

# Repairing Deviant Journalistic Practice

## The French Press and the Dupont de Ligonès Case

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n the evening of 11 October 2019, French daily newspaper *Le Parisien*, citing police sources, broke a news story: Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, a man suspected of murdering his family in April 2011 and who had been missing since, had been arrested at Glasgow airport in Scotland. Shortly after, news agency *Agence France-Presse (AFP)* confirmed the news, opening the floodgates for many more articles and news reports announcing the arrest. Within less than 24 hours, however, the scoop was debunked after it was confirmed that the fingerprints of the man arrested did not match those of Dupont de Ligonès. For several media, priority turned to explaining to audiences how such a case of misinformation, i.e., the accidental production and/or dissemination of false information (Wardle, 2018), came to be.

The literature has shown that by engaging in discourse about themselves, or metajournalistic discourse, journalists affirm and, in some cases, attempt to repair the boundaries of their professional authority (Bennett et al., 1985; Berkowitz, 2000; Carlson, 2014; Eldridge II, 2019; Hindman, 2005; Thomas, & Finneman, 2014). This research examines the narratives used by six daily, generalist French newspapers to address this problematic news story that failed to conform to expectations of fairness, accuracy, and quality, and what their discourse says of the locus of responsi-

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bility and accountability within the professional ideology of journalists in France.

The Dupont de Ligonès case occupies a particular place within the French media and public imaginaries. The violence of the crimes (five members of the same family were shot dead before being buried in their garden), the time elapsed between the murders and the discovery of the bodies (approximately two weeks), and the carefully planned disappearance of the main suspect (after sending letters to relatives announcing the family's departure for the US, the patriarch was last caught on camera on 15 April, approximately 1,000 kilometres away from his home) have contributed to turning this murder story into an ongoing media saga. New elements, despite being few and far between since the murders took place, have been the focus of widespread news coverage. At the same time, audiences' appetite for the case has remained strong; in the summer of 2020, *Society* magazine sold over 400,000 copies of its special issue about the murders. Given the significance of this story for both the media and the public, the study of how news professionals reflected on their shortcomings takes on a particular resonance when examining the questions of journalistic authority and accountability.

To analyse how journalists in France discussed their responsibility in disseminating false information about the Dupont de Ligonès case, as well as the extent to which this discourse was used to restore their authority, this manuscript first reviews the literature on metajournalistic discourse, boundary work and paradigm repair. Follows an outline of the method employed for the analysis of news articles before the presentation of the findings. The research shows that through the use of three main discursive strategies – *minimisation*, *externalisation*, and *circumscription* – journalists repaired this case of journalistic misinformation by presenting it as an isolated incident of deviant professional practice. While the metajournalistic discourse examined in this research demonstrates efforts to bring stability to the profession by emphasising that its norms and practices remain, overall, sound, it also circumvents deeper reflections about responsibility and self-regulation. Such considerations are important, not only in regard to journalism in the current information disorder, but also as they hint at broader implications for the French media and the question of accountability.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### Metajournalistic Discourse

In France, research on journalistic discourse acquired visibility in the 1990s, around the same time that the sociology of journalism emerged as a distinct

category of study (Ringoot, 2014). For this to happen, discourse first had to be freed from the shackles of linguistics, an undertaking led by Foucault as early as 1969. The scholar developed the concept of discourse from a socio-historical perspective, demonstrating that syntax and semantic structure, alone, are insufficient to identify discursive meaning. Instead, discourses are shaped by the context in which they emerge but also shape the world they speak of, as such legitimising power relationships in society. While Foucault's approach has been criticised for failing to strongly connect discourse and social structures (Benson, 1999), his work has, nevertheless, inspired researchers to explore the social meanings behind discourse. French-speaking studies interested in journalism and its discourse have, for instance, shown how the emergence of a unique discourse, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was crucial to affirm the profession's legitimacy and further separate it from the literary and political fields (Ferenczi, 1993; Ringoot & Utard, 2005). While journalistic discourse continues to feed on other discourses, be they political, economic, or scientific, it remains compelled to "stand out in order to impose its social and professional legitimacy"<sup>1</sup> (Ringoot, 2014, p. 154). Given the profession's lack of a strongly institutionalised identity in France, this "discourse order" has become a "combat weapon" to legitimate and assert journalism "as an intangible and unquestionable component of democratic societies"<sup>2</sup> (Ringoot & Ruellan, 2007, p. 68). Thus, as a social practice of discursive production (Ringoot & Utard, 2005), journalism shapes meaning about itself. A fringe of the French-speaking literature has delved into journalism about journalism, or metajournalism, with Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022) demonstrating how such studies have often been conducted from a normative perspective (Bernier, 1995; Bertrand, 1997). Bertrand (1997), for instance, suggests that journalists talking about their practices, and critiquing them, can serve as a mechanism to regulate journalistic activity, alongside press councils and ombudsmen.

Similarly, the English-speaking literature has been interested in the social meanings behind journalistic discourses, demonstrating how these "comprise a territory of fragmentary utterances expressed by a range of actors that shape and constrain meanings, identities and conceptual boundaries" (Carlson, 2016, p. 353). For Farkas and Schou (2018, p. 301), "discourses are contingent and historical constructs, emerging through struggles and contestations over time". In attempting to impose their vision of social reality, journalistic discourses contain implicit definitions of journalism (Vos & Thomas, 2018). Where the French and English-speaking research traditions, however, differ is in the latter's attention to explicit forms of journalistic discourse about journalism through empiric studies, and how these participate in authority affirmation strategies. Originally led by Zelizer (1990, 1993)

and, more recently, by Carlson (2014, 2016, 2017) and Hanitzsch (2017), this strand of research focuses on what is commonly referred to as metajournalistic discourse, to examine “the central arena where journalistic culture and identity is reproduced and contested”, and where “struggles between the preservation and transformation of journalism take place” (Hanitzsch, 2017, p. 2-3). In other words, metajournalistic discourses constitute the site of an ongoing struggle over discursive authority to legitimise the profession to broader society, while articulating, for journalists, dominant positions attached to certain norms and practices (Hanitzsch, 2017, p. 3). Understood as such, metajournalistic discourse is not so much informative as it is performative, in that it “actively attempts to influence people’s perceptions of journalistic authority” (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022, p. 2313).

While establishing journalistic authority is an ongoing process of convincing society, at large, that journalists are best suited to “create legitimate discursive knowledge” about the world (Carlson, 2017, p. 13), studies have highlighted how metajournalistic discourse is often “activated in times of institutional strain” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2002). In labelling practices, actors, and norms as meeting or deviating from societal expectations, “journalists conduct power maintenance on strong institutions and individuals” (Perreault et al., 2022, p. 368). Practices, such as reporting and verification, are intrinsically linked to journalism’s institutional mission, so much so that they become quasi-norms (Schudson, 2001). Vos and Thomas (2018) suggest that these quasi-norms are part of a shared repertoire that comes to the fore when journalistic authority is questioned, and around which the community of journalists congregates to renew this authority. In their study of journalistic authority in a ‘post-truth’ age, the two scholars consider that “journalists have had occasion to renegotiate their authority more than they would have probably liked in the twenty-first century” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2004).

Thus, metajournalistic discourse becomes particularly evident in the face of certain crises and phenomena, and operates as a stabilising force in the journalistic field (Carlson & Usher, 2016). In interpreting an issue, journalists charge it with significance. This process may, in turn, catalyse reflections on journalistic practices and norms (Farkas, 2023; Hindman, 2005; Tandoc et al., 2019), and prompt the profession to stress and re-assert its “institutional value as a public good but also journalists’ individual role conceptions” (Schapals & Bruns, 2022, p. 8). Compelled to reaffirm their legitimacy, journalists engage in image restoration, and in a norming of experiences and perspectives (Perreault et al., 2021). This discourse is as much directed at audiences, in a “process of authority-buttrussing” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2002), as it

is inward-facing, in an effort to foster discussion and bring together the fragmented community of journalists (Perreault et al., 2021).

### Boundary and Repair Work

A common trait among most of the recent research on metajournalistic discourse resides in the identification of boundary work carried out by journalists to affirm the authority of their community. By discursively excluding certain actors, the ‘bad apples’ (Eldridge II, 2019), journalists protect their ranks (Tandoc et al., 2019), creating insiders and outsiders. Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022), in their analysis of metajournalistic discourses on transparency, highlight how these constitute performances providing insights into boundaries and power dynamics within the journalistic community. This boundary work also takes place around what Carlson and Lewis (2015, p. 10) term professionalism, which “includes efforts by journalists to establish themselves as a distinct community with specialized knowledge”. This consists, for instance, in expelling deviant values and forms, such as tabloid news. In labelling these as ‘un-journalistic’, news professionals patrol the boundaries of their field “to maintain their cultural authority and the privileges that accompany it” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2003). In France, studies have shown how a variety of actors in the media field have framed the issue of disinformation so as to legitimise certain journalistic practices and norms while discrediting others (Cabrolie, 2018; Doutreix & Barbe, 2019). At the core of this process are also “questions about the ethos of journalists and the societal role of the profession” (Farkas, 2023, p. 2).

Thus, in the case of deviant practice by one or several journalistic actors, metajournalistic discourse may also be used for repair work. Tuchman (1978) first coined the term *paradigm repair* to describe the process through which the journalistic community attempts to normalise a problematic news story that has slipped through its gates. For instance, through the lens of *paradigm repair*, Bennett et al. (1985) have examined the case of US national media seeking to make sense of a local TV station’s responsibility in letting a man set himself on fire live on camera in the early 1980s. The media’s conclusion was that the event was insignificant and unnewsworthy, and could have been prevented with better journalistic judgement. Therefore, “so conclusive and consensual was the ending to the national coverage that there was little repair work left to be done at the editorial level” (Bennett et al., 1985, p. 66). Journalists’ paradigmatic understanding of what is and what is not news was not altered, the scholars conclude (ibid). More recently, Thomas and Finneman (2014) have analysed how the Leveson Inquiry provided an opportunity for the British journalistic field to influence the shape of the debate through

*paradigm repair*. Using a variety of narrative strategies, the British media attempted to repair their practice and, therefore, retain their authority “at a time of great flux in the journalism paradigm” (Thomas & Finneman, 2014, p. 184).

Through repair work, journalists reaffirm their authority by discursively attending to internal breaches of their norms and practices (Berkowitz, 2000; Hindman, 2005), while reimagining “their work based on how their role performance is perceived” by audiences (Hanitzsch, 2017, p. 11). According to Carlson (2016, p. 361), “journalism’s status as an authoritative form of knowledge creation is not guaranteed or static, but the product of discourses that both delimit and legitimate its cultural forms”. Examining metajournalistic discourse not only helps understand how journalists affirm their authority but also provides key insights into the defence and repair strategies of this authority. Based on these considerations, two main questions guide this research:

RQ1: What are the main narrative strategies used by journalists to make sense of their responsibility in the false scoop about the arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonès?

RQ2: How do these narratives serve as repair mechanisms for journalists to maintain their authority?

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## METHOD

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To operationalise these questions, the research employs a qualitative method for the analysis of 54 articles published by six generalist national daily newspapers – *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *L’Humanité*, *Le Parisien*, *La Croix* and *Libération* – during a one-week period. Although these media cannot claim to represent the entirety of meaning-making in French journalism, they benefit from authority and influence as legacy publications. Additionally, their articles are publicly-available as opposed to, for instance, AFP’s content, which is mainly aimed at news professionals. As such, the newspapers’ discourse is dually directed, addressing society at large as well as the community of journalists, an aspect which merits particular attention when exploring the meanings behind metajournalistic discourse on deviant practice.

The study period starts on 12 October 2019, when it was confirmed that the man arrested at Glasgow airport was not Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, and ends on 19 October 2019, after which articles on the subject become sporadic. The articles were harvested using the Factiva database for *Le Figaro*, *L’Humanité* and *La Croix*. Archives for *Le Parisien*, *Le Monde* and *Libéra-*

*tion* were available on Europresse. These were sampled using, as a first step, the keyword ‘Dupont de Ligonès’. This process resulted in the identification of 111 articles. A second step consisted of combing through the data to eliminate duplicates as well as articles that did not contain any metajournalistic discourse. To identify evidence of metajournalistic discourse, attention was paid to words and tropes related to the themes of the media, journalism and information, and whether these were articulated in such a way that they demonstrated reflection on professional practices.

The final sample consists of 54 articles, including 11 editorials, all of which were published online. However, only 23 of these were printed as they often recapped several stories that had appeared on the newspapers’ websites. Editorials, as “the privileged site of the manifestation of the discursive identity of a medium” and “the emblem of a newspaper’s commitment, the mark of its involvement in current affairs”<sup>3</sup> (Esquénazi, 2014, p. 121), provide a vantage point from which to examine meta-discursive strategies and were, therefore, kept in the sample; so were articles labelled ‘analyses’, ‘commentaries’ and ‘chronicles’, which “occupy an ambiguous middle ground between information and opinion” (Benson & Hallin, 2007, p. 31). Given their propensity to contain greater comments and reflection on journalism compared to factual articles, such pieces often take on a prominent place in discourse studies, despite representing only a small portion of the journalistic production. Berkowitz (2000), Farkas (2023), Pereira and Mastrella (2022), as well as Thomas and Finneman (2014) have all chosen to focus exclusively on editorials when examining metajournalistic discourse.

The distribution of articles per news outlet is as follows: *Libération* ( $n=16$ ), *Le Parisien* ( $n=15$ ), *Le Figaro* ( $n=10$ ), *Le Monde* ( $n=5$ ), *La Croix* ( $n=5$ ) and *L’Humanité* ( $n=3$ ). The discrepancy in the number of articles published by the newspapers is a function of several factors. It is unsurprising that *Le Parisien* published a comparatively large number of articles in the aftermath of this story given that the newspaper was the first to break the (false) news. As for *Libération*, the newspaper is known for its in-depth analysis and critique of the media; most of the articles on the coverage of the Dupont de Ligonès’ case have been published under its media section. Finally, the relatively small number of articles from *L’Humanité* may reflect both the fact that the publication never published the false story, as it did not have the resources to immediately do so, and that, on average, it produces fewer articles than its competitors, again for want of resources.

To identify the principal metajournalistic narratives on the falsely reported arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, NVivo 12 software was used to establish codes, partly based on predetermined sets found in the literature due

to their relevance when analysing meta-narratives on journalistic responsibility (Carvalho, 2008; Thomas & Finneman, 2014; Zelizer, 1990). Thomas and Finneman (2014) have, for instance, found that to make sense of its role in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, the British press used four main discursive strategies: catastrophization (the risk of state control); self-affirmation (affirming journalists' central role in democracy); minimisation (mitigating the phone-hacking scandal and, therefore, the relevance of the inquiry); and localisation (placing responsibility for the scandal with a handful of members and therefore mitigating its impact on the rest of the community). Meanwhile, Zelizer (1990) demonstrates how the US media asserted their authority in their retelling of John F. Kennedy's assassination through three narrative strategies: synecdoche (whereby journalists use the authority gained from having covered certain events to apply it to an event they did not experience); omission (whereby journalists rearrange, and at times omit, the times, people, and places associated with the original event); and personalisation (whereby journalists recollect the assassination in terms of their own experiences).

For the present paper, an inductive approach was also implemented so as to not limit the range of categories. Through axial coding of the principal emerging themes, three main discursive logics were identified: *minimisation*, whereby the responsibility of the media is mitigated, with articles suggesting that journalists had no choice but to report on the information provided by Scottish police officers; *externalisation*, which enables journalists to distance themselves from this news story, placing responsibility away from their publication while blaming a certain type of reporting; and, finally, *circumscription*, whereby journalists admit responsibility in this media frenzy while insisting on the fact that it remains an isolated incident, which was contained through adherence to their professional norms and practices.

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## FINDINGS

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Most of the articles examined acknowledge the responsibility of the media in spreading false information about the arrest of Dupont de Ligonès, with some even apologising to their readers for the incident (Albouy, 2019; Joffrin, 2019). However, three distinct discursive strategies are used by journalists to retain control of the narrative on their professional misconduct, a process which eludes deeper reflections on journalistic accountability.

### Minimisation

A common narrative strategy found in the news outlets studied is to minimise journalists' shortcomings in this story, once it is proven that the man arrested at

Glasgow airport is not Dupont de Ligonès. Diverting attention away from the media to instead focus on actors who are external to the journalistic field is a recurring trope in the days that followed revelations about the mistaken identity. This logic is prevalent in articles published by *Le Parisien* but also *L'Humanité* and *La Croix*. In an editorial published on 14 October 2019, two days after the story was debunked, *La Croix's* editor-in-chief Florence Couret places the blame mostly on Scottish investigators:

In this case, it was the police who first communicated on this infamous arrest, when they only had second-hand information. Because it was, indeed, Scottish police officers who carried out the fingerprint comparisons and who, at the same time, refused to transmit the results to their French counterparts... But it doesn't matter. Today it is less about finding the "culprits" than about learning lessons (Couret, 2019)<sup>4</sup>.

*Le Parisien*, too, highlights the many police sources that misled its journalists ('Five sources for a dead-end', *Le Parisien*, 2019) and describes how police forces on either side of the Channel are embroiled in a dispute over their respective responsibilities. The subtext absolves the media of most guilt: "The denunciation of this suspect and especially the reasons for which he was identified – wrongly – as the French fugitive strain relations between the police"<sup>5</sup> (Décugis et al., 2019).

For *L'Humanité*, responsibility also lies with the Internet and social media: "24-hour news is a trap which, with the Internet, closes in on all newsrooms. When information starts spreading, there is only one option: follow, and disseminate it on social media"<sup>6</sup> (Constant, 2019). This effort at minimisation is evident in the recurrent use of the term 'media frenzy' – '*emballement médiatique*' in French (Alexandre, 2019; Brafman, 2019; De Montety, 2019; *Le Monde*, 2019a; *Le Monde*, 2019b; Lutaud & Cornevin, 2019; Trémolet de Villiers, 2019) – suggesting that journalists were not able to escape this freewheeling spiral of misinformation regarding such a headline-grabbing murder case. For instance, in an editorial, *L'Humanité's* editor-in-chief Jean-Emmanuel Decoin does not fully blame journalists for this false information, having not "knowingly lied". Instead, the media frenzy obeys "quasi-mechanical" factors and is also the result of "citizens' lack of critical distance"<sup>7</sup> (Ducoin, 2019). Such a narrative, therefore, paints a picture of journalists "caught in the hamster wheel"<sup>8</sup>, as per Neveu's expression (2019, loc. 2410). Similarly, *La Croix*, in the previously-mentioned editorial, narrates this incident as an important lesson for journalism, all the while pointing to several exogenous constraints:

Many media outlets have announced the arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonès. False information ... No one will ever be safe from an error of judgement or a mistake. But the combined pressure of continuous information and social networks makes you lose caution and composure. These qualities are nevertheless the hallmark of journalistic work<sup>9</sup> (Couret, 2019).

In this narrative, journalists tend to place most of the responsibility on actors and factors located outside their community, thereby protecting it.

### Externalisation

A second commonly-found discursive strategy consists in highlighting the media's role while distancing their own publication from this case of misinformation. While present in the discourse of most newspapers, this logic of externalisation is mostly employed by journalists from *L'Humanité* and *Le Figaro*. Looking at *L'Humanité* specifically, it is the only outlet to not have published this false information; it is also the smallest publication within the sample studied and produces fewer articles, on a daily basis, than its competitors. Thus, when news broke of Dupont de Ligonès' arrest on the evening of 11 October, the newspaper did not have the resources to conduct last-minute verification and, therefore, chose to wait until the following morning to report on the story. Of a weakness, *L'Humanité* seeks to make a strength. Through a logic of externalisation, the news outlet disparages a certain type of reporting that favours immediacy over verification and caution:

Far be it from us to place *L'Humanité* above the fray, let alone on a pedestal. Due to the pace of our publications, we have escaped the "herd" effect. However, let's take advantage of this "out of the ordinary" event to think things through. Subject to the reign of "master rabbit"<sup>10</sup>, where everything, immediately, must be fast, without horizon, outdated and already recycled, speaking faster than reason becomes the norm, as if journalism were only a consumable and already disposable commodity. The omnipotence of collective infobesity threatens us, every day a little more<sup>11</sup> (Ducoin, 2019).

In a separate article, *L'Humanité* criticises its competitors for hastily trusting the information provided by Scottish investigators: "Can we speak of different sources? 'To have confirmed 5 times one piece of information by 5 different cops, it is not cross-checking information, it is being addicted to police speech', the lawyer Raphaël Kempf opined on Twitter"<sup>12</sup> (Mouloud, 2019). Through Kempf's words, the newspaper, therefore, distances itself from this case of journalistic

misinformation, by highlighting its superior practices all the while shedding light on continued economic pressures faced by journalists in the race for exclusive news.

In this narrative strategy, the blame is also placed on news agency *AFP* for confirming *Le Parisien*'s scoop, thereby diverting attention away from the rest of the journalistic field, as in this editorial from *Libération*: "*AFP* is a reliable agency, where factual errors are extremely rare (it indicated on Saturday that it had gathered information from four different police sources)"<sup>13</sup> (Joffrin, 2019). Meanwhile, *Le Parisien* insists on the fact that *AFP* was hot on the newspaper's heels in confirming the scoop:

It is at this moment that we publish the information of the arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonès. This information was very quickly confirmed by Agence France-Presse in a wire published at 9:01 p.m. under the title "Xavier Dupont de Ligonès arrested at Glasgow airport (source close to the investigation)"<sup>14</sup> (*Le Parisien*, 2019).

Similarly, *Le Figaro* singles out the news agency in the conclusions that must be drawn from this media frenzy: "The lessons are clear: even usually reliable institutions, *AFP*, Home Office, can be wrong; nothing replaces the time required for verification"<sup>15</sup> (Trémolet de Villiers, 2019). The metajournalistic narratives on *AFP* and its responsibility with regard to the Dupont de Ligonès story confirm Lagneau's (2007, p. 110) observations about the agency's unique place within French journalism's imaginary: "Although they do not belong individually to the elite of the profession, news agency reporters collectively embody a model of journalistic excellence that dates back to the emergence of news agencies more than 150 years ago, that of the news hunter, fast, rigorous and precise."<sup>16</sup> *AFP*'s reputation for excellence also rests on its strict policy about clearly and quickly rectifying mistakes (Lagneau, 2002). As such, the repetition of the word 'reliable' looks to absolve the rest of the profession of most blame, with the implication that this case of misinformation was so unusual that even *AFP* could not escape it. At the same time, for news outlets that showed more caution in their reporting, comparing their own practice to that of *AFP* enables them to elevate their authority.

### Circumscription

Efforts to depict this case of journalistic misinformation as an isolated incident underpin the third discursive strategy. As highlighted previously, most of the articles acknowledge journalistic responsibility in this case of false information. However, through a logic of circumscription, news outlets insist on the fact that it

remains an unfortunate case of misinformation, which was circumscribed thanks to adherence to traditional journalistic practices and norms. *Le Figaro*, for instance, underscores its cautious attitude throughout as well as the reliability of its verification practices, which enabled the newspaper to be among the first to suspect misinformation:

After 11 p.m. (...) sources told our journalist Christophe Cornevin of their serious doubts about the identity of the captive. In the midst of the tsunami of evidence, we choose to mention this. Online articles are immediately modified in this sense and the latest print version at 11:30 p.m. specifies that a man identified as being Xavier Dupont de Ligonès has been arrested in Scotland but that a formal identification must take place on Saturday. The conditional tense is used. The next morning, we publish, very early, on our website, the various elements which, one after the other, deflate the case<sup>17</sup> (Trémolet de Villiers, 2019).

*Libération* also emphasises its use of the conditional: “We had been alerted at 8:45 p.m. by an article from *Le Parisien*, which we took up using the conditional and quoting the newspaper”<sup>18</sup> (Joffrin, 2019). The newspaper, however, fails to mention that it published, in its print edition on 12 October, a short article announcing the arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, using the indicative mood throughout.

Other newspapers resort to transparency as a discursive strategy to make amends for their role in disseminating false information. This emphasis is particularly evident in articles published by *Le Parisien* to explain how its erroneous scoop came to be: “For the sake of transparency and after the publication of erroneous information on the arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, we look back at the unfolding of the last few hours and detail how our editorial staff worked”<sup>19</sup> (*Le Parisien*, 2019). The original article with the false scoop is still present on its website with, however, an addendum that reads: “Our article published on 11 October is ... obsolete, but we leave it as is, for the sake of transparency”<sup>20</sup> (Décugis & Pelletier, 2019). Importantly, the news is not described as false but simply as “obsolete”, again mitigating the responsibility of journalists. *Le Monde* also engages in a transparency performance (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022) when providing insights into the chain of events that resulted in the publication of this misinformation: “For the sake of transparency and clarification as to our news coverage, we publish the story of these few hours where incorrect information was published on our website”<sup>21</sup> (*Le Monde*, 2019a). Thus, in many of the newspapers’ narratives, transparency takes over from the norms of accuracy and verification to affirm journalistic authority.

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## DISCUSSION

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The study of metajournalistic discourse on the media’s responsibility in disseminating false information about the Dupont de Ligonès case has shown that journalists attempt to repair their practice and, thus, restore their authority, through three main discursive strategies. Each of them – *minimisation*, *externalisation* and *circumscription* – pivots on a logic of transparency. By lifting a corner of the veil on what went wrong in their coverage of the false arrest, journalists demonstrate efforts at introspection and repentance. At the same time, through these transparency performances, they reaffirm their ascendancy over the public by keeping control of and “articulat[ing] the idealized authority relation between journalism and its audiences” (Carlson, 2017, p. 93). Although readers are given the opportunity to witness how information is produced, little is known about the aftermath of this incident from a self-regulation perspective, including whether new processes will be put in place to limit such reporting errors. As highlighted by Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022) in their study of transparency in metajournalistic discourse, narratives constitute a weapon used as part of a strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1972) to have audiences, and members of the journalistic community, recognise mainstream media’s authority by showing adherence to ethics principles. In the journalists’ discourse on the Dupont de Ligonès case, the norm of transparency becomes a new form of journalistic responsibility, alongside traditional expectations of accuracy and independence, to showcase the soundness of the profession’s paradigm in the face of this deviant incident.

Additionally, amid broader concerns about what being a journalist means – in times of struggling business models, political pressures, and competitive truth-telling claims – resorting to similar tropes helps bring stability to the community of journalists (Perreault et al., 2021; Vos & Thomas, 2018). Through these meta narratives, “journalism’s authority finds itself reinforced – be it by letting audiences see a united front (outward) or by dispelling journalists’ inner doubts (inward)” (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022, p. 2324). This shared discourse also suggests that if the profession abides by its traditional norms and practices, such as verification, these incidents will remain exceptional. In doing so, journalists repair their practice and fend off potential criticisms about their lack of self-critique, all the while avoiding deeper reflections on relations with sources, and questions of accountability and self-regulation.

Although all the news outlets studied in this research do engage in self-critique, this process is often also directed at their peers. A recurring criticism

found in the articles studied is the tendency, in certain newsrooms, to favour speed over verification, as the previously-mentioned editorial from *L'Humanité's* shows. Having avoided the media frenzy enables the newspaper, as well as *Le Figaro*, to emphasise their superior norms and practices against a handful of journalistic actors. *Le Parisien* and *AFP* have become, in this context, “constitutive others” (Farkas, 2023), against which news outlets can elevate their own authority. Although the question of how *AFP* addressed its own misconduct did not form part of the study, the focus placed by other media on the agency’s reporting confirms that its “influence is never as evident as when its errors are reverberated throughout the chain of information”<sup>22</sup> (Lagneau, 2002, p. 59).

By conducting peer criticism that is limited to a small number of actors, and whose failings are partly attributed to external factors, journalists draw boundaries to protect the rest of the community. Their narratives act as “border patrols” (Singer, 2021) to limit disruptions to the profession. As such, “what is considered to be ‘deviant’ remains tightly controlled by the journalistic community to stave off broader questions of journalistic performance”, Carlson (2014, p. 45) highlights. At the same time, “the reliance on individual violators circumvents more uncomfortable questions about journalism’s relations with centers of power, its own role as a powerful institution shaping public knowledge, and its accountability within democratic society” (Carlson, 2014, p. 45). In the Dupont de Ligonnes case, the question of the relations between journalists and police sources takes on a new significance which, however, few articles address. *L'Humanité* and, to some extent, *La Croix and Libération* are the only newspapers to consider, in greater depth, the implications of this false story for the profession

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## CONCLUSION

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In publicly acknowledging their mistakes while mitigating their responsibility and circumscribing this case of journalistic misinformation, news professionals normalised their experience vis-à-vis the false scoop, thereby protecting as well as bringing stability to their community. Emphasising the norms of transparency and verification, the publications also repaired the boundaries of their authority vis-à-vis the public and each other; in their narratives, the core ideology of the profession remained intact. Although metajournalistic discourse may be understood as an effort by the profession “to enter into a conversation with itself as a form of self-reflective practice” (Schapals & Bruns, 2022, p. 8), this study has shown that this practice constitutes, first and foremost, a public performance to defend authority. As such, the limited amount of reflection on greater implications for journalistic responsibility sug-

gests that the question of accountability is yet to form an intrinsic part of French journalism’s professional identity.

As highlighted by Carlson (2014, p. 45) in his study of six prominent cases of journalistic misconduct in the US, public discourses on professional misconduct often avoid “critically addressing contradictions between stated norms and the difficulties inherent in news practices”. In the articles studied for the present research, proposals put forward to prevent such an incident from happening again in future are often limited to adhering more closely to existing norms and practices of verification, accuracy and vigilance, as opposed to engaging in deeper reflections about journalism and self-regulation. Although this public exercise in self-reflection may have enabled news media to demonstrate efforts at repentance, its impact on recreating trust with audiences remains questionable.

To further test these findings, future studies may be interested in broadening the sample to compare the metajournalistic discourse of print and broadcast media and, thus, understand whether narrative strategies vary according to the type of news media. By focusing on elite news outlets, the following results cannot lay claim to speak for the whole field of journalism. Another aspect to consider is the question of audience reception of such discursive strategies. Any form of discourse is polysemic and meaning depends on the receptor. Carlson (2016, p. 364), for instance, advocates for a “mixed-method approach combining textual analysis with audience measurement methods (e.g., surveys, focus groups, interviews) to examine meaning-formation further”. As journalists are increasingly expected to be accountable for their actions, paying attention to their discourse, as well as its limits, is paramount to engage in truly critical reflections on reestablishing trust between the news media and the public.

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## NOTES

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- <sup>1.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>2.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>3.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>4.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>5.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>6.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>7.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>8.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>9.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>10.</sup> A potential reference to Aesop's fable *The Tortoise and The Hare*.
- <sup>11.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.

- <sup>12.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>13.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
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- <sup>21.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.
- <sup>22.</sup> Translated from the French by the author of this research.

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**Repairing Deviant Journalistic Practice. The French Press and the Dupont de Ligonnès Case**

**Réparer les pratiques journalistiques déviantes. La presse française et l'affaire Dupont de Ligonnès**

**Reparar a prática jornalística desviada. A imprensa francesa e o caso Dupont de Ligonnès**

**Reparar las prácticas periodísticas desviadas. La prensa francesa y el caso Dupont de Ligonnès.**

**En** The current iteration of the information disorder has created several challenges for news organisations, not least exacerbated pressure to identify, rapidly, false and fabricated content, which has found new impetus through social media. In the current context, the imperative is also, for many journalists, to maintain their authority as truth providers. However, when journalists, themselves, contribute to the dissemination of false information, adhering to that imperative is compromised. Prior research (Bennett et al., 1985) has shown that the media may attempt to repair problematic news stories that fail to conform to expectations of fairness, accuracy, and quality by reaffirming the boundaries of what is acceptable journalistic practice. This paper examines the case of French news outlets falsely reporting the arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès, a man suspected of murdering his family in April 2011. The analysis of metajournalistic discourse, or discourse about journalism, in news articles about the aftermath of the false scoop demonstrates that the French media repaired this news story through three main narrative strategies: *minimisation*, *externalisation*, and *circumscription*. By either mitigating their responsibility vis-à-vis this false story, distancing themselves from it, or presenting it as an isolated incident, news organisations normalise this example of journalistic misinformation as an unfortunate case of deviant professional practice in an otherwise mostly sound paradigm. However, limited reflection on greater implications for journalism and on how to prevent such shortcomings in future hint at the fact that the question of accountability is yet to form an intrinsic part of journalists' professional identity in France.

**Keywords:** accountability; journalistic authority; metajournalistic discourse; misinformation.

**Fr** Le désordre informationnel confronte les médias à de nombreux défis, y compris la nécessité d'identifier, rapidement, les contenus faux et falsifiés qui ne cessent de circuler, notamment sur les réseaux sociaux. Dans le contexte actuel, l'impératif est aussi pour les journalistes de maintenir leur autorité en tant que pourvoyeurs de vérités. Cependant, lorsque les journalistes contribuent, eux-mêmes, à la diffusion de fausses informations, adhérer à cet impératif se trouve compromis. Des travaux de recherche (Bennett et al., 1985) ont montré que les médias, à travers leurs discours, tentent de réparer des articles ou reportages qui ne répondent pas aux attentes d'équité, d'exactitude et/ou de qualité en réaffirmant les contours de ce que constitue une pratique journalistique acceptable. Cet article examine le cas de journaux français ayant annoncé, à tort, l'arrestation de Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès, un homme soupçonné du meurtre de sa famille en avril 2011. L'analyse du discours métajournalistique, ou discours sur le journalisme, dans des articles de presse sur les conséquences de ce faux scoop démontre que les médias français ont réparé leur pratique professionnelle au moyen de trois narratives : la *minimisation*, l'*externalisation* et la *délimitation*. En atténuant leur responsabilité vis-à-vis de cette fausse histoire, en s'en distanciant, ou en la présentant comme un incident rare, la plupart des organes de presse ont normalisé cette fausse information comme un cas isolé de pratique déviante dans un paradigme journalistique par ailleurs plutôt sain. Cependant, la quasi-absence de discussion sur les implications pour le journalisme et sur la manière de prévenir de telles erreurs à l'avenir suggère que la question de la régulation des médias est encore à l'état d'ébauche dans les réflexions collectives des journalistes en France.

**Mots-clés :** Autorité journalistique, Discours métajournalistique, Fausses informations, Responsabilité, Régulation

**Pt.** O caos informativo impõe uma série de desafios aos meios de comunicação social, especialmente no que diz respeito à necessidade de se identificar, com rapidez, os conteúdos falsos e desinformação que circulam constantemente, sobretudo nas redes sociais. No contexto atual, é também imperativo que os jornalistas mantenham a sua autoridade como fornecedores da verdade. No entanto, quando os próprios jornalistas contribuem para a disseminação de informações falsas, o cumprimento deste imperativo fica comprometido. Estudos demonstraram que os meios de comunicação social, através dos seus discursos, tentam corrigir narrativas ou histórias que não correspondem às expectativas da imparcialidade, exatidão e/ou qualidade, reafirmando os contornos daquilo que se espera de uma prática jornalística aceitável (Bennett et al., 1985). Este artigo examina o caso dos jornais franceses que anunciaram falsamente a detenção de Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, um homem suspeito de ter assassinado a sua família na França, em abril de 2011. Uma análise do discurso meta-jornalístico, ou do discurso sobre o jornalismo, nas notícias sobre as consequências deste caso, mostra que os media franceses repararam a sua prática profissional através de três estratégias narrativas: minimização, externalização e delimitação. Ao minimizar a sua responsabilidade em relação a esta história falsa, distanciando-se dela, ou apresentando-a como um incidente isolado, os veículos de comunicação normalizam este exemplo de desinformação jornalística como um caso infeliz de prática profissional desviante num paradigma que, de resto, é maioritariamente consolidado. No entanto, a ausência de um debate sobre as implicações dessa prática no jornalismo e a forma de evitar tais erros no futuro sugere que a discussão sobre a responsabilização dos media ainda não faz parte da identidade profissional dos jornalistas na França.

**Palavras-chave:** Autoridade jornalística, Discurso meta-jornalístico, desinformação, Responsabilidade, Regulamentação.

**Es.** Los medios de comunicación se enfrentan a numerosos retos frente al caos informativo : entre ellos, la necesidad de identificar en seguida los contenidos falsos y falsificados que circulan constantemente, sobre todo en las redes sociales. En el contexto actual, también es imperativo que los periodistas mantengan su autoridad como proveedores de la verdad. Sin embargo, cuando los propios periodistas contribuyen a la difusión de información falsa, el cumplimiento de este imperativo se ve comprometido. Estudios han demostrado que los medios de comunicación, a través de sus discursos, intentan reparar los artículos o reportajes que no cumplen las expectativas de imparcialidad, exactitud y/o calidad reafirmando los contornos de lo que constituye una práctica periodística aceptable (Bennett et al., 1985). Este artículo examina el caso de los periódicos franceses que anunciaron falsamente la detención de Xavier Dupont de Ligonès, un hombre sospechoso de asesinar a su familia en Francia en abril de 2011. Un análisis del discurso metaperiodístico, o discurso sobre el periodismo, en los artículos de prensa sobre las consecuencias de esta falsa primicia muestra que los medios franceses repararon su práctica profesional mediante tres narrativas: minimización, externalización y delimitación. Al minimizar su responsabilidad en la falsa noticia, distanciarse de ella o presentarla como un incidente excepcional, la mayoría de los medios de comunicación normalizaron esta falsa información como un caso aislado de práctica desviada en un paradigma periodístico por lo demás bastante sano. Sin embargo, la práctica ausencia de debate sobre las implicaciones para el periodismo y la forma de evitar errores de este tipo en el futuro sugiere que la cuestión de la regulación de los medios de comunicación está todavía incipiente en el pensamiento colectivo de los periodistas en Francia.

**Palabras clave:** Autoridad periodística, Discurso metaperiodístico, Desinformación, Responsabilidad, Regulación