The development of local online journalism in South-Western France: the case of *La Dépêche du Midi*

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Abstract
 Since the advent and consolidation of the web as a news medium, expectations about its positive role in journalism diversity were high, especially when it comes to the local public space. Our study aims at examining professional practices in the online newsroom of a French local newspaper, *La Dépêche du Midi*, through ethnographic observation. The paper also examines the business model of the publisher's internet subsidiary and the impact of financial constraints on its editorial strategy. We found that despite a great potential for the development of online journalism in a local level, in this case insufficient resources as well as a purely marketing-centered vision of executives limits editorial and journalistic innovation.
 Keywords: online, journalism, local, newspaper, strategy, content, newsroom

In France the Regional Daily Press (RDP) is the central element of the local and regional public sphere. This situation results from a number of its features and functions. First, in many territories of France regional and local newspapers are monopolies. The consolidation movement, which has been engaged since the 50s, led to a sharing of French territory between a few major groups of RDP (Le Floch, 1997). Nowadays, more and more territories are covered by only one local journal. In addition, the development of the RDP was accompanied by the creation of a large network of correspondents and the opening of local offices throughout the covered territory (Lerner, 1977). This field presence in each municipality or township makes each regional publisher the only professional player able to cover local information in detail. Furthermore, the RDP's field presence is organized upon electoral and administrative boundaries, a characteristic that makes it undoubtedly central to the organization of local politics (Tetu, 1995). Thus, through these features, the RDP in France contributes to strengthening territorial identification of its readers, as it does in other countries (Kaniss, 1991).

The RDP proposes also valuable services to its readers. In France, it's virtually the only medium capable of delivering a daily comprehensive directory of all service information covering especially rural territories (from the obituary section, to the local theaters' program and the pharmacies on duty). This feature makes it an instrument of daily life and an agent of integration into local life (Martin, 2002). Finally, the RDP links its readers to the political, economic and social players of the territory maintaining a social bond which participates in the functioning of local societies (Tetu, 1995; Ballarini, 2008).

Nevertheless, this somewhat idyllic description of the RDP needs to be revised today. Indeed, local and regional as well as national media are going through important changes and adjustments due to several reasons: the emergence of "generalized public relations" (Miege, 1995); the development of the internet and its economic and editorial consequences; constant changes in readership practices; the presence of new entrants in the field of local information. A number of trends regarding the changes undergone by the digital media at national level should be considered for local media as well.

In the field of contemporary journalistic practices, recent research found that journalist background and working conditions in newsrooms are changing rapidly (Estienne, 2008). For istance, deadlines have disappeared online and information is expected to be produced and published in real time. This leads to what Chris Paterson (2008) calls "shovelware phenomena" (repackaging content produced for other media) with news agency and print setting the agenda for websites. Online journalism tends to become a "passive journalism" relying in news providers such as news agencies and public relations (McManus, 1994). This trend is also related to the second class status that online news professionals occupy. What counts as journalism in the contemporary media environment is more open to negotiation than before (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009).

At the same time, it appears that the form of the news is changing, marked by increasing convergence (Klinenberg, 2005) but also new technical constraints (Cabrolié, 2010). This results in online newsroom employees becoming frequently agents of editorial innovation (Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2011). For instance, an important innovative trend is community and user generated content management (Flichy, 2010; Wardle & Williams, 2010). Readers' practices such as seeking information through search engines and recommendations on social networks are also developments that publishers are required to consider as such powerful infomediaries impose new conditions in news circulation and monetization (Rebillard & Smyrnaios, 2010). Finally, a crucial stake is that of viable economic

models of online media (Ahlers, 2006). For the moment no lasting solution applicable to all the players has appeared. Nevertheless, an overreliance to advertising revenues is clear and subscription models seem particularly difficult to implement (Chyi, 2005).

Method

The main axis of our research project is the study on the economic and editorial models of the local press in the Midi-Pyrenees region[1]. In order to address them, we focus in this work on one player *La Dépêche du Midi* leading newspaper in the Midi-Pyrénées. Our methods are inspired by recent research (Paterson & Domingo, 2008). We applied a qualitative approach including a dozen of interviews with stakeholders in the journal (senior managers, journalists, stringers and technicians) that were held in their workplaces in 2009. The interviews were accompanied by ethnographic observations of their work practices. In supplement we collected and analyzed a corpus of various internal documents such as financial statements, strategic guides and reports, market research and readership analyses. We will first present the economic strategy and business model of *La Dépêche du Midi* on the web, before considering its editorial model in its two dimensions, print and web, less hermetically separated than managerial views suggests.

The group *La Dépêche du Midi*

Undoubtedly the most important player in the media of the Midi-Pyrénées region is the group *La Dépêche du Midi* built around the eponymous newspaper. Created in the second half of the nineteenth century, during the Franco-Prussian War, *La Dépêche* originally focused on news from the front and later became a newspaper of general information about the area of Toulouse. In the early twentieth century, bought by two brothers from the Ariège region, it developed over a larger geographic area and became a major popular and politically engaged newspaper. Indeed, besides an interest in daily life on its geographical area, *La Dépêche*, like most French local newspapers of the time, endorsed a political family: the Radicals. Its influence asserted during the inter-war and its territorial hegemony was confirmed after the Second World War. In the 80's the Baylet family, who controls the newspaper since 1927, built a media group including several newspapers in the Midi-Pyrénées region (*La Dépêche du Midi, Midi Olympique, Le Petit Toulousain, La Nouvelle République des Pyrénées, Le Petit Bleu, Le Villefranchois*), classifieds newspapers (*Publi-Toulouse, Publi-Pyrenees*), magazines (*Toulouse Mag, Toulouse Femmes, Toulouse Matchs*) and a broadcast news agency (*La Dépêche TV*). Today the group also has participations in newspapers of Montpellier and Nimes and in the local television station of Toulouse TLT. Besides the Baylet family the two main shareholders of the group *La Dépêche* are industrial conglomerates such as the Lagardère Group and the pharmaceutical company Pierre Fabre.

The newspaper nowadays covers the Midi-Pyrénées Region of South-Western France (with a population of approximately 2,5M, out of which about 1M lives around the city of Toulouse) where it's daily sales are about 200,000. After a strong deficit of around 7.5 million Euros in 2008, the group regained profitability in 2009 earning a profit of 1.7 million Euros for a turnover of around 118 million Euros. This recovery is mainly due to drastic cost reductions including eighty lay-offs in 2009 on a total of 1040 employees. Nowadays, the main shareholder of the group, Jean-Michel Baylet, is at the same time President of the Radical Party of the Left, member of the French Senate, President of the General Council of the Tarn-et-Garonne department and one of the richest businessmen in the region. This extreme situation of collusion between politics, media and business, which was usual in the

French press in late nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, is now an exception but still remains unchanged in the Midi-Pyrénées region.

The digital strategy of *La Dépêche du Midi*

From the beginning the group has spanned off its internet activities. The subsidiary *La Dépêche Interactive* was established in 1997 with the aim of creating and maintaining the websites of the group's two main journals, *La Dépêche* and the *Midi Olympique*, which is a sports weekly with focus on rugby. In the late 90s, the audience of French websites was low, due to the relatively low penetration of the internet, and advertising revenues resulting from that activity were nonexistent. That's the reason that pushed *La Dépêche Interactive* to quickly turn itself into a web agency with several activities (creation of websites and related services, CD-ROMs, interactive terminals, databases) that allowed the company to break even.

In the 2000s, an additional effort was made to promote the websites of *La Dépêche* and *Midi Olympique* in order to increase audience and advertising revenue. At the same time the group established a partial pay-wall on the two sites, in an early version of a *Freemium* model (Groeneveld & Sethi, 2010). These attempts to leverage the group's internet business by setting up a subscription based system quickly proved unsuccessful. The fragmentation of the subsidiary's activities between web agency services, advertising and paid content, blurred the group's strategy. That's why in 2006 it was decided to conduct an audit by an outside consultant to implement a restructuring plan for the group's internet business that included closing the web agency activities. Access to the two main sites of the group was made free and all efforts were concentrated on increasing audience and advertising revenue. In May 2007, an experienced executive was hired to implement the new strategy which appears to have paid off as the traffic of *Ladepeche.fr* has increased dramatically, from 167,000 unique visitors in 2007 to around 3 million in 2010 according to the user-centric measure of Médiamétrie.

This strategic shift has engaged a reconfiguration of the relations between the subsidiary and the mother company. Until 2006, *La Dépêche Interactive* positioned itself as a service provider for the group's websites. The subsidiary then billed its services to the parent company. Since 2007 the cash flow has been reversed: the subsidiary now buys the newspaper's content as it does with news agencies.

To this date *La Dépêche Interactive* operates four websites: *Ladepeche.fr, Midipress.fr, Publi.fr* (classified ads) and *Rugbyrama.fr*, the website of *Midi Olympique* in partnership with *Eurosport*. It employs eight people who work mostly for the website of *La Dépêche*. According to its head, *La Dépêche Interactive* is a "machine that generates traffic". Not a structure intended to produce original articles, but only to edit newspaper and agency content and thus generate advertising revenue. This is a purely marketing approach that considers the web and mobile platforms simply as additional distribution channels for existing content and not a means for regenerating journalistic practices and formats. The fact that the executive who heads the internet subsidiary is at the same time Director of marketing of the group reinforces this view.

The advertising revenues of the internet company come as far as 90% from the regional market (professional and classified display advertising). The rest comes in roughly equal proportions from national publicity campaigns and Google Adsense. The share of income from online subscriptions is negligible. Advertising revenues are supplemented by advertorials that are often sold together on print and web to businesses or institutional

players such as municipalities and local authorities. In 2009, the subsidiary broke even: with a turnover of 1.9 million Euros the company had a profit of 60,800 Euros thanks to low costs. Breaking even was a major goal of the new management because pressure from the newspaper executives was great. Indeed, early in the implementation of the new digital strategy of the group, the web subsidiary was often criticized as "stealing" content and readership from the newspaper while worsening the economic deficit of the parent company.

The Online newsroom

La Dépêche du Midi operates a tight separation between the journalists who produce the print edition of the newspaper and those that publish it online. Geographically distant from one another, the newspaper's editorial staff has no contact with the team of the website. The first one is located in the Cépière area (south of Toulouse) in the vast premises of the group, the second is located boulevard de Suisse (north) in a small building shared with other companies. This separation is a calculated act that reflects the will of the group's executives to refuse any editorial prerogative to the team of *Ladepeche.fr*.

At the same time, the central newsroom of the newspaper as well as the local correspondents are kept away from the process of online publishing. The journalists of the newspaper that we interviewed told us that they knew that their papers were published online, but they did not really know how, or under what conditions. In the same vein, employees of *Ladepeche.fr* are careful not to claim any editorial prerogatives, even if the type of task before them is certainly at least partly journalistic. Thus, we have on one side "news producers" (the journalists who work for the newspaper) and on the other hand editors whose main task is to adapt that content to the context of the web.

How does the website influences newspaper journalists

According to the sayings of newspaper executives but also journalists with whom we spoke, their daily work hasn't changed dramatically since the creation of *Ladepeche.fr*. The previous period of the 90's, with the computerization of the newspaper and the adoption of software for journalists to directly lay-out the content seems to have been more important in terms of organizational changes. Journalists have received no special instructions or editorial guidelines intended to improve online publishing of their work. Nevertheless, evidence gathered during our interviews implies that the changes in journalistic practices introduced indirectly by the website are quiet important in at least one dimension: taking into account the audience's preferences as they are expressed through traffic statistics and adapting their stories to them.

Indeed, aware that their work is systematically published online, newspaper journalists can find out in real time through the company's intranet how many visitors clicked on their articles, where from, at what moment etc. Some journalists working in a local small-town office of the newspaper told us that, thanks to traffic statistics of the website, they were able to make daily competitions for appointing the winner author of the article with the most views. Others admitted that after having noticed that certain type of subjects generated more clicks than others they tend to write more papers related to them. Finally, some journalists said that during editorial conferences, the head of the local edition made explicit reference to the figures of the website as an important element in the choice of topics and angles. This evidence suggests that the website has created an instrument for quantitative evaluation of journalists' work which is quiet a novelty. Until recently, only the

sales figures, letters to the editor and readership surveys enabled journalists and editors to get feedback on their work. That feedback came after some time and was generally not very detailed. Journalists always knew empirically what sort of content was more popular than other, but didn't have tangible real time proof of that.

Now, the internet traffic figures provide an instant quantitative judgment on each individual item of content. The quantitative logic of maximum audience, well known in commercial TV (Bourdon 1994), seems to settle in the print media through their digital outlets. The online newspaper is no longer a single entity evaluated editorially and financially as a whole like its print counterpart, but the sum of content items whose individual value is measured through the number of clicks they receive. This phenomenon has two major consequences: first, cross-subsidies between different types of content online are much weaker than in print (Shirky, 2009); second, the quantitative trend that invades local newspapers through the internet can potentially drive and deepen editorial changes.

The "editorial webmasters" of *Ladepeche.fr*

The newsroom of *Ladepeche.fr* occupies about two hundred square meters, with four offices occupied by executives, a meeting room and a large open space staffed with four editors who are referred to internally as "editorial webmasters". According to the executive director of the subsidiary, their mission is to adapt the newspaper's content to the internet and to increase advertising revenue. The work of the editorial webmasters is basically described as formatting and marketing news content. In reality this description of the website's operations is correct but incomplete because it does not reflect the entire work of the team which in many respects carries out real editorial tasks. However, the insistence on the fact that the website's editorial staff is not "journalistic" has a pecuniary explanation: the actual collective agreement in the company, which regulates the terms and conditions in work, is that of the technicians in the computer industry (Syntec). This means that, for example, a newly hired employee of *La Dépêche Interactive* in 2011 would start at the minimum wage in France (1,073 Euros net). If the staff of *Ladepeche.fr* had access to the status of journalist and the associated collective agreement, salaries would be much higher. Behind the strategic option of non production of original content from the website staff, there is the will to simply minimize salary costs.

In the same vein, the team is "ideally" consisting of 12 persons, as indicated by its head, but in fact at the time of our observation in July 2009, the team had only 8 people, because of "insufficient advertising revenue". Four of them occupy the position of webmaster and are primarily responsible for managing the incoming flows of three main types of content:
- All the articles of more than 400 characters that are produced by the newspaper. These articles are published automatically on the website at 5 am and then are rearranged by the web team all through the day ;
- Press agency news from AFP (general news) and Actustar (TV-entertainment) acquired by subscription;
- Various service contents (traffic, weather, jokes, TV programs, etc..) purchased to suppliers such as France Météo or acquired by partnership. Numerous editorial processes are provided by the website team on the basis of this content: prioritization, headlining, search engine optimization and comment moderation.

Content prioritization

The first task of the so-called webmasters is to operate a manual process of prioritization of content. First, this process consists in eliminating automatically published

improper content. For example, the group's policy was, at the time of our investigation, to keep the main service and practical information (obituaries, birthdays, weddings, pharmacies and doctors on call) for the print version. Thus, the webmasters of the site manually remove these items that may have surpassed the number of characters required to switch automatically to the website's database. In theory, anything that can relate to the obituary section or civil status must be taken offline. Nevertheless, at the time of the observation, a debate took place between webmasters that could be summarized in arbitrating between the logic of the audience (keep all content to create traffic) and the preservation of newspaper (keep service information unavailable online).

Second, prioritization consists in composing the 26 items list that will appear in the same order in the newsletter, sent everyday to about 100,000 subscribers, and on the homepage. This is done according to principles leaving room for interpretation and personally motivated choices from the website staff. The main objective of prioritization of content is to generate the most of the traffic possible. So webmasters tend to systematically highlight on the homepage the items that have already had or are expected to receive many views. However, alongside with traffic generation potential, other factors must be taken into account in the process. According to the person responsible for the homepage/newsletter ranking, in her work she tries to reflect a certain territorial balance in the region by ensuring that each department is represented almost daily. She avoids to use too many news items about sport, scabrous stories, crime, or tragic accidents, even though such articles have high click rates, and ensures that politics or international news as well as some magazine style issues (health, mode etc.) are also present. This indicates a gap between the journalists' and the consumers' preferences that results from high level preferences about public affairs news on the journalist side and much lower level on the consumer side (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Walter, 2011).

The prioritization of content is too important to be made automatically or only on a click ranking basis. The person in charge of the homepage/newsletter list feels she carries an important responsibility regarding the type of information that is put forward and therefore the image of the media that is reflected. The day we made the observation, she made several important decisions concerning the homepage/newsletter list, such as fostering an article qualified as "more joyful" including an emphasis on cultural life, and that of choosing the theme of international events, namely the G7 meeting in Italy. Crucial for the image of the website but also for attracting audience this prerogative is eminently a journalistic one.

Editing, search engine optimization and (non) community management

The second important task performed by the team of webmasters is editing: changing headlines and adding key words and photographs to the articles. Three dimensions are identified in this task: explicitation, localization and adaptation to the online context. On the one hand editing aims at making the content of the site more attractive to users, thereby increasing the click rate, on the other hand it aims at improving search engine optimization for *Ladepeche.fr* and thus capturing a floating audience.

As mentioned previously, the articles of the newspaper are automatically published online with their original title. As part of the printed newspaper, an article is located within a territorialized section and intended for a readership with minimal knowledge of the issues and players in its territory. However, all the contextual elements (column, department, city) of the article disappear when it is published online. Thus, the elliptical headlines, not explicit or built on word games, are rewritten by webmasters. The latter also add the name of the location of the reported event to the headline and assign keywords to the metadata

describing the content of their article in order for that to reach the various sections of the site. Localization is extremely important for the organization of the website since many articles do not contain explicit reference to a municipality. The work of the webmaster is to check the location in the newspaper when he can find no indication in the text. Another dimension of the webmasters' work, close to the previous, is adapting content to the context of the internet. Indeed, the headlines in the online version must be explicit but also catchy. Unlike the printed newspaper, where only the first page headlines serve as a showcase to attract potential readers, on the internet all the articles headlines play this role. According to the webmasters they must give a quick overview of the content of the article but also tempt the visitor to click.

Thereafter, a second element comes into play: the presence on search engines. This is crucial for the site with more than 40% of its visits coming from Google's users performing queries on trending topics. *Ladepeche.fr* is undoubtedly the best known website for local and regional news in Midi-Pyrénées so its market share in that area is preponderant. In consequence its potential for audience growth comes mostly from other regions of France where people are not particularly interested in local news of Midi-Pyrénées, but for national and international stories. So for the group *La Dépêche*, search engine optimization is decisive in order to enlarge its market share outside its traditional fief. For infomediaries like Google News, responsiveness, real time and extensive coverage as well as inclusion of popular keywords are key dimensions (Smyrnaios & Rebillard, 2009). In order to improve the position of *Ladepeche.fr* in search results and aggregators, some headlines are modified during the day to give the impression that new content has been created. This is particularly true for national and international news provided through the subscription to AFP agency. The employ of an SEO specialist in the company demonstrates the strategic importance of this activity.

Once the headline and the keywords defined, webmasters add a photo to all the articles that do not have one already. For this, they have access to the newspaper's bank of images that includes all published and unpublished photos taken by professionals, amateur local correspondents or acquired from other local newspapers or agencies. The choice of a photography is clearly a journalistic prerogative, even though it is perceived by webmasters only as an illustration activity and is done very hastily. Finally, the website's staff inserts links in some of the articles. In no case these links are outgoing to third party sites. *Ladepeche.fr* is a news site closed on itself. The architecture of the site, consisting in a multitude of inserts giving an impression of openness to the outside, is thought to keep the user inside the perimeter of the site as long as possible.

In the afternoon, once all the formatting tasks are completed, webmasters update stories, especially on national and international news, and change the homepage. For this, they base themselves on the AFP feed for general information and on Actustar for information on entertainment and celebrities. They also manage user generated content which is minimal given there are neither hosted readers blogs nor a forum. The participation of the readers on the website limits itself in comments under articles. The main task of the webmasters is to erase insulting and improper comments. This is done a first time automatically by filtering comments including a predefined list of keywords and then by hand. After a full day of work, the editorial webmasters consider comment moderation as drudgery and act in consequence. There is an official Facebook page (5,500 fans) and a Twitter account (350 followers in May 2011)[2] of *La Dépêche* that are regularly updated. But neither the journalists of the newspaper nor the webmasters answer to readers' messages.

The media never engages in real conversation with its audience and there is no particular policy in community management basically because of lack of resources.

Discussion

The case of *La Dépêche du Midi* online newsroom is typical of general trends observed in the sector. Due to the instable business model of its internet subsidiary, based entirely on advertising revenues, and its own bad financial situation the newspaper has invested very little on its website. Organized in order to increase productivity, conceived as a "machine" for high rhythm publishing of existing material through desk work, *Ladepeche.fr* produces neither original reporting, nor innovative formats. It does not exploit user generated content or community engagement. The symbolic capital and the salaries of the people who produce the website are quiet lower than those of their newspaper counterparts. Their working conditions are also worse, something that reduces their willingness to innovate and engage themselves in the project. Nevertheless, their everyday work includes *de facto* some journalistic prerogatives, even if they are not recognized as such in the company. In conclusion, what limits the development of *La Dépêche* on the web is material constraints related to insufficient resources as well as its purely marketing-centered vision of the internet, not technologic or human potential.

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[1] This article is part of a research report supported by a grant of the Regional Council of Midi-Pyrénées: Bousquet, F., & and Smyrnaios, N. (2010). *Les nouveaux modèles économiques et éditoriaux de la presse en région Midi-Pyrénées*, July.

[2] http://www.facebook.com/pages/ladepechefr and http://twitter.com/ladepeche_fr