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« Opinion accidents » : Communication in Society Under Pandemic Stress

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Abstract—The Coronavirus pandemic has created a context in which societies have experienced exacerbated features of social communication practices. This paper proposes to examine three French cases which may illustrate the notion of “opinion accidents”, i.e. when initiatives taken in the public space produce effects which may differ from – or contradict – the original intention. Some aspects of related opinion risk management are outlined.

Keywords—Opinion, Risk, Communication, Accident, Social Networks, Society, Management

I. INTRODUCTION

Stressful periods are conducive to the exacerbation of three broad categories of behaviors:

- Certain individuals express their urge for the exercise of leadership and the development of their fame by coming up with *messianic* postures and messages;
- The big challenges which stressful events pose to organisations and their leadership cause the latter to hold bold, *heroic* discourses promising to overcome the test;
- Crowds more numerous than usual turn to social information and communication media to seek answers to their questions or express their anxiety, particularly in forms of aggressivity, panic or fears in *gregarious* moves.

The common use of social networks established in present societies facilitates the spreading of such communication phenomena. The combination of multiple interconnexions of publics and the mass of circulating messages – texts, images, data – result in a higher **probability** of accidents happening to those exposed in public space. In certain circumstances, the communication context which thus prevails may also increase the potential **gravity** of accidents.

The purpose of the present paper is to share initial thoughts to the notion of « opinion accident ». In proposing the expression « opinion accident », we take stock in Paul Virilio’s notion of « Original accident »: « There is no “science of accidents”, Aristotle warned long ago. Despite *cindynics* evaluating risks, there is no *accidentology*, but a fortuitous discovery, an archeo-technological invention. Inventing sail or steam boats is *inventing shipwreck*.

Inventing train is *inventing railroad accident* of derailing. Inventing personal automobile is producing *chain-crashes* on highways. »¹

The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise, in the public space and in particular on social networks, to a very intense communication. As Jean-Pierre Le Goff put it: « Never had a pandemic been so “chatty”, giving rise to such a mass of writings, comments, images, debates in the very course of its happening. One can consider that to be evidence of “transparency” in a democratic society. But there is in that “transparency”, paradoxically, something blinding: the pandemic is a “monster event” which has invaded and saturated the public space, the media and social networks, resulting in an effect of mental fixation and confinement reinforced by lockdown. »²

Three situations are exemplified by three French cases:

- The debate around « Didier Raoult » and what the Professor’s name embodied;
- The expression repeated by the French President of the Republic in his initial pandemic speech: « Nous sommes en guerre »;
- the role played by the hashtag #Covid-19 and its diverse avatars, and how it evolved over the first year.

¹ Il n’y a pas de « science de l’accident », avertissait Aristote, il y a bien longtemps. Malgré la *cindynique* qui évalue les risques, il n’y a pas d’*accidentologie*, mais une découverte fortuite, une invention archéo-technologique. Invention du navire à voile ou à vapeur, c’est *invention le naufrage*. Invention du train, c’est *invention l’accident ferroviaire* du déraillement. Invention de l’automobile domestique, c’est produire *le télescopage en chaîne* sur l’autoroute.

Virilio, Paul : *L’Accident originel*, Galilée, Paris, 2005, p. 27

² Jamais une pandémie n’avait été aussi « bavarde », donnant lieu à une telle masse d’écrits, de commentaires, d’images, de débats dans le cours même de son déroulement. On peut y voir une preuve de la « transparence » dans une société démocratique. Mais cette « transparence » a paradoxalement quelque chose d’aveuglant : la pandémie est un « événement monstre » qui a envahi et saturé l’espace public, médiatique et les réseaux sociaux, créant un effet de fixation et d’enfermement mental renforcé par le confinement.

Le Goff, Jean-Pierre : *La Société malade*, Stock, Paris, 2021, p. 12

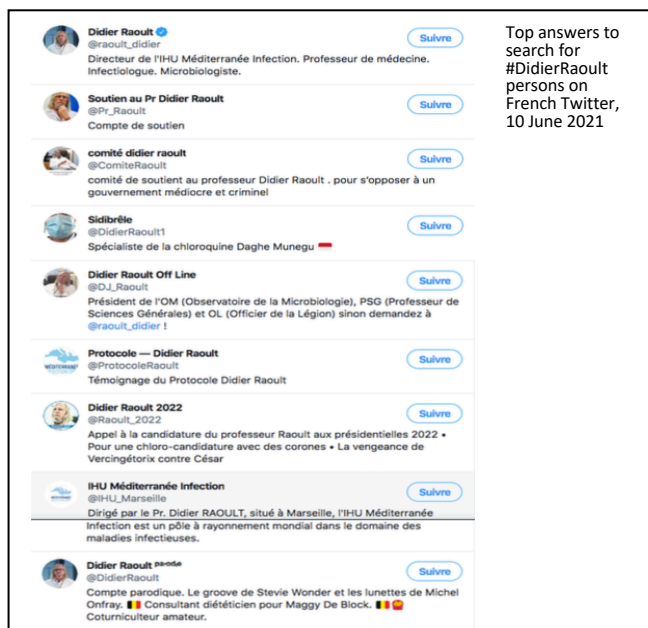
II. "DIDIER RAOULT": FROM EXPERT-BRAND TO EGO-FIGHT

The public debate around the person of Professor Raoult and his recommendations has quickly moved from health matters to political issues and controversies. If we try to situate the moment of the "opinion accident" in this journey, it seems that we can point to what Renata Varga describes as the passage from the « staging of words of legitimate experts by the media » to « the incursion of non-specialists into the controversy »³. This moment, pending a more precise scrutiny of the chronology, has a date: that of March 2020 when the positions of Professor Raoult, until then developed mainly on the website of the Institut Hospitalo-Universitaire Méditerranée Infection, led to the creation, by the Professor himself, of a Twitter account in his personal name.

The move from *expert* institution to *messianic* personalization confirms the shift of the center of gravity of the debate from the scientific and medical sphere, the foundation of Prof. Raoult's credibility, to the scene of controversy, to the public space of polemical debate where the "media value" of an ego outweighs the scientific substance of information.

A. Creation of the hashtag

This is the moment when "Didier Raoult" becomes a hashtag. It is also the moment when some markers of the actors in the debate are modified. Thus, in particular, the identity of the Institute depositary of competence and source of legitimacy, with its four terms "Hospital-University-Mediterranean-Infection" which describe fields of competence, is at that point in time trivialized into "IHU de Marseille", easier for use by mainstream media. The apparent approximation of identity, which erases the medical and scientific references, is in fact a translation into a "brand system" of the shift which has occurred in the



³ Analysis published in December 2020 by Renata Varga (University of Lille, GERIICO) under the title *La 'Polémique Raoult': brouillage de la communication* <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03048120/>

nature of the debate's core, from science to opinion.

By moving from the register of scientific controversy to that of public opinion controversy, the debate refers to mainstream categories. For example, "Marseille" is a standard brand federating people whose value sought after in the media is their communication weight in the public space more than the weight of their expertise. From then on, Twitter accounts using the terms "Didier-Raoult" in their own name are essentially polemic or parodic accounts, not scientific or medical accounts.

B. Several damages in one accident

As from March 2021, the controversy is rebounding around the "IHU de Marseille" and Professor Raoult in the field of the judiciary, with questions around health costs linked to the IHU and mass testing for Covid-19. The "opinion accident" causes damages of various kinds:

- The notoriety of Professor Raoult and the IHU Méditerranée Infection has grown among a very large audience, but:
- The public image more than the professional reputation of the IHU M-I has probably been degraded. Any controversial episode, founded or not, leads to a degradation of image by the simple fact of being embroiled in a debate whose causes, when it comes to controversy, are of an ideological nature or become a battle of egos;
- Professor Raoult's image and reputation are degraded. The mechanisms of instrumentalization of his figure as much by himself as in the logic of certain media certainly obstruct the professor's future ability to exercise a magisterium in public opinion, including in the circles of his specialties;
- Personalities who have mobilized, especially on Twitter and in the mass media, in support of Professor Raoult's cause are being questioned or partially discredited. This is the case of figures whose independence of judgment has been challenged because of their links, including economic ones, with the IHU M-I. This aspect of the questioning can be very durable for these actors, including in legal matters. The future will tell.
- The image of "Marseille" will not come out of it any better. The question of the ethics of the positions taken in the debate by actors related to this territory are still to come, at least for a judiciary part which is now underway.

The question is then in Paul Virilio's words: « Public opinion or public emotion? It is in this area the same as in so many others where the community of interest conducive to political action gives way to a "community of emotion" susceptible to all manipulation. »⁴ The accident results here in the loss by Professor Raoult of his role of expert in the public debate, as Michaël Føessel described such role: « The expert explains, he advises, he justifies or he influences, but, in all cases, he puts limits to the arbitrary profusion of opinions by confronting them with the requirements of proof. Most critics of the technocratic future of democracies

⁴ Opinion publique ou émotion publique ? Il en est de ce domaine comme de tant d'autres où la communauté d'intérêt propice à l'action politique cède le pas à une « communauté d'émotion » susceptible de toutes les manipulations. Virilio, Paul : *op.cit.*, p. 102

insist on this tension between the rise of expertise and the free expression of opinions. »⁵ If some of the consequences of the “road swerving” of the “object” Didier-Raoult still are to happen (and “an accident is what happens”, recalled Paul Virilio), one consequence has been established: Prof. Raoult will no longer be able to limit « the arbitrary profusion of opinions » since he himself has contributed to its inflation.

C. Avoiding the accident?

An actor who leaves his legitimate arena for one unfamiliar to him risks an accident. Legitimate in his familiar arena, he is likely to be judged as an intruder or usurper in another one where his status is not established and where the rules of the game are different. Comparing two personalities can shed light on the necessary rigor of the “containment” of an actor to the role in which his voice is listened to, in the arena in which he is legitimate and familiar with the rules. At the same time as Professor Raoult in France, Dr. Anthony Fauci was becoming a voice heard in the United States. The capacity of the second to maintain his position with an economy of words, a rigor of speech and a respect for the limits imposed on him by his official functions as much as the proven field of his competence, is an asset when confronting polemic. Containment limits but protects the jurisdiction which its limits describe. The growing debate around the incursions of politics into health and vice versa exemplifies the perils of confusion resulting from absence of containment. In France, « we have become a nation of 66 million prosecutors »⁶ after 66 million epidemiologists...

The risk of accident is all the more real that the first moments of a change of arena may seem more promising. To continue with the example of Professor Raoult, his beginnings in the field of the “general public”, asserting a medical solution and challenging politics have gained him a wide and rapid impact. As always with notoriety, the halo can easily and quickly become a target. Brands know that their opinion risk is directly proportional to their exposure in the public space.

III. “WE ARE AT WAR”: A PERFORMATIVE WITHOUT CONSTATIVE?

« Any constative (...) is a happy performative which has become true. »⁷ As soon as the President of the Republic had finished his speech on March 16, 2020, the comments focused on the relevance or not of the chosen and repeated register: “We are at war”⁸.

⁵ L’expert explique, il conseille, il justifie ou il influe, mais, dans tous les cas il vient borner la profusion arbitraire des opinions en les confrontant aux exigences de la preuve. La plupart des critiques du devenir technocratique des démocraties insistent sur cette tension entre la montée des expertises et l’expression libre des opinions.

Foessel, Michaël, « La Philosophie à l’épreuve de l’opinion et de l’expertise » in *Esprit*, mars-avril 2012, Paris, p. 203

⁶ President Macron, January 21, 2021

⁷ Tout constatif (...) est un performatif heureux qui est devenu vrai. Cassin, Barbara : *Quand dire, c’est vraiment faire*, Fayard, Paris, 2018, p. 113

⁸ On March 18, 2021 two authors from the Université Libre de Bruxelles published an article on the website

The “war” register is absent from the next intervention of the President of the Republic, one month later, on April 13. The line “we are at war” then continues to circulate in the public debate because of the comments made on it since it was uttered whereas its original author has moved from the “war” spirit to the expression of care and empathy.

An analysis of the implications of the recourse to “we are at war” is proposed in June 2020, in the *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, by Barthélemy Courmont⁹. Two dimensions of the « performative » effect of President Macron’s statement can be found there on page 28 of the article:

- the words immediately cause an update of the very notion of war, extended to questions of non-military security, which installs the State in its exclusive role: « The formula “we are at war”, is not based so much on objective and indisputable criteria – “what is war?”, one could thus ask – than on the justification of exceptional measures to neutralize a vulnerability »¹⁰;

- and the President’s words install consequences of the « state of war » for the functioning of the nation: « The “war”, in fact, does not allow debate nor opposition, and we see in the example of 2001 and that of 2020 that it is no longer limited to military affairs. Because behind the war and its invocation, it is the field of security that has expanded. »¹¹

If we reread the year that has passed since then, looking for the corresponding « constatives », it appears that, if oppositions were expressed among a minority of the general public, in particular concerning the application of « exceptional measures », they consisted far more in words of protests than in acts of disobedience, at least during the first year. The debate on the use of the term « war » and its justification remained primarily limited to rhetorical questions rather than practical challenges. The sense of urgency has relegated the political debate to the background. Or to a second stage of the pandemic. Perhaps it is less the adhesion to the establishment of a « state of war » than the fear of the disease which has led the vast majority of the population to respect restrictive instructions, foremost among which is the first lockdown. The extension of the concept of war to situations involving individual and collective security other than military is illustrated in that fact.

<https://theconversation.com/sommes-nous-vraiment-en-guerre-contre-un-virus-133981>

⁹ « Nous sommes en guerre » : vulnérabilité et sécuritisation face au coronavirus, in *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, Armand Colin, Paris, 2020 <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategie-2020-2-page-25.htm>

¹⁰ La formule « nous sommes en guerre », qui ne s’appuie pas tant sur des critères objectifs et indiscutables – « qu’est-ce que la guerre ? », pourrait-on ainsi répondre – que sur la justification de mesures exceptionnelles pour neutraliser une vulnérabilité.

¹¹ La « guerre », en effet, n’autorise pas le débat et les oppositions, et l’on voit dans l’exemple de 2001 et celui de 2020 qu’elle ne se limite plus aux affaires militaires. Car derrière la guerre et son invocation, c’est le champ de la sécurité qui s’est étendu.

Until the summer of 2020 at least, "we are at war" can thus be considered a « happy performative », observed in majority behavior. Political opposition, too, was almost nil at the time of the President's declaration. The national unity required by the "we are at war" functioned to admit or support the first « exceptional measures » at the start of the pandemic. Here too, the implications of the call for a « state of war » which « does not allow debate nor opposition », to use Bathélemy Courmont's words, seem to make the formula a « happy performative ».

A month after the « war » speech, the term, as we have noted, disappeared from the presidential speech. Was the "war" that was supposed to be then over? Obviously not. The words disappear but what they wanted to designate has not disappeared in lived reality. The phrase "we are at war" then becomes in the memories a lasting marker of a political choice in the face of a situation, the inaugural mark of a period, or at least of a story, the end of which remains uncertain.

This is the mechanism that Jean-Marc Ferry described: « In the order of the story, the event no longer has the objective reality of what takes place, nor the subjective reality of what is experienced, but the intersubjective reality of what is said. It is true that what is said can also be considered as what takes place, or even as what is experienced. But in this case, what takes place or what is experienced is no longer the said event: it is the discourse itself. »¹²

The « intersubjective reality of what is said » here is "we are" and "at war".

A. "We are", but who is "We"?

As soon as the reference to a state of war disappears from the official discourse, so as soon as one month after the utterance, the "we" becomes uncertain. Is this the "we" of the executive? The "we" of the nation? The "we" of the State apparatus, especially its sanitary apparatus? The third option appears to be the one that describes the lived experience. The caregivers are « on the front line », again a war term, but the population applauds from afar, as it were for convoys returning from a front. The « rear » will gradually demobilize, shifting from recrimination in the face of constraints to growing disobedience. "We" is... another. The very practice of the ritual 8 pm applause from city windows immediately establishes a distance between those, the « front lines », whose mobilization is welcomed and encouraged as a means of facilitating the demobilization of the mass of others who hope to stay away. The applause ceases, in France, with the announcement of the first « deconfinement » on May 11, 2020.

¹² Dans l'ordre du récit, l'événement n'a plus la réalité objective de ce qui a lieu, ni la réalité subjective de ce qui est vécu, mais la réalité intersubjective de ce qui est dit. Il est vrai que ce qui est dit peut aussi être considéré comme ce qui a lieu, ou encore, comme ce qui est vécu. Mais dans ce cas, ce qui a lieu ou ce qui est vécu n'est plus l'événement dit : c'est le discours lui-même. Ferry, Jean-Marc : *Les Puissances de l'expérience*, T.1, « Le sujet et le verbe », Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 1991, p. 105

B. "At War", really?

The decision for a second lockdown on October 28, 2020 hardly revives some criticism of a phrase that has not been the government's motto since mid-April. The comment by the President of the Republic in the weekly *Le Point* about his speech of March 2020, at the time of the lifting of the second lockdown, mid-December 2020, is only on the register of the lexical and contextual analysis of the expression, in an interview devoted to the use of the French language. However, « discourse is not something on top (...); it is part of the economy itself. »¹³ And the feeling of being in a state of war was not broadly shared: critics point out that a war economy was not organized, that a war effort was not imposed, that the objective to achieve a « mobilization » had not broken the barriers of many corporatism, each claiming for itself, and more and more with time, the exemption from mobilization.

C. An Opinion Accident?

If there is an opinion accident about "we are at war", it is the gap between the symbolic weight of words and the inertia of the society which the words were intended to set in motion. Opinion is not enough, as Emile Durkheim already noted: « It is the state of society, and not the state of opinion that must be reached. Only, in fact, it is hardly admissible that opinion expresses nothing real, that the aspirations of the collective consciousness are pure hallucinations. »¹⁴ The accident would, then, be the result of an inadequate calibration of the vehicle in relation to the reality of society, the load to be moved. The debate between opinions on "we are at war" remained largely external to what was going on. And what was happening was a personal security fear much more than a national health warfare, reserved for a « professional army ».

The authorship of the term will remain attached to its author. The seriousness of the opinion accident, of the disconnect between the intention and the result, will make the initial performative a happy choice for what it will have achieved – to not have allowed debate nor opposition at least for a while – , therefore a possible electoral benefit ; or it will make it an unfortunate performative for what it will not have accomplished, depending on the relative « state of peace » in which society will be at the end of the period. An uncertain horizon, at the time of writing these observations by the end of May 2021.

An accident is only certain when it does happen. Opinion varies over such a length of time, enough for an accident to be avoided, more or less narrowly, or even for the risk taken

¹³ Le discours n'est pas quelque chose en plus (...); il fait partie de l'économie même.

Bourdieu, Pierre : *Raisons pratiques*, Seuil, Paris, 1994, p. 209

¹⁴ C'est l'état de la société, et non l'état de l'opinion qu'il faut atteindre. Seulement, en fait, il est difficilement admissible que l'opinion n'exprime rien de réel, que les aspirations de la conscience collective soient de pures hallucinations. Durkheim, Emile : « L'Etat de la société et l'état de l'opinion » (1906) in : *Sociologie et philosophie*, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris, 1924, p. 93

to be brilliantly transformed into a daring, *heroic* feat, in retrospect.

D. Avoiding the accident

A rallying cry fulfills its role if it opens up a horizon. Opportunism must be long term. “Yes We Can” by Barack Obama on January 8, 2008¹⁵ or “Wir schaffen das” by Angela Merkel on August 31, 2015¹⁶ both gave hope in a context where the social body globally needed it. “We are at war” designed a state – at least a state of mind – for a moment that one hoped would be brief. In this sense, “we are at war” is an observation that may have had no performative purpose. It may mark a moment which can possibly be used as a fact to be recalled if facing, after the stressful period is over, requests for justification of the exceptional measures taken at that time, and of the unconcerted processes by which the decisions were made to impose such measures.

E. A “constative” for the present, a “performative” for the future?

A « state of war » requires a state of exception. Posed from the outset as a « constative » and not as a performative, the “we are at war” then is a potential performative for the future, in case of need. The succession of phases is reversed.

If the performative becomes happy at a later, possibly much later moment, then it will be a happy performative *ex post* after having been a constative *ex ante*. The statement could then be: « I said, “we are at war” and no one seriously said the contrary at that time. This allowed an exceptional functioning of the State, which any state of war requires ». This reminder of the « constative » of March 2020 will remain available in the face of any future questioning. At which time it would have a performative value, at least politically. In this case, the above hypothesis of an « opinion accident » attached to “we are at war” is wrong. The immediate observation, at the time of declaring “we are at war”, would then have been designed as an object to be available for the future more than a mobilizing project for the present.

IV. #COVID19: AN OPINION “INVARIANT”?

The hashtag #Covid19 – and its avatars – has been since its inception the marker of a pole of attraction in the public space. An analysis of the frequency of hashtags linked to Covid-19 on Twitter in France during the first two lockdowns, from March to May and then from late October to mid-December 2020, gives a picture of what has been circulating. The tables below are taken from the *epilogue-covid.org* platform where detailed data can be found, in particular for two periods, March 10 - May 10¹⁷ and November 18 - December 14¹⁸, 2020¹⁹.

¹⁵ https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2008/11/13/yes-we-can-expression-populaire_256456/

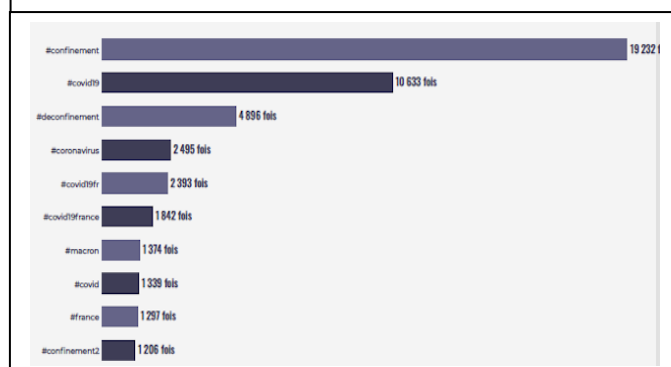
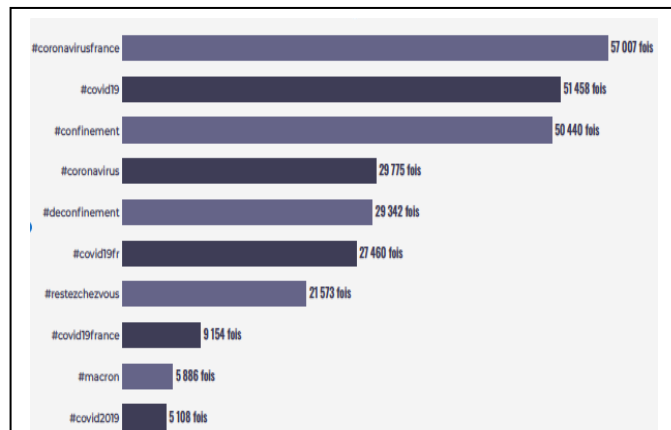
¹⁶ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wir_schaffen_das

¹⁷ <https://www.epilogue-covid.org/reseaux-sociaux-confinement/>

¹⁸ <https://www.epilogue-covid.org/reseaux-sociaux-mensuel/>

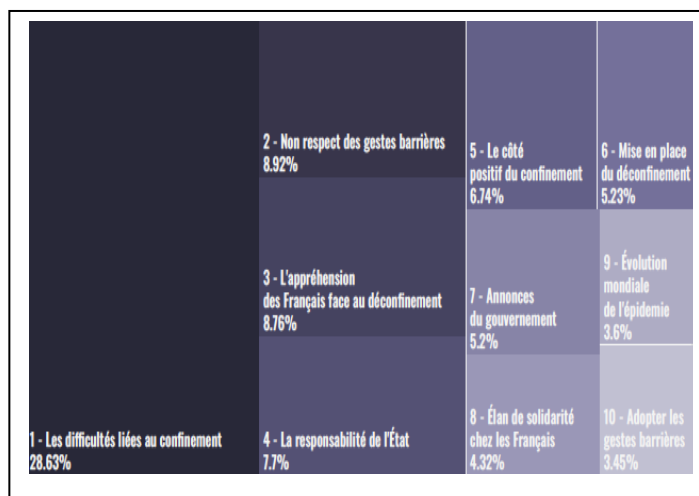
¹⁹ At the time of writing this article, it seems that the second reference has been deleted from the website of *epilogue-covid*

The two periods observed are of different lengths, the first covering two months and the second only one. The decrease in frequency is general, even taking into account the shorter



duration of the second observed period. A few points stand out:

- the two lists of hashtags correspond to similar themes from one period to the other. Their order changes, moving from a need for basic information above all (the virus, the disease, the rules to be respected) to a need for reaction to the experience of the first nine months: two themes, “responsibility” and “strategy”, together represent two-thirds of the volume for the second period.
- The content of the tweets evolves significantly towards judgments during the second period, instead of factual information during the first one.



the top of the list, which is confirmed by data published by Twitter on December 7, 2020, shown above²⁰.

Identifying the themes that circulate gives an indication of subjects that mobilize public opinion from the moment they emerge. Thus, the table published by *epilogue-covid.org* for the period of November-December 2020 shows at a still low intensity the question of the situation of students, which became a few months later one of the sensitive topical subjects, marked by the hashtag *#EtudiantFantome*²¹.

B. Avoiding accidents?

The more factual a tag, the more it generates a convergence of queries without prejudice to opinions. « The signpost does not make the trip ». The junction thus marked can become a site of fortuitous or deliberately provoked accidents. The success of the hashtag *Covid19* and its derivatives underscores this constant: the more the marker of a sought-after topic is used to call attention to posted messages, the greater the risk of collision between actors of diverse opinions. And the more traffic on the tag, the more numerous accidents become, mechanically. The tendency to express aggressiveness, acrimony and anathemas, which has developed on social networks, starting with Facebook and more recently gaining Twitter, gives these crossroads often the appearance of bumper-car arenas rather than forums to share points of view or convictions. The emergence of sites with controlled admission and content management in a spirit of debate shows that previous offers do not meet this demand. Even LinkedIn, which remains a professionally oriented platform, often finds itself skewed by the tendency, this time, to narcissism and complacency.

Deciding to enter a feed signaled by a hashtag by using it to improve one's own visibility on the network immediately implies a decisive choice: a factual tone or an activist tone. Either, for example, the factual *#Covid19* or the militant *#EtudiantFantome*. Possibly the association of the two registers: a field and a position in the field.

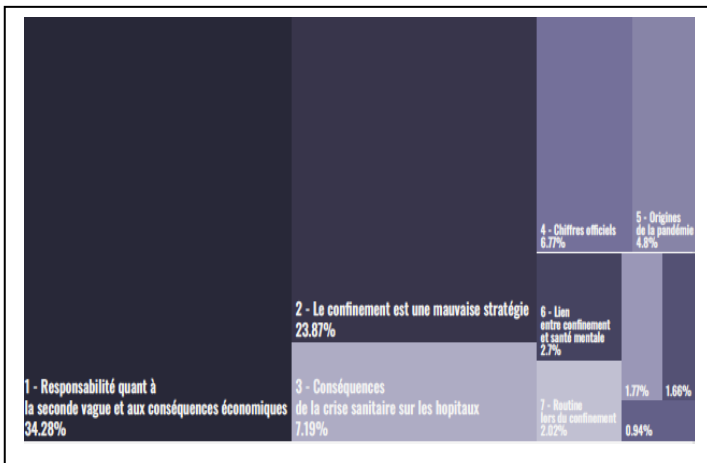
Tagging a post with a hashtag pulls the author into one or more feeds. The danger then comes less from the flow itself than from the author's ability to resist it, or to move around in it. In a way, knowing how to drive on unsafe roads or knowing how to swim in turbulent flows... The more the author reacts to the content of the feed where his own message leads him because of the hashtag, the more he will be carried away. To return to the example of Dr. Fauci, mentioned above, one of his strengths was his inertia in the face of the most senseless political flows in which he could have been tempted to intervene in the name of his scientific competence.

C. Controversy, pugilism, polemics and "media value"

Unless you choose to enter the fray of a militant controversy, a fist fight or a polemic, the three possibly

²⁰ Most popular hashtags used on Twitter in France in 2020, in million tweets
https://blog.twitter.com/fr_fr/topics/events/2020/retrospective2020.html

²¹ <https://www.epilogue-covid.org/etudiantfantome-sante-mentale-etudiants/>



To these data collections, *epilogue-covid.org* adds, for the first period, an analysis of the links contained in the tweets listed, noting in particular that « in total, more than 60% of the links shared come from information sites such as national and regional press, foreign press, news channels, public information sites ».

A. Danger is not in the hashtag

#Covid19 and the hashtags associated with it are only beacons or hubs for the circulation of content. They are, in this way, occasions of accidents for the users who circulate there, but the purely factual character of the term contained, which does not vary over time, does not in itself represent a danger. It is the intensity of traffic on the topic that signals the level of accident risk. The higher the number of occurrences due to heavy traffic, the higher the sensitivity of the topic in society. And the higher also the "nervousness of the drivers", *gregariously* contagious...



The hashtag *#Covid19* and its related formulations designate objects and not positions, opinions nor judgments, unlike *#NousSommesEnGuerre*, for example. Even the name contained in the *#Macron* hashtag does not indicate an orientation of the associated content. And it should be noted that the hashtag *#Raoult* or *#DidierRaoult* does not appear at

being the successive degrees of the same topic, the use of hashtags should remain centered on factual terms, letting the potential readers of a message give it their own color if they wish by adding their comments. The success of a factual hashtag is a testament to the intensity of interest for a topic in society. Yet the success of an activist hashtag, measured by its frequency, does not necessarily imply a majority rallying to its orientation. The mechanism works in two opposite directions: it is the intensity of the attention paid in society to a subject that makes the hashtag of the theme go up on social networks, while it is the intensity of a militant hashtag's circulation on social networks which may, at a sufficient level, result in its entering the public space of mainstream media because it becomes an event. At that stage of diffusion, the probability of an opinion accident becomes high. Reaching that stage may even be the objective of parties fueling the debate for it to gain mainstream news value. As noted above: « What takes place or what is experienced is no longer the said event: it is the discourse itself. »²²

V. OPINION ACCIDENTS: A MANAGEABLE RISK?

Accidents have causes. Many have their causes in the victims of accidents. Others have theirs in the devices used by the victims or other direct or indirect parties to the accident. Some are not accidents but deliberate assaults. Fatality has long ceased to be accepted as a cause of accidents. Responsibilities are sought in all cases. The "human factor" is always pointed at, and the human factor can be a complex "black box", both for the causes of an accident, and for its consequences. « Instead of isolating the risk as a technical problem, we should formulate it so as to include, however crudely, its moral and political implications. »²³

The probability and severity of an accident nonetheless appear to be manageable²⁴ with some caution for at least part of their causes: mainly the ones that have their origins in the victims themselves, whose competence to evaluate the multiple dimensions of risk is a key factor in avoiding accidents.

A. Sharing opinions vs. exposing knowledge: The limits of the French "Moi, je"

A message that begins with "moi, je"²⁵ weakens its content. The opinions of "moi, je" are considered to be all equivalent. Everyone sticks to their convictions. Social networks are not the place to question the diverse "moi, je" which all collide there, in the literal sense.

²² ce qui a lieu ou ce qui est vécu n'est plus l'événement dit : c'est le discours lui-même.

Ferry, Jean-Marc : *op.cit.*, p. 105

²³ Douglas, Mary : *Risk and blame*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 51

²⁴ We have proposed an initial analysis of « opinion risk » : Beaudoin, Jean-Pierre : *Etre à l'écoute du risque d'opinion*, Ed. d'Organisation, Paris, 2001

²⁵ A great number of French personalities, political and other, interviewed in media begin their declarations with « moi, je... », thus accepting that what they say can be no one else's view. And may have no more value than that of a personal view.

The sharing of substantial content, information, proven facts, knowledge, meets less excitement but better quality attention. Knowledge sharing prior to opinions is the condition of public debate. The attempts to propose a framework which allows public debate, in the form of citizen conventions, "états généraux" or other debating formats the denominations of which, consciously or not, refer to the lexicon of a revolutionary period, testify both to the need of them and to the lack of available response to the need. It is undoubtedly necessary, first of all, to realize that starting with "moi, je" immediately eliminates any possibility of common examination of a case by placing oneself in the mode of confrontation. And to realize that the communication by formatted "key messages" marks the bankruptcy of substance.

Knowledge is never final, but starting with sharing "what we know" instead of "my view" improves the odds of the dialogue. The choice to enter by one or the other of the modes of expression must be made consciously.

B. Acknowledging risk, avoiding accident by ignorance

Exposing oneself or one's beliefs, or even sharing information, includes the range of risks of any communication. « We have entered the accident age, and that is why we live in a world where the organization of safety and the management of insurance occupies an increasingly important place in corporate governance. »²⁶

Exposing oneself carries the risk of personal attack²⁷ exactly where one may have sought narcissistic satisfaction from exercising influence. Exposing your convictions will call for contradiction at least as much as assent. Sharing information, knowledge, may be understood by some others as sharing beliefs. Confusion of registers between science and beliefs is a constant in social networks.

The severity of accident will be proportional to the fragility of the ego more than to the violence of the collision, and the "degree of ego" is not the same in the exposure of oneself, of one's convictions, or in knowledge sharing. When engaging into any communication, one must remember that « Communication presupposes non-identity of those involved in it, hence also a difference in perspectives and hence the impossibility of perfect congruence of experience. »²⁸

²⁶ Nous sommes entrés dans l'âge des accidents, et c'est pourquoi nous vivons dans un monde où l'organisation de la sécurité et la gestion de l'assurance occupent une place de plus en plus importante dans le gouvernement des sociétés.

Caye, Pierre : *Durer – Eléments pour la transformation du système productif*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2020, p. 159

²⁷ See also : Beaudoin, Jean-Pierre : *Le Dirigeant à l'épreuve de l'opinion*, Pearson, Paris, 2008

²⁸ Kommunikation setzt Nichtidentität der an ihr beteiligten voraus, daher auch Differenz der Perspektiven und daher auch Unmöglichkeit vollkommener Kongruenz des Erlebens. Luhmann, Niklas : « Einführende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie symbolisch generalisierter Kommunikationsmedien » (1981), in : *Aufsätze und Reden*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 2001, p. 3

The choice of register, or the dosage between registers, must be conscious.

C. *Establishing legitimacy to hold relationship*

Confusion of registers leads to general confusion. All judges, all epidemiologists, all journalists, all... everything on all subjects. « (...) all these questions are expressed in the greatest confusion on our screens, as elsewhere, because the society of individuals is one where we are less and less in a place and more and more in a relationship, in the requirement to engage in it from this bottomless pit that is our own individuality. »²⁹

The correctness of the debate requires the legitimacy of the protagonists, each in his capacity bringing his point of view from a solid knowledge base. Being drawn into someone else's arena leads to credibility flaws that even, in the end, destroy legitimacy on the home ground. You have to remember what allows participation in the debate. It is the self-containment in competence that protects credibility and legitimacy.

The basis of legitimacy is a given to be enriched, an asset of which it is necessary to remain aware.

D. *Taking the long pace of society*

Speeding is a cause of accidents. To the slow pace of society, opinion breathes more deeply than to the fast pace on the surface of flows. Adopting the pace of society gives public opinion time to become informed, to form a basis for opinions.

Contradictory reproaches addressed to leaders who would at the same time "infantilize" the public and not resort enough to "pedagogy", without perceiving the contradiction in the terms, are largely due to the feeling of urgency in which one should "stick to current events".

The last word to Paul Virilio and his "original accident": « A society which inconsiderately favors the present, REAL TIME, to the detriment of the past as well as the future, also favors ACCIDENT. Since, at any moment, everything happens and most often unexpectedly, a civilization which implements immediacy stages the accident, the catastrophe. (...)

After two millennia of experiences and failures, the third millennium inaugurates, with globalization, the *paradox of the failure of success* since it is the success of Progress that causes disasters. Integral accident of a science deprived of conscience, whose arrogant victory erases even the memory of its ancient benefits. »³⁰

²⁹ (...) toutes ces questions s'expriment dans la plus grande confusion sur nos écrans, comme ailleurs, parce que la société d'individus est celle où nous sommes de moins en moins à une place et de plus en plus dans une relation, dans l'exigence de nous y engager à partir de ce puits sans fond qu'est notre propre individualité.

Ehrenberg, Alain : *L'Individu incertain*, Hachette Littératures, Paris, 1995, p. 302

³⁰ Une société qui privilégie inconsidérément le présent, le TEMPS REEL, au détriment du passé comme du futur, privilégie aussi

l'ACCIDENT. Puisque, à tout instant, tout arrive et le plus souvent inopinément, une civilisation, qui met en œuvre l'immédiateté, met en scène l'accident, la catastrophe. (...) Après deux millénaires d'expériences et d'échecs, le troisième millénaire inaugure, avec la globalisation, *le paradoxe de l'échec du succès* puisque c'est la réussite du Progrès qui provoque les désastres. Accident intégral d'une science privée de conscience, dont l'arrogante victoire efface jusqu'au souvenir de ses anciens bienfaits.

Virilio, Paul : *op.cit.*, pp. 47, 147

