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To cite this article: Raymond Kuhn (2013) The Media and the 2012 Presidential Election, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 21:1, 1-16, DOI: [10.1080/09639489.2012.720054](https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2012.720054)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2012.720054>



Published online: 26 Sep 2012.



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# The Media and the 2012 Presidential Election

Raymond Kuhn

*This article analyses and evaluates key aspects of media coverage of the 2012 presidential election in a framework that allows for selective comparison with the first direct election of the president of the Fifth Republic in 1965. The article covers: the huge expansion in media supply accompanied by notable changes in consumption patterns by audiences; the enormous growth and increased influence of opinion polling; the professionalisation of election campaigning, particularly by the so-called ‘serious’ candidates; the institution of electoral primaries; the rule-bound nature of the campaign, including specific regulations governing coverage by the broadcasting media; and the head-to-head television debate between the two leading candidates prior to the decisive second round. While much has changed in the political communication landscape between 1965 and 2012, the impact of the media on the campaign and on voters continues to raise searching questions.*

Media coverage of the 2012 presidential election, the ninth to be held since the 1962 constitutional amendment introduced direct election of the head of state by a single national constituency of voters, was both extensive and intense. In part this was due to the substantive and symbolic political significance of the contest. Outside of periods of executive cohabitation, the presidency has long enjoyed the status of supreme political office (Levy and Skach 2008), the result of the presidential election has a huge influence on the content and tone of national politics over the following five years and turnout at presidential elections is now well above that of all other elections in France, including the parliamentary contest. In 2012, against the background of an ongoing financial and economic crisis in the eurozone and high levels of public debt and deficit in France, the campaign stakes could scarcely have been higher. In symbolic terms, voter turnout at the presidential election is widely regarded as a test of the health (or otherwise) of French representative democracy, while direct election of the president by mass universal suffrage can be regarded as the ultimate expression of the popular will, giving unparalleled legitimacy to the authority of the victor at the polls.

Yet it is clear that the extent and intensity of media coverage were also driven by other factors that had little to do with national or European politics. The highly

personalised competitive nature of the contest lends itself to a ‘horse race’ framing designed to capture and hold the attention of audiences in competitive media markets. In addition, the long campaign with its diverse cast of characters, parallel plots, interlacing story lines and instances of pathos, humour and drama can be viewed as a contemporary political soap opera with resonances of Balzac’s *The Human Comedy*, elements of Racinian tragedy and episodes of farce worthy of Feydeau. If in Schumpeterian terms the French presidential election exemplifies the ‘competitive struggle for the people’s vote’ (Schumpeter 2010), it is also a media battle for audiences, a political spectacle and a particular form of national cultural narrative.

In analysing and evaluating selected aspects of the contribution of the media during the 2012 campaign, this article uses as a comparative benchmark the first direct presidential election of the Fifth Republic held in 1965. The first section examines key changes in the political communication landscape between the two contests, while the second section emphasises elements of relative continuity. The final section speculates about possible changes that may occur by the time of the next presidential election, scheduled to take place in 2017.

### **From 1965 to 2012: what’s changed?**

Of the many important changes in political communication that have taken place between the 1965 and 2012 presidential campaigns, four are highlighted in this section: the huge expansion in media supply accompanied by notable modifications in consumption patterns by audiences; the enormous growth and increased influence of opinion polling; the professionalisation of election campaigning, particularly by the so-called ‘serious’ candidates; and the institution of electoral primaries. France is certainly not unique in respect of these changes; similar developments can be found in many other western democracies over roughly the same time frame, albeit to differing degrees depending on national specificities such as the political framework and electoral rules. Nonetheless, any cross-national commonality does not reduce the historic significance of these changes in political communication within the French context.

#### *Media supply and consumption*

The media system has been radically transformed in terms of both supply and consumption patterns. In 1965 the main components of the French media comprised 13 national and 92 regional daily newspaper titles with combined circulation figures of over 12 million copies, two weekly news magazines (*L’Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*), a handful of state and semi-commercial national radio stations and one state television channel transmitting nationwide (a second had begun to come on stream only a year earlier but did not have its own news programme until 1967).

In 2012 the media system was significantly bigger and more complex, especially in the broadcasting and online sectors. In the print media (2010 figures) the number of

paid-for daily newspaper titles had fallen sharply (10 national and 57 regional), with combined circulation figures of below eight million copies; in addition, 13 free newspaper titles had combined daily circulation figures of over two and a half million. In recent years the business model of many newspapers had virtually collapsed in the face of competition from online information sources and a corresponding change in consumer habits of accessing news, especially among the young. In contrast, the number of weekly news magazines had grown to include *Le Point* and *Marianne* and combined sales of the four main news magazines were reasonably healthy at around one and a half million. Yet despite their comparatively low circulation figures by the standards of many other western European democracies, French newspapers still performed important functions in the 2012 election. First, they provided information and commentary about candidates' policies and campaigns to their readers; second, they acted as communication platforms for candidates, even if François Hollande refused to be interviewed by the right-wing national daily *Le Figaro* in protest against what he regarded as its one-sided election coverage; and finally, they helped to structure the campaign agenda for the regional and national broadcast media.

By 2012 the radio sector had expanded enormously, with a wide range of public, commercial, national, local and community stations, differentiated by content specialism and target audience, competing for listeners and revenue. The early morning radio interviews on the main national networks (France Inter, RTL, RMC and Europe 1) were prime slots for candidates in 2012 due to the high listening figures at this time of the day. In television there was a mix of national and local, public and commercial, free-to-air and pay-TV channels accessible via a variety of digital platforms (terrestrial, asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL), satellite and cable). A CanalSat subscriber, for example, could access well over 300 channels. Rolling news channels, such as LCI, BFM TV and i>Télé, had established themselves as an integral part of the news media landscape, with two of them freely available on the digital terrestrial platform. In the 2012 campaign, for example, Hollande's formal launch of his presidential bid in a speech at Le Bourget on 22 January was covered 'live' by all three news channels, eager to evaluate the Socialist candidate's performance and, among other things, see whether he would make any reference to his ex-partner, Ségolène Royal.

The nationwide implantation of television as a mass medium took place during the 1960s (Sauvage and Veyrat-Masson 2012). While during de Gaulle's presidency state television news acquired a reputation for one-sided pro-government coverage, the visual qualities of the medium and its easily accessible content ensured the routinisation of viewing habits across the nation; watching the main evening news programme became a daily ritual for many citizens (Bourdon 1990). In 2012 national television was the main source of political information for French citizens as a whole, well ahead of all other news media. At the start of the year television was the primary source of national and international news for 56% of citizens, followed a long way behind by radio (19%), the press (12%) and the internet (12%) (TNS-La Croix 2012). Thus television was a more frequent primary source for news (excluding local

news) than radio, press and the internet combined. In this regard it should be noted that while their hold over viewers is under threat in the multi-channel digital communications environment, the combined audiences of the main evening news programmes of the national free-to-air channels TF1, France 2, France 3 and M6 remained high during the campaign.

During the 2012 campaign there were also some good viewing figures for political interview and discussion programmes, with the public service channel France 2 generally outperforming its commercial rival TF1. In January, Nicolas Sarkozy's interview with four journalists on government measures to be taken in response to the economic crisis was shown on no fewer than nine channels, with a combined audience of 16.5 million; in early March the appearance of the *Front National* candidate, Marine Le Pen, on *Parole de candidat* on TF1 was watched by around five million viewers; and the successive interviews with Hollande and Sarkozy in a single transmission of *Des paroles et des actes* on France 2 in the week after the first round of voting attracted 6.2 million viewers, over 25% of audience share.

Finally, the online media sector, non-existent in 1965, had burgeoned. In 2012 the online world of political communication included websites of candidates and political parties, of mainstream print and broadcast media and of freestanding independent news outlets such as Mediapart and Arrêt sur images, as well as a range of citizen and user generated content, including the citizen journalism site AgoraVox. Social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Dailymotion and Twitter had become part of what some regarded as a change from a top-down, professional model of public information provision to a more horizontal, interactive communications environment in which citizens could actively participate as producers and contributors. The growth of online media had also sparked changes in news consumption patterns as mainstream media outlets such as *Le Monde* sought to attract younger users with a range of web content (Fottorino 2012). Among the 18–24 age group the internet (25%) had become the second most important source of national and international news after television (58%) (TNS-La Croix 2012).

Yet compared with 2007, when Royal had used her website *Désirs d'avenir* as an integral part of her campaign in favour of participatory democracy, there was no significant change in online electoral communication in 2012. To mobilise the vote for Hollande the Socialist party emulated Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, albeit on a much smaller scale, by following up online contact with potential supporters with subsequent door-to-door visits by party sympathisers. In addition, during the head-to-head debate between Hollande and Sarkozy, journalists and voters used social media to comment on the candidates' performance and also to fact-check in real time. Yet for most French voters the main online media event was wholly unplanned and unanticipated. This occurred during the parliamentary rather than the presidential campaign when, in the week between the two rounds of voting, Hollande's partner, the journalist Valérie Trierweiler, sent a tweet to the dissident Socialist candidate in La Rochelle supporting him in his run-off against the official Socialist party candidate, who just happened to be Hollande's former partner, the mother of their four children

and the party's defeated candidate in the 2007 presidential election. Hollande's previous condemnation of Sarkozy for blurring the dividing lines between private life and public office rebounded against him as officials at the Elysée desperately tried to play down the significance of Trierweiler's intervention against Royal. Social and mainstream media had a field day in covering the impact of the tweet, with lively debates on the role of the 'first lady', the political function of Twitter and the embarrassing position that Hollande now found himself in.

In retrospect, the political communication landscape of 1965 was marked by penury and limited choice. In contrast, its equivalent in 2012 was characterised by spectacular abundance and diversity, with old and new media both competing with and complementing each other in an increasingly hybrid, converged communication landscape. Yet, while the extensive nature of media supply can be clearly demonstrated, two points are worth bearing in mind. First, there is no simple correlation between plurality of supply on the one hand and diversity of content on the other. With advertising revenues sorely squeezed there was a tendency for cash-strapped newsrooms to rely on candidates' press releases and news agency material in an attempt to keep down costs; as a result, many media outlets produced and distributed very similar information during the campaign. Second, there is no straightforward link between plurality of supply and either greater audience consumption or a more varied diet of political information on the part of the user. In 2012 there was an incalculable amount of mediated electoral content on offer for those who wished to access it. However, it was also possible for the uninterested citizen to bypass political information to a significant extent and for the committedly partisan voter to use print and online media content that reinforced their existing views.

### *Growth and influence of opinion polling*

A second element of contrast between the political communication landscapes of 1965 and 2012 can be found in the huge growth in opinion polling and the concomitant increase in its importance for politicians and the media. Candidates may now integrate the results of polls into their campaign strategies, finessing their political messages so that these are attuned with the expectations of particular target segments among the electorate. In addition, evidence from private voter surveys and focus groups supplements that gained from public polls. During the Sarkozy presidency the amount of money spent by the Elysée on polling—€9.4 million on over 300 surveys conducted between 2007 and 2012—became a subject of political controversy, while during the campaign the incumbent candidate invested considerable effort, largely in vain, to occupy the psychologically important lead position in the polls.

In 1965 only 12 opinion poll surveys were published; in 2012 there were around 400, with eight polling companies (BVA, CSA, Harris, Ifop, Ipsos, LH2, OpinionWay and TNS Sofres) competing to be the most accurate and the most influential (see Table 1). Opinion polling on such a scale means that France has a 'hyperpolled' electorate, with voters regularly being asked questions about their voting preferences, interest in the

**Table 1** Published opinion polls during presidential campaigns 1965–2012.

1965	12	1995	157
1969	19	2002	193
1974	24	2007	293
1981	111	2012	400 (estimate)
1988	153		

Source: Cayrol 2012, 59 (for 1965–2007 figures).

campaign, issue salience and their evaluation of the personal characteristics and leadership skills of the candidates. The impact of polls on voter behaviour whether in terms of mobilisation or partisan preferences has long been open to debate (Garrigou 2006), although it is evident that Royal's lead in the polls prior to the Socialist party primary contest in 2006 was a decisive factor in her selection as presidential candidate by party members.

Whatever their impact on voters, however, there is no doubt that the results of polls exert a strong influence on the media. Both a candidate's score compared to that of their rivals and the trend over time (upward or downward) have a direct effect on the amount of space/time given to that candidate by media outlets (with the notable exception of the formal official campaign in the case of broadcasting outlets—see below). Opinion poll results also influence the way in which a candidate's campaign is framed by the media. For example, a low opinion poll rating (or simply a lower than expected score) may result in a candidate being marginalised in media coverage, and vice-versa.

In 2012, for example, François Bayrou's organisational support was limited and his party base small; as a result, his candidacy was highly dependent on the media if it were to gain national resonance with voters during the campaign. In the event, however, Bayrou obtained significantly less media coverage than in 2007 because not only was he not regarded as a potential winner, but he was also not even seen as a possible king-maker. To put it simply, once his opinion poll scores put his candidacy in the 'also-ran' category, Bayrou struggled to persuade the media to take his campaign seriously. In contrast, the rising opinion poll scores of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (up to 17% in some surveys), combined with the well-attended and visually impressive mass open-air rallies (Place de la Bastille, Marseilles and Toulouse) and his verbal baiting of his feisty rival for *le vote populaire*, Marine Le Pen, boosted media coverage of the *Front de gauche* candidate to the extent that his first round result of 11.10% was considered a huge disappointment by his supporters.

### *Professionalisation of candidates' campaigns*

The third element of contrast between the political communication landscapes of 1965 and 2012 can be found in the professionalisation of election campaigning by candidates and their ever more sophisticated attempts to impose control over their



mediatised image and messages (Swanson and Mancini 1996). In 1965 the incumbent-candidate, General de Gaulle, scarcely bothered to campaign at all before the first round, believing that he would and should be elected as of right; de Gaulle initially took his victory for granted. In 2012 the two major candidates devoted considerable attention and resources to the media planning of their campaigns. One recent innovation, for instance, concerns the television pictures of their election rallies, which were filmed by production companies working on behalf of the candidates. Sarkozy started this process well before the 2007 presidential campaign; Hollande emulated him in 2012. As a result, the pictures in television news footage conveyed the positive visuals desired by the two front-runners.

Jean Lecanuet, who stood in the 1965 election, is widely regarded as the first presidential candidate to have introduced political marketing techniques from the United States into France. All serious *présidentiabiles* now pay considerable attention to managing their media image. In 2012, following a presidency during which he had attacked the Roma community in a speech in Grenoble and presided over a sterile public debate on the theme of national identity (Brochet 2011, 181–204), Sarkozy reaffirmed his persona as a man of order and authority, going even further than in 2007 in pursuing a right-wing campaign in a desperate bid to attract voters from the extreme-right.

Hollande's crafted image was threefold: first, to place himself firmly as the legitimate successor to Mitterrand, even imitating the former Socialist president's oratorical style (Estier 2012, 17); second, to emphasise his unifying capacities as a *rassembleur* in contrast to the divisive role allegedly performed by Sarkozy; and, third, to present himself as a *candidat normal*, thereby underlining the difference between himself on the one hand and both the 'bling bling', hyperactive, hypermediated, 'president of the rich' Sarkozy and his former Socialist party rival, the hedonistic Dominique Strauss-Kahn on the other. In addition, since the heroic leadership style of de Gaulle or the cultivated distance imposed by Mitterrand are no longer seen as appropriate in an age when voters know more about the daily lives of their leading politicians and show little deference towards them, in stressing his 'normality' Hollande was not just accepting the desacralisation of the presidential office, but was actively forging his own template for the role.

Neither Sarkozy nor Hollande emphasised their private life in their campaigns. Sarkozy had been scarred by the sharp downturn in his popularity in the early months of his presidency following the mediatisation of intimate aspects of his personal relations, first with his wife Cécilia and then with his new partner Carla Bruni (Nay 2012). In the light of his previous criticisms of Sarkozy on this matter, for Hollande there was more to be lost than gained in using his relationship with Trierweiler for the purposes of the campaign. As a result, there was less marketing and journalistic coverage of the private lives of the two leading candidates than in 2007 when both Royal and Sarkozy had been the darlings of the celebrity magazines.

This professionalisation of campaigning has been driven by the perceived need on the part of candidates and their advisors to feed the news media's appetite for content



under conditions which they hope to control. It is thus in part a response by politicians to the changes in the media system outlined above. There are also political reasons for this professionalisation. The decline in the extent of ideological differentiation between mainstream candidates, whose freedom to manoeuvre in economic policy has been restricted by the creation of the single European market and currency, the interdependence of the global economy and the growth in the power of financial markets, has placed a greater premium on managerial competence. At the same time, there has been an increase in voter volatility, with voters less aligned to political families than in the past and political appeals based on grand narratives less mobilising of a more sceptical electorate now accustomed to *alternance* between right and left. In these circumstances, politicians cannot simply rely on activating voters' ingrained political loyalties by appealing to their allegiance to a particular political tradition. Finally, professional practices of election campaigning are traded across national boundaries as candidates' communication advisors in France seek to emulate best practice from other western democratic systems, notably the United States, thus leading to the charge that professionalisation is synonymous with Americanisation (Negrine et al. 2007).

### *Electoral primaries*

The single most important political innovation of the 2012 campaign was the institution of a citizen-wide 'open' primary by the Socialist party held in October 2011. Prior to this event citizens who were not members of a political party, i.e. the overwhelming majority of French voters, had no say in the selection of presidential candidates. Indeed, among parties of the right in particular even the input of members was frequently notional at best. Within the Socialist party a primary contest to select the party's presidential candidate began in the post-Mitterrand era, with contested primaries prior to the 1995 and 2007 elections; both of these involved only party members. So too did the 2011 primary contest in the EELV (*Europe Ecologie—Les Verts*) which saw Eva Joly defeat Nicolas Hulot for the party's presidential nomination.

In early 2011 opinion polls suggested that the result of the Socialist party's 'open' primary would be the selection of Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK), who was regarded as the candidate of the left most likely to defeat Sarkozy. A sympathetic documentary, *Un an avec DSK—Au Coeur du FMI*, was screened on Canal + in March with lots of footage showing Strauss-Kahn in his role as head of the International Monetary Fund, engaging in a mix of public and private activities, accompanied by his ever smiling wife, the journalist Anne Sinclair. However, Strauss-Kahn's presidential ambitions and political career came to an abrupt halt in May with the shocking revelation of his arrest in a case of alleged sexual assault and attempted rape of a hotel chambermaid in New York. The downfall of DSK—he quickly acquired in some media content the unenviable status of 'ex-future probable president'—was one of the most covered news stories of 2011, helping to boost newspaper circulation figures and audiences for television news and discussion programmes as well as giving rise to a slew of so-called

*quick books* (Veilletet 2011). Strauss-Kahn's interview by the TF1 news anchor and friend of his wife, Claire Chazal, in September 2011 was watched by more than 13 million viewers, one of the largest audiences ever for a French television news programme since the start of the more competitive market in broadcasting following the abolition of the state monopoly in the 1980s. His performance was considered unconvincing by a majority of those who watched and while his continued alleged involvement in sex parties with prostitutes in France was an important news story in 2012, the DSK affair had no further influence on the campaign; Sarkozy's attempt to raise the issue in the head-to-head debate in an attempt to embarrass Hollande fell flat.

The Socialist primary allowed for the participation of all citizens who expressed support for the values of the left, not just party members. The exercise was a huge success both in terms of media coverage, with three television debates prior to the first round and one prior to the second, and electoral participation, with over two and a half million votes cast in both ballots. The primaries allowed the Socialists to totally dominate media coverage of national politics for a few weeks. While the six candidates articulated some policy differences and traded the occasional barbed comment (Martine Aubry, the party's general secretary, was reported in the press to have accused Hollande of being a *couille molle*), there was no repetition of the damaging internal splits that had torn the party apart in the early 1990s. The process of the open primary helped legitimise Hollande's presidential candidacy and contrasted with the lack of any similar exercise on the right by the UMP (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*) where Sarkozy's candidacy was given a clear run. Providing a solid launch pad for his presidential bid, the result meant that while victory against Sarkozy was by no means guaranteed, the Socialist candidate benefited from top spot in the opinion polls early in the campaign. From October 2011 onwards it was Hollande's election to lose.

### **From 1965 to 2012: what's stayed (more or less) the same?**

In contrast, other aspects of the political communication landscape changed much less between 1965 and 2012. Two are covered in this section: the rule-bound nature of the election campaign, including specific regulations governing coverage by the broadcasting media; and the head-to-head television debate between the two leading candidates prior to the decisive second round (an innovation of the third presidential election held in 1974).

#### *A rule-bound campaign*

The electoral process remains substantively rule-bound and procedurally highly regulated, with rules governing inter alia the nomination of candidates, campaign funding and the length of the official campaign (Vedel 2007). Tight regulations on political billboard advertising were introduced in the 1990s, with the result that since then elections have been fought even more than before via the news media (Saussez 2012, 78). Radio and television are subject to specific regulations to ensure fairness and

balance. In 1965 rules governing equality of access to the broadcast media for all six candidates were applied during the official campaign period of two weeks. In 2012 these rules were intended to deliver equity of coverage in the pre-campaign period starting in January and then a more stringent equality of coverage during the short official campaign once candidacies had been officially approved by the Constitutional Council in March. Since paid-for political commercials are not allowed on French radio or television either during or outside of campaign periods, election broadcasts were allocated to candidates on an equal footing and strict rules governed their production.

Responsibility for monitoring broadcasters' performance in ensuring fair coverage lies with the relevant regulatory authority, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA), which published its findings on a regular basis on its website (<http://www.csa.fr/>). A concern on the part of broadcasters and regulators with achieving 'stopwatch pluralism' between presidential candidates should not be undervalued in the light of the ideological diversity of candidacies on offer in 2012 (from extreme-left to extreme-right) and a history of political control of broadcasting in the early years of television as a state monopoly. A survey of journalists in 2012 showed that 66% regarded the provisions as necessary to guarantee fairness; without the rules, their fear was that coverage would be less pluralistic (Lévy 2012).

Yet rules on 'stopwatch pluralism' clearly only scratch the surface of how to avoid partisan bias in radio and television's election coverage. In the long run-up to presidential elections, for example, the broadcast media, supported by opinion polls, may decide in advance who are the major candidates and skew their coverage accordingly. In 2002, for example, the media focus was on the anticipated second round run-off between president Jacques Chirac and prime minister Lionel Jospin. In concentrating on this aspect of the contest between the two heavyweights of right and left, the broadcasting media—along with the press and opinion pollsters—failed to appreciate the challenge from Jean-Marie Le Pen and so played their part in contributing to the thunderbolt result of the first round that saw Jospin unexpectedly eliminated by the leader of the extreme-right. A similar critique of the broadcast media's focus on the competition between Sarkozy and Royal—condemned as a '*bipartisme étouffant*'—was made with reference to coverage of the run-up to the 2007 contest (Reymond and Rzepski 2008, 74). In the same fashion, in 2012 in the weeks running up to the start of the official campaign, the CSA condemned the amount of broadcast coverage given to Sarkozy and Hollande, who across all the relevant television channels combined had respectively 28.74% and 31.57% of speaking time (figures for 1 January to 9 March) (CSA 2012). In much of its coverage prior to the first round, therefore, television was already functioning within the logic of the second round run-off and choosing to focus on its two favoured candidates accordingly.

The main defect of the stopwatch approach, however, lies not so much in the difficulties associated with its application, but in its inherent limitations as a guarantor of pluralism and safeguard against bias. For instance, the concern with monitoring time allocation tells us nothing about the tone and style of coverage. Prior to the

second round of the 2002 contest, for instance, Le Pen and Chirac may have received roughly equal time in television news coverage, but they were by no means equally treated either in news reports, where Le Pen's candidacy was routinely vilified, or broadcast interviews, where the journalists adopted quite distinct inquisitorial styles and were clearly more hostile towards the leader of the extreme-right than to the incumbent candidate (Kuhn 2004).

In 2012 all ten candidates were interviewed over two successive evenings on *Des paroles et des actes* just before the first round of voting. The allocation of time—just over 15 minutes per candidate—was scrupulously monitored to ensure strict equality; indeed, a digital clock ticking down the seconds could at times be seen on screen, testimony to the broadcaster's determination not just to be equal but to be seen to be equal. Yet the amount of time actually given each candidate to speak differed depending on the frequency of interruption by the chairperson, David Pujadas, and the panel of journalists. Moreover, not only were the candidates asked different questions (not unreasonable in the light of their different policy proposals), but in terms of tone they were treated quite differently, especially by Pujadas, with greater courtesy and even deference shown to those considered to be 'serious' candidates.

Finally, if internal pluralism in broadcast election coverage is to be fully achieved, then it could be argued that there should be no bias in the construction of the issue agenda or the framing of issues by the broadcast media. The issues focused on by the broadcasters must not consistently advantage or disadvantage one candidate over the others. This is difficult to achieve, with intense competition taking place between candidates to raise their favourite issues, which they hope will be picked up and highlighted by the news media. To some extent, therefore, the resources and professionalism of a particular candidate may give him or her a competitive advantage in setting the media's campaign news agenda. In 2012 the election agenda covered a range of issues, notably the economy, employment, education and social integration. On many issues Hollande was perceived in voter surveys to be more competent than Sarkozy; the latter was being judged on his record, while Hollande was being assessed on his promises. To this extent the broadcast media agenda during the campaign objectively favoured Hollande, which further helped fuel the criticisms of those politicians and commentators on the right who thought that much of the media had become anti-Sarkozy during his tenure of the presidential office (Pilichowski 2012).

Sometimes the 'background news' agenda may intervene in a campaign. In 2002 the media's news focus on *insécurité* directly benefited Chirac and allowed Le Pen to surf on a series of television news items concerning petty crime and an apparent breakdown of law and order in French society (Kuhn 2005). In 2012 the main 'background news' story that for a short time threatened to derail the plans of the candidates' communication advisors was the fatal shooting in the southwest of France by a young French citizen of Algerian extraction, Mohammed Merah, of three soldiers, and a teacher and three children at a Jewish school. For a short time the campaign was suspended to allow for a period of national grieving. Speculation that the killings might allow Sarkozy to steal a march on his rivals by assuming the mantle of national

leader or aid Marine Le Pen in her criticisms of Moslems living in France proved to be unfounded and the impact on the campaign agenda of the sequence of events, including the killing of Merah by the police, was negligible. The main background news events remained the financial crisis in the eurozone and the parlous state of the French economy.

The task of ensuring fairness in broadcast campaign coverage is, therefore, immensely complex. It certainly involves achieving an equitable/equal stopwatch balance between candidates, providing minor candidates with a reasonable platform without at the same time overstating their importance. It embraces a level playing field in terms of qualitative aspects such as the tone and style of reporting. In addition, in an ideal world the mediated campaign agenda should not unduly and systematically favour any particular candidate in terms of the issue terrain.

Finally, it should be noted that the print and online media sectors are not bound by the same constraints as radio and television with regard to fairness and pluralism. Newspapers, for example, are free to be as partisan in their coverage as they wish. In 2012 *Le Figaro* was unashamedly pro-Sarkozy, while *Libération* favoured Hollande. Indeed, such was their commitment that journalists on both papers publicly complained about the degree of partisanship displayed by their editors, Etienne Mougeotte (*Le Figaro*) and Nicolas Demorand (*Libération*). After the first round *Le Monde* published a critical editorial of Sarkozy's strategy of moving closer to the *Front National*, but did not formally or explicitly endorse Hollande. Many regional newspapers, with de facto monopolies in their zones of circulation, eschewed overt partisanship for fear of alienating a section of their readership. In the online media, everything was permissible within the law.

#### *Head-to-head television debate*

A second feature of continuity is the face-to-face television debate held a few days prior to the decisive second ballot between the two leading candidates from the first round (Delporte 2006, 365–403). The first debate took place in 1974 between the candidate of the right, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and the Socialist challenger, Mitterrand. Since then the debate has become the single most watched television event of the campaign (with the notable exception of 2002 when Chirac refused to debate with Le Pen). In 2012 the debate between Sarkozy and Hollande was punctuated with ill-tempered moments, notably when the incumbent accused his Socialist challenger of being a liar [*menteur*] and a mud-slinger [*petit calomniateur*]. The role reversal that had been evident throughout the campaign was replicated in the debate. As the front-runner in the opinion polls, Hollande continued to assume the presidential mantle, while Sarkozy maintained his role as challenger. Hollande's body language during the debate was formal, even rather stiff, while Sarkozy with his usual nervous gestures and tics (Badiou 2007) constantly sought, without success, to destabilise the Socialist candidate. Indeed towards the end of the debate Sarkozy was put on the defensive by a succession of commitments recited by Hollande to

distinguish his future presidency from that of Sarkozy: all began with the phrase ‘Moi, président de la république, ...’ as if the election were as good as over.

The two journalists who chaired the proceedings, the news anchors of TF1 (Laurence Ferrari) and France 2 (David Pujadas), intervened mostly to remind the candidates and the viewers of the time used up by each protagonist, preferring to let the two political heavyweights slug it out. While the debate lasted just under three hours and the agenda roamed widely, various issues such as health and housing were barely covered. With over 17 million viewers the audience for the debate was huge, although not quite as large as in 2007. There was no clear ‘winner’ to the debate, with supporters and partisan media outlets generally claiming that their candidate had been the stronger. However, since Sarkozy had entered the debate behind in the polls, Hollande could take greater satisfaction at the outcome.

Does the debate have any impact on voters? Not much in terms of partisan preferences; it comes too late in the electoral cycle and most voters view the debate through the prism of a choice of candidate that has already been made. Its political function is rather to keep supporters mobilised and to try to attract any wavering voters of those candidates eliminated in the first round. For Sarkozy, for instance, the debate was an opportunity to reach out to the six million plus voters of Marine Le Pen, many of whose votes he needed if he were to win the second round. Whatever its electoral importance, however, the debate has the potential to be a dramatic televisual event. It has become part of the ritual of the presidential campaign, a battle of images and words, style and tone; in 2012, even behind the professional image projection, an insight into the characters of the two combatants could clearly be gleaned.

### **From 2012 to 2017: what will/may/should change?**

If one looks ahead to the next scheduled presidential contest in 2017, what changes are in prospect? First, with regard to the media system, one can reasonably expect the continued decline of paid-for newspapers in their printed form. The media system will become even more technologically convergent, with news content increasingly accessed through a range of different devices (tablet, smartphone). Any distinction between ‘traditional’ or ‘mainstream’ media on the one hand and ‘new’ or ‘online’ media on the other will be even harder to maintain than currently as a mix of text, audio and video content is accessed by users, much of which will be done while they are on the move.

Second, the regulatory constraints on broadcasters to ensure equity and equality of treatment will be open to question. In 2012 several broadcasting news editors and journalists complained about the unduly onerous nature of these rules in the light of the high number of candidates standing—10 in 2012 (but down from 16 in 2002 and 12 in 2007). One of the perverse consequences of the ‘stopwatch’ approach during the first round official campaign period is that it is manifestly easier for broadcasters to interview no candidate rather than have to interview them all. In addition, in 2012 one had the rather bizarre situation of the incumbent and the eventual winner being given

the same amount of time during the first-round official campaign as a candidate, Philippe Poutou, who explicitly stated that he did not want to become president. If it does turn out that the broadcast media rules regarding equitable and equal coverage are considered unworkable because of the number of candidates involved in the contest, then a more appropriate response might be to restrict the number of candidacies—a constitutional ‘gatekeeping’ issue—rather than weaken the broadcast rules, although both of these recommendations would prove controversial in principle and unacceptable to minor candidates in practice.

Third, there is the question of the head-to-head debate. Is the formula of one very long debate just a few days before the second round optimal? During the 2012 campaign Sarkozy for his own partisan purposes somewhat belatedly argued in favour of two or even three television debates, while the main radio stations proposed a debate on radio in addition to the scheduled television confrontation. Hollande quite understandably preferred to settle for the status quo. Yet in principle Sarkozy’s idea is not without merit. Three media debates—on the economy, political and social issues, and foreign affairs—might allow for broader and deeper issue coverage. One possible argument in favour of the single long debate, however, is that there may be less opportunity for candidates to maintain a controlled image during a prolonged confrontation than in three successive shorter debates and so the voter gains more of an insight into the candidates’ leadership style.

Finally, in the one and indivisible republic with its emphasis on equality of treatment for all citizens, it is surely now necessary to close all polling stations at the same time across metropolitan France. This would avoid, or at least mitigate, estimations of the final result being made publicly available, first by online foreign media and then echoed by social media in France, prior to the current official close of the polls in Paris and other major cities at 8 pm. In 2012 the CSA expressed strong concerns about the estimated results being made public prematurely, as some French citizens sought to bypass the regulation by tweeting in code and giving the ‘temperature’ (i.e. the estimated share of the vote) in Amsterdam (Hollande), Budapest (Sarkozy), Moscow (Mélenchon) and Nuremberg (Le Pen). While the CSA has no authority over the behaviour of Belgian and Swiss media outlets, it can recommend, as it already did in 2007, the harmonisation of polling station closures across metropolitan France.

## **Conclusion**

While much had changed in the French political communication landscape between 1965 and 2012, the role of the media in all direct presidential elections during the Fifth Republic has remained a constant source of interest for politicians, the public and, of course, the media themselves. In 1965, for instance, television was still a relatively new mass medium, with considerable uncertainty surrounding its potential impact on both the campaign and voters. This question of media influence, extended to embrace social as well as mainstream media, remained equally pertinent in 2012.



Clearly the media have had a huge impact on the conduct of presidential campaigns. Beginning with the 1965 election, television in particular has had a transformative influence on candidates' campaign strategies, with the power of the medium's images helping to contribute to a focus on image by the candidates. The institutional rules of the presidential election make it a personalised contest, the voters' choice of an individual; television amplifies this focus on the person, playing up the importance of appearance, gesture, language and tone of voice as candidates attempt to convey the requisite image of competence, integrity and leadership in the hope of acquiring that indefinable quality the French call *l'étoffe présidentielle*. In 1965 de Gaulle presented himself as a sacerdotal leader pursuing French grandeur in the world (Gaffney 2010); in 2012 Hollande sought to make a virtue out of his claim to ordinariness as he searched means to boost economic growth in France.

Do the media have any influence on voters during the campaign? While many have decided how to vote well in advance of the campaign, a high proportion (anything up to 40%) declare in the days and weeks immediately before polling that they are still undecided regarding their choice of candidate. In the light of turnout figures in both rounds in 2012, around half of these voters went on to register a preference at the polls. For these undecided voters media coverage of the candidates' campaigns made a difference to their choice (Lewis-Beck et al. 2012).

In addition, while the decision to vote or abstain can be correlated with certain sociological characteristics (age, levels of educational attainment) and the perception on the part of the voter of the significance of the political stakes involved in the election, the media also play a role in mobilising or demobilising voters. Neither public interest in the campaign, nor turnout in the two rounds, was as high in 2012 as in 2007 when not only had the two leading contenders represented a clear generational break with their immediate predecessors at the Elysée, but one of them had also been the first woman in the history of the Fifth Republic to have a serious chance of winning the top office. In contrast, in 2012 Sarkozy was a well-known quantity with a presidential record to defend, while Hollande lacked the charismatic appeal that had been such a notable feature of Royal's mediatised image five years previously. Yet at the same time there was no evidence in 2012 that the media's campaign coverage had contributed to fostering a climate of disillusionment with electoral politics; turnout in the two rounds (79.48% and 80.35% of registered voters), although lower than in 2007, was more than respectable by the standards of previous presidential contests.

In the 2012 presidential campaign, therefore, the media continued to have an impact on the campaign and on voters as they had done in the very different political communication landscape of 1965. The extent of that impact, however, should not be overstated. Upstream, candidates' campaign use of the media, however professional, fails to be effective if their policies and strategic positioning on issues are out of sync with voter expectations; downstream, voters filter and interpret media content, engaging in selective processes of exposure, perception and retention. Even in a highly

mediatised presidential campaign, therefore, media influence is contingent and should not be equated with omnipotence.

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