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On the values guiding the French practice of journalism: Interviews with thirteen war correspondents

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Abstract
What are the values guiding the French practice of journalism? What is the place of objectivity among these values? These questions were asked of 13 war correspondents working for eight of the leading French newspapers.

While objectivity is rejected as either an unattainable standard or an undesirable norm, it appears that a definition of objectivity is lacking and that this notion is often mistaken for neutrality. Three different conceptions of objectivity-as-neutrality emerge from the interviewees' discourses: as a separation between facts and commentaries, as cautiousness in labeling and as a balance between the parties.

Can or should one of these conceptions serve as a guideline in the daily practice of journalism? The interviewees seem to be divided on this question and several propose moral values such as honesty or modesty as alternatives. The reference to moral values in turn proves problematic insofar as the focus on the journalists' attitudes or intentions fails to address responsibility for highly consequential actions. In the end, when discussing specific dilemmas that they themselves have faced, most of the journalists quote accuracy and fairness as criteria for the evaluation of journalistic performance. '*Etre juste*' – meaning both to be accurate (*justesse*) and to be fair (*justice*) – is what is expected of a professional journalist.

Keywords
accuracy, fairness, journalistic profession, objectivity, standards, values, war correspondents

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Introduction: journalistic professionalism and the crisis of objectivity

Historically, the conception of journalism as a profession emerged alongside the notion of objectivity (Schudson, 1990). By grasping the journalists' mission as a quest for truth,[1] the standard of objectivity encourages the constitution of an autonomous journalistic field;[2] that is, a field relatively free from external – political, economic and other – pressures.

Yet the standard of objectivity has been seriously challenged in recent decades, not only in media studies but in the social sciences in general. Objectivity is often blamed for all sorts of weaknesses and dismissed as a standard (Altheide, 1984; Glasser, 1984; Stoker, 1995; Tuchman, 1972). Such questioning has opened a crisis insofar as it did not go along with the proposition of alternative standards accepted by the profession as a whole.

Since ethics is inseparable from journalism (Belsey and Chadwick, 1992), one might consider searching for such standards by turning to the numerous codes of ethics or of professional conduct that have been proposed for journalists all over the world. However, many codes prove to be too negative in tone and to content themselves with providing lists of actions to avoid (Harris, 1992), instead of indicating what would represent good practices of journalism. This remark suggests that one might start with addressing the journalists themselves and asking them about the values that guide their daily practices.

Sociological approach to the study of journalistic values

Insofar as practices differ from one country to another, the present article deals exclusively with the values guiding the French practice of journalism. French journalism represents a challenging case since it is considered as proposing a counter-model to American journalism (Benson, 2005), in which the standard of objectivity was born and developed.

The evolution of French journalism is often summed up as the history of its 'Americanization' from the 19th century onwards (Chalaby, 1996; Riutort, 2000) – and this can actually account for the lack of research devoted specifically to French journalistic values. However, other scholars, while recognizing the commonality between French and American journalisms, consider that the French model is defined as more opinion-oriented, in contrast to the American information-oriented model. Comparing French and American immigration news coverage in the 1970s and 1980s, Benson (2002) has shown that the 'political/literary model' of French journalism was profoundly modified by the assimilation of the American model, though it also maintained some earlier traits due to the rootedness of the French journalistic tradition. Likewise, drawing from data sets on American and French news reporting on immigration and sexual harassment, Benson and Saguy (2005) endeavored to 'account for the factors that favor cross-national convergence or divergence in the form or content of public political debates in news media'.

The present article proposes to complement these comparative studies with a comprehensive sociology approach (Lemieux, 2000; Neveu, 2004). It intends to understand the actors, their actions and their values from within.[3] This study, drawing on a collection of journalists' voices and providing an analysis of the journalists' discourses and

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self-reflections, seeks to contribute to the identification of the values that either guide or should guide daily journalistic practices. The study also attempts to explain the ways in which the journalists mean to *perform* these values in the context of constraints and concrete dilemmas.

Insofar as one can assume that practices and, accordingly, the promoted values might significantly differ amongst the various journalistic subfields (Marchetti, 2005) or genres, I have decided to focus on the study of one sub-community of journalists, i.e. the war correspondents working for the press. My hope is that similar micro-studies will come to complete the jigsaw and enable us to reach an understanding of the values that characterize French journalism as a whole. The choice of war correspondents is not so much motivated by the fact that the *grand reportage* is traditionally considered as the noblest journalistic activity (Martin, 2005), but rather stems from two other considerations which indicate the particular importance of the issue of journalistic values in this specific subfield. First, because the reported events occur in foreign countries, the media happen to be the dominant, if not exclusive, source of information for the public. Hence, war correspondents' standards and practices appear to have a potentially considerable impact. Second, since they deal with violence and death, reports on armed conflicts convey a heavy emotional and moral charge and should thus place the issue of journalistic values at the forefront of war correspondents' minds. These two reasons actually return us to the significance – importance and meaning – of the journalistic responsibility.

The interviews: objectives and methodology

The empirical data were supplied by in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 13 war correspondents (see Appendix 1) working for eight journals: *Le Monde*, the conservative *Le Figaro*, the leftist *Libération*, the more popular *Le Parisien* (which is also the national newspaper with the largest circulation), the communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, the Catholic daily *La Croix*, and two weekly magazines, *L'Express* and *Le Point*. These were selected for the importance of their circulation and the place granted to foreign news.

Emails were sent to about 30 war correspondents working for these eight publications. They were followed by phone calls. The names of the correspondents were selected through a database search for newspaper articles covering armed conflicts: wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (second Intifada from 2000 to 2003), and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. I stopped calls for interviews after reaching a sample of 13 journalists because by then the same themes and positions were already recurring and no new elements were arising.

The sample includes only two women. This imbalance reflects the state of the journalistic profession as a whole and more particularly the war correspondence field, which is characterized by male dominance.[4] The French press is also strongly concentrated in Paris. Journalists were met in their office in Paris or, more often, in the cafeteria of their building or a coffee shop close to their workplace. Notes were taken during the first seven interviews. The other six were recorded, which allowed more limited note-taking. The recorded interviews were integrally transcribed.[5]

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Each interview, in French, lasted between one and one and a half hours and was composed of two parts: one on the values guiding the French practice of journalism, for about 40 minutes to an hour; and one in which the journalists were asked to react to the presentation of a model of news analysis. The present article only relates to the first part of the interviews.

During the first part of each interview, five topics were proposed and opened to the journalist for comment:

1. What values should guide the practice of journalism?
2. What is the place of objectivity among these values?
3. What are the constraints on or obstacles to compliance with these values?
4. Is there a French practice of journalism as compared, for instance, with an Anglo-Saxon practice?
5. What are the specificities of the coverage of foreign conflicts with regard to these issues?

I refrained from interrupting the interviewee until she or he had finished answering each question. Further explanations were then pursued when clarification was required on certain key points of a respondent's discourse. And eventually I could move on to the next question or theme.

I tried to identify the recurrent concepts and themes that emerged from the interviews and to bring to light the different positions held by the respondents on each question. The following discussion reflects the categorization resulting from the recurrent concepts and themes.[6] While searching for similarities and differences between the interviewees' discourses, I tried to avoid reducing the polyphony, complexity or even internal contradictions in their statements.

I came to understand the crucial importance of interviewing as a method when I noticed the hesitations and skepticism first demonstrated by the interviewees when I briefly introduced the subject: 'My work is dedicated to the identification and understanding of the values that guide the French practices of journalism. I would like to suggest a few themes of discussion on this issue.' Reactions to this introduction often consisted of heavy sighs and remarks of this sort: 'This is a huge subject, an endless matter'; 'There is no doctrine on the subject'; 'It seems very theoretical, I don't know if I'll be able to answer your questions! Anyway go ahead.' But after a while, all the interviewees turned quite voluble. This was especially the case with Pierre Rousselin, assistant director of the daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, who first regarded the subject as too vast and complex. He objected that each journalist has a conception of her or his own and that the questions raised seemed too theoretical, if not far from the daily concerns of common journalists. However, he showed much enthusiasm once I entered into each topic. He even felt it necessary to return to the preceding topics in order to clarify certain points. He finally asked questions about the study: When would the conclusions be available? Could he read the final paper? At the close of the interview, he kindly asked that I contact him in case I needed an opinion on any further step.

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1 Rejection of the standard of objectivity

Objectivity was almost unanimously rejected from the outset by the journalists. As Sylviane Stein (freelancer, formerly journalist for *L'Express*) put it, 'we hardly dare pronounce this word today'. From the assistant director of the conservative daily *Le Figaro* to the correspondent working for the leftist newspaper *Libération*, nearly all seemed to agree on the emptiness of the term: 'It does not mean much' (Pierre Rousselin, *Le Figaro*), 'There isn't much meaning in the word "objectivity"' (Marc Sémo, *Libération*).

Surprisingly, the only respondent who endorsed objectivity was the journalist working for the communist daily, *L'Humanité*: 'For some, objectivity does not exist. For me, it actually does' (Damien Roustel). Must we interpret this espousal of objectivity as an individual exception or might it reveal the desire for legitimacy on the part of journalists who, working for alternative newspapers, believe that objectivity was historically promoted by mainstream journalism as a standard of professionalism? A clue to answering this question can be found in the fact that the journalist felt it necessary to specify from the outset that, while he was working for *L'Humanité*, he was not himself a communist and that, although the editorial line of the newspaper was compelling, one could still achieve objectivity. The size and composition of the sample does not enable us to settle this issue. In fact, other studies have rather suggested that 'non centrist' journalists are actually more eager to reject objectivity than 'centrists' (Lemieux and Schmalzbauer, 2000).

Despite the potentially significant differences between mainstream and alternative journalism, we can maintain that most of the interviewees dismiss objectivity on two accounts: as an unattainable standard and as an undesirable norm.

Objectivity is disregarded as an impossible standard

Denial of the existence of objectivity is expressed tersely by Jean-Pierre Tuquoi (*Le Monde*): 'Objectivity does not really exist.' Many conceive of objectivity as an ideal that is unattainable by its very essence. For instance, Sylviane Stein believes that 'objectivity remains in the horizon' and that it 'represents the "skyline"', but emphasizes the problem posed by the fact that 'the journalist *is* a subject'. This idea that objectivity is doomed to failure because it claims to turn subjects into objects recurs in the journalists' discourses:

> Objectivity is a chimera. One can easily understand it if they consider the etymological meaning of the word. We deal with human passions. That's the journalist's object. Hence, talking about 'objectivity' sounds absurd. In the same way, the journalist herself is a subject, a determined subject. (Vincent Hugeux, *L'Express*)

These journalists conceive of objectivity as promoting an impossible 'value-free' or 'perspective-free' spectatorship. Indeed, journalists place blame on the scientific – if not the scientist – pretension exhibited by the tenets of objectivity: 'Journalism is not an exact science. Objectivity is not a value *per se*' (Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Figaro*). Thus, a shift is evident from the idea that objectivity is impossible to the belief that it is undesirable.

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Objectivity is also denounced as an undesirable norm

Some journalists went a step further in their rejection of objectivity by suggesting that the promotion of objectivity as a standard is actually a bait and, accordingly, by warning against the malicious intentions hidden behind the promotion of objectivity: 'One shouldn't fall into the trap of objectivity. (…) Objectivity is an obsession that we must drop. It is used negatively, by those who consider that we're not going along the same lines' (Vincent Hugeux). Objectivity is here strongly rejected for fear of ideological manipulations. Many scholars (notably Durham, 1998; Friedman, 1998) have insisted on this claim to ground their criticism of objectivity. By excluding minority voices, objectivity naturalizes the mainstream ideology and thus maintains the status quo. Objectivity is seen as dangerous for its enervating effect: 'Do we need a castrated journalist?' (Yves Cornu, *Le Point*). This literally echoes Stoker's argument that objectivity turns journalists into spectators and encourages them to surrender their independence as moral agents: 'the rules of objectivity did not emancipate journalists, they emasculated them' (Stoker, 1995).

That is what Vincent Hugeux denounces strongly when he proudly 'admits' that he writes more and more polemical articles and when he claims responsibility for his 'radicalism'.

A definition of objectivity is lacking

Looking back, the objections that the interviewees formulated reflect the same classic claims that many scholars have already indicated. In fact, the interviewees prove more moderate than the scholars in that their criticisms were focused on empirical concerns rather than on philosophical or metaphysical assertions. Indeed, while several interviewees rejected objectivity because of the inevitability of the journalist's subjectivity as a subject, none of them adhered to the postmodernist thesis that the apprehension of facts is impossible altogether. If truth is a concept that should be taken with caution, they all believe in the authority of empirical data. As Patrick de Saint-Exupéry (*Le Figaro*) repeated several times during the interview, 'what counts and what is of fundamental importance is presence in the field. One has to echo what he sees in the field.' Jean-Pierre Tuquoi (*Le Monde*), Jean-Christophe Ploquin (*La Croix*) and Damien Roustel (*L'Humanité*) also stressed the crucial importance of presence in the field and of the professional eye-witness account. Interestingly, journalists working for newspapers with such divergent leanings happen to share the same philosophy, emphasizing the centrality of the experience of the field. The field is perceived as the essential safeguard, as Patrick de Saint-Exupéry explains: 'The journalist in the field is kept in check by reality, which imposes itself upon him and prevents him from writing nonsense.' He emphasizes this point: 'Reality rises from the field. The field, the field, the field!'

Therefore, most of the problems that were brought to the forefront had to do with the issue of implementation rather than with philosophical considerations. The fundamental question may be formulated: How can one cope with the instrumentation and manipulation to which the concept of objectivity is so prone? Beyond this, it appears that most criticisms are based on vague definitions of objectivity. More specifically, objectivity is

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often confused with neutrality. It is neutrality that many interviewees actually reject when they show reluctance towards objectivity as a professional standard. To be sure, questions of terminology should not be underestimated here.

2 Confusion with neutrality

Three conceptions of objectivity as neutrality are rejected.

Objectivity/neutrality conceived as a separation between facts and commentaries

On the specific issue of whether commentaries can, should or must not be introduced in a report, a strong cleavage emerged among the interviewees. In line with Jay Rosen's denunciation of a 'separation fever' (1993), some journalists grasp objectivity as the incitement to comply with an artificial separation between facts and commentaries. In contrast with this position, Sylviane Stein warns that 'journalists mustn't fall into the pitfall of commentary. They must help people to open their eyes and, for that purpose, they have to develop their subject, but avoiding being themselves the producer of ideas or opinions.'

Between, or beyond, these two antagonistic positions, some journalists propose to analyze the issue in relation to journalistic genres and especially to the distinction between 'reportage' and 'investigative journalism'.

> I think that a correspondent, a war reporter, is more concerned with telling a story than with investigation. In an investigation, you look for causes. We don't look for causes. We come at a given time and we tell what happens, what we see. Most often we don't have any explanation to provide. (Damien Roustel, *L'Humanité*)

In a similar vein, Rémy Ourdan, director of *Le Monde* editorial department for international affairs, argues that '*Le Monde* seeks to restrict the commitment to the editorial pages' and considers that 'the article shouldn't contain analyses, but only the gross results of investigation', while commentaries and the expression of opinions should be the preserve of editorials.

Objectivity/neutrality conceived as cautiousness in labeling is perceived to introduce biases

According to Rémy Ourdan, neutrality stems from the 'caution' demanded by the readers' sensitivity. Yet, immediately after he has pronounced himself in favor of reports free from commentaries, he qualifies his stance on the issue: 'At the same time, we should avoid neutrality of tone, for otherwise the article would be dull.' It seems that journalists must perform a delicate balancing act: on the one hand, they must demonstrate enough neutrality to prevent readers from taking offense to what is reported and, on the other hand, they must avoid 'excessive neutrality' lest readers get bored.

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This care to avoid a neutral tone can be interpreted in light of the literary tradition of French journalism that many of the interviewees perceive to be surviving in some form. Remnants of such a tradition seem peculiarly pregnant in coverage of war and are not only a matter of style but of content: 'there is certainly still a bit of "romanticism" in the reportage' (Jean-Christophe Ploquin, *La Croix*); it is true that special correspondents on conflicts often delight themselves in the writing' and tend to start their account with 'pretty stories' (Romain Gubert, *Le Point*). Yet, as interviewees point out, this tendency is more characteristic of articles published in weeklies, whereas in the daily newspapers, 'the form of journalism is more and more compact' and this is especially because journalists are more and more limited in terms of length. 'It is very difficult to do literature on two columns' (Catherine Tardrew, *Le Parisien*). Such constraints would result in a more neutral tone.

Other journalists hold that the now prevailing tendency to 'water down' the reports stems from economic pressures and the increasing precariousness of the profession:[7] 'Young journalists perhaps dare less than seniors because they're afraid they might lose their job. An open-ended contract at *L'Express* is too precious an asset to be compromised by bold behavior' (Vincent Hugeux). Far from a professional ideal, neutrality of tone appears to be the positive face of what can actually be interpreted as a form of self-censorship, if not cowardice. These analyses remind us of those critics who denounce objectivity as a 'strategic ritual' (Tuchman, 1972) or as a 'convention' that enables the media 'to appeal to the middle of the road audience and increase their market share' (Ognianova and Endersby, 1996).

Above all, neutrality of this sort appears to be a potential source of bias, especially when labeling is at issue. Rémy Ourdan's statement that 'there is often a fight over the terms, the labels' echoes Stuart Hall's (1982) reflection on the political struggle over signification. Yet, interestingly, whereas Hall suggests that connotations are not pre-given as in a dictionary, but rather a product of a political competition over meanings, Rémy Ourdan claims here that it is this struggle which finally leads to the resort to neutral terms and to a true purge of connotations. He laments that this forced neutralization is sometimes done at the expense of accuracy. As an illustration, he evokes the coverage of the siege of Sarajevo: neutrality led journalists to write about 'the belligerents', whereas in fact there were clearly identified besiegers and besieged.

Nevertheless, other journalists insist that choices of connoted labels – be they positive or pejorative – can veil the complexity of a situation. For instance, Jean-Pierre Tuquoi (*Le Monde*) regrets that, by resorting to the label 'rebels' to designate the military force opposed to the governmental power in the Ivory Coast, he evoked a positive image of these opponents, presented as liberators, though they too were serving their thirst for despotic control.

The question of labeling thus appears crucial and poses several problems. If connoted labels can lead to distortions or even Manichaeism, excessive caution and euphemisms can also introduce biases.

Objectivity/neutrality conceived as balance raises moral dilemmas

An interesting contradiction can be observed in the discourse of some of the interviewees. Paradoxically, objectivity is rejected on a theoretical level when mistaken for

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neutrality and neutrality is scorned, but journalists often praise a position of balance between two sides, which can be interpreted as a neutral positioning on several accounts. Indeed, Rémy Ourdan, for example, explains that in the case of the coverage of the second Intifada, as in other cases of conflict coverage, 'when we receive letters of protest from supporters of both sides, it means that we've made a good job of it, that it's balanced'. But is the criterion of 'balance' not contradictory with his previous rejection of neutrality? While the term 'neutrality' is considered with distrust and contempt, the ideas of balance and distance are often put forward through concrete examples drawn from the interviewees' experiences. Balance is seen as an ascetic attitude consisting of entering into the alien and possibly repulsive perspectives of actors. For Pierre Rousselin (*Le Figaro*), 'the key is to present both adversaries' points of view in order to make it possible for the reader to understand'.

Yet this conception of objectivity/neutrality as balance/distance still inspires harsh criticisms, particularly on Vincent Hugeux's part:

> The journalist must provide answers. He cannot content himself with reporting his sources' words: 'According to this source, blah … while according to that source, blah …', implying: 'You, the reader, have to make up your mind'. That is not satisfying.

Many scholars have stressed this criticism of objectivity conceived as moral disengagement (Merritt, 1998; Stoker, 1995). In this sense, one can understand Theodore Glasser's (1984) blame that 'objectivity precludes responsibility'. Vincent Hugeux proposes to solve this moral dilemma by clearly taking sides and claiming responsibility for it:

> Five minutes for the Jews and five minutes for Hitler? I say 'No!' In the same way, there can't be five minutes for those who were slaughtered in Sarajevo and five minutes for the Serbians (…) There actually are heroes and bastards [*salauds*], even if I am perfectly aware that there is no such thing on earth as chemically pure icons and 100% certified rascals.

As we see, the categorization '*salaud*' is meaningful here, especially in the context of the coverage of war, in which there could be a (natural?) tendency to group people by nation or ethnicity and to draw generalizations in which one group is 'the victim' and the other is 'the torturer'. As the journalists' discourses demonstrate, polarization and Manichaeism are tempting when one deals with violent conflicts. As their remarks also reveal, most journalists are aware of the risk of overgeneralization. Indeed, many of them emphasize this problem by providing concrete examples drawn from their personal experience:

> From the moment that a civilian population is concerned, it always becomes very disturbing, because there never are only the bad and the good guys. In former Yugoslavia, I also felt empathy for Serbian populations. The Serbians were not all bad. Serbian populations also suffered. (Romain Gubert, *Le Point*)

Thus, the moral conception of the journalist who is assigned the task of pointing out the 'heroes' and the 'bastards' turns out to be problematic, because the identification of the victims and the torturers is not always obvious.

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3 Moral values as alternatives?

Honesty and modesty are the most frequently cited values.

Confronted with practical difficulties, suspicions and moral problems surrounding the conception of objectivity as a standard, many journalists propose moral values as alternatives: ‘Subjectivity does not prevent you from doing your job in good faith and with honesty. Even when you have your own point of view, you can report honestly’ (Thierry Oberlé, *Le Figaro*). Promotion of values such as honesty is seen as a modest yet effective way to cope with daily tasks. Honesty and good faith are promoted as positive and universally appreciated values, whereas objectivity seems to be apprehended in a negative way: ‘Objectivity tends to be defined negatively; it is revealed when it is lacking. It means to avoid being false’ (Sylviane Stein). Still, one must provide a positive and practical definition of honesty: What does it mean concretely for a journalist, in terms of what he or she is expected to do or to avoid doing in such-and-such situation?

Honesty can be related to the notion of transparency evoked by three of the interviewees. Transparency means providing and making explicit the process by which information is produced. Journalists are indebted to their readers and owe them explanations of their work and the way they ‘manufacture’ news. Beyond that, several respondents closely link ‘intellectual honesty’ to the adoption of a modest attitude, which finds expression in the journalist’s straightforward recognition of his or her own ignorance and limitations. Pierre Rousselin expresses it plainly: ‘When you don’t know, you don’t know! That’s also being honest.’ This acknowledgment is conceived of in terms of a duty towards the readers, which Vincent Hugeux catches in the injunction ‘Don’t take people for fools!’ This seems particularly important in the case of coverage of foreign conflicts, since most readers do not have direct access to the field and receive almost exclusively mediated information.

The notion of ‘honesty’ as grasped through the journalists’ discourses can be related to the French concept of ‘*l’honnête homme*’, as described by Michèle Lamont (1992) in a book untitled *Money, Morals and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-middle Class*. Lamont portrays the French ‘*honnête homme*’ as somebody who is good company, who displays vast and often superficial knowledge. But she adds that ‘the notion of “*honnête homme*”’ is also associated with ‘intellectual honesty, honesty in relation to oneself … the idea of honour’. Interestingly, she locates this concept in a social stratum and goes so far as to identify the notion of intellectual honesty as ‘quintessential to French upper middle-class discourse on morality’. Indeed, the journalists I met belong to a Parisian upper-middle class.[8] Besides, Lamont’s analysis of the concept is based on interviews of upper-middle class white males, including a journalist. Living in Clermont-Ferrand, this journalist conceives of intellectual honesty as the refusal to ‘conform to what people who are your superiors would like us to do, in a servile way’. Honesty, as defined here, seems to be a synonym of integrity or of authenticity in the sense of ‘being faithful to oneself’: ‘One should be faithful to his own perceptions and shouldn’t lapse into neo-realism’ (Vincent Hugeux). Lamont opposes the category of ‘*honnêtes hommes*’ to that of ‘*salauds*’ which was invoked by Vincent Hugeux. According to Lamont, ‘s*alaud*’ is a label used to refer to ‘one who lacks intellectual honesty and who is ready

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to sacrifice the interest of others to his own by repressing them politically or by being blatantly unfair to them if necessary'.

Honesty versus responsibility?

As one might notice, these definitions of honesty – as good faith, transparency, modesty or as behaving as a '*honnête homme*' – all put the stress on intentions and/or attitudes. The problem with such a focus is that it prevents an evaluation of journalistic professionalism. Indeed, being a moral person is not the same as – and is not sufficient for – being a professional. Moral values cannot account for such criteria as competence or usefulness or the relevance and interest of what is reported. Is one a good journalist simply by being true to oneself, by recognizing one's limitations and maintaining transparency vis-a-vis readers? Perhaps, but perhaps not.

Promoting honesty can in fact lead to the exoneration of many consequential faults. For instance, after evoking his regrets about past mistakes, Jean-Pierre Tuquoi concludes: 'But I console myself when thinking that I did it in a disinterested way. I was not paid by somebody. I did it in a totally disinterested way and because I believed in what I wrote.' Telling about one of his main mistakes, Yves Cornu showed a similar leniency: 'That was not dishonesty. That was thoughtlessness [*légèreté*]'. Yet, he then admits: 'But in fact dishonesty is generally not viewed as such.' The risk run by the invocation of honesty is that, so long as you believe that you are honest, you can persist in your mistakes, all the more so since you can ignore criticisms emanating from the outside. Such criticisms are promptly interpreted as pressures and as a threat to your integrity. Honesty opposes responsibility in the sense that it fails to respond to those who provide criticism.

This problem brings us back to the fundamental idea that professionalism and morality do not belong to the same sphere or field. Honesty, modesty, and the like are a matter of personal – if not private – morality, whereas professionalism demands that the journalists comply with an implicit or explicit code of ethics. Nevertheless, attention should be called to the fact that, with the exception of Sylviane Stein,[9] none of the interviewees referred to any formal text on ethics. And even then, Sylviane Stein points out that the formal codes surprisingly refer to personal morality rather than to professional norms:

> Objectivity must be combined with ethics, as already defined in the 1918 Charter of the Journalist and also notably in the European Charter of Munich. These codes generally deal with honesty rather than with objectivity. This honesty has to do with personal morality. While deontology refers to a collective ideal, morality remains personal.

Interestingly, the journalist here claims that the opposition between honesty and objectivity mainly refers to the cleavage between personal and collective norms. She proposes to combine honesty, as defined in the codes, with objectivity, as a collective standard.

This combination actually corresponds with the idea that journalism is at once a collective and individualistic profession: 'The press is both a milieu in which the idea of belonging to a community is very strong and which has a lot of individualists among its members.' In fact, this ambivalence proves strangely significant when one considers the place and importance of authorship and the sharing of responsibilities between journalists

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and the journals they work for. Regarding this specific issue, Vincent Hugeux draws attention to cultural differences, particularly between French and Anglo-Saxon practices of journalism: 'Anglo-Saxon journalism is different. The correspondents send their notes to the head office and there the editorial staff writes the paper. *Times* [London] and *Newsweek*, for example, take the risks. They are held responsible for the finished product.' As a result, according to Vincent Hugeux, 'the Anglo-Saxons prove better than us regarding the rigorousness and the checking of information. It happens that their editorial staffs call the correspondents' sources in order to check what has been reported.' As a recent illustration of this, Vincent Hugeux recalls the Jayson Blair case, where *The New York Times*, as an institution, was first and foremost incriminated and had to apologize profusely to its readers. Thus, there is a different notion of responsibility: 'In France, the journalist who signs is on the front line, whereas in the United States, it is the paper that takes on the responsibility as a last resort for what has been published in its columns.' There are also divergent conceptions of authorship:

> In the United States, the article is written and signed by someone from the editorial staff and at the bottom of the page appears a 'with' giving the name of the correspondent in the field. This sharing of tasks is incompatible with the French spirit. For the French, the notion of the author proves essential.

Sylviane Stein confirms the existence of such a fundamental difference and recalls, by way of illustration, that 'the articles from *The Economist* are not signed'. So while the evaluation of professionalism demands that journalists refer to collective standards, responsibility in France is a matter of personal concern.

4 'Etre juste' is what is eventually expected of a professional journalist

When trying to theorize journalistic values, the respondents show disagreement and even internal contradiction. This was especially obvious when they dealt with the conception of objectivity as balance. However, during the discussion, when they related to their experience, to concrete examples and to the dilemmas raised by specific cases, the same expression almost systematically recurred in all journalists' discourses: '*être juste*'. The implicit definitions that the journalists suggest for this term are at once inspired by a focus on personal experience and connected to universal moral values.

The French adjective '*juste*' can be translated as 'accurate' or as 'fair', according to the context. It can indeed refer to the noun '*justice*' (same meaning in French and in English) or to the noun '*justesse*' which means 'accuracy' (and secondarily, 'precision', 'correctness', 'exactness' or 'soundness'). Rémy Ourdan, *Le Monde*'s director of the foreign affairs department, implicitly refers to both meanings when he discusses the problems raised by the selection of labels. First, he explains that '*être juste*' (justice-fairness) should not be confused with neutrality. He then states that words should be chosen carefully ('*être juste*' meaning accurate). As one can see, both meanings are closely connected insofar as by accurately reporting on a situation in the field, the

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journalist avoids misleading her or his audience and shows fairness in the characterization of the parties to the conflict.

In this sense, '*être juste*' is both a professional and moral standard. Consequently, this criterion helps to resolve the dilemma raised by Vincent Hugeux when he suggests that it is the journalist's role or even mission to point out 'the heroes and the bastards'. As Yves Cornu explains, the concern for justice does not necessarily mean that the journalist should emphatically regard himself or herself as a judge or a righter of wrongs. Instead, he argues that 'the basis of our job is to inform' and 'then denunciation can ensue from the job of information'. Indeed, information and denunciation may be related by a sort of automatic link, as Yves Cornu suggests when he asks: 'Where does information end and where does denunciation start when you describe children in a makeshift hospital, with shrapnel in their bellies? It [denunciation] is not the vocation, but it [information] can lead to it.' Romain Gubert makes the same observation when he explains that mutilation of children in the villages of Sierra Leone cannot be reported in cold terms, because such a description would inevitably betray the reality in the field. Here, the expression of empathy is not seen as conflicting with the care for accuracy, but the contrary.

Likewise, the concept of fairness as derived from the idea of '*être juste*' raises the possibility of resolving the dilemma of balance formulated in the question: Can/should the journalist choose a side or must he or she be content with representing both parties' arguments without making a ruling? In fact, as the examples provided by the journalists reveal, a distinction should be made between the news-gathering phase and the reporting phase. While gathering data, the journalist should give voice to all the participants in a story: 'You should be able to go to each side, in all neutrality' (Marc Sémo). This kind of balance is praised as equity of treatment. However, while constructing a narrative, the journalist should make a ruling, when considering the question: What if I know that one of the voices or participants in a conflict is right or innocent while the other is lying or guilty? The journalist is expected to proceed in evaluating each competing version of a story. This is done by judging the arguments presented by antagonistic voices and by considering the evidence provided by the different available sources. Here, neutrality, in the form of reporting both sides in a detached way, might be rejected as inaccurate and unfair in the distribution of praise and blame to the participants in the conflict; that is, in the assignment of responsibility for what occurred in the field – a task which proves to be of utmost importance in the case of violent conflict coverage.

Conclusion: a community of individuals

The journalists seem to share common values, although they are hesitant to provide definitions of their norms and standards. Taking into account these qualms and disagreements, I attempt to summarize the main findings.

The journalists first reject the concept of objectivity as being void of all meaning. Instead, they promote, in their discourses, a line of conduct. Suspicion and rejection of ideology, good faith, modesty and the acknowledgment of one's own limitations, these are – beyond the journalists' divergences on many topics – the most recurring elements of this line of conduct. The journalists also frequently stress the conception of journalism

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as a practice: let the field speak for itself rather than extrapolating, be a witness instead of a judge, give voice to all sides, render the complexity of a situation, etc.

As an alternative to objectivity conceived as neutrality, they mainly advocate moral values, and first and foremost 'intellectual honesty'. Nevertheless, their approach in terms of moral values turns out to be problematic since it refers to a vague attitude or *état d'esprit* and not to a means by which journalistic performance may be evaluated. In other words, unlike objectivity, honesty is a moral personal value that cannot be turned into a professional standard.

When in line with the importance that they grant to the experience of the field, they give concrete examples of the dilemmas that they had to face in the course of their careers, the journalists recurrently resort to the expression '*être juste*'. Discussions with journalists on the concrete cases they were confronted with demonstrate the interdependence between accuracy and fairness. Interestingly, whereas many scholars have striven to add the ideals of moral and justice to the concept of objectivity understood as the exclusive pursuit of a cold truth, the expression '*être juste*' reconciles the ideals of truth and justice: when the journalist accurately describes a situation observed in the field (truth in the sense of a high degree of correspondence between the journalist's assertion and the world to which this assertion refers), she or he also demonstrates fairness towards the participants (justice in the sense of a justified assignment of praise and blame).

Perhaps it is in this sense that one can understand Raymond Aron's (1938) argument that 'objectivity does not mean impartiality but universality'. Objectivity is universality in its opposition to the unfair application of two sets of rules. Objectivity is universality in the sense of a justified judgment; that is, a judgment in accordance with the truth of a situation.

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Notes

1 Beyond national differences, the bottom-line commonality of journalists qua journalists can be found in the reference to truth, which Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987) consider 'at the heart of the journalistic enterprise'. The quest for truth can be said to have a universal dimension, in that it seems as old as the newspapers themselves and it is not limited to the American press. For one illustration out of many, one can quote the last lines of a prospectus published in 1662 by French journalist Renaudot, in his *Gazette*: 'In one thing, however, I will cede to no one, and that is in seeking the truth' (quoted in Hudson, 1968).

2 For a reflection on the issue of autonomy of the journalistic field, see Benson and Neveu (2005), especially Chapter 11 by Michael Schudson: 'Autonomy from what?', pp. 214–23.

3 I here refer to David Held's definition of 'immanent criticism' as a method or a procedure: 'Social theory, developed through immanent criticism, is concerned to investigate (aspects of) the social world "in the movement of its development". It starts with the conceptual principles and standards of an object, and unfolds their implications and consequences. Critique proceeds, so to speak, "from within" and hopes to avoid, thereby, the charge that its concepts impose irrelevant criteria of evaluation of the object' (quoted in Illouz, 2003: 212).

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4 Female journalists represent 43.4 percent of a total of 37,301 holders of the press card (January 2008), according to the commission in charge of the attribution of the press cards (Commission de la Carte d'Identité des Journalistes Professionnels). This proportion grew significantly over the last 50 years, since women made up only 14.3 percent in 1960 (Rieffel, 2003). Yet one should point out that more women have precarious jobs and are confined to subaltern posts such as secretary of redaction.
Besides, there are important disparities between the sectors: females represent more than 50 percent of the journalistic population in the sector of the feminine press, whereas this proportion falls to less than 30 percent in the press concerned with general, political or economic news (1999 statistics provided by Rieffel).
A 2006–2007 report for the French Senate (Gautier, 2007) quotes female journalist interviewees who commented on these disparities. For instance, one of them deplored the existence of 'a hierarchy of the topics, defined by males, between topics regarded as masculine, such as war, sports and economy, and topics considered as secondary and feminine, such as social and child concerns'. However, another journalist pointed out that 'an increasing number of women have been entering the journalistic profession, especially in the "shock troops" that dare go to the field, notably in zones characterized by situations of war'.
5 A draft of this article was sent to the 13 interviewees who were asked whether their quotes were faithful to their thought or whether they wished to propose modifications. Eleven interviewees replied and a few asked for slight changes that I took into account in this final version.
6 One recurrent theme has been excluded from the analyses presented in this article: the issue of detachment versus involvement of journalists. Though I did not explicitly propose this theme for discussion, it recurred in almost every discourse and importance was granted to the challenges and dilemmas it poses to the journalists. Therefore, I have decided to dedicate a full article to this specific issue.
7 In 2007, a group of French sociologists published a study that stressed the increasing precariousness of work in the journalistic profession (Accardo et al., 2007).
8 Rodney Benson (2005) observes that 'systematic, direct information about the class backgrounds of journalists is scarce' and believes this is 'in part because of the difficulties inherent in asking such questions, in part, perhaps because of the doxic assumption of journalists and many social scientific researchers that class no longer matters'. Given the paucity of data on class backgrounds, Benson refers to the use of educational background, which 'often serves as a rough proxy for class'. He then observes that access to professional training in journalism 'especially at elite levels is so powerfully determined by class background' that it may 'reinforce the upper-middle class "bias" of the field' (pp. 101–2).
9 Sylviane Stein's special concern with formal codes of ethics can be accounted for by the fact that she is also a teacher of journalism and, as such, has a more theoretical view on the subject than do her colleagues. This is also the case of Vincent Hugeux, whom I quoted abundantly, for he shows an ability to formulate in clear and synthetic theoretical phrases ideas that were also expressed by other respondents.

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Biographical notes

Sandrine Boudana is a doctoral candidate (ABD) in the Department of Communication and Journalism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her doctoral research is supervised by Professor Tamar Liebes and Dr Paul Frosh. Her dissertation is entitled 'Journalistic objectivity as a performance: Construction of a model of evaluation and application to the case of the French press coverage of the second Intifada'.
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Appendix 1

The thirteen interviewees

Rémy Ourdan, now *Le Monde*'s foreign editor, began his career as a war correspondent in Sarajevo. He has covered many conflicts, including Bosnia and Kosovo, investigated the genocide in Rwanda, and after 9/11 covered the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A book published under his direction in 2001 analysed postwar eras in the 1990s (*Après-guerre(s). Années 90, chaos et fragiles espoirs*. Autrement).

Jean-Pierre Tuquoi joined *Le Monde* in 1992, first as a business journalist and then as a foreign correspondent. He specialized in the coverage of events in the Arab world and in Africa. He is also the author of several books, the last of which is entitled *Paris-Alger, le couple infernal* (Grasset & Fasquelle, 2007).

Pierre Rousselin works at *Le Figaro* as editor in chief, head of the foreign news desk and foreign-policy editorial writer since 1998. He started his career at the press agency AFP and, in 1988, was recruited by *Le Figaro* as a special foreign correspondent. He notably

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covered the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a permanent correspondent in Jerusalem from 1990 to 1995.

Patrick De Saint-Exupery is an international reporter for *Le Figaro*. He has received several prizes: Prix Albert Londres, Prix Bayeux and Prix Mumm. He is also a member of the Prix Albert Londres jury. A specialist on the war in Rwanda, he published *L'inavouble* (Les arènes, 2004), a book on the genocide and French responsibility for the events.

Thierry Oberle works for *Le Figaro* as a war correspondent. He covered conflicts in Africa and the second Intifada from the beginning (he was sent to the field fewer than 48 hours after the triggering of the confrontation).

Marc Semo works for *Libération* as a foreign correspondent and has covered many conflicts, including the war in the former Yugoslavia.

Damien Roustel works for *L'Humanité* and covered the conflicts in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. He is the author of an essay on the deontology of journalists in the context of a political affair: *Les journalistes et Pierre Botton. Vous avez dit déontologie?* (Editions lyonnaises d'art et d'histoire, 1996).

Catherine Tardrew works for *Le Parisien* and has covered, among many others, the conflicts in Algeria, Israel, Iraq and the Ivory Coast.

Vincent Hugeux began his career 25 years ago and worked for *La Croix* and *Le Monde*. For the last 18 years, he has been working for the weekly *L'Express*. He was awarded the renowned 'Prix de Bayeux des correspondants de guerre', for an article dealing with the situation in Uganda. As a teacher in two of the most prestigious French schools of journalism, at Sciences Po in Paris and ESJ in Lille, he deals with issues of ethics and the place of objectivity in journalism.

Sylviane Stein is a freelance journalist who has worked for *L'Express* for a number of years. In addition to the daily practice of journalism, her work as a teacher at the CFJ de Paris leads her to take a keen interest in the academic study of journalistic values.

Yves Cornu works for the weekly *Le Point* on the coverage of events in Europe. He notably covered the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland.

Romain Gubert works as a war correspondent for *Le Point* and covered conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Africa (notably Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast), and the Middle East.

Jean-Christophe Ploquin is the head of foreign affairs at the Catholic daily newspaper *La Croix*. He is particularly interested in the coverage of events in the Arab world.

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