

French journalists have won back their gatekeeping function

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2015/11/24/french-journalists-won-their-gatekeeping-function-back-in-one-night/

2015-11-24

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On Friday night, I was made aware of an explosion going on at le Stade de France a little after 9.30 PM through a push notification. A quick look at Twitter made it clear that something alarming was going on. I logged on a 24-hours French news channel : the news anchor announced that coordinated attacks were on-going.

Following the attacks we thanked police and special forces, saluted hospital staff and praised teachers for their work and efforts, but there is one body of the population that we, the French people, failed to be grateful for : our journalists. Recounting this horrid moment is not an act of sensationalism, it is rather my way of introducing what a central role journalists have played on the night of the attacks and the days that followed.

Whether in Paris or abroad, many of us became aware of the attacks thanks to push notifications. In a way, these invasive messages have become the modern-day newsflash.

But unlike traditional newsflash they are not accompanied with the image or voice of a news anchor. It is more difficult for us as mobile news consumers, to imagine the newsroom from which these notifications come. We rarely make time to think of the people who are behind push notifications. We rarely make time to think of journalists at all. Except, of course, when it comes to criticizing them.

The January attacks led to severe criticism of French journalists and especially news channels. Different controversies led to a decision of the CSA (the French Ofcom) to sanction six television channels and seven radio channels. Over fifteen warnings and twenty-one formal notices were delivered : it was understood as a clear message that journalists had done their job badly.

Ten months later, we were shown that journalists and media outlets had learned their lesson. It would be simplistic however, to think that the previous CSA sanctions were the incentive for journalists to deliver more careful coverage and avoid mistakes. The gravity of the situation was probably the first incentive: the January attacks did not have the magnitude of the November ones. This time, journalists were called upon to report on multiple alarming situations that were unfolding.

In a [Medium article](#), Michaël Szadkowski, an editor-in-chief of the digital edition of Le Monde, who was attending a party in another newsroom when the first reports came in, recounts :

We must get to work . We must keep a cool head and try to only say what we know for sure and avoid disseminating false information. We must be responsible as a medium at such a time more than ever. The line has never been so blurred. In Libération, Le Monde, we all seek at the same time to hear from our friends, our relatives, or our families. We are our first audience.

On Friday, journalists were on the ground covering the events as they were unfolding in spite of the uncertainty of

their own safety or the safety of their relatives. If not, they were running around in their newsroom trying to verify and fact-check all kinds of information. All of this for one simple purpose : informing a (panicked) audience.

I did not live the terror in Paris, I lived it through social networks in London. At a time of complete panic, and when official sources are busy dealing with the situation, journalists are the one body we can count on to disseminate correct information :



“Ever since the Charlie Hebdo attacks, we have learned to fact-check and only disseminate information that we have verified with our own sources” , Samuel Laurent, head of the fact-checking division at journal Le Monde said in an an interview. In another interview, Laurent claimed that he and his team, nicknamed Les Décodeurs, had managed to bust over fifteen online hoax within the days following the attacks.

Verifying information does not stop at verifying the truthfulness of facts, it also entails the verification of content. Media outlets in France had the responsibility to broadcast images that were respectful of human dignity and not harmful to the public. And they did so, by refusing to publish a picture of the inside of the Bataclan (a picture that was bought and published by the Daily Mirror) and by carefully selecting user-generated videos from the streets of Paris. During the live coverage of the assault, iTELE's news anchor Bruce Toussaint announced to the public that the images that were broadcasted were not live images, because authorities on the ground had advised journalists to stop filming. He later confided in an interview that he believed he and his colleagues had done a dignified and careful job and that the coverage of Friday night had been a positive response to the constant “news channel bashing”.



Bruce Toussaint, iTELE's news anchorman announcing that the images of the assault will not be broadcast

For some journalists, informing the audience was a simple matter of gathering testimonies. Radio journalist, Julien Pearce, was the first survivor of the Bataclan attack to speak out. At a time of complete panic and when we are all overwhelmed by emotion, journalists become the voices and witnesses that help us understand and make sense of the events. They are also the ones giving voice to those we do not always think about: Le Petit Journal interviewed children and BuzzFeed France published an article on how homeless people lived through the attacks.

There has been a lot of debate of what the terrorists stole from the Paris people on Friday November 13th and they did take a lot. However, there is no denying that the attacks have helped journalists regain control of their watchdog and gatekeeping roles.

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