

LE MÉDIA — A POPULIST CRITIQUE OF JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA BY JOURNALISTS:

journalism as a social good of the
people



CÉDRIC TANT

Université Saint-Louis, Brussels - Belgium

ORCID: 0000-0003-0402-896X

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ABSTRACT – This paper aims to question the critique of journalists and the media by *Le Média*, a French press body close to a populist party (La France insoumise), which means regularly opposing “the people” and “the elites” (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, 2019). Through a methodology inspired by the sociolinguistics of Gee (2014) and by the concept of “social goods”, the results bring to light: a metajournalistic critique based on the opposition between “the people” and “the elites”, a desire to delegitimize legacy media and the wish to make journalism a “social good” in the service of “the people”.

Key words: Critique of journalists. Metajournalism. Populism. Media. Social goods. Elites.

LE MÉDIA – UNE CRITIQUE POPULISTE DES JOURNALISTES ET DES MÉDIAS PAR LES JOURNALISTES : le journalisme comme bien social du peuple

RÉSUMÉ – Cette recherche vise à interroger la critique des journalistes et des médias par *Le Média*, un organe de presse français proche d'un parti populiste (La France insoumise), c'est-à-dire qui met régulièrement en avant l'opposition entre le "peuple" et les "élites" (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, 2019). Plus particulièrement, à travers une méthodologie inspirée de la sociolinguistique de Gee (2014) et notamment du concept de "social goods", ce travail met au jour une critique métajournalistique, basée sur l'opposition entre le peuple et les élites, qui, tout en délégitimant les médias traditionnels, pose le journalisme en véritable "bien social" au service du peuple.

Mots clés: Critique des journalistes. Métajournalisme. Populisme. Médias. Social goods. Élités.

LE MÉDIA – UMA CRÍTICA POPULISTA DOS JORNALISTAS E DAS MÍDIAS PELOS JORNALISTAS: jornalismo como um bem social do povo

RESUMO – Esta pesquisa busca questionar a crítica sobre os jornalistas e a mídia feitas por *Le Média*, um veículo da imprensa francesa próximo a um partido populista (La France insoumise), ou seja, que destaca regularmente a oposição entre o "povo" e as "élites" (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, 2019). De forma mais específica, por meio de uma metodologia inspirada na sociolinguística de Gee (2014) e, particularmente, no conceito de "social goods", a pesquisa atualiza uma crítica metajornalística, baseada na oposição entre povo e elites, que, ao mesmo em que deslegitimam as mídias tradicionais, definem o jornalismo como um verdadeiro "bem social" a serviço do povo.

Palavras-chave: Crítica dos jornalistas. Metajornalístico. Populismo. Mídia. Social goods. Elites.

LE MÉDIA – UNA CRITICA POPULISTA DE LOS PERIODISTAS Y DE LOS MEDIOS POR LOS PERIODISTAS: el periodismo como bien social del pueblo

RESUMEN – Este estudio tiene como objetivo interrogar la crítica de los periodistas y de los medios por *Le Média*, una entidad de prensa francesa cercana al partido populista (La France insoumise), es decir que destaca a menudo la oposición entre el "pueblo" y las "élites" (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, 2019). Y más específicamente, a través de una metodología inspirada de la sociolingüística de Gee (2014) y del concepto de "social goods" que pone al día una crítica metaperiodista, basado en la oposición entre el pueblo y las élites que, al tiempo que deslegitima los medios tradicionales, plantea al periodismo como un verdadero "social good" al servicio del pueblo.

Palabras clave: Crítica a los periodistas. Metaperiodista. Populismo. Medios de comunicación. Social goods. Élités.

1 Introduction

Populism – understood as a propensity to oppose “the people” and “the elites” (see below) –, represents an entry point that is both original and relevant when it comes to questioning the critique of the media and journalists. Among the strong and stereotypical social representations related to journalism (Grevisse, 2016), the links between journalists and “elites” have often inspired research which attempts, among other things, to capture their evolution (Rieffel, 1985; Mercier & Amigo, 2021), and even have been condemned by certain authors (Chomsky & Herman, 2008; Bourdieu, 1996). This article aims to understand the critique of the media by another medium that feeds this type of critique with a strong distinction between “the people” and “the elites” (in which traditional journalists are sometimes integrated).

The article is based on the speeches delivered by an online press organ created in January 2018, in France, called *Le Média*. This news media, close to the left-wing populist party “La France insoumise” (Castaño, 2018)¹, has the status of a cooperative society of collective interest and positions itself on the left on the political spectrum, claiming both progressivism and citizen anchoring. Indeed, it clearly mentions in its “manifesto” the place of citizens in its productions: *Le Média* “relying on a network of correspondents, associations, NGOs (...) will call for citizen collaborations”². This appeal to citizen collaboration is part of a populist vision which tends to put in parallel (and in opposition) “the people” and “the elites”, the first being the legitimate representative of the majority (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen, 2019; Muller, 2016). We believe that this invocation of “the people” tends to question the place and role of “traditional” journalists³ and their legitimacy in representing and serving citizens, a representation of journalists often found in the literature (see below).

What seems interesting in *Le Média* productions is its propensity to take a critical look at journalistic practices, as evidenced by the following editorial line: “Committed to social and environmental causes, *Le Média*, through its free access, strives to fulfill the public information service mission that is now disappearing in the media landscape”⁴. This research thus focuses on a media which criticizes “traditional” media, which underlies a metajournalistic process (see the theoretical framing). It, therefore, aims to better understand this

type of critical metadiscourse by linking it to the notions of people and citizens mobilized by *Le Média*.

The interest of such research is twofold. First, it apprehends media critique through the citizen, popular, even populist prism, which makes it easier to grasp the relationships between the media and “the people”, the importance granted to citizens in the public space, mistrust of elites, etc. Then, it looks at a rather particular critical discourse of the media and journalists: the critique by another medium. Such critique is based, in our opinion, on the increased development of media critique by other media and journalists. This movement is particularly noticeable in France but could also be found everywhere. This critical genre is attested by Halimi (1997) who points out the collusion between the traditional media and the political and economic worlds. Associations such as Acrimed (Action-Critique-Médias) or even websites for analyzing and criticizing media such as “Arrêt sur images”, eponymous of a program with similar objectives that ended in 2007, are good examples of this representation.

2 Conceptual framework: questioning the roles of journalists through metajournalistic critique

By no means exhaustive, this conceptual framework reflects a connection between representations of news journalism and the critiques that accompany this activity. Then, from the roles and values regularly associated with journalism in the literature, the objective is to bring out certain reasons which would explain the loss of legitimacy of journalists and the media (see below). More precisely, we show that such a critique has a metajournalistic dimension. As such, the critique developed by *Le Média* deserves particular attention: on the one hand, it is explicitly based on a reproach of non-integration of the public – the “people” – to journalism and, on the other hand, an opposition between the “people” and the “elites” (see, on this point, the analysis proposed below).

First, let's focus on journalistic values and roles that both appear to be inherent in journalism and are a good tool for capturing the way journalism can be inclusive in society. Deuze (2005) questions, in connection with journalistic ideologies, five components (or values) which are public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics. His work shows that the sometimes unconscious or

contradictory nature of these values does not represent a problem for journalists: they integrate these values into the debate which allows them to constitute and constantly reinvent themselves (Deuze, 2005).

The roles of journalists, on their side, represent an interesting object to understand a series of issues surrounding how they are integrated into society (see the work of Hallin, 1986). Their mobilization makes it possible, for example, to question the missions of journalists, especially the way they serve a “public” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), their independence (Thibault et al., 2020), or even their fragmentation and diversity (Bernier & Watine, 2019). For example, McQuail (2006) identifies four kinds of missions that are intertwined: journalists are informants (monitoring role) who, helping democracy (facilitator role), associate – or collaborate – with society and institutions (role of collaborative) to test authority (critical role). Among these roles, participation in democracy is regularly cited by authors who refer to a collective imagination made up of expressions such as “watchdog” (Curran, 1991) or “fourth power” (Derville, 2017), regularly mobilized by journalists to defend themselves. On this subject, Le Bohec (2000), in an ideal-typical construction of journalism, clearly highlights a close link between this democratic role and the place of journalists in the public sphere as actors of the “*res publica*”.

As we can see, journalism and journalists carry values and play roles whose (non-)respect constitutes an important issue of legitimacy. The legitimacy of journalists is most of the time associated with the relationship they have with the public as “representatives” of the citizen (Cornu, 1997). In this regard, the identification of the public to the media and journalists is essential, otherwise, there may be an erosion of legitimacy (Esquenazi, 1999). In this article devoted to the critique of journalists and the media by another medium that invokes citizens, I decided to evoke a particular origin of the loss of legitimacy: the (non-)participation in/of journalism.

By representing the world, journalists regularly face critique based on the premise that these representations are invalid. According to some research, some citizens then develop a double critique: these representations do not correspond to their representations and access to the production process of these representations is not available to them. In this regard, Heikkilä and Kunelius (1998) believe that journalists, by focusing on “the elites”, restrict access to their journalistic practices, which has the effect of not always offering a

fair distribution of “publicness”. In other words, access to journalism is largely guaranteed to social groups who themselves give access to their group (to journalists). This access corresponds to a give-and-take process that tends to exclude minorities or to represent them in a very general way without allowing them to make their voices heard (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998)⁵.

Aubert’s work (2009) shows in this sense the ambiguous and sometimes even paradoxical integration of a public both critical of the media and asking for greater participation. This integration seems to increasingly involve more granted through what the author calls the empowerment of individuals over the media. From this sort of paradoxical frustration emerges the so-called “alternative” (or “free”, “cooperative”, etc.) media, which one of the most natural characteristics is to criticize the media then qualified as “dominant” (Cardon & Granjon, 2013).

From these elements, it is possible to bring out a central aspect of the research: critiques addressed to the media, moreover those which come from other media, refer to a metajournalistic dimension, in other words, to a reflective discourse on journalism. We are particularly thinking of the work of Carlson (2015, 2017) on metajournalistic discourses or of Ogbebor’s one (2020) who evokes the concept of journalistic metadiscourses. If the first comes from journalists as well as other actors, and the second points to journalistic discourse, then the two concepts refer not only to attempts at drawing the boundaries of journalism but also at legitimizing the practices of journalists. Whether we are talking about journalistic metadiscourse or metajournalistic discourse, these are central notions for this article: they underlie a metadiscursive dimension of the media critique that must be questioned in this article. For the remainder of this article, we choose to speak, in general, of metajournalistic discourses.

Finally, based on several reflexive points such as the critiques related to non-participation in journalism, the obvious lack of legitimacy that results from it, or the discussions about journalistic roles, it is possible to show how the study of this kind of speech from a media close to a populist party seems promising. To start the research from this point, we rely, among others, upon the work of De Cleen (2019), in which the author presents populist discourse from the “down-up” opposition between an illegitimate “elite” and “the people” who are the only ones to benefit from absolute legitimacy. From this opposition, actors who carry a populist discourse exclude from the

“real people” other actors who do not have – or no longer have – the legitimacy to represent this “real people” (Muller, 2016). However, if the appeal to “the people” seems to represent the constancy of the populist discourse, as Valadier (2018) underlines, the fact remains that these same discourses do not define these “people”.

Concerning the media and journalists, the nodal point of tension, therefore, lies in their ability to represent “the people” whose constituency is therefore far from easy. However, for this research, it is less a question of apprehending the definition that media journalists give to “the people” than of grasping the way in which journalists present themselves as legitimate actors of the democracy (an issue that goes beyond the journalistic field as pointed out by Valadier, 2018), to the detriment of others who do not have this legitimacy. Consequently, the lack of participation and integration in journalism becomes an essential issue of legitimacy. Indeed, it tends to oppose journalists who are part of an “elite” and “the people” (or the citizens) who do not feel included not only in the decision-making processes (political, economic, and media) but also in the way in which the information which concerns them is made available. It is therefore reasonable to imagine a close link between populist discourse and the critique of the media and journalists, as they share a common base: the critique of a non-integration of “the people” by “the elites” in media logic.

This theoretical framework pinpoints certain crucial issues around the critique of journalists, such as the (non-)integration of citizens in the information process or the metajournalistic dimension of critique. These are all elements that can be found in a media populist critique. This article aims to answer the following research question: how does the metajournalistic component of the critique addressed by *Le Média* to traditional journalists express itself in its journalistic productions?

3 Methodology

To question how *Le Média* produces a metajournalistic critical discourse, I chose to develop a discourse analysis that is largely inspired by Gee (2014). The relevance of this choice lies in two of Gee’s main contributions in the field of discourse studies, and more particularly in their methodological aspects, which allow understanding of the metajournalistic discourse.

First, the author introduces and develops the concept of “social goods”, which precisely captures the way in which politics fits into any discourse, making it a tool of power and legitimacy. Indeed, for Gee (2014, p. 8), the speeches make it possible to bring to light things (an idea, a set of ideas, values, etc.) which are valued and redistributed in a political way by actors within a social group: “politics... is about how to distribute social goods in a society: who gets what in terms of money, status, power, and acceptance on a variety of terms”.

Through this notion, the author offers a reflective tool for considering journalistic power and legitimacy in the sense that these “social goods” can be attributed or taken often to the detriment of something else. This notion is quite “potestative”, in the sense of Vibert (2016), which is based on the vision of a conflicting social world in which the search for power seems to guide the actors. Without making this logic a nodal point in our approach, we recognize the relevance of a concept that brings out certain underlying tensions in the attribution of “social goods”. We argue that the latter then make accessible the metajournalistic aspects of the critique offered by *Le Média*.

The second contribution of Gee’s conception of discourse is operational and resides in what the author calls “building tasks” which are ways of constructing a part of reality through language (Gee, 2014). There are seven tasks (significance, practices [activities], identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems, and knowledge), each one representing one line of investigation that a discourse analyst is entitled to follow when he or she questions one or more discourses. Assuming that these tasks can be modulated according to the research objectives, we will take into account: the (non)significance given to certain things, ideas, or behaviors in order to bring out the core criticisms addressed to journalism; identities, whether received, created or attributed, with the idea of determining how media journalists are discursively distinguished from “traditional” journalists; the relationships between the actors to understand how *Le Média* forges links between itself and other journalists but also with the audience, the people, etc.; the valuation as well as the (re)distribution of social goods as mentioned above with the perspective of identifying the logic of power and legitimacy in discourses (Gee, 2014).

Concretely, I analyzed the 26 discursive productions of *Le Média* on its website (lemediatv.fr) which were marked, by journalists, with

the “media critique” tag over a period from March 22, 2019 (first article containing such a “tag”) to January 19, 2021 (at the time of writing this article). It seemed appropriate to us to directly target productions that have the explicit purpose of criticizing the media to circumscribe the corpus. Each production, which sometimes takes the form of a written text and sometimes the appearance of a video, was analyzed by considering how media journalists attach importance to a particular element, construct their (journalistic) identities as well as those of other actors, establish relationships between people and groups and mobilize social goods in the logic of legitimacy. The building tasks guided the categorization carried out inductively via the NVivo qualitative analysis software which will serve as a structure for the part presented below. The categories of meaning, consequently, emerged from the corpus from the following three questions (see Gee, 2014): how is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not by *Le Média*, and in what ways?; what identity or identities is this piece of language enacting, and what identity or identities is this piece of language attributing to others, and how does this help the speaker or writer enact his or her own identity?; what sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?

4 Analysis

Guided by the tools and considerations exposed in the methodology, the analysis of journalistic media productions as metajournalistic critiques addressed to “traditional” media has highlighted three nodal points that will structure this part. The first element analyses how *Le Média* opposes “the people” and the traditional (dominant) journalists who constitute the non-citizen elite. This metajournalistic process tends to show that journalism should nevertheless work for “the people”. The second point of the analysis intends to identify the metajournalistic aspects which participate in delegitimizing journalists and in withdrawing the public or citizen confidence in the media. Finally, the analysis highlights the importance that *Le Média* gives to journalism and public information considered as a “social good” essential to democracy. Such a point of view reinforces the idea of a metajournalistic component of *Le Média* discourses: through its critique, it points to the importance of journalism as much as it delimits its contours.

a) “The people” and “the elites”, a strong opposition

The relationships established by *Le Média* tend to place its critical approach towards other media in a systematic opposition between “the people” and “the elites”, whether political, intellectual, or mediatic. In this dichotomous representation, the media and the “mainstream” journalists are part of “the elite”, and *Le Média* regularly associates them with politicians, the economic world, and the intellectual “elite”. For each of these associations, *Le Média* marks the distance that separates the traditional media – and the other members of “the elites” – from “the people” who are only very rarely, if ever, included in a (weakened) democracy. Through its critique, *Le Média*, therefore, underlines, as we shall see, that the role of journalism must be part of a close relationship with “the people” and dissociate itself from “the elites”.

At the political level, traditional journalists are qualified as “sociologically and emotionally” close to the ruling class (Kouamouo, 2020)⁶. By regularly associating journalists with power, with the government, or with the President of the Republic, *Le Média* emphasizes the social distance between the media and “the people”. Thus, according to *Le Média*, journalists and politicians are qualified as “above ground” elites and disconnected from the world (Roulot, 2020) without considering citizens who do not or no longer find themselves on the same horizon (Roulot, 2020). At the level of identity, the journalists of the “dominant press” are then represented both as members of this “elite” or these “elites” and as agents of the “propaganda” of the government and French President Emmanuel Macron (Le Stagirite, 2021).

Analysis of the corpus on this subject shows that, according to *Le Média*, the traditional press does not or no longer meet the expectations of “the people”, who do not seem to matter. By contrast, *Le Média* considers that political power, for its part, greatly influences journalists. An extract from the corpus illustrates this representation of an “official” press being part of “the elites” while serving the propaganda of the state (Kouamouo, 2020). The journalist reports on a controversy between Jean-Louis Rocca presented as an “expert on China”, and Pierre Haski, president of Reporters Without Borders. When the first draws a parallel between China and France by emphasizing that, to be informed, one must not read the official press – in other words, the media qualified as

dominant – the second reacts strongly by pointing out that in France the journalists are not locked up.

The comparison of China with France allows *Le Média* both to associate the latter with a country where democracy is undermined and to underline certain complicity on the part of traditional journalists in this situation. In doing so, *Le Média* takes the opportunity to emphasize the uselessness of a press which, being this close to power, “does not deserve to be saved”. This point is particularly challenging because it accounts for the way in which *Le Média* deprives traditional media of a large part of their democratic role: too close to decision-makers, belonging to the same “elite”, they do not or no longer exercise the counter-power that characterizes them.

These media, therefore, lose an important “social good” for *Le Média*: the public and citizen legitimacy. By simply “relaying the power discourse”, the “dominant media” (Le Stagirite, 2021) delegitimize their own role. However, withdrawing public legitimacy from traditional media is not a way for *Le Média* to give it to its journalists but to put it in the hands of “the people” who are the only ones, in the current state of the politico-media situation, to be able to benefit from this democratic legitimacy. We will come back to this notion of legitimacy in the next part of the analysis when we discuss media treatment as well as the liberal structures that could weigh on the media.

The very marked opposition between “the people” and “the elites” is also found in the links of interdependence that journalists maintain with “experts”, “specialists” and, more generally, “intellectuals” (Roulot, 2020). The issue of public legitimacy as we have just mentioned is also found in this relationship between the media and experts or intellectuals who are very distant from citizens. One of the examples that best illustrate this resides in the way in which they regularly gave the floor to Prof. Didier Raoult⁷ and in the way in which the latter took advantage of his media exposure to convey his ideas (Roulot, 2020). It is interesting to note that *Le Média* dissociates itself from the figure of Didier Raoult who is, however, often represented as popular, even a populist figure. Indeed, the corpus shows that the professor, far from the concerns of citizens, serves more his own interests as well as those of a media-intellectual “elite” far removed from “the people”.

In this regard, *Le Média* pinpoints the column that Didier Raoult regularly holds in *Les Échos*, a French newspaper, even qualifying him

as a “columnist”. The professor then is presented as part of the same media environment, which illustrates the close relationship between the professor and the media in general and this newspaper to which he often seems to give exclusivity. This is a situation which, according to *Le Média*, shows “a proximity that goes beyond the framework of the usual relationship between a newspaper and its subject” (Roulot, 2020). “Raoulmania”, as *Le Média* describes it, reinforces the feeling of interdependence and the feeling of belonging to the same “elite”. Thus, *Le Média* invokes a speech that D. Raoul had given twenty years ago and in which he explained that to reach politicians, it was necessary to go through the press, which is the only way to attract their attention. An interdiscursiveness that allows *Le Média* to bring to light both advertising and decision-making mechanisms that involve politicians, experts, and the traditional media at the same time.

This situation is found in a more general intellectual context, beyond the sphere of experts, in which the media are also associated with “the elites”. Indeed, *Le Média* tends to confuse actors such as the media, journalists, editorial writers, philosophers, presenters, etc. All these “elites” convey false values in society in the sense that they are far removed from those values of the citizens. *Le Média* particularly targets television, both programs such as “On n’est pas couché” or “Balance ton post”, as well as the BFMTV channel, described as “masses” during which “buzz” and “clash” are made (Enthoven & Chastrusse, 2019).

It is interesting to note that *Le Média* does not question the audience of this type of program to know whether it belongs to the same elite. Here again, the uselessness of these media moments which primarily serve “the elites” is emphasized: “The people” do not need intellectual reflections which do not concern them. The image that emerges is that of an “elite” disconnected from “the people” and made up of the media, government, intellectuals, experts, etc. *Le Média* also considers that the boycott of the traditional press, as a channel of transmission “elites” of which it is part, represents the only solution to a situation far from being democratic (Enthoven & Chastrusse, 2019).

It appears that *Le Média* is part of a logic of populist metajournalistic critique in the sense defined above: it strongly distinguishes “the elites” from “the people” (even if it does not define either one of them). To counter the grip of journalistic “elites” on information, *Le Média* invokes society and “the people”, the only ones

capable of forcing the dominant media out of their position. In this sense, one journalist from *Le Média* believes that, if images of police violence are found in traditional media, it is thanks to the citizens who published them on Twitter (Le Stagirite, 2020a). A process which aims, as we will see in the following part, to restore the lost trust in them.

b) Delegitimize journalists and (re) trust

Beyond placing the dominant media in the sphere of “the elites”, *Le Média* assigns them identities and highlights a series of significant elements (in the sense of Gee) intending to delegitimize them. In doing so, it proposes, in a metajournalistic manner, a new way of thinking about the relationship between journalists and “the people” in which (re)trust plays a central role. It is possible to identify two types of central elements: on the one hand, those targeting the practices, topics, and the way of practicing journalism, and, on the other hand, those which reflect the membership of journalists in a restrictive structure crossed by liberal ideology.

First, *Le Média* often discredits journalists by targeting the way they treated topics, which refers to the way of practicing their activity. A first point raised by *Le Média* lies in how journalists evoke the actors. For example, the discrediting of Greta Thunberg regarding her age, the tone she uses, etc., pushes *Le Média* to qualify many journalists as reactionaries, meaning that they are threatened in their position within the public sphere (Le Stagirite, 2019). How they mobilize and present certain actors such as Greta Thunberg or the “Gilets jaunes” (or “Yellow vests protests”) delegitimizes them in the sense that they embody the “system”. *Le Média*, therefore, considers that these journalists, wishing to maintain this system, are carrying out biased and non-objective media treatment. The comparison between G. Thunberg and the “Gilets jaunes” by *Le Média* illustrates the flaws – and delegitimization – of practices characterized by bias, “contempt” and “very great symbolic violence” (Le Stagirite, 2019).

We see in this observation of misguided practices an echo of the media’s connections with the government (see previous section). In terms of practices, the relationship between journalists and politicians is reflected in journalistic productions that tend towards political communication, and more particularly governmental, or even State propaganda (*Le Média*, Robert, 2019a). Far from investigative articles characterized by independence in the service of readers (Collectif de

medias indépendents, 2020), the productions of traditional media are portrayed as press releases at the service of the ruling power.

This idea is reflected in the choice of sources made by traditional media, directly questioned by *Le Média*. Indeed, extending the critique that points to the communicative nature of journalistic productions, *Le Média* questions the institutional aspect of information sources (Le Stagirite, 2020a). It also believes that the non-diversity of journalistic sources symbolizes the biased treatment of news: it does not allow neutral information to be returned to the public. The best example from the corpus is found in the media management of police violence that accompanied the “Gilets jaunes” movement. For many months, journalistic sources, according to *Le Média*, came either from the Interior Ministry or from press releases from the national police (Le Stagirite, 2020a). *Le Média* reports dependence on these kinds of institutional sources, particularly police sources, which it believes are so rare that the traditional media tend to overvalue them. In addition, to avoid any conflict with these precious sources, the traditional media tend to spare them in their treatment in a logic of interdependence that we have already noted regarding politicians and experts.

Significance is also placed on sources that come from other newsrooms. The loss of credit is embodied here by the dominance of certain media which put on the agenda what will end up in the media coverage space (Le Stagirite, 2020a). The dominant journalists are grouped in a single entity, the “press choir”, in which each media looks at what the other is doing through activities such as press reviews, Twitter, or 24/7 news channels. This media context of self-sustaining content seems to explain why the media cover or do not cover a subject. For example, *Le Média* criticizes how police violence coverage by traditional media was long.

The other nodal element of the loss of legitimacy of the traditional media underlined by *Le Média* lies in the participation in liberalism which appears as a driving force in mistrust of the press. The corpus has shown that, while the dominant media are systematically associated with the liberalism in which they participate, they are also – and perhaps above all – constrained by this current of thought, particularly within the major press groups. It should be noted that, if we imagined finding this element in the analysis, we did not expect to find in the corpus such a recurrence of the discourse aimed directly at the bosses or the press groups in general. Critique

in this sense is, moreover, quite explicit: “we criticize the dominant press, which is overwhelmingly owned by banks, telecom operators, luxury goods companies and other armaments companies” (Collectif de medias independents, 2020). These large groups belong to a liberal economic “elite” – which also includes the French government – very distant from citizens, or at least which does not necessarily take them into account (Le Stagirite, 2021).

According to *Le Média*, the consequences of a media world in the hands of these large companies are the constraints weighing on editorial choices. An idea that could explain the non-coverage in the traditional media of the possible privatization of “Aéroports de Paris”. By dealing very little with this topic, the dominant media, qualified as “press in the hands of billionaires” (Gautheron, 2019), did not address a democratic issue. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the bosses of these media are very often mentioned and even named – Bernard Arnaud, Patrick Drahi, Vincent Bolloré, or Xavier Niel – by emphasizing the monopoly they hold. *Le Média* is opposed to this monopoly and goes so far as to suggest, along with other media that define themselves as independent, to ban the possession of multiple media (Collectif de medias independents, 2020). It would be possible to multiply the examples as *Le Média* systematically attributes this liberal identity to the dominant media which would contribute to the loss of trust in the press.

To counter this discredit which generates a loss of trust in the traditional press, *Le Média* proposes a redefinition of the contract which binds it with “the people”. By recognizing information as a “public good and service” (Kouamouo, 2020), it believes that verifying the impartiality of journalistic content should not be the responsibility of individuals but of “institutions that produce knowledge” (Le Stagirite, 2021), the two players being bound by a contract of trust. And according to *Le Média*, only new conditions to produce this “public knowledge” would generate renewed confidence in the traditional press. Confidence in this institution is what citizens need, so as not to fall into a conspiracy, the origin of which lies precisely in the loss of confidence (Le Stagirite, 2021). As we will see in the last part of the analysis, emphasizing the need to trust traditional media goes hand in hand with a real defense of journalism and its values.

c) Defense of journalism through public and citizen information

This observation of the desire to (re)instill confidence in the media invites us to insist on a final essential element that the analysis has highlighted: the defense of journalism, its values, and its role (or roles) within society. Indeed, if the critique of traditional media is virulent, it also makes it possible to (re)define the contours of ideal journalism according to *Le Média*, showing once again the metajournalistic dimension of such critique. In this sense, it is useful to underline the fact that *Le Média* defends journalism and even journalists, sometimes underlining the precariousness of the profession (Robert, 2019b; Cazenaves, 2020), sometimes erecting the public information as a real “social good”. The value of the latter relates directly to the capacity of the media to provide work for “the people” to participate in democracy. Two aspects seem to guide *Le Média* in its position: the quality of public information geared towards “the people” and represented by certain journalistic values, on the one hand, and the democratic effects of this information which refers to the roles of the media, on the other hand.

Through its critique of the mainstream media, *Le Média* associates a series of values, characteristics, and standards that it considers essential to journalism and that it struggles to find in current traditional media. In this sense, freedom of thought and expression, as well as freedom of the press, represent necessary prerequisites for public information (Collectif de medias indépendents, 2020). Upstream the journalistic production, there must therefore be a political and economic environment characterized by independence and freedom that makes it possible to provide information free from any constraint (Collectif de medias indépendents, 2020), like the previous sections of the analysis has already pointed this out. Above all, these different facets of freedom condition the existence of democratic debate accessible to citizens (Collectif de medias indépendents, 2020).

Public information produced under good conditions can thus reflect values often associated with journalism (see above) such as objectivity, neutrality (Le Stagirite, 2020a), or even independence of the press (Kouamou, 2020). *Le Média* recognizes the legitimacy of these journalistic values in that they participate – when they are respected – in the maintenance of the public sphere, which it defines as an “abstract

space which relies materially on newspapers, books, radio, television, debates, and public meetings” (Le Stagirite, 2020b). This point seems essential in the defense of journalism, which participates in the development of a space for dialogue and democratic exchanges for “the people” if the values it is supposed to convey are truly respected. *Le Média*, therefore, links values to the roles of journalists, the main one of which is to promote, even encourage exchanges within this space.

One of the main roles of journalists consists in making public, democratic, and diversified debate possible. The lack of media coverage of a shared initiative referendum on the privatization of “Aéroports de Paris” that we mentioned above illustrates this need, expressed by citizens, for a space for discussion, even for direct democracy to which journalists are invited to participate (Gautheron, 2019). According to *Le Média*, this citizens’ initiative – therefore coming from “the people” – should be publicized because it concerns the whole society. Here, the challenge for the media and journalists lies in the need to account for the diversity of points of view and actors that exist in the public sphere, which echoes the diversity of citizens (Collinet, 2019).

A press that respects this principle of diversity would then offer information understood as citizens’ knowledge because it concerns society as a whole and not only “the elites” (Robert, 2019b; Robert, 2019a). In doing so, the media would renew the conditions conducive to the development of critical thinking and thus promote the democratic debate which is the basis of the public sphere (Le Stagirite, 2020b). This point refers directly to the new contract of trust that we have pinpointed and would link journalists and the media to “the people” in order to make the public sphere a real place of critique of the elite (Le Stagirite, 2020b).

5 Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the discursive productions of a media close to a populist political party from the notion of metajournalism offers, in my opinion, an interesting perspective for approaching the critique of traditional journalists produced by this kind of media. Indeed, the theoretical framework has shown that part of the loss of legitimacy of journalists lies in their disconnection, their failure to consider the audience, and, in doing so, an exercise of their less legitimate roles. It is therefore entirely relevant to question a media which criticizes

them and whose editorial line not only places citizens at the heart of discussions but tends to oppose “the people” and “the elites”.

In this, I believe it is possible to provide some answers to the research question, posed earlier in the theoretical framework, which was: “How does the metajournalistic component of the critique addressed by *Le Média* to traditional journalists express itself in its journalistic productions?”. In this discussion and conclusion section, I articulate elements of answers with a more theoretical reflection, pointing out what the research brings to the works on the critique of the media.

First, it appears that *Le Média*'s critique of the media and journalists is built around the populist opposition between “the people” and “the elites” to which traditional journalists seem to belong. This opposition allows *Le Média* to invoke the need of rethinking the relationship between “the people” and the media to restore confidence. In this sense, *Le Média* echoes the work on participation in journalism which questions the (non-) consideration of citizens in the process of journalistic production (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998; see also Ahva & Wiard, 2018).

This opposition is also linked to the communication contract (Charaudeau, 2011) to legitimize a certain type of media discourse. In this regard, *Le Média* brings to light and questions what it considers to be the current contract between journalists and citizens which is part of a communication situation (the power of “the elites”) that should no longer be accepted. In this sense, *Le Média* proposes the evolution of this contract based on a greater integration of “the people” in the editorial choices of journalists. In a populist discourse, the regular invocation of “the people” who take on the role of witness and guarantor – even judge – of the quality of public information is essential in justifying the critique of journalism. In this context, it appears that the discourse mobilized by a media which criticizes the traditional media and opposes “the people” and “the elites”, fits quite well into the general critique of traditional media: this kind of critique brings back journalistic practices to an ideal that is not or no longer respected, which leads to a loss of legitimacy.

Next, it is interesting to underline that the critique developed by *Le Média* seems to be based on several “forms” of journalism criticism, articulating the more pessimistic vision carried by the Frankfurt School and the structural approach of Bourdieu (who is not as far from it that much as underlined by Lemieux, 1999) or drawing on representations strongly opposing an “innocent public” to the “evil journalists” that Muhlmann (2004) associates in particular with the work of Chomsky and Halimi. However, it was possible to observe

that *Le Média's* political project in no way aims to call into question the place and, above all, the democratic role of journalists in society. On the contrary, journalism and its ability to provide public information is a necessary condition for the public sphere and the development of critical thinking. The analysis of media productions thus contributes to extending the work that raises the question of the social and political meaning of journalism (see, for example, Muhlmann, 2004). Through its critique of the media and journalists, *Le Média* poses a metajournalistic dimension that combines reproach and normativity in the name of a certain legitimacy that can be awarded or not.

In addition, this paper has several contributions that articulate media critique and journalists with metajournalism. First, it points to the entanglement between metajournalistic discourse and critique of the media and journalists by another medium. There was no question here of comparing critiques from different fields (journalistic, political, citizen, etc.), but the mere abundance of metajournalistic aspects of the critique proposed by *Le Média* tends to show a strong presence of these elements. In addition, the corpus has shown that critique of the media and journalists is protean, which invites to apprehend it from different objects and actors.

However, it is possible to identify constancy in this critique such as the non-respect for certain values and certain roles necessary for journalism. In this sense, the research shows that the metajournalistic discourse that arises from such critique carries journalistic renewal, through a new normativity and a new communication contract between journalists and the public – “the people”. As such, I believe that the journalistic productions offered by *Le Média* reflect its populist tendency but pose a metajournalistic reflection which, in our opinion, goes beyond the simple political project.

The oscillation between the virulence of certain disapproving speeches and a media normativity based on the inclusion of journalism in society invites us to think of journalism as a real “social good” for many actors who pose a metajournalistic discourse – a “social good” questioned, of course, but also valued. The challenge for researchers in journalism who have made this critique their object of study then lies in considering the many interests that run through it and make it so difficult both to understand and to describe, despite the constants that seem to guide it.

NOTES

- 1 I therefore postulate a link between *Le Média* journalists and this political party [see, for example, an article published in the web version of the newspaper Liberation (Moullot, 2018)].
- 2 This manifesto can be viewed on the lemediatv.fr site from the following URL: www.lemediatv.fr/annexes/manifeste, site consulted on March 14, 2021.
- 3 In the sense of journalists working for the “legacy media”.
- 4 A quote that can be found at the bottom left of each article in *Le Média*, as on the home page accessible via the following URL: www.lemediatv.fr
- 5 On this subject, see the update of this vision of participation in Ahva and Wiard (2018) and Ahva et al. (2011).
- 6 The sources contained in the analytical part all come from the corpus as defined in the methodology.
- 7 Didier Raoult is a French doctor, a specialist in infectious diseases, who became well known during the health crisis linked to covid-19, both in his controversial proposal to use a treatment based on hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin to treat the disease and in the over-mediation it has benefited from.

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CÉDRIC TANT. Researcher at the Engage-Research Center for Publicness in Contemporary Communication and Centre d'anthropologie, sociologie, psychologie – études et recherches (CASPER) at Saint-Louis University in Brussels. His research focuses on public criticism, in particular its metadiscursive dimensions, as an element structuring the relationship between journalists and politicians. E-mail: cedric.tant@usaintlouis.be

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