers). As in other countries, the business model of online media is still being debated. After a period where media provided full-access to their online content, most traditional media now give partial access to their online content to those who are not subscribers of their newspaper (*Le Monde*, *Libération*). The press sector, while suffering from the global economic crisis, has invested heavily in innovative developments, especially the iPad (or iPad clone) technology¹². Basically, most of the French national newspapers would not mind getting rid of their newspaper but not their newspapers' journalism identity. When print media turn towards online news media, the lack of a viable business model¹³ and the global economic crisis have combined to hinder the innovation and developments of their original practices. As already mentioned, online journalists face unstable positions, low salaries, etc. The pressure to generate flows of viewers is high and the rhythm of work intense. If online journalists have developed specificities (the general tone used is less serious, the development of live accounts of events, the use of multimedia content) these specificities are exerted under the pressures mentioned

¹⁰ They created an informal union (the *Djiin*) in response to an article from a journalist at *Le Monde* who described them as the underclass of journalism.

¹¹ Named ironically 'Le café des OS' (the specialized workers café) in response to the miserable picture that is given of their speciality.

¹² For example, *Le Monde* has launched an iPad edition at the start of 2011.

¹³ To transform 'free-to-view' online-only news sites to subscription based sites.

above. Thus, Backchich.info¹⁴ declared bankruptcy on the 26th of January 2011. In the meantime, a new actor was launched at the beginning of 2011: <http://www.atlantico.fr/>.

However, the fast evolving online environment has also provided new opportunities for journalism in France. As in the US, where non-profit based news media arose (e.g. Propublica.org), a non-profit news media has recently been launched: owni.fr. This site represents, in the eyes of the journalists we interviewed, the avant-garde of French online journalism. As one of them explains “*they do the R&D we can't afford*”. Both in formal terms (a very visual style of writing) and in terms of practices (data journalism¹⁵), owni.fr, given its privileged position remote from the pressures of audiences and market, is able to experiment in new formats of writing and reporting. Other actors tend to use online possibilities to escape from some of the limitations of their media technology. Radio-France (public service radio), for example, use its website to provide the public with more background information and more developed analysis: <http://sites.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/ev/dossiers.php>. Auditors are often invited to check the website on a specific topic if they want more in-depth information.

On the whole, and despite the uncertainties mentioned above, the last ten years have initiated major changes in journalism and the media landscape at large. New (online-only) actors have appeared and the traditional media have invested (both in terms of money but also of functioning and routines) in the online potentialities. One traditional actor has resisted and is still resisting the online trend, and it's a highly symbolic actor: *Le Canard Enchaîné*. This journalistic ‘institution’ (a satirical weekly extensively read by political actors and journalists) is one of the oldest French newspapers (founded in 1914). The paper's resistance to ‘going online’ finally collapsed, as reflected by the recent launch of (<http://www.lecanardenchaine.fr/>). Yet what appears on the (only) page deserves to be quoted *verbatim* (see Box 4):

¹⁴ One of the first French online-only news website launched in 2006.

¹⁵ <http://data.owni.fr/>

Box 4: Le Canard in English is The Duck

One webbed-foot in the cyber-puddle (but just one)

No, despite what it seems to be, 'Le Canard' is not starting to paddle on the net. Yet we've been invited to by more or less well-intentioned operators, and sometime by readers who would like to read their weekly online. And especially by the expatriated ducklings [readers] who receive their newspaper at the other end of the world days after it has been released.

But our job is to inform and to entertain our readers with paper and ink. That's a nice job and it's enough to keep our team busy.

This official website of 'Le Canard' limits itself, at the moment, to providing some practical information and also to occupy the Internet addresses some crooks have sometimes tried to hijack pretending to be us.

Little by little, we will do our best to enrich the content, with an historical section and, maybe, an access to archives.

For the moment, the very modest cyber-Canard sets you a rendez-vous, Wednesday, at your newspaper seller!

This oddity, both in the global and the French context, that *Le Canard Enchaîné* represents should not deserve attention were it not an oddity in three other fundamental aspects: (i) Le Canard's journalists own the newspaper; (ii) the newspaper is advertisement free; and (iii) the business is in excellent financial health (which is greatly beneficial).

2. Practices initiated by the media

When online journalism emerged in France it rather represented a devaluated professional subspace with blurred borders. In this respect, the situation has dramatically changed. Distinctions between a 'noble' journalism (traditional printed press) and a devaluated one (online journalism) are still used by part of the profession to stigmatise what remains a repelling medium for professional journalists (Estienne, 2007: 153)¹⁶. Yet the success of the Internet, the growth of online media and of online journalism has not only increased the visibility of this professional sub-space but also contributed to the diversification and the organisation of practices and of professional representations of the job of 'online journalists'. It is now possible to identify some specific tendencies, characteristics and internal divides, which remind us that the "morphologic transformations [of the journalistic milieu] never occur without reviving the

¹⁶ Estienne concludes that: "at the end of our research [2006], online journalism belongs to the dominated pole of the journalistic field" (2007: 165). The information we collected during this exploratory fieldwork indicates that the situation is evolving: First, because the growing online news sector did not transform the rules of the journalistic field and the divide between generalist journalism and specialized journalism on one side, and an intellectual and a commercial pole on the other (Marchetti, 2002), which remains and applies to online journalism; Secondly, because the progressive accumulation of journalistic capital (especially the ability to produce news that will be quoted and reproduced by peers [Duval, 2004]) and the emergence of new hierarchies specific to this professional sub-space (with online journalists (rising) stars appearing and being acknowledged as such by peers and a growing editorial space allocated to online journalists in some media.

recurrent identity debates within the profession about the definitions of journalistic excellence” (Marchetti, 2002: 30).

What is an online journalist? The answer is trickier than it seems given the “blurred professionalism” of journalism as a whole (Ruellan, 1992) and of online journalism more specifically. Unsurprisingly, the definition of online journalism, just as the definition of journalism in general, heavily depends on the position (and the constraints linked to this position) of the individual providing such a definition. Being an online journalist does not imply the same realities, nor does online journalism definite what are the good and legitimate practices in Mediapart.fr or Rue89.com as opposed to Lepost.fr. Within these online media, being a political or investigative reporter does not imply the same practices as those working for the new technologies’ desk. As already said, the double opposition (specialised/generalist pole; commercial/intellectual pole) is still active and meaningful when it comes to describing French online journalism (Marchetti, 2002).

2.1. Trends in the practices initiated by media organizations

2.1.1. Among the online-only actors of the new Internet game

Online journalism has a short history, yet Internet specific practices have evolved rapidly. Some practices disappeared while other took on a growing importance. Journalists’ blogs are now rather deserted. While most of journalists had a blog, it is often inactive now and replaced by microblogging through Twitter. As this appears to be peculiar to France, we will particularly stress this aspect. The importance Twitter now has in the daily work of French journalists is even more surprising as the public have not adopted Twitter to the same extent.

Twitter appears both as an information source but also as a mean to structure online journalism.

Twitter as an information source

In the online journalism routine appears as a source for information and more generally as a working tool. They have developed strategies to collect the ‘good’ information (the information their competitors do not have¹⁷): they follow US based accounts or accounts run by specialists, which they are the only ones to know about. These might well become sources (even if not quoted as such in most cases).

¹⁷ They have even been reluctant at mentioning it to sociologists when asked about it...

Box 5: Twitter as an information source

“When compared with traditional news websites such as Le Monde, where the discourse is unilateral, where they deliver an information and then people can comment on it, we don’t work the same way: people really communicate with us : we dialog with the audience, they comment and we follow-up and it might well become an article: ‘This is what online readers think’; or, even more interesting, we go on social networks like Twitter or Facebook among the users that publish on our website... For example, at the moment, the snow [Paris being partly blocked by snow in December] we have wonderful pictures about it at the moment and they don’t come from news agencies but from readers [...] the main thing is Twitter, because publishing on it is instantaneous, is very simple but also because profiles are public which is not the case with Facebook... Me, even if I have access to my friends’ Facebook profiles I won’t publish things that come from their private profile, that’s private information... On the contrary Twitter, I consider that since their profile is public, I can use their information... I do provide a copyright: I provide the source: Mr. X published this picture, the link and that’s it.” Interview with Aude Baron, Le Post, 2010

Twitter as a supra newsroom

One interviewee said Twitter helps organizationally as a supra newsroom because journalists tend to rely and correspond more on Twitter with colleagues than other media). Twitter appears as a way to abolish the borders between media as one journalist can exchange with other online journalists from other media without moving physically from their desk.

Twitter also appears to be a way of evaluating the internal hierarchy of this group mainly based on the number of followers of their accounts. Online journalists have an average of 4000 followers. Vincent Glad, the online journalist has the highest number of followers, 11,000 and is well-known for them. Twitter is above all a collaborative tool for these journalists who can work together on a particular subject. One example that has been given is the investigative work they collectively run to demonstrate that, contrary to what was announced on Nicolas Sarkozy’s Facebook page in November 2010, he could not have been in Berlin the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, since he was giving a speech somewhere else (see Box 6).

Box 6: “People work together (...) beyond the newsroom”

“I’ve got the impression that there is a kind of ‘supra-newsroom’, made up of online journalists who, whatever the place they publish, are connected with each others. I’m connected to Vincent Glad [Slate.fr journalist at the time] on some topics yet we don’t always cover the same things... there’s a kind of solidarity that enables to build a subject together [...] That was especially clear with the subject “did Sarkozy actually go to Berlin*” ... we all did our investigation, published it and went further. Lefigaro.fr was digging up archives, pictures of that time. At 20minutes.fr, we were in touch with L’Elysée [French presidency]. TF1.fr published pictures. One thing after another we rebuilt the story.” Alice Antheaume, 2010 (Fradin, 2010/2: 86)

* Nicolas Sarkozy announced on his Facebook personal page that he was in Berlin the day after the wall fell, which appeared to be a false claim.

“There’s a huge participative aspect as we see what people do, how they follow up on an [item of] information... and everybody follows. That’s quite impressive... for three hours we would all talk about the same thing [...] everybody tweets the links of everybody and it even happened that some twitter links ended up in articles! People work together, way beyond the newsroom.” Melissa Bounoua, 20minutes.fr journalist, 2010 (Fradin, 2010/2: 87).

Twitter also appears as a way to exchange information with readers, and their followers (and colleagues) who represent an elite readership for them. In this respect Twitter appears much more important and effective than comments (on websites) to their articles that are now devalued (because they are often biased, and due to people trolling the forums) except in specific cases. For example, *Mediapart.fr* is a subscription based website, and comments are not anonymous, which makes them more efficient and productive).

If Twitter is also a way to promote an individual journalist’s production (having a high number of followers is also important for the newsroom who hires the journalist...), Twitter would also appear to be a means to control and to cross-check the work of these journalists. In a way, while journalists often do not know¹⁸ whether they are doing a good job (other than those who consider the audience is a good way to evaluate the quality of production), social networking on the Internet has made it possible to know almost instantly what others (the audience and colleagues) think of the article just produced. As one journalist put it “*When you misbehave, they kick your ass*”. Twitter now ensures this ‘article promotion’ function by spreading the articles on the social networks; not only promotion but also control of what is published is ensured by readers but also (and foremost) by other journalists.

Box 7: Twitter as an instance of regulation

“We have an elite of readers on Twitter. That’s partly Slate’s readers and others who follows you, who read your stuff, who tell you that they’ve liked what you’ve tweeted or who contradict you when you’re wrong [...] Compared to printed press, you’re read, you get feedbacks, you know what people think, if your article is good”, Interview with Vincent Glad, Slate, 2010.

About her very first article published in *Liberation*, this journalism student says:

“I’ve had forgotten the most important: this article was going to be printed but also read. And commented [...] Really harsh comments appeared on the Internet [...] I had to wait [before] it calms down. Some tweets were really harsh: “I announce you the end of online journalism”. Another one went and dug-up personal information about me on social networks, my accounts yet being private”, (Trainee report, journalism student, Toulouse, 2010).

To conclude, Twitter ensures a collective regulation function within the profession and especially among online journalists. Thus, it contributes to the setting of new hierarchies within

¹⁸ Philip Schlesinger calls it the ‘missing link’ between the journalist and his audience.

this journalistic sub-space as the recognition from the peers and the followers provides retributions (within the newsroom, within the profession, and consequently notoriety) and creates new forms of journalistic excellence within online journalism. To these collective practices must be added individual practices but these do not seem specific to online journalism.

2.1.2. Among those who consider the Internet as a way to continue journalism through other means

Among online journalists there are also professionals who consider online journalism as journalism as usual. Interestingly, they have the same age as their peers (about 25 years), they work for online-only news websites too, they are considered as the best online journalists but they do not consider themselves as online journalists and are not considered as online journalists by other journalists. They do not have the same practices, they do not belong to the clique, they are journalists working for web-based media but they are not online journalists. At least they do not share the same characteristics as those who represent this professional milieu.

Box 8: “Are you a web journalist?”

As Fabrice Arfi (29, journalist for *Mediapart.fr*) puts it:

- “you’re a web journalist?”
- “Not at all: I’m a journalist that works on the web but I’m a journalist, that’s my identity... In the same way a journalist from *Le Monde* is not a paper journalist... the organ is distinct from the function... A runner can run without shoes. Yet no one says that he’s a runner with shoes”

In terms of MA practices, even for a pure player online media, depending of the positioning of it, the regulation of practices might well rely more on professional values and debates (internal to the newsroom) than on the public or audience.

Case 2: Mediapart and accountability

Mediapart.fr is a subscription based news website, which promotes investigative journalism and positions itself at the intellectual pole of online journalism. They dealt with the major political scandal of 2010 when they published their investigation about the “Betancourt affair”. Suspicions about the illegal financing of Nicolas Sarkozy’s campaign in 2007 became one of the central aspects of the scandal. The material on which the story was based is the collection of secret recordings of discussions in the house of the billionaire, Betancourt. Hours of tape were given to the journalists and then deontological issues arose. In this type of scandal, juridical constraints are strong, requiring specialized knowledge from both the journalists themselves and also an attorney, who was working with *Mediapart* (‘calibrating’ the contents of the article and the relationship with the peers, explained Fabrice Arfi).

They left out everything that belonged to private lives, to focus on what was relevant for public interest.

Fabrice Arfi describes *Mediapart.fr* functioning as follows:

“ before [publishing the story] we’ve had a collective discussion with colleagues to know collectively what we should do, what was defining our job. That happened several times... *Mediapart*, internally, is a unique journalistic laboratory when it comes to how to proceed professionally... That’s one of the rare place where the practices of journalism are discussed at that level.” (Fabrice Arfi, interview, 2010).

2.2. Practices initiated by media organizations in issues of actor transparency, production of transparency and responsiveness¹⁹

2.2.1 Actor transparency

Actor transparency involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. Transparency of individual journalists is quite variable among the journalistic (online) space and tends to be related on the media wherein they write. Beyond, it often consists with providing online news with bylines and more rarely, with a photo of the journalist (mostly in op-ed). The journalists' blogs could also be used as a transparency tool, (besides their personal branding's aspect) for journalists, allowing them to develop extra news of a story or to contextualize some data they provided. But one has to admit to a relative and gradual decline of journalists' blogs over the last few years due to competition from social networks, especially Twitter. While most online versions of media offer the possibility to their journalists to have a personal blog (<http://www.lemonde.fr/blogs/>; <http://www.liberation.fr/blogs.26>; <http://rtl.fr/blogs>), most of them are not used for providing news. An increasing number are not maintained and the remainder are dedicated to pastime activities. In addition, there are a few published codes of ethics like *Le Monde* (http://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2010/11/03/la-charte-d-ethique-et-de-deontologie-du-groupe-le-monde_1434737_3236.html), and more generally, of in-house codes of ethics.

Table 1: Practices fostering actor transparency in French online news websites

Practice	Availability at online news websites
Bylines	Yes (even if some websites can use a collective name, which is often the name of the media)
Profiles of Journalists	A few
Journalist blogs	A few even if it declined since the popularization of social networks like Twitter
Published mission papers	No
Published Code of Ethics (GJ)	A few
News policy document, in-house code of ethics	Often
Public information on company ownership	No

¹⁹ The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

2.2.2. Production transparency

Production transparency denotes practices where media organizations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news. These practices of transparency are also really variable in online journalism, depending mostly on the news organizations and journalists. In general, transparency often consists in providing links to original sources (even if it remains an unsystematic practice) or explanations on the process of production of a story. One interviewee explained the process of production using the “Betancourt affair”, which required (even in a legal way) more transparency about the practices of the media and the journalists involved.

Social networks (in particular Facebook or Twitter) can also provide the opportunity for transparency, allowing journalists to render their information accessible to their public of ‘followers’. However, it appears that Twitter still remains a promoting tool for articles and for journalists among their peers. The concept of collaborative news production is still rare in France, but not non-existent. There are a few opportunities of co-producing news, like *Mediapart.fr*, which offers the possibility to its subscribers to run their own news production (often in their area of expertise). *Le Post.fr*, in a larger format, publishes readers’ articles (specifying the status of this information) and *Rue.89* allows readers to contribute to the news conference online. Finally, there was the notable launch of the participative platform on *Rue 89* “j’aime l’info”, wherein readers can produce their own information and financially contribute to the development of 80 news blogs: <http://www.rue89.com/making-of/2011/03/28/lancement-de-la-plateforme-jaime-linfo-concue-par-rue89-197201>.

Table 2: Practices fostering production transparency in the French online news services

Practice	Availability at online news websites
Links to original sources	Not systematically
Newsroom blogs	A few
Presence in the Facebook	Often
Presence in Twitter	Often
Collaborative news production	Limited
Citizen journalism, initiated by the news media	Rare

2.2.3. Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organizations’ reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. Responsiveness instruments are quite usual in French online news services. The key aspect is their real effectiveness in the production of news. Indeed,

the way media use this interactivity with audience depends mostly on the media and varies between cases of dialogue with the audience or, on another hand, an absence of consideration of these feed backs. In this perspective, forums are widespread in the online comments of news. However, the journalists tend generally not to consider them as important in the production of news, because of people trolling these forums). It appears that correction buttons are quite rare, but exist as in the audience blogs in *Le Monde.fr* or *Lefigaro.fr*, *Liberation.fr*. Finally, there are the uses of social network in this part, enhancing more and more responsiveness with the audience.

Table 3: Online practices fostering responsiveness in the French online news services

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Availability at online news websites</i>
Feedback form and tip-offs	Yes
Correction buttons	Rare
Online news comments	Yes
Audience blogs	A few
Feed backs on social network	Yes

3. Practices outside media

Among the practices outside media (barring social networks like Facebook or Twitter, as we have already described), a few enterprises of external accountability do exist, (particularly when considering the general trend in journalism not to “air the dirty laundry in front of the guests” and to handle questions of accountability). Firstly, some websites dedicated to media have recently (since the late 1990s) challenged the journalistic monopoly over media critics and ethics. As a media observatory, this association of media websites debates on journalistic practices and provides some documentation about media accountability. The most well-known institution is ACRIMED (Action-Critique-Medias), an Internet association comprised of trade unions, individuals, academics, journalists, and citizens who pool their documentation on deontology, and organize symposiums and meetings. Finally, some new websites have appeared recently, as journalism.com, which presents itself as “the website of all journalists”, promoting debates and perspectives about practices in journalism, and gathering information about the profession.

4. Conclusion

In France, no formal regulation bodies or sets of rules exist for online journalism. This assessment leads to the need to focus on the actual practices of French online journalists in order to give an account of the unwritten rules and mechanisms that frame their daily work and prevent (most of the time) journalistic misbehaviours. The lack of institutionalised online MAS did not turn the French online media into a chaotic environment. What our does show is:

- 1) That online development did cause some changes in matter of accountability in journalism, even if these transformations could be led, not by deontological preoccupations but by economic constraints, depending on the weight of audience and the necessity of interactivity.
- 2) That practices of transparency and responsiveness tend to spread out (in different ways) from the economic pole to the intellectual pole of journalism.
- 3) That the variations of accountability (and the practices correlated) still rely on a position in the journalistic field; the opposing positions remain both in terms of practices and of legitimacy structuring the world of French online journalism and also continuity between offline and online journalistic practices.

Sources

Experts:

Alice Antheaume, Responsible for prospective and international development, journalism school of Sciences Po Paris, former deputy editor in chief of *20minutes.fr*, interview by Fradin (Andréa), 2010 (2)

Arfi (Fabrice), Journalist at *Mediapart*, 2010

Baron Aude, journalist at *Le Post*, 2010

Bounoua (Mélissa), journalist on *20minutes.fr*, interview by Fradin (Andréa), 2010 (2)

Fradin (Andréa), MA dissertation, *Webjournalisme : une identité en perpétuel mouvement*, IEP Toulouse, 2010 (2)

Glad Vincent, journalist at *Slate.fr*, 2010

Several trainee reports by journalism students are quoted anonymously for reasons of confidentiality.

Literature:

Baisnée, Olivier; Balland, Ludivine (2011) Media and accountability : Much ado about (almost) nothing? In Eberwein (Tobias), Fengler (Susanne), Lauk (Epp) (Eds.), *Mapping Media Accountability - in Europe and Beyond*. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag, pp. 40-50.

Champagne, Patrick (2000) Le médiateur entre deux "Monde" : transformation du champ médiatique et gestion du capital journalistique. *ARSS*, 131-132, pp. 8-29.

Duval, Julien (2000) Concessions et conversions à l'économie. Le journalisme économique en France depuis les années 80. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 131-132, pp. 56-75.

Duval, Julien (2005) Economic Journalism in France. In Rodney Benson, Erik Neveu, *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge, Polity, pp. 133-155

Estienne, Yannick (2007) *Le journalisme après internet*. Paris, L'Harmattan.

Marchetti, Dominique (2002) Les sous-champs specialises du journalisme. *Réseaux*, 111:1, pp. 22-55.

Neveu, Erik (2009) *Sociologie du journalisme*. Paris, La découverte.

Ruellan, Denis (1993) *Le professionnalisme du flou. Identité et savoir-faire des journalistes français*. Grenoble, PUG.

The authors:

Ludivine Balland, PhD, researcher at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Toulouse. Research interests: education related to social and political issues, sociology. E-mail: ludivine.balland@gmail.com

Olivier Baisnée, PhD, associate professor in political science at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Toulouse. Research interests: political sociology of the EU, including democracy theories and the sociology of journalism. E-mail: obaisnee@club-internet.fr, website: <http://www.sciencespo-toulouse.fr>