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From News Diversity to News Quality: New Media Regulation Theoretical Issues

Inna Lyubareva and Fabrice Rochelandet

1 INTRODUCTION

Online platforms and services have challenged the press industry for more than twenty years. Internet media made possible the proliferation of news from a wide variety of sources, including non-professional sources, on different supports (tablet, smartphone, computer), and with high diversity of alternative viewpoints and opinions. In light of concentration in the media industry and lack of media independence, now is an ideal opportunity to give way to alternative media models, to social minorities, to heterogeneous political interests—that is to say to media pluralism.

However, one may notice: Diversity is not so much the problem in the digital context with the dramatic increase in the amount and variety

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of news available online. Information pluralism, in its normative sense of what journalism must be to accomplish its democratic role (Karppinen 2018; Rebillard and Loicq 2013; Merrill 1968), is far from achieved. Indeed, diversity and abundance are no longer synonymous with more quality, open debates, and equality. There are many obstacles in the way: circulation of fake news, hate speech and illicit content, social and political polarization, extremism in content and in users' opinions, cultural and ideological confinement of readers because of platforms' recommendation systems, large-scale diffusion of poor and meaningless information.

These phenomena clearly contrast with the widespread idea—notably among mainstream economists—that competition goes hand in hand with efficient outcomes. This diversity-pluralism discussion clearly necessitates an introduction of a third component, information quality, and a set of rules—regulation—to guarantee some minimal quality of the information in circulation.

Potential regulation tools may target various parts of the production value chain: economic models of news providers and middlemen (incentive regulation), media concentration (antitrust), actual conditions to access and impart news, media literacy, rights to information. One aspect rests crucial: Without any clear definition and measure of quality, media regulation will be difficult to build.

More precisely, we propose fundamental difficulties in regulation reside in three main factors: (1) multidimensional nature of the concept of information quality, widely discussed in the literature (*are there some prior dimensions to be respected or all of them are of the same importance?*); (2) multiplicity of agents' wishes and needs in respect of the information quality (*whose needs should be covered by the regulation taking into account that different consumers may diverge significantly in their preferences?*); and (3) lack of empirical evidence about the impact of different value chain modalities (*economic models, property rights, or how we access information*)—i.e., potential targets of regulation—on the quality of the circulated information.

This scholarly article discusses these three elements and proposes an original framework for the analysis of the information quality with new dimensions and with respect to the heterogeneity of consumers' preferences. This framework may be also used to get a legible presentation of the link between the existent media strategies regarding produced information and their economic models, property owners, or any other available media characteristics. Such comprehensible representation makes possible implementation of specific regulation tools in order to promote information pluralism and democracy.

In the next sections, we, first, propose a short overview of the impact of digital platforms on media industry, in general, and information characteristics, in particular. Second, we make a literature review on how the quality concept is approached in different works and some inherent limits of the proposed definitions. On this basis, we formulate, in the third section, an original approach on how to analyze news quality. The final section proposes a short empirical example of implementation of our approach to real market data, based on the French media industry.

2 THE PLATFORMIZATION OF THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok have become information gatekeepers, prompting a new set of concerns impacting the production, diffusion, and consumption of information. They encourage new kinds of ‘alternative’ actors—readers, politicians, activists, etc.—which produce their own content in the information marketplace. This mixes up with established media and their newsrooms, which removes newsrooms as lone gatekeepers of the news selection and delivery process. As a consequence an unprecedented plethora of heterogeneous information, from professional news to info-tainment and user-generated content, now competes for readers’ attention.

Foremost, by providing direct access to news articles and new practices of ‘picking,’ digital platforms enable readers to bypass the front-page of online outlets. In so doing, they challenge the editorial line of the outlet and their traditional revenue models. This is doubly adverse for media increasingly dependent on advertising revenue. Symmetrically, online intermediaries (‘infomediaries’) have become essential and control direct relationship with readers, enabling the intermediaries to collect vast amounts of personal user data. Since access to news by individuals passes often through social media, producers of information are subject to disadvantageous pricing conditions imposed by platforms when sharing advertising revenue. Consequently, one may observe that the audiences’ capture—based on Google Trends, ‘likes,’ Google Analytics, and so forth—is the main criteria of performance. Or, that in-depth, costly, staff-written articles make way for wire service copy and the plagiarism associated with (almost) zero production costs. This pressure adds to that felt from investors, who tend to focus on short-term economic results and require newspaper managers to cut back on resources to increase profitability (already threatened by reduction in advertising revenues).

Then, media industry has become extremely dependent upon audience/web metrics. Journalistic and professional practices are polarized around data produced by the algorithms of digital platforms. The press, newsrooms, and journalists share the same data that is publicly available or produced by the same algorithms. *Speed-driven journalism* illustrates the impact of such a generalized behavior where, on the one hand, the selection and treatment of news topics are determined according to their online popularity, and on the other hand, articles only survive in the light of their own popularity on the internet. Such behaviors impact the quality and diversity of information, whether in terms of the reduced variety of subjects addressed, or in focusing the attention of online readers on a small number of ‘star’ topics.

Finally, another important transformation element is situated alongside both the users’ side and the practices associated with news consumption. Importance of digital platforms as main support induces not only the availability of free offerings (and therefore the problem of profitability for producers), but also new constraints on the content format, information deepening, and complexity. Circulation of short, easy-to-read-and-share news (not necessarily fakes) attracts larger public and stimulates network effects based on interactions among platforms’ users’ on news. This permits the massive collection of users’ data by the digital giants reinforcing their market power as essential intermediaries in access to online news. As a result, today consumers often have strong preferences for short and descriptive ‘snack content.’ More generally, networking tools such as ‘likes’ or ‘retweets’ expand mimic behavior through which individuals select and share the same kinds of information, whatever the intrinsic quality of veracity, originality, or richness of that information. In addition, the well-known fact that the content selection procedures are often determined by the platform’s algorithms and user’s previous choices then reduces the user’s feasible search space. This could lead to filter bubble (Pariser 2011), where users get less exposure to diverse, conflicting viewpoints and prove to be isolated in their own informational bubble.

To summarize, these transformations lead to a higher variety of sources of information (blogs, social networks, alternative media, and more) and of conditions stipulating the production and consumption of news (end of the monopoly of traditional media, data-driven journalism, etc.). The widespread and often free provision of digital tools and services on these platforms has undeniably lowered the barriers to

entry in the production and distribution of news: less capital requirements to create and sustain an outlet; decentralization of production sources; sharp reduction in distribution costs; and more yet unlisted. In this context of information abundance, the problem of news quality has become crucial in this changing environment. It is not surprising that one may observe today flourishing organizations and initiatives aimed at developing new standards in journalism, supposed to sustain and to improve information quality, and consequently, media pluralism. Among them are The Fourth Estate, The Independent Press Standards Organisation, The Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors, The Media Pluralism Monitor—this list is far from exhaustive. While being mainly focused on the supply side and the characteristics of the produced content, these initiatives create more questions than answers (Karppinen 2018; Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006; McLennan 1995).

To shed some light on these questions, we need first to clarify the concept of quality.

3 DEFINING NEWS QUALITY

Beyond some differences between USA and European traditions, the concepts of pluralism and diversity are quite established in media studies literature. Whereas pluralism refers to a normative orientation and democratic role of journalism, diversity is understood as its measure, i.e., the heterogeneity at the level of various production elements (Karppinen 2018; Rebillard and Loicq 2013). The dimensions of diversity vary depending on the levels of analysis ranging from the media ownership to the content characteristics. Among the most well-known classifications of information diversity, Napoli (1999, 2003) proposes to distinguish between sources diversity, content diversity, and exposure diversity (both vertical and horizontal). Source diversity refers to ownership and nature of outlets; content diversity concerns formats and viewpoints; and exposure diversity addresses either the variety of information provided by different outlets available to consumers (horizontal diversity) or the variety of information provided by an individual outlet (vertical diversity). For McQuail (2005) the main dimensions of diversity are ‘genre, style of format in culture or entertainment; news and information topics covered; political viewpoints; and so on.’ Rebillard (2012) proposes a definition based on topics’ diversity, topics’ equilibrium, and their disparity of treatment.

In the aforementioned approaches, diversity is used as synonym to news quality: The presence of this characteristic in the journalistic information supply available on the market is supposed to be associated with higher quality and further, the necessary and sufficient condition for normative media pluralism. However, especially in the digital context, diversity does not necessarily imply any quality (e.g., circulation of poor or wrong information, content promoting illicit activities, etc.). Moreover, the problem arises when one tries to deconstruct the value of pluralism: Are there some limits to diversity and whether at some point ‘healthy diversity’ may turn into ‘unhealthy dissonance’? Are all interests equal in defining the quality attributes or some issues are of higher priority? How to connect individual-level criteria to social-level outcomes which are more than just a summing of individual utilities? In Karppinen (2018) one can find a detailed discussion on this matter. The author argues that in the context of growth of digital media, characterized more by abundance than scarcity, the conceptual ambiguity and divergence of definitions of normative and political frameworks are stronger than ever, making difficult their measures and promotion of some quality standards.

To tackle this problem, some authors elaborate on the idea of the quality of the journalistic information, *complementary* to diversity. According to Meyer and Kim (2003), quality definition comprises two levels—organizational and content ones. The former level focuses on the media or press outlet as unit of analysis, whereas the latter one is inherent to the produced information. Often these levels are somehow mixed up in media studies literature.

At the organizational level, quality indicators can correspond to the reputation of the media (Stone et al. 1981) or its organization characteristics such as integrity, staff enterprise, community leadership, editorial independence, staff professionalism, editorial courage, decency, influence, and impartiality (Gladney 1990). Among other features, Merrill (1968) proposes such criteria as (1) financial stability; integrity; social concern; good writing and editing; (2) strong opinion and interpretive emphasis; world consciousness; nonsensationalism in articles and makeup; (3) emphasis on politics, international relations, economics, social welfare, cultural endeavors, education, and science; (4) concern with getting, developing and keeping a large, intelligent, well educated, articulate and technically proficient staff; (5) determination to serve and help expand a well- educated, intellectual readership at home and abroad; desire to appeal to, and influence, opinion leaders everywhere.

Bogart (1989) conducted a large survey asking newspaper editors how they rate different attributes of newspaper quality¹: accuracy, impartiality in reporting, investigative enterprise, specialized staff skill, individuality of character, civic-mindedness, and literary style. Bogart justifies for the choice of such subjective criteria because they are allegedly commonly shared by newspaper editors themselves when assessing the quality of their own outlets.²

Rather in line with the content level, abundant literature proposes originality, diversity of topics and comprehensive coverage, comprehensive coverage, accuracy of reporting and expert judgment, timeliness, and novelty as indicators to characterize news quality. Picard (2000) considers quality as related to the amount of journalistic work in terms of investigation, verification, and sourcing that have been carried out before writing the news.³ Abdenour and Riffe (2019) note that, in general, academics tend to focus on strong investigative reporting to infer news quality indicators. McQuail (2005) holds honesty and checkability as the characteristics of journalism products. In addition, quality can be defined by negative indicators like shallowness, incompleteness, inaccuracy, bias, or misinformation (Craig 2011; Urban and Schweiger 2014). For instance, Magin (2019) shows that tabloidization generates lots of news of lower quality and associated with a large share of ‘politically irrelevant topics, a focus on episodic framing and a visual, emotionalised, opinion-driven style.’ In addition, some researches put in light the value of audience engagement and digital interactivity on the news as quality dimensions (see, for instance, Bogart 2004; Blanchett Neheli 2018; Belair-Gagnon 2019).

Finally, some authors argue that, in addition to the supply-oriented approaches presented above, quality definition must take into account the type of actors who define it, i.e., academics and journalists, politicians, judges and lawyers, or final users (Meier 2019; Lacy and Rosenstiel 2015). For example, the focus on the consumers’ and recipients’ perceptions (Lacy 2000; Urban and Schweiger 2014; Rosenstiel et al. 2015; Lacy and Rosenstiel 2015) is in line with the Federal Communications Commission’s proposition: ‘As an alternative to measuring the “supply” of content to assess viewpoint diversity, should we take a “demand side” approach and utilize measures of audience satisfaction and media consumption as proxies for viewpoint diversity.’ In this demand approach, any news is considered as a bundle, and ‘[its] quality aggregates individual consumer’s

perceptions of how well journalism serves their needs and wants' (Lacy and Rosenstiel 2015).

Some quality elements (e.g., news accuracy or fairness) are quite the same as the supply approach that surveys media managers and journalists. However, demand approach implies that, contrary to the supply approach where the concerned economic actors share the same concept of quality, 'two different news consumers would evaluate the quality as being different because of their differences in information wants and needs' (ibid.). Depending on the types of individual media uses and motives (e.g., feel connected to community, decide places to go, stay healthy, etc.), which differ from one consumer to another, the news consumer evaluates quality of the content, i.e., how well it meets individual information needs and wants.

The definitions of news quality raise a set of problems.

As demonstrated in Urban and Schweiger (2014), 'the level of analysis in these studies is quite broad. Most of them ask for recipients' evaluations of whole media brands like the New York Times or whole media genres like newspapers or news websites. Hence, the results cannot say much about recipients' concrete evaluations of different news items. They rather express an aggregate opinion over a variety of articles, sections and editions. It remains unclear which part of the coverage was judged.' Then, often in different studies, the set of criteria chosen to evaluate information quality is the result of a specific filtering through the lens of academic expertise and not directly derived by surveying recipients' expertise. Therefore, sometimes it is unclear whether media users or journalists taking part in surveys and experiments are able or understand—at least, in the same way as researchers—the indicators they have to rate in order to evaluate quality of news (Urban and Schweiger 2014). Such research biases can negatively impact overall results.

The organization-level criteria of news quality, presented in the literature, may be called into question. To our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence in the area of causes and consequences, or more generally relationships, between different production context and organization and the characteristics of the produced news. For instance, we cannot say, without an in-depth study, when news are staff-written the characteristics of honesty or checkability of information produced by journalists are always present; or that there is a link between media's sources of revenue (e.g., advertising) and accuracy; or again that media ownership has always

a direct impact on the spectrum of the subjects that covered by this media or that actually interest the public, and so on.

At the content level, particular sets of news characteristics as quality standards puts the problem of perspective. For instance, investigative reporting may be one of the dimensions of quality from the supply-side, professional perspective. However, from the demand-side perspective, it may be of no importance for some users' information. In the same manner, in some contexts readers may appreciate shallowness (for instance, if one wants to have a short review of current affairs) or opinion-driven style in news (for instance, if one wants to know the viewpoint of a political party or an interest group on a given situation). For the same reasons, focusing exclusively on the demand-side may also be insufficient to define the news' quality, taking into account heterogeneity of information users and their needs and wishes in respect of the news consumption. Finally, quality criteria do not necessarily meet unanimity among both journalists and readers: 'legitimate' journalists will be able to put forward some criteria that otherwise are not considered as important (or even evaluated negatively) by certain categories of readers (geeks in a hurry, compulsive information sharers, and so forth) or journalists (gonzo, alternative, or others entirely).⁴

Facing these problems we suggest that some consensus can be found due to the introduction to the analysis of the information as example of economic goods. In example: a product that 'satisfies human wants' and is 'exchanged on the market' (Milgate et al. 1987). In this economic sense, goods are not 'just physical objects, but the qualities with which they are endowed' (ibid.); their value is the combination of 'objective conditions of production' and 'subjective conditions of their consumption' (ibid.).

When considered this way, the definition of the news quality may be reformulated as follows. First, journalistic information is produced to satisfy concrete users' needs and wishes. Users may be final consumers, regulators, industrial actors, etc.; their needs may be of various natures (to be informed of the news, to share an opinion, to sustain political diversity or polarization, etc.). In this sense, different characteristics of journalistic information (rates of staff-written content, checkability, covered subjects, etc.) and their combinations are supposed to satisfy various wishes and needs. Second, among various users' wishes, as for any other economic good, one can find those unanimously assumed by all actors (e.g., preference for being informed by truth information at the consumers' side, preference to be considered as reliable media for producers) and those for

which users' (and other actors) may differ a lot. For the former needs, the associated information characteristics refer to a sort of 'objective' goal and underlying condition for information pluralism. The latter range of users' needs implies the presence on the news market of diverse information characteristics attracting heterogeneous users.

The quality of information exchanged on the market (or its value) resides in the existence of sustainable economic models which lead to the availability of the market of journalistic information capable to satisfy the both criteria: unanimous features and diversity criteria.

We propose to consider this condition, which, contrary to previous definitions goes beyond the characteristics of the content or its production conditions, and which makes a bridge between supply-side and demand-side perspectives, as necessary requirement for information pluralism. Our next section develops in detail this approach.

4 A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Product Quality and News' Characteristics

The notion of quality exists in some creative and cultural industries as both established social convention and the main criteria which help professionals, users, and regulators rank and compare the goods. This kind of collective consensus prevails, for instance, in the arts market, where originality and uniqueness as criteria of quality (and the prices) of works distinguishes originals from fakes (Lazzaro 2006; Benhamou and Ginsburgh 2002; De Marchi and Van Miegroet 1996). On the one hand, the case of news and journalistic information in general is quite different as there is little chance that all readers will weight equally different characteristics of the content (e.g., some information users prefer subjective journalism and others appreciate impartiality and the use of illustrations). In this sense, contrary to artworks, there is no established social convention that would help to range any journalistic information according to its quality. On the other hand, taking into account the crucial role of information in democracy and the scope of problems coming from platformization and digital context (cf. here above), some conventions emerge today to rule on the quality of journalistic information. Some of them are of legal nature (e.g., misinformation laws, legal definition, and control of the content promoting illicit activities, etc.). Other emerging norms are less clearly defined and identifiable.⁵ For example,

lack of originality (plagiarism) among press outlets in the digital context, demonstrated by previous research (Cagé et al. 2017), may be negatively perceived by the majority (if not all) of the news' users, who are trying to choose a particular outlet to satisfy their information needs.

We suggest that the Kevin Lancaster's theory (Lancaster 1966) is particularly useful to analyze the specific case of journalistic information as an economic good. According to this approach, for any kind of goods and services, quality is defined as a relationship between product characteristics and the preferences and needs of consumers. In the case of news, each 'service' corresponds to a unique combination of features providing for different levels of utility for readers by satisfying their needs. Figure 1 illustrates this idea. 'Service 1,' for instance, combines different features to provide for the need, in our example, 'stay informed.'

Different features of both news and media may be of varied values for different information users: If someone only wants to stay informed, she may have higher preferences for 'accuracy,' 'originality,' or 'interviews' than to 'impartiality' and 'authenticity,' even if all these components must be brought together to make information valuable for them. This way we obtain a range of consumers' needs and wishes of the news consumption and particular content features permitting their satisfaction. At the intersection of this data, we then measured the weights associated with each feature, representing its importance for the satisfaction of consumers. Figure 2 gives such example. Note that our illustrations are purely arbitrary and only (large-scale) surveys and experimentations could permit to fill this kind of table by asking or testing people about their needs in terms of journalistic information.

Such a representation permits this essay to grapple with the multidimensionality of the news quality and its evaluation. All the combinations of 'need-information features' characterized by high divergence in the weights' ordering among information users, make reference to news and media characteristics for which no social convention is applicable (and, if exists, may be harmful for the diversity). At the same time, the combinations evaluated similarly by different information consumers constitute the ground for the development and support of collective norms and conventions. In terms of information quality—the first combination's higher quality is associated with the diversity of information features available on the market. On the contrary, for the second set of combinations, higher information quality means obligatory presence of particular features in the journalistic information. These considerations situate the question of

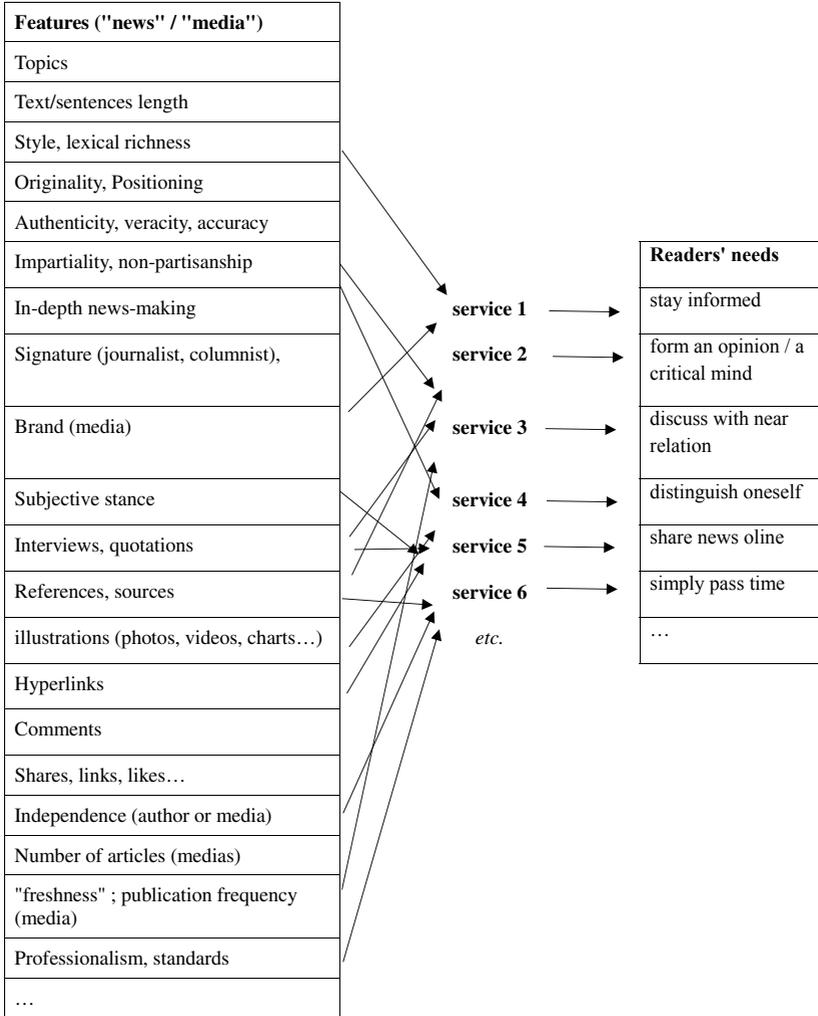


Fig. 1 News' quality (1/2)

Needs Features	Stay informed	Discuss	Distinguish oneself	Form an opinion	Share online	...
Specific news topics	---	+++	+++			
Accuracy	+++	+++	++	+		
Independence				+++		
Text/sentences length	-			+++	---	
Style, lexical richness						
Originality	+++	+++	+++	+++	++	
Impartiality, non- partisanship	+			+++		
....	+++	+++	+	+++		
Online sharing tools		+++	+++		+++	

Fig. 2 News' quality (2/2)

information quality definition and measurement in the framework of the economic theory of differentiation.

Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation

This approach defines 'quality' of news by envisaging it in an economic theoretical framework and analysis grid associated with the horizontal and vertical differentiation (Gabszewicz and Thisse 1979; Lyubareva et al. 2020).⁶ As mentioned above, different news features correspond to different levels of 'quality' according to readers' needs. Combinations of product features produce 'services' that consumers use to satisfy their needs and wishes.

In the case of *horizontal differentiation*, the same features will give rise to different 'qualities' according to the tastes and expectations of readers (*de gustibus non est disputandum*). Here, goods are considered as different in their characteristics, proving impossible to order them according to unanimous criteria. In other words, there is no social consensus because consumers' tastes are heterogeneous regarding certain attributes of news. Applied to the journalistic information, a short article, an in-depth analysis

or a subjective standpoint (e.g., ‘gonzo’ journalism) will not be appraised in the same way when the reader is a highbrow individual, a journalist, or a social media addict. The ‘qualities’ of news (thematic, formats, points of view ...) correspond to the various opinions in place each reader choosing a specific quality.

By contrast, in the case of *vertical differentiation*, some features could correspond to socially unanimous criteria of quality. At identical prices, each consumer will rank a vertically differentiated good in the same order. Quality refers to vertical differentiation, where the weight of some information features can be classified on a unanimous basis and therefore considered as being of higher quality (this basis may be established by the users themselves or come from some socially desirable or legal objectives established by regulators for example). For instance, in the automotive industry, all buyers agree on the highest efficient brake systems (at a given price). In the press industry, (almost) all actors consider fake news as being undesirable whereas they will prefer a true story that is verified. Readers will always choose news with the second attribute (truth and authentication) against the first ones (misleading fabrication). The same prevails regarding originality and plagiarism, as is the case in the art market.

This horizontal/vertical differentiation theoretical approach enables to envisage many aspects of the news ecosystem from the social practices and economic models to the regulation tools of media pluralism.

At the level of social practices, it can help to better identify the differences in the readers’ perceptions, needs, and consumption according to news quality. At the level of news providers’ strategies, firms can choose to differentiate the goods they produce in order to increase their profits or to reduce the competition by insulating their own market according to some degree (goods are imperfect substitutes). It clearly depends upon their skills, reputation (brand), initial market position, and competitors’ (potential) reaction. In the same way, from consumers perspective, differentiation, in particular vertical differentiation, can create inequalities. For low-income people, the price to be paid to get vertically differentiated goods (luxury goods, for example) can be too high. In addition, news production and consumption can be analyzed altogether using this approach. For instance, frequent releasing of fresh news can prevent a media from verifying systematically their authenticity but such low-cost information can suit readers not very demanding and/or with low willingness-to-pay. More generally, a media is supposed to produce news

compliant with the expectations and preferences of its particular audience (*horizontally differentiated news*), but not necessarily in terms of the unanimous qualitative criteria, e.g., plagiarism or copy-paste of news vs. original content (*vertically differentiated news*).

At a more holistic level—the news industry and more generally the media ecosystem (including social media, independent news producers)—this approach makes it possible to assess the actual degree of media pluralism associated with the production and circulation of news. We can consider that one major goal of media regulation is to favor the extension of such ‘horizontality,’ i.e., that media industry and news providers supply readers and communities with the largest range of news (socially and legally acceptable) in terms of topics, political viewpoint, gender and ethnic representation, and so on in order for individuals to make their sovereign choices with all kinds of accessible information.

Another major objective of media regulation is to promote economic models or consumers’ interest that favor the most the production and circulation of news of the best possible *vertical* quality in order for people to make non-biased sovereign choices with the highest-quality information and to stimulate the ‘good practices’ from both production and consumption sides. This requires the definition of *unanimous* quality standards corresponding to the viewpoints of all stakeholders (readers, journalists, politicians, civil society). This condition is, indeed, crucial, in order to avoid transforming news into ‘merit goods,’ i.e., to favor the production and release of the kinds of information that politicians or regulators would favor according to their sole criteria and interests.

An Analysis Grid: Crossing Vertical and Horizontal Quality

By crossing the two dimensions of news quality, we can conjure an analysis grid to determine whether or not pluralism is achieved in its multiple aspects. Gabszewicz and Resende (2012) and Gabszewicz and Wauthy (2012) suggested such a theoretical framework to study the market strategies of media competitors in terms of differentiated pricing. Figure 3 illustrates this theoretical framework with a simplified representation.

In this graph, we distinguish four possible cases: (A) and (B) correspond to the provision of news of high vertical quality—original news—but correspond to two distinct tastes or judgments from readers, journalists, etc. For instance, A-type news can be objective information with argumentation and many references whereas B-type corresponds to news

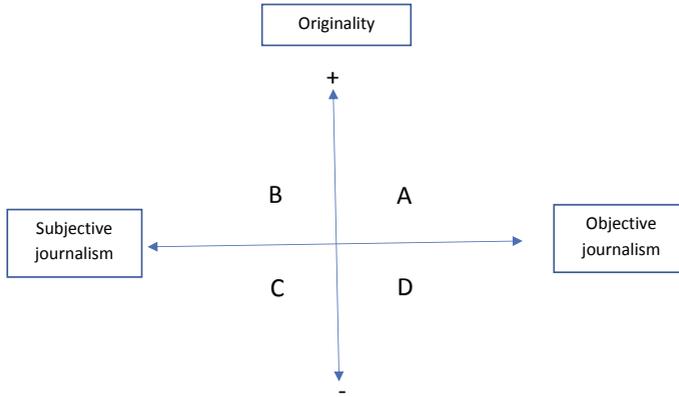


Fig. 3 A simplified example with two dimensions

based on first-person narrative and interviews. (C) and (D) cases refer to news of low vertical quality—information and news providers of copy-paste content of breaking news—that can be horizontally differentiated in the same manner as (A) and (B) cases.

By definition, A-type and B-type news are costlier to produce and, therefore, might be behind a paywall, whereas the other types can be cheaper or free to access (with or without ads). In the first case, higher costs incurred by media outlets and independent journalists can be explained by different expensive operations and resources, i.e., getting exclusivity of news, interviewing specialists, sending reporters in the field, and making undercover journalism. To exist, (A) and (B) media supposes that the number of readers and readership communities willing to pay for such news is sufficient to make their production profitable. By contrast, C-type and D-type news are cheaper to produce and then could correspond to undemanding readers that prefer short, concise, fresh news. Even though such news could be unoriginal, they can be easily shared and discussed with friends and family. Digital platforms contribute to the production and proliferation of those information goods. In this context, *speed-driven journalism* and *snack contents* are representative and widespread practices.

5 AN ILLUSTRATION: EDITORIAL STRATEGIES, NEWS QUALITY, AND MEDIA PLURALISM⁷

We applied our conceptual framework to make an empirical study on the news quality produced by French news producers. Using a linguistic discourse analysis method on 31 striking events and 93,648 articles published over the 2015–2019 period in France, we characterized their editorial choices of 55 representative media outlets. This study shows that media strategies nowadays make it possible to produce journalistic information that is sufficiently differentiated horizontally to meet distinct consumer needs, albeit with significant disparities in vertical quality.

Our sample is made of traditional press media, all online digital media players (e.g., Yahoo News!), and ‘alternative’ or ‘partisan’ left- and right-wing media. Each selected event meets two main criteria: is singularized without ambiguity as well as containing associated key words in our publishing window. To measure the two types of news quality available in the market, we used the following dimensions as criterion. On the one hand, the *originality* of the information was used to assess the vertically differentiated quality. We assumed that to avoid copy-and-paste of wires or plagiarism is commonly accepted among readers. The doc2vec method (Le and Mikolov 2014) was applied to measure the semantic distance between press articles and all previous AFP wires on the same news topic. On the other hand, *argumentation* or *analysis*, as an added value proposed by journalists in the articles, was used to assess horizontal differentiation. A rhetorical analysis of documents (Roze 2013) quantifies the relationships between sentences and the presence of morphosyntactic indicators referenced in the literature. We calculated an argumentative index that makes it possible to distinguish between articles containing an analysis, consensual content or a discussion of a current subject, articles based on facts or precise positions leaving less room for analysis. This index is implicitly associated with heterogeneous tastes and preferences of news recipients.

Crossing the vertical dimension (*originality*) and the horizontal dimension (*analysis*) makes it possible to visualize the variety of editorial strategies for media outlets. On the following graph, the horizontal axis intersects the vertical axis at the median value of the maximum distance between press articles and AFP wires for the same topics. The AFP is logically located at the bottom of the southwest square associated with no significant analysis and no originality. This mapping of news providers

balanced way with some of the newspaper opting for two different strategies. Publishing strategy can also lead national newspapers to replicate agency wires (low originality) and after to significantly enrich some articles according to the importance of the topics, sometimes to differentiate from rivals. As for regional newspapers, they are slightly more present in the South-West quadrant. While they publish news close to the AFP wires, those media outlets differentiate horizontally in terms of argumentation. This result can be explained by the fact that our survey covers only national and international events less treated by regional newspapers which allocate more human resources to local events and topics.

This analysis highlights the editorial strategies of French news producers. There is a relation between those strategies and news quality. We also show that variety and viability of editorial choices of media can be closely linked to their economic models. These media have expanded in the market during two decades of digital transformation. For example, national and regional media, in order to foster their position as leaders, systematically explore diversified editorial strategies to generate new kinds (and streams) of revenues. Their strategies, despite their substantial resources, are concentrated in areas with higher demand (and therefore profitability) and not necessarily with higher added value (as suggested by the overrepresentation of these players in the north-eastern quadrant in our graph). For alternative media, the only way to survive this competition is to position itself in highly targeted niche markets. These actors must unite loyal and stable communities of readers to finance their production so as not to disappear or be bought by bigger media groups. But an excessive dependence upon a readers' community might lead them to an overproduction of news consistent with the opinions of the target readership. For more generalist new media creators, which were largely free when they emerged in the media landscape, a choice is currently being made between adopting a pay-for model or remaining free on condition of producing low added value information. Advertising revenues, which drive this decision, prove insufficient to profitably finance production in the press sector. The problem with these choices is that the financial success of the pay-for strategy is not guaranteed if the number of actors adopting it increases significantly.

Finally, our study suggests that the criterion of horizontal quality (*diversity*) of the information provided by the French media is satisfied because the large supply of vendors is likely to meet the readers' tastes and needs for different types of information. Readers can thus find any type

of information by focusing on one type of media or by combining several media according to their preference. There are also all types of media in terms of vertical quality. However, a low willingness to pay of readers might lead them to select a (too) low vertical quality, raising a crucial issue for liberal democracies and therefore for regulation: How can media be encouraged to improve the quality of their supply or readers to increase their willingness to pay for higher vertical quality? For instance, regulation could aim to increase the readers' willingness to pay for higher vertical quality news without restraining their access to horizontally differentiated information. This could consist in influencing their individual preferences—training young and easily influenced people to better identify fakes or misleading news—or increasing their real income by awarding virtuous news producers (reduced taxation) and overtaxing those providing recipients with excessive amounts of copy-paste from wires or proven fakes. Implementing such a cross-taxation might be possible precisely by being able to identify and target outlets according to the nature of news quality they provide in the media market. The range of such tools then may cover a large area of instruments from education, promotion campaigns, taxation, and subsidies to sanctions and rewards.

6 FURTHER RESEARCH

In this chapter, we discussed the issue of news quality as a key aspect of media pluralism. We elaborated upon a theoretical framework that permits to evaluate the news quality in an economic perspective. Depending on the definition of quality (veracity, independence, etc.) and the stakeholders' expectations, the criteria used for the analysis can be classified according to the vertical and horizontal axes. As a tool, the resulting media mapping helps identify editorial areas with high media concentration against underdeveloped areas. This approach can serve to explore different phenomena in the media ecosystem and, from a regulation perspective, to correct new and traditional market failures. Once we agree on the description of the news by means of needs and features (i.e., as an economic good), understanding of the factors determining users' preferences and producers editorial choices opens the discussion on potential regulation tools.

On the side of readership preference: Cultural capital, the social influence by peers (the media and type of news that social neighbors look up), the social media used by readers, and more generally their demographics

play a key role in forming their preferences. Thus, these factors are among the main factors that could impact the quality expectations of the news' consumers. For instance, a reader with a high cultural capital is likely to be more demanding on certain characteristics of news (i.e., in-depth news making, references...) and will discredit the media producing unverified or tabloid information that does not meet their expectations. This factor may also determine how other actors like academics, journalists, politicians, and legal experts appraise the quality of news.

In dealing with supply: Media competition, ownership, and business models are capable of determining which characteristics of news will be produced by the media. For instance, the business models⁸ choice implies particular market positioning, customer segments serving by the media, the customer relationships established and maintained with each customer segment, the revenue and pricing model, the cost structure and financing, and the partnership network (in-house production vs. outsourcing). All these elements may be determinant for the editorial choice—as in, the set of information features produced by the media to satisfy demand, expectations, and needs.

Finally, the perception of quality by different actors can be impacted by more general factors—i.e., the institutional framework, actions of civil society such as NGOs, (medi)activist groups, trade unions, and political parties—whose actions and decisions could influence some news features to the detriment of others (veracity against sensationalism) (Fig. 5).

A general mapping of media, according to horizontal and vertical axes of different news features, crossed with the factors underlying producers' (e.g. economic models) and consumers' (e.g. number of subscribers) editorial choices substantiate potential efficiency of various regulation

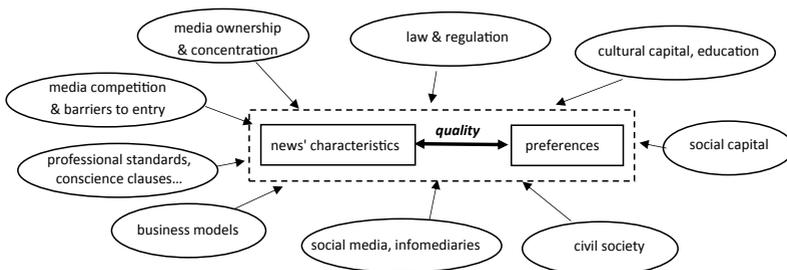


Fig. 5 The determinants of quality

tools. Distinguishing news according to their quality—horizontal or vertical—by using transparent and measurable criteria could permit to finely design and advice for regulation instruments (media education and prevention campaigns, taxation and subsidies, rewards, sanctions, and prohibitions...) to preserve and promote media pluralism.

NOTES

1. In addition, Bogart (1989) proposes the following three measures for quality in outlets: (1) high ratio of staff-written articles to wire service copy, (2) high amount of editorial (non-advertising) content, and (3) high ratio of interpretation.
2. In the same way, many studies use the same selection method based on what previous researches have done. Meyer and Kim (2003) select 15 quality indicators they identify in the literature to ask newspaper editors to rate them. In her survey on the impact of audience metrics on news quality, Fürst (2020) also uses literature-based indicators to evaluate news quality according to the journalistic production processes in newsrooms.
3. Picard (2000) suggests that the journalistic quality is directly correlated to journalistic activity that can be measured by interviews; telephone gathering of information, arranging interviews; attending events about which stories are written; attending staff meetings, discussions, and training; reading to obtain background material and knowledge; thinking, organizing material, and waiting for information and materials; traveling to and from locations where information is gathered.
4. Cf. Debates between authors like Kunelius, Jacobsson & Jacobsson, Usher, Shapiro, Bogart Kovach et Rosenstiel. Some of them think that only journalists are able to evaluate the quality of journalistic information—the social role of journalism is to permit citizens to form opinions—while others suggest that individuals are able to know what they want by their own (snack news or investigative journalism).
5. Information is a type of “credence good,” which real qualities are often difficult to observe by consumers even after purchasing. This creates information asymmetries between information producers and users and makes sometimes impossible objective evaluation of these qualities (Gabszewicz and Resende 2012). For example, readers have limited capabilities to evaluate the accuracy with which some media outlets select and dispatch their news.
6. We elaborate this theoretical framework as part of a general research project on the question of pluralism and social media in France: Pluralism of online news (<http://www.anr-pil.org>).

7. This section summarizes the main results of a study published elsewhere (Lyubareva et al. 2020). It was conducted in a research project (*Pluralisme de l'Information en Ligne*, www.anr-pil.org/) supported by the French National Agency of Research.
8. Some studies examine the relationship between business models and performance/profitability—do media spending resources in higher quality (i.e., by providing more investigative news) make more profits? (Udell 1978; Meyer and Kim 2003; Abdenour and Riffe 2019)—but not the relationship between quality choice and business models: Are there some combinations in terms of customer segments, cost structure, revenue streams... matching with quality choice?

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