



# Perverted uses of digital networks: when journalists and communicators get entangled! An analysis of the paradoxical process of re-feudalization related to the evolution of contemporary capitalism worldwide

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# ***Social Media Archaeology from Theory to Practice***

area : *Empirical studies of user behavior on social media*

## *Chapter*

### **Perverted uses of digital networks: when journalists and communicators get entangled! An analysis of the paradoxical process of re-feudalization related to the evolution of contemporary capitalism worldwide**

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#### *Abstract*

The increasing commercialization of media had led Jürgen Habermas to speak in terms of a "re-feudalisation" of the public sphere and a substitution of the principle of integration by the principle of publicity from increasingly powerful interest groups. Since then, the author corrected his analysis: a communicative power can also influence the administrative power and oppose mainstream media manipulation.

However, recent analyzes now take up the concept of "re-feudalization", in another way. It could be used to signify the social transformation underway, leading to the establishment of "neo-feudal" privileges for the wealthy classes, while the lower social categories are confronted with exclusion and return to forced labor. These paradoxical situations also explain why, for certain other social actors in the intermediate categories, the fear of declassification - felt or real - justified the development of perverse strategies to eliminate competitors, for example women, in the labour market work.

In this chapter, the analysis is applied to the recent cases in France of tweeting harassment, carried out by journalists and communicators, some of them consecrated as VIP, and all of them organized in packs around *The ligue du Lol (Laughing Out Loud League)*. For several years since 2009, their favorite targets have been confreres and especially sisters. Some of them were already fragile. But others were considered as potential stronger competitors likely to upstage them, either to the entry into the profession, either for promotions to team responsibilities, or even to editorial direction. Significantly, the explanatory perspective proved to be absent in the mainstream media reconstitutions of the event by the corporation, suddenly plunged unwillingly into the position of the "sprayed sprinkler".

Moreover, the vicious dynamic particularly worked for the members of the pack, thanks to their own feeling of impunity that *Twitter*, like other GAFAM (*Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft*), protected against the injunctions from public authorities to declassify the secrecy of correspondence. In the name of freedom of expression and respect of privacy for the first, as actors of digital journalism! In the name of liberalism, for the second, as hyperpuishing groups of the information technology sector, taking advantage of more and more profitable and competitive investments, as contents providers.

**KEYWORDS:** *troll - harassment – re-feudalization - cultural industries*

*« Information and communication technologies  
should not be accepted with gregarious naivety,  
nor be rejected in sterile opposition.  
They are simply there !»*

Breaking news to this beginning of February 2019, with the frosty suddenness of bad news on Twitter and other digitized media of whistleblowers: famous French daily *Liberation* has just laid off two of its journalists as a safeguard measure, because they are implicated of moral harassment by victims through their own tweets. The affair could be trivialized : the denunciation of criminal acts, even simply macho against women, are, unfortunately, abundant in recent months. But in this case, the resonance is immediate in the French public sphere linked to the professional affiliation of deviants, writing in one of the leading daily newspapers in France, which moreover, was born from the protest movements of May 68 and then regarded as within the so-called "well-meaning" press. Admittedly, initially intended the measure is just an administrative one, the layoff is not a definitive sanction. It does not prejudge any kind of guilt. However, it shows that the daily management of *Liberation* took the matter "very seriously". Rightly. Because the following days, the revelations elevate the news brief to the rank of media and public affair, which journalists, usually fond of, would rather not have been involved in as defendant. Thus, soon the entire Parisian information and communication microcosm are indicted – and no longer just two of its representatives – through the criminal acts of a *Ligue du LOL* club of which they are all members. Everyone thus finds themselves in the uncomfortable situation of sprayed sprinklers.

## **1. A simple brief news significantly raised as a scandal**

Immediately, the two involved journalists apologize on *Twitter*. But beyond the emotion aroused by the double confession, the revelation of the imagined process, as well as the medium used and the protagonists involved in the offense, in number and quality, are immediately seen as a proof of a drift of journalism. Worse: as a rout of a so-called "professional" journalism. Immediately, the whole corporation feels blamed, whatever the nature of the medium it uses – digital included at the age of a trivialization of blogs and tweets of journalists and the development of pure player media.

To understand, we must remember that, at the social networks start-up at the beginning of the Third Millennium, when competition between producers of mediated information had suddenly increased, some journalists of the mainstream newspaper's journalists – synonymous with professional quality – had chosen a haughty attitude toward digital usurpers, considered to be inexperienced amateur (Salles, 2010). Investigating the phenomenon, *Liberation* had titled its investigation: "Blogs, all journalists? ", But the contemptuous, then reserved attitude of the journalists of *Le Monde* newspaper was indicative of the disdain at that time, against these "web 2.0 dummies". To avoid any confusion with their own journalism practices, they had arrogated for themselves and this, in an exclusive way, the quality of "professionals", as if the territory was undoubtedly as a profession, which the sociology of professions denies, speaking in terms of "vagueness" (Ruellan, 2007 and 2011).

The aristocracy of journalism intended to remind the deontology that constituted all the peculiarity and nobility of the profession, exercised by practitioners whose rigorous techniques of collecting and disseminating information are distinguished precisely by ethics. We know whose ancestor they get them from and how to fight back: the first professional journalists is traditionally known as Théophraste Renaudot, founder and host of *La Gazette*, who had defined the basic rules of ethics.

### **1.1. An ethical concern going back to the origins of "professional journalism"**

Renaudot's proposal, which enabled him to impose *La Gazette* over its competitors as a benchmark newspaper, was meant to be open ("All those who are in love like me with Truth, in whatever climate of the world they live, are welcome to boldly send me their news"). But it was very demanding too.

It stood out from others for the quality of its information with the aim of correcting rumors. Thus, quickly, *La Gazette* became a quality political and social newspaper with an international renown. Its founder editor-in-chief, Theophraste Renaudot is cited as the creator of the modern press, linked by definition to the life of the nation. From his qualities of social generosity, curiosity, liveliness of mind, power of work, and stubbornness, his academic reference had even justified the constitution of both a French literary prize (Renaudot prize) and a global network of journalism training (Theophraste network).

Thus, the basic principles of journalistic investigation and writing were codified. A deontological system has been added to the basic rules of journalism, as taught in journalism training schools, which goes beyond writing *stricto sensu* to engage the social responsibility of the journalist. Article 2 of the *Charte des droits et devoirs du journaliste* (Charter of Rights and Duties of Journalists) July 1918, revised in January 1938, stipulates that any journalist, worthy of the name, takes responsibility for all his/her writing, even anonymous. He/she consider slander, unproven accusations, tampering with documents, distortion of facts, lies as the most serious professional misconduct. He/she only accepts assignments which are compatible with professional dignity. He/she does not plot for a colleague's position, nor for the dismissal of a colleague by offering to work under inferior conditions. He considers scruple and justice to be the first rules.

However, the history of ethics rewritten by representatives of the corporation is partial and one-sided: it ignores allegiance to the king, which reduced Théophraste Renaudot's writing to an obedient "ghost writer". The control before publication of the articles was not only technical and ethical: it was primarily political as an act of very strict censorship, exercised directly by Louis XIII and Richelieu.

The professional corporation doest not try to speak about *protojournalism* either. However, before Gutenberg's invention of the printing press between 1430 and 1440, regular correspondence services had been organized in Europe. The ancestors of journalists are therefore those *Menantii* : from the 13th century, they were trafficking in news, which they also traded, braving the sanction of the papal authorities (Pie V, Gregory XII, Sixte-Quint). The penalties incurred were not light: the Roman rigors wishing that their hand was cut off and their tongue torn out. It is true : any means were good to feed the gossip and other peddling of information quickly gleaned, but profitable. It had already been discovered that information could constitute a means of pressure, disqualification or even blackmail. In the middle of the 15th century The arrival of the first periodicals had not compromised the activity, whose good practices were to listen at the doors and "to be there at the right time" to reveal the Truth (Voyenne, 1959). During the Renaissance, the *gazetiers* thus extracted anecdotes and gossip.

These were practices that Renaudot proposed to reject. And by the end of the 17th century, magazines had been added to newspapers. Thus, they were intended to

be didactic and were aimed primarily at the circle of educated laymen. Soon, critical analysis soon through feature articles, in the field of scholarly truth (Habermas, 2006, p. 35). And it was on this ground that Jürgen Habermas had identified the principle of *Publicity* which, ethically, opened up to the control that then, the bourgeoisie opposed to Power. The *public sphere* was born. It worked to put an end to the practice of secrecy, peculiar against any absolute State. It worked too to submit any public authority to the tribunal of rational criticism. However, we should not forget that quickly, this shift from the 19th to the 20th century corresponded to a particular context : the "golden age" of journalism, i.e. the transition from the craft press to a true industrialization of the production of information with the improvement of printing techniques (Balle, 1990, p. 89).

Thus, these "professional" rules and practices, which some people persist in examining only from the perspective of moral virtues, must be put into perspective with the more pragmatic requirements which impose them, this time with an economic, financial, even ideological perspective.

## **1.2. More pragmatic requirements due to the industrialization of the press**

From the very-beginning, Information and Communication sciences have been dissatisfied with analyzes of media content just reduced to declarative literature of journalists, even if the analysis of the discursive modalities (genres, columns, tones, registers, etc.) of papers can be interesting. Media information is not only a sum of contents. It must be considered also and above all as modes of relationship, i.e. as a pattern of productive communication between groups and social forces, and as a social construct revealing a type of power relationship between different social actors (De la Haye, 1985).

So, contextualizing the rule-making period (investigation and drafting techniques), some of them turn proving not to just correspond to ethical imperatives. For example, the inverted pyramid basic format of news stories is often presented as a mark of scrupulous attention of a positivist journalist, attached to facilitating the immediate readability and the understanding of the facts by his reader, by, first of all, purging his text of any comments and judgement of intentions (Pélissier, 2005). But these presentation rules – to be applied since the *chapô* (text entry) – were also

enacted to prevent the risk of interruption linked to telegraphic transmission, by respecting the so-called 5 W's questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why?) as proposed in the research program developed by Harold D. Lasswell. Thus, already, ethics and economic interest came together opportunely: in the one hand, readers gained ease of immediate access to information and in the other hand, press publishers gained space savings.

In the same way, the myth of the press publisher as a gatekeeper of the democratic values does not draw its strength only from the *journalist-vigilante* symbolic figure. The reference was brought by the French Third Republic (Lemieux, 2001), before being overvalued by Hollywood cinema: the investigative work of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein up to the impeachment of Richard Nixon then functioned as a symbol. Even more distantly, this journalism had captured the model of virtue that the Republican School had attributed to the schoolmaster. A dialectical model was thus constructed, which contemporary positivism is working to strengthen: thus, director of studies at Oxford, researcher at Stanford and journalist, Timothy Garton Ash had established a clear border between Literature on the one hand, History and Journalism on the other: the one that separates *Truth vs Lies*, *fiction vs non-fiction*, *Objectivity vs Subjectivity* (Cabedoche, 2004).

The proposal has already provoked a constructivism questioning which are now appropriated by the information and communication sciences. Thus, Bernard Delforce considers that *Truth* – that the journalist corporation is gloating over – is first a social construct (Delforce, 1996; Delforce, Noyer, 1999; Delforce, 2004). Socio-linguist Patrick Charaudeau considers journalistic content not as reality but as the product of a whole series of negotiations between actors, at the crossroads of which the journalist works (Charaudeau, 1997). We have reconstructed this reading of the co-construction of media information, based on the author and other lessons of information and communication sciences.

Producers		Context		Endusers	
Area of production conditions		Area of traffic conditions		Area of interpretation conditions	
Management authority	Writing authority	Partnership area	Acculturation area	Imaginary constructs	Identity Constructs
Competitiveness, rank and state of the market; modalities of economic, financial, socio-professional organizations; ratio between content industries and communication industries; distribution networks	Nature and format of the media; organization of editorial staff, institutional weight; management of the group's overall project; "DNA", ethics, values; editorial line, creative space; <i>habitus</i> , training, status, practices of journalists.	Socio-cultural spiritual environment of production and dissemination: societal values, dominant social actors, public / private status, advertisers' game, community management, correspondence networks, public journalism followers and coopetition games with social networks	Strategies and tactics of actors and the State in the public sphere; "invisible script", "circular circulation of mediated information"; doxa and glocalization; regulatory authority, trans-nationalization of media, strategies of telecommunication operators	Construction and circulation of imaginaries in terms of knowledge ( <i>authenticity</i> effects), desire (capture effects) and practices (games of rehabilitation and (de) programming) linked to the chosen target(s),	Negotiations, pressures, practices, expectations and versatile tricks of public(s) as a consumerist and citizen authority; health of the media business model and performance of marketers and community managers
<b>Imposed economic effects</b>	<b>Targeted incentive effects</b>	<b>Possible socio-cultural effects</b>	<b>Authorized socio-political effects</b>	<b>Supposed interactional effects</b>	<b>Co-constructed product effects</b>

Admittedly, the discipline does not adopt with one voice the radical constructivism of Jean-Louis Lemoigne for example (Lemoigne, 2001). Gilles Gauthier even believes that the posture is unsuitable for journalism, preventing any evaluation (Gauthier, 2005). Carried to the extreme in fact, the posture can lead to two traps. Considering that knowledge does not arise from an adequacy to Reality, *cognitive anti-objectivism* dissuades from any evaluation, as the Althusserian structuralism did yesterday; calling for a definitive suspension of judgment on Reality, *ontological skepticism* leads to cynicism as an ersatz analysis or to radical cultural relativism: everything being equal in its inadequacy to Reality, *cognitive nihilism* levels barbarism or the negation of the Other.

It is this positivist prevention that the journalist sometimes avails himself of, to rise to a normative overhanging posture, without further debating the objectivity to which he/she claims to be. But this is claimed without any evaluation scientific protocols a researcher must accompany the presentation of his/her conclusions



(Cabedoche, 2004). Thus, an idealtype has been established, which essence is initially liberal.

Thus, the rule that disqualifies the "subjective" process of saying something ("énonciation" in structuralist theory) in media discourse also corresponds to the evolution of media organizations at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Because it was effectively with the increase of the print media becoming industrial organization, and therefore of competition, that this rule of a journalism without any bias has been imposed and, therefore, the conception of a journalist as a gatekeeper of democracy and as a mass educator (Pélissier, 2005 and 2009). Thus, by ethics raised the economic imperative to work to broaden its audience by observing the majority opinion and the "Truth of facts". At the same time, scientific objectivity requires the researcher not to reduce knowledge to a simple addition of facts (Husserl, 1936): to assume a theoretical posture aims to gain access to the understanding of the mechanisms and process beyond the media "froth" in a short time (Bauthier, 2006). A century later, with the development of digital technology which is accelerating the breathlessness of an troubled economic model for press organizations, "professional" journalists have community management responsibilities added to their job descriptions, as if they were employees of a simple merchant business (Galibert, 2014; Shimmin, 2017), still with the same concern for the optimal audience, therefore for economic profitability (Cabedoche, 2016a). The development was all the more significant for a journalistic corporation that it is traditionally rebellious to this type of approach (Deslandes, 2008).

However, this growing commodification of media had ever been perceived: Jürgen Habermas spoke in terms of a "re-feudalisation" of the public sphere from the observation of the substitution of the principle of integration to the principle of public space (*Öffentlichkeit*), by increasingly powerful interest groups. (Habermas, 1962). Thus, behind the Manipulated Publicness (*Publicity*), the drive was no longer a public opinion, but a fabricated consensus, ready to be acclaimed.

We know that, later, clarifying his assessment on the basis of his recognition of the critical capacities of publics and conceding the possibility of a public space nevertheless, the author had corrected the radicality of the analysis which had made him known in the sixties. Since then, the author considers having first "assessed too pessimistically the capacity for resistance, and especially the critical potential of a pluralist and largely undifferentiated mass public" (Habermas, 1992, p. 174). A

communicational power can indeed also influence the administrative power and oppose manipulation by the mainstream media. Effectively, actually, the public sphere is now considered as a fragmented one, extended to all social classes and categories, even if they do not take part in it in an identical and egalitarian way (Habermas, 1992, p. 175). Analysis is now classic for authors of information and communication sciences (Dalhgren, 2000; Miège, 2011; Cabedoche, 2016b).

However, warnings remain relevant, when with the sixties, the *theories of the State* had endorsed a fragmented vision of a cultural apparatus, considered as confined in its functioning, to the ideological-political sphere. This conception made possible to "*ignore the industrial, even commercial, dimension of mass cultural production*". Without, however, accepting the equally partial shift of reflection and foresight into the sphere of the economy, some precursors had already taken note of the growing commodification of the cultural sector and of its interweaving in the development of information technologies, to the point of projecting culture at the very heart of the industrial and political system (Mattelart, Mattelart and Delmas, 1984, p. 51-52).

The concept of re-feudalisation returns to relevance today, this time signifying the ongoing social transformation: on the one hand, "neo-feudal" privileges for the wealthy classes against a background of modernization; on the other, the lower strata, faced with exclusion and a return to forced labor (Neckel, 2017); between the two, the fear of being downgraded in the intermediate categories, whether it is felt (Goux, Maurin, 2012) or real (Chauvel, 2006). This discomfort would justify the development of strategies to eliminate competition. Thus, the harassment of candidates for the exercise, even for the direction of an economically weakened journalism today, could shed light on the digital excesses of certain journalists in a new way: those of a socially economically hard-pressed microcosm, at the same time imbued with the feeling of impunity attached to the status of justice that he attributed to himself, without any imperative mandate.

But a researcher who would like to test the hypothesis by using the disapproving metadiscours of the media corporation could be disappointed by the emptiness of the method.

## **2. A posture of media information producers between outraged indignation and corporate protection**

It was very easy to Constructivists showing that even when it looks like a kind of self-criticism, the reflective work of journalists most part of time just come for shifting the wheat from the chaff. The essential is rarely questioned, i.e. the sufficiency of "genuine" journalism. Patrick Charaudeau had already made this observation: whatever is a journalistic drift, the reflex of the corporation is to limit itself to distinguishing the good practices from the bad and to dissociate itself from the deviations, leading to a "non-pensé" (unthought) which dissuades to question media activity more fundamentally (Charaudeau, 1997).

Indeed, our own press review (general media) in the weeks following the scandal breaking revealed by the dismissal of the two journalists, one as an editor and the other as a freelance writer at *Liberation* (French reference newspaper), confirms this measured contrition, even as the storm was keeping growing to the entire corporation of Parisian information and communication professionals.

### **2.1. The horrified observation of a collective drift within the Parisian microcosm of information and communication**

They grouped together behind the name *La Ligue du LOL* (acronym for Laughing Out Loud), a Facebook group created ten years ago by the two accused journalists. Their tweeting activity had gradually turned into recurring practices of moral harassment, against named victims. Identical in all media, the historical reconstruction of the crime revealed a list of journalists that seemed to be unfixed. Definitely, most of the facts alleged to the members of *La Ligue du LOL* could no longer be prosecuted before the courts, even if the statute of limitations had been postponed to six years since March 2017, most having been committed before 2013. But legally, the severity of the penalties provided for by law indicated the gravity of the offense: two years' imprisonment and 30,000 euros penalty (three years in prison and a 45,000 euros penalty if the victim was minor or vulnerable or when the damage caused gives rise to a total incapacity for work of more than 8 days), from the recognition of cyber-harassment by the French courts before the limitation period.

The traumatic wave had been certain for the Parisian information and communication microcosm, first flabbergasted to have welcomed in some of their editorial offices such an enterprise of collective malicious acts.

Then, commentators in the media worked towards decoding, i.e. dissociating themselves and trying to forestall the stigma against the entire corporation. Originally, in media analyzes, we discover a joke – unhealthy – under a *troll* activity, as an intrusive action of Internet users just to disturb debates by stirring up controversy. “Just to laugh and see what's going on”, without trying to harass anyone. And then, a Facebook group has been created in 2009: “A private group like there were many at the time, in which a lot of tweeters kept a veritable observatory of funny things from Twitter [...] It was brilliant, it was stupid. We made fun of people, mainly some specific Youtoubeuses [female users of Youtube] and sisters ”<sup>1</sup>. In short, this dubious pastime that Internet users refer to as “net weenies”. “In this affair, there is the 'boys club' side, with the staging of a male inter-self that recalls the networks that have structured society for a long time: the brothel, the barracks, the locker rooms, the boarding school”<sup>2</sup>. Until the drift! Then, *La ligue du LOL* would have escaped its two creators to become “a monster”. Because what media must have finally revealed – without having first really believed in it – was this incredible reality: beyond the schoolboy inconsistency of its two founders, the club formed now a significant number of its members, thoughtful Parisian media, who have finally to face dozens of accusations of harassment online.

The reconstruction revealed the mechanism in all its horror, the investigating journalists now choosing the investigation, as *Liberation*, after having practiced the *omerta* (code of silence). From the victims – mainly women, journalists or feminist bloggers – the systematic and coordinated denigration they suffered from the end of the 2000s to the beginning of the 2010s, could have constituted serious obstacles to their promotion of professional careers in the Parisian world of professional communicators and journalists, even disasters in their private couple. Like many

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<sup>1</sup> Our translation from: “Un groupe privé comme il y en avait beaucoup à l’époque, dans lequel plein de twittos tenaient un véritable observatoire des trucs drôles de Twitter [...] C’était brillant, c’était bête. On se moquait des gens, principalement de certaines youtoubeuses et consœurs”.

<sup>2</sup> Our translation from : “Dans cette affaire, il y a le côté 'boys club', avec la mise en scène d'un entre soi masculin qui rappelle celui des réseaux qui ont structuré pendant longtemps la société : le bordel, la caserne, les vestiaires, l'internet”.

victims, no one expected the scale of the phenomenon, and for observers, all of them were ultimately stunned by the number of sisters thus targeted by *La ligue du LOL* and by the nuisance power of their torturers: "They were people who had more than 5,000 followers on social networks and therefore, who had a nuisance power by all the people they gathered with them"<sup>3</sup>.

At first, the attacks were limited to name-calling, insults, malicious messages. But soon, the perverse uproar could have led to the publicization of photomontages showing the victim's head on a pornographic body image; or to the visibility on the web of compromising reactions of the victims of telephone hoaxes, for example during a pseudo recruitment interview; or to the launch of real digital raids, as a lynching by the masked community of predators (punishable by law only since August 2018). Some of these journalist victims said they were "psychologically destroyed", multiplying sick leaves, sinking into burn-out and depression, to the point of choosing temporary exile in Canada in the hope of finding a return to calm for one of them: "It undermined my self-confidence at all levels"<sup>4</sup>. Others said they even thought about committing a suicide: "When we are told that we do not have the right to exist virtually, we say to ourselves that we do not have the right to exist in real life"<sup>5</sup>. All recognized: "Seven, eight years later, it still hurts too much"<sup>6</sup>.

Aggravating circumstance, while prescribed, the facts also appeared to have been accomplished in the course of employment and no longer only in private life. The sanction could lead to dismissal for serious misconduct, with the option of suing the employee for affront to the good moral standards if the employer proved that he was not informed at the time of the occurrence, or that he was not inactive, by blind and permissive laxity.

Precisely, several years after the facts, the law of silence was the rule for everyone, included victims, as one of the harassed journalists working for Slate.fr had recognized later: "Why did not we speak for all these years ? Because these people [members of *La Ligue du LOL* League] had important positions, were friends with

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<sup>3</sup> Our translation from : "C'étaient des gens qui avaient plus de 5000 followers sur les réseaux sociaux et donc, qui avaient un pouvoir de nuisance par tous les gens qu'ils rameutaient avec eux".

<sup>4</sup> Our translation from : "Ça a sapé ma confiance à tous les niveaux".

<sup>5</sup> Our translation from : "Quand on nous dit qu'on n'a pas le droit d'exister virtuellement, on se dit qu'on n'a pas le droit d'exister dans la vraie vie".

<sup>6</sup> Our translation from : "Sept, huit ans après, ça fait toujours trop mal".

influential editors or with people at a high level of management positions in media"<sup>7</sup>. Lawyers and police even then dissuaded from filing a complaint: "this will not work, because French culture"<sup>8</sup>, while the "lolers" [member of La Ligue du LOL] spoke in the same voice: "It is useless. Getting trolled is the rule"<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, as Clara Gonzales, member of the *Force Juridique de la Fondation des Femmes* (Legal Force of the Foundation of Women), observed on *FranceInfo*, a reversal of guilt had been able to develop from some of victims themselves: "If they attack me, it's a proof that I'm never going to pull through the media world"<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the anonymity behind which some of their tormentors managed to protect themselves in the one hand, the difficulties in gathering evidence and the lack of means given to the legal institution to deal effectively with cyberviolence in the other hand, had not encouraged the filing of complaints. The magistrates themselves recognize their own difficulty in obtaining information, even just a real moderation from the sites, despite the denials of Facebook, Twitter or Youtube, for example, or their commitment to reform. In fact, it was only after the direct feedback of information to the media management by a dozen courageous women journalists that the affair had finally exploded! Finally! "If those people hadn't been so indecent in their posture, repeating their tweets and comments, maybe I wouldn't have spoken"<sup>11</sup>. Some "youtoubeuses", victims of *La ligue du LOL*, saw a kind of signal, more than a year after the launch of the #MeToo campaign. Therefore, they were emboldened to publicize their misadventure, waiting for sanctions to say "That there is no longer impunity"<sup>12</sup>. *La Fondation des Femmes* [the Women's Foundation] had supported the process, by launching a fundraiser for all these victims of cyberbullying.

On the harassers side coming mainly from the world of journalism, the pressure had been enormous, caused within the very brotherhood by the increasing revelations of their delinquent actions. For the shocked colleagues, the disaster was total, as well

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<sup>7</sup> Our translation from : "*Pourquoi n'avons-nous pas parlé pendant toutes ces années ? Parce que ces gens-là avaient des postes importants, étaient amis avec des rédacteurs en chef influents ou des personnes à des postes de direction*".

<sup>8</sup> Our translation from : "*Ça ne passera pas, à cause de la culture française*".

<sup>9</sup> Our translation from : "*Ça ne sert à rien. Se faire troller, c'est la règle*".

<sup>10</sup> Our translation from : "*S'ils s'en prennent à moi, c'est bien que je ne vais jamais m'en sortir dans le monde des médias*".

<sup>11</sup> Our translation from : "*Si ces gens n'avaient pas été aussi indécents, dans leur posture, la répétition de leurs tweets et commentaires, peut-être que je n'aurais pas parlé*".

<sup>12</sup> Our translation from : "*Il n'y a plus d'impunité*".

by the number of implicated professionals (about thirty) as by the quality of the present or past members of the disputed *Ligue*. Their signature appeared at the end of articles published by the *Brain Magazine* site, but also in the media *Usbek & Rica*, the online information news *20 minutes*, the daily *Liberation* and even the prestigious cultural magazine *Télérama*. Some were occasional collaborators, for example for *Le Grand Journal* on Canal +, others still students - or even temporary teachers - in one of the best fourteen French journalism training schools. Some still collaborated in post-cast studios, like *Nouvelles Écoutes*; others finally appeared in the executive board of reputable publications, as an indication of the involvement of members of the editorial staff, sometimes even the founder, for example concerning the online magazine of pornographic culture *Le Tag parfait*, but also the magazine *Les Inrocks* or *Slate* site.

Then, media had tried to sort out by themselves before the end of the judicial inquiries. Thus, it appeared that some of their colleagues who was involved, such as the *Télérama* journalist, were only mistaken for negligence, even passivity, for not having been more vigilant in joining *La ligue du LOL*. Others, for example a *Le Nouvel Observateur* columnist, had confessed to having maintained a hundred interactions with members of *La ligue du LOL* without having joined. They just and left [behind them] "a trail of tweets which challenge".

In light of what has been publicized in the media at the end of this internal inquiry, every one was so innocent, even naive. Some of the "brazen" journalists reportedly said they were "quiet", even bragging about having erased all the evidence. Some others admitted to being guilty of not having reacted, when they discovered the abuses carried by the club. Others, finally, had admitted having participated directly in the repeated operations constituting harassment, but also shirking all collective responsibility: "My bullshit, I take it. Those of others, no thanks"<sup>13</sup>.

However, as a sociologist explained, "risk-taking, performance and attitude towards women" could have constituted the new repertoire of values contributing to the construction of masculinity in a weakened journalistic environment. Finally, some had agreed to discuss this matter with their victim. Others had apologized. On the sidelines of the *Ligue du LOL* case, only one, popular cartoonist on *Facebook*, had

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<sup>13</sup> Our translation from: « *Mes conneries, je les assume. Celles des autres, non merci* ».

taken responsibility for his actions, admitting not to regret any of his insults at the end of his conviction by the courts for calling for cyberbullying against a feminist activist.

After a first disbelief and then astonishment phase as the revelations progressed, the employers, bosses of the editorial staff, had been summoned to express themselves publicly. Their response had often been radical. *Checknews*, Liberation's fact-checking project, had published an article on February 8 on the subject. As soon as the information had been confirmed, they had "to react and quickly", as justified revolted Laurent Joffrin, director of publication of the daily, in his decision of immediate suspension - "as a precaution" - of the two editorial journalists involved in *La Ligue du LOL*. *Qualiter* (a podcast production company) announced "the final shutdown and not subject to appeal" of its show *Studio 404*, one of the columnists of which was a member of the Evil Club. At the same time, media such as *L'Observateur* and *FranceInfo* had opened their antennas and columns to testimonies from cyberharassed victims who was journalism students or journalists holding the position.

Still, the damage was done. When *Liberation* had published its article, "we said, with friends, that in three hours, everyone would have forgotten"<sup>14</sup>. But the (expected?) respite hadn't happened. The words of the victimes of *La Ligue du LOL* had been liberated, and several victims were now telling, publicly and at length, what they had suffered. "You may have forgotten, but the people you hurt remember"<sup>15</sup>.

The repercussions were even more bitter since the affair was no longer limited to members of *La Ligue du LOL*. We learned now on the professional messaging *Slack* of the channel dedicated to the writing of *HuffPost.fr*, that sexist, racist and homophobic comments had crept in gradually and *crescendo*, even if it was not moral harassment as it was for *La Ligue du LOL*. More than fifteen male journalists has thus joined the channel, setting it up with an increasingly violent and targeted tone.

The government then seized the case: Marlène Schiappa, State Secretary for equality between men and women, had thus declared all her support and solidarity "to the bloggers and journalists who had to suffer the sexist harassment of the

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<sup>14</sup> Our translation from: "on s'est dit, avec des potes, que dans trois heures tout le monde aurait oublié".

<sup>15</sup> Our translation from: "Vous avez peut-être oublié, mais les personnes à qui vous avez fait du mal se souviennent".



#LigueDuLoL”<sup>16</sup>. For his part, the State Secretary for Digital, Mounir Mahjoubi ,had encouraged: “These mockeries had an impact in reality. Victims of cyberstalking need to be able to speak out, and for their part, I hope they are ashamed”<sup>17</sup>.

The two ministers immediately proposed an action plan against online harassment, in order accelerate the removal of hateful content circulating on the platforms and to make them accountable, explaining that it was also necessary to "go to the base, start through education and training, then facilitate the way to report and detect this content”<sup>18</sup>. These official protests seemed to respond directly to calls for protection, for example from an indignant collective of 600 students from 16 journalism training higher schools, also addressed to the editorial staffs<sup>19</sup>.

The scale had grown to such an extent that the whole corporation could no longer be content with limited reactions. Under now internal pressure, some journalists pointed out by the scandal had offered to resign. Others had withdrawn by themselves from their editorial responsibilities. Still others had seen their collaboration suspended; others had been laid off as a precaution. The sweep had won the front of the doors of the journalism schools. Their protest Initially deemed too much timid – "so as not to lose a training agreement or a partnership with a press company”<sup>20</sup> according to some victims – , the journalism training schools had ended up reacting in turn, like *l'École de Journalisme de Grenoble* which had discovered that a Facebook group of alumni, called *Ultim-hate*, had remained active, in the midst of the controversy over *La ligue du LOL*. Several targeted victim groups, preferably women, classmates, even teachers of these young delinquents, had also suffered the particularly salacious contents of their stalkers.

This particularity of the novitiate in the profession among stalkers goes back to the history of digital journalism. Indeed, the pioneers who brought social networks into

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<sup>16</sup> Our translation from: “aux blogueuses et journalistes qui ont eu à subir le harcèlement sexiste de la #LigueDuLoL”.

<sup>17</sup> Our translation from: “Ces moqueries ont eu un impact dans le réel. Les victimes de cyberharcèlement doivent pouvoir s’exprimer, et eux, j’espère qu’ils ont honte”.

<sup>18</sup> Our translation from: “aller à la base, commencer par l’éducation et la formation, ensuite faciliter la façon de signaler et de détecter ces contenus”.

<sup>19</sup> Celsa, CFJ, CFPJ, Cuej, EDJ Sciences Po, JCAM, JDG, JT, PJT, SJ Lille, IFP, IJBA, IPJ Paris-Dauphine, IUT de Cannes, IUT de Lannion, master de journalisme de Gennevilliers.

<sup>20</sup> Our translation from: “pour ne pas perdre une convention de stage ou un partenariat avec une entreprise de presse”.

newsrooms of classical media in the early 2010s coincided with this characteristic of youth, while their elders had initially just tolerated them with strong doubt, particularly in the mainstream media, like the daily *Le Monde* (Salles, 2010). Their great success in terms of followers had finally convinced the professional community, at the same time as it had propelled them, in terms of influence: "We were big boys!"<sup>21</sup>. So, they had succeeded in enforcing their own rules, as one of the founders of *La Ligue du Lol* finally recognized. It is true, their humor, sometimes brilliant, sometimes schoolboy, ironic as well as self-denigrating, could be drawn from the *Canal* spirit [*Canal +*], as well as from the tradition of the satirical monthly *Fluide Glacial*.

Until the slippage, which consisted in denouncing, compromising, disqualifying, until threatening with rape and death anyone who did not look like them, starting with bloggers and other influencers who did not fall under their club and who had the nerve to conteste their virtual territory. The clan reflex was particularly fierce against beauty *Youtoubeuses* of "Beauty sections" and feminist or anti-racist activists, *a fortiori* publishing from the province.

Finally convinced of the collective slippage, the corporation reacted according to the classic pattern, already identified by Patrick Charaudeau more than twenty years ago: the *Ligue du LOL* affair was not a drift of journalists but the one of social networks. The essential was saved, namely the intellectual and ethical probity of the "genuine professional journalism".

## **2.2. An entangled contrition, reduced to a reminder of ethics in a slightly open minded societal environment**

"Yes, they have the right to laugh, to make fun in a private group. Nothing is illegal", as one journalist immediately analyzed. "But I will never consider them as colleagues. It strikes me as shameful that people whose vocation is to inform can be reduced to simply criticizing for the fun of it"<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Our translation from: "On était des caïds !".

<sup>22</sup> Our translation from: "Oui, ils ont le droit de rire, de se moquer dans un groupe privé. Rien n'est illégal, comme l'avait aussitôt analysé un journaliste. Mais jamais je ne les considérerai comme des confrères. Il me semble honteux que des personnes ayant pour vocation d'informer puissent en être réduits à simplement critiquer pour le plaisir".

More incisive, other dear colleagues soon denounced this journalist who, since repented, would have reconverted himself into "model journalist who plays the examples after having had a good time in packs of harassing journalists"<sup>23</sup>. Even within the members of *La Ligue du LOL*, the distinction had become a weapon of defense: "there was every kind of people: people incapable of being anti-feminist, assholes [sic], funny people and people not funny or trying to be"<sup>24</sup>. Some had spoken of "toxic individuals", from whom they dissociated themselves, having participated to nothing but one practice which they had advised to reconsider in the thinking of the time, when "the clash was the mood of their area for online exchanges (...) It was fashionable on *Twitter* to use black humor. I loved stand-up and because I was frustrated not practicing it, I killed my desire to jokes on the networks. Without realizing that what I wrote could be sexist, obese phobic, homophobic and constitute harassment"<sup>25</sup>. "As for the creator of *La Ligue du LOL*, he had tried to deflate the scandal: "We were influential people, and it is true that if we criticized someone, it could take a lot of importance. There is a part of truth there : a part of people who may have felt legitimately harassed. But there is also a big part of fantasy"<sup>26</sup>.

The corporation have had an easy time of separating the wheat from the chaff. Delivered by the back door at the request of the Minister of Culture, Françoise Nyssen, a *Hoog Report* advocated the creation of a press and audiovisual regulatory body (Hoog, Clément-Cuzin, Baudet, 2019). For some journalists, the project could become fatal to freedom. The position is historically constant, within a corporation hypersensitive to any authoritarian and exogenous regulatory project, such as the allusion to an Order of Journalists which would bring back to the horrors of the French Vichy government (Pélissier, 2005, p. 78). The French *Syndicat national des Journalistes* [National Union of Journalists], had preferred, with other associations, to

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<sup>23</sup> Our translation from: "*journaliste modèle qui joue les exemples après s'être bien amusé au sein de meutes de journalistes harceleurs*".

<sup>24</sup> Our translation from: "*il y avait de tout: des gens incapables d'être antiféministes, des connards [sic], des gens drôles et des gens pas drôles ou qui essayaient de l'être*".

<sup>25</sup> Our translation from: "*le clash était le régime en vigueur pour les échanges en ligne (...) Il était de bon ton sur Twitter de faire de l'humour noir. J'adorais le stand-up et frustré de ne pas le pratiquer, je tuais mon envie de blagues sur les réseaux. Sans réaliser que ce que j'écrivais pouvait être sexiste, grossophobe, homophobe et constituer du harcèlement*".

<sup>26</sup> Our translation from: "*Nous étions influents, et c'est vrai que si on critiquait quelqu'un, ça pouvait prendre beaucoup d'ampleur. Il y a une part de vrai là-dedans, une part de gens qui ont pu se sentir légitimement harcelés. Mais il y a aussi une grosse part de fantasme*".

call for the unity of the profession and launch on May 16, 2019 the foundations of a national body of ethics, while mistrust against journalists had never been so strong.

Beyond that, all the media had tried to stop the fall of their image by shifting the reproachful charge and resorting to the classic linguistic figure of naturalization (Reboul, 1980): this was not the problem of just one professional practice. Twitter had provoked the drift within the entire society. Social networks were thus referred to as “spillways of hate”. In a cruel twist of irony, and proof of the societal level of the drift, the former members of *La Ligue du LOL* now in turn suffered the same harassment as their victims.

After the moral condemnations of delinquent Internet users, the reactions of journalists also aimed to challenge the legislator, reviving the debate on the anonymity of the web. The process is classic of the eruption of a public problem, according to the trilogy defined by William Felstiner, Richard Abel and Austin Sarat, and summarized in the formula *Naming, blaming, claiming*. *Naming* means clearly to define a situation as an offense, claiming consists in transforming it into a grievance and an imputation of responsibility, blaming leads to a process of institutional disqualification and of complaints in the form of a demand for reforms (Felstiner, Abel, Sarat, 1980). President Emmanuel Macron himself reacted, judging that anonymity was harmful to democracy: “every expression is legitimate, but words are not all equal”<sup>27</sup>. Opponents pointed out that a study by Lea Staher, Katja Rost and Bruno S. Frey of the University of Zurich found the correlation between digital harassment and anonymity questionable (Staher, Rost, Frey, 2016). Others felt that the problem was not anonymity (some “loleurs” acted openly) but the inadequacy of the system of legal responses to criminal acts.

The debate was also focused on the questioning of public aid to the press, particularly for a public journalism, faced with the risk, proven with the development of digital expression, of sacrificing the responsiveness of the live coverage vs the requirement of hard worked, precious, civic meticulous investigation. The burden is not only an ethical level: the advertising resource, which formerly offered funding for the journalistic investigation, is proving more and more captured by peer-to-peer sharing content on platforms, what are called “infomediaries” like *Facebook* and *YouTube* and search engines like *Google*. Professor at Sciences Po Grenoble, Gilles Bastin

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<sup>27</sup> Our translation from: “*Toutes les expressions sont légitimes, mais les paroles ne se valent pas toutes*”.

observes the growing decrease in the number of journalists and the correlative recourse to the employment of amateurs, to forms of non-salaried employment, to the proliferation of fixed-term contracts of use, freelance contracts or outsourcing of content to companies manufacturing low-cost articles with a low information value (Bastin, 2019). In such a context, Kurt Imhof had judged the media henceforth incapable of serving the integration of different social perceptions and inclined to confuse ethical rigor with moralizing, emotional, easily consumable populism (Imhof, 2014).

At the same time, the disapproving media discourse stopped at the identity of the victims, in terms of gender. Parisian journalism now felt directly splashed beyond the blacklist of the League of Lol: similar acts of damaging acts against female colleagues had occurred within the editorial staff of the site *Vice.fr.*, systematically disqualifying their work and private life. Testimonies on Twitter had confirmed that nothing had been spared these victims, the "obese phobic" charge can add to the ignominy of "these little Parisian guys who laughed at us (...). I was fat, so I had not right to speak"<sup>28</sup>. The cabal was thus constituted: "*La Ligue du LOL* located me and began its work of undermining little by little: photo montages, videos aimed at making fun of me (...), recurring criticism of my appearance. ... All this on a regular basis, free of charge, and involving a whole bunch of twittos in their unhealthy and devastating wake"<sup>29</sup>.

The snowball effect had amplified the quagmire, the harassment which could even extend beyond the Internet. The weekly *L'Express* had thus revealed that in the summer of 2017, the new director of human resources ( a woman) of the offending site had been informed by employees of the development of a "discriminating and sexist culture" within the company, supporting by facts and nominative designations, attributable to seven employees who had qualified themselves *Les Darons* ("fathers, bosses"), then *Townhall* on their private messaging site. Two compulsorily redundancies immediately followed the complaint and five legal proceedings had been initiated against five employees of the site. Then, some media considered that this deplorable cyberstalking affair could constitute the expected trigger "for a deep and

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<sup>28</sup> Our translation from: "*ces petits mecs parisiens qui se foutaient de notre gueule (...). J'étais grosse, donc je n'avais pas droit à la parole*".

<sup>29</sup> Our translation from: "*La Ligue du LOL m'a repérée et a commencé son travail de sape petit à petit : montages photos, vidéos visant à se moquer de moi (...), critiques récurrentes sur mon apparence.... Tout ça de façon régulière, gratuite, et entraînant tout un tas de twittos dans leur sillage malsain et dévastateur*".

collective questioning of the sexism and the inter-self that plague the world of journalism"<sup>30</sup>. 900 journalists had already signed a column launched in the daily *Le Monde* by the association *Prenons la Une* ("Take up the front page") and the AJL (association of lesbian, gay, bi and trans journalists), denouncing "a profession plagued by systemic sexism"<sup>31</sup> and enjoining editorial teams to fight against discrimination experienced by women.

But in this case, once again, the corporation as a whole had reacted by using the figure of *universalization*: sexism and harassment of sisters do not only concern journalism. In addition to a member of *La Ligue du Lol* in the communication sector (*Publicis* company) and two others whose summons by the employer had revealed that they worked at the City of Paris, similar gatherings, outside journalism, were also offered a cyber harassment platform: young doctors operated in the same way as an organized group, within a group called *La Team Air Médecine / Bienveillance* (*sic*). Finally, the professional identity of these derivatives could not constitute a really explanatory factor of the mechanism: "They perpetuated, under cover of a new culture, the most ancestral dominions and the most old-fashioned patriarchy"<sup>32</sup>, as one journalist explained on *France Inter* radio. Therefore, it was not a question, from the harassers, of stigmatizing one precise socio-professional category more than another, even if the French *Haut Conseil à l'égalité* ("High Council for Equality") had still observed that 71% of the chronicles in the morning radio shows of January 2019 had mobilized sexist springs, such as stereotypes attributed to women: hysterical, foolish, sensitive, fragile, emotional, etc. . Some researchers had corrected in the same direction: "To make boy clubs is superfluous since society is already a boy club!"<sup>33</sup> (Coulomb-Gully, 2012 and 2016). Likewise, the feminist idea, admittedly rapid but striking, was spreading, denouncing a "rape culture" in France which would have its source in gallant love (Rey-Robert, 2019). Jürgen Habermas himself ever recognized that the structural transformation of the public political sphere took place "without affecting the character of a society marked by patriarchy as a whole" (Habermas, 1992,

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<sup>30</sup> Our translation from: "d'une remise en question profonde et collective sur le sexisme et l'entre soi qui gangrèment le milieu du journalisme".

<sup>31</sup> Our translation from: "une profession rongée par un sexisme systémique".

<sup>32</sup> Our translation from: "Ils perpétuaient, sous couvert d'une culture nouvelle, les dominations les plus ancestrales et le patriarcat le plus vieillot".

<sup>33</sup> Our translation from: "Faire des boys clubs, c'est superfétatoire puisque la société est déjà un boys club!".

p. 166). Specifying the evolution of his thinking, he added: "[...] the exclusion of women has been a constitutive element of the public political sphere, in the sense that it was not only dominated by men in a contingent manner, but determined, in its structure and its relation to the private sphere, according to a sexual criterion "(Habermas, 1992, p. 167).

Be that as it may, in the media, the reconstructing of the practices of *La Ligue du Lol* had tended to forget that the media "halali" was not be taken just only against a specific genre. Certainly, women – especially if they reflected feminist positions – had been the favourite targets. But the deepening of ex-post journalistic investigations had shown that in fact, the harassment practiced by members of *La Ligue du LOL* had been directed against anyone with a difference from their own condition. Those who weren't Parisians, like them. Those who were only suspected of being LGBT, even if it means distributing to underage children some of their compromising photographs, private or resulting from pornographic montages. Those who appeared on the web 2.0 *black* – Jews, North Africans and those who militated against racism, in particular against discrimination on air against "visible minorities" – as we ourselves analyzed (Cabedoche, 2009 and 2013) and that the request for a preliminary investigation requested from the Public Prosecutor's Office by the *SOS Racisme association* had confirmed. Finally and again, those who had the awkwardness of having presented themselves as "neuroatypical" or in a state of vulnerability, for example looking for a job, or in an intermittent professional situation. In short, *La Ligue du LOL* had gradually appeared as an *old boys network* of white males, who come from the same schools, evolve in the same circles, operate by acquaintance and by co-optation and stick together, like the *American fraternities* that journalist Emily Chang had already denounced in the Silicon Valley. In fact, these fraternities are very homogeneous, as Isabelle Collet – who works on gender issues at the University of Geneva – notes (Collet, 2019). The comparison had thus earned a few articles in the *New York Times* on the scandal of *La Ligue du LOL*.

The hypothesis of a sectarian league, working as a gatekeeper of a kind of professional *apartheid* against a specific socio-professional profile of the victims, had not resisted. Clara Gonzales explained it on *FranceInfo* radio: even if sexism is inherent in these networks, the harassment was identical, with the same symptoms on the mental health or the professional development of the victims, whatever their gender

and their condition. Certainly, such this woman journalist felt that she had immediately been dropped by her former professional environment in the video game press, when she had reported the harassment she had suffered in four different media during 13 years. The statistics of a percentage of over 90% of women finding themselves unemployed after having denounced similar facts confirmed the extent of the damage. But this male author for his part had had to change the name of his professional signature and then to reject the announcement of the publication of his first work under his real name, thus hoping to stop being reduced to a character in the "box of losers game"<sup>34</sup>. These findings had forced the analysis to be shifted as to the profile of the stalkers.

The case criminally implicated young men in a sector of activity, admittedly still attractive from an economic point of view, if we consider the extravagant remunerations of the few founders of the main communication groups or stars of the TV news. But where the disappointment is often cruel for the majority of those who will evolve only in precarious functions of hard-working assistants of journalism. For Clara Gonzales, starting by harassing people identified as minority and fragile, members of *La Ligue du LOL* "have, more or less consciously, eliminated potential competitors"<sup>35</sup>. This harassment would have allowed them to settle in the profession, or even access positions of responsibility. The rapid censuses revealed by journalistic surveys had also shown that, at best, some people harassed in this way had sacrificed their own visibility on social networks in order to no longer exist as targets, even if it meant depriving themselves of access to the employment. Others outright had changed their activities: "It's like preventing a lot of competent people from having a professional career and maintaining the same logic of power"<sup>36</sup>. In fact, certain competitions had been ruthlessly ruled out: "By dint of reading dirt about me everywhere on the networks, I was convinced that I was worth nothing"<sup>37</sup>, admitted a former web journalist, who has since converted to fashion. Another one, who has been also professionally reconverted, had deciphered the mechanism of *La Ligue du Lol* in the same direction:

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<sup>34</sup> Our translation from: "*boîte à jeu des losers*".

<sup>35</sup> Our translation from: "*ont, plus ou moins consciemment, éliminé des concurrents potentiels*".

<sup>36</sup> Our translation from: "*C'est comme ça qu'on empêche plein de gens compétents d'avoir une carrière professionnelle et qu'on entretient les mêmes logiques de pouvoir*".

<sup>37</sup> Our translation from: "*À force de lire des saletés sur moi partout sur les réseaux, j'ai été convaincue que je ne valais rien*".



"When you have built yourself in a community which gives you power, and which never makes you accountable, you do not want not lose it"<sup>38</sup>. In particular when seeing people arriving with different profiles and points of view. A third witness was more precise, pointing out that the harassed victims were mainly influential women, with threatening power! Under the load, members of *La Ligue du LOL* had finally admit to having participated in such a professional raid out of resentment, because he was annoyed after being dismissed from key positions, or having been refused a promotion, expected, during the reorganization of their editorial staff. Michel Foucault had already thus understood the rules for the formation of discourses of power as mechanisms of exclusion of what we must consider as "their own Other".

## CONCLUSION

Probably, with *La Ligue du Lol*, we are still close to the excitement of the schoolyard or to the "*bidasserie potache*" (schoolboy banter) that has been transported to *Twitter*. Which for all these cases, mitigates in no way the dangerousness lethal assault. Finally, convergences are weak with the *Incel*s or with the white supremacists, who theorized their hatred: the first of women, the second of "non-whites". For Isabelle Collet, "We are ultimately closer to cyberbullying situations where no one is aware - or wants to be aware - of the harmfulness of what he is doing because each individual does a very small thing. But if they are ten to do this thing continuously, it becomes monstrous" (Collet, 2019). Stanley Cohen has already demonstrated with relevance how deeply the capacity to let things go and the refusal of awareness are rooted in a society saturated with information (Cohen, 2001). Moreover, Stanley Milgram's famous analysis explains how the ascendancy of a few can lead to the submissive acceptance of collective behavior, even immoral ones, solicited by injunction until adoption by mimicry, or even outbidding, by others (Milgram, 1974).

However, we have shown that beyond the intentionality of the authors, the event at the origin of this media uproar is symptomatic of the re-feudalisation of our contemporary societies. The change brought about by online media is creating new attention spaces in the internet (Imhof, 2014, p. 327), the issues of which go beyond

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<sup>38</sup> Our translation from: "*Quand vous vous êtes construits dans une communauté qui vous donne du pouvoir, et qui ne vous demande jamais de comptes, vous ne voulez pas la perdre*".

the sole framework of public expression. Particularly with the development of GAFAM, private empires have replaced the initially distributed internet network (Lanier, 2015). The latter are also the least cooperative, if we consider *Twitter's* silences to the injunctions of the public authority ordering it to communicate information to identifying and sanctioning offenders. Thus, this economic power of a few leads to a devastating effect on the conditions for negotiating public affairs. It results in the production of "neo-feudal" modes of distribution of wealth, recognition and power. The process strengthens corporatism and assures to elites the attribution of immeasurable advantages, for example to the leaders of communication groups. At the same time, it reinforces the growing pauperization of the lower classes (Neckel, 2014). Then, these are exposed to working conditions that make them ever more fragile, which can lead them to cynical strategies of dominant actors, justified by survival, or by the rigid safeguard of certain "privileges": for example, the refusal of suppression of the flat-rate tax allowance enjoyed by journalists. Admittedly, the measure protects the most precarious, but it "also allows companies to maintain downward pressure on wages and (...) contributes to fueling public doubts about the independence of journalists with regard to the political power "(Bastin, 2019).

In our analysis panel, only one testimony had suggested: " La Ligue was a pyramid group where the servile courtesans harassed to show the bosses that they were valuable.<sup>39</sup>" Later, *Le Monde* and *FranceInfo* also welcomed the hypothesis of a "class contempt" by "loteurs", following an *#EntenduALaRédac* investigation, conducted with several groups of journalists. But otherwise, this thesis of re-feudalisation had never been mentioned in mainstream media, whatever the format: paper, audiovisual or digital. On the contrary, a boycott had been put in place in the mainstream media against a devastating pamphlet (Branco, 2019): expeditious and sometimes not very rigorous, the essay was however edifying concerning the "complicity of the media with power", even the confusion of interests when the ownership of the first distinguishes Arnaud Lagardère, Xavier Neels, Bernard Arnault, Patrick Drahi, Vincent Bolloré, Martin Bouygues... among the greatest fortunes in France. This discretion in media analyzes testifies to the disposition in the media of representations according to the interests of the dominant and to the persistence of

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<sup>39</sup> Our translation from: "La Ligue, c'était un groupe pyramidal où les mange-merde [sic] harcelaient pour montrer aux boss qu'ils avaient de la valeur".

the professional field constituting them. Pierre Bourdieu thus designated any socio-professional collective, whose cohesion – as it is expressed through the discourse of professionals – makes it possible to notice the reality of a clan-type habitus, whose main characteristic is participate in both the preservation and reproduction of the field (Bourdieu, 1996 and Watine, 1999).

Of course, since the *Ligue du LOL* affair, many journalists have embarked on a genuine process of self-criticism. But even today, as illustrated by the reactions of journalists to this *Ligue du LOL* affair, the journalistic universe remains a relatively autonomous field (Bourdieu, 1996). But it also constitutes a play area where disempowerment operates, as it does in entire sections of society where the middle class had hoped to access in sustainable positions of responsibility and prosper. The intractable laws of contemporary capitalism have today shattered those dreams of social advancement inherited from the *Glorious Thirty*! And explain pack behaviors, which some of the delinquents now wonder how they could have let themselves be drawn into, despite their personal ethics and their deontological benchmarks.

On a theoretically broader level, the *Ligue du Lol* episode forces us to move away from a holistic reading of a social totality to which individuals socialized could belong to, as members of an organization that includes them belong. The updating undertaken by Habermas invites us to consider the multiplicity, not reducible, of conflicting interests.

Above all, understanding the mechanism makes it necessary to re-register the challenges of contemporary journalism in a theoretical cultural industries approach, of which information is one of the channels. It is a question of going beyond a mediacentric reading of journalism, and take into consideration a whole chain of actors and actions “which contribute to a cultural production with complementary wayss of doing and a shared culture” (Miège, 2018, D8 ). The proposal also offers a revealing framework of the transfer to humans of the burden of uncertainty, specific to this type of industry in a context of globalization: the massive and growing recourse on the part of the dominant communication groups to the sub-treatment of employees – sometimes very qualified – makes the less sensitive to ethics as they are paid based on piece-work and threatened with precariousness. Finally, the theoretical proposition explains the additional tension caused by the emergence of large operators in the digital sector.

In the name of liberalism and a technicalist conception which is trivialized in the computer world to which they belong, the latter flout the traditional rules of economic equilibrium in the production of information. Thus, they do not hesitate to damage intellectual property, to ignore the injunctions in terms of moderation, to counter any inclination of the public authorities in terms of regulation (Miège, 2018, D8).

The example of the drifts of la *Ligue du Lol* and their media treatment triply illustrates the contemporary developments in this information sector. It testifies both to its porosity and to a global process of recomposition of capitalism, with its absorption into large communication conglomerates, whose short-term financial visions tend to be dominant, dramatically (Bouquillion, 2008) . It also invites to consider the information sector in a specific way compared to other areas of industrial production, even if its financialization tends to weaken the symbolic value of culture. Finally, it forces to consider the ideological construction of the new economy of the collaborative web: immersed in a status close to the media-man within clan affective communities, the user can only testify to an emotional participatory commitment and an illusory sublimation in virtuality, when one's needs and desires are not satisfied in the real and immediate context of self-realization (Bouquillion, Matthews, 2010; Ben Balaïd, 2019).

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