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## **War on the Web. The various frames of Libya's conflict in French online news.**

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### **Introduction**

Undoubtedly, the web is now one of the main means of massive public expression. Yet the contemporary online news sector is the result of a complex set of relations established between professional media, amateur content producing communities and powerful intermediaries such as Google (Rebillard & Smyrnaio, 2010). From this point of view, the electronic public sphere is more likely to be considered as a conflicting arena, rather than a peaceful marketplace of ideas (Peters, 2004), where news and politics embody rival editorial, political and industrial strategies (Mosco, 2009; Fenton, 2009). In this context, news websites have to make editorial choices to situate themselves in a *continuum* opposing productivity to creativity and reactivity to reflexivity. Indeed, when it comes to the question of pluralism of online journalism, one can observe an opposition axis: on the one side there are high traffic news websites, with strong commercial constraints that are highly dependent from news agencies; on the other side there are low traffic news websites that are more autonomous, creative and often less dependent on time and money constraints.

Previous results of our research project IPRI (Internet, Pluralism and Redundancy of Information)<sup>1</sup> tend to prove that pluralism coexists on the web with strong redundancy tendencies (Smyrnaio et al., 2010). Our quantitative study of French-speaking news websites showed that their production has quite similar characteristics to those of traditional media. News appears to be both varied and very unevenly distributed. Indeed, our study illustrates a classic power law distribution, as old as those of Pareto, Zipf or

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Bradford: a minority of the most important topics in the news agenda occupies the majority of content.

There are two main reasons that can explain this situation: firstly, the nature of digital information that allows widespread duplication; secondly the particular constraints of online news economy that determines how online newsroom function. Indeed, the enormous quantity of information daily produced and reproduced online by a large spectrum of entities provokes a situation of oversupply. The information is systematically computerized, that is stored and/or processed in systems of computers and networks, allowing massive duplication processes to operate with very low costs. This digital content supply is then provided to millions of users around the globe through a multiplicity of channels and tools (rss feeds, search engines, social networks sites, personalized portals, aggregators, blogs etc.) that, in their great majority, do not produce original content. At the same time, as recent research shows, there is a strong tendency towards high productivity inside online newsrooms (Domingo and Paterson, 2011). Constrained by permanent deadlines for publishing and a general injunction to immediacy, online journalists tend to concentrate on rewriting and editing, relying on existing material at the expense of original reporting (Degand, 2011).

In the light of these findings, we can assert that the quantitative growth of online information circulation does not necessarily mean that online news is more diverse in journalistic terms. Nevertheless, these previous findings were based on an agenda-setting approach (Dearing & Rogers, 1992), trying to identify and measure the variety of issues dealt with in French news websites. This paper, which is a part of the same research project, aims at measuring the diversity of online news in France from another point of view. Its goal is to complete previous quantitative results with a focus on a particular subject: the journalistic treatment of the Libyan Revolution in 2011. More precisely, it provides a lexicometrical analysis of the covering of this uprising against Muammar Gaddafi by French news websites. An initial quantitative analysis of online news agenda in France, led among more than 200 news websites from 7<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, showed that this particular issue was covered in a very large extend. Our purpose here is to pursue our analysis of the question of pluralism from a frame analysis perspective (Entman, 1993). This in order to determine whether the multiplicity of sources available online favors or not the variety of frames provided by online media on a major issue, such as the Libyan uprising. This is because pluralism refers not only to the spectrum of issues that are present in the media, but also in the manner in which these issues are covered and the opinions and political debates that are associated to them.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Frames analysis and pluralism in media discourse*

Since the 1980's, the media frames analysis approach has produced a wide range of academic literature in the United States (but much less in Europe and particularly in France). One of the first authors who used the concept of frames to designate the construction of meaning by the media is Gitlin (1980). For him, « media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, for some

important degree, for us who rely on their reports » (p.8). One important aspect he insists on is that frames are not opinions. Much broader, they constitute a conceptual space that organizes speech and leads the construction of meaning. Rather than opinions, frames can be seen as « *interpretive packages* » guiding both activities of producing and understanding discourse, so that the same frame can include more or less conflicting opinions and integrate a certain degree of controversy (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). According to Gamson and Modigliani, as far as journalism is concerned, frames tend to be influenced by professional norms and routines in the selection of sources, in the definition of the *newsworthiness*<sup>2</sup> and in the use of discursive patterns to build the news. But for these authors as well as for Gitlin, media discourse is not the starting point of people's way of thinking: « Each system interacts with the other: media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in public discourse » (p.2).

One other important point mentioned by Gamson (1992) is the existence of a « framing contest », in which different groups of interest are competing to impose their own definition of facts in the media. The means of access to the media that these groups own tend to determine their presence in the news and, consequently, their public audience. From this starting point Entman (1993) elaborated a precise definition of what is framing activity for media: « To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described » (p.52). For Entman, the social world is like a kaleidoscope of potential realities and the media tend to favor some aspects of it. This phenomenon is partly due to cultural backgrounds of journalists (as all journalists are audiences too), but also to the nature of relations they establish with sources and, once again, to current journalistic norms and routines, leading to numerous biases in the construction of news. Therefore, the main research question in this paper, according to this theoretical framework, is to determine whether the different categories of online news websites provide a greater variety of frames in covering important issues such as the Libyan conflict.

### *Categorizing news websites*

Our previous work allowed us to map the French internet news landscape by categorizing different types of websites providing news (Smyrnaiois et al., op. cit.). We distinguished at the time six news websites categories: *news media digital outlets* (online versions of existing medias), *webzines* (news websites without an offline counterpart), *participatory journalism websites* (publishing user-generated content), *blogs* (personal and mostly amateur sites), *portals* (news components of multiservice platforms) and *aggregators* (sites that package links to news content in an automated way). This first categorization was mostly based on the typology proposed by Rebillard (2006), inspired by Deuze (2003). But as some changes have progressively occurred in the web in recent years, this categorization has now to be updated. First, the frontier between *aggregators* and *portals* has been blurred, because both now use automated process to aggregate and publish news. Consequently, we merged these two categories into a single one labeled *infomediaries*, defined as services that operate a mix of edition, aggregation and distribution of third party content between supply and demand

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<sup>2</sup> That is the value of a fact or an account, in terms of economic return as well as public interest.

of news (Smyrnaio, 2012). In addition to that we also merged *webzines* and *participatory journalism websites* into a new category we called *pure players*. This category includes all news websites that were born on the Internet without being affiliated to traditional media and that are including a variable level of regulation by user communities (and sometimes professional newsroom). We then propose a simplified and renewed categorization that distinguishes *news media digital outlets*, *pure players*, *blogs* and *infomediaries*. However, inside each category, a particular attention must be paid to the question of professionalism and amateurship. Indeed there is a difference between amateur bloggers writing in their own blog and professional journalists blogging in a site owned by their media company, or even between pure players whose content is mostly produced by amateurs or, at the opposite, by a professional newsroom.

## Methodology

### *The sample of websites*

The IPRI corpus is made of articles released by websites that publish information and comments about general and political news, and dedicate most of their production to French national news. Technically, we performed a listing of all websites corresponding to these criteria. On the basis of a previous corpus, constituted between 2008 and 2010, the list has been updated manually for news media digital outlets, infomediaries and for some pure players. This listing included 14 infomediaries and 42 news media online, which is a comprehensive sample for France. Then, through a set of different methods (retrieval within blog aggregators, use of a navi-crawling<sup>3</sup> software) we identified 111 blogs and 42 pure players matching our criteria, bringing the total number of considered websites to 209.

### *The corpus of articles*

The corpus of news articles that we analyzed focuses on a particular issue: the uprising in Libya. It is composed of all the articles covering that issue on Tuesday, March 8 2011. The choice to focus on these particular issue and day is motivated by the will to study what Moirand (2007) called a “discursive moment”, that is a fact that occurs in real world at one point in time and that becomes an event through media attention. The initial quantitative analysis of online news agenda, from 7<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, showed that the Lybian revolution was covered in a very large extent. We then focused our analysis more precisely on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March and the particularly violent episode of the battle in Ras Lanouf. Of course all websites didn’t publish new content on that day, in particular pure players and blogs. Finally, our corpus was composed of 179 articles, distributed as following in our four categories of websites:

Website categories	Nb of websites	Nb of articles/category
Blogs	(111 websites e.g. Sarkofrance)	2
Infomediaries	(14 websites e.g. Google News & MSN)	28
Online news media	(42 websites e.g. LeMonde.fr & Tf1.fr)	123
Pure players	(42 websites e.g. Rue 89 & Mediapart)	26

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to a Firefox plug-in developed by Web Atlas: <http://webatlas.fr/wp/navicrawler/>

<b>Total</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>179</b>
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Table 1

We can immediately notice that some websites are much more productive than others. For instance, our sample of news media websites has released 123 articles, whereas blogs have produced only two articles. Blogs, as previously mentioned, are much less productive than professional media, as their amateur practice doesn't depend on reactivity or profitability constraints. But there is more that explains this huge gap. On March 8, the Libyan conflict appeared to be the first issue in the online media agenda. The second one was the result of a poll indicating that the far-right leader Marine Le Pen was leading voting attentions for the French presidential election in 2012. It makes no doubt that this story caught French bloggers' attention, first because most of them are highly involved in politics, and also because this particular issue is more easy to deal with than an international subject implying diplomatic issues, as they clearly can't afford to cover Libyan conflict from the ground. We can detect an agenda bias in these two characteristics of blogs: overrepresentation of domestic politics and lack of means to cover international issues. As a result, in our sample of blogs there were 24 blog posts on the subject of Marine Le Pen this particular day compared to only two on Libya. Nevertheless, March 8 was also particularly interesting as far as Libya was concerned. The resurgence of violence in Ras Lanouf on that day made the question of UN military intervention more pressing.

#### *The automated cluster analysis*

To answer our main question, that is determining whether the different categories of online news websites provide a greater variety of frames on the Libyan conflict, we used the Iramuteq<sup>4</sup> software that operates textual statistics (Lebart & Salem, 1994), following the method of hierarchical cluster analysis (Reinert, 2007; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008). This method carries out successive splits of the text. It finds the strongest vocabulary oppositions in the text and then extracts some categories of representative terms. This methodology does not require *a priori* knowledge about the text to be analyzed. In consequence it is particularly adapted to our sample.

This included 179 articles from 41 different publishing websites (out of 209), leading to a corpus of 115,975 *occurrences* (i.e. words) and 9,890 *forms* (i.e. different words). We then applied computerized content analysis with Iramuteq in order to identify frames and to measure their use by different websites, in the tradition of *frame mapping* (Matthes & Kohring, 2008) based on the classic definition advanced by Entman (1993). The technique of automated frame mapping is considered by Baumgartner and Mahoney as a good means to improve validity and reliability of the identification of frames: « Methodological advances in computer science now allow much greater use of complex analytic schemes, assisted by computer technologies (not driven by them) to measure the relative use of different frames by different actors in the process » (p.447). Frames are here considered as viewpoints built in media discourse, through « universes of discourse » (Reinert, 2007) developed in speech, considering them as specific constructions of reality concerning a particular event. This analysis allows us to identify and label frames conveyed by online news discourse, on the

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<sup>4</sup> Iramuteq is a software published under a GNU GPL licence and developed by Pierre Ratinaud, Lerass research group, University of Toulouse. <http://www.iramuteq.org>

basis of statistically significant co-occurrences of words, as well as repeated phrase segments. Identifying precisely the lexical specificities of the frames is an essential step to label them, as they mainly consist of salient *and* omitted words. Indeed, Entman (op. cit.) consider that « most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience » (p.54). Then we can measure the use of the previously labeled frames by the different news websites, so as to picture the main tendencies of French online news landscape in framing Libyan conflict.

## Results and interpretation

### *A panorama of frames: the dendrogram figure*

Applying the cluster analysis, we identified three different frames (labeled as 'classes' in Figure 1) concerning conflict in Libya:

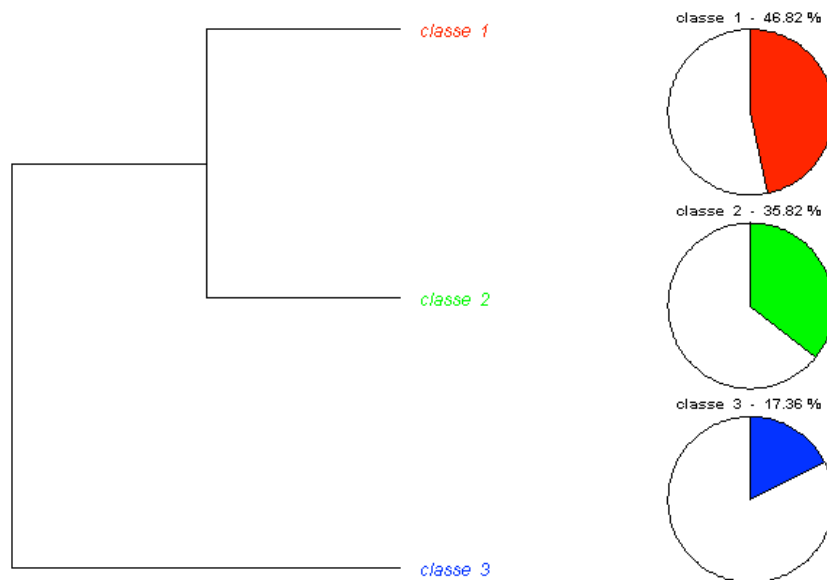


Figure 1

### *Detailed description of the frames:*

The first frame (red) represents about 47% of the corpus. It essentially focuses on geopolitical stakes of the perspective of an international forces intervention in Libya, in an analytical and rather critical way towards governments (mainly French and American ones). Its specific words are related to economic and geopolitical interests, like the following<sup>5</sup>: war, oil, market, price, revolution, Tunisia, threaten, America, imperialism, Africa, Occident, military, Islamist, young, arrive, year, Egypt, political, become, Italian, important, American, woman, army, day, frontier, world, Al Qaeda, mercenary, movement, red, observe, stock, explain, refugee, Iraq, risk, officer, supply, manifestation, defense, revolutionary, popular,

<sup>5</sup> The words given here are English translations of the original words, as the articles were obviously written in French language. This explains why the extracts remain in French.

specialist, victory, king, profit, life, black, intervention, conflict, worldwide, tactic, help, control, production, develop, ship, expert, need, affect, fear, interest.

As an illustration, here is one extract from the amateur pure player website Bellaciao, which the cluster analysis has identified as characteristic of this frame:

*« Par contre, Barack Obama pourrait devoir faire face à un problème plus grave que le Kosovo : l'augmentation des prix du pétrole menace déjà de stopper le rétablissement économique et par conséquent de réduire considérablement ses chances d'être réélu l'année prochaine. On ne plaisante pas avec ce genre de choses. »*

This frame is used by the two blogs of the corpus (Sarkofrance and Rebelles.info) and by pure players (Alterinfo, Le Post, Agoravox, Le Grand Soir, Bellaciao). To a lesser extent, this frame is also conveyed by the online version of French daily Le Monde. These websites question the intentions of countries helping Libyan revolution, notably through their interest towards Libyan oil and their need for a military presence there.

The second frame we identified covers about 36% of the corpus. It deals more precisely with the question of negotiations in the UN for a military intervention and for setting up a « no fly zone » in Libya. While the first frame clearly conveys a negative tone towards deciders, this one is quite neutral, focusing more on a detailed report of international negotiations. Its specific words are related to diplomatic vocabulary, as the following words show: council, nation, zone, ministry, union, negotiation, U.N., Europe, France, N.A.T.O., resolution, Arab League, exclusion, national, zone, negotiation, conference, declare, general, leave, security, parliament, international, challenge, arab, propose, advocate, offer, responsible, secretary, crime, transition, contact, plan, sanction, reject, freezing, aerial, sovereign, Alain Juppé [French Foreign Office Minister], leader, announce, guarantee, abroad, intermediary, central, favorable, chief, fund, Great Britain, Mouammar Gaddafi, Strasbourg [home of the European Parliament], confirm, sue, decision, diplomacy, community, Bruxelles [home of the European Commission], prepare, refuse, lawyer, protect, Libya, criminal, proposition, inquiry, denial, bank, government, Al-Jazeera, authority, television, divide, gulf, money, infringe, Rasmussen [NATO Secretary General], option, justice.

The following extract from the website of the economic daily Les Echos is characteristic of this frame:

*« La Ligue Arabe a prévu une réunion de crise, samedi, pour évoquer les mesures à prendre pour protéger le peuple libyen, en particulier l'établissement d'une zone d'exclusion aérienne. La France et la Grande-Bretagne préparent un projet de résolution pour le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, imposant une zone d'exclusion aérienne au-dessus de la Libye, qu'ils veulent présenter dès cette semaine. »*

This frame is mainly used by online versions of French dailies (LeFigaro.fr, LesEchos.fr, LeParisien.fr, Aujourd'hui en France, Metro.fr) and weeklies (L'Expansion.fr) but also by radio or television digital outlets (RMC.fr, FranceInfo.fr, Europe1.fr, France 24). To a lesser extent, it is also used by infomediaries (Msn actualités, Orange actualités) and by pure players (Arrêt sur images, Actualites françaises, Planet, Les Infos).

The third and last frame, covering 17% of the corpus, is dedicated to reports from Ras Lanouf, where violence was getting stronger<sup>6</sup>. Once again the discourse is mainly a factual report, but with narrative cues pointing the willingness to make the reader 'live' or 'feel' the war situation. Its specific words are related to a military vocabulary of "embedded reporting": Ras Lanouf, town, west, port, force, kilometers, raid, control, combat, bombing, rebel, dwelling, Ben Jawad, Zenten, insurgent, artillery, building, situate, inhabitant, wound, reach, attack, encircle, loyalist, position, bombardment, AFP [Agence France Presse], base, shot, floor, posture, locality, strategic, Sunday, journalist, hail, front, hunt, opposition, meter, plane, line, explode, strike, violent, shell, coast, intensive, injured, witness, vehicle, Tripoli, Tuesday, progression, road, huge, desert, siege, fire, damage, edge, counter, sacrifice, documentary, film, respond, victim, car, rocket, near, bodies, night, Syrt, highway, cloud, fear, air force, missile, instruction, village, opponent, Misratah, scream, heavy.

The following extract from the website of the French television channel TF1 / LCI is characteristic of this frame:

*« L'aviation a bombardé la ville pétrolière de Ras Lanouf, base la plus avancée de l'opposition dans l'Est, faisant un blessé et touchant un immeuble. La banlieue ouest du port pétrolier, à environ 300 km au sud-ouest de Benghazi, a été pilonnée et trois personnes ont été blessées. »*

This frame is clearly over-used by television websites (TF1/LCI.fr, France2.fr, France3.fr) in articles that accompany video footage from Libya. But it is also used by some newspapers (Liberation.fr, LesEchos.fr, Aujourd'hui en France, JDD.fr). Their online production provides stories from embedded witnesses and/or reporters, or comes from agency wires. Some infomediaries (Voilà Actualités, Orange Actualités) and the pure player Planet.fr also used this frame, but in a more sporadic way.

### *Mapping websites discursive identity*

Processing the words co-occurrence frequency for each website, the factor analysis<sup>7</sup> allows us to measure statistically the lexical distance between each website. The graphic representation of this factor analysis locates each website of the corpus on an orthonormal plan (Figure 2). The distance of each media on the plan then illustrates its place towards others, on the basis of its lexical identity in the treatment of the issue. The three colors match those of the *dendrogram* and indicate the main frame each website has favored in its treatment of Libyan conflict.

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<sup>6</sup> We can notice that this frame, whose facts are geographically apart from the others, is also the first to distinguish statistically (see figure above). This characteristic reinforces the validity and relevance of hierarchical clusters.

<sup>7</sup> In French « Analyse factorielle des correspondances » (AFC)



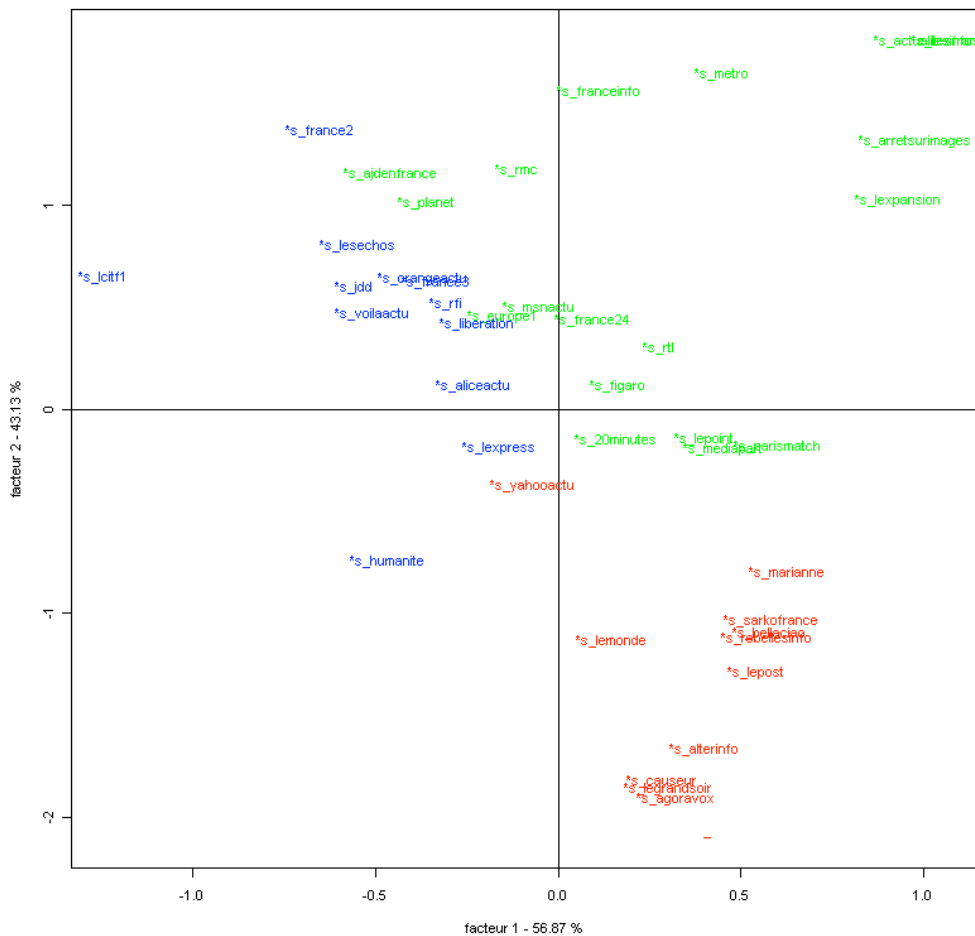


Figure 2

### What do we learn from our results?

These results tend to confirm some strong tendencies observed in our previous work: pure players and blogs distinguish themselves by focusing on comment and debates about the situation, in a rather polemist approach. We make the hypothesis that they neglect ground report because of the lack of means to carry it out ~~that would allow them ground report in Libya~~. On their side, traditional news media mainly avoid opinion and debate to the benefit of factual and objective reports of diplomatic and military situations. Each traditional media seems to import to the web its discursive specificities: the way it covers news online doesn't change much compared to its original outlet.

Indeed, daily and weekly newspapers have mainly focused on the diplomatic stakes of the UN debate about the no-fly-zone, while television and radio broadcast have privileged embedded real-time reports, including audio and video footage from Libya. In terms of discourse construction, the aim of television and radio websites is to provide news with a strong reactivity and to offer an emotional thrill to the audiences, as they do in their traditional outlet. Online print media have rather a propensity to recount stories, passing on to audiences the diverse quotes and opinions conveyed by a wide range of actors, with a clear advantage to official sources such as government and international organizations. Nevertheless, some of them contribute to a real discussion about the situation (for example

LeMonde.fr), trying to analyze the stakes of the international intervention. But even when there is a debate, journalists themselves don't take part in it as they avoid expressing personal views in favor of one position or another. Here we can detect the importance of professional norms in the press such as objectivity, which is one of the most shared professional values that journalists tend to respect in order to reinforce their credibility.

At the opposite, pure players and blogs are digital native media. Their identities are structured around other values, founded on amateurship in an explicit opposition to journalistic norms (Matheson, 2004) even though they can be domesticated by professionals and traditional media companies (Singer, 2005). Actually amateur bloggers take the opposite way to the mainstream journalistic treatment of news. Political commitment and personal opinion are much more important to those actors than to fit into the norms of credibility or professionalism. However, there is a distinction to make between real amateur pure players, such as Agoravox, AlterInfo or Le Grand Soir, and some of them who are (or want to stand for) professional media, such as Planet, LesInfos or Actualités françaises. The difference being that the former are structured as associations or independent bloggers, while the latter try to monetize their activity mostly through advertisement. This socioeconomic discrepancy that characterizes different kind of pure players tends to influence the frames that are being used.

More generally, we can consider in conclusion that our results lead us to a better understanding of the global news arena. They do confirm the complementarity between professional and citizen-based media that Reese and his colleagues (2007) found through an analysis of the linking patterns between blogs and news websites. By conducting a content analysis upon a whole national online media landscape (news media digital outlets and blogs, but also pure players and infomediaries), our study brings a new element. It shows a dual dimension in this complementarity. Even though most websites tend to focus on the same major issues of the media agenda, some of them tend to adopt radically different framings of particular issues. The amateur news websites clearly add a layer of opinion and debate to the factual and objective journalistic treatment that professional news websites mainly deliver. This kind of contribution to the public sphere could be studied further by both quantitative and qualitative content analyses. Moreover, in order to know if such an opportunity for the diversity as sent is actually transformed in diversity as received (Van der Wurff, 2011), this work should be completed by observations and surveys among internet users.

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