



**HAL**  
open science

## Radical Journalism à la française. Between Differentiation and Stigma

Laurent Thiong-Kay, Nikos Smyrnaio

► **To cite this version:**

Laurent Thiong-Kay, Nikos Smyrnaio. Radical Journalism à la française. Between Differentiation and Stigma. Radical Journalism Resurgence, Reform, Reaction, 2023, 9781032115672. hal-04702487

**HAL Id: hal-04702487**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04702487v1>**

Submitted on 19 Sep 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



**HAL**  
open science

# Radical Journalism à la française. Between Differentiation and Stigma

Laurent Thiong-Kay, Nikos Smyrnaio

► **To cite this version:**

Laurent Thiong-Kay, Nikos Smyrnaio. Radical Journalism à la française. Between Differentiation and Stigma. 2023. hal-03959691

**HAL Id: hal-03959691**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03959691>**

Preprint submitted on 27 Jan 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0  
International License

## **Radical Journalism à la française. Between Differentiation and Stigma**

Laurent Thiong-Kay and Nikos Smyrnaiois

Pre-print from Farrell S., Siapera E., Souvlis G. (ed.), 2023, *Radical Journalism. Resurgence, Reform*, Routledge, London

### **Abstract**

Focusing on the case of French radical journalists, this chapter has several objectives. After recalling the specific context of repoliticization of the journalistic field in France, under the influence of digital media, it focuses on the conditions that allow for certain journalists to break with the professional ideology of neutrality-objectivity. In a second step, our analysis specifies why this break is partial. Indeed, our interviewees remain attached to the journalistic deontology as the basis of their professional legitimacy. They specify the function of journalism against the competing figures of the 'automedias' and the 'editorialists'. Finally, they are aware that committed and radical journalism is a label or a stigma that can reinforce the mistrust toward them by the political and media elites.

### **Introduction**

In France, the dominant pole of the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1994) has been strongly impacted by neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2004). Indeed, from the 1980s onwards, the major newspapers, such as *Le Monde* and *Libération*, underwent a process of depoliticization (Juhem, 2001). Neutrality became the normative horizon of the profession, in a country where journalism was historically engaged and politicized (Neveu, 2001). At the same time, journalists became increasingly precarious and were subjected to intense competition for material but also symbolic resources such as the 'press card'. The attribution of this card is supposed to distinguish professional journalists, who are meant to respect deontological norms such as rigor, accuracy, integrity, fairness, impartiality and objectivity, from other media workers, outsiders, radicals or militants. Thus, the press card functions as a mechanism of symbolic recognition of the profession – and therefore exclusion of media perceived as non-mainstream.

It was not until the end of the 1990s and the anti-globalization movement that this trend was strongly and concretely challenged. These mobilizations sought to find margins of autonomy vis-à-vis mainstream media. Based on the Indymedia model, a wave of "mediactivism" (Cardon & Granjon, 2010) developed in France. Symmetrically, the criticism of mainstream media spread to professional journalism itself: numerous outlets that carry out an endogenous critique of the media industry were created. The development of online news from the early 2000s onwards has allowed the rise of alternative and participatory media that could reach a wider public with relatively low costs (Marty et al., 2012; Smyrnaiois, 2013). Since that period, many original editorial projects have developed, engaging themselves in promoting solidarity, ecology and progressive politics (Lévêque & Ruellan, 2010).

Our research aims to understand the sociopolitical logics behind the emergence of this alternative and sometimes-radical journalism. More precisely, we want to question the identity of politically committed journalists and their relationship to the norms of their profession. Our objective is to examine the conditions that make the advent of this new professional identity possible. In order to do so, we composed a sample of six journalists who

are freelance or have worked as permanent staff for five independent professional online media with a large audience: Grégoire Souchay, who works for Reporterre, a news website sympathetic to ecologist and alternative movements founded by a former journalist of *Le Monde*; Camille Polloni, who worked for Basta!, an online media with a team of journalists and civil society activists and *Les Jours*, an independent subscription-based news website founded by former journalists of *Libération*; Louise Fessard and Jade Lindgaard, who work for Mediapart, a progressive subscription-based investigative journalism website founded by a former director of *Le Monde*; Gaspard Glanz founder of the press agency Taranis News, which documents social conflict from the inside; and Frédéric Scheiber, a freelance photographer who has worked for several independent outlets covering particularly social movements.

Through lengthy semi-structured interviews with these journalists and content analysis, we studied their productions, their trajectories and their representations in the context of a qualitative study on the media coverage of the movement against the Sivens dam (Thiong-Kay, 2020a,). This mobilization is part of the struggles against what is called in France 'Grands Projets Inutiles et Imposés', a designation that groups together massive construction projects that are considered anti-ecological, inefficient and useless such as the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport in the region of Nantes, the Center Parks in Roybon or the Bure radioactive waste burial project.

The Sivens dam (Barrage de Sivens) was a dam which was planned for construction across the Tescou, a tributary of the Tarn River in southwest France, near Toulouse, that aimed to support intensive agriculture. Supported by local authorities such as the Department of Tarn, the dam was to be built in the Testet wetland which includes an extremely rich ecosystem, in the heart of a forest that is the "subject of attachment" (Latour, 2017), in the region. In 2011, a collective called "Tant qu'il y aura des bouilles" was created to fight against this project. Later, hundreds of people came to protect the biodiversity of the wetlands and to prevent the construction of the dam, creating a permanent protest camp in 2013 the Testet ZAD (Zone à défendre or 'Zone to Defend'). The Testet ZAD was inspired by one of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the most well-known 'Zone to Defend' in France that resisted several concerted attempts by the French state to evict it in order to construct a new airport.

The sociological composition, ideological background and repertoires of collective action (Tilly, 1995) of the two groups opposing the Sivens dam differed: the first one was composed mainly by ecologist militants and was legalistic (Ollitrault & Villalba, 2014); the second one included anarchists and radical ecology activists and favored direct and sometimes illegal action. Construction work began in 2014 and was then halted after Rémi Fraisse, a 21-year-old man protesting against the construction project, was killed by a stun grenade fired by police. His death sparked further protests across France, some of which were violent. The project was then abandoned in 2015. This movement was covered by the journalists who we interviewed for this research.

### **Informational Activism and Fragmentation of the Journalistic Field**

At the heart of the rise of radical journalism in France, we find journalists with a political trajectory and socialization that predispose them to forms of, if not commitment, at least critical reflexivity. Most of the respondents have a university education in social sciences (sociology, political science) which gives them the ability to question the characteristics of their

profession and their own relationship to it. On the other hand, the creation of left-wing media, in the context of the restructuring of the journalistic field (Demers, 2007), allows political radicalism to flourish in the media. Our respondents have an activist experience that gives a specific meaning to their journalistic practice. But it is necessary to work for certain media so that this politicization can be fully combined with journalism.

For example, Jade Lindgaard graduated from Sciences Po Paris and the Centre de Formation des Journalistes in 1997. She started working for AFP, the French public press agency, in the economics department, which she then left for the cultural magazine Les Inrockuptibles, where she worked on contemporary art until 2007. But Jade Lindgaard then experienced personal activism in the anti-globalization movement through the climate action camps. She recalls:

---

*[...] A revelation about the importance of the climate issue and the richness of the climate justice movement. I see this thing, both the radicalness of the proposal, the creativity of the mode of mobilization, the intellectual richness of the exchanges, how the very sharp expertise on energy transition plans.*

*Jade Lindgaard, Mediapart*

---

Back in France, she set out to cover the climate issue. This objective coincided with her recruitment at Mediapart, an online investigative media explicitly positioned on the left of the political spectrum:

---

*I was offered] a position in higher education and research, and I told him [Mediapart's editorial director] that I was really interested, but I asked him what he had planned for ecology [...]. He looked at me and replied: "Nothing, for me ecology means turning off the tap water when we brush our teeth, that's fine." [It was] completely anecdotal in his eyes. I was very upset when he said that. And then I remember well, he looked at me and said: "If you also want to do articles on ecology, of course it will be possible". And so, it started like that. To answer your question, it was also, at the beginning, a fight within Mediapart to impose ecology as a subject in its own right. [...] Today it would never occur to anyone in the editorial staff to question the legitimacy of having a full-time person on ecology.*

*Jade Lindgaard, Mediapart*

---

The case of Gaspard Glanz (Taranis News) is also enlightening. Socialized in participatory democracy within the Strasbourg youth council, he is strongly committed during his university

years against the two neoliberal laws promoted by right-wing Presidents Jacques Chirac, in 2006, and Nicolas Sarkozy, in 2009: respectively, the “first employment contract” and the law on the “freedom and responsibilities of universities”. There he rubbed shoulders with the fringes of autonomous university activism, and quickly experienced clashes with the police. At the heart of the confrontations, he became familiar with filming from a first-person point of view (Thiong-Kay, 2020b), which was part of a more general trend of internet activists (Blondeau & Allard, 2007). At that point, for Gaspard Glanz, the objective was less to publicize the conflict than to build up a corpus of images that can defend the activists in case of a trial (Nez, 2015). He once again indulged in the practice at the NATO summit in Strasbourg in 2009, marked by the first appearance in France of the “black bloc”, a tactic used by protesters who wear black clothing and other face-concealing and face-protecting items associated with anarchism. At the heart of the protest, the then activist understood that there were no journalists to film these demonstrations from the inside. He then saw the potential of such a practice as a professional journalist:

---

*And it's also the first time I'm in a place where there are no journalists. I'm in my city, I'm at the heart of the demonstration, of the “bloc” as it could exist at the time, without a banner, without anything, but I'm embedded in the middle of the demonstrators, and while demonstrating, I don't have a TV headset, I just have a camera. [...] It was the real turning point, April 2009, when I was no longer an activist in the sense of being active on the ground.*

*Gaspard Glanz, Taranis News*

---

It is therefore in his activist commitments that Gaspard Glanz draws the specificity of his journalistic activity. He finished his studies in sociology and created his company in Rennes in 2011. Initially planned to be a subsidiary of Rue89's network of local news websites, the project was abandoned and then transformed to a TV agency and renamed Taranis News. The agency's journalist started working on the subjects of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and Sivens Zones to defend, the situation of migrants in Calais, and then the Yellow Vests movement, a series of grassroots weekly protests for economic justice and institutional political reforms that began in France in November 2018. Of course, the subversive and sometimes ambiguous nature of Taranis News' reports and publications earned our interviewee hostility. This hostility comes not only from the political field, but also from his fellow journalists, as we will see later.

The French journalistic field is indeed characterized by fragmentation, power struggles and legitimacy disputes that are exacerbated by its depoliticization. Thus, committed journalists have to work in independent radical media in order to fight for the recognition of certain issues they care about because politically controversial topics are often neutralized by the mainstream press. This is particularly true of climate change. As Jean-Baptiste Comby (2015) has shown, the dominant, generalist national media do not offer regular forums to social actors criticizing the ecological damage provoked by capitalism. This situation is considered

structurally unfavorable by our respondents, which leads them to invest themselves in the margins of the journalistic field. However, this “migration” is not an exit, but on the contrary a will to influence the profession and push the media to participate in the emergence of public problems and their inclusion in the political agenda (Hassenteufel, 2010). For our interviewees, this requires the consolidation of their media ventures. It is therefore a question of fighting not only ‘through’ the media but also ‘in’ the media.

---

*My activism includes politics, ecological and social commitment, but it is above all how to allow other media to exist in the journalistic universe. So that we can get out of the niche. As François Ruffin (French journalist who is now deputy of the Left) says: “alternative media are not an alternative”.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

---

Committed journalists thus assert their desire to treat information differently. By seeking to change their ‘framing’ or ‘angle’, they have a twofold objective: to offer original coverage in order to establish the specificity of their media, but also to deploy a counter-framing to the representations of the social world in force within the dominant media space formed by the national and regional press, as well as political communication. During the latest social movements in France, stereotypes were aimed at the subaltern counter-publics (Fraser, 2003), such as the ‘zadists’, the ‘black blocs’ or the ‘Yellow Vests’:

---

*[On the subject of the environmentalist mobilization against the Sivens dam] We also had this concern at Rue 89 to shift the gaze a little in relation to what could be done in the daily press [...] We agreed on the fact that it was more interesting to tell where the people who were demonstrating there came from, what their intellectual influences were, their militant backgrounds, and what they came to find on the ZAD.*

*Camille Polloni, Les Jours*

---

Finally, radical journalism also comes about as a reaction to what the actors perceive as the dysfunctions of the mainstream media. These dysfunctions have prompted them to join the politicized margins of the field, which carry out a critique in action of the latter. Thus, the strong dependence of the regional daily press on local political actors (Bousquet, 2014) and institutional sources is pointed out:

---

*I had done a month’s internship at La Dépêche du Midi in Toulouse, I didn’t like it [...] As a local intern during the summer, it was really disgusting and*

*the little I had done (he blows his nose), it had been rewritten, you could feel the weight (he insists on this word) of routines and heaviness that there was to write [...] and then ... the self-censorship, even direct censorship. There was really this thing where you said wow [...]. I really don't want to be there.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

*The facts that are reported by the regional press, generally we see quite quickly that it is told through the police version, and there is very little room for another version because it is told the very next day, [...] I understand, I don't necessarily know how to meet the family, etc. [...] I understand, I know a lot of journalists from La Provence (main newspaper in the region of Marseille), for example, there's an emergency, they have to fill in the paper for the next day, etc. [...] They're the ones who have to do it. [...] These are journalists who will enter the police station much more easily. They have a relationship of trust with the police officers, who are also their suppliers of ... of news in fact.*

*Louise Fessard, Mediapart*

---

The same applies to the media's submission to the political and media agenda, which generally forces journalists to cover the hottest news. However, our respondents consider that it is sometimes necessary – and rewarding – to work on events that are not in the main agenda. For them, it is therefore a question of breaking with the injunction to instantaneity:

---

*[Working for Les Jours] I was really interested in this multi-article format. To be able to dig into issues over several weeks, several months, and I function a bit like that, I have obsessions. I'm interested in all police issues. [...] Since I've been here, almost two years, I've worked on four or five subjects, no more. It allows you to do the preliminary documentation, you're not a researcher but you can take the time to read books, to read the press that has already appeared to try to get up to speed on the subject, to go and see people with not just three specific questions to ask them but a discussion to have with them on what would be interesting to do journalistically, What do they think of the way the media report their activity, are there possible improvements in the journalistic treatment of an issue, because there are subjects that have been little or badly treated and that deserve to be revisited. [...] It is quite satisfying intellectually.*

*Camille Polloni, Les Jours*

---



### **Autonomy, Subjectivation, Proximity**

To attract competent journalists, media companies that invest in the margins of the field also understand that they have to rethink their internal organization. For committed journalists, it is not so much a question of joining a politicized media as of working in conditions that suit them. These conditions are often thought in opposition to the model of management and the editorial strategies in force within the mainstream media:

---

*On the web, there is Rue89, which is in the process of collapsing, there is Mediapart, which is doing very, very well, there is Les Jours, which is also starting to do well after a year, and Basta! [...] In a few years, openings have been created everywhere. With organizations that are also flexible and interesting. Here, in the way we work, we are 26 employees, but not like in a very hierarchical daily newspaper with a head of department on every floor. I have two editors-in-chief, and it's one or the other who proofreads my papers, who gives me indications on what I could do, who suggests things. It's also a more pleasant way of organizing work.*

*Camille Polloni, Les Jours*

*We send the articles in the evening, in the morning Hervé Kempf reads them, he calls between 7 and 8 am for the last modifications and at 8 or 9 am they are published. Hervé Kempf is editor-in-chief and director of the publication. In 2014, there were four journalists in Paris, and about twenty freelancers. [...] I was free in Reporterre to write as I wanted. I was never rewritten. And therefore, I had total freedom to explain my perception of things.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

---

In the choice of their subjects, sources and treatment, we therefore find among our interviewees an aspiration to autonomy that resonates strongly with that of the activists of the new social movements (Ion, 1994; Dupuis-Déri, 2005). As a result, journalists and their sources are connected by 'elective affinities' (Löwy, 2004): autonomy as a political value resonates with the radical media's desire to free journalism of the straitjacket of the dominant press. Our journalists, driven by autonomy, do not fetishize objectivity and instead leave more room for their subjectivity (Lemieux et al., 2010). The following passages attest of a desire to work on subjects that affect them personally. But also, to 'change the order of things':

---

*Basically, there are things that interest me, a ZAD is opening up not far away, I'm interested in anti-capitalists, I want to know. For me it's part of history! It's important, there are things that are created, even if they are*

*epiphenomena on the scale of humanity, but it's my own history. I won't live long but on my scale it's interesting. [...] In fact, it's super egotistical, because I do things that interest me. And I'm not good at it because I don't think about the subjects that interest "them", the press. I do things that interest me. I do my own journalism, in fact.*

*Frédéric Scheiber, freelance photojournalist*

*I insist on this: posing as a journalist on ecology means that yes, it is a commitment [... I insist on this: posing as a journalist on ecology means that yes, it's a commitment [...] i.e. the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport must not be built, Europacity if it is built, it's really a problem and well 1), Mediapart allowed me to do it, 2) it allowed me to do articles that were different from the articles published by the newspapers or media with which we compare ourselves, so that means the mainstream media Le Monde, Les Echos, Le Figaro for example, and 3) it allowed me to, how shall I put it, to gain a particular audience who came to read it.*

*Jade Lindgaard, Mediapart*

*Journalism [...] I have the impression that it is the means by which I am most useful for advancing "The Cause", that is to say that it is my lever. Some people are going to be trade unionists in their company, some are going to write revolutionary pamphlets like the Invisible Committee, some are going to be involved in a party or take up positions of power. [...] Where I am effective and useful is here. [...] I didn't write an article on Sivens to attract militants, but if it did, then it was useful. You see, it's this relationship that's a bit difficult, because an ordinary journalist doesn't have to have an impact somewhere. You make the news, and it's pure news. And if it has an impact, it's almost suspect. So there is this thing, this positioning that is a bit complicated.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

---

This logic of subjectivity is embodied in the proximity between our interviewees and their activist sources. As for local press correspondents, committed journalists' identity is constructed in the opposite way to the discourse founding the professional autonomy of journalists. It is through the search for social proximity and not through the distance established between the editor, the sources and the readers that belonging to the profession is forged" (Bouron, 2015, p. 96). Thus, our journalist respondents seek to build relationships of trust with activists (Thiong-Kay, 2021). This is a way for them to neutralize the 'substantialist' critique that considers journalism as an entity governed by universal rules and logics, despite the diversity of media (Nollet, 2009). Similarly, they rely heavily on counter-expertise, 'fact checking' and material such as amateur video content that activists post on their websites and

social media profiles. Finally, through the participatory dimension of their media, committed journalists fully involve activists and militants in their production process.

### **Toward a New Mythology of Professional Excellence?**

Journalists deploy this range of practices for different reasons. First, they are generally more in tune with the activist perception of the issues they are working on. Second, they know that their first readers will be activists or sympathetic audiences. Third, unlike their mainstream counterparts, they have little access to institutional sources. Fourth, they want to show, on the ground, that ‘another journalism’ is possible. This ‘other journalism’ is not just a question of investigative subjects or ways of handling information. It is claimed as a reaction to the coverage by mainstream media, and to the way the latter manage the social distance separating them from their interviewees. Journalists want to distinguish themselves from their colleagues, in the sense of Bourdieu (1979):

---

*There's a colleague and friend who's not super flexible we'll say, who's a bit more into the salons. Well, he's got a good background, but he's not always prepared to go and see people with dreadlocks and dogs, things like that, whereas I don't have any worries. Anyway, I don't have any problems with anyone, really: suits and ties, djellabas, I talk to everyone.*

*Frédéric Scheiber, freelance photojournalist*

---

This logic of distinction of ‘another journalism’ promoted by our interviewees aims also in occupying a better position in the journalistic field. As we wrote above, journalists as a social group are characterized by strong internal competition. This competitive dimension produces orders of magnitude by valuing specific trajectories, social capital and professional practices. As we have said earlier, through the press card allocation commission, the field of journalism in France provides itself with a validation mechanism (symbolic and effective) that institutes certain actors and marginalizes others. This exacerbated competition between members of the journalistic field may lead some of them to assume an explicitly ‘rebellious’ position with regard to these legitimacy grids. It may be a question of making the non-respect of the journalistic *cursus honorum* a reason for audacity, and therefore excellence, which turns the stigma of illegitimacy to an advantage. The case of Gaspard Glanz is particularly enlightening here as he encounters the beginning of his career:

---

*I arrive at the first municipal council of the city of Rennes, the boss of Ouest France (the main local newspaper in northwest France) arrives, he does not shake my hand. He looked at me with contempt, like you don't exist. It took him three years to shake my hand, I think ... ] So disdainful as if we were a danger for Ouest France, with a turnover of 25 million euros. Why this contempt? [...] And so, at some point, having to make our own way without having to rely on the others, well, I understood that straight away. They didn't want us because we hadn't followed the normal route, because we hadn't done the training courses, because we hadn't said 'yes' to serving*

*coffee. Because we hadn't been 'stamped' correctly, because we didn't correspond to the social norm of the young journalist.*

*Gaspard Glanz, Taranis News*

---

This criticism of the journalistic *cursus honorum* is not without consequences for the autonomy to which the activists aspire or which they claim, and which we have described above. For Gaspard Glanz, it becomes 'critique in action' through the creation of a media centered on social conflict. It is expressed in the strengthening of a do-it-yourself journalistic identity, of the reporter as an entrepreneur of himself in reaction to a highly competitive field. He continues:

---

*And still today it remains, you see. When people tell me: the 'alternative' media, the 'militant journalist', the 'journalist but not a journalist because he doesn't have a press card', it's always the same story. Being the black sheep has never bothered me, but if you want the press, [...] functions in cannibalism. I'm not from Paris, I didn't go to journalism school and I don't have a press card. And on top of that I have a big mouth, I don't like to be told what to do. [...] We came in saying: 'no, no, we're opening our business, we're journalists now, we're doing it by the book, the way we want to, if we don't make any money, too bad, if we do, screw you'.*

*Gaspard Glanz, Taranis News*

---

Thus, a more autonomous and subjective journalistic counter-ideal is emerging. The latter is a reaction to the structural transformation of the journalistic field. Indeed, in France, certain specialties are constantly at the center of newsrooms. This is notably the case of economic journalism. Other specialties are increasingly successful. This is particularly true of pundits and commentators who in France are called "editorialists". Generally ideologically conservative, editorialists are reactivating a French-style model of journalism, whose emphasis on commentary, as opposed to reporting, reflects the weight of meta-discourse on current events transforming the news into pretexts for the expression of opinions (Neveu, 2001, p. 14). Editorialists who are very present and influential in French newsrooms repel our respondents, who are attached to the legitimacy of investigative journalism and fieldwork. And it is often in opposition to the editorialist model that our journalists position themselves, drawing the contours of their ideal vision of the profession. Jade Lindgaard, for example, talks about the lasting influence on her of the "muckracker" type of journalist, who, at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States, worked as close as possible to the working conditions in the abattoirs and slums of Manhattan:

---

*It is much more prestigious and valuable as a position than to tell stories from an overhang, or whatever. You have to go for it. On the contrary, you*

*have to go all the way. That's the only way to scratch, how can I put it, this straitjacket of discourse, of dominant representations.*

*Jade Lindgaard, Mediapart*

---

Gaspard Glanz, for his part, calls for a certain fairness of treatment. He considers that the actors of the political and social world do not question the political and ideological attachments of editorialists, unlike those who are designated as committed journalists:

---

*I'm a bit tired of answering this question, but today when Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Aurélie Filippetti, Gaspard Gantzer, are judged as journalists when they are people who have just finished a forty-year career in politics without ever having done anything else, [...] hardcore politicians, these people are journalists from one day to the next and they are not considered to be activists? Well, in that case I don't think I am either. [...] The more time goes by, the more journalism and politics become intertwined, journalists become politicians, politicians become journalists, and the less sense this question of militancy has. Today you have raw reporting, which is what I try to do, and you have analysts, commentators, they are two different jobs.*

*Gaspard Glanz, Taranis News*

---

In return, French editorialists regularly target committed journalists as their adversaries. A tweet from editorialist Brice Couturier, which reads “I had the opportunity to denounce this Gaspard Glanz in ‘Les Matins de France Culture’ as an extreme left activist disguised as a journalist”, is a case in point.

### **“Radical Journalist”: A Label to be Neutralized**

We understand that the committed or radical journalist is not just an identity assumed by our respondents. It is also a label or a stigma (Becker, 1963) attached by some of their resolutely hostile colleagues. In reality, left-wing radicalism remains marginal within the French journalistic field. The reasons for this are of different kinds. First of all, although they are committed, the journalists studied remain attached to what generally founds the legitimacy of their activity. As Jocelyne Arquembourg (2011) explains, journalists “stabilize readings of the facts, of a temporal structure, distribute roles between protagonists to whom they attribute responsibilities” (p. 34). Their activity “implies homogenizing, organizing, articulating and confronting a quantity of heterogeneous information” (Arquembourg, 2011, p. 25). Thus “media objectivity [is] the basis of their legitimacy in a democratic regime” (2011, p. 2). Our journalists, however politicized or critical, still adhere to this definition of the role of journalists. They deploy an arsenal of techniques that constitute a particular “reading contract” (Véron, 1985): contextualization of events, factual narration, gathering of all points

of view, use of quotation as a way of distancing themselves from the object of investigation, explication of external resources (such as militant websites), etc. The use of these techniques is a necessary condition for the expression of subjectivity. The deployment of the former allows for the acceptance of the latter. As Jade Lindgaard explains:

---

*I worked for the first time on the Sivens dossier, saying to myself, we have to do something, but that's always the problem when you've missed the beginning of a story, as they say in journalism, when you haven't been on the subject since the beginning, you have to get back up to speed: often these are technical and complex dossiers. [...] for me, our role as journalists is to be in a kind of accelerated research compared to the time of the research, but a research [all the same], and therefore a documentary work, of factualisation of the problem, that seems important to me.*

*Jade Lindgaard, Mediapart*

---

Grégoire Souchay offers a more consistent analysis. He theorizes the complexity of the position he tries to hold between demanding external and internal constraints. Thus, he combines the respect of a certain journalistic deontology with a personal aspiration for political change:

---

*There is an expression I use to sum up my position, it is "the ass between two chairs" and it is the position I have always adopted and that I have chosen to take because I am not comfortable in the posture of the activist and I am not comfortable in the posture of journalism alone. I need to combine commitment with professional work, without being militant, but without being neutral. This is my position. But I am not an activist in the sense that when I work, it is a profession. And I apply professional techniques.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

---

Criticized for belonging to radical media, and sometimes for their activism supposedly disguised as journalism, our respondents adjust their discourse. This adjustment is designed to ward off criticism from their opponents in the media. But it is also formulated to resist other transformations of the media sphere. In this respect, we have already mentioned the presence in social movements of a type of media activism who sometimes defines itself as 'self-media' (automedias). This kind of political and communicational activism (Thiong-Kay, 2020) also contributes to widening the borders and modifying the structure of the journalistic field. If we consider the mediatization of certain struggles, a range of statuses and identities coexist: self-media, citizen reporters, independent journalists without a press card, committed journalists

with a press card, amateur contributors to participatory media, etc. However, when compared to these “associate-rivals” (Neveu, 1999), our respondents wish to differentiate themselves:

---

*I always had this thing about not becoming self-media, [...] I didn't want to become an embedded journalist on the ZAD. If you do that, then you're affiliated with the zadists: they had their own media, I totally respected them, I was doing my job, we crossed paths, other journalists were doing other types of journalistic work, and we crossed paths and respected each other and it was complementary. It wasn't competition, you see.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

---

In journalism, recourse to ethics functions as a modality of self-institution, because the profession is subject to competition and criticism from the social worlds around it (Ruellan, 2011). For journalists, invoking ethics makes it possible to establish orders of magnitude intended to specify – or even confine – the roles of each person, but above all to justify the relevance of their own work. While Grégoire Souchay recognizes the functional complementarity of committed journalism and activism, such a consideration allows him to reaffirm the specificity and contribution of his own professional activity. According to him, being a professional journalist implies not only reporting what is happening ‘on the ground’, but also knowing how to use a whole conceptual and analytical panoply to qualify and explain the facts. Such a position relegates the self-media to its primary status of a source or an actor directly implicated in the events. But it can also consist in downgrading it symbolically, by reducing it to a militant ersatz of the editorialists who dominate large news television channels. Thus, the function of journalism, even if it is committed, consists in reporting the facts, but above all in contributing to their deciphering, qualification and reinsertion in a given context.

To conclude, we must specify that the register of committed journalism sometimes turns against the interviewees themselves. This is a backlash against the current structure of the journalistic field and its strong polarization, as mentioned above. Thus, several of our interviewees mentioned the difficulty of accessing official sources. They also testify to an inability to access certain demonstrations and thus do their job, because they are blocked by police. The Yellow Vests movement and a recent draft law in France have shed a harsh light on these practices, which even committed journalists find very difficult to cope with.

---

*Clearly, they were the ones who had the first information. [...] The journalists from La Dépêche, [...] they had a greater capacity to access official sources, so we heard them more. So, you could hear the prefect, you couldn't hear the pro-dam farmers, the FNSEA. I didn't have access to these sources. [...] For the zadists I was Reporterre, whereas I saw myself as a journalist and that's why at the beginning of September when there were*



*police blockades, the head of the gendarmerie told me after passing a first blockade: "I said that Reporterre didn't pass" [...] The big problem I had with the cops was the blockades. According to them, I wasn't a journalist, so I didn't go through the roadblocks.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

---

These practices of the public authorities and the police forces prevent journalists from collecting all points of view. They are the translation of two public representations. Firstly, they inform us about a 'functionalist' reading of the journalistic field, which would thus be a simple copy of the political field. Secondly, these practices correspond to a 'deterministic' reading of the journalist with whom the official source or the representative of the police forces is confronted. The journalist is thus assigned to his press card, his specialization, his supposed political convictions and the media to which he belongs, as if he were a prisoner. In both cases, these representations favor a mechanical identification of committed journalists to militant sources. This can be observed empirically in the field.

Indeed, Grégoire Souchay has to find a way into his field of investigation in Sivens. He then takes the same route as the activists to bypass the police blockade and reach the ZAD. Consequently, the forced division of journalistic labor also has very physical causes in the media coverage of a controversy. It reinforces the routinization of relations between journalists and a certain type of source, sometimes confronted with the same adversity. In this sense, the question of journalistic access to the plurality of actors in a conflict has a performative dimension. It establishes entry rights and refusals that influence not only the media's treatment of the conflict on D-day, but also affects that of the following day and the day after. The problem of access to the field, which is closely linked to the polarization of the journalistic field, has a major impact on interactions on the ground. It therefore conditions the content of the journalistic production.

---

*So I went through the forest and I made the same journeys as the zadists. And so I reinforced the image that I was a zadist. It's like in demonstrations, there are guys wearing balaclavas who attack the cops, so there are people who wear scarves to protect themselves, so they are seen as balaclavas. [] Basically, you are just an enemy. On the day of the burials (protestors burying themselves in the Sivens forest), I found myself stuck with the buried guys, surrounded by cordons of cops for three hours.*

*Grégoire Souchay, Reporterre*

---

In order to do their work in decent conditions, professionals need to neutralize, at least in part, the label of 'committed journalism', which would imply a bias. In these conditions, loyalty to



journalistic ethics is a reason for resilience in the minds of our journalists. This allows them to maintain intellectual rigor and professional justification, which are expressed through their attachment to investigation, to the description of public policies or to the study of local configurations. For example, when asked about her view of the ‘Grands Projets Inutiles et Imposés’, in general, Camille Polloni refuses to pass judgment from above without having access to the data on each of the projects fought by the militants:

---

*I'm not necessarily comfortable answering that, actually. I don't always know the details of the project and I don't always have the tools to judge their relevance. I read the arguments on both sides. What interests me more is the mobilizations against and the way they are structured, the journey of the people who come to join the ZADs, more than the project itself. But the project itself I have never been led to analyze it in detail to form an absolutely definitive opinion on it.*

*Camille Polloni, Les Jours*

---

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have examined left-wing radical journalism in France. The commitment of journalists can consist in consciously participating in the construction of public problems. From an oppositional perspective (Negt, 2007), this commitment aims to fight against the pejorative stereotypes that target activists. It helps overcome the perceived dysfunctions of the journalistic field. In this sense, the commitment of our respondents seeks to bring about a journalistic counter-field, in which professionals would accept their share of subjectivity and construct new motives for journalistic excellence. However, it should be pointed out that for the actors, this perspective must be carried out in permanent tension with different elements: the normative framework of the profession, the competition of new information producers and the adversity of the political context. The notion of the ‘committed’ or ‘radical’ journalist is therefore operative from an empirical – analytical – point of view. However, its social and scientific use must be rigorously apprehended.

## **References**

- Arquembourg, J. (2011). *L'événement et les médias. Les récits médiatiques des tsunamis et les débats publics (1755–2004)*. Paris, Éd. des Archives contemporaines.
- Becker, H.S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, New York, Free Press (trad. fr., *Outsiders: études de sociologie de la déviance*, Paris, Métailié, 1985).
- Blondeau O., & Allard L. (2007). *Devenir Média. L'activisme sur Internet, entre défection et expérimentation*, Amsterdam Editions.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, P. (1994). *L'emprise du journalisme*. In: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. Vol. 101–102, mars. *L'emprise du journalisme*. pp. 3–9.

- Bouron, S. (2015). Un journalisme en mode mineur: compétences d'amateurs et trajectoires de professionnalisation de la presse locale. In Ferron, B., Harvey, N., & Olivier, Tredan O., (dir.) Des amateurs dans les médias, Paris, Presses des Mines, Collection Sciences sociales.
- Bousquet, F. (2014). Pour une approche globale de l'information infranationale, Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches en Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication. Université Toulouse 3 Paul Sabatier.
- Cardon, D., & Granjon F. (2010). Médiactivistes, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po.
- Comby, J.B. (2015). La question climatique. Genèse et dépolitisation d'un problème public, Raisons d'Agir, 256 p.
- Demers, F. (2007). Déstructuration et restructuration du journalisme, tic&société [En ligne], Vol. 1, n°1 |, mis en ligne le 20 mai 2019, consulté le 11 octobre 2019. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ticetsociete/298>
- Dupuis-Déri, F. (2005). L'altermondialisme à l'ombre du drapeau noir. L'anarchie en héritage. In Agrikoliansky, E., Fillieule O., & Mayer N., (dir.), L'altermondialisme en France. La longue histoire d'une nouvelle cause. Paris, Flammarion, pp. 199–231.
- Foucault, M. (2004). Naissance de la biopolitique, Cours au Collège de France. 1978–1979, éd. par Michel Senellart, sous la dir. de François Ewald et Alessandro Fontana, Paris, Gallimard-Seuil,, coll. «Hautes Études».
- Fraser, N. (2003). Repenser l'espace public: une contribution à la critique de la démocratie réellement existante. In Renault E., & Sintomer, U. (dir.), Ou en est la théorie critique?, Paris, La Découverte, p. 103-134.
- Hassenteufel, P. (2010). Les processus de mise sur agenda: sélection et construction des problèmes publics, Informations sociales n° 157, pp. 50–58.
- Ion, J. (1994). L'évolution des formes de l'engagement. In Perrineau P. (dir.), L'Engagement politique. Déclin ou mutation? Paris, Presses de la FNSP, pp. 23–41.
- Juhem, P. (2001). Alternances politiques et transformations du champ de l'information en France après 1981. In: Politix, vol. 14, n° 56, Inconstances politiques, sous la direction de Gaïti B., et Serna P., pp. 185–208.
- Latour, B. (2017). Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique, Paris, La Découverte.
- Lemieux, C. (dir.). (2010). La subjectivité journalistique, Paris, Éd. de l'EHESS coll. Cas de figure.
- Lévêque, S., & Ruellan D. (2010). Journalistes engagés, Presses universitaires de Rennes, séries «Res Publica».
- Löwy, M. (2004). «Le concept d'affinité élective chez Max Weber», Archives de sciences sociales des religions, 127, pp. 93–103.
- Marty, E., Rebillard, F., Pouchot, S., & Lafouge, T. (2012). Diversité et concentration de l'information sur le web: Une analyse à grande échelle des sites d'actualité français. Réseaux, 176(6), pp. 27–72.
- Negt, O. (2007). L'espace public oppositionnel, Payot, Paris.
- Neveu, É. (1999). Médias, mouvements sociaux, espaces publics, Réseaux n° 98 CNET/Hermès Science Publications, pp. 17–85.
- Neveu, É. (2001). Sociologie du journalisme, Paris, La Découverte.
- Nez, H. (2015). Des informateurs citoyens. Usages des images par les indignés espagnols. In «Médias, engagements, mouvements sociaux», Sciences de la Société, Presses Universitaires du Midi n° 94, pp. 139–154.

- Nollet, J. (2009). Croiser analyse des politiques publiques et sociologie des médias: genèses et usages des concepts de mise à l'agenda et de construction des problèmes, Congrès de l'AFSP: "L'analyse des politiques publiques existe-t-elle encore?".
- Ollitrault, S., & Villalba, B. (2014). Sous les pavés, la Terre. Mobilisations environnementales en France (1960–2011), entre contestations et expertises. In Pigenet M. (éd.), Histoire des mouvements sociaux en France: De 1814 à nos jours, Paris, La Découverte, pp. 716–723.
- Ruellan, D. (2011). Nous journalistes. Déontologie et identité, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, coll. Communication, médias et sociétés.
- Smyrnaio, N. (2013). Quel avenir pour les pure players journalistiques en France?, <https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/quel-avenir-pour-les-pure-players-journalistiques-en-france>
- Thiong-Kay, L. (2020a). La production médiatique de l'opposition au barrage de Sivens sur Internet, entre reconfigurations info-communicationnelles et repolitisation de l'enjeu local. Thèse de doctorat en Sciences de l'information et de la communication, Université Paul Sabatier, Toulouse.
- Thiong-Kay, L. (2020b). L'automédia, objet de luttes symboliques et figure controversée. Le cas de la médiatisation de la lutte contre le barrage de Sivens (2012–2015). *Le Temps des médias*, 35, 105–120.
- Thiong-Kay, L. (2021). Divisions du travail médiatique entre journalistes et militants, de l'altermondialisme à Sivens. *Sur Le Journalisme, About Journalism, Sobre Jornalismo*, 10(1), 162–173.
- Tilly, C. (1995). Contentious repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834. In Traugott, M. (ed.), *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.
- Veron, E. (1985). L'analyse du contrat de lecture : une nouvelle méthode pour les études de positionnement des supports presse », in *Les médias: expériences et*