

# HOW HAS FRENCH POLITICAL JOURNALISM CHANGED? (1980–2017)

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**How has political journalism in France changed in the last quarter century? Any answer must highlight the crisis of confidence in the ability of political action to change the world that has developed in France and question the interdependency between the worlds of academics, politics, and the media. Political journalism has undergone a loss of status. Talk shows have become the prime forum on television for invited politicians. The clout of political reporting has declined even in the print media. At the same time, ironically, political journalism is displaying its vitality within a wider media landscape. It is to be found in new formats (blogs, books) consumed by a socially privileged audience. New codes for narrating politics are emerging: emphasis on personalities, humor or more informal speech, and use of social media. These new spaces are reorganizing an ecosystem of voices that places greater importance on experts, bloggers, and think tanks. These changes also lead back to an old dilemma: Should political journalists be analysts of a microcosm, speaking to a minority? Or should they seek ways of making sense of politics for the majority?**

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How has political journalism in France changed in the last quarter century? One difficulty in answering the question is probably that researchers' contributions on the subject have varied widely in accuracy and are not connected. Changes in print media political journalism have been well described (Kaciaf 2013) and informed by a large number of case studies (Saitta 2006). Changes in political programs on television have also been widely researched (Bonnafoous and Véron 1989; Gauthier, Gosse- lin, and Mouchon 1995; Esquenazi 1999; Neveu 2003b; Le Roux and Riutort 2013), and here the differences in definitions begin to show: is a program dealing with politics presented by "political journalists"? On the other hand, political journalism on radio and the way political journalists use books (Le Bart, Leroux, and Ringoot 2014) are less well researched. And since the various studies are seldom interconnected, they are difficult to summarize.

Changes in journalism's coverage of politics cannot be addressed without mentioning the status of political activities. Although the changes observable over the last 25 years are not linear (some elections, such as the presidential one in 2007, are times of repoliticization), a clear trend can be seen whereby increasing numbers of

citizens distance themselves from overt forms of political activity, and identification with and trust in politicians is eroded. Failure to register to vote and low turnout in elections have become the working classes' main way of relating to politics, what some have called "a democracy of abstention" (Braconnier and Dormagen 2007). Nicolas Sarkozy's sharp loss of public confidence within 18 months of his election, seen as an anomaly at the time (Neveu 2012), was overshadowed by François Hollande's even faster collapse. From a trust rating of 55 percent after his election in 2012, he fell to 24 percent a year later, and never rose above that figure, which indeed fell on occasion to 10 percent.

A full explanation of these changes would exceed the remit of this essay (cf. Mastropalo 2012). There are the many types of disillusion caused on both the left and right of politics by the experience of seven changes of direction between 1981 and 2012. The political world's focus on its own arcane topics and the sociological narrowness of its recruitment have also played a role. An analysis of the party format, as described in the "cartel party" thesis (Katz and Mair 1994), would note how the combination of public financing for and the "managerial" running of parties has led to an erosion of militancy, especially among the working class, and consequently to a reduction in the number of men and women acting as interfaces and as transmitters of the party's word to a wider public (for the *Partie Socialiste*, see Lefebvre and Sawicki 2006).

But the most decisive factor in the change of status of politics and citizens' relationship with it, as suggested by those such as Colin Crouch (2004) and Colin Hay (2007), is to be found in the political offerings. Emphasis on voters' thoughtfulness and skills in strategic calculation, by those who praise the "rational" or "strategic" voter, assumes they have the discernment to question the actual ability of the team in government to meet the challenges that affect their daily lives: mass unemployment, financial crises, funding of public expenditure, distribution of wealth. In short, when the record of government after a number of shifts in power does not suggest that any team is particularly effective at addressing issues such as unemployment, when government parties' discourse is perceived as converging on an inevitability of crisis and hard choices, when politicians are proud of passing major powers to non-elected bodies supposed to be better at using them (central banks, WTO, European Commission), then it does not require hostile media or versatile voters to cause an increase in skepticism, distrust, and even contempt towards most political movements. This simple picture needs only the addition of some of the effects of globalization and the feeling, indeed the reality, that some decision-making centers are now outside the reach of elected officials.

This essay was completed in the aftermath of the double success of Emmanuel Macron in the presidential election and of his movement *En Marche* in the general elections gaining a large majority in parliament. A complete renewal of French politics? Yes, considering that 75 percent of the parliamentarians are newcomers, that the two parties (*Partie Socialiste*, *Les Républicains*) that had dominated French political life for nearly 40 years were crushingly defeated and have split in ways that probably mean, for the *Partie Socialiste*, a lasting position on the fringes of politics.

But social sciences' task is not to overbid on their subjects' claims and beliefs. There are good reasons to remain skeptical of Macron's "revolution." The figures from the June 18, 2017, election provide a first reason: the high rate of abstention and spoiled ballots (57 percent and 4 percent, respectively) suggests a lasting and wide distance from politics in general and Macronism in particular, whose supporters made up only one-fifth of registered voters. A second reason for caution is the sociology of these new faces: they are, promisingly, younger than France's parliamentary gerontocracy, close to the private sector, with experience working for and heading companies. But while their résumés have changed, their recruitment remains elitist, perpetuating the absence from parliament of people from working-class backgrounds. Note too that many of these self-proclaimed representatives of "civil society" were already in parliament under another label and began their careers in the traditional parties. The most salient lesson of these elections, immediately forgotten, was that in the first round of the presidential election 50 percent of voters supported candidates (Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, etc.) who in their different ways sought a radical break with the institutional system, public policies, and ideas for redistributing society's wealth widely shared by government parties from 1988 to 2017. The intensive use of the elastic concept of "populism" for both the extreme Right and the radical and ecological Left is clearly intended to stigmatize. It hardly leads to a greater understanding of the force of a massive turn away from politics, both on the right-wing nationalist side and on the radical Left as embodied in particular by the Front de Gauche and La France Insoumise. The almost comical desire of the great majority of editorialists and political commentators to celebrate the discontinuities and marvels of the En Marche presidency has been passionately discussed.<sup>1</sup> It probably says much about a change of direction sufficiently well behaved to fit within the categories understood by our star journalists. This reasonable revolution brings more youthful politicians, more from private enterprise and the "creative industries"; it proposes as public policy an unabashed free-market liberalism in modern language, spiced with a pinch of libertarianism. The new government's first three moves were to announce a bill to moralize and modernize political life, the reform of labor law reducing employee protections—and de facto decriminalization of the consumption of cannabis.

So political journalism must now address a society less legible than before because its decision-making centers are less identifiable, its interdependencies more complex. And a less clearly marked political world, because the contrasts between government parties are lessening, because the concepts for interpreting it (the return of words like "center" and "populism" to embrace a wide range of players) themselves reduce the differentiation. But "less legible" and "less clearly marked" can be applied to journalism itself. The final section of this essay will examine the difficulty of identifying and classifying the players, including many outside journalism, who now talk politics in the contemporary media. The image of a

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<sup>1</sup> See studio discussion on the TV show *Arrêt sur images*, March 17, 2017, <http://www.arret-surimages.net/contenu.php?id=9673>.

world of journalism that is “less clearly marked” may be due to many journalists’ agreement with a sort of common sense, a definition of what is politically thinkable, that largely overlaps with that of the government parties. The way many of the most eminent political and economic journalists see market democracy as it currently operates as the be-all and end-all of politics is quite enough to restrict any potential criticisms. The spread of a free-market liberal economic culture and antistate dogma—via the top selective-entry schools, the zeitgeist, and economics teaching—among most political journalists and editorialists has brought them within what the free-market essayist Alain Minc has called the “circle of reason.” Jean-Pierre Esquenazi’s (1999) stimulating history of politics on television identifies Giscard d’Estaing’s presidency (1974–1981) as the point when the mode of political debate began to shift: a combination of technocratic thought among graduates of the National School of Administration (École Nationale d’Administration, ENA) and a belief in the iron laws of economics tended to make a lively two-sided debate look not like a confrontation between visions of the world, conflicting social interests, but rather as an expression of error, an inability to submit to the reality of those who speak of reorganizing labor relations. The growing clout of this dogma has consolidated these tendencies and turned this “circle” of reason into a straitjacket. Witness the lack of dissenting views among the editorialists on morning shows and Sunday *Esprit Public* program of France Culture radio and the Macron-philia, already mentioned, of the great majority of celebrated editorialists and journalists. Witness too the condescending or aggressive treatment accorded representatives of the Front National or La France Insoumise and their virtual banishment from the airwaves once the electoral period was over. This discriminatory treatment and its ambivalences require more extensive analysis. These people may admire the left-wing politician and recent presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon for his talents as a public speaker and his repartee, but the “radical” side of his ideas is unacceptable. On the other hand, the spokespeople of the Front National, although primarily perceived as threats to democracy, are given a less aggressive reception as the party gains more seats, and a spokesman like Florian Philippot manages to argue in terms perceived as more technical.

The stress placed by political professionals on differences in style and symbolic measures, at a time when differences in content are waning in political programs, finds its equivalent in journalists’ practice. The desire of many political journalists to focus their questions on leadership races and internal quarrels within parties increases the general perception of politics as an arcane activity in which professionals’ own issues trump any concern for outsiders.<sup>2</sup> The television channels’ eagerness in May 2014 not to broadcast the debate between candidates for the presidency of the European Commission—considered of no interest to view-

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<sup>2</sup> One illustration is the coverage of the internal election for the party presidency of the Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP) between François Fillon and Jean-François Copé, with all its irregularities. From November 2012 until the spring of 2013 this “arcane” battle, more about personalities than politics, was covered at length like a soap opera, with the leading personalities subjected to psychological analysis.

ers—illustrates the increasing difficulty of finding space for traditional political debate in mainstream media.

Although this self-restricting pluralism is largely due to a tacit consensus among journalists about the limits of what is “democratically reasonable,” an increasing role is played by the concentration of control of much of the French press by persons (Bernard Arnaud, Vincent Bolloré, Martin Bouygues, Serge Dassault, Patrick Drahi, Arnaud Lagardère, Xavier Niel, Matthieu Pigasse, François Pinault) who embody French versions of the oligarch, often owning groups that need the government as a placer of orders or framer of regulations favorable to their sector. Their relationship with “their” media is consequently complex. Owning a media outlet, especially a prestigious one like *Le Monde*, provides a sort of cultural legitimacy for entrepreneurs whose pasts may be murky. Media are also resources for either putting pressure on the government or giving it the reward of favorable coverage. They are also fiscal instruments whose deficits may be transferred to the holding company’s accounts, thus reducing the cost of the media “kept woman” to her industrial and financial patrons (Stern 2012). This control by major groups reduces the space for critical or irreverent comment in the mainstream media (such as Canal+, “normalized” by Bolloré), increases the number of topics where investigation is discouraged if it might irritate a powerful business partner. So there are backroom deals with the authorities, which may go far indeed, as evidenced by the *Nouvel Observateur*’s deputy editor’s account of her dismissal (Lancelin 2016) against a complex backdrop of pressure from the Elysée Palace, the major shareholders, and government-supporting journalists.

These preliminary remarks are intended to avoid two simplifications. One is “it’s the media’s fault.” The devalued status of politics and its transformation into a spectacle cannot merely be explained by journalists’ preconceptions or obsession with viewership figures; it is also to a large extent due to complex interdependencies between the internal workings of the political world and the growing sentiment that politics has little influence over the internationalization of decision making. Conversely, journalists’ own contribution to the ways in which politics is staged and narrated must also be examined. Their influence may be characterized as containing a stark asymmetry. They possess both a real power to modify the staging and topics of political discourse and a weak ability to subject it to critical independent questioning. Moreover, the manner of treating politics, especially on television, is also being reshaped by the way that political journalists are facing competition from other voices and commentators.

These changes will be examined in three stages. First, I will discuss how political journalism in both the print and broadcast media is subject to devaluation. To this is added the revelation of two other changes. One is the paradoxical increase in the supply of specialized political journalism, which can be highly reflective but is consumed mainly by a socially privileged audience. The other is a reconfiguration of both the ways of talking about politics and the identity of those who contribute to it.

## THE THREEFOLD DEVALUATION OF POLITICAL JOURNALISM

The first trend in political journalism in France is a process of devaluation that may be summarized in three statements: political journalists, at least on television, are no longer the primary interviewers of politicians. Their position as the aristocrats of editorial offices is increasingly contested. Their professionalism itself is suspected of being as much a handicap as an asset.

If television is considered to be the primary platform for political discourse and the medium best suited to reaching a wide audience, then an unobtrusive revolution occurred in 2000. That was the year the curve of numbers of political leaders invited to political programs crossed that of those invited to talk shows (Le Foulgoc 2003). Both in terms of screen time and type of interviewer, politicians today express themselves more often on talk shows, where they are questioned by the hosts. To be invited onto a political program<sup>3</sup> to be questioned by journalists specializing in politics has become not the norm but a privilege for an elected official. More specifically, the use of talk shows varies according to the political influence of the elected officials and party leaders. On general-interest channels, the television news is still an event to which top leaders are invited. Consequently the change operates in an unbalanced way: the best-known leaders (party heads, members of the government) continue to appear opposite journalists on current affairs programs. Conversely, outsiders and second-rank politicians have no choice but to go on talk shows and primarily those where they are most explicitly denied any marks of deference (Neveu 2003a). The retreat of political journalism may be seen in the virtual disappearance of political programs from the major general-interest channels. Although during election periods the major channels revive their political debate formats, the rest of the time there are almost none. Of the public networks, La Cinq, with the lowest audience figures in the public sector, was the only channel in 2015 to present a weekly political interview (*C Politique*) at 6 p.m. on Sundays. France 2, the main public channel, broadcasts a short interview of an invited politician in *Quatre Vérités* during the morning news program at 7:45 a.m. Public channels do have a monthly program (*Des paroles et des actes*) for an invited politician, but it was only broadcast eight times in 2014 and three times in the first half of 2015.

The devaluation of political journalism is also due to the reduced power its practitioners have within journalism. Politics sections, particularly in the print media, were for years powerful fiefdoms and recruitment pools for future editors, only rivaled by the journalists of the international section. Things have now changed, with the rise of economic journalism and the “Society” pages. *Le Monde* may be taken as a symbolic example, with the planned reduction in the power of the politics section during the editorships of Jean-Marie Colombani and Edwy Plenel (Saitta 2005). Since 2007 no journalist from this section has become editor, a post

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<sup>3</sup> A “political program” may be defined as a program run by the current affairs section of a network and fronted by journalists specializing in politics. This general definition leaves open the question of how the conversation is held, the number of journalists and politicians, and the presence of other speakers (experts, members of the public called on to speak).

they had held since the paper's foundation in 1944. It is not easy to provide an objective hierarchy of the best-known figures in the profession of journalist. But whereas a few political editorialists (Christophe Barbier, Laurent Joffrin), who have headed newspapers, maintain their high visibility, the figures of the major political interviewer and analyst of political life, as symbolized in the past by Jean-Pierre Elkabbach, François-Henri de Virieu, and Alain Duhamel, have no equivalents today. Instead the visibility goes to television news and magazine presenters, news magazine editorialists, investigative journalists, and even economic specialists. The fact that the recent presidential debate was conducted by two section heads hardly known to the public (Nathalie Saint-Criq and Christophe Jakubyszyn), after candidates had rejected better known presenters, illustrates this decline of the major figures in political journalism.

The devaluation of political journalism is also seen in a process of despecialization. This involves a trend of opening up politics sections and reducing their status as powerful fiefdoms. It takes the form of including them in wider sections or *cahiers* entitled "France" or "Society." It is also due to the increase in the number of columns with crosscutting contributions ("L'événement" in *Libération*) focusing on a situation or event. There is also the matter of their access to the front page (Hubé 2008). They are certainly there during election periods, but the focus on politics is increasingly subject to competition from economic and environmental matters. Among the appearances of political news on the front page, it is important to examine the topics featured, Pyrrhic victories as it were, showing politics as a mean and petty world, distasteful and even shameful. Among recent examples are the scandals associated with the Budget Minister Jérôme Cahuzac and the Foreign Trade Minister Thomas Thévenoud cheating on their taxes in 2013 and 2014, respectively, and, on the right, the irregularities that occurred during the 2012 leadership election in the UMP, followed by, in 2014, the revelation of financial manipulations during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential reelection campaign (known as the Bygmalion affair), as well as many other "affairs" that have embarrassed Sarkozy.

The combined effect of these changes has been to reduce, but not destroy, the right to be commentators of last resort that the politics section once exercised, addressing any issue of public interest once it rose up the political agenda, as this was shown by Patrick Champagne and Dominique Marchetti (1994) with respect to the "contaminated blood" affair, when hundreds of hemophiliacs died after AIDS-contaminated blood transfusions. There also seems to be a trend—to be confirmed by monographs on particular publications and channels—towards a greater turnover among journalists. With less symbolic status the politics section is no longer seen as the career fast lane to an editorship and barely keeps its lead in the struggle for column and air space. It is perceived, on television, as producing a supply of programs that do not attract viewers. The politics section and its staff no longer have the magic or prestige of those who cover the essential topics, who deal with the sacred. And the new generations of journalists also share the growing incredulity of the general population toward the power of politics to change the world. All these trends necessarily lead to skepticism, when journalists, who are also to some extent the

champions of the activity they cover, have a distant or disabused attitude towards the community they describe (Saïtta 2008).

This trend toward devaluation of political journalism should also be considered within its broader context. It does not imply the disappearance of traditional forms, reflective ways of exercising the profession. One might almost say, quite the contrary.

## A GOLDEN AGE NOW?

### UNPRECEDENTEDLY WIDE OFFERING

One sound objection to this description of devaluation would note that a French voter who complied with the model of the “good citizen,” who paid attention to public affairs, now has an offering of political information rich in quantity and perhaps in quality of explanation. Brian McNair (2000) pointed this out in the case of Britain some 15 years ago: any talk of decline comes up against the fact that there has never been so much political information available as now. Where is it to be found?

First of all in the development of continuous news channels, four of which (I-télé and BFM, joined in 2016 by LCI and France-Info) are now broadcast digitally free of charge in France. One might even say there are five, since much of the schedule of the Chaîne Parlementaire contributes to political debate. The pressure of current affairs and the simple fact that inviting politicians or academics to a studio is the least expensive form of program have led to a significant increase in the interactions between journalists and politicians, journalists and experts in polling and political life, and to schedules whose planning and “quality” standards are no lower than before.

The development of political information also involves unprecedented offerings on the internet (Rébillard, Fackler, and Marty 2012). There are newspaper sites often giving content that supplements and anticipates their paper editions and also enables users to respond. Internet-only sites have also brought new elements. Examples are Médiapart, combining proactive investigative journalism and comments on current affairs from academics; Rue 89, considered to be on the left; Atlantico, which claims rigorous news provision and a right-wing position. The number of sites is regularly increasing, with a French version of Slate.fr, Huffingtonpost.fr, and Politico Europe in Brussels in 2015.

The diversification of the offering of political comment and analysis includes blogs. These may be totally independent, hosted on a general media site (e.g., the *Le Monde* journalist who covers the French parliament<sup>4</sup>) or indexed on a blogroll. The lasting bias of gatekeeping, visibility, the highly unequal visibility and numbers of hits should deflate any wide-eyed talk of the birth of a new public space more diverse than ever. But it is true that this offering does innovate. One may suggest four ways. Journalists’ blogs are often less inhibited and more responsive.<sup>5</sup> They can raise questions and report facts that media conventions of what is proper make too controver-

<sup>4</sup> <http://parlement.blog.lemonde.fr>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.oplm.fr/tag/jean-michel-aphatie>.

sial or insufficiently “serious” to be included in a feature article or mentioned on air. Blogs also enable journalists disagreeing with their management to become more independent, at the high cost of finding the “economic formula” to live off internet work. Daniel Schneidermann has done this, with his criticism of the media and their relations with politicians on his site *Arretsurimages.net*. A blog may maintain a space for expression free from newspaper constraints, like that of the former *Libération* staff member Eric Dupin.<sup>6</sup> The third contribution of blogs is that they compete with those political journalists who see themselves as “owning” the legitimacy to comment on political affairs. This can be seen when specialists in a field attract a large number of hits. One example is Maître Eolas’s blog *Journal d’un avocat* dealing with legal matters;<sup>7</sup> another when something like independent small political organizations or public intellectuals, positioning themselves ambiguously between journalism, politics, and essay writing, occupy a particular niche, such as Caroline Fourest on feminism, with her Islamophobic crusades.<sup>8</sup> Websites and blogs have also introduced or revived a ranking of topics and interests by the buzz they produce, a background noise structured around the themes that must be addressed. A number of sites and monitoring centers measure and rank this “media noise.”<sup>9</sup> This is then amplified by the continuous news channels that often seek to increase the speed of reporting on a subject presented as urgent and important now, only to be replaced by another within 48 hours or less. Although buzz is new in its medium (internet), it consolidates two older trends in political journalism: the “circular circulation” of information described by Pierre Bourdieu (1996) and the trivialization of political topics by excessive emphasis on insignificant data.<sup>10</sup>

Two remarks may be made here. One concerns the appearance of niche political media.<sup>11</sup> *Charles*, a quarterly book-magazine, launched by Arnaud Viviant and emerged out of *XXI*, is one example. Viviant explains his thinking: “For a start, the magazine contains formats not found in the press: long interviews, in-depth reports, and investigations. That avoids shallow clichés and the dominant discourse that feeds on its own speed. Our approach is not partisan. We refuse the bipartisanship that the two dominant parties tell us is a modernization of political life: blues against pinks ... The French are a great political people. They are quite capable of coping with a color chart of ideas from deep, almost black red (anarchy) to a pale, almost white blue

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<sup>6</sup> <http://ericdupin.blogs.com>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.maitre-eolas.fr>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://carolinefourest.wordpress.com>.

<sup>9</sup> For example, <http://visionarymarketing.fr/blog/2007/01/la-mesure-du-bruit-mediatique-avec-mediometrie-et-tns-media-intelligence/>.

<sup>10</sup> To support what may seem a somewhat normative assertion, we may ask whether a medical examination of the president’s prostate or the umpteenth media legal investigation into the financing of Sarkozy’s 2012 presidential campaign really justify filling the bottom-of-screen news tickers for a whole day and calling in panels of experts.

<sup>11</sup> This may include writers producing “nonfiction” books on election campaigns, such as Yasmina Reza on Sarkozy in *L’Aube, le soir ou la nuit* (2007) and Laurent Binet on Hollande in *Rien ne se passe comme prévu* (2012).

(monarchy)" (Mimoune 2012). Any description of an extended offering of political journalism must include the fact that journalists write books. Whereas in the 1980s and later political journalists' books ranged from backstage storytelling about politics, more indulgent and gossipy than biting, to a starry-eyed defense of journalists' services to democracy, since 2000 quite different texts have appeared. There are wide-ranging authors relating the humorous side of campaigns (Tchakaloff 2017). Other more numerous political or cultural journalists produce what one might call "metajournalism." Updating the symbolic revolution of Timothy Crouse's *The Boys on the Bus* (1973), these books do not merely talk about political players but examine as subjects of political reporting the relations between politicians and journalists, the interactions among journalists, and between journalists and the candidates' entourage and advisers. Without succumbing to arrogance or self-flagellation they challenge, in an informed and lucid manner, the groupthink that symbolically ties journalists to the politicians they cover. In newspapers<sup>12</sup> even more than in the books by people like Daniel Carton (2003), Thomas Legrand (2010), Philippe Ridet (2008), and Aude Lancelin (2016), columnists are increasingly applying critical thought to what a political sociologist would call field thinking, interdependency mechanisms, the game of gift and counter-gift between professional politicians and the media.

### THE "HIDDEN DISENFRANCHISEMENT" CONTINUES

Has the evidence for a devaluation of political journalism presented in the first part of this essay been wrongly interpreted then? It would be sociologically more correct to remember that political programs and political columns in newspapers have always been consumed in a manner described by Daniel Gaxie (1978) as a *cens caché*, the de facto exclusion of some people from full citizenship. Those who enjoy, decode, and consume these programs are those members of the public who possess considerable social capital, a feeling of political competence, and an interest in political struggle and debate. In this sense we may agree—recalling Voltaire (Neveu 2001)—with the assessments of authors such as Brian McNair (2000) and Pippa Norris (2000): the current media scene presents, if not the Panglossian "best of all possible worlds" in information, at least a probably more abundant and diversified offering than ever before. This rose-colored observation only makes any sense if it comes with two major caveats. First, this extended offering has emerged at the cost of the virtual disappearance (from television) or marginalization (from free newspapers, for example) of programs and columns intended to present political discussion for the general public. Second, both the tiny size and sociology of their viewer- and readerships, as well as the cultural<sup>13</sup> and economic<sup>14</sup> barriers involved, reveal how far this new offering of

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<sup>12</sup> See the two double-page spreads "Ma vie avec Ségo" and "Ma vie avec Sarko" on the 2007 campaign by Isabelle Mandraud and Philippe Ridet, who had covered the two candidates (*Le Monde*, February 20–21, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Magazines like *Charles* and *XXI* and the books cited here are sold in bookshops and not on newsstands or in supermarkets.

<sup>14</sup> French daily newspapers are expensive: a single issue of *Le Monde* costs €2.20, a yearly subscription is €300. Access to the Médiapart website requires a yearly subscription of €90.

political journalism is consumed by highly politicized minorities endowed with considerable cultural capital. Broadly speaking, political journalists in France have subjectively chosen a path that was already objectively imposed on them: to explain and interpret matters that primarily interest a minority of politicized citizens, often well endowed with cultural capital or holding posts of responsibility.

## OTHER FORMATS, OTHER AUTHORS

While in one corner there is an offering of comment and analysis of political life suited to a politicized audience, the interwoven restructuring of the media, intellectual, and political landscape has also radically altered the places where people talk about politics, the way they talk about it, and the identity of those entitled to talk about it.

Broadly speaking, in the case of television, the more that political discussion occurs on networks for high-cultural-capital viewers or at times of great political mobilization (e.g., presidential election), the more it fits within the definition of political discussion institutionalized in the 1960s–1980s. This discussion is led by journalists specializing in politics (or news presenters). Alone or as a group they question one or more invited politicians. Their questions mainly concern the tactics and issues of party and electoral competition and their guests' manifestos and proposals. Conversely, the more political journalists are speaking on general public channels or are included on programs that cover all topics of current affairs and cultural events, the more they are channeled towards a positioning where their expertise as political journalists and their status as insiders are less desirable because they are perceived as arcane, boring, or a threat to the audience size.

## TALK SHOWS, HUMOR, AND TWEETS

For 20 years now, and France is no exception, the main way television media has made politics digestible and acceptable has been to shift it to talk shows. Fronted by a host rather than a journalist, these shows start discussions on a specific topic or general current affairs between speakers from varying backgrounds. They may be experts, politicians, artists, or cultural figures who have come to promote a show or a book and also talk about the news, guests selected for their ability to provoke, ordinary French people talking of their own experience or their victimization. Another feature of many talk shows is that the audience may be asked to speak and respond to what is said. The rise of these shows is widely discussed in the literature (Livingstone and Lunt 1993; Gamson 1999; Neveu 2003b; Amey and Leroux 2012; Leroux and Riutort 2013). The shows vary in the time they give to politicians, the respect or aggressiveness they display towards them, and even the type of questions asked. In a news-based program like *C dans l'air* (broadcast five times a week on the public channel La Cinq), the discussions do not differ greatly from a traditional political program, although the number of invited politicians is limited. The tone of conversation is more entertaining on *On n'est pas couché* (France 2).

Inviting “ordinary” people to speak on talk shows (even if they are selected for their fluency or appearance) and on political programs during election periods definitely alters the nature of the questions asked and debated (Neveu 1997). Inviting outsiders has introduced more practical topics into the discussion (tackling unemployment, changes to the welfare state, objections to professional politicians) and limited debate about leadership tussles. The journalists who are marginalized on or absent from these programs have criticized this introduction of personal experience for turning studios into confessionals or complaint bureaus. It may do this and sometimes does. But this criticism probably says more about many star journalists’ ignorance of their fellow citizens’ daily lives than about the risk they mention. A more serious objection would be to note how talk shows often stress the presentation of the private lives of politicians, their interests and lifestyles, and downplay reasoned debate about issues, policies, and principles. As a result these shows have often helped institutionalize *allodoxia*. This is a term coined by Bourdieu for the use of analytical categories, of common sense ill suited to understanding the matters under consideration. It means assessing the importance of a scientist by their number of television appearances or their sense of humor and not by their discoveries or the recognition of their peers. It means ranking a football or tennis player by their good looks rather than their performance. It also means judging a politician on their style, apparent approachability, or physical appearance rather than their ideology or policy choices. Someone can be both friendly and despotic, speak simply like “ordinary” people and yet promote policies to favor the privileged. These are differences that *allodoxia* tends to obscure, when a viewer with no ability to judge “a good idea” or be interested in it focuses instead on a politician having the “right face” or good looks.

The second trend in the coverage of politics for the general public has been humor and the use of commentary that is offbeat with some attempt at analysis or morality. The vague concept “infotainment” suggests one of the connections between comedy and talk shows. Mockery, whether kindly or aggressive, is no rarity on talk shows, where it is often more advantageous to make fun of oneself than attempt to present a policy proposal. Humor is not only mockery or disrespect. *Les Guignols* on Canal+ (based on the UK’s *Spitting Image*) is a good example: at their best these puppets uncover almost sociological insights into the interdependency between politicians, the media, and business (Collovald and Neveu 1996). Although Canal+ is not the only one—there is the humorist Nicolas Canteloup on Europe 1 radio and TF1 television, as well as Charlotte Vanhoenaker, Sophia Aram, and François Morel commenting on current events on France Inter radio. Many among these humorists have particularly developed this approach using irony to give insight into politics. It can now be seen in Yann Barthes’s<sup>15</sup> show *Quotidien* where the intention was both to make the dependency and connivance between media and politics visible and hold up to derision the politicians’ tricks of the trade (rhetoric, bits lifted from old speeches,

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<sup>15</sup> See Ariane Chemin’s report in the magazine supplement of *Le Monde*, January 26, 2012, pp. 29–35. Following the industrialist Bolloré’s takeover of Canal+, Yannick Barthes left his previous program *Le Petit Journal* and launched a similar one on the TMC network called *Quotidien*.

staging). The ambiguity of the exercise resides in its basic principle. If the program makes too visible the interdependency between media and politics, if it alludes to the routines, tricks, and insincerity in political ritual and discourse, this viewpoint, based entirely on these approaches, threatens to reduce politicians to actors hamming up their usual acts with varying degrees of talent. This program is hardly suited for—indeed is not designed for—producing any insight into manifesto choices, the effects of proposals and policies on various groups in society. Even if its irony does not create these feelings, if used systematically, it may well confirm an attitude of distance, cynicism, or disillusionment towards politics.

For France the literature on the political use of social media is as yet small. Social media are used by politicians to give instant reactions and produce “sound bites” and have become a political forum in their own right. This has not been to the immediate advantage of political journalists. Social media enable politicians to reach a motivated audience without the mediation of journalists, although the wide distribution of a tweet may be due to its being mentioned by a mainstream publication. Social media have also produced a new form of expertise, which measures the number of occurrences of a name or expression and describes the nature of the comments it attracts.<sup>16</sup> In television and radio studios this monitoring function is currently given to speakers who are not political journalists, as if the task were too technical or too vulgar. It may well be that, as occurred with opinion polls in the 1970s, an increasing number of journalists will turn to these sources of information and analysis. Many already use social media to comment on politicians’ remarks, contact their own audience,<sup>17</sup> react to tweets from their colleagues, and so on, which paradoxically links these media to the foundations of political journalism as an elitist “microcosm.”

The most comprehensive effect of all these changes, thus far, has been to desacralize politics. Politicians are stripped of the privilege of having television programs solely devoted to them, run by a clerisy of journalists dedicated to politics. Irony with respect to elected officials is no longer confined to satirical programs but has become a standard register in comments. This trend potentially involves contradictory effects. It may bring elected officials closer to citizens, make the person behind the official mask easier to understand, and force them to speak plainly about practical issues. But other effects seem to be stronger. There is an overemphasis on personal features and lifestyle as a way of assessing elected officials, putting them on a level with film stars and athletes in a process for which the French have coined the term *peopolisation* (Delporte 2008).

### A NEW ECOSYSTEM FOR POLITICAL TALK

Although not all digitally broadcast television channels have political programs, news programs, and talk shows, there are a dozen or so public and private networks that do put out programs of debates, interviews, and news bulletins. In addition, at

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Observatoire TransMédia (<http://www.ina-expert.com/projets-de-recherche/otmedia.html>).

<sup>17</sup> Two examples of political journalists’ twitter streams: <https://twitter.com/hubertthuart> and <https://twitter.com/arianechemin>.

least three public and even more private radio networks also devote hours of airtime to commentary on current affairs. A full inventory of the space available for talk about politics would include the pages in daily and weekly newspapers given over to invited “specialists” and opinion columns by public intellectuals. And the increase in the number of websites that debate political events has also engendered a considerable demand for expertise and commentary.<sup>18</sup>

These remarks are not intended to repeat the theme of an abundance of communication but rather to describe its effects on the diversification of the producers of discourse and information about politics. In these new editorial spaces, political journalists, indeed journalists of any sort, are no longer the only or most important commentators on politics. Much research has featured the appearance in the 1980s of a new type of media intellectual (Bourdieu 1984; Pinto 2009). Media intellectuals, male and female, generally have little legitimacy in the academic world of the spheres of cultural production they claim to come from (literature, counseling). They display a remarkable ability to latch onto events, respond immediately to requests for reactions and predictions on the most varied topics, such that the mocking Italian term *tuttologo* has been transferred into French as *toutologue*. They do have a real talent for meeting the requirements of the media: they can spin a sound bite, a condensed expression, a firm opinion, or an emotional response on any subject. Some issues involving public policy (international crises, terrorism, environment, health, etc.) require accurate knowledge of geographical areas or technical data, so there has also emerged a demand for expert opinion (Bérard and Crespin 2010), bringing to the microphone a range of academics, company officials, and “specialists” who may not belong to academic institutions. Also worthy of note are the many think tanks whose number of partisans or experts may be extraordinarily small, so perhaps some their functions should be reconsidered. The largest ones—such as Terra Nova and Fondapol—operate as ways of pooling symbolic and cultural capital, with a brand that legitimizes their intellectual authority and a discourse that can be positioned politically without being purely partisan. Many small think tanks give their directors (of whom there may be two or three) a fashionable name, an apparent institutional foundation, to justify making pronouncements that their personal resources alone would barely legitimize. Any understanding of journalism and the media must involve a greater use of the sociology of expertise (Delmas 2011; Henry et al. 2015). There has been little research, but it would be useful to monitor the careers of the spokespeople for these think tanks, originally moving between academia, media, and political consultancy, then gradually being invited first to make brief comments in obscure programs and then to prime-time exposure on news channels. The fact that some think tanks’ home pages list the media appearances of their few collaborators is an indicator of this osmosis.<sup>19</sup> A think tank’s specialization in a particular subject

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<sup>18</sup> The launch of the French *Huffington Post* website aroused controversy because its director, Anne Sinclair, asked well-known bloggers and experts for regular unpaid contributions (see, e.g., Ginisty 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Such as political scientist Virginie Martin, who is the chair of the think tank Different and a frequent commentator in the media: <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/thinktankdiff/>.

may be another way of gaining access to the media. On the evening of the Greek referendum in July 2015 to decide whether to accept conditions of the EU-proposed bailout, a virtually unknown commentator, legitimized by being the spokesman of a think tank dedicated to Europe,<sup>20</sup> could hector both the Greek government, described as ignorant of the institutional reasoning of the European Union, and the Greek guests in the studio.

The reshaping of the media scene has meant a change in those who speak about current affairs. The parties are represented not only by their leaders but also by those whom journalists consider to be “good customers”: elected officials who speak bluntly, whose proposals shock, or who have a talent as showmen. A journalist-blogger may be found next to a television anchor. Academia provides a motley crew of speakers. These include scholars recognized by their peers, specialists working for pressure groups, and the hybrid community of PhDs for whom think tanks and institutes provide a way of coping with status anxiety and a possible alternative to an academic career. This space for speakers about politics also includes politically committed artists and creators, NGO officials, retired civil servants displaying their experience and specialization, and whistle-blowers. The frequent misuse of symbolic authority and the dubious legitimacy of many speakers make it tempting to speak metaphorically of a zoo. The notion of ecosystem is preferable because it is neutral and even more because it suggests how far this reshaping is caused by institutional developments and social interdependency. Thomas Medvedz’s (2010) analysis of the think tank community may be valuable here. All these speakers may be given coordinates mapping them and their particular features with respect to the resources and support they receive (or do not receive) from the worlds of political commitment, academic research and artistic creation, the media, but also from the business interests that have acquired spokespeople and intellectual advocates for their vision of desirable policies. The true map of these new frequenters of the media space remains to be produced, but the initially enlightening idea of the media intellectual turns out to be a simplification.

The reasons for this reshaping are many and involve the sociology of the intellectual professions, expertise, and academia. They also include the new requirement of institutions and companies in the public eye that they justify themselves with respect to the environment, human rights, public health, and the “precautionary principle.” Two strategic reasons are due to changes in journalism. One is the tendency to “hystericize” the news, whereby continuous news channels attempt to have one major event per day, preferably a worrying one, and then ask a variety of experts to comment. The other is the clear tendency to make news commentary less formal, less academic by focusing on playful disputes, subjective expression, or relaxed chat. Examples can be found in the increasing number of “duels” between editorialists that are broadcast on television, in which, to suggest a whiff of battle, an indulgent role is given to speakers (such as political journalist and writer Eric Zemmour) expressing ideas stamped as “provocative,” when they are merely xenophobic, sexist, or

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.europanova.eu/>.

nationalist<sup>21</sup> or add an arrogant or aggressive tone to a neoliberal or conservative discourse. The conversational register can also be found in programs with a wide mix of guests such as *Les informés* on France-Info radio and the *On ne va pas se mentir* sequence on I-télé. One effect of these changes is clear: political journalists are seeing their “market share” of political commentary shrink. This obliges them to adopt at least two win-back strategies. They involve a tension between two forces. The dominant one is most journalists’ concern to put forward their technical knowledge, their expertise in a field (public policy, health, etc.). They follow a track described as early as 1976 by Jean Padioleau as the objectivizing “rhetoric of expertise” (Padioleau 1976), a strategy more easily adopted when they are not fascinated by politicians as a class. Conversely, an increasing number of broadcast and internet debates has contributed to a repoliticization led by a small group of highly visible editorialists and professional figures (Christophe Barbier, Laurent Joffrin, Nicolas Domenach, Renaud Dely, Arnaud Leparmentier, Judith Waintraub). Their manner of speech is disconnected from the personal investment in collecting new information that was once core to the definition of journalism. It is sometimes hard to distinguish from partisan positioning or the expression of opinion, which may explain why polls reveal a devaluation of the profession of journalist, identified with “politicians.” Caught between ideological discourse and the limitations of critical expertise, other journalists feature on the edges of traditional journalism, in media perceived as providing a more generous space for speaking in a more personal and subjective manner. Blogs are one. Books of in-depth reporting on social issues are another, as seen in Stéphane Horel’s (2015) book about how the European Union has not reacted to the risk of endocrine disruptors.

These last two decades may suggest a twofold continuity: Political journalists today do what they have always done quite well: offer a politicized public, aware of the ground rules and issues of politics, analyses of election battles, politicians’ strategies, and glimpses behind the scenes of the lives of elected officials. They have even added a genuine competence in dismantling political initiatives aimed at the media. At the same time, political journalism still chokes at two tasks. One is to move from politics to policy. This would mean analyzing in detail how matters become public problems and are addressed by public policy and assessing how that policy is executed. Analysis of this sort is rare. When it can be identified, it is more often done by economic, social, and environmental journalists than political ones. Worse still, political journalism has made little progress in carrying out the educational task of explaining the reasoning, players, and impact of political activity to a public that is not very interested, of reintroducing into what is defined as talk about politics the way that the issues are perceived by ordinary citizens, and analyzing the effects of government decisions on their daily lives. What explanation is there for what seems to be a structural inability to meet this challenge (Neveu 1991)? One initial answer is that it is hard to report on a complex, widely stigmatized activity for parts of the

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<sup>21</sup> A media company seeking for commercial reasons to maximize its audience will necessarily give a platform to what many journalists will condemn as a “populist” plague that must be fought, including those who host these embarrassing guests and act as their foils.

public who are repelled by it. The second is that an educational approach would involve communication at a lower level and less emphasis on the analysis of arcane battles between professional politicians—which is precisely the sort of information that journalists are incomparably good at finding. The least publicly acceptable but probably most accurate answer is to do with the syndrome of “populism.” This term is taken to refer to the nationalism and xenophobia, refusal to change, and lack of realism that are supposed to typify an increasing section of working-class voters, appealed to by the demagoguery of a long and varied list of hateful parties and leaders. Any move to take seriously, let alone reflect, this working-class distance from politics, the failure to represent people, these varied feelings of injustice and loss of status, it is thought, would risk encouraging populism. As Annie Collovald (2004) points out, the obsession with populism comes primarily from the fantasies of the dominant classes, including political journalists, which see the *vox populi* as the main threat to democracy.

In a poem about the 1953 uprising in East Germany, Bertolt Brecht remarks that if the people rebel against those supposed to represent them, “would it not be easier to dissolve the people and elect another?” Back then, the people were too demanding to be communist; now, the people are too populist to be worthy of democracy. Political journalism in Paris and Moscow may well survive in a tranquil social bubble, producing its subtle and stimulating analyses for other insiders only. But it is far from certain in that case that its claim to serve democracy is convincing. Alternatively it might dare to bring to a wider public a new understanding of politics. The way to do this is not a complete mystery. It is about “precision journalism,” using the tools of computer graphics and the social sciences. As shown by new journalism in the United States (Neveu 2014), it would mean adopting a narrative journalism that explored the effects of public policy. It might also mean some reflective introspection into journalists’ relations with professional politicians and exploration of productive ways to use the voice of outsiders within television studios. If political journalists do not examine these opportunities, they will find it extremely hard to escape from a pincer movement: loss of viewership even among the highly educated and encirclement in television studios and newspaper columns by commenters, pseudoexperts, and the self-proclaimed spokespeople of a civil society reduced to think tanks.

*Translated from French by Roger Depledge*

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## КАК ИЗМЕНИЛАСЬ ФРАНЦУЗСКАЯ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ЖУРНАЛИСТИКА? (1980–2017)

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Как изменилась политическая журналистика во Франции за последнюю четверть века? Отвечая на этот вопрос, необходимо принять во внимание растущие сомнения французов в том, что политическое действие способно изменять мир, а также проблематизировать взаимозависимость ученых, политики и средств массовой информации. Статус политической журналистики за этот период существенно снизился. Основной формой выступления политиков на телевидении стали ток шоу. Разделы, посвященные политике, утратили былой престиж даже в печатной прессе. В то же время, как это ни парадоксально, политическая журналистика вполне жизнеспособна в других медийных сферах. Пусть в ином формате (блоги, книги), ее активно потребляет социально привилегированная публика. Возникают новые способы говорить о политике, делающие ставку на личности, юмор или неформальную речь, а также на использование социальных сетей. Эти новые пространства перестраивают журналистскую экосистему и наделяют экспертов, блогеров, экспертно-аналитические центры большей, чем прежде, значимостью. Эти изменения также заставляют нас заново задаться старым вопросом о роли политических журналистов: должны ли они замыкаться на микрокосме, обращаясь к меньшинству, или же им следует стараться найти способ, чтобы сделать политику доступной для понимания большинства?

**Ключевые слова:** эксперты; Франция; политическая журналистика; политизация; ток шоу