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**An Acceptable Daily Intake of Bad News. Public/Private Problems and Media Trivialization of Environmental Health Issues: The Case of Indoor Air Pollution in France**

**Renaud Crespin & Benjamin Ferron**

(translation in English of an article published in *Politiques de Communication*, vol. 2, n° 7, 2016)

**Abstract.**

Since the mid-1990s, the issue of indoor air pollution has discreetly made its way onto French political and media agendas. Confined to the periphery of the highly-competitive public health problem market, the issue of the long-term exposure of inhabitants to household pollutants receives little media coverage, and even that is predominantly didactic and educational in nature. Covered by non-specialist and occasional journalists, the problem generally appears in sections of secondary importance from a journalistic point of view. The current article analyses the social conditions of the media confinement of this issue, paradoxically described by some analysts as a "sanitary scourge" that may play a role in a worrying epidemic of chronic diseases. This inquiry into the career taken by the indoor air problem in French media between 1995 and 2015 is based on the analysis of a corpus of written and audiovisual publications (n=746) and a campaign of interviews with journalists and communicators having worked to publicize this issue (n=16). Data provides us with a better understanding of the mechanisms ensuring that media exposure of this problem to the public remains tightly controlled: on the one hand, the unequal relationships between journalists and their sources which helps reduce their role to that of mere relayers of public health policy, and on the other, the specific dynamics at work within the journalistic field. These include transformations in the conditions of information production and the work of journalists in a context of reinforced economic pressures and the rising influence of public communication.

**Keywords: Social problems – Mass media – Public communication - Environmental health – Indoor Air Pollution.**

## **An Acceptable Daily Intake of Bad News. Public/Private Problems and Media Trivialization of Environmental Health Issues: The Case of Indoor Air Pollution in France**

"Open your windows to avoid indoor pollution!" - thus read the title of an article in a regional daily paper in northern France (Courrier Picard 2009)<sup>1</sup>. Reminding us that we spend the vast majority of our time indoors, its author lists the multiple sources of pollution within the home identified in a *Guide to indoor pollution* published by INPES (French National Institute for Health Education and Illness Prevention): smoking, damp, building materials, furniture, mites, cleaning products, heating appliances, carpets, etc. These elements that accumulate in the air, we learn, can cause allergies, irritations and headaches. Indeed, it seems that these symptoms are directly related to our domestic activities: DIY, cooking, drying laundry, showering, smoking, etc. In line with health authority recommendations, the paper thus invites its readers to take one "simple" measure: namely, to open the windows wide "for at least ten minutes every day" so as to dilute certain pollutants. Readers are also directed to a dedicated website for further details. This article, which falls not far short of being an institutional "advertorial", ultimately provides us with two items of information: the unveiling of a health problem capable of affecting the whole population and, simultaneously, validation of a prevention model promoted by the public authorities, which invites everyone to do the "right thing" every day.

Such a publication might seem anecdotal, were it not for the fact that it uncovers a more general trend - one identified by various sociological works on health and environment challenges well beyond the scope of the French case (Ungar, 1992; Kroll-Smith and Floyd. 1997, Gilbert and

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Henry, 2009; Saguy and Gruys 2010; Comby, 2015), pointing out the contemporary emergence of "public/private issues". This oxymoronic category refers to public issues whose solutions, drawn up by the public authorities, are fully contained by symbolic measures. Like anti-smoking policies, and public health policy as a whole, the symbolic aspect seeks to be perceived as an action "by and on the signs" (Padioleau 1977) promoting institutional communication that tends to come down to management of the problem via personal responsibility (Berlivet 1997; Bergeron 2010) rather than by public authorities or industrial companies. This type of problem is thus more likely to find itself dissolved than resolved because, as Erik Neveu (2015) has observed, the dissolution of public problems can happen within "the very movement of their solemn recognition and the display of their being addressed by public policy whose primary reality is to send out the signal that it is "being taken care of" (p. 229). As this contribution seeks to show, the journal article quoted above seems exemplary of the predominant journalistic treatment of the public problem of "indoor air pollution" in France, itself revelatory of the ambivalent role played by news media in the controlled exposure of citizens to the multiple health and environmental alerts that have accumulated over several decades in advanced industrial societies (Cicollela 2013; Robin 2014).

The problem of indoor air pollution is certainly not new (Walsh et al. 1983; WHO 1984; Sexton 1986; Week and Gammage 1990; Spengler et al. 2001; Sundel, 2004; Blanc 2009), including in France (Corbin 1986; Guilleux 2011), but ever since the mid-1990s, it has been embroiled in definitional struggles, with one of the central issues concerning its autonomy in relation to other public problems. Though various legislative and regulatory measures have strongly contributed to better framing treatment of the indoor air pollution problem (Jamay 2016), the whole set of such measures has failed to dispel the vagueness that continues to surround definition of the problem within the public media environment. The concept of indoor air pollution is subject to plural - even competing - definitions. For example, an initial perspective makes indoor air

pollution a simple appendix to air pollution as a whole; a second approaches it as having to do with chemical pollution, affecting not only the air but also water and earth; a third mainly links it to a type of pollutant (tobacco, carbon monoxide, damp, formaldehyde, etc.); a fourth uses it to justify the adoption of a more ecological lifestyle, etc. Far from wanting to rule on the validity of these different perspectives, our approach seeks to discover whether this overlap might not constitute one of the main obstacles to the recognition of indoor air pollution and to its becoming a priority issue on both media and political agendas.

Over the past few years, social sciences works have demonstrated that prescriptive intervention by political and administrative actors (in the form of laws and regulations) are strongly linked to the definition of health and environmental problems being reduced to such terms as "scandal" or "crisis" (Champagne and Marchetti 2005; Henry 2007, 2011, 2013). Yet, at first sight, with regard to indoor air pollution, this form of publicity does not seem to be dominant, despite certain forms of "dramatization". The embedding of the problem within the set of factors encouraging its appearance (poor housing, energy poverty, substandard housing, industrial pollution, poverty and exclusion) can have paradoxical effects on its recognition and media coverage (Sexton 1986). Indeed, these multiple factors contribute to extending the scope of the problem, and should thus confer upon it an overall dimension likely to widen both its audience and its notoriety. Yet this very entrenchment can also attenuate the specificity of the problem: embedded within other problems often in receipt of greater media attention, the health dangers associated with indoor air pollution are thus overshadowed by other, rival types of issues and risks. This tension between "dispersion" and "insertion" of the problem is our starting point for analysis of the publicity dynamic governing media coverage of indoor air pollution. To do this, and like the sociological work on public problems - which agree on the necessity of preferring a structural and diachronic approach for thinking about the career of these problems (Becker 1966; Blumer 1971; Hubbard et al. 1975; Spector and Kitsuse 1977), our analysis will focus on

the process of shaping indoor air pollution as a problematic issue in both public and media discourse, and in the communications strategies of health and environmental agencies, associations, scientific bodies and construction industry organisations.

Two main data collection methods were used. The first is the constitution and analysis of a corpus of archive documents, using the Europresse.com database, the INAthèque collections of broadcast media, and websites (Keyword: <air intérieur> [indoor air]). This corpus (n=746) has been subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis conducted on the basis of a thematic grid, which was drawn up following a test phase. The second method is the face-to-face semi-directive sociological interview (n=16). We questioned generalist and specialist journalists working in national French news, both general and political (*Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, La Croix, France 2, France 5*) as well as in journals and magazines specializing in consumer, health or environmental issues (*Que Choisir, AlloDocteur, Magazine de la santé, Pollution atmosphérique*). We also questioned people responsible for the communications of various organisations involved in the construction of news and mediatized public debate on indoor air: the OQAI (French Indoor Air Quality Observatory), Anses (French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety), Ademe (French Environment and Energy Management Agency), FNE (French federation of associations for the protection of nature and environment), Capeb (French Confederation of Artisans and Small Building Companies).

Our investigation into the vague nature of the public definition of the indoor air problem led us to conceive it as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989) and to formulate the hypothesis of a type of plasticity in its definition, facilitated by a series of structural factors. The heuristic of this hypothesis is that it allows the bias of "mediacentrism" to be avoided (Schlesinger 1990) by analysing the adjustments between the competing definitions - held not only by the journalists but also by those news sources having heterogeneous professional cultures. This also led us to stress public communication issues (Ferguson 1990; Weingart et al. 2000; Aldrin *et*

*al.* 2013). It is therefore a matter of understanding whether any potential collaborations between different "indoor air entrepreneurs" favour the emergence of a synthetic definition of the problem in the media. However, even supposing that such a definition exists, it must be conceived of as resulting from both the effects of the structure of the journalistic field and the opportunities offered by this theme for the actors involved in the production of news (Benson and Neveu 2005). Therefore, it is all about analysing journalism as an intermediary social arena that is neither neutral nor transparent, which selects and transforms the various sources from which news is constructed in line with its own interests. It is also about remembering that this media handling can only be fully understood by taking into account the multiple external relationships news professionals maintain with a set of actors and "sources". Given that, as Dominique Marchetti (2008) has stressed: "The state's publicity is never as effective, in terms of media impact, as when it doesn't seem too visible" (p. 5), what effects (in terms of domination and imposition) can the state framing of the indoor air pollution issue have, via communication mechanisms, on the work of defining the problem created by the journalistic field? In this way, any attempt at making intelligible a paradoxical sort of public problem - that of a scandal contained, depoliticized, and in a way "privatized" - by a public communication that is itself subject to media pressure, comes down to asking and discussing the wider question of the relative autonomy of the journalistic field (Bourdieu 1998; Champagne 2016).

### **AN ACCEPTABLE DAILY INTAKE OF NEWS ON INDOOR POLLUTION?**

The work on media construction of public problems has shown that journalists' interest in a given issue is correlated to neither its importance nor its "objective" severity (Hubbard et al. 1975), as shown in such varied examples as crime (Roshier, 1973), nuclear risk (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) and the question of homelessness (Best, 2010). Even though the issue of indoor air pollution can lay claim to "priority" public health status in France (Chesnais 2012), the analysis of our corpus reveals, on the contrary, the marginal and largely depoliticized nature

of its media framing, which since the early 2000s been dominated by the preventive discourse of the public authorities, which function as true "symbolic tranquilizers" (Beck 1992).

*Media coverage that is both discreet and nebulous*

Coverage of the indoor air pollution problem is relatively discreet, breaking it down under subheadings, and many journalists address the issue only once in the course of the period being considered. When they remember that the theme exists (which is not always the case) the journalists questioned talk about the secondary position it holds in their everyday work. Described as a "*minor subject*"<sup>2</sup>, "*somewhat marginalized and relatively ignored*"<sup>3</sup>, the theme is considered to have been "*insufficiently*" and "*belatedly*" covered<sup>4</sup>. The limited frequency of publications on the subject (2.5 documents per year across all formats) bears witness to the shortcomings of this editorial coverage. Journalists evaluate this peripheral position in comparison to related environmental and health problems, such as the pollution of water and outdoor air, or exposure to workplace pollutants. A statistical comparison of media coverage of indoor air pollution with neighbouring problems allows measurement of the relatively low level of interest paid to this question. Between 1995 and 2015, the newspaper *Le Monde*, for example, published 1,681 articles on asbestos and 1,425 on air pollution in general, as against just 55 specifically addressing indoor air pollution (Figure 1). Chronologically-speaking, no significant correlation was observed between coverage of related problems and that of indoor air. For example, asbestos, though paradoxically one of the indoor air pollutants, seems to have an independent media pathway.

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<sup>2</sup>G. Dupont, *Le Monde*, interview, 26/05/2015.

<sup>3</sup>M. Court, *Le Figaro*, interview, 9/10/2013.

<sup>4</sup>D. Sergent, *La Croix*, interview, 7/10/2013.



### Table 1 about here

Analysis of the distribution of documents per section also highlights the dispersion of the indoor air pollution problem, which doesn't seem to always fall into the same category in the various media. The question is covered in a regular way, using formats that are generally short and spread across at least five sections: society, home/lifestyle, environment, science and technical, political and health/well-being. Moreover, it is regularly addressed in the local pages of the regional dailies, which represent a third of all documents taken into consideration. The problem is thus disseminated across a multitude of sections and subsections, corresponding to a range of territorial levels (and readerships). Next, taking article type as an indicator, three press genres predominate: the news report, the news article and the news in brief. Even though the art of the editorial entails conferring an order of magnitude on events, just 14 editorials (1.8%) were published on the subject, across all media, during the period considered. Lastly, the problem of indoor air does not seem to have any journalist "owners" (Gusfield 1981). Half of the articles are unsigned, as though the subject were unlikely to make yourname. Of those putting their names to articles (n=232), 4/5 wrote just one article, while only 14% have written between 2 and 5 articles, and a tiny minority (8, just 3%) have written between 6 and 20.

The sociology of journalism shows that the media contribute to modifying not just the stock of knowledge, but also preference frameworks and public perceptions. An analysis of the phrase "indoor air pollution" suggests that this is the product, itself causing a framing effect that helps depoliticize the issue. This is what linguists refer to as nominalisation. Comprising a determinant (<la> [the]), a noun (<pollution> [pollution]) and a possessive phrase (<de l'air intérieur> [of indoor air]), this linguistic form reduces the phrase (<l'air intérieur est pollué> [indoor air is polluted]) to a group of words. The stylistic point of this is two-fold (reducing a phrase or proposition to a group of words) and argumentative (preventing denial of the verbal proposition by causing it to disappear). Naming the problem is thus not – *a fortiori* - a neutral

act, given that the public authorities prefer the expression "indoor air quality" which chases away even the very idea of pollution. An opinion is implicitly formed (<l'air intérieur est pollué> [indoor air is polluted]) even as a "problematization": "indoor air" is posed as being ontologically distinct from "outdoor air", and this air "is" polluted, but we do not know by what or by whom, nor with what effects. We can therefore ask whether the very formulation of the problem might encourage not just the freezing of public discourse of which it is the subject, but also, indirectly, the marginalization of alternative framings that place the emphasis on the responsibility of industrial players or public authorities - framings that are indeed present in both the scientific (Blanc 2009; Cicollela, 2013) and the journalistic fields (Que Choisir, 2009; Robin, 2014). Answering this question demands the avoidance of two pitfalls. The first would be the common-sense consideration of journalists as simple information relays. The second would be to consider them as more or less objective partners in a deliberate and organised strategy of stifling the scandalous potential of the indoor air problem. To release ourselves from these two approaches, our analysis seeks to emphasise the social and professional constraints weighing on media coverage of this environmental and health issue.

Those journalists having written most about the pollution of indoor air struggle to perceive it as an established, consistent and autonomous problem. This difficulty arises because it is cognitively interlocked with other themes (outdoor air, asbestos, climate), which helps muddy the waters. This heteronomy is accentuated by its technical dimension, especially for those journalists who are only just beginning to delve into environmental questions. One journalist at *Le Monde* (B. Hopquin) recalls that the problem emerged during the 1990s as an "*extremely vague and highly complicated, very technical*" issue. The low level of media coverage can also be explained by the high volume of scientific information needing to be processed every day, which, according to one journalist at *Figaro* (M. Court), tends to "*drown*" the scientific data on indoor air pollution. Moreover, journalists question the very pertinence of the subject of indoor

air pollution: from a political perspective, some people suspect it of serving as "counter fire" aimed at distracting the public from the problem of atmospheric pollution, while others wonder whether it really is of interest to readers. Indoor air pollution also struggles to garner the specific investment of "environment" journalists, due to the morphology of this professional group and its subjugated position in the internal hierarchies of editorial teams: "*you can't become an expert on the quality of indoor air when you're an environment journalist, there are so few of us. So you say to yourself that the climate is 'more important'*"<sup>5</sup>.

If we take the perspective of the public (Le Grignou 2003, Comby et al. 2011), without preconceptions as to the type of reception information about indoor air might receive, statistical work on our corpus allows objectification of the "flow" of media framing on the subject by demonstrating that it is the result of a dispersion of the problem between multiple sources, causes and solutions. The articles and programmes of our corpus only cite, on average, one or two information sources, generally issuing from the bureaucratic and scientific fields. In some cases (10% of the total), no cause of indoor air pollution is mentioned. In others, the pollutants incriminated are those that are easiest to find substitutes for in consumers' purchasing acts (DIY and cleaning products, furnishing and interior decoration elements, glues, etc.). Most often, no specific population is designated as victim of indoor air pollution (30% of the total). Where this is the case, the general population is generally concerned, without discrimination (27%). The only clearly-identified group having victim status is that of children and babies. A similar observation can be made of the symptoms: very often (35% of the total), no particular symptom is mentioned. Where symptoms are mentioned, journalists mainly cite respiratory problems, allergies, cancers, reproductive issues and neurological problems. Next, where the documents mention the buildings concerned, in one third of cases the private home is mentioned, followed,

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<sup>5</sup> C. Schaub-Delesalle, *Libération*, interview, 18/06/2015.

to a lesser extent, by schools and nurseries, workplaces and public or private transport. Sometimes, all buildings are mentioned, without any further detail. Lastly, the main solution conceived for resolution of the problem is individual action, consisting of making sure that buildings are well-ventilated by opening your windows at home (17% of cases), rather than any action taken by the public authorities, which is essentially reduced to such "symbolic" measures as labelling the most harmful products. More "substantial" actions, which seek to constrain the chemical industry or construction professionals, are rarely envisaged. An example would be action seeking to forbid the sale and use of certain substances (5%) or acknowledge their toxic or carcinogenic properties (2%). In the end, the inventory logic allowing us to draw up the media coverage table for indoor air pollution is more eclectic than it is exhaustive. Only the solutions benefit from a less impressionistic approach, since these are essentially drawn up from the perspective of the individual responsibility of occupants of the places concerned.

#### *The indoor air career through the French media (1995-2015)*

A diachronic analysis of our corpus sheds additional light, since it allows us to distinguish four main sequences, between 1995 and 2015, in the media pathways of the problem. Unlike other problems (Neveu 2015) for which becoming "a public policy issue" (p. 183-215) follows a phase of mobilization and alert, what is striking about the career of the indoor air problem is that its administrative control *precedes* a phase of politicization, the low profile of which can be partially explained by the efforts deployed by a whole series of agents, aimed at avoiding a panic.

#### [Table 2 about here](#)

The first sequence falls between the start of the 1990s and the founding of the OQAI in 2001. As shown in an interview with one journalist who had worked on the subject early on, "*back*

*then, indoor air pollution did not exist*"<sup>6</sup>. During this period in which the problem was emerging into the public arena, the total number of documents including the expression <indoor air pollution> is relatively limited (0 to 2 art./yr in the daily national press, for example). However, the format of these print media articles is 2.3 times longer than it was in the next periods. The newspapers thus preferred news articles and news reports in long format, where the most-often cited sources are scientists and experts. Indoor air pollution tried to set itself apart from other problems, especially that of outdoor air, serving to put the progress boasted of by the public authorities into perspective. Echoing the state of scientific knowledge on the subject, media coverage remained evasive as to who the victims of indoor air pollution were, and which symptoms were linked to it. Workplaces were more frequently mentioned at this time than later on, especially with regard to "sick building syndrome" (Barthe and Remy 2010). At this stage, solutions conceived of in the media mainly featured monitoring by approved scientific or health organisations. Yet, in spite of how early on this subject was addressed in a magazine such as *Que Choisir*, the problem did not, in the media agenda, take on the "public health scandal" form. How can this be accounted for?

The approach involving institutionalization of the problem, which prevailed during the second sequence, provides some elements of explanation that may bring understanding. This second sequence sits between the beginning of the problem being addressed by various central administrative bodies (2001), that were later to play a central role in deployment of a non-scary communication action to the public, and the opening of the first "Grenelle Environment Forum" in 2007. This phase of institutionalization was initially marked by a significant increase in the number of documents devoted to indoor air (0 to 7 art./yr in the daily national press). The average length of print media articles became shorter (315 words). The subject was thus given

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<sup>6</sup> E. Chesnay, *Que choisir*, interview, 9/10/2013.

more coverage, but in less detail, and was spread across three main sections: society, local pages and home/lifestyle. From this point on, fewer specialist than generalist journalists got to grips with indoor air, which built legitimacy within national TV channels. During this period, administrative departments often replaced scientific sources. The accent was on consumer products rather than on the deficient structure of buildings. Although the problem still struggled to identify its victims, we did note that references to children (as a population more exposed to indoor pollutants) increased, especially in schools and nurseries. There was also a change in the identification of pathologies: respiratory problems and allergies overtook cancers. Lastly, public measures destined to resolve the problem began taking shape. The first solution relied on individual responsibility ("Air your home!"). Both public and private collective actors in construction and industry tended to steer clear of the problem's public arena and conceivable solutions.

The third sequence in the media pathway of the problem happened between the two "Grenelle Environment Forums" (2007-2010). Even though these two events encouraged the intervention of political actors, no scandal alert was really observed. It is true that media (and especially television) coverage might use a dramatizing register, but only in an ordinary mode in which it is less a case of revelations than addressing the public authorities' failure to act on a public health problem capable of affecting children. This routine scandalization was less present in the print media, where the problem was the subject of more articles than during the other three periods, although the formats became shorter still (286 words). The stand-out development concerns choice of section. Although the local and "lifestyle" pages were still dominant, the subject was more often covered in the "political" pages, where there were debates on the pertinence of pollutant exposure thresholds, the failure to take into account "cocktail effects" (exposure of inhabitants to many toxic products) or the inadequacy of evaluation systems on the effects of substances for which "the dose does not make the poison" (endocrine disruptors).

Moreover, the distribution of documents began moving away from the "science" and "health" pages and towards those devoted to the environment. The number of interviews increased, leaving room for official spokespersons, such as Séverine Kirchner, Coordinator of OQAI and a regular media presence, or more exceptionally the Minister of Health, Roselyne Bachelot whose "authorised" words backed up the importance of the subject. In general, both political and voluntary sector actors earned, during this period, a privileged position as information sources. Lastly, this period encouraged the more frequent mention of solutions that might be considering more limiting for industry and /or the public authorities. This was the case in particular with regard to the limitation or ban on producing and selling substances such as formaldehyde, which were recognised as "definitely carcinogenic" by several international organisations.

The fourth phase (2010-2015) stands out for its standardization of both political and media approaches to the problem. This began with implementation of a regulatory framework following the second "Grenelle Environment Forum", which attracted less media coverage than the first - although more than at phase 2. The average length of print media articles dropped substantially (191 words) and coverage was shared between the local pages of the daily regional press and (to a lesser extent) the "society" pages. Regular positioning in the "environment" pages shows that there was stabilisation in terms of which categories the problem was considered by specialist journalists to belong in. Moreover, the proportion of news-at-a-glance and news-in-briefs rose significantly, with the local pages of the PQR prioritising event announcements such as numerous information and training workshops on the quality of indoor air. In its own way, this journalistic format illustrates how journalistic coverage of the problem had become routine, making it something of a "chestnut". Although administrative sources continued to occupy a central position for journalists, (1/4 of quotes) political actors were quoted less often than in the preceding period. The haziness that marks media coverage of the

problem tended to be accentuated. It was as though the problem had become so obvious that journalists no longer felt the need to explain its origins. The lack of transparency around mentioning the symptoms linked to exposure to indoor air pollutants was further reinforced, with respiratory and allergy problems getting a higher profile than carcinogenic effects.

In this way, contrary to what has been shown by a number of works devoted to the emergence of public health "scandals" (Champagne and Marchetti 2005; Henry 2010, 2013 Gilbert and Henry 2009; Nollet 2010), it seems that the politicization-media coverage phase came in here, *following* a phase in which indoor air pollution problem became subject to administrative control, mainly via the creation of a dedicated public body: the OQAI. Relatively early on in its pathway, then, the problem was placed under the control of the public authorities which, since 2001, have "enrolled" scientists to a public mechanism that produces veritable "scientific intelligence" on indoor air pollution (Buton 2006). One question that arises is thus that of understanding how this state thinking on indoor air pollution can play a role in the public forms of expression of a problem for which media coverage seems to operate, in the words of the health authorities, on the principle of the "acceptable daily intake".

### **"BE CAREFUL WHAT INFORMATION YOU ARE PROVIDING": THE MANUFACTURE OF A MEDIA CONSENSUS**

At this point, a series of questions must be asked if we are to understand the mechanisms contributing to this relatively consensual coverage of the indoor air pollution problem in France over the past two decades. Which agents are behind the "elements of language", widely echoed by journalists, who dominate media coverage of the matter? What are the rationales and social conditions governing the production and circulation of the discourses emanating from their sources of information? We stress the communication work of several bodies that serve as sources of information to journalists on the indoor air question. Sources that, as we will show, are highly professionalized, though not all-powerful. Indeed, despite efforts made to "control"



public discourse on the subject, journalists remain relatively autonomous in their work. Paradoxically, this very autonomy makes it possible for the media to actively contribute to the production of a *doxa* capable of slowing - and even blocking - the emergence of a problem in "scandal format" (Boltanski and Claverie 2007).

### *Communicating on indoor air pollution*

"Indoor air is more polluted than outdoor air. Yet we spend 85% of our time indoors. This exposure presents risks to our health. Measures are called for in terms of monitoring the quality of indoor air, and each of us must keep our homes well ventilated". This is basically the message that has been relayed and endlessly repeated by the news media on the matter of indoor air pollution ever since 2001, when the OQAI was founded: a body that has successfully positioned itself as the legitimate "owner" of this problem (Gusfield 1981). The OQAI - based in Marne-la-Vallée within the CSTB (Building Scientific and Technical Centre) premises - was originally created in response to concerns that were political as well as a scientific. In particular, as co-founder Séverine Kirchner explained to us in an interview, it was all about averting the fear of seeing a fresh public health scandal appearing in the press hot on the heels of the asbestos and contaminated blood "affairs". This objective at least partially explains the meaning of the communication strategies deployed by the OQAI towards journalists: informing the scandalous potential of the indoor air problem, even as they contained it.

OQAI's "Press relations", were but one element of a broader communication package (also oriented towards decision-makers and the general public) subscribed to this same approach. Initially entrusted to the CSTB's communications department, the "targeting" of journalists and the organisation "of media events" (Champagne 2016) such as press conferences, were outsourced to a specialist communications agency in 2010. Its head (aged 36) kept in contact with OQAI members but unlike them, did not come from a scientific background: educated in the arts, she had learned her trade in the fields of publishing, business and communication.

From her perspective, *"The OQAI was clearly a media reference point for journalists working on the indoor air quality issue"*. A few figures allow us to measure this media capital. Each year, the OQAI receives between 40 and 60 interview requests. To maximise media visibility of *"major"* events, the OQAI notifies a list of around 300 journalists, broken down into two main categories: a *"hard core"* which regularly takes an interest in or tracks the subject of indoor air quality (*"core target"*) and a shifting peripheral group whose interest is more occasional. In order to secure exchanges with the media over the long term, a central aspect of the press relations task was thus to adjust the professional work pace of journalists (who sometimes request interviews *"for that evening, or for the next day"*) to that of OQAI members, especially researchers whose working patterns are organised over longer periods of time, punctuated with a lot of travel.

The OQAI thus owes some of its media success - proven by the frequency of quotations concerning it our corpus - to the work of a team that was gradually able to build close working relationships, even becoming familiar, with a group of journalists who had no reason to distrust the content of the press releases they received. Another factor in its success was that OQAI's principal representatives (C. Mandin and S. Kirchner in particular) were perceived by the media to be *"good customers"* and *"good communicators"*, because they were able to *"explain themselves simply, effectively, quickly, and pleasantly, nicely"* - skills that allowed them to address the general public. From then on, congratulating themselves on the relatively consensual nature of the air pollution problem, as the director of communications did when stating that it was not *"a polemical subject for journalists"*, was a self-fulfilling prophecy, given that her work as a communicator had contributed so much to creating the situation thus described. A contribution that was limited by the mission entrusted to her by the OQAI, since the fear of seeing a critical point of view published in the press - a situation considered *"dangerous"* - forced her to *"be careful with the information she gave"*.

Involved in the politics of the fight against indoor air pollution, ANSES also contributed to the production and dissemination of "controlled" information on the subject to journalists. The model adopted was that of "routine communication", inherited from its predecessor, Afsset<sup>7</sup>. During the environmental health questions in the course of an interview with a manager of the specialist Risk and Society unit, which organises workshops on indoor air for professional and voluntary sector groups (midwives, nursery managers, baby planners, sustainable development consultants, etc.), we were told that "*We are more concerned with the long term*". Moreover, since indoor air is classed as a sub-category of "health-environment issues", its position in Anses' communication is marginal. Although this agency receives around 1,500 "*press requests*" per year (half of which concern questions relating to food), only eight such requests in 2010 concerned indoor air, with 11 in 2011 and 16 in 2012. According to the manager of the Risk and Society unit "*indoor air is not a subject in its own right. It is multi-faceted, it is protean*" which, she says, prevents the issue giving rise to any social campaigning. In fact, Anses' communication to the media on indoor air is routine "low noise" communication, and there is little risk of it being transformed into "crisis" communication.

Its rationales are similar to those of Ademe (French Agency for the Environment and Energy Control). This agency plays a key role, not just in the politics of the fight against air pollution in general, and indoor air in particular, but also in the media framing of this problem, since it is a preferred source of information on this subject for journalists. This work with the media concerns all of the agency's activities. Since the start of the 2000s, Ademe has devoted a greater proportion of its budget to communication. Florence Clément, who was in charge of information for the general public at the time of the study, is qualified in "environmental public

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<sup>7</sup>Anses was created in 2010 out of the merger of Afssa (the French agency for food safety) and Afsset (French agency for health and safety in the working environment).

relations"<sup>8</sup> and was also responsible for "press contact" - she is thus regularly called upon to respond to questions from journalists. Since 2012, she has also been the "expert guest" on a *Europe 1* radio programme, as part of a partnership with Ademe. She has discussed various environmental subjects on air, including indoor air. This information to the "general public" is founded on two postulates: that of individual responsibility and that of the possibility of changing each person's behaviour: *"It is important to avoid giving [the public] the impression that we are in the process of addressing a global theme. Air quality is a good example. When we called it that, almost nobody took the guide. Since it's been renamed 'Healthy Air at Home', demand for the guide is very high. It's very clear, when we respond to an individual problematic, it works"*.

In line with this, in Ademe's information brochures for the general public, which used to stress the environmental dimension of indoor air pollution in the home) have now been reoriented towards the health dimension of the problem. According to Florence Clément, this is in response to public expectations. She feels that "*people*" are more concerned about their own health than they are about the quality of the air. And yet, for her, the news media have an important role to play in the construction of the health-environment theme of which indoor air is a part. Recourse to the media is also a way of reducing the high cost of producing information materials for the general public, which are regularly sent out in batches of two or three million copies. In exchange for this semi-delegation of its public service mission to the press, the agency has to adapt to the constraints of the media, by responding to the approaches of journalists and their audiences. This demands a process of permanent adjustment, to achieve balance in the messages delivered. Indeed, on the one hand, due to its position as an expert agency, Ademe must remain

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<sup>8</sup> She has also worked for the European Commission as well as in a private company specialized in electrical, mechanical and climatic engineering, energy, and communications networks.

"neutral" by drawing only on responses in terms of the "proven impact" of indoor air pollution.

Yet on the other hand, the agency often has to provide simple answers to questions that cannot, strictly speaking, be answered without introducing a minimum of complexity.

In this way - regardless of which public bodies are required to produce information messages and supports - those institutional communication actors who directly participate in media framing of the indoor air pollution problem converge in their view of it as a problem that lacks autonomy and is dominated by other problems because it is classed as a sub-problem that is relatively consensual and stirs up only limited interest among both journalists and the "public". These patterns of perception circulate much more easily than collective mobilizations on the subject, which are almost non-existent<sup>9</sup>. Each element offers a partial - but only partial - explanation of the overly discreet approach to the problem. Indeed, if we are capable of understanding that the concerns of the public authorities are well received in the agencies' communication, how can we explain the fact that journalists also participate in keeping the problem under control?

#### *A paradoxical journalistic autonomy*

Far from being a neutral intermediary between their sources of information and their audiences, news media journalists subject indoor air pollution to a series of transformations. It is not necessarily the case that institutional communiqué will be picked up, especially by news professionals with a scientific background, such as this scientific journalist - who has a PhD in Biology, and is responsible for the Science section in the *La Croix* daily newspaper:

*"Communication - now that I've done journalism, I'm wary of how often things are presented in a highly promotional way, very much arranged, simplified, as though it's*

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<sup>9</sup> As the spokesperson for France-Nature Environnement explained to us in an interview, getting this subject onto the activist agenda is a real uphill struggle.

*natural - and ultimately giving a false image of the science [...] So there are people who turn up and spit out this little thing in three lines, the first three lines of the press release. We ask a little more, and they don't have any more. It smacks of prettification that's very unpleasant, I find it exasperating" (D. Sergent).*

The formal modifications and rewrites that journalists impose on the institutional discourses they receive are due not only to their reflective abilities, but also to structural factors linked to their position within a given state of the journalistic field. Where it is treated as an environmental and/or health issue, the production of indoor air pollution information is subject to the specific constraints incumbent on these sections (Marchetti 2005; Comby, 2015). Let's take the example of the problem as it is addressed in the general national media by journalists specializing in the environment, and as it is addressed by general journalists. It was thanks to a window of opportunity for environmental matters that was open in the 2000s that the journalists we questioned in the course of our study recall having addressed the indoor air problem. Indoor air quality thus seems all the more pertinent because it can be linked to political and health issues, assuring it both internal (the hierarchy) and external interest, meaning it was capable of interesting readers.

These newcomers on environmental themes are newcomers precisely because, in the course of their training in journalism, they have picked up specific techniques that equip them with resources to work on any type of subject. The journalists questioned on indoor air had, in the course of their careers, already worked in other sections (economics, politics, sport, agriculture, etc.) prior to working on environmental issues. This generalist approach more or less explicitly meets the internal demands of certain editorial teams in terms of career management. Distancing oneself from militancy is thus one way of presenting as a professional equipped with a particular "objective" expertise - while also allowing acknowledgement of a prior interest in

environmental matters<sup>10</sup>. Yet, in the discourse of these journalists, setting oneself apart from activists is a matter of taking a broader interest, and systematically making use of data and studies issuing from science - precisely those that the above-mentioned agencies and bodies provide on indoor air.

However, the conversion of information that had long since been marginalized in editorial teams into more legitimate information led to a situation in which the environment had to address a "wider" audience. Because of this, the environment pages became subject to competition within editorial teams: journalistic commitment on the environment thus also entailed professional commitment to bringing these subjects onto the pages of newspapers. "*You have to fight internally to convince, to say that such and such a subject is important,*" said Coralie Schaub-Delessale, a journalist at *Libération*<sup>11</sup>. But imposing these subjects can prove all the more complex because they are often spread across several sections: international, society, medicine, the natural world, etc. This complexity is made denser still by the instability to which the environment section is subject in editorial teams. Indeed, under cover of the evolution of newspaper "formulas", this section can disappear and/or reappear with fresh boundaries, which can lead to a multiplication of approaches and angles when dealing with environmental issues. This multiplication can however prove to be an obstacle to garnering support and weighing in consistently, in trade-offs concerning editorial space allocated to the section when it's up against the "political", "international" or "economic" sections which, being more structured, predominate in the dailies.

Environmental issues are at once dispersed and overpowered, rendering them highly dependent on current events. For a long time, these were "*holiday*" subjects (B. Hopquin), yet the growing

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<sup>10</sup>Gaëlle Dupont, *Le Monde*, interview, 26/05/2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, 18/06/2015.

interest in environmental matters during the 2000s can be explained by their becoming more of a burning issue, politically. For journalists, the positioning of the political parties on environmental issues was explicitly seen as an indicator of the legitimacy and credibility of environmentally-themed news, as demonstrated by the spike in indoor air coverage observed during the "Grenelle Environment Forums."

Certain specificities of the indoor air problem work against it being covered by journalists. Firstly, it is one of the most legitimate of environmental subjects, particularly air pollution - a matter often addressed as an overarching aspect of global warming. According to this "Russian doll" line of thought, already observed in the classification categories used by health agencies, indoor air pollution was thus no more than a sub-subject of a subject (air), itself a sub-subject of other, broader, subjects. And this was within a section - that of the environment which, even though it was entering a more propitious period, was still overpowered and dispersed within editorial teams. Moreover, even if journalists did consider the subject to be newsworthy because capable of "*concerning everyone*", the problem was also perceived as abstract, largely intangible and highly technical. Making such a subject accessible and understandable for the reader is practically a routine journalistic task - yet for indoor air pollution, it is also an obstacle to covering it. Undertaking such a task has a cost, and it is more cost-effective, professionally, to do so on other subjects that have higher potential because editors are more likely to be interested in them. In fact, everything conspires so that indoor air pollution has to be written about and spoken about in a conditional mode that traps it within the register of emerging issues. And yet, like other health and environmental problems, indoor air pollution does not escape being covered through the fear register. For journalists, this register is thus a rhetorical instrument for justifying the existence of the "environment" section in the journalistic production space - and even more markedly when it comes to television. Even though it is a means of internally "selling" indoor air pollution as a subject, the fear register is also a way of



maintaining a position in the journalistic production space on this type of subject. Thus, in a newspaper like *Le Monde*, conceiving of, formulating and presenting solutions serves twin purposes. It allows a move away from a discourse loaded with doom-mongering that is likely to repel "the general public", while maintaining the identity of a newspaper whose vocation is to interest, and take an interest in, political and economic elites. But an approach via solutions is also a response to a strong belief in what are mainly individual choices (especially in terms of the reader-citizen consumption) - which are better equipped than political decisions to drive environmental issues forward.

We thus identify rapprochements between information produced by the print media and that produced by television, where individual consumer choices are more often presented as the best way to ward off a fear that is largely staged. Focusing on the solutions offered by the market thus tells us how powerful economic mechanisms are, in the production of information. Including practical and concrete solutions in articles, documentaries and/or magazine programmes is a way of "being concerning" that is one of the strongest constraints weighing on the production and dissemination of television images. A constraint that is an explicit demand made of certain distributors in order to keep the viewer - who is also considered a consumer - captive. Being alarming, but not too much so, and offering solutions that are both practical and concrete, thus prove ways of "handling" those audiences addressed by a television programme on environmental issues which, like that of indoor air pollution, are mainly addressed from the "health-well-being-consumer" angle:

*"It's true that, closer to consumption, choosing paint is less anxiety-provoking. [...] A programme on indoor air, it's about opening the windows, it's easier to tell people to open their windows than to move house! [...] it's a public service programme, it's on in the early afternoon, and people are good, they drink their coffee [...] we can't really*

*take a political angle about whether or not this or that type of product should be banned, it's too pointed, our programme is about health.*"<sup>12</sup>

The analysis of decisions as to which section of the publication an item will appear in and the construction of the newsworthiness of indoor air in the media cannot entirely account for the interest (however limited) taken by certain journalists. Their social and professional characteristics thus allow them to shed light on certain social predispositions to getting to grips with the issue. Without claiming that our analysis of the journalists' professional and personal trajectories is exhaustive, and bearing in mind that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the journalists in our corpus put their names to just a single article on indoor air, we can note that what stands out clearly, among the authors of several contributions on the subject, is a social and professional "profile" whose specificities are as follows: more women than men, over-representation of 40 - 50 year-olds, social origins that are overwhelmingly upper-middle class, graduates of schools of journalism, the environment representing just one stage in their career. Insofar as these journalists constitute specific "sections of the population", these results are worthy of comparison with those of a national study conducted for Anses on "French people's confidence in the products and environments that surround them" (Jauneau et al. 2015). This study, which comprises a series of questions on the quality of air in homes, indicates that there is over-representation of university graduates, managers and economically active people among those most "reassured" in terms of their health. In this way, 59% of those questioned stated that they were confident in the quality of the air in homes, as against 45% for outdoor air. One could speculate that journalists may be even more able to channel the "reassuring" communication coming from the authorities on indoor air because they are themselves of the very "relaxed" opinion that is music to the agency's ears.

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<sup>12</sup>C. de Froment-Baril, Magazine de la Santé, France 5, interview, 21/7/2015.

Indeed, two ways of investing in indoor air can be identified in the journalists questioned. Firstly, a professional investment that, as we have seen, manifests via a measured commitment to establish the environment as a legitimate and credible section within an editorial team and in the newsroom. Yet added to this additional form is a second, more "personal" investment. It is not, strictly speaking "activist" in the sense that, to the best of our knowledge, none of the journalists questioned was a member of an environmental association. The personal commitment we are talking about is at a more private, domestic level. Claiming to be very (even over-) informed, the journalists questioned say, for example, that they have made changes to certain aspects of their lifestyle and consumption habits in the course of their work on the environmental theme (which is also true of the OQAI communicator). Although some say they have, at least partially, converted to "organic" food and travel, as much as possible, by bike, this conversion also concerns behaviours aimed at maintaining the quality of indoor air in their private habitat. Not repainting a bedroom just before a baby is born, choosing "organic" paint, avoiding new furniture (especially made of chipboard), choosing natural detergents or those bearing a "green" label, airing rooms every day (morning and night) - these behaviours are widespread, even though little research has been conducted into their effectiveness or pertinence. Ultimately, it is as though these journalists had taken on board (in their private lives) these elements of the preventive messages formulated within the public health agencies, and relayed by the communicators with whom they share, beyond any professionally constructed mistrust (Legavre 2011), many social properties. Their signing up to the "*awareness-raising doxa*" that celebrates the benefits of "the right daily gestures", typical of certain sections of the middle and upper classes, includes, just as Jean-Baptiste Comby (2015) has argued, "a conception of behavioural changes that are mechanistic and psychologizing, and that are ensured social success even more broadly because they support the idea [...] that the solutions to the problem [...] are first and foremost in the judgement calls made by individuals and

household, rendering unnecessary those solutions that would be more structural and systematic" (p. 16-17). This is a powerful sociological factor in these "public private problems" that have succeeded in no longer being thought of as public, nor even as problematic. Through the example of indoor air pollution, we can see that media coverage can constitute a public policy relay that is even more powerful for the fact that it relies on unscheduled orchestration of *habitus* and can thus legitimately be held up by journalists as an autonomous product of their work.

Let us bear in mind that this contribution suggests an analysis of how the media became interested in the question of "indoor air pollution" in order to shed light on the mechanisms at work in the emergence and career of public/private problems. In the course of the past 20 years (1995-2015), this problem has discreetly - yet regularly - become part of journalistic news coverage. The results of scientific research and preventive messages designed to limit the scale of the problem have been relayed by the editorial teams of the print and broadcast media, at both national and local levels. Indoor air has thus become Muzak, a refrain chanted low and haphazardly, picked up in various sections (society, local pages, consumer pages, environment, home life, health, science) on different registers (communication, information, promotion, public action) by a range of public debate actors (generalist and/or specialist journalists, elected representatives, health professionals, construction professionals). Occasionally, a political journalist, a "committed" editorialist or researcher has been able to play an audacious tune, denouncing the potentially disastrous health or economic effects of the prolonged exposure of populations – children in particular - to legal doses of toxic products within their own homes. This remains exceptional, however. Indoor air remains confined to the extremely competitive periphery of public health "affairs". Although indoor air is a familiar air, it is meant to be hushed and discreet, and does not (yet) resound as a scandal. This confinement is a distinctive feature of the public career problem, precociously positioned by means of the mechanisms of public

information and communication under the scientific, administrative, political and normative supervision of the public authorities.

Two main lessons can be learnt. The first is paradoxical in form. Analysis of the emergence of media "scandals" generally relies on the "revelation" format, via investigative media in search of *scoops*, of a problematic situation which public opinion would have remained unaware of as a result of cover-up or manipulation by the public authorities, experts and/or private stakeholders (Marchetti 2009). The case of indoor air is an instance of fuss-free media storytelling, so to speak, in which a problematic issue that has all the ingredients necessary to transforming it into a scandal benefits from *a minima* media attention. The second lesson may be helpful in continuing analysis of this type of phenomenon. Indeed, media construction of the indoor air problem serves to illustrate, in France, the effects of a contradictory evolution in the contemporary production of information contributing to the emergence of a type of health communication journalism (Charron and De Bonville 1996) that is constructed as a public health mechanism in its own right (Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer 2010). Media sociology research thus converges to emphasise, first, the beefing up of communications departments in many public, private and voluntary sector bodies - which tend, as a result, to acquire an unprecedented degree of autonomy in the public definition of many social problems (Aldrin et al. 2013) and, second, the fragilization of journalists' professional autonomy, in a context of economic "crisis" and the transformation of hierarchies of legitimacy within the journalistic field. This serves to benefit more commercial approaches and diminish job security in information-related fields (Frisque and Saitta 2011). In this way, perhaps, a pathway opens up that will improve our understanding of the role played by the media space in translating environmental questions into "public policy" and "economic" ones.

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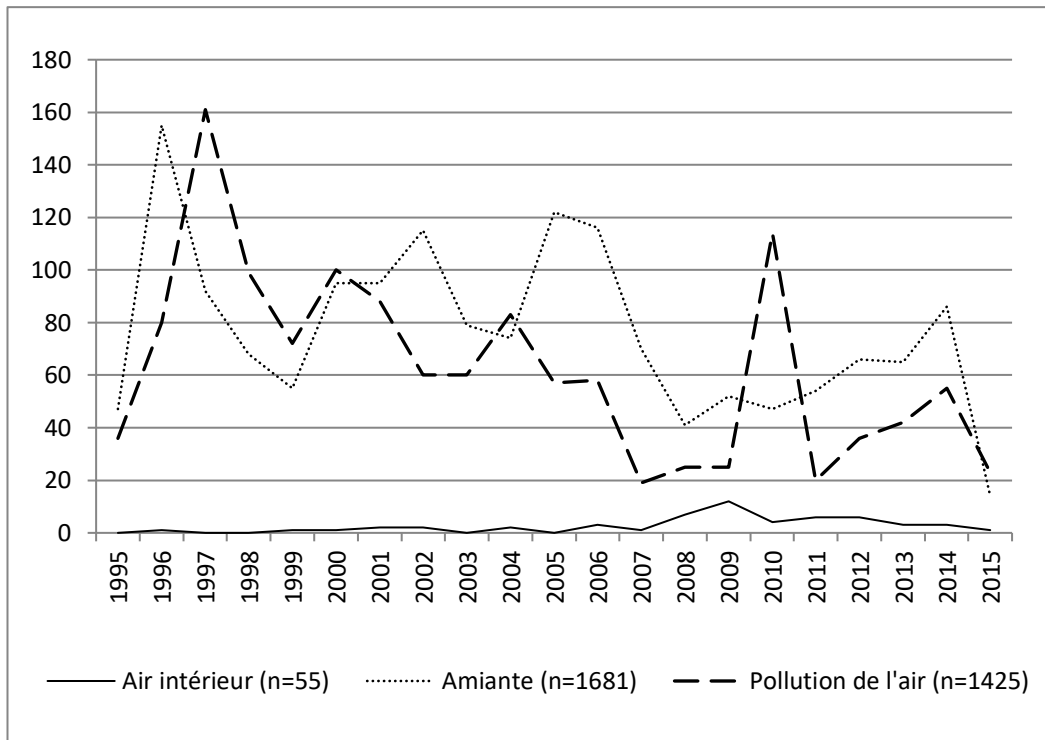


Table 1. Articles containing the keywords <asbestos>, <air pollution> and <indoor air> (*Le Monde*, 1995-2015)

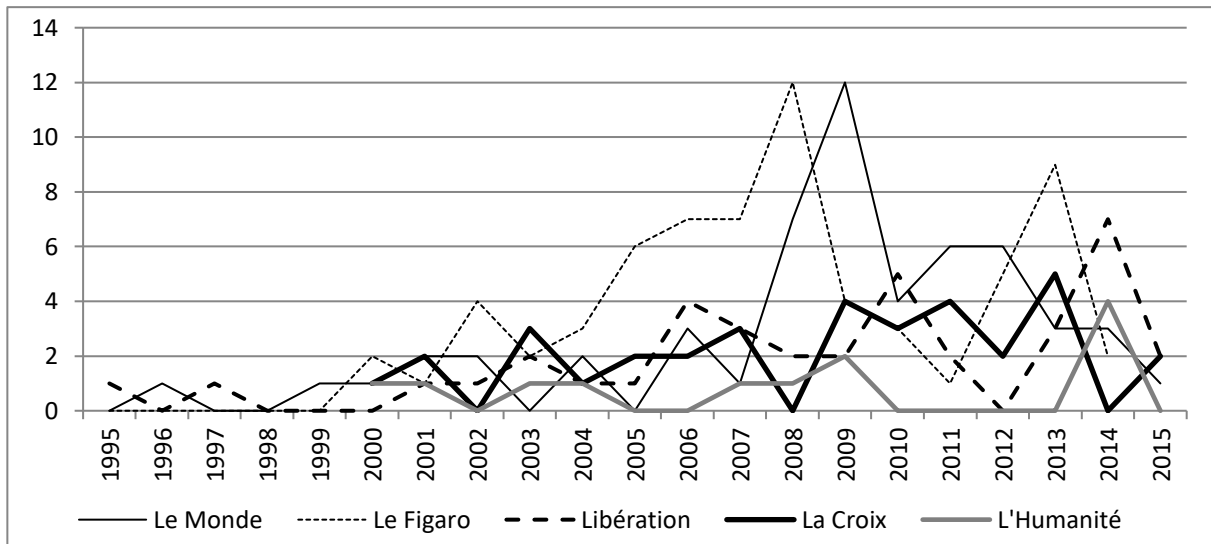


Table 2. Articles containing the keywords <indoor air> in the French national daily press (1995-2015)