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Article

# Digitalization, Standardization, and Diversification: Crime News Under Online-First Pressure in France and Germany

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## Abstract

Based on a qualitative survey (comprised of interviews with 42 journalists) in French and German mainstream media (print and TV), this article aims to compare the effect of the digitalization process on editorial choices and journalistic roles concerning crime news. Crime news appears to be particularly revealing of the new journalistic constraints: tabloidization and high-speed publishing, but without jeopardizing the ethical requirements of an ongoing legal investigation. Three main changes can be identified, namely regarding (a) the use of social media and its audience as a legitimate source and as a key factor of newsworthiness, (b) the importance granted to online metrics for planning media content and editorial meetings, and (c) the transition observed toward the “online-first model,” which encourages journalists to publish all content online first, updating it to the minute before any print publication. The article first underlines the importance of the digital conversion of newsrooms. Interviewees point out that this pressure has counterintuitive effects, giving them room for autonomy and journalistic creativity in crime news reporting. Finally, and more worryingly for them, journalists are concerned that their professional practices may be undermined, since the online-first model has affected the organization of newsrooms and the structure of the media market in both countries. This structural process is somehow stronger in France than in Germany, but this is more a matter of degree than of structural model differences.

## Keywords

audience metrics; crime news; division of work; journalism practices; online-first model; social networks

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

While numerous structural transformations in communication processes and practices have been identified by the international literature (such as a greater polarization of the media, an exacerbated race for audiences and scoops amplified on digital networks, the weight of anti-elitism and populism in public spaces, or the lack of interest in political subjects and the search for soft news; see Blumler, 2016; van Aelst et al., 2017), current research is still divided on the impact of these changes on the media, and especially the effect of digitalization.

A first set of transformations highlighted by the literature raises the question of the increased commercialization, i.e., tabloidization (Esser, 1999; Hubé, 2008), of the media. For some, the two continental European models (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), also known as the polarized pluralist model (including France) and the democratic corporatist one (including Germany), seem to have been converging toward the liberal model under the growing weight of commercial and financial imperatives over the last decade. For others, the Internet and digital platforms became the new economy, blurring the line between producers and consumers of information (Humphrecht

et al., 2022). A consensus seems to be emerging that traditional media content in these systems is relatively unaffected by their respective national evolution, moving more slowly than their digital contents (Benson et al., 2012). The digitalization of the traditional media seems to have encouraged a “sheep-like journalism,” characterized by the homogenization of all media news. The “circular circulation of information” due to pure commercial pressure, as analyzed by Bourdieu (1998, pp. 22–29), is now reinforced by permanent public control over content and its imitation process (Boczkowski, 2010).

But these generalizations about media systems sometimes tend to overshadow the concrete effects of these developments on the organizational aspect of journalistic work. Digitalization has impacted the work of journalists over the past two decades (Boczkowski, 2004). Newsworthiness and news selection are influenced by this process (Anderson, 2011; Christin, 2018; Grossi, 2020; Parasie & Dagiral, 2013) since social networks and websites help reporters and their bosses to know exactly what contents generate traffic. However, this process is not univocal. In some newsrooms, editors may be engaged in an alternative use of metrics, thus leading to disagreements about the roles and functions of each person within the editorial team (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Reporters can sometimes take advantage of these metrics to become less dependent on their hierarchy, thus turning metrics into something other than a “marketing trojan horse” (Amiel & Powers, 2019; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019). Moreover, Internet users and social networks may now even be considered by journalists as singular and legitimate sources of information that are highly valued in the context of increased competition between media looking to publish faster and faster, to be the best ranked online, and thus generate more traffic (Benson et al., 2012; Esperland & Sauder, 2007; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019; Ruffio, 2020). Public participation thus contributes to the agenda-setting and politicization of certain subjects in the newspaper to gain audience share (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022). In other words, this public participation is both a useful marketing tool and a professional tool to ensure the accountability of the media outlet, allowing it to make content corrections transparently (Chung & Yun Yoo, 2008; Joseph, 2011), even if this can lead to a strengthening of media distrust when these corrections are too frequent (Karlsson et al., 2017). One effect of this process is its direct contribution to the diversification of journalistic formats and genres to differentiate media outlets from their competitors in this highly competitive market.

Both the widespread use of online audience measurement devices (Christin, 2018) and commercial pressure may explain the increasing attention paid to crime news by the media as a whole. Crime news ranks among the topics most frequently covered online by all kinds of media, conversely to the news published offline (Berthaut, 2013; Esser, 1999; Jewkes, 2004; Sécaïl, 2012). Meanwhile, though crime news is profitable, it also cov-

ers highly sensitive issues that sometimes encourage editors to be more cautious and to show more professionalism in order not to polarize debates too much (Rowbotham et al., 2013; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). In Western Europe, rather than adopting a punitive stance driven by the liberal model (Simon, 2007), editors prefer to frame crime news as a society-wide issue rather than a pure crime-related issue (M’Sili, 2000). Concerning crime news, digital networks affect journalists’ work in the same way as a structural logic would do, by helping to redefine their professional practices (Patterson & Smith Fullerton, 2016; Rowbotham et al., 2013). As part of the study of these structural transformations in national media systems, crime news appears to be a relevant indicator of changes in journalism. Crime news is not confined to a particular journalist or department, which is why it is referred to in French as *faits divers* (news in brief). In this article, the expression “crime news” refers to all journalistic content published on crime-related topics, both court cases (corporal and non-corporal offences, financial crime, drug trafficking, etc.) and issues related to criminal matters and their judicial, political, and social treatment (judicial policy, counter-terrorism policy, feeling of safety, prison and punishment, etc.).

## 2. Research Questions

Looking at discussions on the recent transformations within media system models, it appears that the economic weakness of the media belonging to the polarized pluralist model (including France) makes them more prone to commercialization logics (Amiel & Powers, 2019; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019). In France for instance, crime and soft news occupy a relatively important historical place in the mainstream media (M’Sili, 2000; Sécaïl, 2012), although not to the same extent as in the North American press (Benson, 2013). One could therefore suggest that the French media system is at the interface of the liberal and corporatist-pluralist models in terms of the race for audiences, with the French mainstream media being more tabloid-oriented (Esser, 1999) through crime reporting (Hubé & Ruffio, in press) than their German counterparts (Hubé, 2008; Leidenberger, 2015). Tabloidization must be understood here as a general process of transformation of content and professional practices affecting all media outlets, placing a greater emphasis on scandals (especially those involving celebrities), crime and soft news, sports, and solution journalism for commercial purposes. In the meantime, the transition to an online-first model based on audience metrics (Lamot et al., 2021) implicitly raises questions about how the speed of publication has accelerated (Joseph, 2011). Characterized by the need for new developments (in the investigation, in the backstory of the protagonists), crime news is already, by its subject and format, conducive to quick journalistic work, driven by the search for a scoop for mainly commercial reasons

(Grundlingh, 2017; Young, 2016). The present contribution aims to investigate the impact of digital journalism on the practices and roles of mainstream journalism in the context of increasing information flows and competition. One may assume that the increasing prominence of online media and social networks has contributed to promoting crime reporting, which is said to appeal to the broadest audience. About international patterns (Amiel & Powers, 2019; Christin, 2018), French journalists may be expected to be more receptive to these changes. But in this regard, the comparative analysis of television channels in eleven European and North American countries carried out by Walgrave and Sadicaris (2009) shows how the competition between media outlets has an impact on the way television channels deal with crime news. More specifically, they observed that the French and German television models tended to be quite similar to each other, but different from the US one. This reluctance to assume a punitive stance (Hubé & Ruffio, in press; Simon, 2007) may, conversely, bring journalists from the two media systems closer together.

Our first research question consists in understanding whether digitalization is bringing the two journalistic models closer together, toward the liberal one (RQ1).

A second major question arises. Since digitalization adds to the pressure already felt by journalists, who are now urged to consider online audience data (Christin, 2018; Lamot et al., 2021), one might ask how journalists react to this growing pressure exerted by metrics: Do they play the game or do they try to resist it? Journalists are asked to work faster and to satisfy the widest possible audience at the same time. They tend to produce shorter and less analytical articles. As a result, it can be considered that they are encouraged by their managers/supervisors to publish exclusive information online first in order to remain competitive, even if this sometimes means infringing journalistic ethics. This is particularly relevant to crime news, which is considered more politically sensitive than other types (Cook, 1998). Content changes online are now made under audience control (Chung & Yun Yoo, 2008; Joseph, 2011; Karlsson et al., 2017). In the current context of widespread distrust of the media (Newman et al., 2021) and far-right populist success in both countries (AfD in Germany and FN/RN in France), one may thus expect journalists to proceed cautiously to content corrections in order not to validate any criticism that they are not working seriously. But the online-first strategy is not only a matter of attracting the audience. It can be explained by two other dimensions. On the one hand, it is a question of not being outpaced by competitors. This inclination to imitate rivals seems to be accentuated in the context of the acceleration of information (Boczkowski, 2010) and by the online ranking issues previously mentioned. The determination not to be accused of being a “secretive press” (Lilienthal & Neverla, 2017; Parasie, 2019) seems to influence the propensity among media outlets to imitate their competitors. On the other hand, under the supervision of

news editors convinced that audience analytics support rather than harm their journalism (Lamot & Paulussen, 2020), one could even suggest that the acceleration of information, accentuated by the digitalization of newsrooms, could lead to the disappearance of the notion of periodicity of traditional newspapers and media in favor of continuous publication modeled on the 24-hour media. Finally, due to tighter deadlines in the context of real-time reporting, reporters and columnists are also increasingly forced to take editorial initiatives because they do not have time to consult with their supervisors, thus blurring the line between their respective functions and statuses.

Thus, digitalization appears to contribute indirectly to the process of standardization of media content, by its effects on the representation of the public's expectations in newsrooms in the digital age (RQ2).

### 3. A Qualitative Methodology

To answer these questions, forty-two interviews were conducted with journalists and their supervisors (22 in France and 20 in Germany; see Table 1) between 7 February 2018 and 21 September 2018, using a semi-structured, theory-guided topic list with a fixed set of questions we asked each editor. Four main topics were discussed: the importance of crime and penal issues in the media and for their career; how journalists decide (not) to cover and frame this type of news; how news sources and other external stakeholders influence journalists' daily work; and how journalists view changes in criminality and judicial work. We chose to target journalists in charge of crime and justice issues in order to examine the influence of the digitalization process on the media treatment of these topics.

We retained the following six criteria in order to select the general news media to be covered: media sector (print or TV), type of media (newspapers, news-magazine, TV journal, or 24/7 news channel), frequency (daily, weekly, or non-stop), circulation territory (national or regional), editorial line (conservative, progressive, or neutral), legitimacy of the media within the field of journalism (quality press, tabloid, or popular press; see Table 2). On this point (and in particular for the audience and editorial line), we proceeded on the basis of the main selection criteria used in international comparative surveys (see, for example, de Vreese et al., 2017; Mellado, 2022; Picard, 2015). One of our objectives was to study a representative panel of the main media sectors in each country. The main difference between the two media systems at this stage is the presence of private 24/7 news channels in France and of a tabloid press (*Bild Zeitung*) in Germany that does not exist in France. Due to the definition of “crime news” retained, we decided to interview any forms of journalistic specialization in criminal matters. More specifically, we intended to meet legal columnists as much as reporters who published on police, justice, and prison

issues. Occasionally, depending on the internal organization of the editorial offices and departments studied, we met with some journalists dealing with topics such as “security” (asked about terrorist issues) and “gender/women” (asked about sexual violence issues) in order not to exclude these specific subjects from our sample.

The interviews took place face-to-face and were digitally recorded, with an average length of one hour per interview. Since the interviewees were all guaranteed anonymity, we decided, when quoting them in the following sections, to specify and qualify only the media to which they belong. Using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 11, all transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, in which we searched

for recurring themes within the data using both codes that were set a priori to look for particular aspects and new codes that emerged from the data. The interview excerpts cited were chosen for their exemplary nature, as they are more complete, detailed, or clear than other comparable excerpts, which were all previously identified and listed.

#### 4. Findings

In our sample, the importance of the digital conversion of newsrooms is without question. All have opted for an online-first audience strategy in order not to be outdone by their media competitors. However, the interviewees pointed out that this pressure has “counterintuitive

**Table 1.** French and German journalists interviewed (N = 42), according to their hierarchical rank and specialty.

		Media section		
		Police/Security	Justice/Court trials	Other
France	Editor/Reporter	8	5	
	Head of department	6		1
	Editor-in-chief/Managing editor	2		
	Total	16	5	1
Germany	Editor/Reporter	7	3	3
	Head of department	2		
	Editor-in-chief/Managing editor		1	4
	Total	9	4	7
Total		25	9	8

**Table 2.** Type of media selected in both countries, according to the six criteria used for the comparison.

		France	Germany
Media sector	Print	7	9
	Private TV	2	2
	Public TV	2	3
Type of media	Newspaper	5	6
	Newsmagazine	2	3
	TV Journal	3	5
	24/7 News channel	1	—
Periodicity	Daily	8	9
	Weekly	2	5
	Non-stop	1	—
Circulation territory	National	8	11
	Regional	3	3
Editorial line	Liberal	3	4
	Conservative	4	5
	Neutral	4	5
Type of audience	Quality	6	9
	Popular	5	3
	Tabloid	—	2

effects,” since in some ways it leaves them room for autonomy and journalistic creativity in their crime news reporting, which appears to be contrary to the very principle of pressure and constraint. Finally, and more worryingly for them, journalists are concerned that their professional practices may be undermined.

#### 4.1. *Generating Traffic With Crime News*

The journalists interviewed emphasize the standardization of online news content due to the quest for the widest possible audience. In some newsrooms, giant screens have been put up on every wall so journalists cannot be unaware of topics that are currently getting a lot of attention in digital spaces. To keep them aware of their online audience’s interest in published contents, comments and messages from Internet users are also now taken into consideration, and, in some cases, must be answered, adding to the journalists’ workload. These digital reviews can even directly influence what the media will choose to publish in the future, in order to respond to their readers’ particular demands:

You shouldn’t make a blind offer, like “I’m the journalist, and that’s how it’s going to be, and I won’t take people’s opinions into account.” It turns out that, with social networks, people give us much more feedback than before. (regional public TV station, France)

Moreover, all media began to cover these topics more frequently, including those that tended to look down on crime news, as the latter was thought to be “popular” and “vulgar.” As we noted in our quantitative content analysis, this process started in France and Germany two decades ago (Hubé, 2008; Hubé & Ruffio, in press). Digitalization has thus encouraged journalists to feed a story, sometimes even artificially (i.e., in the absence of new items), to keep an audience captive for several days or weeks (or even more), depending on the possible twists and turns of the case. The objective is to write at least one line about the story that other media are talking about. “I want this information to be available under the brand name [our newspaper],” confessed a French local journalist.

However, this process does not affect all the media in the same way. For the regional press, the online and offline audiences seem to be merged, registered as a continuum during the day, while for the national or upmarket media, the two audiences seem to be clearly distinct for the journalists interviewed. Unlike their national competitors, local media (both print and TV) do not have “a reputation to uphold,” said a regional newspaper journalist from France, at least not to the same extent. Most of the local journalists interviewed were more likely than their colleagues from national media to say that the professional culture has changed; that, for instance, it is now considered possible to publish unverified information in order to be *the* first (answering RQ2):

And the first thing I have in mind is the online version and not the paper version for the next day. First comes online, everything has to go out as quickly as possible and then be updated....There is not just one text that stays there, it is constantly updated. And then comes the print version. (regional newspaper journalist, Germany)

Conversely, national and upmarket media appear to dissociate their online and offline audiences: Online content aims to attract a large audience for economic purposes, while offline (print/TV) articles are meant to reflect the “seriousness” and the “reliability” of the media. As this German journalist puts it: “We have...two different audiences: online and print.” To sum up, crime news tends to be published online where one piece of information replaces another, contributing to “[forgetting] today’s news,” something which is said to be particularly appreciated in the event of a journalistic error. This increased attention paid to crime news can even lead to the partial reorganization of certain editorial offices, as happened with an upmarket newspaper’s society department, which is now designed to promote crime reporting, as explained by one of the newspaper editors:

The editorial management said that it would be great to find an assistant who was more interested in “more general” news, in other words, in crime news. [Journalist] had been reporting on these topics for quite a few years [he covered crime news, trials, and terrorism for eight years]....So we thought it would be great to have two profiles, a kind of two-headed head department: one interested in social issues, me, and the other one in [hesitation] “general information,” let’s say....There is indeed a desire to treat more crime news, in particular on the Internet, because it is successful....Crime news is very popular online. (national newspaper journalist, France)

In the current context of general distrust of the media, according to some readers and Internet users, traditional media do not publish everything, but instead conceal certain information for ideological and political purposes. Journalists anticipate this criticism by copying their competitors in order not to be associated with the list of media which are thought not to have relayed the information. For instance, a French regional newspaper journalist explained that readers now tend to seek answers directly from journalists—via online comments and messages—when they do not understand why the information relayed by different media on a particular event is sometimes inconsistent, or even contradictory:

We are questioned by our readers in online comments about why we didn’t talk about this or that. This often happens with important crime news, especially everything related to terrorism. They don’t understand, because they watch [a 24/7 TV channel]



which relays certain things, and we don't because we know that the information is not reliable at the moment. But as a result, our readers don't understand why we don't mention this topic. Their questions quickly turn into conspiracy theories.

Journalists tend to take into consideration the criticism about a "secretive" press all the more in that crime news captures a very large audience, and is thus likely to be interpreted politically, often in quite a controversial way. They anticipate any mistakes that might serve some conspiracy theory, as this journalist points out (answering RQ2). For this reason, they feel that they have to take even greater responsibility when covering crime news in a rush. Especially in Germany, the media are pressured by the new populist criticism of being a "lying press" (*Lügenpresse*), mostly coming from far-right movements (AfD, PEGIDA) and sometimes from the far left (Holt & Haller, 2017):

Certain circles are continuously bombarding us with online comments and e-mails, and it's this nasty term, "lying press," as if we were hiding something....But this enormous public pressure according to which we would keep silent about crimes committed by foreigners incites us to mention it more often now than we did in the past. And that is also a problem that the police press offices have. (regional newspaper journalist, Germany)

This was obvious in Germany during the gang rapes and assaults that occurred on the 2015 New Year's Eve in Cologne. The media decided to partially change their usual practices in the days after the event to satisfy particular demands on social media, and thus retain their audience:

It changed because the AfD sprang on it and because the police didn't speak to us....Because the AfD made it an issue we had to be careful: Here comes this criticism about the lying press....This meant that journalists, whether they are working for print or television media, were globally insulted and pilloried. (national newspaper editor, Germany)

But the media were criticized by the German Media Council (*Deutscher Presserat*) because they published the nationalities or religions of the defendants without hard facts (Haarhoff, 2020). "New Year's Eve in Cologne" had a lasting effect on various journalistic routines within editorial offices.

While the online-first process looks similar, there is one important difference between the two countries. In matters of crime news as well as in solution journalism, the economic vulnerability of the French media has forced reporters to take on these transformations in person (Amiel & Powers, 2019). On the contrary, in Germany, the lower economic pressure and, above all, the influ-

ence of the tabloid *Bild*, have led reporters to adopt a more distant approach. Everything is as if it is always the other media competitor who has behaved badly. But *Bild* is an agenda-setter. Typically, this is what this journalist says:

The *Bild* newspaper has a strong agenda-setting effect, not so much in the general population as amongst the media. If they make it big, you can't get past this thing at all. You can write it up differently...but to leave a topic out completely when they're really serious about it? That's difficult, yes! (national upmarket journalist, Germany)

#### 4.2. An Instrument for Journalistic Genre and Format Diversification

Unsurprisingly, our interviews show that this traditional division of journalistic work is evolving due to the increased digitalization of newsrooms. According to the journalists interviewed, the once-clear line separating digital and "editorial" (print and television) offices has been blurred over the past decade, despite the organizational (and symbolic) distinction being maintained between digital and print departments and specialties. In both countries, in newsrooms where the two departments still exist, reporters and columnists are now asked to check and supplement information identified online by digital journalists, or to produce joint publications. These increasingly frequent collaborations make it possible to save time during rush periods by bringing together the various individual resources these journalists have to offer (sources and address books; expertise in a specific subject; specific techniques and practices, such as computer graphics, data journalism, etc.). While these results are in line with our research questions and previous studies (Boczkowski, 2004; Christin, 2018), it could be argued that a new journalistic division seems to be emerging in most digitalized newsrooms, where print or television reporters and columnists tend to verify and investigate the news pre-selected by desk journalists in charge of digital monitoring. As a French court reporter working for a local newspaper said: "Our editorial management is now more focused on the Internet...[which implies] an increasingly significant contribution from journalists who usually work on the paper edition. [This implies] an increasingly significant collaboration between the print team and the digital team."

The paradox of this pressure to work together is that these more frequent interactions give digital and print/television journalists the opportunity to discover each other's respective department's standards and expectations. During these collaborations, digital journalists, most often young recruits freshly graduated from journalism schools, are thus trained by more experienced journalists in the "traditional" editorial rules and ethics governing the coverage of crime news. For their part, the more senior reporters are asked to adapt to

digital formats, forcing them to unlearn some of the fundamental journalistic standards acquired during their studies and careers (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019). While this process of mutual learning points to the standardization of content—since digital and print journalists share each other’s publication standards—it appears that all journalists are concerned about the risk of producing lower-quality information. For instance, and backed up by most of the journalists interviewed, a German reporter working for a national newspaper confessed: “We [print reporters] have nothing to do with the online publishers....They sometimes take over our stories....In order to generate better click rates, they also rephrase our texts. And then all of a sudden they are no longer correct.” In sum, crime reporters are permanently concerned with maintaining their independence when covering crime news (Ericson et al., 1989), but still feel the huge pressure to publish these best-selling stories as soon as possible.

Both in Germany and France—and in response to both our research questions—the main objective is to attract readers using digital tools to redirect them to the media’s own social networks and website. While some reporters are opposed to the editorial transformations resulting from the digitalization process, others emphasize the opportunities that it offers to propose and experiment with new journalistic formats by juggling with print space and airtime constraints. A news-magazine journalist reported that, on their media’s website, journalists “can publish whatever [they] want [like] very short papers of two thousand characters, and others of twenty thousand signs...which would never have fit into the magazine, because it doesn’t have twelve thousand pages.” This also offers the huge additional advantage of enabling up-to-the-minute correction following factual changes in a case. Journalists have adapted their work on a whole new platform to drive crime-related traffic into the newsroom. Amongst all the current innovative aspects offered by digitalization, journalists spontaneously cited live-tweeting as a new journalistic practice particularly suited to covering crime news in a rush, experimented with most notably since Dominique Strauss-Kahn’s arrest for sexual assault in 2011 (Pignard-Cheynel & Sebbah, 2015). In the event of crime news, live-tweeting does not only involve using social networks as sources (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Hernández-Fuentes & Monnier, 2020) or as a means to fact-check a story (Coddington et al., 2014). Live-tweeting helps journalists compensate for the absence or lack of images and testimonies, both of which are essential for television and print reports, more in France than in Germany. In other words, live-tweeting “allows [journalists] to be at the trial in real-time” (private TV journalist, France), while giving them the choice of publishing short, occasional tweets or posting long sequences of tweets (“threads”), thus changing their investigation methods:

Now I only have to reread my tweets to see the highlights of the hearing: a strong statement from the accused, or an impassioned plea from a lawyer....So I take fewer and fewer notes during trials, I’m on my phone more and more, tweeting about what is being said....Then our media publishes our tweets, [referring to] our live-tweets. (private TV journalist, France)

Nonetheless, it appears that the increasing use of Twitter to cover crime news has coincided with the gradual disappearance of court reports in the traditional media. As a result, the reporters we interviewed explained that they tend to use social networks and digital tools to promote their own individual added value and expertise, by doing what they call “pedagogical work” online. This specific use of Twitter allows them to re-specialize their publications by providing explanations deemed essential to a full understanding of the events and judgments reported, but also to depoliticize certain cases that have been politicized through media coverage. They tend to expand their role as a knowledge-broker to online platforms in order to reinforce some of the most basic journalistic standards that have been abandoned online (mainly for commercial reasons) and, at the same time, to attract audiences to the media outlet:

[Regarding two cases that received a lot of media and political attention in France in the 2010s] In these two cases I considered that the role of the reporter was really to put things into context and to go beyond or even against public opinion. I was shocked! I know the case, I know in what context Jacqueline Sauvage killed her husband. Yes, there was obvious domestic abuse, but we must not turn her into a saint, we must not make her a symbol....It is up to us to explain that if the court did not wish to grant her parole, it is because there are reasons in the law. There are legal arguments against it. And instead of saying things without being familiar with the case, you read the legal grounds. So I put that on my Twitter account, saying “read them, it’s explained, it’s six pages, it’s not long.” (private TV station journalist, France)

This observation appears to be particularly salient in relation to court reporters and journalists in charge of day-to-day police and justice stories. Due to their respective specialties, these reporters are highly accustomed to hearing the views of justice professionals on specific court cases, as well as on the judicial, political, or media treatment of crime. Journalists from other departments (politics, society, economy, or international, for example) who are occasionally asked to cover cases to help their overworked colleagues, therefore deal with these topics from a more descriptive and factual point of view than their colleagues, who are specialists and therefore capable of explaining:



I think that [non-specialist journalists] tend to pick a specific case and try to make it emblematic of something bigger, greater....But most of these reporters do not know the law or how the justice system works, so they do not really talk about cases in full knowledge of the facts....For instance, when the alleged rapist of an eleven-year-old girl is finally judged not for rape but sexual assault, and is finally not sentenced, one could think that the justice system does not protect children and thus does not work correctly. In fact, this means, above all, that the legal rules of the judicial process are not known. (national newspaper journalist, France)

#### 4.3. From Sheep-Like to Inaccurate Journalism

Our interviews confirmed what the existing literature has already pointed out: Publishing in real-time raises the question of the disappearance of the *periodicity* of publications, and consequently redefines the organization and routine of the newsroom. By shortening deadlines before publication, the digitalization process accentuates the overload already described by reporters in charge of crime news: "I think that [other] departments' reporters are under less pressure....They have schedules and know more or less what's going to happen in the next few months....When you cover crime news, anything can happen at any time" (private TV journalist, France). But more specifically, publishing in real-time also creates challenges in terms of editorial authority: Who is considered legitimate, within a newsroom or department, to decide whether or not to publish an article on the media website in the rush? An important difference emerges from our comparison. French journalists, who work under greater commercial constraints (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019), try to maintain control over the processing of their stories, whereas the better-kept hierarchical division of labor tends to prevent German journalists from doing so (answering RQ1). In a hurry, French journalists increasingly need to decide for their bosses because they often do not have enough time to ask them for a decision. This situation can lead to tensions between journalists and their bosses, since it indirectly calls into question their respective functions within the editorial team:

In the morning I'm often in charge of our website's news feed, so I may have to decide to relay certain news that hasn't been validated by my bosses. Most of the time, this is not a problem, but sometimes it can lead to disagreements. What is paradoxical is that our bosses can reproach us for having published something without having asked them, even though we had no choice because we were alone in the newsroom at the time. And if we hadn't published it, we could have been criticized for that too. (national newspaper journalist, France)

In contrast, German journalists seem to remain more distant from audience metrics, fully leaving the choice of publication to the editors and/or webmasters. German reporters thus appear to be more likely to be critical of this development, which they consider to be a threat to quality (answering RQ1). As a result, in both countries, and contrary to journalistic rules, the risk taken by the media outlet is to publish information that has not even been checked in order to be the first to relay it online. Commercial considerations thus prevail over professional principles and ethics, characterizing the shift from sheep-like to erroneous journalism:

Because there is an increasing number of online readers whose main priority is speed and not accuracy...this is where a lot of fake information can circulate. The main point is that it should be published quickly, first, and then investigated....The most important thing is to bring the topic to the audience. Then we make a few phone calls....That's exactly how it shouldn't be. (regional Newspaper journalist, Germany)

According to the reporters we interviewed, journalistic mistakes are sometimes even rationalized and monetized by certain journalists, who choose to publish new content to rectify the original errors to generate more clicks and traffic online.

## 5. Discussion

In line with previous studies, we find that digitalization enhances crime coverage in traditional media (print and TV), and crime appears to be the most popular (hence profitable) topic consulted online by Internet users. But perhaps more surprisingly (and answering RQ2), this trend may have less to do with digitalization per se than with competition between newsrooms, which has become sharpened by digitalization. This increasing attention paid to metrics reflects the management's desire to constantly remind journalists of the media's commercial objectives. In the context of accelerating online and offline information, editors, and more particularly crime reporters, say that they are under ever greater pressure to publish more stories, ever faster, leading to the gradual disappearance of regular deadlines in favor of 24/7 publication. As they have to be responsive in real-time, digital and print/TV teams have to collaborate more and more regularly to share their (re)sources in order to publish faster in line with their supervisors' expectations. Reporters tend to relay shorter, more descriptive articles, based on news already published by competing media, in order to profit from the buzz and traffic generated. This tendency to imitate their peers contributes to the standardization of news, which can be described as "sheep-like journalism," and can lead to inaccurate or even erroneous journalism when media choose to publish unverified, and therefore potentially

fake information. Journalists are thus concerned about the resulting criticism of their outlet's reputation.

Paradoxically, a second interesting finding is that the endorsement of this logic by crime reporters (especially French ones) seems to give them autonomy and legitimacy through this organizational evolution. It first appears that, paradoxically, both digital and print/TV journalists have gained in autonomy. They have to make editorial decisions on their own when they do not have enough time to ask their managers. While it could be argued that reporters now get to make (editorial) decisions in a rush and can thus publish content on their own with no prior approval from their supervisors. They are also now more than ever constantly reminded what topics are currently the most popular online thanks to metrics and live statistics. Encouraged to write less analytical articles online to please their digital audience, journalists can nonetheless experiment with new journalistic formats and genres (e.g., live-tweeting and "threads") on their own personal Twitter accounts. By distinguishing their own posts from those written in the name of their outlet ("my tweets are my responsibility"), journalists extend to themselves the dissociation already made by some traditional (especially national and upmarket) media between their digital editorial line (focused on crime news that generates the most traffic) and their print edition (supposed to reflect and guarantee the outlet's reputation and reliability).

Finally, concerning comparative media system theories (answering RQ1; see Hallin & Mancini, 2004), unexpectedly, the discrepancy between French and German models is not one of structure, but of degree. Audience pressure through digitalization is an analogous process in both countries. The systematic differentiation between digital and conventional (print and TV) editions shows that the symbolic distinction between various media in the field is at stake. While experimentations with format and topic as well as mistakes are allowed online, they are still not tolerated in conventional editions, which are associated with the outlet's reputation. Errors, guesswork, and experiments are not permitted in order to preserve their legitimacy. This distinction between conventional and digital publications is particularly significant for media that do not usually cover crime news. This observation is particularly true for upmarket newspapers and periodicals, which may prefer to publish crime stories online. It is also more systematically the case for German media seeking to distance themselves from the repulsive figure of the tabloid *Bild*.

In order to verify and extend this qualitative research, it would be worth comparing our results to quantitative analyses of media coverage of crime news over the longer term (Hubé & Ruffio, in press). This would measure and qualify more precisely how journalistic practices and standards have changed over time. Another approach would be to conduct ethnographic observations of journalists covering crime news to study their daily routines and to better understand how they select

and frame this specific news (or not), depending on constraints and demands. This qualitative survey would also make it possible to characterize the evolution of decision-making logics within editorial offices, as described in this article.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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