

Inventing new journalistic formats? The integration of audiovisual contents in French online newspapers

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Since the mid-nineties, “multimedia storytelling” has been experimented by some online newspapers, and since 2007 almost every online newspaper has integrated audiovisual contents. This extension raises important issues for journalists and editors: how should audiovisual and textual contents be combined in the visual organization of a website and in the narration of events? This issue is particularly important for online newspapers which keep strong connections with printed newspapers. Based on content analysis of four French online newspapers (lemonde.fr, 20minutes.fr, Liberation.fr, rue89.com) and interviews with drafters, editors and technical directors of each newspaper, this paper shows how those organizations have settled a limited number of “formats” organizing textual and audiovisual contents in websites. These formats are worked out along three main dimensions: the journalistic conception of their social and political role; the imagined newspaper reader or user; the sociotechnical frame of journalistic activities.

KEY WORDS: online newspapers; formats of news; sociotechnical inscription; innovation.

Nowadays, almost every online newspaper displays audiovisual contents: videos, sounds or “multimedia stories” involving textual, audio and video contents. The technical ability to display video and audio contents has existed since the beginning of the internet, and was largely used in pornography (Coopersmith, 1998). While the first online newspapers –such as *The San Jose Mercury News* in California– initially displayed only texts, in the following years, photographs, drawings and other pictures appeared. Use of audiovisual contents in online newspapers remained however rare. Among those rare cases was a section of *houston.chronicles.com*, “Vitual voyager” which displayed texts, photographs, audios and videos between 1997 and 1999 (Boczkowski, 2000). Since the end of 1990’s, the use of audiovisual contents

has increased, in TV news websites (The BBC News since 1997) and newspapers websites (*The Guardian* since 2000). As North American and British professionals pointed out, 2007 can be considered as the year of a “video explosion” in online newspapers (Layton, 2008).

The same phenomenon occurred in French online newspapers. Since the late 1990’s, TV networks have displayed their news on their websites whereas online newspapers have started slowly to use audio and video contents. Yet before 2007, very few video contents are displayed in French online newspapers. Between the end of 2006 and the end of 2007, video contents are displayed in national and local daily newspapers websites (lefigaro.fr, January 2007; liberation.fr, September 2007), in newsmagazines websites (nouvelobs.com, march 2007) and online newspapers which are pure web services (rue89.com, may 2007).

Several features made this extension possible in a context of rapid extension of broadband access. First, video and photosharing websites (YouTube, Dailymotion, Flickr) made it cheap and convenient for online newspapers to display audiovisual contents. Second, some online newspapers hired multimedia journalists and webmasters and invested in audiovisual devices. Third, journalists realized the benefit of such contents to draw readers’ attention and increase advertising incomes.

The integration of audiovisual contents raises major issues. How should they appear on the website? Should they be produced internally or bought to news agencies? Should journalists have a pencil in one hand and a video camera in the other? A quick historical glance shows that similar questions emerged in the 1930’s, when photographs were integrated in American and European newspapers. Historian Barbie Zelizer showed that if the entry of photographs in the columns was a slow process, it was because journalists had mixed feelings about photography. On one hand, they considered it allowed a better reading of news and strengthened the authority of news. But on the other hand, they felt that pictures could bypass the power of words. American journalists then collectively decided to reduce the power of photographs. By the end of the 1940’s, photography became a major field of journalistic practices, but some narrative conventions were designed to reduce the role of pictures to their denotative function, *i.e.* their role in recording reality (Zelizer, 1995). Thus, in the 1930’s and 1940’s, the integration of photography in American newspapers led to a change in news formats. We call “format” a set of conventions ruling the visual organization of contents in the newspaper and ruling their contribution to the news story.

The issue is particularly sensitive for online newspapers which keep strong ties with printed newspapers. Since the mid 1990’s, the weight of textual contents in online newspapers has remained high: if innovators had to dispose of their “culture of print”, their work practices still strongly relied on a “culture of text”. Indeed, non textual contents used in online newspapers (drawings, graphics, photographs) didn’t initially challenge the existing conventions in

printed newspapers concerning the relation between textual and non textual contents. If historians are right, these conventions restricted the part of non textual contents to a denotative part, and rarely to a connotative one. Analyzing the role of photographs in British press, Stuart Hall claims photographs have both an informative value in the newspaper and an ideological meaning. According to him, some textual contents –such as titles, summaries, captions– close the message by imposing an unique ideological meaning (Hall, 1973). Yet, the history of radio and TV news shows that audio and video contents give the opportunity to display a larger range of meanings which are able to resist this kind of closure. Hence the following question: to what extent does the generalization of audiovisual contents in online newspapers change the conventions concerning the relation between textual and non textual contents?

In this paper, our purpose is to study the renewal and stabilization of press formats following the generalization of non textual contents in online newspapers. We studied four websites which keep strong ties with the printed press. Whether because they are connected to a printed newspaper which bears the same name, or because they have been created by journalists who came from the printed press. The collection of empirical data was made in two steps. First, we collected articles from these four websites during the first six months of 2008, and we did interviews with journalists working in these newsrooms. Second, we interviewed drafters, a technical manager and webmasters of one newsroom (rue89.com).

Four modes of combining audiovisual and textual contents

The four French websites share a cultural proximity with the printed press although their newsrooms organization and their human and material resources are quite different. Created in 1995, *lemonde.fr* is the oldest French online newspaper. Its newsroom works with thirty persons, and is disconnected –from a geographical, organizational and a widely cultural point of view– from the print newsroom. This website was the first to display audiovisual contents, although its material and human resources to produce them are quite limited. Also created in 1995, the website of *Libération* is produced in a newsroom placed in the same building as the print newsroom. Audiovisual contents have been very scarce until September 2007, and the launching of *libelabo.fr*. Closely connected with yet distinct from the main website, this experimental website displays audio and video contents which are largely manufactured inside the newsroom. The third website, *20minutes.fr*, was created in 2002 at the same time as the free printed newspaper *20 minutes*. Until 2007, the website only displayed the content of the printed newspaper. Then, it displayed audio and video content although its resources were limited. Contrary to the other websites of this study, *rue89.com* is not connected to a printed newspaper.

Designed and created in 2007 by former journalists of *Libération*, this website displays textual, video and audio contents. The newsroom works with a dozen of journalists who use cheap video cameras and voice recorders.

These websites display both textual and audiovisual contents. Analytically, this integration of audiovisual contents raises two questions: the visual organization of contents and the part each content plays in the narration of news. On one hand, the contents must be visually organized on the website's pages. Video and audio contents can be inserted in the text (above, below or between two paragraphs), placed aside the text, or placed on another page accessible by a hyperlink. This hyperlink can itself be placed within the text or on the side of it. This visual organization also implies fixing the size, length, appearance or frame of each element. For professionals, this visual organization is crucial to grab the reader's attention. Moreover, the contents must be integrated in the narration of news. The audio or video content can have an *illustrative* role if the content does not show the event the article is about or does not give any analysis. It can play a *denotative* role, if it shows the event commented in the article. The audiovisual content can also play a more *connotative* role if it gives an account of the event. Specifying which role each content plays in the narration of news is an important task for the journalist.

The four online newsrooms made different choices concerning the visual organization of contents and the participation of contents to the news storytelling. The web pages collected between February and March 2008 show there are four major modes of combining audiovisual and textual contents.

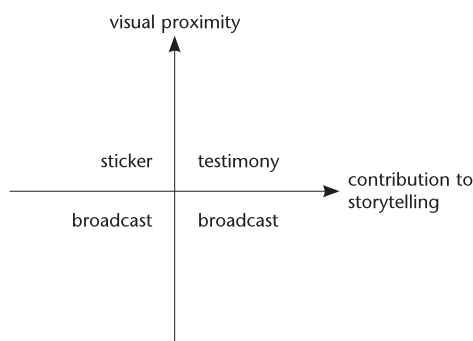


Figure 1. Four modes of combining audiovisual and textual contents.

The *sticker* is a mode characterized by visual proximity between audiovisual and textual contents and by a limited contribution to the news storytelling. The video or audio content is placed in the same page as the text (for instance inserted between two paragraphs), and plays an illustrative or denotative role in the story. The audiovisual content is often there to give access to the event itself whereas the text frames and accounts for the event. The article below deals

with the amputation of an Austrian skier after a violent fall in a competition in March 2008. A 20-second video is placed below the text. Recorded on TV and posted on YouTube, this video shows the accident. The text above describes the fall, explains how difficult it has been to drive the wounded skier to the hospital, and evokes the criticisms of the Austrian press towards medical assistance.

Le skieur Matthias Lanzinger amputé après une chute
LEMONDE.FR avec AFP | 04.03.08 | 15h19

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T Le skieur autrichien Matthias Lanzinger, victime d'une grave chute, dimanche 2 mars, lors de l'épreuve de super-G de la coupe du monde de ski alpin à Kvitfjell en Norvège, a été amputé à Oslo, mardi 4 mars, a annoncé la Fédération autrichienne de ski.

"L'aggravation de son état général et les risques pour sa vie ont rendu indispensable une amputation sous le genou immédiate", a expliqué l'angiologue Thomas Holzbstein, qui a opéré le skieur avec le professeur Lars Engebretsen de l'hôpital Ullevål à Oslo. **"L'état général de Matthias Lanzinger s'en est nettement amélioré. Il n'est plus en ce moment en danger de mort",** a ajouté le chirurgien.

L'Autrichien de 27 ans souffrait d'une fracture tibia-péroné accompagnée de graves complications vasculaires et a subi deux lourdes interventions depuis dimanche qui n'ont pas réussi à rétablir la circulation sanguine dans sa jambe gauche. Placé dans un coma artificiel, il a repris conscience mardi.

Entre la chute du skieur, son évacuation en traîneau puis en hélicoptère de tourisme jusqu'à l'hôpital d'Oslo et sa première opération, se sont déroulées six longues heures. Les médecins ont redouté d'entraîner une blessure "très importante", le pied n'étant apparemment retourné plusieurs fois sur lui-même, endommageant irrémédiablement la jambe et les tissus, selon le professeur Engebretsen.

UNE AMPUTATION ÉVITABLE SELON LA PRESSE

La presse autrichienne a vivement critiqué mardi l'organisation des secours et les conditions de sécurité de l'épreuve de Kvitfjell, déplorant l'absence d'hélicoptère de secours près de la piste et le fait que l'hôpital le plus proche, à Lillehammer, n'était pas assez équipé.

Le quotidien *Kurier* a notamment évoqué "une série de dysfonctionnements lourds de conséquences", alors qu'en cas de complications vasculaires, chaque seconde compte. Une intervention rapide avait ainsi permis de sauver de l'amputation la légende du ski autrichien Hermann Maier en 2001.

Lors du super-G dimanche, Matthias Lanzinger a été déséquilibré dans sa descente et sa tête a heurté une porte de slalom de plein fouet. Il a ensuite glissé sur la neige, visiblement inconscient, et roulé jusqu'aux filets de protection au bord de la piste.

Le skieur Matthias Lanzinger amputé après une chute

Votre réaction

Yves B. : Je souhaiterais que l'article évoque la sécurité de la fixation.

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Figure 2. "Skier Matthias Lanzinger amputated after a fall" (lemonde.fr, 4 March 2008, 7:19 p.m.).

The *testimony* is characterized by the same visual proximity between audiovisual and textual contents, but by a stronger contribution to the story. Placed in the middle of the text, the audiovisual content plays here a more connotative part. The audio or video content is not there to show the event or to illustrate it, but to give to a person the opportunity to account for an event he is involved in. In this way, the video or audio content replaces classical extracts of interview in printed newspapers. It accentuates more strongly the personality of the individual.

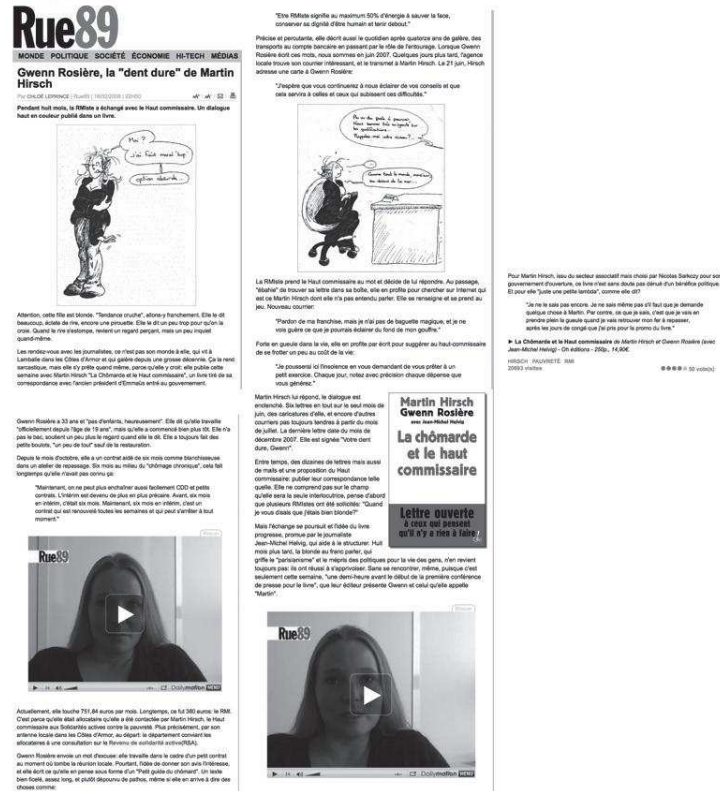


Figure 3. "Gwenn Rosière, Martin Hirsch's adviser" (rue89.com, 16 February 2008, 10:50 p.m.).

This article is about a 33-year-old woman who had been a working poor since the age of 19. For a year, she exchanged letters with Martin Hirsch, a minister in the French government. Those letters have been published in a book, and the article contains two short videos (1'32 and 2' long) where the young woman answers questions written in white letters on a black screen. Those questions are few and general ("how do you explain your own situation?", "does a book change the image society reflects of yourself?"). The text introduces the woman and explains how she came to exchange letters with the minister. Videos play a major role in the story. Framed in close-up, they allow getting not only Gwenn's accounts and explanations but also the emotional part of her discourse (irony, shame). The text presents and highlights Gwenn's testimony.

The *window* is characterized by a visual distance between audiovisual and textual contents –the audio or video content is placed on a different web page, eventually linked to a textual article by hyperlink. It shows an event or broadcasts an interview, but tells no story. The video or audio contains no marks of journalistic intervention: the reporter does not appear on the screen; his questions cannot be heard or read. Traditional conventions rule the display of the audiovisual content: sources, caption, etc. Hyperlinks play a major role by linking the content to other articles concerning the same topic.

The screenshot shows the le Monde.fr website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links. The main headline reads: "Mémoire de la Shoah : François Bayrou juge le projet 'dangereux et déplacé'". Below the headline is a small video player with a play button and the text "Source : Le Monde.fr". To the right of the video is a photograph of François Bayrou. Below the photo is a caption: "LEMONDE.FR/T. VUITTON". To the right of the main article is a sidebar with a video player and a text box. The video player has a play button and the text "Vidéo 'Des démarches diverses et adaptées' pour enseigner la Shoah". The text box contains the following text: "Les personnalités invitées à réfléchir sur l'amélioration de l'enseignement de la Shoah, mercredi 27 février à Paris, autour du ministre de l'éducation nationale, Xavier Darcos, se sont accordées sur l'idée qu'il n'y aura pas de 'formatage unique' sur la question." Below the text box is a small photo and the text "Son 'On ne peut pas entrer au coeur de la".

Figure 4. "Memory of Shoah: François Bayrou considers the project as 'dangerous and irrelevant' " (lemonde.fr, 20 February 2008, 4:06 p.m.).

In this page, the audio content is placed under a title, next to a picture of a French politician, above a caption. In the content, this politician explains why he disagrees with the governmental project to give each French pupil the responsibility to honor the memory of a Jewish child killed during World War II. The recording is one minute long and consists only of the politician's discourse. The reporter's name only appears in the expression "interview made by". The box at the bottom right links this content to several articles related to similar topics.

Finally, the *broadcast* is characterized by the same visual distance between audiovisual and textual contents, but by a strong contribution to the story. The content is not really linked to the other articles of the website. However, contrary to the *window*, the marks of the journalist's interventions are numerous. The journalist comments on pictures, speaks in front of the camera or is filmed with journalists or experts chatting in a studio. Those contents mostly focus on explaining the news. This format is very close to TV or radio formats. These contents are often longer, can become daily or weekly programs, and may end with credits.

The screenshot shows the Libé Labo website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'ACCUEIL', 'S'ABONNER/PODCAST', 'A PROPOS', and 'GRILLE'. The main content area features a central article titled 'PHOTOS DE FAMILLE: Guevara comme Che lui' by Jean-Hébert Armengaud. The article includes a photo of Che Guevara with his family and a play button. To the left, there are several sidebar widgets: 'RECHERCHE', 'UN SITE DE Libération', 'L'INVITÉ LES INTERVIEWS DE LA RÉDACTION' (featuring '5 JOURS À LA UNE'), 'LES DVD DU CINQUÈME LES SORTIES EN VIDÉO', and 'L'INVITÉ' (listing interviews with Michel Issaly, Karine Gavand, Patrick Bloche, and Karim Bitar). To the right, there are widgets for 'S'ABONNER', 'PODCAST', 'LibéLabo' (with a star rating), 'VIDÉO' (listing various news items), and 'PLUS ACTU'.

Figure 5. "Guevara just like home" (libelabo.fr, 31 March 2008).

In the middle of this page, the audio slideshow consists of six old photographs of Che Guevara with his family, which are described and explained by a journalist of *Libération*. The journalist presents the historical context and the relationships between Che and his relatives. The content starts and ends with credits.

These four modes of combining audiovisual and textual contents consist partly in an adaptation of the existing conventions ruling the integration of photographs in the printed press. The *sticker* for instance is very close to the denotative use of photographs in newspapers: it shows 'reality' whereas the text presents and accounts for the event. Relying on classical conventions (title, caption, sources), the *window* innovates with the use of hyperlinks, which enables the creation of new conventions. *Testimony* and *broadcast* may lead to more deep changes for journalistic conventions. *Testimony* may look like an extract of interview placed between paragraphs, but because it contains a connotative discourse, the audiovisual content can be in contradiction with textual content. For *broadcast*, several codes come from TV shows, but they are not exactly the same since journalists and online newsrooms are different.

These modes are not mutually exclusive for the websites we studied. In February and March 2008, the four online newspapers used several of them but not all of them simultaneously. *Lemonde.fr* and *20minutes.fr* almost only used *windows* and *stickers*, but whereas *lemonde.fr* mostly used *windows*, *20minutes.fr* mostly used *stickers*. Because of its separate website, the online newsroom of *Libération* almost exclusively used *windows* and *broadcasts*. *Rue89.com* mostly used *stickers* and *testimonies*. Content analysis therefore shows the existence of four different ways of linking audiovisual and textual contents, which partly correspond to the renewal of existing conventions.

Exploring formats

Accounting for changes in formats is a difficult task, especially because press organizations have a long history. They made technical and organizational choices in the past that had strong effects on how audiovisual contents have been introduced in online newspapers. This is the reason why we decided to focus on *rue89.com*, which is not connected to any existing press organization. Its small newsroom grew independently since the beginning of 2007. Since technical and organizational constraints from the past have been minimized, we assumed that the factors of the formats determination would come up more obviously in the study of *rue89*. This is why we interviewed four redactors, a technical manager and a webmaster of the website.

In January 2007, three former journalists of *Libération* announced the launch of a news website, *rue89.com*. Their goal was to innovate both editorially and technically. Editorially, their aim is to renew the news writing by broadcasting exclusively original contents conceived by three types of people: journalists, experts (in the broad sense of the term: scholars, activists, professionals, etc.) and amateurs. Besides, the founders of *rue89* used to be bloggers, and they were convinced that blogging promoted a new type of news writing: less formal (Matheson, 2004), articulating text and audiovisual contents. Technically, they chose an open source software in the category of “content management system”. This type of software allows different persons to cooperate in a workflow, and distinguishes between the form and the content of information. According to the founders, this technical choice should allow the newsroom to conceive and develop the website internally, and to experiment new formats without being hampered by the necessity to seek for external technical help. At the beginning of 2007, the founders had no precise conception about how textual and audiovisual contents should be articulated on the website. The layout which is chosen for the homepage looks like blog: articles’ titles are put vertically; the most recent is placed above the others. Each article is available on a different page. But at the beginning, the founders chose to let blank the main column of each page. By not fixing a layout, this design choice is intended to encourage experimentation amongst journalists. The main goal they express

to follow during interviews consists in strongly mixing text and audiovisual contents, in order to “select the best of each media, giving up their drawbacks”. Inventing “real multimedia” formats requires a step by step approach. The video integration tries at Rue 89 have notably led to the eviction of audio comments, which seemed to be too TV-related and hard to product following professional standards. Two main formats were created and tended to stabilize during our study: the “no comment” format (named after the *Euronews* TV program), and the “interview” format.



Figure 6. Introduction and picture from a “no comment” (“Night of violence in Villiers-le-Bel – worse than in 2005”, 2007 november 27th).



Figure 7. “Interview”’s issue (“How big is Monsanto’s power in your opinion?”) and picture extract.

In both formats, one can never see or hear the journalist. Both do not require high video skills, and are aimed to show some pieces of information about people that you would not get as a text reader only. At the same time, an introductory paragraph presents the video in order that the article remains understandable as a whole watching it.

Moreover, the framing of these experiments relies upon technical, but also organizational and historical considerations. Articulating text and audiovisual contents as a practice leads us to underline the determining factors of the formats. Three main factors can be stressed: the journalistic conception of their social and political role; the imagined newspaper reader or user; the sociotechnical frame of journalistic activities. Several works emphasized the strategic role of public representation by the professionals in print formats making. Some researches also pointed how French political TV shows put people personalities forward in order to think ahead their public preferences (Neveu, 2003). Yet in Rue 89 journalists constantly call upon the public in many different ways. The main differences concern the reception context, the required technical tools for watching, personal tastes and media use. Journalists have to take into account such varied parameters as the user’s location (at

home or at work) and their browser and pluggins configuration, but also their attitudes and expectations toward press. The making of an innovative format depends on various considerations regarding the public.

The social and political role of journalists is also relevant when considering the making of formats. According to Michal Schudson, American journalists have long favoured comments over politics quotations in their writing practices. They did so as they progressively imagined themselves as expert analysts in charge of explaining political world to the general public (Schudson, 1978, 1982). However, journalists at Rue 89 consider themselves as “modest narrators”, and so endeavour to create narrative more than interpreting in public’s place. They especially care about experts, internet users and accountants’ speech, which means they quite became sort of symmetrical. Such a representation has had a decisive effect in the format’s building process. For example, the “interview” video is made of questions written on a black screen, in order to make multiple points of views understood.

Finally, choosing a format is closely related to the sociotechnical frame of journalistic work. Several historical studies stressed out how telegraph has transformed the production of information in the nineteenth century (Blondheim, 1994). Schudson underlined how this particular short message form that characterizes this technic led to a brief news format and made longer interpretation analysis possible in return. In the case of web-only based Rue 89, most founders and journalists took a part in designing the formats of multimedia information. Most of them had a previous experience as bloggers. This extended the opportunity to imagine everyday experiments and new findings in articulating text, audio and video contents. One main consequence deals with the journalists getting more and more accustomed to new information and computer softwares.

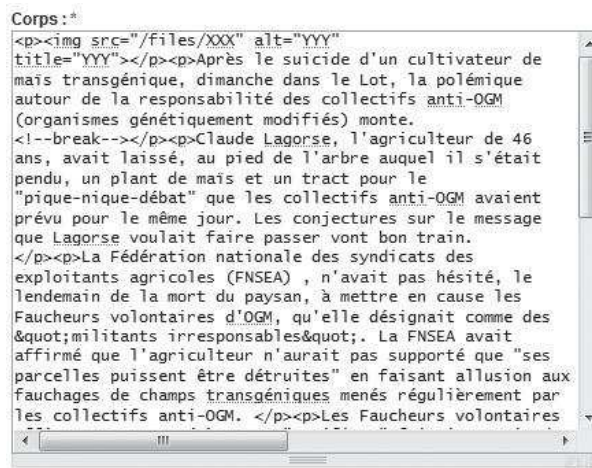


Figure 8. Article window: ordinary language and HTML.

New online editing tools and content management systems especially have then been integrated further in everyday journalistic infrastructure. Our study pointed out the ways in which online journalists carefully established new rules in order to organize contents in a web page. This transitional process appears to be very unsettled, though new formats tend to stabilize.

Conclusion

This study shows how journalists reconfigure contents organization in a quick evolving Web context. Narration and visual contents are highly related when it comes to experiment in web-only newsroom. We raised two main issues about the renewal of "formats". First, we identified four ways to articulate visual and textual contents which partly correspond to the renewal of existing journalistic conventions. They represent significant changes partly based upon previous existing formats (in printed press, radio and TV). Second, we examined the formats determination in a French web-only based case (Rue 89). This example tends to underline that three main factors are at stake in this reconfiguration process, involving journalist professional identity, the imagined reader and the sociotechnical frame of their activities. Even in the case of a newly created newsroom, new media and old media still keep strong connections in the remaking of formats.

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