**Local pure players in Southern France between journalistic diversity
and economic constraints**

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In France, during the last few years, there has been a proliferation of independent news websites. These so-called pure players try to invent a new form of online journalism, partly emancipated from the constraints of traditional news organizations. The particularly rich ecosystem of pure players in France was noticed in a report of the Reuters Institute that evokes a "Nouvelle vague" of journalistic start-ups in the country (Bruno and Nielsen, 2012). Since 2010 this new wave is sweeping across numerous French cities and rural areas where local journalistic start-ups are challenging established monopolies. Some of these pure players have common points with their national counterparts such as Rue 89 or Mediapart: they cherish their independence towards local political and economic elites, if not in fact at least in discourse; they try to innovate journalistically; they engage themselves in intense relations with their public with whom they share geographical proximity but also often sociological and political closeness; and, finally, their presence reinvigorates local public spaces. Nevertheless they also suffer from weak business models and from a lack of recognition by local institutions and informants.

According to David Domingo (2008), pure players are the result of the junction between two groups who jointly invented the "myth of online journalism": on the one hand there are experimented journalists who reject traditional media because of their lack of independence and innovation; on the other hand there are digital enthusiasts, carrying a techno-utopian ideology and a specific technological know-how. As Domingo rightly points out, the initial goal of this junction between experienced professionals and young technophiles is the reinvention of independent journalism in the service of society and democracy. However, empirical evidence suggests that it is very difficult to keep such a commitment while undergoing strong material constraints (Smyrnaios, 2013). Still far from economic success nevertheless these experiments tell us much about the evolution of contemporary journalism.

Therefore, our paper explores online news pure players in Southern France. It is based on the results of a research project that took place between 2010 and 2013 and focused on their editorial strategies, journalistic practices and business models. First we will describe the context of online local news and journalism in France. Second we will present our corpus, method and

theoretical framework. Finally, we will present the results of our empirical research based on three axes: relations to the public, journalistic practices and business models.

1. General trends of online local news in France

Recent research on local news in France shows that the local and regional media landscape is rapidly evolving (Bousquet, Smyrnaios, 2012). First of all, changing reading habits tend to make it harder for local newspapers to maintain and renew readership. Second, advertising revenue for local newspapers is fading, especially when it comes to classified ads. Third, the local media landscape is subject to increasing concentration of ownership. The latter point is particularly salient in France: the country is partitioned by regional media groups that detain monopolistic positions in their territories. This situation doesn't push traditional media to innovate in deploying local journalism on the web, neither from a journalistic or a business perspective. Web strategies of local monopolies such as La Depêche du Midi in the area of Toulouse (Southwestern France) tend to concentrate on building audience through classic recipes for advertising-based business models like intensive search engine optimization and "shovelware" publishing (Smyrnaios, Bousquet, 2011). These players tend to reproduce their offline content on the web with no journalistic added value but also with little effort to renew and enrich their relations with the public through interaction and participation. This lack of innovation in the sector of local news is also due to the aforementioned economic crisis of local and regional press. For instance, in the area of Marseille (South-eastern France), despite the existence of two competing local dailies (La Provence and La Marseillaise) the development of original online reporting is constrained by insufficient means. On the other hand, local television and radio are underdeveloped in France as broadcast media consumption is concentrated on nationwide (Paris-based) networks. Therefore their online presence is also quite marginal in terms of investment and audience. Consequently, the conservative strategies of traditional media in most French regions, due to lack of competition and/or underinvestment, offer an unprecedented opportunity for independent local news websites to gain popularity. But this opportunity has yet to be seized.

Indeed, in France only two journalistic pure players, Rue 89 (that has been bought by the Nouvel Observateur press group) and Mediapart, are as famous as their US counterparts Politico or the Huffington Post and have some influence in public debates. Numerous local ventures are directly inspired by these two pioneers and some have even been affiliated to Rue 89, like in the cities of Rouen, Strasbourg and Lyon. Others, like Dijonscope and Telescope d'Amiens, have followed the model of Mediapart, producing investigative journalism available on subscription only. But all of these websites remain unknown to the majority of the public, even at a local level. According to Médiamétrie's audience measurement, in May 2012 there were only three Paris based pure players (Rue 89, Planet.fr and Slate.fr) with more than one million unique visitors a month. None of them was part of the ten most visited news websites in France. These figures are consistent with two sociological surveys conducted in 2009 on news consumption in France (Cevipof, 2010, Granjon, Le Foulgoc, 2010) in which the percentage of people who say they regularly get news on pure player websites is very low, ranging between 3 and 6%. What explains the preference of this minority of the population is the fact that it belongs

to the upper urban and educated classes and that it has an extensive daily use of the internet (Comby et al., 2011). Thus, the main target of pure players seems to be confined to a small and relatively homogeneous social group, quite close to that of journalists themselves.

Nevertheless, despite of their lack of audience, there is a kind of self-awareness movement growing stronger among journalistic start-ups in France, based on their common interests. An example of this movement of collective organization is the foundation of a professional association of journalistic pure players, the *Syndicat de la presse indépendante d'information en ligne* (Spiil). The goal of this initiative is to increase the visibility of journalistic pure players towards authorities, but also to balance the influence of traditional media. For instance, one of the main claims of the Spiil was to convince the French government to lower the VAT on online subscriptions from 19.6% to 2.1%, like the one applied to traditional media. Another major claim of the Spiil was that independent news websites be subsidized by the French government like newspapers. President Sarkozy met the latter claim in 2010, even if the sums at stake were much lower than those given to traditional media. The former claim of the Spiil about the discrepancy in the VAT between traditional media and pure players was finally satisfied in February 2014.

Proof that pure players increasingly organize themselves as a distinct sector of news media can also be found in their few collective partnerships in recent years, even though most of these initiatives have failed. For instance in 2013, through the Spiil, local pure players have tried to federate themselves in order to create a unified advertising and publishing network called leSquare.info. The concept was to aggregate content from numerous local pure players in order to produce a portal for local news in France and share advertising revenue. The project was abandoned in late 2013 because of lack of investors, but also because of divergences between partners. Another project called Jaimelinfo.fr was launched by Rue 89 in 2010. Jaimelinfo.fr is a crowdfunding platform exclusively dedicated to journalistic start-ups and blogs. The platform still exists but its level of activity is very low and the funding is scarce, showing the lack of interest of the general public in financing such ventures.

To summarize one can say that the landscape of online media in France offers great opportunities to develop and renew local journalism but also serious difficulties to find sustainable and sufficient revenue streams. The findings of our empirical research that follow shed more light on that fundamental contradiction.

2. Positioning theory and method

Our analysis is based on a socioeconomic approach. As has already been shown in the past, business models are consubstantial to the editorial strategies and modes of internal organization of online media (Boczkowski, 2010). Consequently, in order to understand the evolution of journalism, one has to take into account not only professional practices, but also the economic structure that supports them. Furthermore, by focusing on the case of three French journalistic pure players we strive to go beyond the issue of adapting the traditional media to the web, which has long dominated research (Mitchelstein, Boczkowski, 2009). Even if one

shouldn't ignore the fact that online journalism is an integral part of the media system and very much linked to traditional players such as newspapers and TV networks, pure players are an extremely useful field of observation of innovative trends and new practices.

Local journalism on the other hand is marked by strong specificities. In France, the physical and geographical proximity between local newspaper representatives and their readership even in the most remote areas is an historic heritage of the press and its main competitive advantage (Ringoot, Rochard, 2005). Traditionally, a journalist of a local newspaper is at the same time a media representative and a member of local society. His "ideal reader" (Eco, 1979) is his neighbour. Thus, local pure players are a privileged field on which to observe how specificities of local journalism blend with start up culture and online practices.

In order to examine critically the emergence of local pure players we have carried out empirical research upon a sample of three websites (Marsactu.fr, Carredinfo.fr and Ariegenews.com) in Marseille, Toulouse and Foix, two major cities and a small rural town of Southern France. Our method was based on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations inside online newsrooms (Domingo, Paterson, 2011). We carried out a dozen of interviews with managers and journalists in their workplaces between May 2010 and April 2013. The interviews were accompanied by meticulous observations of their work routines. In supplement we regularly visited the three websites and also collected and analysed a corpus of various internal documents such as financial statements, guides and reports, market research and readership analyses. This relatively long period of observation allowed us to follow the trajectory of these websites and thus understand how they evolved over time.

Name	Founded	Founders	Average monthly audience for 2013	Revenue for 2013	Full time employees/ journalists	Revenue stream
Marsactu.fr	2009	Pierre Boucaud	200,000 UV	€220,000	10/5	Advertising + PR film production
Carredinfo.fr	2011	X. Lalu X. Druot B.Enjalbal	60,000 UV	€12,000	4/3	Advertising + subscription + teaching
Ariegenews.fr	2007	Philippe Bardou	450,000 UV	€254,000	8/2	Advertising + PR film production

Marsactu is a local pure player launched in 2009 and located in the heart of Marseille. The website employs five full-time journalists out of ten employees and aims explicitly to compete with the main local newspaper *La Provence* by deploying investigative journalism especially in the area of local politics. In 2013, Marsactu had 200,000 unique visitors per month in average

and an annual revenue of €220,000. Its net income for the same year was negative (-€100,000). Marsactu is published by RAJ Media, owned by Pierre Boucaud (49) who detains 43% of the capital. Other shareholders include local businessman Frédéric Chevalier with 35% and telecom mogul Xavier Niel. Pierre Boucaud has had a long career as advertising executive (Publicis and Havas) and as head of two local TV stations (TLT in Toulouse and LCM in Marseille). He is therefore an experienced manager and has very good knowledge of the media market in Marseille. What motivated him in founding Marsactu was on the one hand his desire to head his own business but also the need he felt for Marseille to have an independent journalistic voice able to criticize and denounce corruption and nepotism that are historically very strong in the city. Each week Marsactu publishes about thirty articles, sometimes with video, and at least one talk-show filmed inside the newsroom's studio.

Carré d'info was created in 2011 by three young professionals with a short experience: journalists Xavier Lalu (29) and Bertrand Enjalbal (30) and manager Xavier Druot (32). In 2012 another young journalist, Pauline Croquet (28), joined the original trio. The four detained 100% of B2X Editions, the publisher of Carré d'info. The team was completed by a dozen of freelance journalists that occasionally collaborated with the website. Throughout 2013, Carré d'info had an average of 60,000 unique visitors per month and generated a little more than €12,000 in revenue for the whole year. The concept of Carré d'info was largely inspired by Rue 89. Like its Parisian model, Carré d'info aimed in producing original news coverage of the metropolitan area of Toulouse with a special attention on issues neglected or unexplored by other local media such as culture, ecology or technology. It also voluntarily encouraged participation of its readers. The weekly production of the newsroom was of ten original articles and a few brief news. By December 2013, and after Bertrand Enjalbal left Toulouse, the remaining partners decided to end the company's activity due to insufficient revenue.

Ariegenews was founded in 2007 in a rural area of Southwestern France by Philippe Bardou (54) who owns 100% of the publishing company Midinews. Philippe Bardou has had a career of consultant in digital media and has launched several ventures throughout the 1990s and until the beginning of the 2000s. He was also involved in the initial launching of Dailymotion in 2005. The idea of creating a local news website came to him when he and his family moved from Paris to the Ariège region on the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains and he observed the lack of news coverage of his town. Today Ariegenews is based in Foix, a town of 10,000, and covers the Ariège region with a population of 150,000 whose main occupation is agriculture and textile production. Ariegenews employs two full time journalists, two editors, a webmaster and two technicians. In 2013 the company had revenue of €254,000 and loses of a few thousand euros while its average monthly audience was about 450,000 unique visitors. Every week the newsroom produces a dozen of original articles and at least three video reports and a news show presented by journalist Laurence Cabrol.

3. Participatory culture and relations to the public

Pure players seem to create stronger and more engaged communities of readers than traditional online media. For instance, Rue 89 and Arrêt sur images have large and well-

connected communities of regular commentators who sometimes blog and interact intensely with journalists. These websites also receive a bigger share of incoming traffic from social networks like Facebook and Twitter than from Google, meaning that readers share and promote strongly their content (Smyrnaios, op. cit.). Thus readers' participation in producing and broadcasting news seems to be a strong feature of journalistic start-ups. When it comes to our sample of local pure players, two out of three websites - the urban ones Marsactu and Carré d'info - seem to fit this description. Indeed these websites aim at a readership concentrated in and around two metropolitan areas. Their goal is to try to fill the gap created by the gradual disengagement of local newspapers from inner city news and the subsequent abandonment of urban readers that can be observed in France since the 90s (Tétu, 1995). The founders of these two websites consider that urban readers, especially young ones, reject regional and local daily press but still have an appetite for local news.

Marsactu has a relatively important community of commentators, due to the special attention they are given in the newsroom. This attention requires all journalists' participation in comment moderation and monitoring. All members of the newsroom, thus, strive to consistently answer to questions, comments and critics formulated by readers. This activity is an integral part of their daily work routines. Articles involving local government and politicians are those that give rise to a large number of comments (frequently more than fifty, which is quite high in regard to the daily audience of the website). Sometimes, people and institutions mentioned in the articles provide clarifications or corrections, or even compliment the journalists. Although Marsactu is not yet open to full contributions from readers, comments on the site and reactions on social networks sometimes push journalists to cover particular issues, revealing a certain degree of public participation in the agenda building process. For instance a piece on the closure of numerous museums in Marseille the very year of its promotion as European Capital of Culture - a story taken up by several nation-wide media - was the result of readers' complaints. Social networking sites, mainly Facebook and Twitter, are not only seen as sources of traffic (which can reach 20 % for Marsactu) but also the means to interact with readers. With 3,000 likes on Facebook and almost 7,000 followers on Twitter in January 2014, Marsactu is one of the most active local websites on social media. This intense interaction builds up a particular public that can be compared to a sort of "regulars club".

Carré d'info has also close but somewhat different relations to its readership. Participation through comments and social networks (1,600 likes and 3,400 followers) is quantitatively smaller than Marsactu's because the overall visibility and audience of the website is lower. Nevertheless, the ideas and the views of the readers are very important for journalists in their selection of issues to cover. Also Facebook (20%) and Twitter (13%) combined account for more of the overall traffic than Google does (25%), meaning that stories are very often shared and discussed by readers and that only a quarter of them visit the website at random through a search query. What is particular about Carré d'info compared to Marsactu is that, besides sociological similarity between readers and journalists, there is also political proximity. Carré d'info is openly left leaning, critical of local political ethos and of traditional local journalism considered to be too reverential. Due to this somewhat radical stance, Carré d'info's journalists refuse for example to attend some official events such as press conferences, inaugurations and

so on but also to cover topics like sports and crime considered to be too commercial. According to their sayings, whenever they seem to drift too far from these principles there is always a reader or more to remind them of their commitments through comments or social networks. In this case, as often in politically engaged pure players, the public takes up the role of a watchdog defending the values and the principles of the community built around the newsroom. In result, the level of accountability of the journalists is very high compared to traditional local media online.

Finally, a common trend of the three pure players of our sample in their relations to the public results from the physical proximity between journalists and readers, which is consubstantial of local journalism. The journalists of Carré d'info, Ariegenews and Marsactu alike have regular encounters with readers, on the street or in particular events. In the case of Carré d'info and Marsactu some of these events, like public debates and conferences, are even hosted by their journalists. Deskwork occupying a relatively small amount of their time compared to online newsrooms of national media, these journalists are really emerged in their social environment during their professional activity and thus get regularly solicited by citizens on local problems or questions. This is particularly true in the case of Ariegenews where journalists don't seem to use comments or social networks as raw material for news production. Indeed, Ariegenews doesn't have an official Facebook page and has only 230 followers on Twitter. This difference compared to the other two can be linked to the sociological characteristics of the website's readership, which is older and mostly rural. Another reason that explains the low investment of Ariegenews in online interactions with readers is economics. Indeed, for Philippe Bardou, Ariegenews' founder, social networks are not interesting from a business perspective because they harness traffic from all over the country that is not attractive for local advertisers.

4. Editorial strategies and journalistic practices

Daily production of news in Carré d'info involves field reporting inside the city of Toulouse, mainly in the centre where the newsroom and the main institutions are located. There is no thematic specialisation among the four journalists. After a brief morning discussion each one of them is free to choose what issues or events he will cover for the day. There is also no apparent hierarchy among the three journalists who have equal tasks and obligations. Articles are systematically illustrated with original photographs, mostly by Kevin Figuier, a freelance photographer, but not with videos because, according to the journalists, filming and editing is time consuming. There is a rotation system for desk tasks that lie to a different reporter every week. This position involves "unattractive" but important operations such as proofreading and editing. It also includes community management (updating Facebook and Twitter profiles, moderating and replying to comments) and also writing a series of brief news and operating a selection of links to publish on the website. Monitoring work is done by classic methods such as morning press reviews of local newspapers (La Depeche du Midi, La Voix du Midi, 20 Minutes etc.) but also quite a lot on the web. Reading RSS feeds was gradually replaced by intensive use of Twitter, more random when it comes to the quality of results but described by the journalists as really performing in discovering little known events. For instance, Pauline Croquet has always a tab open on TweetDeck with the search query "Toulouse", which functions as an

alert and provides ideas for stories. Compared to their colleagues who work in big Parisian online newsrooms, the specificity of these journalists is their great amount of fieldwork. But mastering online tools is also essential to these young professionals because it enables them to carry out "virtual investigations".

One of the main problems of Carré d'info is the bad relations they have with local authorities and institutions: "We don't like them and neither do they" jokes Xavier Lalu. Overall, the feedback they get from authorities is limited due to the low visibility of the website. However, the staff members of local politicians who monitor everything that is said about them do not hesitate to tackle the journalists about their coverage. The Mayor of Toulouse himself, for example, has already directly expressed his discontent about an article of Carré d'info. The website's journalists also admit suffering from the treatment they get from PR services that consider them to be "nosy", contrary to other media such as La Depeche du Midi, more docile, with which these services are used to working. Carré d'info's journalists say they are seen as mere bloggers despite the fact that they are recognised professionals and holders of the Press card. Except for making reporting more difficult, these bad relations with local authorities have also direct economic consequences because these are among the main players in the advertising market of Toulouse.

Marsactu, on the other hand is much more recognisable than Carré d'info in its own city. It aims to compete with the local daily newspaper by proposing "high quality" content, distinguishing itself from *La Provence*'s coverage of the news, centred on crime and sports (mainly on the local football team Olympique de Marseille). According to Pierre Boucaud the website endows the role of a "news decoder", paying particular attention to topics or issues related to local government's policies. Marsactu's journalists imagine that their readers are keen in politics and that they know Marseille's political players and stakes. Thus the coverage of local news is built around investigations into political and financial deviant behaviours. At the same time, the central position of Marsactu's newsroom in the heart of Marseille facilitates ground reporting and offers the possibility to rapidly access different local political, economic and social actors.

In Marsactu field reporting "in the city" accounts for half of the journalists' working time. The other half is spent inside the newsroom, writing and doing desk tasks such as rewriting wire news, doing research and interacting with readers. This can be partly explained by the strong digital culture of these young journalists (excepting Pierre Boucaud, average of age is 28), more inclined to search for issues and stories online, through digital networks, than their counterparts of traditional media. Deeply acculturated to digital interactions, they use comments and social networking both professionally and personally, as a complementary approach to ground reporting much like their colleagues of Carré d'info. This trend is made easier by Marsactu's relatively loose hierarchical organization and highly autonomous working methods inspired by start-up culture and observed also in Paris-based pure players (Damian-Gaillard et al., 2009).

The journalists of Ariegenews, unlike those of Marsactu and Carré d'info, are systematically multitasking, producing in a daily basis photographs, video and text. The newsroom functions much like a weekly magazine, with a general meeting every Monday morning where journalists

discuss the topics to cover under the instructions of Philippe Bardou. When defining the week's agenda, great attention is given to official and public relations events. Thus, production process is more adapted to "soft news" as opposed to investigation and breaking-news. Every day Ariegenews journalists are on the field, which is mainly villages and some small towns like Foix, Pamiers or Lavelanet. Equipped with microphones and cameras they produce at least one or two video reports of a few minutes each on a daily basis. Video content is edited and published online by two film editors. Consequently, the work division in news production is more pronounced in Ariegenews than in the other two websites of our sample, as are hierarchical organization and productivity constraints. Each video is accompanied by an article, generally short, factual and neutral in tone, written by the same journalist that filmed the event. Before publication, a great attention is given to search engine optimization, which seems to be quite effective since more than one third of the website's traffic comes from Google and lands on pages with national or international news where Ariegenews has no expertise whatsoever.

According to Philippe Bardou, the main goal of Ariegenews is to be "influential" in the local public sphere. Being influential in his words means gaining the respect of the public as an independent media by criticising local political and economic elites when necessary. But at the same time it also means being very close to these elites and even promoting their actions. That's because local government and business are also the main funding providers of Ariegenews.

5. Revenue streams and business models

Despite the verve of local pure players in France, few of them have sustainable business models. Indeed, pure players are unable to attract sufficient sums from the two traditional revenue sources of local media: subscription and advertising. One of the most widely known local news websites, Dijonscope in the city of Dijon, terminated operations in May 2013. After being free access between 2009 and 2011, Dijonscope deployed a paywall making all news available only to subscribers. It's founder Sabine Torres argued that local advertising only was insufficient to sustain the website as she refused advertorials and other PR work. But with a few hundred subscribers after two years, instead of 3,500 needed to break even, it was clear that the paywall model wasn't working. Téléscope d'Amiens applied the same recipe with comparable results. Between September 2012 and December 2013 the website gained only 500 subscribers for €4,99 per month, far from the 2,000 necessary. Its existence is now at stake.

Nevertheless most local pure players - like the three in our sample - opted for free access. But they soon realised that mere advertising was insufficient and tried different combinations of revenue streams. Carré d'info's revenue came mainly from advertising (60%) and from its journalists' conferences in a journalism school. The website also had around fifty supporters, mostly friends and relatives of the journalists, who paid a monthly subscription of €5. In an effort to increase its advertising value, the website's manager sold display advertising on the basis of time of exposure and not on cost-per-thousand impressions (CPM). The same method that is used for advertising campaigns in local newspapers. For example, a homepage banner costs €240 per week. He also limited the number of banners and didn't use pervasive formats in order

to preserve user experience. In addition to that he tried to negotiate directly with clients rather than using ad networks such as Hi-Media. That is because on the one hand speaking directly to local clients was a better way to secure long term partnerships and on the other hand doing so avoided the website displaying ads that were not "in the spirit of Carré d'info".

Nevertheless, all three revenue sources combined generated about €1000 per month, which was of course not enough to sustain a (small) newsroom. During two years the founders of Carré d'info relied on other resources to make a living (unemployment benefits, welfare, parents support etc.) and used their small revenue to pay office and website costs as well as some freelance content. But their business plan proved to be completely wrong. After two years revenue didn't rise as much as audience did. This failure is mainly due to the lack of experience of the founders, especially when it comes to defining an adequate commercial strategy, and their refusal to engage in PR activities. Different solutions were examined like joining leSquare.info but none was pursued because of lack of means and motivation. The founders came to the bitter conclusion that local news as those produced by Carré d'info were definitely unprofitable.

Marsactu's business model is also based on advertising. Pierre Boucaud used to have a parallel activity as a PR consultant but ended it in order to dedicate himself completely to the website. Its contracts are secured over a long period of time (from several months to more than a year), something that facilitates the deployment of a long-term strategy. What is decisive in the case of Marsactu is the personality and the credibility of its founder as well as his long experience in advertising. Under his lead, Marsactu managed to satisfy the need of local economic and political players for reaching urban, educated upper class inhabitants of Marseille who don't read local newspapers. Marsactu succeeded in monetizing its position by producing advertorial talk shows in which local business personalities are interviewed, promoting local subsidiaries of companies from different sectors (banking, energy, telecoms, fast-food etc.). For 2013 this form of advertorial accounts for 80% of the website's revenue. These advertorials are efficient because Marsactu is credible and influential among the "informed". In addition to that, Marsactu's CPM for display advertising is quite high (€8) because of the quality of its audience. Pierre Boucaud acknowledges that even if he aims to increase traffic, his primary goal is to satisfy this particular, educated and well off audience rather than the general public. This specific ad-based model allowed Marsactu to almost triple its revenue from €78,000 to €220,000 between 2012 and 2013 and gradually diminish its yearly deficit from €225,000 to €100,000.

Ariegenews' basic revenue stream is also advertising. His clients are mostly local businesses and institutions. Much like Carré d'info and Marsactu, Ariegenews doesn't use an advertising network to sell its ads but manages all the phases of a campaign internally (prospecting, producing ads, customer relations). Also, banners are sold on the basis of duration and not CPM. This shows the proximity between local pure players and advertising clients that rarely exists in nationwide news websites. The automated systems of ad network such as Doubleclick for instance are not adapted in this context. Furthermore, the design and production of banners and video clips is a necessary revenue stream for Ariegenews, which functions also as a video producer for municipalities and local government.

But video is also a source of supplementary costs. Contrary to Marsactu and Carré d'info that use platforms such as Dailymotion and Youtube, Ariegenews broadcasts video from its own servers. Thus, it has to pay tenths of thousands of euros yearly for bandwidth and infrastructure. Philippe Bardou has obtained a subsidy from the government in order to buy a new server. But his main problem when it comes to developing his business is the lack of capital. His search for investors the past few months was fruitless. This incapacity to invest impacts human resources. For instance he is the only one inside the company prospecting for advertising clients. Consequently, Ariegenews seems to stagnate financially. Between 2011 and 2012 it's revenue grew of almost 46%, from €172,000 to €251,000. But in 2013 it was merely €254,000 and yearly deficit remained around €10,000. This forced the founder to lay off a journalist he hired in 2012 and to revise its plans for future investments.

Conclusion

Our study shows that local pure players function quite differently from nationwide newsrooms and local newspaper websites. Indeed, inside journalistic start-ups, daily operations involve interaction and permanent adjustment between journalists and a particular segment of the public whose members hold both the role of expert, informer, commentator and reader - even if decisions are ultimately made by professionals (Rebillard, 2011). This very active segment of the readers, a far cry from the average citizen, is characterized by specific features such as possession of a strong cultural capital (embodied by high levels of education) and a keen interest in politics. In the case of local pure players, the sociological and sometimes political proximity between the journalists and the public is also reinforced by geographical and physical vicinity. The sentiment of belonging to a community that is created by intense interactions among journalists and readers inside and around pure players is therefore very strong. Thus, accountability of journalists towards their readers is a structural characteristic of this particular kind of news website.

Indeed, working in a journalistic pure player in France equally consists in compelling to new trends (high degree of accountability, permanent discussion with the public) and also in doing away partially or totally with constraints that dominate large online newsrooms (real time coverage, shovelware). For instance, time constraints in pure player newsrooms are more flexible compared to that of websites of mainstream media which privilege immediacy and hence productivity (Degand, 2011). The latter tend also to be comprehensive in their offer of news, a trend that forces them to rely largely on second hand material (wire news, PR) and to closely follow the "official" agenda. Pure players are not obliged to act in the same way, even if some do. In terms of management pure players' internal organization is often closer to that of a start up than to a traditional newsroom. For instance, Marsactu and especially Carré d'info are characterized by loose hierarchy and the requirement of a strong commitment to the project. Finally, at the local level, journalistic pure players tend to practice field reporting at least as much as they do deskwork. In this, they differ from Paris-based or local online newspapers.

From a journalistic perspective, all these characteristics are very positive. One can even infer

that local pure players might be able to renew and reinvigorate local public spaces and debates. This is true to a certain degree. But our study showed two important shortcomings. First, the local pure players that we have examined are still addressing themselves to a very small fragment of the public with particular sociological and political characteristics. The overwhelming majority of the population is not familiar with them, so their influence is limited compared to that of traditional players. Second, as we have shown, local pure players like Carré d'info or Dijonscope that based their business models either on traditional advertising or subscriptions have failed to break even. In other words, local online news is not unprofitable *per se*. Those that succeed in maintaining important revenue streams, like Marsactu and Ariegenews, concede to non-journalistic activities such as PR film production and advertorials. From an ethical point of view this situation jeopardizes their independence towards local financial and political power. At the same time the French context makes it difficult for non-profit journalistic start-ups to exist. Indeed, the state funded subsidies benefit mostly to traditional media and are not adapted to Internet ventures, while there is no tradition in the country of non-profit foundations in the news sector. Thus the equation of how to finance independently produced local news of quality remains a hard one.

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