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Fuelling the controversy on Uber's arrival: A comparative media analysis of Paris and Montreal

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Abstract

In the last decade, ride-hailing services and especially Uber – the most famous of them – have created a stir in urban mobility and its governance. Much has been written in the media, but not much of this media coverage has been analysed in the academic literature. The purpose of this paper is to understand the representations tied to Uber's arrival and how public opinion has been shaped. To do this, we analysed the media discourses generated by Uber's arrival in two cities: Paris and Montreal. We explored the role of media coverage in fuelling controversy on Uber and in influencing policy debate. The material consisted of 354 articles published in local newspapers between 2014 and 2016. We found extensive media coverage of street protests. The scale of the coverage reflected the intensity of the protests, which were more frequent and violent in Paris than in Montreal. The media functioned as an echo chamber for the taxi industry and also for Uber. Public opinion about Uber as shaped by the media was ambivalent. The media dramatised the controversy, pressuring policymakers to take a position. Policy responses have shown more flexibility towards ride-hailing in Quebec than in France.

Keywords

Ride-hailing; Uber; City comparison; Media Analysis; Public opinion

Highlights

- The media focused on taxi strikes, more frequent and violent in Paris than in Montreal
- The media functioned as an echo chamber for the taxi industry but also for Uber
- Public opinion about Uber as shaped by the media was ambivalent
- The scale of media coverage influenced the political agenda
- Uber was viewed as an illegal service to be banned in Paris, to be legalised in Montreal

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1. Introduction

The development of digital mobility platforms has received significant media attention in many cities across the world, with ride-hailing platforms – which connect unlicensed drivers with passengers via smartphone applications – attracting the lion's share. The best-known of these ride-hailing platforms is Uber, founded in San Francisco in 2009. According to its website, a decade later the company is operating in more than 800 cities across the world.

The academic literature on the use and impacts of Uber's service is extensive, showing both the positive and negative aspects of ride-hailing. Uber's efficient and relatively cheap service is popular with users (Dudley et al., 2017). More than just a 'better taxi' (Rayle et al., 2016), it is a competitor to both taxis and public transport, but also complements public transport, especially for first- and last-mile connectivity (Shaheen and Chan, 2016). It is often used by young adults (Alemi et al., 2018), affecting private car ownership and the incidence of drunk-driving (Young and Faber, 2019). It may also enhance consumer welfare and reduce environmental damage (Rogers, 2017). In most cities, its modal share is small but may have an impact on traffic (Jin et al., 2018).

In the majority of cities where it is present, Uber began operations in a grey zone, which disrupted the local mobility system (Mohamed et al., 2019) and posed new regulatory challenges for local and national governments (Cetin and Deakin, 2017; Thelen, 2018). Uber recruited unlicensed drivers who were not bound by taxi regulations and gained market share within cities (Rogers, 2017). The taxi industry reacted vehemently to this change, with taxi drivers going on strike in many cities. At the same time, they were themselves forced to adopt new technologies and to develop e-hailing services in order to raise their quality of service and become more competitive (Cetin and Deakin, 2017; Shaheen and Chan, 2016). Uber was a significant creator of jobs. However, it often made unilateral changes to the terms and conditions of its drivers (Rogers, 2017), affecting their incomes, which resulted in strikes and lawsuits by drivers. It also had a negative impact on the earnings of taxi drivers (Berger et al., 2018).

Because it disrupted the incumbent taxi industry and contravened legislation in offering new mobility services, Uber sparked significant public opinion reactions. Defined as the collective view of a society (Blumer, 1948), public opinion plays a role in influencing societal agendas. It is formed through discourses that are collectively constructed, notably by the media (Hajer, 1997). Such collective speech is based on repetition, a cumulative process characteristic of the media (Bhabha,

1994). The latter play a key role in influencing social representations by reflecting and reinforcing community attitudes (Rissel et al., 2010) and reporting opinions (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007; Ryley and Gjersoe, 2006). Media discourse thus influences the political agenda (McCombs et Shaw, 1972). It has an impact on the policymaking process, while policymakers in turn try to influence media discourse. Analysing this discourse is therefore a way to investigate the rationales of different stakeholders or interest groups (Grabkowska, 2018) and to understand the influence of the media on the perceived salience of key political issues (Protesse et al., 2016). Media discourse analysis has been used in many disciplinary fields, including those relating to urban and transport issues. Examples include an analysis of the American press to assess public opinion on climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007) and of the role of the British press in steering the debate on the introduction of urban tolls (Ryley and Gjersoe, 2006; Vigar et al., 2011). Other authors have drawn on media content to compare representations and public opinion on transport policy in different urban contexts (Rissel et al., 2010). Up to now, research on the media's role in fuelling debate on Uber has been limited. Current research mainly focuses on perceptions of Uber conveyed through social media (Laurell and Strandström, 2016; Baj-Rogowska, 2017). Laurell and Strandström (2016) analysed a dataset of 6,500 items of user-generated content (blogs, forums, Facebook, Twitter), showing that Uber was perceived more in terms of institutional disruption than technological innovation.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the literature on the impact of ride-hailing services on the urban mobility system by understanding the representations associated with Uber's arrival and how public opinion has been shaped. We compare the cases of Paris, France, and Montreal, Canada, through an analysis of local media discourse. Both cities experienced big taxi strikes and major political controversy following Uber's arrival. The aim of this research is to determine the role the media play in influencing policy responses. In order to achieve this aim, we conducted a cross-analysis of local media discourse to identify similarities and differences in representations of Uber by local newspapers. We selected local newspaper articles written in French to compare the tone, the terms and the way in which the content was exposed. To date, most of the existing literature on ride-hailing has focused on events in the United States (Jin et al., 2018), and to a lesser extent in Northern Europe (Dudley et al., 2017; Thelen, 2018). Our study introduces an international perspective, as it brings in new data from two French-speaking cities, one in Europe and another in North America.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the case studies, data collection, and methodology. Section 3 presents the main findings from the media discourse analysis. Section 4 institutes a discussion on the role of the media in fuelling the controversy, followed by a conclusion on policy orientations.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Case studies

Paris and Montreal share a similar background of economic development but present different mobility systems. Paris is a large high-density European capital. Public transport and walking are the main transport modes. Montreal is a smaller lower-density North-American city, which remains more car-dependent than Paris. At the metropolitan level, the modal share of public transport in Montreal is similar to that of Paris (24% against 26%), which is high by North-American standards. The private car is the main transport mode in Montreal. The average household owns one car and 60% of day-to-day trips are made by car, compared with 18% in Paris. Table 1 presents main figures on daily mobility.

| | Paris | Montreal |
|------------------------------------|-------|----------|
| Population (thousands inh.) | 6,578 | 1,887 |
| Area (km ²) | 762 | 483 |
| Population density (inh./sq.km) | 8,633 | 3,907 |
| Car ownership rate (car/household) | 0.75 | 1.00 |
| Private car modal share | 25% | 60% |
| Public transport modal share | 26% | 24% |
| Walking and cycling modal shares | 49% | 16% |

Table 1 – Transport data for Paris and its inner suburbs and for the Island of Montreal (Sources: Paris Enquête Globale Transport 2010; OD Montreal 2013 - production: authors, 2019).

Paris and Montreal have both a regulated taxi industry. The industry has been regulated since the 1930s (Darbéra, 2009; Davis, 1998). It is subject to entry restrictions. The number of taxi licences is fixed. Taxis operate across a delimited geographical area within which the same fare rates apply. As Figure 1 shows, the jurisdiction of Paris taxis covers the city of Paris plus a large part of its inner suburbs. In Montreal, the local taxi jurisdiction equals to the Island of Montreal formed by the city of Montreal plus 16 municipalities.

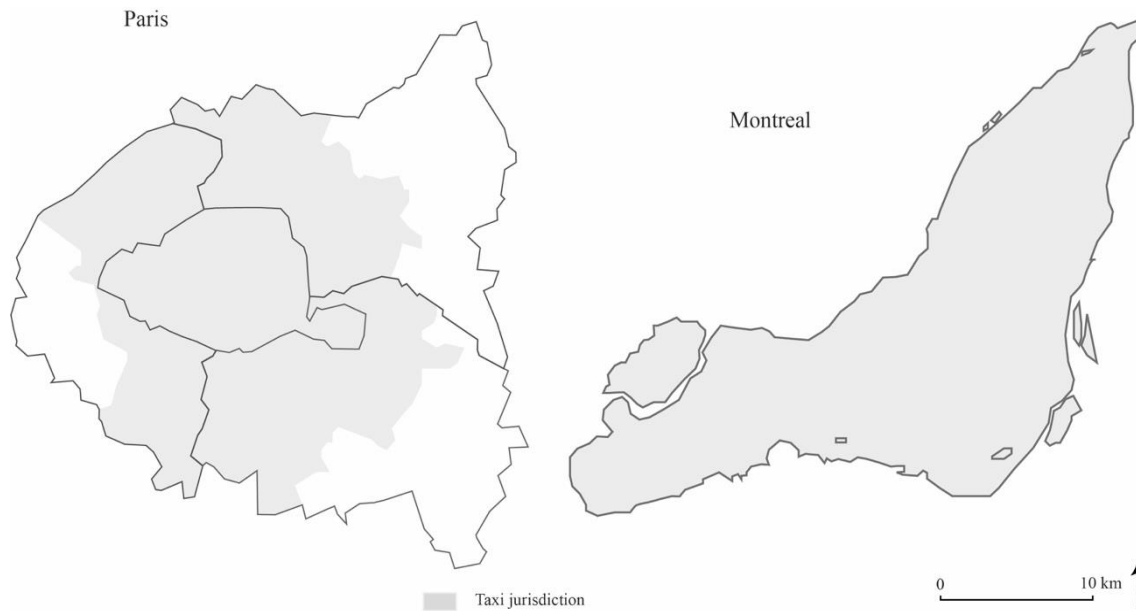


Figure 1 – Taxi jurisdiction in the agglomerations of Paris and Montreal (production: authors, 2019)

Taxis serve two distinct markets: the street hail and cab rank market, mostly at airports and railway stations, and the dispatch market. Based on the Montreal Taxi Bureau statistics, there are 5.49 taxi drivers per 1,000 inhabitants. In the agglomeration of Paris, the taxi supply is much lower, with 2.54 taxi drivers per 1,000 inhabitants. It has been outpaced by the development of private-hire vehicle (PHV) services in the dispatch market, called in French *Voitures de Transport avec Chauffeur* (VTC). Since the liberalisation of the PHV sector in 2009, professional drivers have been able to make a living similarly to taxi drivers but with easier entry requirements and without having to purchase a taxi permit. The PHV supply now outnumbers the taxi supply with 2,78 PHV drivers per 1,000 inhabitants (Omnil, 2019).

Uber first launched its high-end service in France. In December 2011, its UberX service entered the PHV market and contracted with licensed drivers. Then followed its low-budget ride-hailing service in February 2014. Named UberPOP, its ride-hailing service connected passengers with unlicensed drivers that used their own cars. This low-budget option immediately provoked opposition from the incumbent taxi and transport companies. The situation was different in Montreal, where the PHV sector did not exist. Uber directly entered the Montreal market in October 2014, with its low-budget ride-hailing option that relied on unlicensed drivers to operate. As Table 2 shows, two options of Uber services coexisted in Paris between 2014 and 2016 whereas only one option was present in Montreal.

| | Paris | Montreal |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Ride-hailing - unlicensed drivers | February 2014 to July 2015 | Since October 2014 |
| Private-Hire Vehicle | Since December 2011 | - |

Table 2 – Different options of Uber services in Paris and Montreal (production: authors, 2019)

2.2 Data collection

We selected the main local newspapers for data collection. We expected the news agendas of local media to be different from those of the national press (Vigar et al., 2011). At the same time, we expected to capture both local dynamics and national-level debates. With respectively 2.4 million and 0.4 million readers a day, *Le Parisien* and *Le Journal de Montreal* were the main newspapers of the selected cities. Both newspapers covered news and local news and adopted no specific political stance. Both were written in French, making discourse comparisons possible without the need for translation, although some authors (Bacqué, 2005) have pointed out that the terms for certain objects or phenomena could be different in Quebec and France. While bearing this difficulty in mind, we took the view that there is a technical French vocabulary relating to digital platforms and taxi sector which is the same on both sides of the Atlantic. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, the large majority of the Montreal population (86%) knows the French language. Only 14% of the Montreal population has no skills in French. They mainly live in the West part of the Island and do not have access to the same media coverage as the francophone communities have. Thus, the selection of a French newspaper presents a limitation as it doesn't cover the whole population of Montreal. Some differences in terms of narratives may then exist between French and English newspaper articles, reflecting the way French-speaking and English-speaking journalists do their work in Canada (Choquette, 2011) and view the subject. For this research, *Le Journal de Montreal* remains the best choice to understand the role of the media in Montreal as it covers the largest part of the population.

The Europresse electronic news archive was searched for all articles that mentioned Uber in Paris or in Montreal in the printed and digital editions of both newspapers. The following search string was applied: 'Uber AND Paris' and 'Uber AND Montreal'. The search was performed for the period beginning 1 December 2011 in Paris and 1 October 2014 in Montreal, which corresponded to Uber's arrival in each city, and ending 31 December 2016, when we assumed that the situation had become normalised. Only three papers emerged from the search between December 2011 and February 2014 when Uber launched its ride-hailing option in Paris. So, we decided to start collecting French articles from February 2014. This change was consistent with the Canadian material. In both cities, it was the launch of the ride-hailing service using unlicensed drivers that triggered the controversy.

All articles were manually screened. Irrelevant articles were removed from the dataset. Articles were considered irrelevant if they were duplicates, if Uber was not the main subject, if they only focused on Uber's business model in general, or if they mentioned Uber's arrival in cities other than Paris or Montreal. After the screening, the material consisted of 167 articles published in *Le Parisien* (LP) newspaper for the period 1 February 2014 to 31 December 2016 and 187 articles published in *Le Journal de Montreal* (JDM) newspaper for the period 1 October 2014 to

31 December 2016. The Paris corpus was smaller than the Montreal corpus, which may perhaps be explained by more intense media coverage dedicated to the terrorist attacks of January and November 2015 in Paris.

2.3 Methodology

We applied a media analysis framework to Uber’s arrival in order to investigate media discourses on Uber and on related policymaking. We conducted a two-stage content analysis on news archive: a quantitative manifest content analysis (A), and a qualitative latent content analysis (B) (Vigar et al., 2011). Figure 2 presents it.

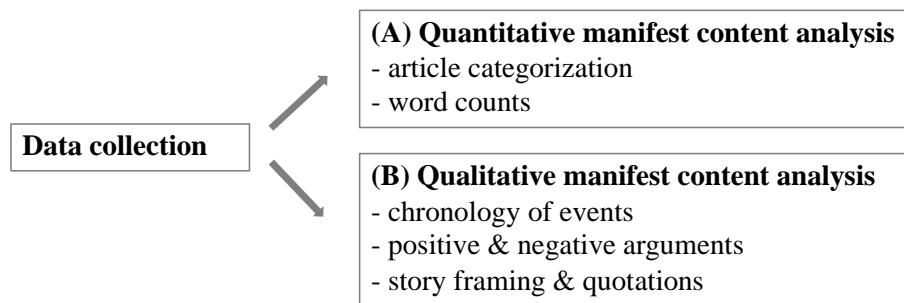


Figure 2 – Methodology for data analysis (production: authors, 2019)

(A) We categorized the dataset according to (1) general data: title, publication date, journalist’s name, newspaper section (news and local news, editorials and opinion pieces, general information on ride-hailing services); (2) context of publication (strike, new law, commercial release, etc.); (3) people quoted in the articles; (4) content relating to changes in mobility behaviour, digital transformation in mobility and competition with other modes of transport, especially with the taxi industry; (5) other potentially relevant data such as comparison with other areas, quality of service, specific words used by the journalist or in quotations. Then, we counted relevant words to the strike and protest context (“Protest – Demonstration”, “Strike – Strikers”, “Violent – Violence”, “Unfair”, “Illegal”). We summarized their frequency into a *Frequency Indicator* that gives the ratio between the occurrence of the relevant words and the number of articles in the corpus. Statistical tests were conducted to measure the significance of the relationship (Chi-square test).

(B) In parallel, we conducted a qualitative latent content analysis. First, we set the chronology of events that occurred during the studied period and performed a breakdown of positive and negative arguments. Then, we identified significant quotations from the different stakeholders (Grabkowska, 2018), and determined how they influenced policy responses.

The media analysis framework was developed for both Paris and Montreal. The comparison among cities (Robinson, 2011) allows to analyse the proximity or differences of local representations by inducing new explanatory hypotheses and by highlighting similarities and dissimilarities (Hajer, 1997).

3. Results

3.1 The newsworthiness of Uber

We classified the dataset into newspaper sections. A first result confirmed Uber’s arrival as a hot topic. As Table 3 shows, respectively 67% of the articles of the *Le Parisien* sample and 76% of the *Journal de Montreal* sample belonged to the news or local news section. In both contexts, the topic was newsworthy and subject to discussions: more or less a quarter of the dataset was made of editorials and opinion pieces.

| | <i>Le Parisien</i> | | <i>Le Journal de Montreal</i> | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|----------|-------------------------------|----------|
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| (1) News / Local news | 111 | 67% | 125 | 76% |
| (2) Editorials / Opinion pieces | 48 | 28% | 53 | 23% |
| (3) General information on services | 8 | 5% | 9 | 1% |
| Total | 167 | 100% | 187 | 100% |

Table 3 – Newspaper sections (production: authors, 2019, from the corpus)

3.2 The media coverage followed taxi strikes

In both contexts, a variation in the media coverage was observed. Spikes in media coverage mostly followed taxi strikes. Figure 3 shows the frequency of articles written on Uber each month in *Le Parisien* and the *Journal de Montreal* during the 2014-2016 study period.

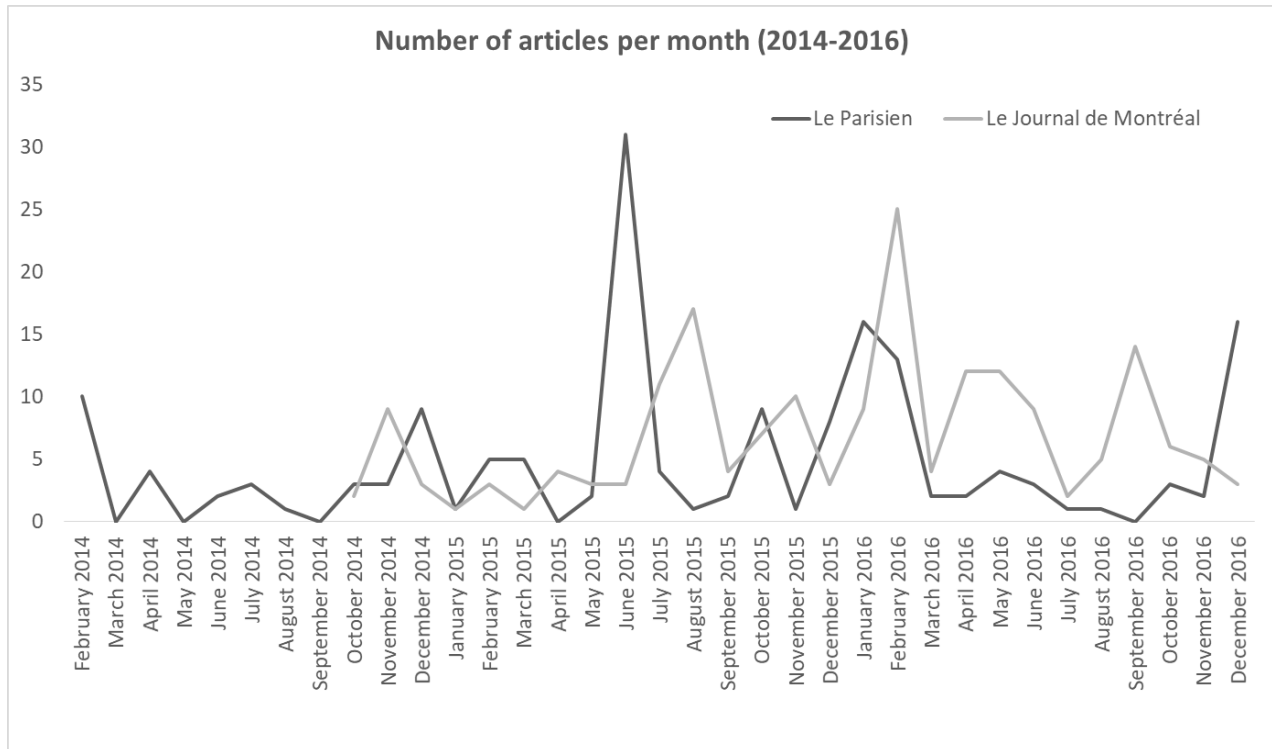


Figure 3 - Frequency of articles on Uber published each month in Le Parisien and the Journal de Montreal (production: authors, 2019, from the corpus)

In Paris, heavy media coverage was clearly related to demonstrations by taxi drivers and then by PHV drivers after 2015. Three major waves of strikes were observed over the period.

In February 2014, Uber launched its ride-hailing service. Taxi drivers went on strike several times to denounce unfair competition until Uber suspended its ride-hailing service in July 2015. The heaviest media coverage was in June 2015, with more than 30 articles devoted to the subject.

After the banning of its ride-hailing service in September 2015, drivers began to acquire LOTI licences, initially created to provide service in rural areas and for which the requirements were less stringent than for standard PHV licences. In January 2016, taxi drivers again went on strike to protest against the illegal use of LOTI licences. PHV drivers followed them with their own strike against LOTI drivers in February 2016.

A final wave of strikes was specifically organized by PHV drivers in protest against Uber's prices. They first came out on strike in October 2015 when Uber unilaterally decided to cut prices by 20%, and then again in December 2016 when Uber increased its commission from 20% to 25%.

As presented on Figure 4, repeated actions against Uber's ride-hailing service and LOTI drivers were concentrated on two main topics: illegal transport and unfair competition. Labour conditions were the matter of the third wave of strikes.

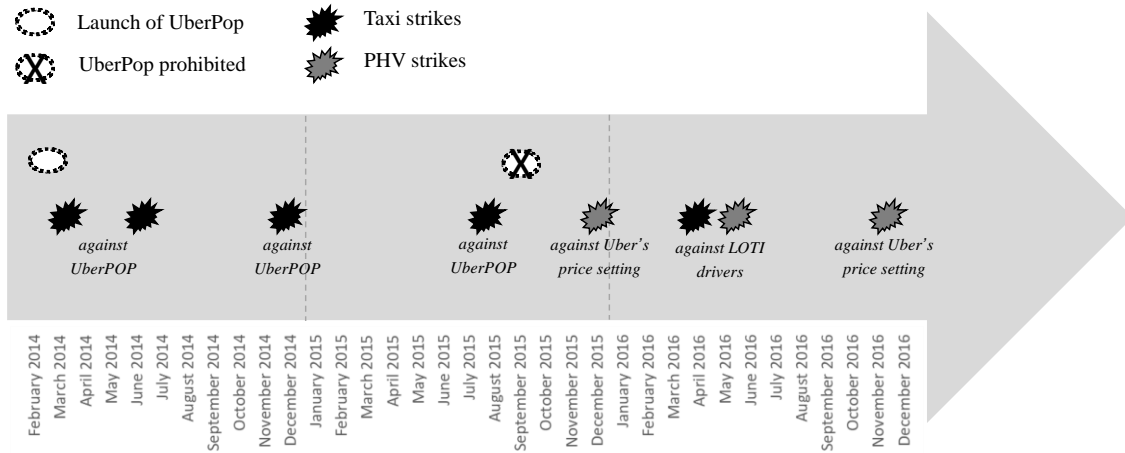


Figure 4 - Chronology of events relating to Uber in Paris (2014-2016) (production: authors, 2019)

In Montreal, a first spike in media coverage followed the launch of the Uber service in October 2014. After this, the frequency of articles on Uber coincided with the main strikes in the taxi industry as it did in Paris. The biggest spike in media coverage took place in February 2016, with 25 articles devoted to the demonstrations by taxi drivers after the Quebec government announced the legalisation of Uber. Over the next six months, the media chronicled the numerous developments in the bill to legalise Uber. In September 2016, the Quebec government reached an agreement with Uber, which triggered another taxi strike, corresponding to a further media spike. In Montreal, all demonstrations focused on the theme of illegal transport (Figure 5).

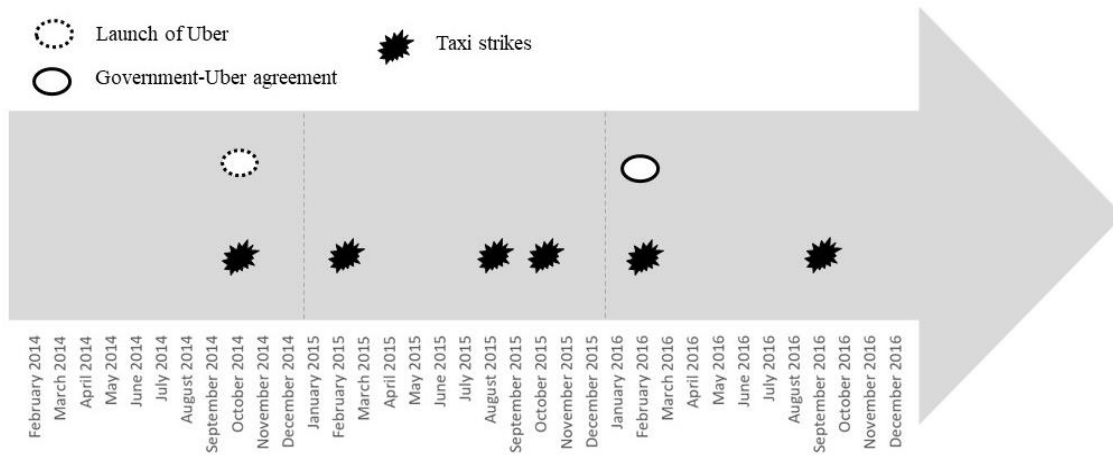


Figure 5 - Chronology of events relating to Uber in Montreal (2014-2016) (production: authors, 2019)

3.3 An ambivalent discourse

The content analysis revealed how the media discourse in Paris and Montreal covered and contributed to the controversy aroused by Uber. In both contexts, the press largely described the benefits of Uber in terms of feedback from satisfied users. The media compared the supposed

qualities of the Uber ride-hailing service with the characteristics of the taxi market. According to the media (Table 4), ride-hailing services were cheaper, more available, more reliable and easier to use than taxi services in both cities.

| Benefits | <i>Le Parisien</i> | <i>Journal de Montreal</i> |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Lower price | Uber ride-hailing option “is favoured by many users who like better this service. It is less expensive than traditional taxis” (LP, 20/6/2015) | Uber is “cheaper than taxis” (JDM, 27/8/2015) |
| Better availability and reliability | “Customers, busy city dwellers who no longer want to wait for their taxi or queue at a station, are in favour of the service” (LP, 13/6/2015) | Uber is “more reliable [...] than taxis” (JDM, 27/8/2015) |
| Easy booking and payment | “The application is very simple and your account is directly debited, no need for cash” (LP, 1/2/2015) | “No need to pay or present a credit card, everything is done automatically, via the application (that even a five-year-old could use as it is so simple)” (JDM, 6/7/2015) |

Table 4 - Benefits of Uber in Paris and Montreal according to local newspapers (production: authors, 2019, from the corpus)

The discourse on the media was ambivalent. Despite these benefits, Uber attracted criticism in both cities (Table 5). Journalists argued that Uber did not pay local charges, and was therefore able to offer lower prices. The competition was considered unfair. Uber was also accused of running an illegal transport service because its drivers were not licensed professionals.

| Criticisms | <i>Le Parisien</i> | <i>Journal de Montreal</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Unfair competition - Tax issue | “It’s unfair competition [...]. They do not pay any charges” (LP, 16/12/2014) | “The Californian company Uber does not play the game of competition on equal terms by not paying the real social charges (taxes) in Quebec, while its drivers agree to work for piece wages” (JDM, 28/12/2015) |
| Illegal transport | “This is an ‘illegal exercise of the taxi profession’, according to the Interior Ministry spokesman” (LP, 18/2/2015) | Uber “allows anyone to become a driver: a form of illegal transport, according to the City of Montreal” (JDM, 31/3/2015) |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Negative economic impacts on the taxi industry | The drivers “report a sharp decline in revenues, [and] question illegal practices on the grounds of PHV services” (LP, 23/1/2016) | “For the fourth year in a row, there will be no increase in taxi fares next year to combat competition from Uber” (JDM, 12/12/2015) |
| Labour conditions - Impoverishment of drivers | “Uber impoverishes its drivers” (LP, 21/12/2016) | “Uber is criticised over the remuneration of drivers” (JDM, 16/11/2016) |

Table 5 – Criticisms of Uber in Paris and Montreal according to local newspapers (production: authors, 2019, from the corpus)

In both countries, when relating critical stories, the media very often referred to the company by its place of origin, as ‘the American company’, ‘the Californian company’, or the ‘American giant’. By contrast, when local newspapers wrote about Uber’s local competitors, they emphasised their local origins and legality. In Montreal, the local company TeoTaxi was presented as a “legal alternative to Uber” (JDM, 20/02/2016).

3.4 A more intense coverage in the Paris media, as a reflection of more violent protests

The vocabulary used by journalists to cover Uber-related news varied in intensity. As Figure 6 shows, occurrences of the words “Protest – Demonstration” and “Strike” were more frequent in the Parisian material than in the Montreal material (the Chi-square test is significant with $p < 0.001$). One reason was that strikes were more frequent in Paris than in Montreal. Similarly, the term “Violent – Violence” was used more in the Paris corpus (112 occurrences, being 0,67 occurrence per article) than in the Montreal corpus (20 occurrences, being 0,11 occurrence per article). The media reported incidents during demonstrations in Paris and Montreal, such as egg and flour throwing. But acts of violence were only recorded in Paris, when “taxis stormed and burned two PHV cars” in June 2015 (LP, 26/6/2015) and “burned cars and tires” in January 2016 (LP, 23/1/2016).

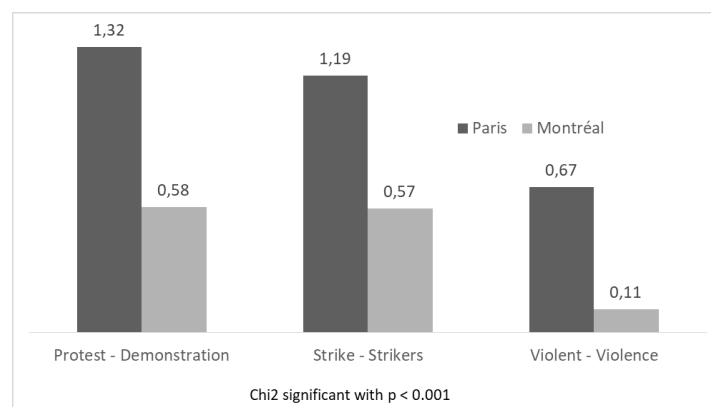


Figure 6 – Frequency Indicator based on words related to taxi strikes in Le Parisien and in the Journal de Montreal (production: authors, from the corpus)

In the Paris media, the debate oscillated between the illegality of the service and the issue of unfair competition. The debate in the Montreal media mainly focused on the illegality of the service. As presented in Figure 7, the adjective “Unfair” occurred 172 times in the Parisian material, being 1,03 occurrences per article, versus 16 times in the Montreal corpus, being 0,09 occurrence per article. The adjective “Illegal” was repeated 114 times (0,61 occurrences per article) in the Montreal corpus, versus 138 times in the Paris material (0,83 occurrences per article) (Chi2 test is significant with $p < 0.001$). The lexical differences reflect different representations of Uber and its integration into the local mobility system. In Paris, Uber ride-hailing service was represented as an illegal service that should be banned, and Uber PHV service as an unfair competitor that should be regulated. In Montreal, Uber ride-hailing service was characterised as an “illegal service” that would inevitably be legalised.

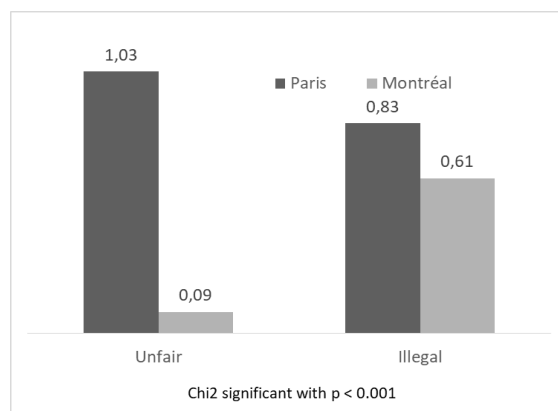


Figure 7 – Frequency Indicator based on words related to the political debate in Le Parisien and in the Journal de Montreal (production: authors, from the corpus)

3.5 Framing the political debate beyond municipal frontiers

The local newspapers did not quote many comments from municipal authorities, in particular in Paris. The framing of the problem quickly became a national issue. The situation was similar in Montreal: it quickly became a provincial issue. The main difference was that the Mayor of Montreal spoke more often to the media and claimed to side with Quebec government.

The media largely reported quotes from the French government that declared not being prone to negotiating with Uber. It wanted to ban ride-hailing from 2014. In October 2014, a bill passed to ban Uber ride-hailing service. But Uber continued to operate its ride-hailing option, leading to major taxi strikes in June 2015. As the conflict escalated, members of the government intervened to reiterate the illegality of the ride-hailing service. Ultimately, President of the French Republic called in the media “for the dissolution of the service, while condemning the ‘unacceptable violence’ observed during taxi demonstrations” (LP, 26/6/2015). The media agenda and the political agenda converged. Faced with pressure from the street and from the French government, Uber suspended its ride-hailing service in July 2015. The suspension was ratified by a ruling of the Constitutional Council in September 2015.

In Montreal, the question of Uber's status was referred to the Minister for Transport of the Province of Quebec as early as 2014. From the very first months following Uber's arrival on the scene, the liberal government declared to the media that it was "open to reviewing taxi regulations to regulate passenger transport companies such as Uber. However, these services remain 'illegal' in the meantime" (JDM, 17/12/2014). Early in 2016, the government considered "legalisation as inevitable" (JDM, 5/2/2016). At the same time, it continued to negotiate with Uber. In September 2016, negotiations led to an "agreement" between the Quebec government and Uber. A one-year pilot scheme based on the granting of taxi permits was designed and a training and theory test was implemented for drivers who gained the status of 'partner-driver'.

4. Discussion

4.1 Ambivalence in public opinion on Uber, overstated in the French-speaking context

The analysis of the media discourse revealed the existence of a public view of Uber that was consistent with the views expressed on social media (Laurell et al., 2016; Baj-Rogowska, 2017). Uber emerged as a topic in its own right. Public opinion was ambivalent, fluctuating between attraction and resistance. Reporting the pros and the cons of Uber, local newspapers reflected the positions of different stakeholders. From a user perspective, they underlined how Uber satisfies a demand and offers sectors of the population services that were previously unavailable. Uber's image in the media was associated with improvements to the passenger transport sector. The use of digital technologies for booking, payment and driver rating reinforced the image of modernity. At the same time, local newspapers also reported on declines in labour standards as the downside to this improvement. Competition from unlicensed drivers was perceived as unfair, as they used their own private cars and did not pay charges, as well as illegal in that they held no professional licence to carry passengers, with the result that their activity was condemned in the media as both unfair and illegal. In addition, it led to poorer working conditions for both taxi and Uber drivers. The company was criticised for keeping its fares too low and its commissions too high to provide its drivers with a decent income, while at the same time taxi drivers' earnings were also eroded (Berger et al., 2018). The content analysis showed that policy responses were mostly driven by public disapproval. The main criticisms identified in the press referred to the principal regulatory challenges raised by Uber's arrival: competition, licensing, taxation and labour issue (Thelen, 2018).

In both contexts, unfair competition and poor working conditions were associated with the negative image of America. Despite the strong influence of American culture, Anti-Americanism – mainly on social issues – is more prevalent in both France and Quebec than in other European countries. By contrast with the American system, individuals in France and Quebec enjoy both employment and health protection through social insurance systems (Dard and Lusebrink, 2008). This socially based anti-Americanism resonates directly with the criticisms of Uber on job security grounds. When local newspapers wrote about Uber's local competitors, however, they emphasised the local origins and rarely discussed the issue of working conditions.

4.2 The media functioned as an echo chamber for the taxi industry

In their coverage of taxi strikes, the media called for political intervention. The analysis showed that the media functioned as an echo chamber for the taxi industry and influenced the political agenda. Despite the fact that Uber services and the taxi strikes were localised, the press reported no clear strategy on ride-hailing services at local level. Cities were more often mentioned as places where demonstrations occurred than presented as pro-active stakeholders on the issue. The problem rapidly took on a national dimension, requiring government intervention. In France, the legal situation was particularly complex. Uber had rolled out its service “in the legal jungle of the passenger transport sector” (Conseil d’Etat, 2017). The French Assembly adopted two successive bills in 2014 and in 2016 to ban ride-hailing and to improve the organisation of the sector. Conditions of access to the private-hire vehicle (PHV) business were tightened. These new barriers to entry reinforced the rent-seeking position of the taxi industry (Conseil d’Etat, 2017). In Quebec, the legal situation was simpler. When Uber launched, the taxi was the only legal category for this kind of service. The public authorities appeared more conciliatory towards Uber than they were in France, and in 2016 agreed to a one-year pilot scheme which was later extended.

4.3 Uber used the media to legitimise its activity

While Uber was under attack in the media, it also used the media to promote its business. In Paris as in Montreal, Uber adopted a similar discourse, based on two main arguments. First, it claimed that it provided a ridesharing service and not a ride-hailing service. Second, it described itself as a technology business rather than a transport firm.

According to the law in France and Quebec (Article L.3132-1 of the Transport Code in France; Article 36 of the Transport Act in Quebec), a service was defined as ridesharing only if the drivers were undertaking trips on their own account and the costs were shared between drivers and passengers. Under the law, Uber was providing a ride-hailing service, since the trips were dictated by the passengers and the drivers were paid for providing the service. The terminological distinction was important, as it was chosen to influence policies. Uber therefore appeared before the French courts accused of circumventing the legislation. In California, a recent change in the law has reclassified drivers as employees (Dubal, 2019) if the work they perform is not under their control. Drivers remain self-employed if they own their own cars, set their own hours, and can work for competitors.

Besides claiming to provide a ridesharing rather than a ride-hailing service, Uber described itself as a technology business rather than a transport firm. Here again, the aim was to influence policies. However, the law caught up with the company. In December 2017, the European court of justice ruled that Uber had to comply with the transport regulations in force in the Member States in the same way as the taxi industry. The digital platform was legally classified as a service in the transport sector.

5. Conclusion

This paper draws on a cross-analysis of articles from local newspapers in Paris and Montreal that reported on Uber's arrival, which revealed extensive media coverage of the topic. The coverage helped to shape public opinion, which fluctuated between attraction and opposition. The main contribution of this article has been to demonstrate that political responses to Uber's arrival were influenced by the media coverage and varied in intensity according to the scale of street protests. Policy responses to ride-hailing were more flexible in the context of Quebec province than in France.

Despite differences in the contexts, the media discourse in both cities was similar. It was ambivalent, fuelling controversy over the competition between drivers. On the positive side, the media discourse emphasised the adjustment in public opinion to changes in urban mobility. It reported user satisfaction over the price and availability of the service, and the simplicity of booking and payment. On the negative side, the media discourse reflected resistance to attempts by international companies to circumvent local legislation. This discourse was dominated by the themes of unfair competition and illegal passenger transport. It was amplified by an anti-Americanism specific to these French-speaking contexts, which contrasted with the more lenient media attitude to local companies. For future research, it might be interesting to explore how representations of Uber's arrival were constructed in other countries, with respect to the role played by local competitors.

This study provided methodological perspectives on the interactions between representations generated by the media and the collective construction of public action. In both contexts, the arrival of Uber was marked by strikes and street protests. The local media gave extensive coverage to these events and dramatised the controversy, influencing the political agenda. The media coverage was more intense in Paris, where the protests were more frequent and more violent than in Montreal. Press reporting of these events put pressure on city and national governments to intervene. The media acted as a message bearer for the collective action of drivers and for political action. The media analysis showed that the issue involved actors from well outside the local framework, bypassing city governments to focus on national level public policy-making.

There were some limitations to the decision to undertake a cross-analysis of media discourse, relating to the cultural diversity of the study contexts. The use of a French newspaper in Montreal, which is a bilingual city, was a limitation in that it did not reflect the opinions of the population as a whole. Further analyses on the way local English-written newspapers covered the Uber arrival in Montreal should determine if there are differences in terms of narratives and if these differences may reflect a practice of French-speaking journalism in Quebec more similar to French journalism than to English-speaking journalism in Quebec. The choice of words in the different contexts also had an effect. The Quebec government said that it was working on "legalising" Uber, while the French government spoke of "regulating" Uber. This difference in terminology might reflect a

different standpoint, but this would need to be explored in the light of future developments in the situation.

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