



REPORT ON HATE SPEECH AND PARTICIPATION IN BELGIUM'S ONLINE FRENCH-LANGUAGE PRESS

Cécile Goffard & Anne-Claire Orban de Xivry

With contributions from

Madeline Corazza & Romuald La Morté

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BRICKS

BUILDING RESPECT ON THE INTERNET BY COMBATING HATE SPEECH

National Study Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The European project BRICkS– Building Respect on the Internet by Combating Hate Speech – aims to combat the spread of online hate speech against migrants and minorities through media literacy and active involvement of web users and web content producers. The first step of this project is a national research combining study cases and interviews that will lead to a European study comparing the situation of hate speech in online press forums in the countries involved in the project (Germany, Belgium, Italy, and Czech Republic). The second step of the project is the development of a media education tool to combat online discriminations and hate speech.

This report analyses the way French-speaking Belgian news media deal with the participation of their readers and with racist and xenophobic hate speech that can be present into their online media. The first part of this report is made up of a contextualisation of the French-speaking Belgian news media analysed including their practices of moderation, of a presentation of various actors around the journalistic sphere and of a synthesis of the choices made by the media we interviewed.

The second part of this report analyses the readers' comments concerning five articles chosen in a given period. These analyses show that the emergence of hate speech is not directly linked to the articles' content or to their formulation but to some key topics, said "sensitive" as immigration or religion. We also notice that there's few exchanges between commenters around the story (most of the commenters only publish one to two comments). When there is actually discussion, we observe usually the same pattern opposing two groups who confront their very Manichean positions with a great verbal violence, as a third group of actors with the role of moderation by urging calm. Beyond those roles taken by commentators in discussion patterns, our analyses note five rhetoric mechanism: victimisation of one's own community to defend themselves from accusations from exogenous communities; referring to authority or experience to give credibility to their words; frequent resort to abuse; inaccurate generalization and lack of nuances; and finally the denunciation of « trolls » by reject or deny. Our analyses also note the invisible presence (unless it is the absence ?) of journalists or moderators from the editorial staff in the conversations of the five selected study cases.

At last, the third part of the report reviews the different issues related to moderation of discriminant comments in online news media by crossing opinions of fifteen journalists, social media managers, managing editors and key resource persons from the associative field having a expertise in journalism or in the fight against hate speech and racism. These opinions bring forward the tensions and multiple influences around four issues: the various modes of online participation, the moderation choices, the notion of responsibility and the issues around freedom of speech. These issues are surrounded by several topics in tensions as the possibility of interaction in the online press and its impact on the profession of journalist, the use of social media (especially Facebook) by news media websites and the way to deal with sensitive issues.

This report finally concludes with some examples of good practices taken from the various interviews with journalists and social media managers. It also highlights the importance of collaborations between the civil society and all media in question to progress towards human rights equality and it stresses the need of finding a balance in the evolution of the journalist profession, in the role of media as mediation in the world, in the contribution of civil society and in the relation media-users, including the role of media education.

I. INTRODUCTION

The BRICKS European project – Building Respect on the Internet by Combating Hate Speech – aims to combat the spread of hate speech directed against migrants and minorities through media education and by actively involving users and producers of web-based content. Phase One of this project is a research phase combining case studies and interviews which will ultimately result in a comparative European study of the hate speech situation in online press forums in the countries taking part in the project (Germany, Belgium, Italy and the Czech Republic). Phase Two involves designing and producing media education tools for combating discrimination and hate speech online.

This report analyses the way the press in French-speaking Belgium manages reader participation and the racist and xenophobic hate speech that may be associated with it in their online media. The report starts by placing in context the Belgian media analysed and their approach to moderation, followed by an introduction to various players in and around the world of journalism and a short history of online participation in the French-language Belgian press. Part Two analyses readers' reactions to five articles taken from different media. Those five articles were selected following observation between 15 January and 31 March 2015 of Belgium's most-read online press sites and according to the reactions they triggered in readers. Part Three of the report then reviews various issues to do with moderating discriminatory remarks on online press sites and compares and contrasts the opinions of around fifteen journalists, social media managers, editors in chief and contacts from different associations who have expertise in the fields of journalism or combating hate speech and racism. Finally, the Conclusion attempts to make some recommendations for the media, civil society and politicians.

II. THE CONTEXT OF THE WALLONIA-BRUSSELS FEDERATION

The difficulty of defining hate speech

Very early on in this study we came up against the problem of defining hate speech. The fact is that several definitions of hate speech that do not encompass the same criteria co-exist in different fields (legal, academic, etc.) and each of the people we interviewed for the purposes of this project has their own concept of it, some broader and some narrower.

The definition of hate speech and its legal limits is intrinsically linked to freedom of speech, in that it restricts it. As emphasized by Bart Cammaerts, a Doctor of Social Sciences at VUB (Brussels), “Inevitably the hate-speech debate also brings into question ideological differences in relation to how absolute the freedom of speech is, the nature of democracy and how or to what extent a balance needs to be struck between different rights, including respect for and recognition of difference and the right not to be discriminated against.”¹ (Cammaerts, 2009). This brings us to question whether being racist is a democratic right and whether freedom of speech includes the freedom to express opinions and views that challenge basic democratic values (Cammaerts, 2009). In the Internet age, when ideas – from the worst to the best – can be expressed anonymously and across borders, there are many issues around freedom of speech. These are mainly divided between the desire to protect minorities and prevent hate from spreading, on the one hand, and the desire to avoid imposing some kind of thought police, making certain subjects taboo and preventing genuine social debate, on the other. That tension between two rights (not to be discriminated against and having freedom of speech) will be explored in greater depth in Part Four of this report. However, it is quite clear that the balance between these two stances is not and never will be fixed. In a way, that balance should actually be arrived at via democratic debate. Whereas on the other side of the Atlantic there are (hardly) any limits to the much-vaunted freedom of speech, over here in Europe freedom of speech is limited, in particular, by the prohibition on incitement to hatred, which is anchored in European legal provisions.

In Belgium, hate speech is governed by four laws. Firstly, the Belgian Anti-racism Law of 31 July 1981 (also called the Moureaux Law²), which itself is based on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 4 January 1969. This law defines “racial discrimination” as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life” (Pax Christi, 2015). This law is chiefly aimed at exclusions based on race and therefore does not cover all the exclusions linked to religion, like Islamophobia. It was therefore supplemented in November 2000 by an EU Council Directive that includes discrimination based on religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. That Directive was transposed into Belgian national legislation by the Anti-discrimination Law of 10 May 2007, which extends those criteria to civil status, birth, wealth, religious or philosophical belief, political convictions, union convictions, language, current or future state of health, a physical or genetic characteristic or social origin (Pax Christi, 2015). Hate speech is also governed by the Men-women Anti-discrimination Law of 10 May 2007 and the Law against Revisionism of 23 March 1995 (Centre for Equal Opportunities, 2009).

¹ From Cammaerts, 2009 Original: “Inevitably the hate-speech debate also brings into question ideological differences in relation to the how absolute freedom of speech is, the nature of democracy and how or to what extent a balance needs to be struck between different rights, including respect for and recognition of difference and the right not to be discriminated against.” (Cammaerts, 2009)

² Philippe Moureaux was the Minister for Justice and Institutional Reform at the time.

In the context of combating cyberhate, ‘incitement’ is a key concept when enforcing the above-mentioned four Belgian laws.

“To be precise, the first two laws prohibit people from ‘inciting to’ discrimination, segregation, hatred or violence against individuals or groups on the basis of certain characteristics (nationality, alleged race, skin colour, ancestry, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, civil status, birth, wealth, age, religious or philosophical belief, current or future state of health, disability, political conviction, physical or genetic characteristics, social origin, language and gender). ‘Inciting to’ is to be understood as any verbal or non-verbal communication that incites, stimulates, stirs up, encourages, accentuates, causes, impels or calls for others to have certain hate reactions. This is therefore more than a matter of mere ideas, information or criticism. However, it is not necessary for that incitement automatically to lead to a reaction” (Centre for Equal Opportunities, 2009).

While the concept of ‘incitement’ is relatively well explained, it appears that, in fact, the distinction between incitement to hatred and simply expressing an opinion is not always so clear, as several social media managers told us in our interviews. It thus regularly happens that if there is any doubt about this distinction, the moderators err on the side of caution, preferring to remove or hide posts.

The legal limits applicable to hate speech are therefore restricted to ‘incitement’ to hatred on the basis of the various protected criteria listed above. In the context of the BRICKS project, this definition seems too restrictive to be usable for analysing the case studies selected and addressing the issue of online participation. As François Deleu, a lawyer with the Cyberhate Unit of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism, explained, there are several levels of hate speech – the ultimate one being that prohibited by law – including stigmatizing remarks that accentuate the tendency to lump things together and are hurtful to a section of the population. In the lawyer’s view, the way to combat such stigmatizing remarks is not through legal channels but rather by education (Deleu, 2015). In this report, in accordance with the aims of the Bricks project, we understand ‘hate speech’ to mean all hate speech recognized by Belgian law and also stigmatizing remarks based on criteria linked to race, origin, birth, religious or philosophical beliefs and language (we will therefore disregard gender- and disability-linked discrimination).

Media’s legal liability in cases of hate speech

François Deleu, a lawyer with the Centre for Equal Opportunities, explains that the rules of legal liability for content are different depending on whether the medium is regarded as host or publisher. The criterion is that if the moderator has a high-profile presence on forums, gets involved in conversations or pre-moderates, that is to say, checks the comments before they are put up, he will be considered to be the publisher of the posts and will therefore be held liable for any hate speech appearing on his site. If, on the other hand, the newspaper practises post-moderation it will be considered merely a host and will therefore be liable only for hate speech it is effectively aware of, that is to say, comments that have been reported to it. This rule applies throughout Europe, as it derives from e-commerce Directives establishing a specific system of liability for hosts. This partly explains why the majority of the media we talked to prefer to post-moderate, as will be discussed below.

All the same, it must be mentioned that a judgment delivered by the European Court of Human Rights, known as the Delfi judgment, goes against this rule which minimizes the host's liability. The European Court indeed appears to take the view that media hosting content must make every effort to avoid and prevent hate speech on their platforms. This position has the media assuming more responsibility than they do at present as hosts. This opinion goes against the rule that applies to the special case of hosts as regards liability (e-commerce Directives). There is therefore a difference between the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights. These two rules being contradictory, the law remains unclear in this respect. Judges can therefore choose the path they wish to take, namely that of the media's civil liability, recommended by the European Court of Human Rights, or that of legal liability as host, recommended by the Court of Justice of the European Union. As François Deleu observed, the speed with which the Internet and new media have taken off has not allowed the body of legislation to develop to deal with this kind of situation. He therefore thinks the European Court of Justice will need to clarify this legislative ambiguity.

Description of the Belgian media analysed

To place in context our analysis of online participation in the online news press in French-speaking Belgium we give below a short overview of the various media that were selected for our case studies or that responded to our requests for an interview. The basis of our research comprises the online press sites, the ways of taking part they offer their readers, and the moderation processes they put in place. To enable these analyses to be summarized at European level it was necessary for the basic corpus to be identical for all the Bricks project partners, i.e., with one medium selected under each of the following criteria:

CRITERIA	CHOICE
The online version of a national newspaper	Le Vif
An online newspaper at national level, on the web exclusively with no paper version	/
An online newspaper that has experimented with new ways of interacting with its readers	Le Soir (11h02)
A popular online newspaper, with lightweight news	Sud Presse
A local online newspaper, with a big readership in a particular area	La Dernière Heure

Two remarks are required with respect to these criteria within the framework of our context. First of all, in view of the federalisation of the arts and media sectors in Belgium, we will confine this analysis to the level of French-speaking Belgium, namely the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, rather than the national level. Secondly, as there is no general-interest newspaper of sufficient scope in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation that has developed an online version only, we have been unable to fulfil the second criterion. In the end, the case studies (cf. next chapter) have been drawn from four French-language media: le Vif, le Soir, Sud Presse, and la Dernière Heure.

However, in order to cover the full context of the French-language media and enhance our analysis with wider considerations, we have taken the liberty of conducting interviews with some other French-language media, including broadcast ones:

- Le Soir (daily)
- La Dernière Heure – Les Sports (daily)
- Le Vif (weekly)
- Sud Presse (daily)
- La Libre (daily)
- RTBF info - Radio Télévision Belgique Francophone (broadcast)
- RTL info – Radio Télévision Luxembourgeoise³ (broadcast)

³ This radio and television broadcaster is based in Luxembourg, but the programmes are broadcast in Belgium ('Television Without Frontiers' Directive). The audience are chiefly French-speaking Belgians. This is therefore the main private television channel in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

With the exception of La Dernière Heure – Les sports and Le Soir, which did not respond to our requests for an interview, we were able to meet at least one person from the editorial staff of each of the press sites mentioned, either a journalist, a social media manager or an editor in chief (cf. Annex 1 – List of People Interviewed). In the pages that follow we briefly introduce each of the media, its editorial line, its moderation policy and the ways of interacting it offers its readers. Most of this information was obtained from our interviews. Several press sites use Twitter, among other social media, to broadcast their information. However, we decided to analyse only that participation which takes place via the press websites or those sites' Facebook pages, these being the ways of interacting most oriented to the 'general public'.

Press and broadcast media groups

The French-language dailies in Belgium belong to three main press groups. Firstly, the Rossel Group, which owns more than half the French-language daily circulation, principally including Le Soir, l'Echo (via Mediafin), Sud Presse and Metro (via Mass Transit Media). Next comes Corelio, a Flemish press group that owns various Belgian daily newspapers (mainly Flemish) and has owned the French-language daily L'Avenir since 1999. And lastly, the IPM Group, a public company that owns La Dernière Heure – Les Sports and La Libre Belgique. (asbl, 2010). Each of these dailies has its own online news site and a Facebook page which is followed by a number of web users.

The Roularta Media Group is another major press group in Belgium which has no dailies but owns a number of weeklies, both Dutch-language and French-language, such as Le Vif l'Express, the leading news weekly in French-speaking Belgium (Roularta, 2008).

There are other online news media not linked to a printed newspaper. These include in particular the RTBFinfo news site, which is linked to RTBF – Radios et Télévisions Belges Francophones. This independent public corporation is subsidised by the French-speaking community and provides radio, television and internet offerings. Its site received more than 334,802 visits in 2014 (CIM, 2014) while its Facebook page has 221,172 subscribers (RTBF Info Facebook page, 2015). The RTL Group is regarded as RTBF's private competitor, as it likewise owns several television channels and radio stations in French-speaking Belgium, as well as a news site. The RTLinfo site records 244,122 visits per year (CIM, 2014) and has a Facebook page which is very popular among Belgian web surfers, with nearly 257,692 subscribers (RTL info Facebook page, 2015).

Le Soir – www.lesoir.be

Le Soir is a general-interest daily covering both national and international news. "It generally focuses principally on domestic politics and events in society" (asbl, 2010, pp. 8, Fiche Le Soir) and is inclined towards analysis, taking a 'heavyweight' approach, and is aimed at a broad readership (Gevers, 2003). Le Soir is described by its editors as a progressive, independent newspaper.

In terms of participation, readers are able to react to articles on the Le Soir site by connecting through a Facebook account. They regularly post articles on their Facebook page, avoiding certain sensitive topics. They also use Twitter. Lesoir.be also has a 'Debate' section on its site that provides two innovative contribution features. Firstly, there is 'Carte blanche', the equivalent of the 'Opinions' page at

Lalibre.be, where anyone who is an expert in a particular area can talk about a topic. The ‘Cartes blanches’ are published once per day, so participation is less spontaneous. Secondly, there is ‘11h02’, a chatroom which is open every weekday (not at weekends) from 11.02 a.m. on a given topic. Surfers have half an hour to put their questions to a guest who is an expert on the subject and he or she replies by live video. An article and the video of the conversations are subsequently published. We were not able to meet with anyone from Lesoir.be and so we were not able to obtain their views on moderation and online participation. However, we can quote Jean-François Dumont, Deputy General Secretary of the Association of Professional Journalists, who in 2011 described the Lesoir.be moderating system as a system “where the moderators take turns from 6.30 a.m. to midnight and can ban an undesirable contributor for varying lengths of time [...] and where articles about immigration, Israel, the Congo and crime reports are automatically off-limits” (Dumont, Forum en ligne: tableau noir et mesures claires [Online forum: blackboard and clear measures], 2011).

** Case study selected from the pages of Lesoir.be: “Islamic State threatens to set 500,000 migrants adrift heading for Italy”, 19 February 2015.*

La Dernière Heure – Les Sports – www.dhnet.be

La Dernière Heure is a daily focusing mainly on national and regional news. The front page is generally devoted to sports news and crime reports, highlighting the more spectacular aspects of a story. The main sections on the website include for example ‘Buzz’, ‘Lifestyle/People’ and ‘BetFIRST’, a service enabling people to bet on matches in various sports. News is therefore not the only offering provided by la Dernière Heure. This newspaper could be termed a tabloid: “There is little room on the pages of the newspaper for putting things into perspective or in-depth analysis. The headlines are attention-grabbing, sometimes calling out directly to the reader and sometimes oversimplifying the information or presenting it in an alarming way” (asbl, 2010, pp. 4, Fiche la DH).

La Dernière Heure offers its readers three ways of interacting: they can comment on articles on the site by registering through its Facebook account; there is a Facebook page where articles are regularly posted and can be commented on; and there is a Twitter account. It would seem that the editors regularly use the social media to appeal for witnesses they can interview in connection with their stories (see picture opposite). We did not get the agreement of the editorial staff for an interview. We were therefore unable to obtain their views on moderation and online participation.

** Case study selected from the pages of DHnet.be: “Molenbeek: more than 200 people remember Soulaïmane Jamili one year after his death.” 21 February 2015.*

Le Vif/L’Express – meeting with Vincent Genot, Editor in Chief of www.levif.be

Le Vif is a weekly which is defined as “centre left, without being partisan” (Lovens, 2003). “Le Vif/L’Express banks on genuine journalistic added value and investigation” (Roularta, 2008). It regularly publishes investigations into political, social or economic topics. The Le Vif site also allows room for different shades of opinion by regularly giving a free hand to politicians, representatives of civil society (trade unions, associations, NGOs, etc.) and academics, allowing them to express their points of view on a current topic or social issue.

The Vif l'Express website offers two ways of interacting. Firstly, comments on the press website, with users being required to register on the site and provide various particulars. This is to prevent people from logging on with false identities or anonymously. The second option for interacting is to post comments on Le Vif's Facebook pages or send tweets to their Twitter account.

We had a meeting with Vincent Genot, Editor in Chief of Levif.be, to discuss moderation on the Le Vif website and on the social media. He explained that the Le Vif website post-moderates comments, via a warning system which readers can trigger by clicking an 'Unacceptable' button if they think a post goes too far. The warning is e-mailed to all the Le Vif journalists and the first one to notice it in his or her Inbox will check whether the post should be removed. All the journalists at Le Vif have undergone Council for Ethical Journalism (CDJ) training on moderation. He noted that younger journalists are most likely to be uncertain whether or not a post should be taken down, whereas older journalists will be quicker to intervene. He estimates that in the case of 95% of posts there is no doubt that they need to be removed. Only 5% of posts are likely to raise questions with regard to freedom of speech. Vincent Genot admits that in fact a post can sometimes be more problematical in terms of its content, making it difficult to decide whether the bounds of acceptability have been crossed because it is a matter of interpretation. In that case the editorial staff discuss it among themselves. It is Le Vif's policy never to explain to users why their post was taken down, because the staff regard it as a waste of time and feel that in the vast majority of cases there is no point in going into explanations for the author's benefit, in view of the wording of the post.

Throughout our interview, Vincent Genot took a fairly pessimistic view of reader participation in the online press which, from his point of view, is of little relevance. In his opinion, the only kind of interaction that results in more sincere communication, and sometimes enables articles to be enhanced, takes place by e-mail, but he regards comments in their present form as rarely helpful. The main reason for providing the possibility of commenting on the site or the social media is a commercial one. The point is that interaction generates more traffic and more 'clicks', which they can subsequently derive a profit from through advertisements.

This rather pessimistic view of online reader participation is reflected in the way posts are presented on the Le Vif website. In practice, the posts below the articles are never viewable straight away: the reader has to click the 'Reactions' button to display them... right at the foot of the page. In order to comment on articles, net surfers have to create an account on the site and read the code of conduct, which sets out the usual newsgroup rules, that is to say, the legal limits along with some notes about etiquette, the format of posts, personal remarks, and promoting commercial products or other Internet sites.

As far as Facebook is concerned, Vincent Genot notes that the social medium provides little in the way of moderating tools and mentioned that he had already written to those in charge of Facebook Belgium to see if it was possible to put some more tools in place. Unfortunately, he received no reply. So the only tool they can use to moderate posts on Facebook is a list of banned words. Whenever these words come up in posts the staff are alerted and they can check whether the post is problematical. Surfers can also report problematical posts via a private message. They have no other means of moderation on Facebook.

Like many other editorial staff, they sometimes disable comments on their site for certain topics, such as homosexuality, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Islam, because such items regularly attract negative and racist comments from certain pressure groups. He also pointed out that often it is the same people who react on press sites, giving a skewed image of net surfers and the Belgian population generally. Vincent Genot told us that *Le Vif* is regularly threatened by certain associations with proceedings and complaints concerning views expressed in articles and/or in comments below articles which the complainer considers offensive. In Vincent Genot's view, these associations could be a useful ally in combating hate posts if they would only communicate in a different way. Most of the time, he said, it was a pity the associations responded by threatening lawsuits if the editors failed to respond within one hour, whereas a friendly e-mail would suffice and would be more positive. Finally, Vincent Genot explained that journalists are not given any instructions on handling sensitive issues because, in his opinion, that has no effect on potential hate posts anyway. He also observed that opinion columns and articles cause fewer inappropriate outbursts than other pieces do. In his view, this is probably because such articles attract a better informed and more mature reader who wants to discuss a topic constructively, engage in genuine debate and exchange views in a climate of respect.

** Case study selected from the pages of levif.be: "The West at war with Islam? An 'ugly lie'", 19 February 2015.*

SudPresse – Meeting with Joël Tricart, Community Moderator at www.sudinfo.be

SudPresse is a general-interest regional daily specialising in local news. On its website, current affairs are arranged by regions, with a review of news and events in the different geographical areas. National and international news appears alongside regional news and can be seen through the reactions of local players. As well as political, social, economic and arts news, the articles mainly contain reports on crimes, sociocultural events, local projects, regional economic activity, key local figures, interesting and unusual people and amazing situations, along with sports coverage and celebrity news. The Sudinfo.be site contains news from the various regional editions of the Sud Presse group's newspapers: *La Meuse* (covering Liège, Verviers, Luxembourg, the Lower Meuse and Namur), *La Nouvelle Gazette* (Charleroi and Sambre-Meuse), *La Province* (Mons), *Nord Eclair* (Mouscron and Tournai) and *La Capitale* (Brussels and Walloon Brabant). SudPresse's editorial style is incisive and trenchant. To make the articles livelier and bring them closer to the readers, the stories are often told by the people involved in their own words or through 'man in the street' witness accounts. Nearly every article is preceded by a half-title giving the location of the story, which is told in a few short paragraphs. (asbl, 2010).

The options for interaction offered by the Sudinfo.be site are fairly basic: readers can comment on articles on the site via their Facebook account or on the medium's Facebook page, or they can interact via Instagram or Twitter (though the latter does not seem to be much used by net surfers). Both on Sudinfo.be and its Facebook page, all the articles can be commented on, no matter what the subject, right from the moment they are published, unlike other media which do not allow the option of commenting on certain articles where the topics are sensitive. Joël Tricart, a Community Moderator with SudPresse, described that choice to leave comments open as "quite brave". He considers no topic should be taboo. He takes the view that if a newspaper speaks out on a topic, it must allow its readers the option of doing

the same. However, the possibility of commenting on articles on their site is withdrawn after a certain time, as part of their moderating system.

In Joël Tricart's opinion, the media should be on the social networks in order to increase their readerships. He makes no secret of the fact that the number of visits to the website has increased hugely thanks to Facebook and the other social media. At the end of the day, a newspaper is a business which must sell its product and increase its readership, particularly on the website, which is partly sponsored by advertising. He does, however, add the caveat that this adaptation to readers' wishes should not take place as a matter of course, regardless of the cost.

Joël Tricart's job involves, firstly, hosting the SudPresse social media by organizing competitions, liaising with users and answering their questions. He also has to sound out readers on a particular topic by looking at the number of visits and the content of the posts and then provide feedback to the editorial staff on how readers feel. He regularly contacts editors in chief and journalists when additional information is supplied by readers or to give an opinion on public interest in a topic on the basis of the number of comments received. The web journalists are in charge of publishing links to articles. As far as moderation is concerned, each journalist is expected to keep an eye on the articles they have written and, if they feel that the posts are starting to get out of hand, they call in Joël Tricart or their managing editor, who is also able to moderate comments. Moderating is therefore not the community moderator's main duty.

While not advocating anarchy, Joël Tricart feels that a community is capable of managing itself. This view of social management of online communities guides him in handling posts: he confines himself to removing the ones that are unequivocally illegal – although admitting that the criteria are very subjective – while allowing readers to express themselves freely, even if their comments can sometimes seem dubious. He distinguishes between what he calls “borderline” posts and “illegal” posts. As he sees it, a “borderline” post comes from someone who is simply expressing discontent, without necessarily being racist, and can therefore be left visible. He gives the example of someone commenting “Another Arab” under an article talking about an offence committed by a person with a North African-sounding name. Someone like that is not, he thinks, necessarily racist – they are commenting on the article, but will then move on to something quite different, and it will go no further than that. Such posts are sometimes at the boundary of what is permitted by law, and most of the time they derive from discontent with everyday life, or perhaps stupidity or ignorance. He therefore does not consider them illegal. According to Joël Tricart, it makes more sense to talk to the readers who post “borderline” comments, and explain to them objectively how things actually are, rather than taking down their posts. “They probably won't believe you, and you may be unable to shake their convictions, but barring them from discussions or banning them from our pages would be a serious mistake and would have the opposite effect from that hoped for by those who are trying to combat extremism” (Tricart, 2015). He thinks that calls for hatred and comments that are definitely illegal are most likely the work of small groups, “microcosms” which represent only a tiny part of the readership and which move around other sites, spreading their racism. Such comments are often posted via bogus Facebook accounts that copy and paste racist messages on all the press sites. He therefore bans them from the Sudpresse page. However, he stresses that

the number of truly racist posts is tiny compared with the number of people who have read the article. According to his analysis in a post published on his ‘Sudpresse Community Moderator’ page, out of 430,000 single visitors to the Sudpresse sites, he counted an average of 8,600 posts, which amounts to a mere 2% of the total number of visitors. As it is possible that these posts may be published by the same person, he counts an average of 4 posts per commenter, making 2,150 single commenters out of 430,000 single visitors, ultimately representing no more than 0.5% of the readership. Based on a generous estimate that 4 out of 10 posts are illegal, he concludes that around 0.2% of Sudpresse readers’ posts are truly problematical (Tricart, 2015).

Joël Tricart does not see himself as a regulator, but rather as a community moderator. He works from the principle that “People are grown up enough to deal with the posts themselves, and sort out the stupid posts from the others”, and he sees no need for policing. In his view, a regulator is someone who has the power to dictate what is allowed on a site and what is not, with reference to a users’ charter, and he thinks that that stops people from really expressing themselves freely. Incidentally, the Sudpresse site does not have a charter. As regards removing posts, Joël Tricart therefore refers to what is laid down by the legal limits, but never goes further than they do. In his opinion, the system of moderation practised in the early years of this century, when the media considered that certain comments should not appear on the site and only the best interactions were selected, is completely out of date. Nowadays, comments on Facebook are no longer deleted, but simply made invisible to other people. He takes the view that when some web surfers write posts that are at the limit of legality, there will always be others to balance things out and thus an equilibrium is established.

Joël Tricart considers that trying to improve web surfers’ participation and raise the tone of the debate is very utopian. He says what people want is to be able to express their views, not necessarily to take part in a discussion. He cites the example of the crime reports, where people only want to express their sympathy with the victims in the posts.

✱ *Case studies selected from the pages of sudpresse.be:*

- *“Dison: denied access to training because she wears a veil, she takes the college and the Minister, Ms Simonis, to court”, 23 March 2015.*
- *“He walks around Paris with a skull cap on his head to see the reactions: spitting, abuse, intimidation...”, 16 February 2015.*

La Libre – Meeting with Dorian de Meeus, Editor in Chief of www.lalibre.be

La Libre is a general-interest daily covering both national and international news. For a long time this newspaper was “Catholic-influenced, before opening up to other points of view” (asbl, 2010). For the last few years La Libre “has positioned itself as a medium for debate (...) and opened up its pages to different shades of opinion. This daily attaches great importance to respect for personal belief, and in particular philosophical and religious beliefs. [The newspaper] believes in creativity and individual initiative and defends the market economy as a tool for social development. Lastly, in Belgium, La Libre defends the parliamentary democracy system and union federalism. This opening up to discussion and different shades of opinion is indicated by the ‘Debate’ section on the lalibre.be site, which invites

readers to “share a well-informed opinion on a current topic or social issue” (Lalibre.be). Each day, one of the opinions received is published on the site, sometimes on the front page. The people whose opinions are published must be people with some expertise in the area they are talking about or in some way connected with the topic discussed. Items dealing with current affairs and well-structured items are more likely to be chosen. This form of participation is thus less spontaneous than the other forms La Libre offers its readers.

La Libre in fact provides three other ways of interacting, similar to those used by the other media analysed. The first of these is on the Lalibre.be site, where readers can comment on articles by logging on via their Facebook account. The second is on Facebook itself, where people can comment on the articles posted on the Lalibre.be page, and the third is via La Libre’s Twitter account. Prior to using the Facebook⁴ plugin on its site to enable readers to react to articles, La Libre used its own content management system. However, in 2014 it was decided to switch to Facebook in order to facilitate access to the posts (users can use their Facebook account directly, without having to create a new account), and also because it is harder for users who have been banned from the community to come back and post again via Facebook than it was with the old system. Bit by bit, the moderators at La Libre have banned from the Facebook page and from the site all the Facebook accounts of users who did not observe the law or their code of conduct, and that has cut down the hate speech. When a user is banned on Facebook, he or she is not aware of that and can still go to the page and leave a comment, but his or her posts will not be visible to other users. Dorian de Meeus, Editor in Chief of Lalibre.be, explained that this Facebook feature has made things very much easier for moderators. They no longer have to give reasons for banning someone, as was the case under the old content management system, where the user would realise that his or her account had been blocked.

At Lalibre.be, moderation is performed by younger journalists who, like all the other journalists on the editorial staff, have undergone Centre for Equal Opportunities training on the rules to be followed with regard to moderation and hate speech. They are regularly reminded about the rules of moderation whenever there is a sensitive news story, such as the Middle East. According to Dorian de Meeus, it is not too difficult to identify a problematical post: in his view, whenever a post contains an attack on an individual or a group because of their behaviour, sexual orientation, origin or skin colour, it must be removed. When things go awry, most of the time all that is necessary is to e-mail or message the author of the post and the situation soon calms down. Legal proceedings are very rare, and when they do happen, it is often a civil society association or an individual who finds certain things unacceptable and decides to bring an action. Such actions can sometimes result in a sentence, but a formal notice is more usual.

At our interview, Dorian de Meeus took a fairly positive stance on online participation by readers. He has seen a big rise in the standard of the posts on the pages of Lalibre.be in four years. By taking drastic steps like not allowing comments on certain topics (religion, homosexuality, foreigners) and making use of the possibility of banning certain profiles, he considers that he has succeeded in improving the quality of the conversations. Dorian de Meeus explained that because of this, his journalists are regularly accused of censorship and muzzling freedom of speech. Nevertheless, he feels it is important for people to be able to say what they think and he believes they should be allowed to do so, even if one

⁴ The Facebook plugin is an extension module that can be integrated with a site to enable web surfers to comment on articles on the site via their Facebook account.

doesn't agree with their opinions, because enabling people to talk to one another is a way of gradually getting them to modify their views. All the same, he thinks that those who do not observe the legal limits should be banned in order to keep the debate healthy and give other readers the chance to express their opinions. The main benefit for Lalibre.be of interacting with its readers is getting reactions, sometimes from experts, to various articles, even though he also pointed out that the first victims of the posts are very often the journalists or the editors in chief, who are attacked for what they have written. The decision to maintain the comments option is partly motivated by self-interest, as it is sometimes a way of finding out that certain aspects have not been covered in the article, or there are errors or omissions, which is helpful. The biggest problem is managing to keep the debate constructive. According to Lalibre.be's editor in chief, constructive posts appear much more often than is believed. Unfortunately, some readers with interesting things to say may be put off taking part in the discussion when they come up against posts that are needlessly aggressive or ill-considered. He thinks it is also a matter of image: readers do not always want their opinions up there for all to see. It is harder to separate the personal from the non-personal on Facebook, and people who belong to an organisation or political party no doubt stop to think before posting their opinions in a public forum.

Dorian de Meeus says that readers need to realise that they can contribute something of genuine interest to the debate, and there is also some education involved in getting them to see that they have power over the newsgroups: they can express their views, but they can also moderate and refocus the debate to make it more constructive and they can report abusive content. The first-stage filter is comprised of the web surfers and readers, and they are also instrumental in making internet debate more constructive and more respectful. As he sees it, "The journalists provide the information, but it's the readers who manage it", via sharing functions in particular.

** Case study selected from the pages of lalibre.be: "Mounting tension around De Wever: he refuses to apologise, and citizens and organisations lodge complaints", 31 March 2015.*

L'Avenir – meeting with Thierry Dupiereux, Editor in Chief of www.lavenir.net and Yves Raisiere, Head of National News at Lavenir.net

L'Avenir is a regional general-interest daily, though it often devotes the first few pages to national news. The newspaper covers events with the emphasis on the local aspect, in particular often focusing on the regional impacts of a national news story, and also on quality. Crime reports, local projects, local politics, sport and entertainment make up the bulk of the publication. There is little coverage of international news. The newspaper aims to be as close as possible to its readers' everyday lives and day-to-day concerns. The Diocese of Namur was a shareholder until 2007. Today, even though the newspaper describes itself as independent, its editorial line remains on the conservative side. (asbl, 2010, pp. 6, Fiche L'Avenir).

Unlike other media, Lavenir.net manages comments on articles on its site directly via a content management system (CMS) which is specific to its site, rather than via a Facebook plugin, and that gives the moderators greater control. When they decide to open up comments on articles they practise post-moderation, but Thierry Dupiereux, Editor in Chief of Lavenir.net, explained that in fact, they do not open their articles for comment too often because they know certain topics will always end up derailing.

They have therefore decided not to allow users to comment on articles on problematical topics like immigration, community squabbling, crime reports, football (club clashes, in particular), etc. However, they do sometimes allow readers to comment on certain topics, while keeping a very close eye on the article in question, with a moderator present. Their community manager works both on the comments on their own site and on the social networks and therefore cannot maintain a permanent presence on the website. Thierry Dupiereux explained that the community manager was hired in the wake of the 2010-2011 government crisis, which resulted in abuse and hate speech between Walloons and Flemish on their page reaching an intolerable level, with some very violent, extremist remarks. They now have two people performing this role.

He sees the comments on the site as very interesting, even when they go awry, because it enables them to target readers' lack of knowledge of certain topics. As an example he quoted the story about the Syrian refugees arriving in Belgium, which brings them in a fair amount of letters and e-mails, saying that they see this as a different and more constructive form of participation. The inaccuracies circulated by surfers in these messages are interesting to look at and can spawn ideas for future topics. Thierry Dupiereux sees the media's duty as being to inform and also to educate their readers. And whenever a topic is deemed sensitive to readers or not fully understood, the journalists at L'Avenir will take great care when using words like 'migrants' or 'refugees' and with the pictures they choose to illustrate their pieces. For instance, they avoid showing videos or photographs of Daesh, so as not to become part of their propaganda, and when writing about issues to do with wearing the veil they take care not to select a picture of a burka.

Thierry Dupiereux told us that when he was appointed Editor in Chief in 2006, the practice of commenting had already started but the journalists took such criticism of their work very hard and were sometimes badly shaken. They were not used to direct confrontation of this kind with their readers, as until then the editor in chief had acted as a buffer between the two sides.

Over time, they came to realise that some articles could not be opened up for interaction. Nevertheless, some surfers found a parry to the articles that were closed to comments, by shifting the conversation about one article towards another article where comments were permitted. Surfers regularly cry censorship when a forum is closed. Moderation of hate posts and illegal comments is likewise seen as censorship. The 'Report abuse' button is used every day to denounce racist or hate speech.

Thierry Dupiereux also pointed out that it is not always easy to decide at what point a comment becomes xenophobic. They apply some house limits that are set higher than the legal limit. For example, they will not tolerate rudeness or abuse on their forums. If comments are really too extreme (threats, for instance) they report them to the police.

Lastly, Thierry Dupiereux observed that the first comment posted on the site by surfers has a huge influence on how the conversation develops. If the first comment is well constructed, the ensuing debate will be more interesting, especially if "the moderator is there to steer the debate back on course from time to time". So the moderator is involved in the discussions on Facebook and on the site and refocuses the debate when necessary. Yves Raisiere, Head of National News, relates how they published a 'citizens' edition' in the newspaper on two occasions, following two events that had given rise to a lot of reaction from their readers: one at the time of the 2010-2011 government crisis, and the other in February 2015 following the government's deci-

sion to abolish unlimited unemployment benefit. Both these citizens' editions were constructed around comments and opinions expressed by readers of Lavenir.net reacting to the articles and debates posted online for a whole week on the same topic, but attacking it from different angles. That positive experience not only utilised the readers' comments productively but also enhanced their quality⁵. Although fairly restrictive with regard to the comments published on its site, the editorial staff at Lavenir.net want to build supervised shared spaces for genuinely constructive conversations with their readers, as they have already done with their citizens' editions. Unfortunately, such an undertaking requires a lot of energy and is not suited to all topics. They are therefore still considering how they could enhance the quality of their interactions with their readers.

RTBF info – meeting with Aline De Volder, Social Editor of www.rtbfbelgium.be

RTBF is an independent public corporation providing television, radio and Internet services. The RTBF Info site, which is linked to it, is a general-interest news site with the emphasis on news, both national and international, the arts and sport. As a public corporation, RTBF sees its mission as defending democratic values by providing more in-depth analysis and it avoids taking sides politically. Aline De Volder, whom we met, has been the Social Editor in charge of publishing news on the social networks since 2012. It is her role to moderate the RTBF info Facebook page and Twitter account. She also supervises the television news broadcast pages (7 à la une, Question à la une, 15 minutes, traffic information and the weather), not by actually moderating them but by giving advice to the page moderators and supervising them. On the RTBF info pages, her main duties are publishing news and moderating. Moderation has a bigger role on the Info page than on RTBF's other pages, which generate less interaction.

The main channel for interaction offered by RTBF is via their Facebook page. Although it is possible to comment on the RTBF Info site, most of the time the comments are closed because they practise pre-moderation and there is a lack of resources to manage the interactions. Surfers wishing to comment on articles therefore have to turn to Facebook, while being aware that not all the articles on the site are published on Facebook. Users comment more readily on Facebook because, firstly, they get more of their information from it and, secondly, they feel more anonymous there. Since June 2015 users have been able to comment on the site from their Facebook profile, but surfers' comments seem clearly to have shifted towards the social media, especially since the articles on the site are not very often open for comment. On the RTBF info Facebook page, Aline De Volder tries to post items that generally work on the social media, such as out-of-the-ordinary stories with videos, but at the same time she tries to keep to the general editorial line of RTBF, which is a public service. She therefore alternates between more lightweight items and heavier, in-depth pieces. She divides the people who comment on the RTBF info page into two categories: those who tend to post aggressive comments, and those who then moderate the comments left by the first group. The latter ultimately play the role of 'ambassador-moderator' and back them up in their work. She noted that it is always the same people who take the same roles, and sometimes it looks like a game between surfers. If more borderline comments are posted but later counterbalanced by other comments, she leaves the borderline comments visible (but not the comments that breach the legal limits) because she thinks there is a certain balance between the shades of opinion.

⁵ We will come back to this in the chapter titled About the possibility of interaction in the online press and its impact on the journalist's job

Inz Aline De Volder's view, it is fairly rare for comments on Facebook to result in posts that are really positive and interesting to RTBF. She is sorry the direct messages on the page had to be closed due to a lack of human resources, as these private messages were the source of a lot of interesting information: ideas for stories, alerts about various events, etc. As she sees it, comments do not really bring in much that is of interest, but simply enable the public to take part and to discuss things: "It's the spirit of the times, you can't just ignore it (De Volder, 2015). Aline De Volder also commented that the advent of the social networks has made the articles a little more provocative as regards headlines in order to spark off discussion. However, she qualified that by saying that newspapers have always used eye-catching headlines to attract their readers. There is so much information being passed around on Facebook that if items do not catch the reader's attention with a picture or headline, they will not get noticed: "You have to engage with people's attention spans nowadays" (De Volder, 2015). Aline De Volder also makes no secret of the fact that she has targets to meet in terms of clicks for advertisers⁶.

She thinks that moderation is quite prominent on the RTBF site and pointed out that, unlike other sites, their moderation charter is also on their Facebook page, in the 'About' section. She refers surfers to that charter if they accuse her of censoring freedom of speech, but that rarely happens because she often hides problematical comments without the author realising⁷. Only if she deems comments to be illegal does she decide to delete them or even to ban the person from the page. In the case of abuse or aggressive messages like "Migrants go home!", she prefers to hide them. If, on the other hand, the writer words the comment along the lines of "I think they should all go back home", she will leave it visible because it is more of an opinion than an incitement. As far as freedom of speech is concerned she sometimes finds it difficult to allow people to express their views on some topics (such as immigration) because the comments soon descend into hate. All the same, Aline De Volder considers it important to be able to allow people to talk about such things, which are social issues, even if she would like readers to distance themselves a bit more from prejudices and stereotypes. She cannot ban or delete comments from people who spread stereotypes and prejudices – that is their right – but there would need to be someone to put things into context and put forward factual information to counter them. She herself does not have time to perform that role, which in fact is not hers at all, but she notes that other commenters often do so, and between them some sort of balance is reached.

She thinks it is very difficult to engage in genuine debate with Facebook surfers. She explained, for example, that RTBF did an experiment in one of its programmes on the subject of 'Refugees and us' where they asked people to send in their questions about refugees. They picked out about thirty questions which they then tried to answer in articles. Various tools for interaction were available during the programme: a chatroom on the RTBF site, with three experts lined up to answer surfers' questions, and the Facebook page, where readers could also ask questions. She does not think that leads to real discussion and genuine debate because people think the answers they are given do not go far enough: "And if you really get into a discussion with people, there's no end to it, because so many of them are convinced you are lying to them and you have got it in for them", (De Volder, 2015). Nor does she think it a good idea to attempt to debate within the comments, even if it often happens that the moderators refocus the debate, especially when they feel that people have not read the article. They then step in and advise people to read the article before expressing an opinion.

⁶ We will come back to this in the chapter entitled About the possibility of interaction in the online press and its impact on the journalist's job.

⁷ We mention this Facebook feature several times in our report and in particular in the chapter titled About the use of social networks (Facebook) by press sites.

RTL info – meeting with Fabrice Cecchi, Editor in Chief of www.rtlinfo.be

RTL is a media group providing television, radio and Internet services. The RTLinfo.be website is a general-interest news site that tries to be close to people. In particular, the site publishes personal accounts and local stories its readers can readily relate to. The site also provides reports from the channel's television news. More lightweight news is also featured via a 'people & buzz' section.

The RTLinfo.be website enables users to interact via four channels: under the articles on the media site, via the 'Alert us' page which is also on their website, on their Facebook page, or on their Twitter page. Fabrice Cecchi, Editor in Chief of RTLinfo.be since 2007, relates that until about 2010 or 2011, users could react anonymously under the articles on the site, and that generated 1,500 to 2,000 comments per day. A great many of them were not published, because RTLinfo.be is one of the few online news media we met to practise pre-moderation on its site. What pre-moderation means is that the comments are read and approved by a moderator before they are published. The system became unmanageable for the site moderator and so they decided to require users to set up an RTL account with an e-mail address and their name in order to cut down the number of comments. That has now fallen to around 700-800 comments per day, and often it is the same people who react to the articles. The site continues to practise pre-moderation, but it is no longer the responsibility of a single moderator. Journalists now take turns at moderating and comments that comply with the terms of use of the forum will be published every two to three hours. The journalists have not been given any special training for this kind of work, other than in-house coaching and tools such as the users' charter. All the journalists follow the users' charter when moderating, and even though sensibilities naturally vary from one journalist to another, the "real limits like xenophobia or racism" seem clear (Cecchi, 2015). Fabrice Cecchi considers that forcing people to identify themselves has slightly reduced the number of unacceptable posts, even though at present 20 to 30% of the comments received are not published on the site. However, they are currently giving serious thought to the usefulness of retaining this system of registering in order to post comments on the site, as it is always the same people, the "hard core", who make use of this feature and the comments they leave are often very negative and not particularly relevant.

Another option introduced in November 2015 is that of commenting on articles on the RTL website by registering via its Facebook account. There too, comments are pre-moderated. Those comments that are not passed by the moderator can be seen by the author of the comment only, and therefore remain invisible to other readers. On the site readers can thus choose to read the published comments via an RTL account or a Facebook account (see screenshot opposite), and that is quite unusual.

The RTLinfo.be Facebook page is the medium that generates the most interaction: an article is posted there every hour and they collect between 2,000 and 4,000 comments per day. Facebook only allows post-moderation, although like Le Vif they have tried asking Facebook for more means of moderating comments. There is less monitoring of comments on Facebook and Fabrice Cecchi told us that comments on most non-sensitive topics rarely go off the rails. In contrast, in the case of tricky subjects like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, immigration, crime reports involving foreigners, and unemployment, they have to keep a close eye on the posts and sometimes even take down the article if the comments go

too far. However, Fabrice Cecchi explained that journalists are not going to change the way they write in order to avoid racist comments, but on the other hand they will pay more attention to the relevance of the information given out, such as the nationality of the suspect in a crime report.

Their Twitter page is used mainly to react to the RTL channel's radio or television broadcasts, but receives far less interaction. Lastly, their "Alert us" page allows journalists to gather information about events that people have witnessed (assaults, fires, etc.) and enables readers to tell their story or express their opinions on a topical issue, and to "share amazing pictures or an interesting page they have seen on the Internet" via an online form. That page is used every day by about a dozen people, who send in their opinions in a more elaborate format than a simple comment. This is then more like the old-style 'readers' letters'. These accounts and opinions are also published from time to time in a journalistic article which places them in context.

In Fabrice Cecchi's view, despite the large number of negative or unpublishable comments, there is no question of not allowing people the possibility of reacting on their media. He thinks that abolishing this interaction would definitely be a backward step in the Internet age. He sums up his way of thinking as follows, "Even if an article generates nine negative comments, and only one comment with a well-constructed, interesting opinion, we still need to allow that option of commenting, even if only to get that one constructive comment" (Cecchi, 2015). The interaction from readers enables the editorial staff to keep in close contact with people and to sound out readers' opinions, and it also allows them to collect a lot of first-hand accounts and life stories. More and more of their stories are in fact built up from personal accounts or issues raised by readers, with a supporting journalistic framework of course (checking details, etc.). This is therefore an asset worth cultivating, as it offers a way of ensuring journalists do not confine themselves to "journalists' topics" and thus draws them out of their cocoon and gives them a basis in reality. However, he qualifies his remarks by saying that the comments are not representative of the whole population. Often it is the same people who react and those people mostly express negative or highly critical opinions. His impression is that people who hold more moderate views rarely or never comment on articles. The editorial staff at RTLinfo.be are therefore careful to put into perspective the feedback they get via comments, even if in some cases it clearly points up trends. For instance, if an article receives nearly 1,000 comments after a major event, there are certainly trends that can be discerned and Fabrice Cecchi thinks it would be foolish to disregard them.

RTL info has a forum users' charter which was developed by their Legal Department. This states what may be said and what may not. Users regularly cry freedom of speech when protesting that their racist or insulting posts have not been published, with some going so far as to threaten legal proceedings. If that happens, Fabrice Cecchi reminds them that RTL is a private group with the right to publish or not to publish whatever it wishes on its pages without having to give reasons. Journalists therefore follow the charter when moderating posts, but do no more than that. Posts that are stupid or just nasty are published, because they do not really breach the charter.

As regards the commercial benefits of public participation, Fabrice Cecchi explained that as far as he is concerned the comments bring in absolutely nothing in financial terms. He thinks they would lose about a hundred readers at most if they stopped people from commenting, but it wouldn't have a big

impact. He stressed that the possibility of interacting is a service offered to readers, but it does not result in more clicks. The RTL editorial staff have a positive attitude to reader participation, even if their views are qualified as regards the relevance of the comments.

External views and players

Belgium is fortunate in having a particularly active fabric of associations which in particular surrounds the journalistic sphere in various ways. We therefore interviewed several people involved with journalism and combating hate speech in order to see how much support or expertise such associations and organisations could provide to the news media in their respective fields. We also met players close to the media concerned whose expertise is enlightening, as well as some representatives of the academic world which, in our view, has a key role in combating hate speech. The point is that researchers are able to step back and analyse the mechanisms at work in the media, whereas journalists, being bound up full-time with their jobs, are often ‘hunched over their work’ and have little time to analyse what they are doing or their readers’ behaviour.

Independent journalist and web expert – Damien Van Achter

We consider that independent journalists, bloggers and web experts often have more scope for innovating in the ways they interact with their readers and are better able to distance themselves from such interactions. We therefore put some questions to Damien Van Achter, a journalist and businessman who is regarded as a specialist in new media and digital culture. He worked with the Belga agency (2002-2007) before being put in charge of RTBF’s social networking strategy (2007-2010). Since 2012 he has been working on a number of projects at lab.davanac, notably a residential digital culture masterclass programme and interactive road trips in cooperation with colleges, universities, (IHECS in Brussels, Sciences Po in Paris, etc.), institutions and media.

In Damien Van Achter’s view, controlling online conversations to ensure they are meaningful is an issue for society and also for information producers. He thinks it is time, in the web age, for them to start serving online communities. This web expert predicts that tomorrow’s journalism will take the form of dialogue with people on social debates. He finds that, unfortunately, journalists are not yet ready for this, whereas in fact the journalists’ attitude is crucial when they are producing content and influencing the feedback they get from their readers: “You reap what you sow and you get the community you deserve” (Van Achter, 2015). Journalists should therefore take heed of their community’s opinions, take care over the content they produce, and interact respectfully with their communities so that in return they get a constructive dialogue with their readers. To come round to this new way of looking at news, journalists would need to alter the way they relate to their readers and be genuinely willing to interact with them. Now, the main obstacle to that change is profitability: serving a community involves dialogue and debate, which takes a lot of time and is therefore unprofitable. The ideal would therefore be to revise the economic model for the media. He says there is a real social issue here of financing a type of journalism that has a connecting value, enables dialogue and serves people.

Damien Van Achter also condemns the basic contradiction within the press, which on the one hand revels in controversy and feeds it, then on the other hand condemns the inappropriate comments that are made on the tail of such controversy. Rants by the press are firmly controlled, but not the comments made by readers in reaction to such articles. He notes that journalists then complain that commenters are not to be trusted, whereas they themselves play with fire by fuelling the controversy. He also thinks the resources employed by French-language Belgian editors to prevent hate speech are somewhat deficient, adding that journalists themselves could defuse lots of situations (inappropriate outbursts, hate speech, racist stereotypes, and so forth) by discussing things with their readers on Twitter or Facebook.

Damien Van Achter stresses the point that a change in the relationship between journalists and readers would benefit society as a whole, as there is a feedback loop between offline and online. He thinks that the relationships formed online benefit the whole of society offline and give rise to debates of public interest which have an effect on people's lives afterwards. This feedback loop principle also operates the other way round: allowing hate speech to spread on the Internet has extremely undesirable effects on offline society. While not being under any illusions about the commercial media, he is more optimistic regarding the public service media, which could play that role of connecting people and creating links and dialogue.

Council for Ethical Journalism – André Linard, CDJ General Secretary

“The Conseil de déontologie journalistique (CDJ – Council for Ethical Journalism), created in 2009, is an organization for self-regulation of the French- and German-language media in Belgium. It consists of representatives of publishers, journalists, editors and civil society.” (Council for Ethical Journalism, 2015). It has three principal functions: setting out the code of ethics (regulation), making it known (information), and dealing with individual cases via mediation and complaints (mediation). In practice, the CDJ supplements the code of practice applicable to information processing in the media, taking into account the specific features of each type of media. It keeps the public and the media industry informed about the code of ethics, deals with complaints concerning the media and acts as mediator between the parties concerned. Lastly, the CDJ can also give opinions, on its own initiative or in response to a justified request, on any matters relating to ethical journalism and the way certain topics are handled by the media. As the CDJ explains on its website, “This aspiration to have a reference tool in matters of ethics will not prevent some from making errors in good faith, and others from making them deliberately – under pressure, or on their own initiative. The CDJ’s main mission is to respond to questions or complaints from those who feel they have been victimized. It does this impartially, acting first as a mediator, and gives reasoned opinions. Its vocation is not to defend journalists and the media versus the public at all costs, but to amend that which needs correction.” (Council for Ethical Journalism, 2015). The CDJ’s role as mediator in connection with complaints is a key one in the context of combating hate speech, as it often enables solutions to be reached between the complainer and the media without having to go to court. But the most important thing is that this practice promotes a dialogue between the media and the complainers.

André Linard, the CDJ General Secretary, explains that the Council for Ethical Journalism is not a court but more of a moral authority that can issue reprimands whenever a journalist fails to comply with the code of ethics. They are not restrictive with respect to the media other than in terms of publishing. However, André Linard believes they do carry some weight and they make journalists think, because credibility and reputation are very important in the world of journalism. Being reprimanded by the CDJ is never well looked on. The opinions given by the CDJ are published on their website and they must also be published by the medium concerned, which is required to tell its readers about any errors it makes. However, sanctioning is not the essence of the CDJ, which proclaims itself to be first and foremost “a reference for those who wish to comply and demand compliance with a code of ethics that is not always sufficiently publicized or stressed in classes; and this code must evolve, since the media themselves are changing. New technological tools in particular are enacting a profound change in the way information is communicated. Competition is pushing [people] to work (too) fast and to seek spectacular stories whatever the cost. Many journalists wonder about the standards to be applied in view of these challenges.” (Council for Ethical Journalism, 2015).

With regard to readers’ online participation and moderation, in 2011 the CDJ published recommendations on forums on media sites. This was accompanied by a half-day seminar in cooperation with the Association of Professional Journalists. They were thus among the first in Europe to look into this issue. In the brochure they recommend in particular that the media draw surfers’ attention to the general terms of use, including legal limits and penalties for breaches; that they make case-by-case decisions on whether to open up a space for comments below an article; that they have the possibility of closing a forum; that they make it a condition that users must register with their true identity (surname, first name, home address, e-mail) before accessing a forum; and above all, that they practise pre-moderation if possible (Council for Ethical Journalism, 2011). André Linard thinks that in 2015, pre-moderation has become very difficult to implement, firstly because it takes a lot of time; secondly because we live in an age of instant gratification and readers are less willing to accept that their comment will not be published immediately; and lastly because many editors have opted to use Facebook, which only permits post-moderation. Failing this, André Linard considers it absolutely essential to enable abusive messages to be reported to the moderator by users. He also regards it as important for the moderator to be able to pass on interesting information to the journalist who wrote the article. In his view, journalists could do a bit of moderating from time to time to keep in touch with their readers’ everyday lives and concerns. However, he does not think it is a good idea for them to moderate their own articles as a matter of course, as they might find it harder to accept critical comments but above all because their main job is to be a journalist, not a moderator. He also regards it as important for community moderators to be trained in ethics. In all cases he considers it unacceptable not to moderate at all, or to subcontract moderation by transferring it abroad, because moderators should remain in contact with the journalists and they also need to know the cultural and social background to the articles. He also emphasizes that filters are not very effective because users always find ways of getting round them and posting their hate speech.

While admitting there is no ideal solution as regards online moderation, André Linard thinks we need to try to implement means aimed at achieving better management. He thinks closing some interaction spaces in order to manage the others better would be a good idea. André Linard adds that the role of

ethics in moderation is not clear-cut, because it is not the journalists who are expressing their opinions but the web surfers, whereas the code of journalistic ethics applies only to the journalists themselves and not to the content of the readers' comments. The media are therefore only responsible for the way they trigger and manage such reactions, at ethical level in any case, for – as will be seen again below in the chapter titled About the possibility of interaction in the online press and its impact on the journalist's job, legal liability is a different matter.

Association of Professional Journalists – Jean-François Dumont, Deputy General Secretary

The Association of Professional Journalists is a professional body that represents and defends Belgian French-language and German-language professional journalists in Belgium and abroad and promotes quality reporting. Together with the VVJ (Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten – Flemish Association of Journalists) and AGJPB (Association of Professional Journalists, comprising in particular the Flemish professional bodies and the AJP), the AJP “upholds freedom of information and maintenance of appropriate working conditions for professional journalists. It provides group or individual services to members” (AJP, 2015). The AJP has a fourfold role: a union role; enhancing the quality of media; studies and research (for example into gender and diversity in the media); and representing the industry with respect to public opinion and politics (lobbying). The Association also endeavours to bring journalists and teachers together on educational projects, such as the ‘Journalists in the classroom’ project where journalists visit schools and talk to students about their job.

Jean-François Dumont, the AJP Deputy General Secretary, shared his stance on reader participation in the online press with us. He sees a big issue in terms of giving users a sense of responsibility when interacting on the Internet so that they understand that the same rules apply online as offline. He notes that when surfers chat live to journalists, a sort of ‘natural selection’ has already taken place, because that format places people in a dialogue situation rather than allowing aggression. So he thinks the chatroom option should be promoted for some topics and subject to a time limit, with the journalist/community moderator there to engage in dialogue rather than leaving comments open all the time below an article. He believes community moderators could fill that role, provided their function – which is currently ill-defined – is clarified. They in fact come somewhere between editorial and marketing, and that raises the question of whether they are there to encourage clicking, sell and develop the medium's brand image, or on the other hand to give people a sense of responsibility, chair the discussion, set out the limits and facilitate responsible behaviour online. Ways of involving readers in debates would also need to be found, like the readers' clubs of the old days.

Jean-François Dumont believes the journalist's role with respect to hate speech is definitely to abide by the code of ethics and the law when dealing with topics, that is, not to discriminate according to ethnic and racial criteria unless journalistically relevant. For example, a journalist cannot conceal the fact that a party spreads racist ideas, but he or she should deal with the topic without promoting those ideas. So the general interest must always be weighed against a subjective interest. From the point of view of democracy a journalist also has a certain social responsibility to dismantle and deconstruct hate speech and put it into perspective. Jean-François Dumont also explained that a lot of that was done at a particular time in politics when the far-right Front National party made a – very short-lived – break-

through. He laments the fact that this is no longer done so visibly today when hate speech is based on religion rather than race. To counter such speech, journalists ought to place the issues in context every time, with figures and background information, bearing in mind that people who are not open to this kind of reasoning will not listen. He acknowledges that the media are to some extent powerless to deal with people who are completely closed to their arguments, but still feels that it is their duty not to make things worse by placing too much emphasis on origin, nationality or religion if such things are not relevant. In crime reports for instance, how relevant is it to refer to someone's nationality? In the late nineties the AGJPB published a booklet on how foreigners are described in the press, titled 'Recommendations on reporting on immigrants'.

The AJP does not offer any specific training on moderation or hate speech, but it does provide training on the treatment of Islam in the media, as well as a module on understanding the Arab and Muslim world and its culture, as these are sensitive topics that generate a lot of hate speech. These training courses enable the problem to be tackled at source by anticipating hate reactions through a knowledge-based approach. The AJP also publishes a monthly magazine called 'Journalists', which is sent out to all its journalists and which has already looked at the problems of hate speech and moderation⁸, notably in connection with the publication of academic works on this topic.

Centre for Equal Opportunities – François Deleu, cyberhate specialist

"The Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities is a public service which is interfederal, independent, and an expert on equality and non-discrimination policy. Its mission, based on human rights, is to promote equal opportunities and equal rights for all citizens and to combat discrimination. It performs that mission from the perspective of collective development and a spirit of dialogue, cooperation and respect" (Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities, 2015).

We had a meeting with François Deleu, a specialist in the criminal aspect of hate crime and hate speech, who works in the Individual Support department at the Centre for Equal Opportunities. The department receives reports from people who feel they are the victims of discrimination, hate speech or hate crimes. To collect these reports (they receive around five thousand per year, one thousand of which directly concern hate speech) and thus combat hate speech, the Centre for Equal Opportunities has set up a contact point where anyone can report what they see on the Internet. On the basis of these reports the Centre performs a qualitative and quantitative analysis and tries various approaches, such as 'notice and take down', which enables content to be removed by contacting the forum moderators or platforms like Facebook and Twitter; directly challenging the author of the speech concerned, reminding them about the law and asking them to withdraw their remarks; or, in more serious cases, calling in the law. Belgian law provides penalties for certain kinds of speech, namely incitement to hatred, violence, segregation and discrimination based on a protected criterion, and revisionism, as mentioned in the Introduction to this report.

François Deleu says that in more than 50% of cases they receive reports to which the law does not apply. Such reports concern speech that tends to be stereotyped or stigmatizing, but does not incite hatred or violence. In such cases, if they appear on the Internet the Centre can refer to the code of conduct of the forums or social networks and ask the host to withdraw the content on that basis. François

⁸ See, for example, issue 124 which came out in March 2011 and talks about moderating online forums, and issue 155, published in January 2014, which looks at how North African immigrants and Islam are dealt with by the media.

Deleu points out that such stereotyped or stigmatizing speech is permitted by law and thinks it should continue to be so, as it is important to guarantee freedom of speech, which is a basic freedom in human rights and one of the foundations of our democracy. That means every effort must be made to guarantee that freedom and, at the same time, to build a society which is aware and responsible, i.e., one which uses that freedom of speech advisedly.

To that end, the Centre for Equal Opportunities conducts awareness-raising campaigns and training to prevent hate speech. In October 2009, for instance, they produced a brochure entitled Delete Cyberhate – Racism and Discrimination on the Internet, which explains what cyberhate is and what the law says about it, and gives examples of hate speech that may be found on the Internet (the different faces of cyberhate) along with practical advice on combating it. The Centre for Equal Opportunities has also provided training for moderators and journalists by visiting the editorial staff of several media to explain the different dimensions of freedom of speech and its limits and also all the legal aspects of moderators' responsibility when they do not moderate at all or moderate too late. They work in close cooperation with the CDJ in those cases where the law does not apply but where they feel a reaction is nevertheless called for. They then ask the Council for Ethical Journalism to react and conversely, the CDJ seeks their opinion on certain content where they are not sure whether the law should be applied or not.

François Deleu considers the modes of interacting currently offered to readers by the media to be a pretext for getting more clicks and making money from advertising. In his view, the only interactions that are relevant from a journalistic point of view are those where the journalist is there to defend his or her article, interact with the surfers and discuss things with them. The issue surrounding readers' interactions in the press is thus quite a broad one and it has to do with how the role of the news organisation as a business enterprise is defined: is it there to make turnover or to provide a quality service? François Deleu reveals that he firmly believes that if the newspapers provided a higher quality service they would have more subscribers than they do with their current interaction forums, which are unsupervised by journalists. He feels that in many cases these forums are safety valves, although others may regard them as a good thing insofar as they allow people to let off steam in a virtual environment rather than elsewhere. However, François Deleu thinks journalists are worth more than that and that they could do more to improve these newsgroups, but that the initiative has to come from the media corporations.

Pax Christi - Nicolas Bossut, General Secretary

Pax Christi is an organisation formed in 1945 with the original aim of Franco-German reconciliation. For several years now their work has followed two main lines, one being imported conflicts, that is to say, the impact of international conflicts on how people get along with one another in French-speaking Belgium, and the other being racism and discrimination. Nicolas Bossut, General Secretary of Pax Christi, explained that the first line of work, imported conflicts, has three main focuses: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkey and the Arab world, and Central Africa (notably the impact of the Rwandan genocide on people in Belgium). These conflicts impact directly upon how people live together in Belgium. The second line of work, on racism and discrimination, is developed in parallel with the first, each conflict being linked to a form of racism in Belgium: anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and negrophobia.

Pax Christi is a second-line organisation. It does not operate in the field itself, but supplies other organisations with tools. It also carries out political pleading with respect to unions, players in the association sector and lobbies. Pax Christi's mission is "to make citizens and decision-makers aware of the conflicts that divide the different peoples living in Belgium and to enable those citizens and decision-makers to become a force for peace. The movement aims to stimulate active citizenship in order to enable individuals to take action and to think critically about our society. It drafts and publishes, with and for its followers, analyses and studies aimed at developing awareness and critical knowledge of the conflicts that divide Belgian society; the ability to analyse, make choices, take action and assess the outcome; responsibility and active participation in social, economic, cultural and political life" (Pax Christi, 2014).

Pax Christi therefore does not work specifically on hate speech on press sites, but rather on the sources of such speech, i.e. racism and discrimination, and also on the conspiracy theories that spawn a lot of hate speech online. They regularly publish analytical articles on conspiracy theories and they address the issues surrounding them in their campaigns and training. Conspiracy theories often involve hate speech linked to imported conflicts, with certain players systematically using a conflict external to Belgium (such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) as an excuse to stir up hatred for other people (for example, Jews) in Belgium and Europe. Pax Christi therefore sets out to deconstruct hate speech by means of analysis and also works for example on the issue of victimisation and competition between victims, which is very strong in imported conflicts.

Nicolas Bossut sees civil society as having a vital role to play in combating hate speech and racism and says that it must campaign, and sometimes even be radical, that is to say, a step ahead of society generally. He thinks the law is obviously not adequate for combating hate speech and in fact always lags a bit behind social developments. By way of example he makes the point that hate speech which is deemed an offence on the basis of the religious belief criterion is not dealt with by the same court as hate speech based on race or nationality. The fact is that written hate speech based on the protected criteria (see Introduction) is considered to be a press offence and is therefore the remit of the assizes (la cour d'Assise)⁹. An exception is made, however, for hate speech inspired by racism and xenophobia, which is dealt with by the criminal court for the trial of misdemeanours (le Tribunal correctionnel)¹⁰. In practice, speech inciting hatred against Muslims (religious criterion) will never go to court, because no assizes have ever been set up to deal with this type of offence in Belgium, whereas speech inciting hatred against Arabs (racial criterion) is more likely to be punished because it comes within the jurisdiction of the criminal court. This is where civil society can play its moral and ethical role and challenge the legislator and politicians to close the loopholes in the law. Nicolas Bossut thinks the Centre for Equal Opportunities should play a different role to that played by civil society. He believes the Centre should be there to uphold the law and not to campaign like civil society. He laments a degree of weakness in civil society at present which is forcing the Centre for Equal Opportunities to take stances it ought not to take, thus laying it open to criticism. His view is that if the Centre starts campaigning it will lose its neutrality and therefore runs the risk of clashing with politicians who might want to restrict its powers, and that is far too risky.

⁹ In Belgium, "the cour d'Assise is not a permanent criminal jurisdiction. The court is formed whenever an accused is referred to it. [...] The cour d'assise comprises three professional judges (the president and two associate judges) and the jury. The jury must state whether the accused is guilty. Afterwards, the jury meets with the professional judges to establish the motive and decide on the punishment. The jury consists of 12 members drawn from the citizens whose names appear on the electoral register" (Service public fédéral Justice, 2015).

¹⁰ The 1981 Anti-Racism Law has been extended to courts of summary jurisdiction to make it easier for complainants to go to court.

Human Rights League - Jean-Jacques Jaspers, LDH Administrator

The Human Rights League (Ligue des droits de l'Homme, LDH) is an association operating independently of politics that aims to combat injustices and infringements of basic rights in Belgium. The LDH makes the French-speaking Belgian public aware of the importance of respecting such rights, challenges politicians and invests a lot of effort in adult training (within the framework of its continuing education activities) and in putting in place educational and training tools for use by education professionals (Human Rights League, 2015).

We had an opportunity to meet with Jean-Jacques Jaspers, a former RTBF journalist who is currently a lecturer in Ethical Journalism at Brussels Free University (l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, ULB) and an Administrator with the Human Rights League. He explained that the LDH is an association for upholding rights, notably those of foreigners, immigrants, asylum seekers, detainees, prisoners, illegal immigrants, and all those who are exposed to danger, risks or discrimination. The League is therefore alert to anything that could endanger the rights of those who are already the most disadvantaged in our society. Its mission is to uphold human rights and basic freedoms, of which freedom of speech is one. The Human Rights League has not developed any specific activities concerning online hate speech, but Jean-Jacques Jaspers considers it necessary to achieve a balance between the basic principle of freedom of speech and combating hate speech. Back in 2013 the League devoted an entire issue of its bimonthly periodical *La Chronique de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* to freedom of speech under the headline *Paroles Libres*. In that issue, an article analyses the issues of freedom of speech and curbing hate speech and explains the concepts of slippery slope and fatal slope, which we will return to in the chapter titled *About the current issues around freedom of speech*. Jean-Jacques Jaspers sees the role of the LDH as continuing to champion freedom of speech and promoting debates on ideas, rather than cracking down in order to combat hate speech. We will hear more of his views on freedom of speech in the chapter titled *About the current issues around freedom of speech*.

Academic world: Brussels Free University - Laura Calabrese, Researcher in Media Discourse and Professor of Multilingual Communication

A new platform has recently been created at Brussels Free University with the “aim of establishing links between journalism research and media industry players in Belgium”. This platform, called LAPIJ (Laboratoire des Pratiques et Identités Journalistiques - Laboratory for Journalistic Practices and Identities) is a joint project by ReSIC, the Research Centre of the Department of Information and Communication Sciences at Brussels Free University. This initiative is geared towards promoting liaison between the research sphere and the media. Round tables, seminars and conferences on media topics are regularly organised in cooperation with players from the field of journalism.

Thus it was in the context of the LAPIJ platform that we met Laura Calabrese, who is carrying out research into media discourse and its reception by studying readers' reactions and the dynamics of communication on the news media forums. She explained that the studies looking at the impact of comments on journalists' work are somewhat contradictory, with several researchers mentioning the “tyranny of the click”, on the one hand, while saying that journalists do not have time to read the comments, on the other. It would therefore seem that journalists do not really pay attention to the content

of the comments, but that the number of comments is an indicator of the popularity, and hence the profitability, of the article. She notes, though, that on the blogs run by the journalists, the replies and interactions with readers are much more frequent and there are fewer instances of hate speech. That ties in with Damien Van Achter's observation that journalists who establish a dialogue with their readers (as tends to happen most of the time on blogs) manage to create a respectful online community where constructive dialogue is the norm.

Whereas reactions to press articles "used to emerge principally in the private sphere, now they spread on the web and affect the way journalists write, as well as the ways information is consumed by readers. The readers think they have a legitimate place in the media structure. And reading the comments is also part of reading a newspaper nowadays" (ULB, 2015). Laura Calabrese therefore does not study hate speech specifically, but explains that it can be found almost systematically in the comments on the articles she analyses, and notably on Facebook. She considers that in fact there are fewer hate comments on the general-interest press sites because pre-filtering takes place, whereas on the newspapers' Facebook module, post-moderating is the practice. She also points out that the Facebook module presents a technical, discursive environment which is less conducive to debate than the press websites: users do not need to read the article before commenting, the comments are much shorter, they happen instantly and people cannot see the earlier comments when there are a lot of them. Web users are therefore encouraged to give their opinions without taking account of what has already been said, and so that does not lead to debate but is rather a matter of publicly expressing one's opinion, which is line with the social medium's aims, namely building a digital identity.

Laura Calabrese also thinks that the debate about freedom of speech is endless, because it depends on each country's, region's or social class's media culture. She considers that the debate about freedom of speech can be a trap when it comes to combating hate speech, as it sometimes serves to mask the indirect consequences of such speech. In her view, there are some types of speech which, even if they do not qualify for legal sanctions, are implicitly unacceptable in any society because of their clear pragmatic force. The oldest types of hate speech, such as racism or anti-Semitism, can be legally stopped by applying the laws that are there to counter them. Other types of speech do not come within the remit of the law but are implicitly condemned because of their possible very real practical consequences. She therefore wonders whether the debate about freedom of speech is really healthy as far as hate speech is concerned, and her impression is that many social players are unaware of the power of words and the pragmatic impact of speech. That tendency to disregard the pragmatic dimension of hate speech with respect to otherness (whether in terms of gender, ethnicity or language) sometimes derives from rhetorical manipulation by certain players seeking to influence the public arena by spreading hate speech on the pretext of freedom of expression (this is very obvious in the case of misogynist remarks).

As Laura Calabrese sees it, any medium produces speech: it authorises a type of practice and speech, which it plays a part in shaping, but the speech and the practices will also shape the medium. The device authorizes, and then the users make the conditions. Hate speech has always been around, long before the Internet; what the social media enable people to do, via the comment facility in particular, is to be in several social places at once. Previously, one had to be an institutional player to be able to spread such

views, whereas now, anyone can give voice to their opinions in several different social arenas. There is also the issue of anonymity, which was much harder to maintain in the past. The online comment system therefore allows opinions to be produced on a large scale and enables them to be spread very fast and anonymously or under a pseudonym (though less and less so, due to the large-scale adoption of Facebook comment modules, which is gradually breaking with anonymity). However, she stresses that the very nature of the Internet 2.0 allows a rumour (misinformation) to be crushed very quickly, which was not the case in the pre-social web world.

The researcher considers comments to be a hybrid genus somewhere between everyday conversation, which is spontaneous and involves little forethought, and a structured letter where both the style and the arguments are carefully constructed. It's a bit like 'writing the way you speak'. From that point of view it follows the same trends as a conversation, such as people wandering away from the main point. Laura Calabrese also maintains that the written nature of the conversation affects the conversational dynamics, insofar as web users sometimes concentrate more on the form than on the substance. Written conversations encourage readers to focus on the form (written), which when added to the monitoring attitude readers tend to have towards the media ultimately results in focusing on mistakes, errors and form generally, as much as or sometimes more than on the content of the articles. She explains that some web surfers will use grammatical mistakes to shoot down the other person's argument, and that can be interpreted as an attempt to control the communications channel by trying to remove anything classed as 'noise' or that interferes with the conversation, to use Shannon and Weaver's Mathematical Theory of Communication terms. The idea that shows through is that if the communication code is not stable, communication becomes impossible. Now, online comments allow us to focus obsessively on that 'noise' and convert it into an ideological argument in order to delegitimise a commenter. We will see in the analysis of comments that this kind of comment, concentrating on the form rather than the content, occurs systematically and in fact serves to affirm the superiority of one commenter over another.

Summary of choices made by the media interviewed

Before getting into an analysis of the comments on the press articles we have selected, we summarise briefly below the choices made by the different editors featured above with regard to readers' online participation.

Since 2001, when the first online debating tools appeared, the problem of reconciling editorial control and opening up for readers to participate has been an issue in Belgium. Back then, Lalibre.be received about one hundred comments per day and, like many other papers (Le Soir, L'Avenir, etc.), practised pre-moderation (Degand & Simonson, *La modération des fils de discussion dans la presse en ligne* [Moderating threads in the online press], 2011). The emergence of the earliest forms of participation in the online press brought with it the question of moderation, and it was generally answered in one of two ways. Firstly, by pre-moderation, which is similar to readers' letters: each comment is read and approved before being published. This form of moderation curbs communication between participants in that their posts are not published instantly, but it does have the benefit of greatly cutting down abuse. It is evident that pre-moderation is becoming increasingly rare today, as it requires a lot of human resources and also because the use of Facebook as a tool for reader participation is becoming increas-

ingly common, either on the medium's Facebook page or on its website. Now, apart from RTLinfo.be, the editors who use Facebook do not pre-moderate. The second option is post-moderation, which gives the readers more responsibility. "In these first two models, the moderator walks a tightrope between two attitudes: over-strict filtering or, on the other hand, vigilance with the edge taken off", Mathieu Simonson explained (Dumont, Forum en ligne: tableau noir et mesures claires [Online forum: blackboard and clear measures], 2011). There are also two other special types of moderation that may be mentioned: 'reactive moderation', the system used at Le Vif/L'Express, which consists of intervening only when abuse is reported by a user, and 'diffuse moderation', which leaves things up to social control by users. This essentially theoretical model relies on a sort of virtuous contagiousness among readers" (Dumont, Forum en ligne: tableau noir et mesures claires [Online forum: blackboard and clear measures], 2011).

MEDIA	PARTICIPATION SYSTEM ON THE SITE	TYPE OF MODERATION ON THE SITE
Lesoir.be	Facebook plugin	Post-moderation
DHnet.be	Facebook plugin	Post-moderation
Levif.be	Own content management system	Post-moderation and reactive moderation
Sudinfo.be	Facebook plugin	Post-moderation
Lalibre.be	Facebook plugin	Post-moderation
Lavenir.net	Own content management system	Post-moderation
RTBFinfo.be	Content management system	Pre-moderation (but comments currently closed)
RTLinfo.be	Own content management system + Facebook plugin	Pre-moderation

Participation in the online press in French-speaking Belgium can take other forms apart from posting comments: question-and-answer sessions subject to a time limit with an expert on hand to answer the readers live online; publishing readers' opinions in the pages of the newspapers; Alert features allowing users to report unusual events or simply send in pictures (see table below). The most widespread form is, however, the comment written by a user in response to an article. Such comments are generally shown underneath the article concerned, either on the medium's website or on Facebook, if the article has been posted there. On all the press sites we analysed, users are required to identify themselves before posting comments, by either their e-mail address, an account on the site or their Facebook account. It is to be noted, however, that up until a few years ago, anonymity was still allowed by a number of sites, such as RTLinfo, which did not make pre-registration mandatory for commenters until 2010 (Dumont, Forum en ligne: tableau noir et mesures claires [Online forum: blackboard and clear

measures], 2011). Most of the French-language media in Belgium have a forum users' charter and the rules generally tend to be the same (see table below). Having a charter is one of the CDJ's recommendations published in 2011 in their booklet *Forums on media websites*: "Any medium opening a forum must make users aware of the general terms of use, comprising as a minimum rules of access to the forum, legal limits concerning the content and penalties in the event of infringement, and the medium's right not to post all the messages received or even to close a forum" (Council for Ethical Journalism, 2011). However, in the course of our interviews the journalists commented that readers seldom read the rules of use and even more seldom do they obey them. Nevertheless, having news-group rules in place gives them a code of conduct to follow when moderating as well as backup when their decisions are challenged. It is to be noted, though, that on the media Facebook pages nowadays it is the general terms of use of Facebook that apply in law and so there is no longer any reference to their own users' charter, except in the case of RTBF info, which still displays it in the 'About' section of its page. Aline De Volder (RTBFinfo) explained that she regularly refers users to that page when her moderation decisions are challenged.

MEDIA	OTHER FORMS OF PARTICIPATION (apart from comments below the article)	GENERAL TERMS OF USE AVAILABLE IN INTERACTIVE FORUMS
Lesoir.be	The 11h02 chatroom 'Carte Blanche'	Yes, link to Terms of Use in all interactive forums ¹¹
DHnet.be	/	No
Levif.be	/	Yes, link to Terms of Use in all interactive forums ¹²
Sudinfo.be	/	No
Lalibre.be	'Opinions' page	No
Lavenir.net	Citizens' edition (from time to time)	Yes, link to Terms of Use in all interactive forums ¹³
RTBFinfo.be	/	Yes, but comments currently closed on the site ¹⁴ Charter also appears on RTBF info's Facebook page ¹⁵
RTLinfo.be	'Alert us' page	Yes, but not available in interactive forums ¹⁶

¹¹ Terms of use of Lesoir.be's interactive forum: <http://www.lesoir.be/services/charte>

¹² Terms of use of Levif.be's interactive forum: <http://www.levif.be/info/commentaires-reglement/article-service-111477.html>

¹³ Terms of use of Lavenir.net's interactive forum: <http://www.lavenir.net/extra/forum/reglement/>

¹⁴ Terms of use of RTBFinfo's interactive forum: <http://www.static.rtb.be/rtbf/www/pdf/cgu.pdf>

¹⁵ Charter of RTBF info's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/rtbfinfo/info/?tab=page_info

III. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

The analysis of readers' online comments on press sites in reaction to the news comprises an initial analysis of the issues surrounding moderating hate speech online.

To that end, the newspapers that had been pre-identified¹⁷, namely *Le Soir*, *DH*, *le Vif* and *Sud Presse*, were monitored between 1 January and 31 March 2015 to identify case studies involving xenophobic or racist comments. The case studies were selected according to a set of instructions common to the BRICKS consortium. First of all, they had to have generated substantial debate: we were asked to pick out articles that had attracted a large number of comments or Facebook shares, in particular. Then, we were required to look at all the sections of the selected newspapers (crime reports, the arts, international politics, etc.). The reason for this instruction was that racist and xenophobic speech can show up even more insidiously in connection with everyday events or happenings rather than in the wake of major events in foreign or domestic politics. Lastly, we were asked to select a case where the 'long tail' effect of the attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff (January 2015) could be felt.

We selected five case studies that form our corpus and which relate to different forms of racism: Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, etc.

Having selected our articles, we then analysed the debates about them, concentrating on those readers' comments that gave a negative image of migrants or that underscored the complexity of the social, ethnic, linguistic or religious differences. There follows a case-by-case study of the dynamics at work in these interaction forums, followed by an attempt to draw some conclusions.

¹⁷ Cf. instructions on media selection: previous chapter Description of the Belgian media analysed

CASE STUDY 1

La Dernière Heure - Molenbeek: more than 200 people paid tribute to Soulaïmane Jamili, hit by an underground train a year ago

CASE STUDY NO.1 Analysis Date April 2015	
Newspaper	La Dernière Heure – Les Sports
Article publication date	21/02/2015
Headline and subhead	Molenbeek: more than 200 people remember Soulaïmane Jamili one year after his death.
Name of author/journalist	Unknown. BELGA.
Section	Regions: Brussels
Picture:	Yes. There are 12 in all, like a mini photo album.
Number of Facebook shares	14 on 21/04/2015 The day after the article was published there were 12 shares.
Number of Twitter shares	5. No change since the article was published.
Number of Likes	378 on 21/04/2015 The day after the article was published there were 376 Likes.
Number of comments:	/
Other shares/ social networks?	238 comments.
Other notes on the article	Link: https://www.facebook.com/dhnet/photos/a.133221048226.109861.123096413226/10152797289433227/

This case was selected because it concerns something that happened in Molenbeek, a district of Brussels which has a generally negative reputation and where a North African community makes up the majority of the inhabitants. The article talks about a ceremony in memory of Soulaïmane Jamili, a young man from Molenbeek who was hit by an underground train in circumstances that remain unclear, after being stopped by the police in a Molenbeek underground station.

The article referring to this news item caused a lot of interaction, with nearly 238 comments on Facebook from 80 different commenters. A large number of these (just over 40%) come from only 4 people, whereas the 76 other commenters produced approximately 1.8 comments per person. Concentrating on Juste J., Ced M., Moha dIV and Imrane C., the four surfers who contributed 40% of the posts, some

opposing ‘sides’ clearly emerge. On the one hand there are Ced M. and Juste J., who pepper the comments with various kinds of hate speech, while Moha dlV tries to counter their racist words in a peaceful manner and Imrane C. answers with abuse and threats (which only serves to trigger more racist abuse and expressions of contempt). Juste J. and Ced M. play their roles of agitators to the hilt, as can be seen from the following examples:

Juste J. Molenbeek again bah burn the place down! !!!!

(...)

Ced M. but I think he’s a shit-stirrer a little loser

Juste J. goes so far as to provoke the people of Molenbeek in order to give them a negative image:

Juste J. Riff-raff, that’s exactly what I wanted people to see about molenbeek just little shits

Now Imrane C. is playing along with Juste J. by continuing to abuse him, while he apparently enjoys provoking him:

Imrane C. Shut your face son of a bitch come to molem and we’ll plug your delicate little negro hole you s.o.b.

Juste J. That’s what you like doing as a gang you bunch of hypocrites! !!

In this hate conversation Moha dlV tries to tone down the hate speech and to argue calmly against it, while urging those who react violently to racist remarks to ignore them.

Moha dlV Marie Line you are quite right but I think we should show these people they are wrong to always try to point the finger at us because we know we are not like they say we are and yet we are trying but as the saying goes, “Only fools never change their minds”

(...)

Moha dlV Why are you getting abusive? I don’t think she said anything to offend you

(...)

Moha dlV what do you think riff-raff means?

Juste J. from Molenbeek, simply

Moha dlV ah well you’re mistaken, that’s the district with the least social problems, yes they do talk a lot about it in the media but it’s them that are the main cause of troubles of that kind

In this conversation, each of the four main commenters thus has a ‘role’ which they carry on playing to the end: two agitators making racist remarks who are abused by Imrane C. as well as by a good few other surfers, and a ‘mediator’ who appeals to each of them not to be violent.

Ced M., an agitator, is using a false profile (as he himself admits) and the odds are that Juste J. is also using a false profile (only one Facebook friend, no photos or posts visible, active on Facebook for only a year). The other two commenters are using genuine profiles (their accounts appear to be the main

ones, they appear in their profile photos and they have published several posts which their friends have commented on), but they also use pseudonyms and not their real names. Incidentally, 7 months after the comments appeared below the article, Imrane C. changed his pseudonym to Imrane R. Commenters often use the profile content (photos, previous posts, age, etc.) to insult and make fun of their opponents and spread hate speech. Another point of note is that while the number of women (37) and men (42)¹⁸ commenting on the article is more or less equal, the four people monopolising the conversation in this case study are all men.

The format of a racist agitator who prompts violent reactions from other surfers while others again try to calm things down occurs several times in the thread in connection with this article, each time with different commenters taking on these same roles:

Agitator, in this case female, of a racist nature:

Caty Point-Barre it's all brown-skinned men and veiled women up there! We need to bomb that den of muzzos!

Violent reactions and abuse from other surfers:

Minnie My My Caty Point-Barre ["Caty Period"] you're a little idiot

Bulgari Bvl caty comma you're just a little bitch

Curbing the violence, calling for calm and respect:

Zaineb E. Lol Bulgari Bvl you've killed me, leave them in their ignorance

Gi Ba Don't go along with their moronic games. They're only trying to stir it, let's reply with silence it's all they deserve. May Allah rest his soul

Apart from these hate speech formats, there are a number of posts offering sympathy. For example, the phrase "Allah y rahmo" ("May God rest his soul"), which is said by Muslims when someone dies, comes up a dozen times, along with other expressions of condolence or prayers like "May he rest in peace". In all, about twenty posts remember Soulaïmane or let the family know they are thinking about them.

Chadi B. May his soul rest in peace

Walid B. Allah y rahmo

Amina M. May the family take heart and hoping they will not have to read all these hate posts where everything is all mixed up. RESPECT

Apart from these messages of sympathy, few posts actually relate to the substance of the article, which is about marking the young man's death. On the other hand, many of the comments are hostile to Molenbeek, prompting replies which react by defending it. This tendency to repeat clichés about the district rather than talking about the actual substance of the article could perhaps be linked to the headline

¹⁸ Plus one person whose gender has not been clearly identified.

to the article, which starts with the word ‘Molenbeek’¹⁹. However, that feature of the headline is most likely not due to any bad intentions on the journalist’s part, since this is a regional newspaper which usually prefaces its articles with the name of the town concerned. It is interesting to note that well over half of the posts do not relate to the article at all, but are in fact quarrels between surfers exchanging insults. It therefore cannot be said that these hate posts are triggered by the content of the article and the way it is written, but rather by the fact that the main character has a North African-sounding name and the action takes place in a district with a high proportion of North Africans among the population.

It is also interesting to note Ced M.’s post, “I am not Soulaïmane”, a reference to “I am not Charlie” in protest against the widespread solidarity for the magazine Charlie Hebdo, which was the victim of terrorist attacks in January 2015. Those words, “I am not Soulaïmane”, could have several meanings, but he appears to be declaring his lack of solidarity with the tragic accident sustained by Soulaïmane and the tribute paid to him.

Ced M. I AM NOT Soulaïmane

¹⁹ “Molenbeek: more than 200 people paid tribute to Soulaïmane Jamili, hit by an underground train a year ago.”

CASE STUDY 2

Le Soir – Islamic State threatens to set 500,000 migrants adrift heading for Italy.

CASE STUDY NO.2 Analysis Date April 2015	
Newspaper	Le Soir
Article publication date	19/02/2015
Headline and subhead	Islamic State threatens to set 500,000 migrants adrift heading for Italy,
Name of author/journalist	Unknown. Online editor.
Section	News: World
Background to information/ article	Informative article about the potential threats to Europe from Islamic State.
Picture:	Yes
Number of Facebook shares	115 on 21/04/2015 The day after the article was published there were 118 shares.
Number of Twitter shares	22.
Number of Likes	106 on 21/04/2015.
Number of comments:	173 comments.
Other shares/social networks?	Google Plus (1) and LinkedIn (1)
Other notes on the article	<p>The article was shared on Facebook 757 times from the newspaper's own site on 29/04/2015.</p> <p>Link: https://www.facebook.com/lesoirbe/posts/10152989007720091</p>

This article was selected not only because of the number of comments that appeared on the Facebook page but also because it deals with the issue of migrants, a sensitive topic that crystallizes a degree of xenophobia. At the time of our analysis we listed 173 posts written by 103 users below the article published on Le Soir's Facebook page, which is a reflection of spontaneous reactions rather than a debate or even a discussion. The average of 1.6 comments per user is not in fact high enough to suggest that people were debating among themselves.

This ‘safety valve’ aspect was soon confirmed when we analysed the content of the posts. Out of 103 commenters, more than half (58) were hostile to this type of immigration, with as many as two-thirds showing their hostility by hate speech such as:

William L A4.....!Cruiser Sunk!

Patrick L. A bomb in the boats

Bob le Bricoleur bah, I can fix up their boat so they can say hi to the fish

Mickeal Hck bring back the gas chamber! ahahahhh

Michel H. Pfffff, we'll have to ask the Herstal weapons factory to make 500,000 rounds^^

Alain H. A few floating mines? Lol

In this conversation a consensus is established that Europe cannot take any more migrants and they should stay in their own countries.

Yvonne P. So we need to take steps to halt the influx and stop feeling sorry for them.

Within this long list of “Out!”, “not here” and “torpedo the boats” there are a dozen or so users who take different stances, such as being unable to understand the situation or trying to find other solutions:

Andrée F. what would we do if it was us

Cha'tool von P. Maybe at least this will help the least smart among us to get one thing straight: the terrorists are our enemies; the migrants are victims of the terrorists. So we are on the same side as the migrants.

Lastly, a handful of commenters try to raise the level of the debate (to moderate it?) by using the xenophobic commenters’ words as a weapon against them or by condemning the import of what they say.

Jean Marie L. Yvonne you're just selfish... a bit of RESPECT for these people who are human beings TOO, whether you like it or not... sorry, but I feel sorry for them... don't you?... That's just what I wrote: you are just SELFISH period... “people like you” sorry but you make me sick...

Patrick H. Send them back along with all the ones already in europe!

Rodrigo RT OK then, let's send Patrick H. back to Libya too!

Concetta M. So what do we do, let them drown?

(...)

Robert G. Just simply send them back to their own countries, and they don't need us to help them drown, the traffickers will see to it and take their money off them as well... now if you have a big garden Concetta Moscato you can take them in... but beware of suicide bombers...

Madeleine G. low-level humour... I can understand why Mr Le Penn is so successful in your country: you can hardly get anyone more xenophobic than France! (I'm talking about so-called civilised countries...) makes you puke

Patrick G. when it starts to affect your integrity and your wallet, we'll see how much solidarity you show then

(...)

Monique V. Madeleine G. perhaps you prefer to sharpen the knife that is going to cut your throat

However, it is an uphill struggle for this handful of 'righters of wrongs', who keep on finding their words used against them.

Three separate interventions by the Le Soir editor may also be noted:

Jean Marie L. What a lot of hate comments on your site friends of Le Soir ...

Gilles S. quite a few impoverished minds on the Le Soir thread...

Nalah B. a certain form of human life is endangered, to read the posts on Le Soir!!!!

From the following extract from the conversation we can see the commenters themselves putting their remarks into perspective:

Michel H. Pfffff, we'll have to ask the Herstal weapons factory to make 500,000 rounds^^

Patrice T. Are you really suggesting genocide for the refugees?

Michel H. Lol, the big word. Noooo, let's allow these people to become terrorists and burn men and children and gun us down as the "dogs" that we are.

And anyway, everyone knows Europe is rich... we have the resources to house, heat and feed all these families. ^^

Beyond this Against><For taking in these migrants dialectic, and as in the other case studies, the subject of the article is a pretext for bringing out other sub-topics in the discussions.

It may be seen, for example, from this ongoing discussion that the 'Italian community' condemns the situation the country is in. A topic picked up by others, assimilating them to this controversial wave of immigration:

Georgette DiP poor Italygetting landed with all these poor people, if it goes on ...it will be a country of foreigners ...

Christine S. well you're in a foreign country yourself

Patrice T. We're used to big boors on forums, but when it comes from the mouth of an old lady

who looks so nice, it's even nastier.

Georgette DiP yes I am in a foreign country.....but legally.....!

Georgette DiP it doesn't take much ... for you to see it as nasty....Mr Patrice T.!

Georgette DiP my dear Lady I am in a foreign countrybut legally and I did not flee Belgium for something better ...but to travel...!

Georgette DiP Before criticising ...which is not what I was doing, read ...or put your glasses on

or

Francis ECF That's what they're doing already with these so-called shipwreck survivors that Europe rescues, takes care of and takes in before getting..

Concetta M. Not europe!!! But Italy, where they remain prisoners because as soon as they get caught in another eu country it's back to square one=====>Italy

Francis ECF You are right. Now normally it's Europe, normally...

Concetta M. Francis I've been following this issue for years because I come from sicily and I can tell you that each village and each town has its illegal immigrants living there waiting to get their papers I don't think the eu does anything about all this flood of immigrants but I can guarantee that there are landings every day and things in sicily are no longer under control

Francis ECF Afraid so Concetta. My daughter-in-law and most of my friends are Sicilian and I'm in agreement with you. If only Gaddafi hadn't been taken out. If the EU does nothing in effect, the citizens are on your side... We are all in the same boat. Ciao Concetta !

In the second example of conversation we note that whereas they started out thinking they held opposing views, they went on to discover that they were of the same opinion and they ended their sparring match with verbal comments, but not without having 'referred to authority/experience': "I come from Sicily", "most of my friends are Sicilian". This reference to experience is particularly visible here:

Ludo B. Patrick, diversity is a good thing... Now you have to be bloody stupid to tar everyone with the same brush... fortunately Dutroux is one of our own!

Patrick G. didn't say it wasn't, there are bloody idiots everywhere, and Ludo, I've got friends who are Muslims, not fundamentalists, and they are very good people, well integrated, and courageous, they respect me and I respect them, to me they are Gentlemen, but they are not into religion, they're just like you and me. I'm of Indian origin myself, I've been in Belgium for over 40 years, I was adopted, and I was one of the first coloured people, and believe me, I suffered abuse and bullying, but I didn't set fire to cars or kill people, I put up with it, but I can't stand the way they behave, because they see us as foreigners in our own country.

Even more automatically, any non-Belgian sounding patronymic is classed as being one of the 'others', the 'invaders':

Youssef A. It's just appalling to see how the Italian authorities try to justify their racist, murderous practices towards migrants in other people's eyes. Islamic State has become a great scapegoat that can be accused of anything in order to justify anything... Load of hypocrites and criminals.

Robert G. You've got the wrong criminals the Italians save these migrants from drowning and what's more it's your friends that rob them of their belongings rubbish...

Michel H. Lol, the big word. Noooo, let's allow these people to become terrorists and burn men and children and gun us down as the "dogs" that we are.

And anyway, everyone knows Europe is rich... we have the resources to house, heat and feed all these families. ^^

Loubna EAI Michel Europe is rich thanks to its policies, like the usa who are robbing the world ..

David B. of course loubna, we are the baddies and the Islamists are the goodies... whatever. Fucking hell, live your life in your own country and stop pissing us off with your ancestral beliefs.

Michel H. Well said David!

Michel H. Louubna EAI..... Another one who's going to go over to IS... Yes we eat pork

Finally, we looked at the profiles of the most verbose commenters (five or more posts). Of the seven commenters listed, three are hostile and aggressive towards migrants (Michel H, Patrice G. and Monique V.), two attempt to moderate the debate and condemn hate speech (Rodrigo RT and Concetta M.), one fills the role of agitator by abusing some of the commenters (Loubna EAI) and, lastly, Georgette DiP appears resigned to the situation.

To sum up, we note that in contrast to the first case study, this is not a match between agitator and responders but more of an outlet (consensus?) for hate speech against migrants. Such hate speech takes the form of protecting one's own culture (and defending one's community) and likening these migrants to economic plunderers and dangerous individuals. The rhetorical mechanisms of comparison and appeal to authority occur in this particular case.

CASE STUDY 3

Le Vif – The West at war with Islam? An “ugly lie”

CASE STUDY NO.3 Analysis Date April 2015	
Newspaper	Le Vif
Article publication date	19/02/2015
Headline and subhead	The West at war with Islam? An “ugly lie”
Name of author/journalist	Source: Belga. Online editor.
Section	International
Background to information/article	Following the attacks orchestrated by Islamic State, a declaration by Obama refusing to accept the phrase “war of religion”. He refocuses the debate on Daesh terrorism.
Picture:	Yes
Number of Facebook shares	28 on 20/02/2015
Number of Twitter shares	47 on 29/04/2015
Number of Likes	62 on 20/02/2015
Number of comments:	100 comments.
Other shares/social networks?	/
Other notes on the article	<p>The article was shared on Facebook 225 times from the newspaper’s own site on 29/04/2015.</p> <p>The article is still online on the site levif.be but no longer on the newspaper’s Facebook page.</p>

The article selected recounts a speech by the US President, Barack Obama, denouncing “the notion promoted by various terrorist organisations that the West is at war with Islam” as “an ugly lie”. Whereas the entire content is a denial of any clash of civilisations between the West and Islam, the majority of the posts in fact contradict that and stress the opposing nature of the Muslim and Western cultures, in many cases lumping together Daesh and the Muslim religion.

The article referring to this news item caused less interaction than the previous articles, with 100 comments on Facebook from 68 different commenters. Nearly one-third of these posts (26%) came from only three people (Mireille W., Said A. and David B.), with the other 65 commenters producing an average of 1.3 posts per person. Two months after it appeared, the article was no longer accessible on Facebook. It would seem that Le Vif removes articles originating from news agencies and leaves only articles produced in-house. It is also to be noted that only four people posted a comment on the Le Vif site. There is therefore a more than significant difference between interactions on the press website and on the social medium, Facebook.

Once again it is evident that the posts do not relate directly to the article, but tend to be reactions to previous comments, creating a conversation between users. Many of the posts would seem to be responding to the question-mark in the headline. Some people answer Yes to the question ‘Is the West at war against Islam?’ while others, such as Mireille W., turn the question round and ask whether it’s more a case of Islam being at war with the West (cf. below). The main contrasts in this thread are between the pro-Muslims (a minority of whom criticise Western policy in the Middle East, whereas the majority argue about how compatible their religion is with Belgian culture) and the anti-Muslims, who defend ‘Western values’. However, the content of the article explains that opposition between the West and the Muslim world is absurd and that we should not get the idea of there being a clash of civilisations between these two worlds. Nevertheless, the headline plays on that very opposition and it is also the basis for the comments.

In one of the first posts Mireille W., the user with the largest number of comments, suggests that democracy is incompatible with Islam, triggering a number of posts disagreeing or agreeing with this idea. The people who contradict that opinion back up their words by facts, like Cédric J., who points out that the majority of the terrorists’ victims are Muslim, or by personal accounts, like Said A. (cf. below).

Mireille W. No the west is not at war with Islam..... It's Islam that's at war with the west

Cédric J. Islam and Muslims have nothing to do with IS and the majority condemn the terrorists ... Remember also that the terrorists' 1st victims are Muslims in Iraq or Africa, but apparently you have swallowed all that stuff our governments fed you, the number of European deaths is merely a drop in the ocean compared with the Muslim deaths in the world

Said A. I am a Muslim believer, I can assure you lady that I do not feel in any way at war with you or with a major part of myself. How could I be at war with my neighbour, my colleague, my friend David, my wife,... Stop confusing different things and stop being obsessed with your fears My Belgian identity is totally compatible with my religious values, which I adapt according to my environment. peace

The conversation between these three people is relatively respectful and there is clearly a genuine desire for dialogue, with Mireille W. trying to understand why Muslim countries vote for Islamist parties. She receives a number of replies, with some commenters interrupting the dialogue by abusing her and others trying to provide answers.

Mireille W. OK, but then explain to me why it is that, when they can vote, they elect Islamist parties

(...)

Mireille W. Completely agree with your reasoning, what I meant was that Muslim countries are not prepared to be compatible with democracy (otherwise they would vote differently) personally I'm like you I mind my own business. I was just asking a question that's bothering me and I can't find the answer.

(...)

Cédric J. Just to add something, Mireille do you think anyone in Iraq voted the IS leaders into power???

Mireille W. I wasn't talking about Iraq, just Tunisia and Turkey and the Arab Spring which came to nothing and Iran which supports the mullahs.

Nadia EA. Ms Winnik, the first elections since the constitutive one were held in Tunisia in late 2014. The real winner was Nidaa Tounes whose special feature is that it brings different political tendencies together on the concepts of democracy, rule of law and opposition to Ennahda. moreover if Ennahda was the leading party before these elections, it represented 42% of the votes, a relative majority but not an absolute one. Finally, comparing Islamist parties like Ennahda or the PJD in Morocco and Daesh is irrelevant. In those countries voting for an Islamist party means voting for a conservative, reactionary party... But not for terrorism. Would you tell those who vote for Christine Boutin that by voting for her they are supporting the Lord's Resistance Army?

While Mireille W.'s comments are undeniably forthright and reveal a lack of understanding of the mechanisms that lead to conservatism and the far right, they do also show a desire to understand what radicalism is and a willingness to establish dialogue with the other users. Indeed, a number of surfers answer her courteously and informatively. Other commenters, in contrast, are not in the least open to discussion, contenting themselves instead with flinging back judgments and opinions that lump together Islam, sharia and invasion, not even backing them up with arguments. The latter group therefore do not join in the discussion with the other commenters and they are in fact refocused by Said A., thus forming a pattern in which those who post non-constructive comments are criticised and challenged by others in order to keep the discussion on track. David B. turns up again – he also commented on the Le Soir article which we analysed in Case Study 2 – here playing the role of 'troll', as he gives a lot of information which is not backed up by arguments but merely delivered bluntly:

David B. yes and calling for jihad or sharia deserves death

Quentin R. It's an invaders' religion. They certainly never try to integrate

Nadjim H. David B. of course calling for jihad and sharia should be severely punished just like people who call for violence in their posts like mireille who comes out with the view that all Muslims are at war with the West (...)

Said A. David and Quentin, raise the level of the debate and provide some arguments if you have the intellectual ability to do so...

David B. for example goes on to compare the Muslim religion to a virus:

David B. I found the definition of Islam on a health website: Definition A virus is a micro-organism that can cause a viral disease of varying severity: cold, flu, chicken pox, measles, rabies, smallpox... These diseases are contagious and can spread rapidly: this is called an epidemic. Prevention is based on vaccination, the aim of which is to stimulate the body's immune defences, and treatment is based on taking medicines designed to relieve the symptoms (temperature, tiredness, etc.). Antibiotics are no use, as they only act on bacteria.

Other patterns appear in the thread where non-constructive comments are refocused by another person who wants to keep the newsgroup pleasant and respectful:

Christian DC. shut it you Islamic fundamentalist warrior in disguise ...

Danielle L. you shut it.

Jacques D. You can talk about anything as long as you remain polite and courteous, no-one has a monopoly of the truth. Have a nice day.

Sylvia D. I'm with you mr Jacques D.

It may also be noted that some web surfers post pictures in dubious taste relating to Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. For example, Georges R. posted this picture which explains that some suicide bombers protect their genitals with a concrete block before blowing themselves up so they will still be able to enjoy the promised virgins when they get to paradise – which is obviously a joke aimed at making fun of their stupidity.

Georges R. >>> The terror inspired by hell! which the Christian religions also predicted! with the added bonus of supposed virgins for the "brave men" (with no body and no genitals) they'll never see them!

It may be noted that the commenters who maintain that the Muslim religion and Western values are incompatible also base their views on their personal experiences, like David B. (see below) or on facts the sources of which are never given, like Fabrice H., who states that the number of Christian victims of terrorism far exceeds the number of Muslim victims.

David B. a former colleague went off sick for ramadan, he couldn't take any more and it was dangerous (heavy goods vehicle driver) the mosques receive state aid (like other religions I admit) the fundamentalist-style beard is only fashionable among Islamic fundamentalists and stupid bastards (or converts) not counting the factories where I deliver that allow muslims prayer breaks (in roubaix, lille and ghislengien). Let's respect differences, ok, in your own home or in an Islamic country, not here. I'm not making any of that up.

Fabrice H. it makes me laugh in this kind of debate when people say that the primary victims are the Muslims.. lool it's one of two things: either you are living in cloud-cuckoo-land or you're blind, the only problem with this is, precisely, that nobody mentions the number of Christians purely and simply eradicated by these crazy followers of Allah and what's more I have never yet seen an entire Muslim community rise up and revolt against it, not as individuals, at a personal level, but as a community, you (Muslims) have never risen up as a group in our societies to denounce this barbarity contrary to our principles which nevertheless enable you to live.. you will never be any better than 'daesh' if you retreat into your ideologies and by not standing up against it you are only fuelling the racial hatred which is growing in our society..

Comments similar to this one by Fabrice H. come up regularly in the threads we analysed. Surfers indeed often use the principle of going one better on victims to justify their opinions, as can be seen again in the comments below which highlight the victims on each 'side', whether Christians killed in Muslim countries or Muslim victims of Western invasions:

Raphaël V. But Islam is at war with the Christians!!!! churches burned down, Christians decapitated, Christians burned alive... doesn't that matter? Who are the 'kpufar' the infidels? who made that up?

Catalina G. Hi Raphaël I agree with you! The US boss' attitude doesn't make sense – they're taking on the whole world by trying to impose their sect! As far as I know the Muslim countries have been the victims of extremist terrorists for years!

Abdelali AA. Wherever the Americans go, blood, hate and fear reign supreme. Wherever the West tries to impose its model for living, war breaks out. So Obama my arse, shut your faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaace. You are surprised that it's so easy to recruit lost young people with no aim in life for a war they understand nothing about

To sum up, what we have here is mainly a pattern where those who post non-constructive comments are criticised and challenged by others in order to keep the discussion on track. The comments are often very blunt and sometimes confuse different things.

CASE STUDY 4

Sud Presse – He walks around Paris with a skull cap on his head to see the reactions: spitting, abuse, intimidation... (video)

CASE STUDY NO.4 Analysis Date April 2015	
Newspaper	Sud Presse
Article publication date	16/02/2015
Headline and subhead	He walks around Paris with a skull cap on his head to see the reactions: spitting, abuse, intimidation...
Name of author/journalist	Unknown. There is just a note that this is an article by the online editor.
Section	News: World
Background to information/article	To make people aware of the increase in anti-Semitic behaviour in Europe, a journalist was filmed walking around Paris for 10 hours while wearing a skull cap.
Picture:	Yes
Number of Facebook shares	82 on 29/04/2015
Number of Twitter shares	33. No change since the article was published.
Number of Likes	97 on 29/04/2015
Number of comments:	There were 124 the day following publication of the article. 156 comments on 29/04/2015
Other shares/social networks?	/
Other notes on the article	The article was shared 2,676 times on the newspaper's own site on 29/04/2015. The article is still online on sudinfo.be but no longer on the newspaper's Facebook page.

This article is a short format principally comprising a commentary on a video made by a journalist not on the SudPresse editorial staff. The newspaper published the video both on Facebook and on the pages of its own website. It was selected not only because of the large number of comments but also because it openly makes one community a victim, and that allows the community dynamics at work in the comments to be observed. Finally, in this particular case the article has little in the way of editorial content and the format is readily 'shareable', and that may attract other kinds of commenter than the 'usual' readers of SudPresse's Facebook page.

Focusing on the comments on the Facebook page we find 156 comments written by 70 commenters, of whom Ilias O. is the most prolific with 24 comments. Seven other users reacted five or more times. Together they account for nearly half the conversation. The average number of comments per user is 2.2.

The roles of the chief protagonists can easily be identified: Ilias O. (24 comments) says he is “a Muslim and proud of it and against the policy of the Israeli government”. He is the most prolific commenter, taking part in a number of threads, and thus takes on the role of agitator. Opposite him, Nico W. (11 comments) plays the part of agitator for the ‘other side’ by defending the Israeli cause and making sure there is no confusing of one thing with another in the exchanges (although guilty of that himself). Both of them stand out from the other users by their propensity to ‘discuss’ and keep the conversation going. We also find the role of defender (of a community) whose comments consist of attacks and aggressiveness towards the other community (rather than seeking to justify his own) or denouncing conspiracies. In this crystallization of Muslim-Jew tension, a number of commenters present themselves as defenders (or rather, accusers) of one community or another: Laetitia LR (8 comments), Abdoullah AK (8 comments), Hicham TB (6 comments), etc. Lastly, there are the trolls (Ampanana De la Vicontesse, comments taken down) who make venomous, provocative remarks and themselves create collateral victims (Enzo C., 5 comments) in this discussion because, feeling obliged to defend themselves, they resort to abuse.

Example of the latter sparring match:

(unknown comment by Ampana de la vicontesse)

Enzo C. Ok so don't answer my comment then it's with people like you that hate develops

Enzo C. I don't give a fuck me stupid nothing is stupider than your ridiculous pseudonym viscountess my arse go on get out of it

Beyond these dynamics, we can quickly identify some recurring themes within these comments.

The first of these, expressed notably through abuse, is that of accusing Arabs of being racist (anti-white racism):

Laetitia LR Yes and who are the most racist??? Those who themselves complain that racist remarks are being made against them. Who's wrong..

Mickael D. Pfff it's always the same ones who have no respect!!! And they want us to respect them???

Gass Ro Who's wrong where's the racism who's racist the video makes it clear who's racist

Another recurring theme that sparks off debate (and abuse) among the commenters is the grading of victims of racism – here is an extract from the thread:

Enzo C. Outrageous didn't they suffer enough in 1940-45 and it's still going on in 2015 I am disgusted with people it's a HELL OF A WORLD we live in

Abdoullah AK what about the Palestinians aren't they suffering enough as it is?

Momo R. What about the blacks who were and still are slaves in some countries that was well before the wars wasn't it

This theme causes the communities to distance themselves from one another, and so the commenters take 'sides'.

Nico W. The Muslims who are always looking for excuses and constantly presenting themselves as victims it's getting really pathetic and ridiculous ... maybe they are not all like that but we need to be very selective

Enzo C. completely agree especially as ampanana de la vicontesse conceals her true identity are you scared of being embarrassed by your real name

Nico W. Enzo there are idiots everywhere and ampanana is one of them ... just ignore that kind of person full of hatred and far more racist than most of us

Enzo C. yeah you're right Nico W.

Since we're talking about grading victims, other people give personal accounts and make comparisons with their own situation of experiencing discrimination:

Sylvain K. Lol very funny! Same ones again being abusive and then they'll be complaining that people are becoming racist learn to accept people as they are (religion, sexual orientation) and perhaps people will be a bit kinder to a certain person! I am gay! Proud of it and yet that upsets people. So if they can say what they want about other people of a different religion or sexual orientation we are entitled to do the same! Freedom of speech is a wonderful thing! But not for everyone apparently pfff small minds...

(...)

Julie M. are we going to be crying over the Jews again? I'm not racist, I'm not Palestinian, I'm Armenian so should I go and kill the Turks? you really need to stop playing the martyrs because in France the bosses are generally Jews, so you have no reason to see yourselves as victims, fed up hacked off with hearing you complain, think yourselves fortunate to have some money which is not the case for all the peoples that have been victims of genocide

Another conversational dynamic: denouncing the video as a fake, saying it was staged, and even a conspiracy against the Muslim community:

Abd A Another fabrication to feed the citizen's guilt with regard to this community.. and at the same time to increase the loathing for the Muslim community!

(...)

Hicham TB I wouldn't be surprised if the people in it were actors

(...)

Abdoullah AK The women wearing the niqab were filmed with the sole aim of ranking them with the other acts of provocation, it's subliminal.

(...)

Will S. Crap, a video planned in advance with actors: I see people wearing skull caps all the time in Paris when I'm there and I never see them getting abused in any way whatsoever...

It's a lie!

including one commenter who makes a point of mentioning several times (in different sub-discussions) what she calls the irony of the situation:

Jennifer P. it makes me laugh some Muslim people here saying that the people doing the abusing are actors... it's yet another conspiracy it's always the same!!! when it's the other way round it's never a pathetic conspiracy!

There then follows a conversation about this theory that the video was staged:

Abdoullah AK I wouldn't be surprised if the people in it were actors

Abdoullah AK I can make the same video the other way round, I put on a djellaba and ask 10 of my mates with typical European looks to insult me and spit on me and it's all set up, where's the problem?

Diamant DM Especially as in France at the moment it's really not so much mounting anti-Semitism as soaring Islamophobia...

Jennifer P. lol it's strange when someone makes a video with a veiled woman being abused in the street the people doing the abusing are racist but here ooh they are actors you are pathetic

Nico W. The big conspiracy as usual ... it's easier to believe that than to look truth in the face

(...)

Abdoullah AK What truth? I'm suggesting a possibility, who made that short film?

Bast S. And what's more we don't give a damn even if it's true

We may note a discussion between two protagonists that shows the need to weigh one's words and explain one's opinion in depth if one wants to be understood:

Faiza L. The Arabs are not spared: spitting abuse giving the finger - go home we're fed up paying you child benefit and I could go on! It's not only Jews that happens to you know you shit-stirrers!!

Nico W. Racism will always be with us, but take a video camera and go for a walk and I'd be interested to see how many insults ... it can't be as many as this boy ... constantly presenting oneself as a victim is not the answer you know so condemn this racist behaviour like everyone else does instead of complaining ... have a nice evening

Faiza L. I'm not complaining and calm down!! ok – I didn't say a word against the Jews! I have recounted similar things against Arabs or other types! don't be aggressive and don't feel you're being got at ok Mr Nico?

Nico W. I'm not Jewish but what you and lots of other people say about this article is very disturbing... and I'm not aggressive far from it

Faiza L. Tell me what's disturbing about it please?

Nico W. What's disturbing is that you don't condemn this behaviour and you prefer to make the Arab community the victims instead ...

Faiza L. That's right I didn't condemn it but I didn't make the Arabs the victims - as I understand it I said what I've seen – I live in Tunis not in France but I go there often!

Nico W. I can see that you are not a bad person I was just giving you my point of view have a nice evening Ms Lourimi

Faiza L. Have a nice evening Nico no hard feelings let's live in peace and love one another

This passage is quite a good illustration of the border between expressing an opinion and racist remarks. Initially suspicious, commenter Nico W. condemns the content of the remarks made by contributor Faiza L.. She then repositions her remarks as a personal opinion ("what I've seen"). She ends up saying "no hard feelings" and "love one another".

Only one comment challenges the maker/journalist behind this video:

Sylvain B. Yeah well there's more to Paris than the places where this journalist goes walkabout. He deliberately chose districts with a big North African presence to prove what exactly? That Jews and Arabs don't like one another? All you need is a little knowledge of history and current affairs... anyway another crap journalist

These threads are also the arena for some trolls – whose comments, incidentally, were removed (by whom? by them?) and who were 'spotted' and cast out by the other users, notably Ralf Louf (and later on, Jean-Charles H.).

Diamant DM Ralph louf you are no help at all in this debate. Clear off goodbye thanks it's you that's the trash.

Abdoullah AK Ralph your settings are completely locked ... that's so cowardly no way, I don't believe you would abuse people like that openly, when it comes to fuelling hatred there's no-one to beat little chickens like you, admit that you're delighted when you see in the news that a murder has been committed by an Arab, a Muslim, a Moroccan (you'll end up confused yourself)

Jean-Charles H. they're big

Ottoman S. Hi Ralphie ...

Ottoman S. I know it's you ralphie ...

Jean-Charles H. You need to take your little pills lady with the funnel-thing on your head, self-commenting, groping, you need to seek advice

Abdellah M. Aaaahhhhh Ralphie the compulsive liar unmasked mouaaahhhh it's not just a few pills you need it's the whole packet because your case is so hopelessly incurable not forgetting the XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXLLLLLLLL size suppository you've just taken

(...)

Ottoman S. Ralphie or jean charles H.??? I know who you are Ralph Louf...

Ottoman S. Yes it's ralphie alias "jean charlie" but i don't particularly care! always on time little lapdog ...

So go and find the bone and come back in three hours there will be a saveloy waiting for you ...

Besides, most of the users leaving only one comment express indignation without necessarily taking part in the debates. A sort of 'spontaneous empathy reaction', no sooner expressed than it is forgotten. Nine single comments reveal such indignation, for example:

Florian H. That's outrageous!!!!!!!

Monique V. Yes shocking!

Chris M. What a world...

Others, meanwhile, punctuate the debate solely with calls for peace and co-existence:

Riina S. Always the same debates that go nowhere!!! Make love not war eh!!! peaceeee

Olivier DS. No confusion eh

Lastly, we once again find the appeal to 'authority', 'proof' based on the individual's position, their 'who I am' that gives them the right to say that:

Laetitia LR Ampanana De la Vicontesse bollocks I know what I'm talking about. If you don't like it that's just too bad. Racism is all around not just on one side this needs to stop. Some Muslims complain about racism against them but they themselves are racist towards others so no more hypocrisy either. I know what I'm talking about. I've been there myself.

Ilias O. Personally, as a Muslim, I'm open-minded.

To sum up, here we again have the same dynamics as in previous case studies (trolls unmasked, reference to identity or experience ("I am ...", "I know what I'm talking about")) along with some new components: victimisation of communities, reinforced here by grading the victims of such discrimination, a conspiracy theory and, finally, calls for "peace between peoples".

CASE STUDY 5

Sud Presse (La Meuse) - Dison: denied access to training because she wears a veil, she takes the college and the Minister, Ms Simonis, to court

CASE STUDY NO.4 Analysis Date April 2015	
Newspaper	Sud Presse
Article publication date	23/03/2015
Headline and subhead	Dison: denied access to training because she wears a veil, she takes the college and the Minister, Ms Simonis, to court.
Name of author/journalist	Dépêche Belga
Section	News, Regions: Verviers
Background to information/article	/
Picture:	Yes
Number of Facebook shares	144 on 21/04/2015 The day after the article was published there were 33 shares.
Number of Twitter shares	10. No change since the article was published.
Number of Likes	180 on 21/04/2015 The day after the article was published there were 122 Likes.
Number of comments:	363 comments.
Other shares/social networks?	/
Other notes on the article	The article was shared 7,169 times on the newspaper's own site on 29/04/2015. The article is still online on the site sudinfo.be but no longer on the newspaper's Facebook page.

This case study was selected because it concerns the issue of the veil, which is still a particularly sensitive topic in Belgium, and it triggered a lot of interaction from surfers. The article explains that an association called Justice and Democracy raised an action at the court of first instance in Verviers (a provincial town in eastern Belgium) following the banning of a veil-wearing mother from attending social advancement classes in Dison last August. As the article says, educational establishments in Belgium “may independently decide, via their house rules, whether to permit or prohibit conspicuous religious symbols”. The leeway allowed to educational establishments to exclude pupils who refuse to obey the

rules therefore derives from their own responsibility and not from Belgian law, and that often generates lively debates in the news when instances of exclusion are noted.

The article referring to this news item caused more more interaction than the articles previously analysed, with 363 comments on Facebook from 173 different commenters. As with Case Study 3, the remarks were not confined to a small number of users, for only 15% of the comments come from four people (Aichaa A., Anduena A., Erhan I and Ersin PY) who have quite a long sub-conversation among themselves without any other commenters interrupting. The other 169 commenters produce roughly 1.8 comments per person, which is in line with the average for the other case studies. Three months after publication, the article was no longer accessible on Facebook. It can also be noted that 264 people left a comment on the La Meuse website (a local edition of the daily SudPresse), i.e. nearly as many as the comments on Facebook. There is thus a huge difference compared with the Le Vif website, which had barely four comments. The fact that La Meuse uses the Facebook plugin for interaction on its website whereas the Le Vif site requires users to create a personal account may explain this difference. Just like Case Study 1 (La Dernière Heure), Sud Presse starts the headline with the name of the place featured in the news item – this is in fact common practice in the regional and local press. However, unlike Case Study 1 where the name of the district – Molenbeek – triggered a lot of hate comments, here none of the commenters reacts on behalf of the district of Dison, which does not have the same reputation among the general public as Molenbeek.

The picture accompanying the article shows a veiled woman, her eyes blanked out by a black rectangle, writing on a school blackboard. Although the photograph shows a veil which leaves the wearer's face exposed (except for the eyes, to safeguard her anonymity), several commenters confuse the burka (a garment that conceals the whole body and the face except for the eyes) and the veil:

Fabienne M. Over here we show our faces at work

Aichaa A. The face is on show by the way! It's only the hair that can't be seen! Why are you being so nasty?!?<

Anduena A. Unfortunately some people can't even see properly nowadays! For pity's sake!

Do you still know where the face and the hair are? Pffff.

Too many racists in this world, then they'll always say the same thing "I'm not racist but" yeah of course.

In the majority of the comments the readers lump together wearing the veil and being a foreigner in Belgium, as though a woman could not be veiled and Belgian at the same time. This idea shows through in most of the posts and is only countered by the occasional comment. Although the majority of the comments are extremely racist and opposed to the Muslim culture, we do find a conversational pattern in which the commenters' points of view move on. Take Myriam D. for example, who starts off by expressing the idea that if the veiled woman does not agree with the ban on wearing the veil she can go 'home'. That comment generates a discussion with a dozen or so writers, getting her gradually to admit that she spoke a bit rashly and did not think about the possibility that a veiled woman might be Belgian:

Myriam D. She can go home then this is Belgium we do things the Belgian way here

Anduena A. Oulalalaa if I was expected to live like SOME Belgians I would be drunk every night.. and worse! You can see them when you go out, in the cafés etc etc.

(...)

Ersin PY Didier says if you're not happy go back to your own country and so if a Belgian woman has converted to Islam does she go to Muslim-land?? What about me? I'm from a Turkish background but I've never been to Turkey I was born in Belgium what am I Belgian or a foreigner? Please tell me, I'd like to know.

(...)

Myriam D. I am not at all racist I was just trying to understand you we are all equal

Ersin PY But why do you tell them to go home Myriam? Perhaps they were born here?

Myriam D. That's true I didn't think about that when I posted my comment especially as my family my children and I have good friends of all nationalities

Ersin PY Now look, I have nothing against you Myriam I realise you are not racist it's more of a problem with the religions but why can't we live together veiled women unveiled women atheists skull caps etc. ... secularism does not mean against religions but just living according to our beliefs our sexuality etc. ...

Myriam D. True you are right best regards I'm off to bed

Apart from this conversation, which ends in a friendly manner, a number of stereotypes and racist prejudices also emerge throughout this thread: those who think that women wear the veil out of fear of being raped, that it is not possible to wear the veil and be integrated into Belgian society, that veiled women are radicalised and cannot obey Belgian law because they are subject to the law of their God, that those who condemn racism set themselves up as unlawful victims, 'anti-white' racism, and so on. Such prejudices are generally countered with irony, ridicule or insults, and the result is not so much friendly dialogue as verbal sparring:

Christelle ND bunch of calimeros hoooo they are all racist pppfff find something else you are sad in the end it's you that are waffling on about nothing do you know what a common-sense rule means? and when you got here did nobody tell you that we are civilized here and rules are made to be obeyed at school the headscarves stay at the door mental cases that's how it is for everyone here

Mathéo S. Raah that's enough of your bloody veils... are you scared a Belgian man will rape you because he sees a bit of your hair or what?

Anduena A. Oulalalaa next time refrain from commenting you won't look such an idiot! For pity's sake!

Neirouze EB They are free in their own country to require people not to wear the veil I completely agree and it should even be banned in our native countries and if she is not willing to follow the rules she can just go back home

Dams D. You nasty bit of filth d izidi you stupid two-balled secularist go and tell them that in Turkey you clown they'll have you and your kind thicko

(...)

Charles F. Because the veil represents submission to a divinity, not to the laws of the country. And especially among the 'non-dangerous radicals'. You know there is a rise in religious radicalism, and not only in Islam but also among the Jews, and the Christians and other evangelists, even the Buddhists. And it gets up my nose when people who believe in a god that doesn't exist (it can't be proved) try to impose their visions on me.

(...)

Steve B. how do you expect us to live together when the people you take in treat us like peasants when we're holding out a helping hand to them time to wake up ok not everybody is in the same basket but a vast majority is much more racist than us.

Ersin PY Steve tells us about the well-known anti-white racist and the unfairness of illegal immigrants getting benefits lol still the same old story eh?

(...)

We also find comments that reflect a victimisation mindset, either from people denouncing colonialist Belgium or others complaining about foreigners taking advantage of the system via the taxes paid by Belgians and having lots of children who grow up to become offenders. The arguments used to support such views are very vague and refer to different stereotypes or popular beliefs, and are once again countered by irony, as in the case of Anduena who is amazed that it's only foreigners who are thieves. Ibraguim G. So she should go back home? Do you know that you Belgians exploited Arabs, Africans and all kinds of people and then you want them to get out of here? What you said is completely unhelpful! You should be ashamed, you need to learn a bit about history...

Pascal K. We didn't exploit anything at all you have come and settled here fled your own country and come to live on our backs so stop thinking of yourselves as badly off criss

Jean-michel V. Completely agree pascal K. ... And what's more we have to put up with all those kids thieving, assaulting people...

(...)

Anduena A. Ah because you think it's only foreigners that steal or assault people?! That's not the way it is!!! I can see you need to get out more!

Unlike other articles where the commenters appeal to the newsgroup moderators, here nobody seems to call in the community moderator. All the same, some users complain that posts like that one are divisive and create unnecessary controversy.

Josee AB we are in a free country you don't believe there is a god!!! That's not the case for everybody... I might add that unfortunately posts like this one divide people!! when right now we should be united... you can like people, talk to one another, live together... without necessarily having the same beliefs or customs...

(...)

Kubilay C. La Meuse it's a load of bullshit about that headscarf you've been forcing that down our throats for a week. Let's hear about the people getting shafted a bit more every day

It would seem that the wearing of the veil crystallizes all the fears and fantasies about Islam. These fears are expressed very directly and aggressively in some of the posts:

Pat O. You simply need to stop trying to change OUR customs, our roots... of Easter holidays to spring holidays... hallal meat in school canteens... it's not down to us to submit to your religion but it's down to you to live respectfully.

Francois F. if we allow the veil it will be the burka next and then their laws.....

TC Osman K. Your scared...It will be back to the Ottoman Empire

(...)

Chantal DC You might not mind that but one day they are going to impose it on us just like they are already imposing a series of their rules from days gone by! Don't forget that the Islam party wants to impose sharia on us and a lot of Muslims support it because it already has one seat in parliament!

Finally, we note that the thread generates a lot of 'sub-discussions' thanks to the 'Reply to this comment' option on Facebook, which allows the discussions to be graded. There are thus a lot of mini-discussions that no longer really relate to the article but to a particular comment posted by a user. For instance, there is a whole discussion about the wearing of the headscarf at the workplace, with each commenter explaining the rules that apply where they work:

Djony ST it depends where in a snack bar, at McDonalds, some delivery men, one of the workers opposite me wears a cap as well, we live in a free country don't we if that's not the case then we are living in a dictatorship and not in a democracy I am an atheist and I think that the key to living together starts with respecting other people's customs I grew up with Muslims and they never imposed anything at all on me they are just demonized for the sake of a handful of madmen who blow themselves up for a religion they themselves don't respect that's my point of view anyway

(...)

Christelle ND. yes of course at home or in the street pfff if you like that's the way they live and that's it but at a school that would be the first time anyone's been allowed to wear a head covering of any kind a peaked cap flat cap hat or whatever and anyway we were taught when you arrive somewhere you take off whatever you have on your head it's a matter of etiquette and good manners so I think it's the same for everybody

CASE STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The case studies we analysed do not seem to show any direct relationships between the way an article is written and the hate comments it attracts. However, it may be noted that the words used in the article's headline to describe the people involved are often attention-grabbers or even sure-fire triggers for comments (Molenbeek, Muslim, Islam, veiled women). These words lead to racist reactions because they have to do with religion (Muslim or Jewish) or they refer to districts with a high population density of foreign / North African origin.

Apart from in the second case study (Le Soir, Islamic State threatens to set 500,000 migrants adrift heading for Italy, 19 February 2015), we found little in the way of incitement to hatred as such, but more in the way of incitements to discrimination, for example urging the expulsion of Muslims who refuse to remove their veils, along with numerous instances of lumping things together, clichés, prejudices and racist stereotypes. These xenophobic and racist comments apparently do not need any incitements in the article to make them appear.

Discussion patterns

The majority of users post one to two comments, confining themselves to stating their opinions without getting into a genuine discussion with the other surfers. It may be noted that in all the case studies, three or four commenters monopolise the conversation, accounting for nearly one-third of the total comments. These lead commenters either hold a discussion among themselves (a sort of debate in camera with little interference from the other commenters), or else they make a point of systematically challenging the other users' comments, either taking a xenophobic stance or, conversely, acting as moderator. The lead commenters generally defend very black-and-white positions and are backed up by other web surfers who rally to one or other of the two dominant opinions. It sometimes happens that a user attempts to introduce some shades of grey or to calm down the debate by calling for less abuse and verbal attacks. This pattern of two opposing groups and one (or more) person(s) trying to calm things down can be found in nearly all the case studies. It also happens fairly frequently that one reader will appeal to the newsgroup moderator when the remarks go too far.

By no means all the exchanges are confined to trading insults, as some of the discussions are conducted in a friendly tone and even result in some people modifying their points of view. However, such instances of friendly exchanges are in the minority compared with the comments that are abusive or not open to dialogue.

Many of the insults are based on the surfers' assumed nationality or religion (according to their profile name or the content of their posts). A lot of commenters use data provided by the other users' profiles (photographs, age, previous posts, etc.) to strip what the person says of all credibility or to ridicule them. The commenters do not appear to be loyal to one publication exclusively, as the same people turned up in several articles in different newspapers, and users sometimes refer to the quality of rival publications' newsgroups as a way of criticizing the standard of the posts.

Mechanisms for arguing

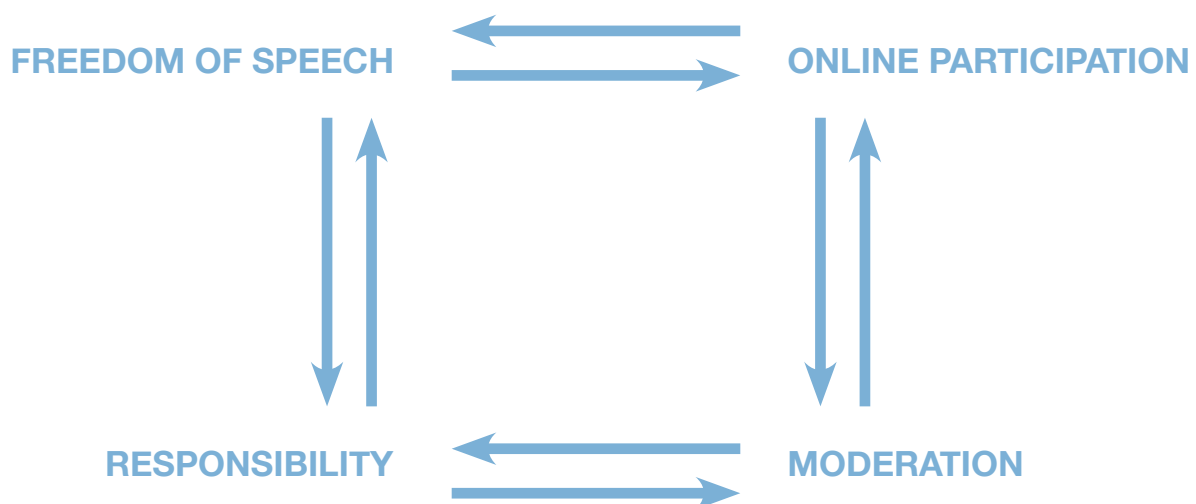
Beyond the roles taken by the various players within these discussion patterns, it may be noted that there are some recurring features in the arguments. We have found five such features:

- Victimisation of one's own community (religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc.) and thus defending it, notably by accusing exogenous communities. We also noted a tendency to grade the types of discrimination.
- Referring to authority or experience: "I know because I've experienced it", "I am Sicilian and so...", "I'm speaking from experience...", "Some of my friends are Muslims and so...". This tendency to position one's remarks with reference to a degree of authority is a recurring one.
- Frequent resort to abuse. Even those who attempt to 'moderate' resort to abuse (losing their head?)
- Inaccurate generalisation, if not to say confusing different things or lumping things together, in the majority of the xenophobic posts.
- Condemning trolls, i.e. deliberately provocative commenters who only join in the conversations with the aim of provoking the other users. The latter tend to either reject (condemn) them or ignore them.

Generally speaking, we are afraid there is a sort of latent, almost consensual xenophobia among the comments in newsgroups. The fact is that if conversations take place at all, they happen when some users counter discriminating remarks. Otherwise, it's more a case of a continuous thread (a safety valve) of 'borderline' remarks, to borrow the term used by a community moderator, which we agree are difficult to home in on and position within the framework of the laws. With regard to assessing the comments we note the invisible presence, if not to say the absence, of journalists or editorial moderators in the conversations in the five case studies selected.

IV. RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS WITH ONLINE PRESS EDITORS AND JOURNALISTS – CONTRASTING OPINIONS

Between April and November 2015 we conducted 15 interviews with editors in chief, journalists, social media managers, researchers, journalists' associations, and anti-racism and anti-discrimination associations. The aims of these interviews were to understand the issues relating to participation in the online press, notably in terms of the possibility of interaction in the online press and its impact on the journalist's profession, freedom of speech, use of the social media (Facebook in particular) by the press websites, the way sensitive topics are handled and, finally, good practice with regard to countering online hate speech. From these discussions a sort of (vicious?) 'square' emerged, i.e., the multiple influences between modes of online participation, moderation choices, responsibility and freedom of speech issues.



Furthermore, within each of these themes we can see that different issues are positioned in a sort of tension between different stances and conceptions of journalism and of online participation, even values. We will therefore deal with the themes mentioned above according to the tensions within which they are likely to be positioned.

About reader participation on online press websites

Nowadays, the possibility of interacting in the online press is no longer an option, it is a must. None of the editors we spoke to left us in any doubt about that: it is no longer possible to do without reader participation. But although everyone agrees on that point, it is interesting to note that not all the journalists interviewed see this need in the same way. Whereas for some people, comments are a 'necessary evil', others regard them as a genuine opportunity to meet their readers and one that should be seized. It is that tension in the perception of reader participation that will be explored here, along with some of the questions surrounding this issue.



As André Linard (CDJ) and Jean-François Dumont (AJP) explained in our interviews, in the early years of this century the possibility of interaction in the online press gave rise to a number of hopes, from the dream of citizen journalism aspiring to break the news monopoly to the ‘people’s forum version 2.0’, but at the same time it completely destabilised the relationship between the event, the media and the public. Whereas in the past, that relationship was linear and unilateral (the journalists had the monopoly of the news), today we have a triangular relationship in which the public can become the mediator or the source of information and can access news otherwise than via a journalist, and the journalist receives criticism from the public and from experts (Dumont, Interview with Jean-François Dumont, Deputy General Secretary of the AJP, 2015).

Linear, unilateral relationship	Triangular relationship
Event → Mediator → Public	<pre> graph TD Event --> Mediator Mediator --> Public Public --> Event Event <--> Mediator Mediator <--> Public Public <--> Event </pre>

This fundamental change has obviously affected journalists, who have had to start emerging from their cocoons and take account of readers’ opinions. This is summed up by Angèle Christin, holder of a Doctorate in Sociology from Princeton and the EHESS who has written a thesis on the journalist’s changing profession in the digital age, as follows: pre-Internet, “the newspaper offices traditionally ignored readers’ letters or readership surveys. Journalists lived with the idea, which is still current today, that they knew better than anyone what news should be reported (Christin, 2014)”. The relationship between journalists and their readers has therefore changed considerably and nowadays journalists must take account of the feedback from their readership. This change has not always gone down well with journalists, as Dorian de Meeus (La Libre) explains. He thinks that to begin with “many of them were scared and they were hurt at finding they could be attacked in the social media and their work denigrated (...), but in the end it turned out to be a good thing having readers putting forward a different opinion to that of the journalist: even if egos sometimes suffer, it’s healthier” (de Meeus, 2015).

If the possibility of interaction affects the journalist in terms of his or her profession, the same is true of the newspaper, as a business enterprise subject to economic constraints. The fact is that the Share and Comment functions on Facebook induce many users to click on the article, and that takes them directly to the pages of the press website, thus increasing the traffic on that site. Of course, journalists have always been torn between editorial demands and economic imperatives, but now digital technology makes it possible to see which articles were the most read or attracted the biggest number of comments, which makes the question of readership weigh much more heavily on web editors. However, this economic aspect is not as clear-cut as it seems. As André Linard (CDJ) explains, not everyone is convinced, even in the media, that offering readers the possibility of commenting is a good way of bringing in clicks that can then be sold to advertisers. It indeed seems that those in charge of the financial side of the me-

dia do not all see things in this way (Linard, 2015). Nevertheless, Aline De Volder, Social Editor of the RTBFinfo website, makes no secret of the fact that they have targets in terms of clicks for advertising. The clicks are counted from the press website, but about 40% of them come from Facebook. At Le Vif, Vincent Genot explains that 70% of their income comes from advertisers who sponsor them based on the number of clicks on their pages. In this context, interacting with readers, on the social media in particular, becomes vital in order to retain the readership, regardless of how this is perceived by the newspaper concerned.

Vincent Genot, Editor in Chief of Le Vif l'Express, tends to side with those who disparage this participation option, in its current form at any rate (comments on the website or on Le Vif's Facebook page). In his view, the comments do not add anything of interest and are clearly a source of problems. He emphasizes that the comments give a distorted image of public opinion, as they are not representative and do not contribute in any way to democracy. The only worthwhile interactions he has with his readers are by e-mail, when they take the trouble to write directly to him to point out an error or give their opinion on an article. He notes that in this case the conversations are much friendlier and more respectful, whereas most of the time the comments are abusive or negative, but never constructive. It is interesting to note that editors like at Le Vif who express a pessimistic view of online participation have not invested very much in options for reader interaction, allowing only the bare minimum and devoting little time to moderation. If it were up to him he would prefer to remove the comments from the Le Vif website altogether, as moderating them takes up too much of his journalists' time: "The best way to manage online moderation is not to do it!" (Genot, 2015).

Persuaded of the benefits of greater reader participation, Damien Van Achter (an independent journalist) takes the view that journalists should make themselves available to serve reader communities and maintain a dialogue with them. He thinks that journalists still tend to be too cocooned and to avoid confrontation with their readers. He considers it essential for journalists to "get down into the comments arena and argue with their readers". Those media that have not realised that their primary role is to serve people are destined to vanish. He sees it as a social issue to finance journalistic activities aimed at raising the general level and developing intellectual value, relationship value and multiple identities, with feedback loops between online and offline. Those media that embrace that dynamism will have more methods and means at their disposal to supervise online conversations and to distinguish between those who are there to help construct a dialogue and those who enter the forum as trolls or for lobbying purposes. Damien Van Achter's vision challenges journalists to change the role they currently play and become "creators of links" between society and the citizens. This redefinition of the journalists' role should be initiated by the newspaper publishers first and foremost, as the change should not come from the journalists alone: it must be supported by the newspaper publishers and by new policies for financing the media.

Whether reader participation is seen in negative or positive terms varies considerably from one journalist to another, and that perception impacts upon the means put in place by the newspaper to get that participation. However, we note that the majority of the Belgian media invest little in terms of innovation in the interaction options they offer their readers. Nor does the current economic climate encour-

age the media to take fresh initiatives in the area of interaction, and in our interviews we discovered that the media have no long-term view of this. Their priority tends to be the immediate need to comply with legal requirements, i.e. by removing hate comments. Lastly, some journalists are wondering whether it is really worth while investing time in interacting with their readers when they see the poor quality of the comments posted.



All the journalists are in agreement that out of the hundreds of comments posted on the pages of the media every day, the vast majority are unhelpful to either the media or society. Fabrice Cecchi (RTLinfo), sums it up thus: “In our reaction spaces, 80% of the comments are just ‘bar room talk’: people who react without thinking, impulsively, often they don’t read the article, only the headline. It’s a safety valve for a great many people, but not for everyone” (Cecchi, 2015). During our interview with Laura Calabrese, a Media Discourse researcher at ULB, she related an anecdote concerning an article posted on a press website’s Facebook page that triggered hundreds of comments. Only then did someone notice that the link to the article was not working: not a single person who had posted a comment had even read or clicked on the article! (Calabrese, 2015)

In French-speaking Belgium it would appear that a number of the editors are resigned to their interaction spaces being a safety valve, although some of them do try to turn that to advantage. Not all the journalists see online participation in negative terms and we noted that those editors who take a more positive view have put in place participation systems that go beyond the basic option of commenting below the article: RTLinfo has its ‘Alert us’ page, La Libre has an ‘Opinion’ page, Le Soir has its ‘11h02’, and so on. They thus see several advantages in interacting with readers and are even keen on the idea of talking directly to their readers on certain topics. For example, Fabrice Cecchi (RTL info) explained that they regularly appeal via the social media for first-hand accounts to flesh out their news stories. On their website, the ‘Alert us’ section, to which readers of RTLinfo contribute, regularly gives them story ideas or provides pictures of events they did not manage to cover. Many editors stress the benefits of getting real-time feedback on their articles (RTL info, RTBF info, L’Avenir, La Libre, Sud Presse): readers can point out a mistake or inaccuracy, shed a different light on events, provide fresh ideas for articles, highlight things they don’t understand, etc. Valuable information for the journalists, but to be treated with a degree of caution, because such comments are far from representative (the journalists we interviewed estimate that about 5% of readers comment on the articles and very often it is the same people who comment every time) and, at the same time, they are by no means all of interest. In our interview with Jean-Jacques Jespers, he quoted Philippe Laloux (Editor in Chief of Lesoir.be) in saying that out of one hundred comments, only ten relate to the article and only one is really interesting (Jespers, 2015).

Should all these comments be sorted and only the most interesting ones published, the ones that truly fuel the debate? This idea is in line with the old-style readers’ letters in the printed newspapers, and it provides as many answers as it does questions. Firstly, because pre-moderation takes a lot of time and

thus human resources; secondly, because it raises all the questions about freedom of speech: isn't there a risk that only those opinions that concur with the newspaper's views will be given space? Who is able to judge that one opinion is less interesting than another?, etc. In February 2015 l'Avenir newspaper experimented with a 'citizens' edition' where readers' opinions were published in a print and web supplement²⁰. Following the introduction by the Belgian government of a new law ending the practice of unemployment benefit being subject to a time limit – a story that resulted in a lot of reaction from readers – the newspaper decided to run themed articles on the unemployment issue for one week and to get the debate going with a polemical documentary film on those debarred from unemployment benefit. At the end of this week of thinking and debate the newspaper brought out a 'citizens' edition' containing the various opinions and comments sent in to the paper's web pages. They got the idea in the wake of Belgium's political crisis, when it took 541 days to form a government. At that time their readers' reactions revolved around this topic and so the editors decided to ask them to expand on their viewpoints and opinions. By giving prominence to their readers' reactions in a special edition the journalists at l'Avenir observed that the quality of the comments had risen and so they decided to repeat the experiment with another topical story that had generated a lot of reaction, and the outcome was positive. However, the two editions took up a great deal of time, from reading and selecting the comments to doing the layout. Afterwards, they also received criticism along the lines that these collected comments lacked perspective and were taken out of context, whereas those were things journalism was expected to provide as a backdrop to readers' real-life stories and experiences.

It should be noted that l'Avenir was not the only newspaper to mention giving prominence to comments. In Belgium, the RTL info website enables readers to display, within the thread, the 'RTL info selection', which is chosen by the editorial team because the comments contribute to the debate. This feature of the site again shows a more positive view of reader participation, even if it turns out to be seldom used and most of the time no comments are promoted (see picture opposite). La Libre says it also uses this feature of promoting comments fairly regularly when they are seen as adding something to the topic under discussion. As Dorian de Meeus (La Libre) himself points out, moving certain comments higher up is above all a way of moving other, more disreputable, ones to a position further down the thread.

Appealing for readers' reactions and giving them prominence would be a way of raising the standard of quality and cutting down on hate speech; however, this solution is not applicable to every topic (it has to be a major social issue that a lot of people have something to say about), and it takes too much time and effort to be done on a daily basis. Moreover, it maintains the "fantasy of political participation where everyone should be able to give their opinion on everything and anything" (Bossut, 2015). As Nicolas Bossut (Pax Christi) observes, not every citizen is capable of expressing a view on every subject and that is why we live in a representative system. Consideration also needs to be given to the comment format, which prevents a well constructed argument from developing because the number of characters is limited (on some press websites) and everything always happens instantly (on Facebook), which does not promote deep thinking.

²⁰ The web edition is available via the following link: http://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20150202_00595649

Among the associations, notably Pax Christi which is opposed to racism, a sort of resignation and despondency is evident with regard to hate speech. In the opinion of Nicolas Bossut (Pax Christi), hate speech is linked to issues of propaganda and also militancy: certain individuals who belong to extremist groups make it their mission to troll newsgroups on certain topics and leave comments. André Linard (CDJ) also thinks that interactions do not currently contribute much to newspapers. The messages posted by users, even when they do not go too far (that is to say, when they are not illegal), are not noted for being of great interest to anyone other than their authors.

Perceptions of reader participation in the media are thus somewhat polarized, from the enthusiastic attitude that sees this as the way forward for the press, to the more cynical view that sees it as a means of letting off steam. However, all the media are in agreement that the quality of comments in Belgium is currently very mediocre and they are either resigned to that or are still trying to improve it. However, the means (if any) deployed in an attempt to improve the quality of reader participation are still very limited, in most cases being confined to avoiding the worst (taking down borderline comments) rather than encouraging the best.



The editors we interviewed explicitly acknowledge that some topics give rise to far more hate comments than others. Those topics remain more or less the same from one newspaper to another; however, not all media make the same choices as regards whether to open comments on such topics. Editors tend to have one of two attitudes to sensitive topics: either they think people should be able to express their views on any topics, even the most sensitive ones, or they consider that as some topics invariably trigger hate reactions, it is better not to enable people to pour out their hatred.

Among the most sensitive topics, the editors we met mentioned first and foremost the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, followed by topics relating to migrants and refugees, Islam and the Arab world, Jews and, finally, homosexuality. Thierry Dupiereux (Lavenir.net) and Fabrice Cecchi (RTLinfo) also reported receiving a lot of hate comments on articles about sports and in particular football, where clashes occurred between clubs. This revelation is not surprising, as it comes from two newspapers that devote a substantial part of their coverage to sport. We will not dwell on this, though, as our focus is more on hate speech linked to racism and xenophobia. Thierry Dupiereux also mentioned having received a lot of hate comments concerning the squabbles between Walloons and Flemish at the time when Belgium had no government (2010-2011). It was in fact after that that they decided to appoint a community manager to handle the comments on their pages.

We note that hate speech is principally aimed at Europe's ethnic or religious minorities. These observations are in line with the results of a 2014 study of populist speech in Europe as part of the European project e-engagement against violence. This study looked at the way populist parties communicated in

seven European countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, and showed that the groups presented as a problem and regarded as a threat that were given the greatest prominence in the populist parties' communications were migrants, Muslims, gays, lesbians and Roma. "These populist views founded on danger or a threat generally play on the security aspect, trying to mobilise voters by heightening existing fears or inventing new ones" (Pajnik & Šori, 2015). It is not surprising to find the same population groups as targets of hate speech in the comments and in the populist views, as they feed off one another. However, it may be noted that the Jews are not mentioned as a target of populist communications, whereas they are one of the targets of online comments. This may perhaps be explained by the law against revisionism, which might discourage the populist parties from pointing the finger at Jews too much. This is also in line with the remarks made by Nicolas Bossut (Pax Christi), who explained that anti-Semitism is less visible than Islamophobia (yet it is there, all the same). These findings about the groups most affected by hate speech may be supplemented by the analyses which the Centre for Equal Opportunities conducts on the basis of complaints received. These are a way of determining which channels are used to disseminate hate speech (forums, social networks, e-mail, etc.) and which groups are particularly targeted (Muslims, Jews, foreigners, gypsies, homosexuals, etc.). Of the complaints received in 2014 for example, 50% were based on racial criteria (ethnic or national origin, skin colour, ancestry), 30% on religious beliefs (mainly in the case of Islam), just under 10% on people of different sexuality and, lastly, to a far lesser extent, complaints about hate speech attacking a person's political conviction or a handicap.

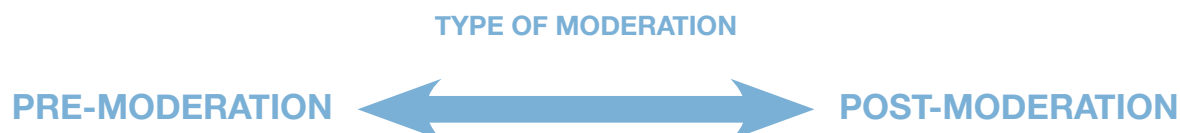
Apart from *Sud Presse*, few editors leave comments open for all of the articles published on their websites, and similarly, not all the articles are posted on Facebook. As Aline De Volder (RTBFinfo) explained, it is not possible to post all the articles that appear on their website on their Facebook page, because there are too many of them and not all of them lend themselves to the social media. Moreover, as moderation on Facebook is harder to control and it is not possible to ban comments, the articles posted there are carefully selected. For example, all the editors we spoke to (except for *Sud Presse* and *Le Vif*) have decided to stop posting articles relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Facebook because they know all too well that they are sure to spawn abuse and hate speech. Also, Aline De Volder (RTBFinfo) explained that pressure groups and lobbies troll their page and create controversy whenever she posts articles on that topic. If the news item is one that cannot be ignored and she decides to go ahead and post it, she keeps a close eye on developments. For instance, the Social Editor takes care never to post a potentially problematic article in the late afternoon, because there is no-one on duty to keep an eye on it during the evening, or just before a weekend. The articles that trigger a lot of comments on Facebook never continue to attract comments for more than two or three days at most, as we noticed in the course of our analyses. It is fairly rare for new comments to appear after that, and besides, the moderators have ceased keeping an eye on them by then because new articles have come out in the meantime which they have to keep a check on. Dorian de Meeus (Lalibre) told us that they do not post anything on Facebook connected with the Middle East, Islam or topics that are deemed too controversial, but he takes the view that news about migrants cannot be ignored and has to be published on the social media, even though it sparks numerous racist comments that give them a lot of work.

SudPresse's practices go totally against the other editors with respect to posts on Facebook and opening up comments: all their articles are published on Facebook, whether they deal with sensitive topics or not, and likewise, comments are open on their website from the very first moment, and that applies to all articles. Joël Tricart defends this choice in terms of the desire to allow people to express their opinions and he thinks that if Sud Presse covers a topic, of course their readers should be able to react to it, no matter what the subject. In his view, the other editors do not open up all their articles for comment out of fear of getting reactions that are not politically correct or because they lack the resources to moderate them. He does not believe any subject should be taboo and he thinks it is no longer up to the media to decide what may or may not be discussed by the public. This willingness of Sudpresse's to allow reader interaction on all their articles whereas there is no-one in charge of moderation could be explained by their greater tolerance for speech bordering on legality. The fact is, as Joël Tricart explains, racist comments are not all deleted as a matter of course: they need to very explicitly breach the legal limits for that to happen. He therefore allows some very borderline comments which he does not consider really hate speech but more a case of someone who is fed up with a situation giving vent to their feelings. He also works on the assumption that if an unacceptable comment appears, one of the readers will let him know, and so moderation is to some extent in the hands of the readers.

Le Vif has also decided to post all topics, even the most sensitive ones, on Facebook, because they take the view that if they publish an article on their website, that means it is worth reading and, therefore, worth putting on Facebook, as that is a way of taking the news to a wider audience. As any article stands the best chance of being read if it is shared on Facebook, Vincent Genot thinks he should not deny his journalists that visibility or prevent his readers from accessing a quality article because of the risk of receiving comments from a few trolls. On the other hand, unlike SudPresse which leaves the forums open for all its articles (Facebook and Sudinfo.be), Le Vif does not allow comments on its own website on any controversial topics.

Questions of visibility, content, editorial line, resources – these are some of the reasons behind the levels of online participation on press websites. Let us now look at the choices and the means of moderation they put in place with regard to these levels of participation.

About choices and means of moderation



The first part of this report already contains an inventory of the moderation systems used by the press websites. From that inventory we have established that pre-moderation is becoming increasingly rare and post-moderation is becoming the general practice. This may be accounted for partly by the human resources need-

ed for pre-moderation and partly also by the trend for instantaneous communication. Finally, it should also be borne in mind that the use of Facebook is becoming more and more widespread as a channel for reader participation.

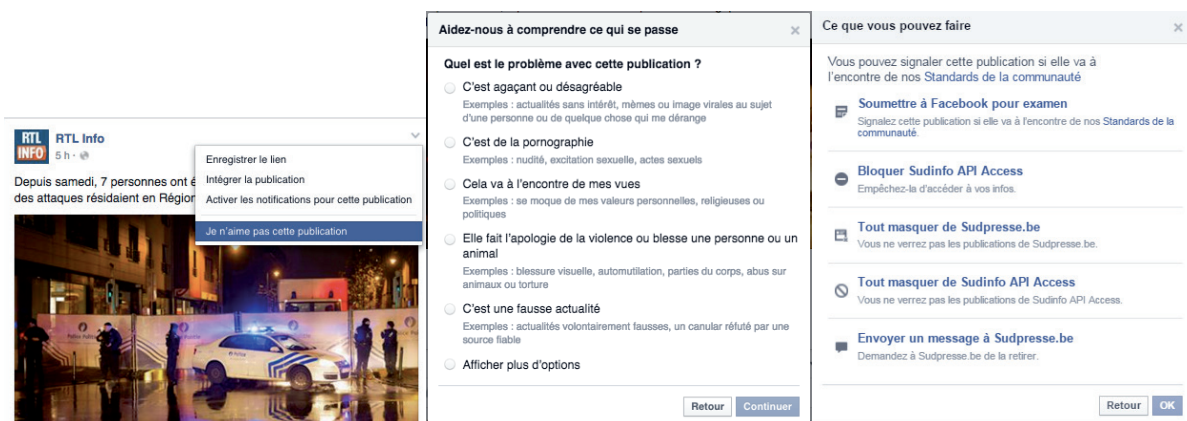


Some media continue using their own system of moderation on their website while others have opted to install the Facebook plugin and to use only that system for reader interaction from now on. Lastly, a third point of moderation occurs on the media's own Facebook pages. These choices have a big influence on the types and levels of moderation.

Posting articles on the newspaper's Facebook page

Posting articles on its Facebook page forces the newspaper to submit to the American social network's technical features, one of these being that pre-moderation is not possible. Admittedly, that promotes direct interactions between users and thus increases the number of reactions. The Facebook pages of the media we interviewed receive between 1,000 and 4,000 comments per day on average, and at most of the newspaper offices there is only one person in charge of moderation, or else the journalists take turns at checking the comments, so that makes it impossible in terms of human resources for all the comments to be read. That is the reason a lot of hate speech is more likely to be found on Facebook than on press websites.

Being unable to keep an eye on all the comments, the media therefore rely on the readers to bring abusive posts to their attention. However, if a user decides to report abusive language, he can only report an entire article, and not one particular comment below an article. To do so, he has to check the option 'I don't like this post' next to the article and state 'what is the problem with this post'. Facebook then explains the available options to the user: he can either submit the article to Facebook for examination, block the newspaper, hide all for that newspaper, or send the newspaper a message (see screenshot below).



If we want to avoid the ‘lengthy’ process of reporting to Facebook, the user’s other option is to send a message directly to the newspaper responsible for the page. The moderator will then be alerted that problem content has been reported. However, some media, like RTBF, have disabled the option of sending them a message on their Facebook page and so the only choice remaining to the user is to submit the content to Facebook for examination, and to stop ‘following the page’ or ‘liking the page’ concerned.

In such cases the media will not be alerted to the excesses on their page, unless the surfer uses other means of communication such as direct e-mail or a phone call. Note also the Facebook page titled ‘Sud-presse community moderator’, created by Joël Tricart as a direct means of communication between the community moderator and the readers for reporting abuse.

These various ways of reporting abusive language are not as simple as the ‘Inappropriate’ buttons on the media’s own websites, such as Le Vif’s, or the ‘Undesirable reaction’ buttons that alert the moderator directly without having to go through a series of questions or send a message.

Adopting Facebook’s system of moderation also means accepting that editors cannot take down comments; all they can do is make them invisible to other users. The person whose remarks have been hidden therefore does not realise this; there is no way for them to know they have overstepped the limits. All they will realise, at most, is that their comments are less ‘liked’ or that they have stopped getting reactions. This feature makes life easier for moderators, as LaLibre explained, in that they no longer need to give reasons for taking down comments, as was the case when they were using their own system on their website, but on the other hand the person concerned is not given a chance to reassess their views. If someone posts problem comments too often, the media page can also opt to ban them. Anyone who has been banned cannot then comment, or like, or do anything else on the page. The person will not be notified, but they will not take long to realise what has happened if they visit the page frequently.

Apart from reporting abuse, the only other moderation tool Facebook offers moderators is the use of filters. The way filters work is that when certain words are used, such as abuse for example, the comments are automatically made invisible. RTBF explained that among the long list of words they have selected to trigger alerts there is the word ‘racist’, because the comments preceding that word are often racist, along with the words ‘nazi’, ‘hitler’, ‘gas’, etc.

The Facebook plugin on press websites

A number of editors (SudPresse, Lalibre, Lesoir, LaDH, RTLinfo) have opted to integrate the Facebook plugin into their websites, thus choosing not to use their own system and thereby relinquishing control over moderation options. At Lalibre, we were told that this was not an easy decision (unsettling regular commenters, readers unable to understand why we were “crawling to an American news multinational”), but it was a necessary one for them, because going over to the Facebook system enabled them to gradually eliminate hate commenters from their page and also to carefully select the articles where the comments option is permitted. It would be more complicated to create a number of false

Facebook accounts than to create false accounts on a press website: so people who have been banned from the page come back less often. Besides, false accounts would be easy to spot on Facebook: those are the ones with no profile picture, few friends, crazy names, etc.

Facebook also offers the possibility of promoting comments on the media website; however, it would appear that this option is used to move less interesting comments lower down the list, rather than to give prominence to the best ones.

Those editors who have chosen to use Facebook on their own websites explain that that also has its advantages for the user. Indeed, as the majority of readers have a Facebook account, when they read an article they do not need to go through the registration process, and that makes posting comments easier and quicker. It stimulates interaction even more, in that it is an appeal for personal accounts and interaction: the users' profile pictures appearing below the article invite them to comment on the article via their Facebook account.

Own management system

Other editors, as at Lavenir.net, have chosen not to use the Facebook plugin on their site because the social network does not provide the same control over comments as they currently have with their own CMS. Thierry Dupiereux considers that there are too many uncertainties surrounding the moderation options provided by Facebook, which he feels are far more cumbersome in terms of procedures. Nor does he like it that each comment appears not only on their site but also on the Facebook wall of the people who have commented. He explains that he has already talked to other people in the industry about this and they maintain that Facebook makes people think more about what they are writing because it is published under their real name. He remains sceptical about that, however, notably when comparing the comments posted on the Lavenir.net Facebook page and those posted on the website itself, the latter being better quality.

Using Facebook for the simplicity of instantaneous communication and the viral effect of the conversation forces the media to lose some control over the way the moderation system is managed and also over the content. The primary users' charter on the Facebook pages is that of the social networking corporation, not that of the media. It may be noted, however, that out of principle RTBF for example has left its own charter in the 'About' section of its Facebook page. Also, Dorian de Meeus explains that some Facebook rules are stricter than others: for instance, posting photographs or drawings of naked breasts is prohibited, but writing xenophobic remarks is dealt with differently, as will be seen below with the concept of the 'slippery slope' in the concept of hate speech specific to the United States (Facebook is, after all, an American platform), whereas European law inclines towards the concept of a 'fatal slope'. This conceptual difference between Belgian law and European law presents a problem. As this problem has not yet been addressed by Belgian or European justice, however, it is therefore important for civil society to continue to devote its energies to it.



It therefore seems certain that doing without reader participation is not an option for the online press these days, but does that mean it is the journalist's role to chair debates and online communities? Can journalists be administrators and community moderators, or should that job be given to other professionals? The various online press editors we visited all have different solutions: at RTL info, the journalists take turns to moderate the comments every two to three hours; at Sud Presse, l'Avenir and RTBF, a community moderator is in charge of overseeing and moderating the Facebook page (among his or her other tasks) and the comments on the website; at La Libre, this is done by the younger journalists or the journalists who wrote the article concerned; and at Le Vif, all the journalists are alerted to abusive content on the site and the first one to see the alert message is responsible for removing the comment. For most of the editors, managing reader participation is confined to moderating, that is to say, removing comments that do not comply with the law or the newsgroup rules. It is very rare to see moderators really interacting with readers on matters of substance, i.e. the content of the article. At most, readers are thanked for reporting an error or, on some press websites, the moderator steps in to calm things down if the remarks start to go off track, but overall the interaction remains at a very superficial level. The moderators are not there to debate the articles, but to ensure the content of the comments does not overstep the legal limits.

Also, the editors in chief and moderators we met all agreed that moderating involves a large degree of subjectivity, even though the law is quite clear as regards incitement to hatred. That subjectivity has its origin, notably, in the fact that some editors decide to remove comments that contain stereotypes, incorrect information or abuse or which are simply poorly expressed. At RTBF for example, racist comments like "Send them all back!" will be hidden, but comments that express an opinion, like "Personally I think they should all go back home" will be left. On the other hand, people inciting hatred with comments such as "Let them all drown!" will be banned. At Le Vif, it was noted that quite often certain remarks do not necessarily fall foul of the law, but they will be removed all the same because the journalist doing the moderating considers them too shocking or too hurtful. If a comment is taken down, the reason is that it is offensive or that it does not contribute anything to the debate. So the decision will depend on the journalist who is moderating at the time.

The editors at Lavenir.net have decided not to tolerate comments that spread mistaken ideas (for example, the misconception that refugees do not immigrate into Muslim countries, but only into Europe), so their red line is quite a bit higher than the legal limit. According to the editors, that decision has created a problem of representativeness in terms of the range of comments. For instance, taking the refugee issue as an example, those who argue against the refugees generally comment in large numbers, but they either leave out some of the facts, they use abuse and stereotypes, or they are aggressive. As a result, their comments are regularly removed, whereas those who argue in favour of the refugees generally post comments that are worded in a calm and measured way and well argued, and so they will not be removed. This ultimately creates a problem in terms of how opinions are represented in the final depic-

tion of the comments, as only the best constructed messages will be left up, whereas there may have been ten times as many with a different opinion that could not be left up because of problems with the way they were expressed. Moderating in this way often causes some conscience-searching, as it creates an imbalance in the perception reflected by the readership. It can also happen that comments that leave out some of the facts or that contain incorrect information are left up by moderators because other users have corrected or challenged the information. This form of social control is considered important and would result in a better balance within the comments. This method is often reported by administrators or community moderators.

Lastly, there is the ambiguous situation created by reader participation on press websites in terms of ethics: the readers – who are not journalists – are not bound to adhere to the code of ethics and yet, they are writing on a media website (there wouldn't be a problem if they were writing in their own blog). Herein lies the ambiguity: the media are partly responsible for the comments, as they appear in their space, but at the same time the code of ethics applicable to journalistic content does not apply to content posted by web surfers. The media cannot be held liable for the remarks made by users, but only for the way it manages them. Belgian case law is not as clear as it is in France and the code of ethics viewpoint is not the same as the legal viewpoint, and that causes some confusion concerning the media's liability with respect to their readers' reactions.

From these tensions relating to moderation systems we can therefore see that it is not only a matter of resources and technology but also a matter of human choices in this area, such as the media enterprise's internal organisation, its liability, the level of subjectivity, and a social control factor.

About the current issues around freedom of speech

Exploring the question of moderation and hate speech in newsgroups inevitably leads to freedom of speech issues. Whether it is web surfers accusing moderators of 'censorship' when their comments are removed or moderators wondering how far their moderating power extends, it would appear that freedom of speech, notably the limits thereon, is the underlying consideration.

During our interviews we also found that the degree of tolerance for comments containing hate speech varied from one editorial office to another, with some confining themselves to enforcing the law (i.e. avoiding incitement to hatred) and others applying their users' charter to the letter and not tolerating stereotypes or racist hotchpotches. We therefore return to the different positions taken by the players we met in this permanent tension between restricted or absolute freedom of speech. Some veer more one way than the other.



The Centre for Equal Opportunities points out that “freedom of speech is an essential value in any democratic society. As the European Court of Human Rights has stated on numerous occasions, it applies not only to information or ideas that are shared by a large number of people or those that make no impression, but also to those that offend, shock or threaten the State or a section of the population. In other words, ‘shocking’ remarks are not punishable as such” (Centre for Equal Opportunities, 2009). Jean-Jacques Jespers (LDH) also stressed this special feature of freedom of speech during our interview. In his view, as long as we remain within the sphere of debating ideas, there should be no limits to freedom of speech. It is only when a text incites people to act, advocates discriminatory attitudes or spreads hate that we leave the sphere of debating ideas and enter a realm that has to do with disturbing the peace and therefore justifies the intervention of the legislator and, then, the judge. Remarks not amounting to ‘incitement’ may perhaps seem absurd, outrageous or unacceptable, but we must not expect the judge to take the place of the historian, the politician or the polemicist: remarks that are unacceptable or deliberately distorted must be condemned and combated with means from the sphere of debating ideas. J.-J. Jespers points out that it is extremely perilous to legislate on the limits to freedom of speech, as the substance is thus likely to be lost. It is important to bear in mind that freedom of speech is, in a way, freedom to harm: the freedom to shock, scandalise, appal others – otherwise it is meaningless. This special feature of freedom of speech, which unlike other freedoms does not stop where that of others begins, explains why it is one of the freedoms most often challenged (Jespers, 2015). However, the Centre for Equal Opportunities points to the background, based on Article 10 (2) of the European Convention on Human Rights:

“The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary” (Centre for Equal Opportunities, 2009).

On certain conditions, therefore (existence of a law, measures that are necessary in a democratic society and measures aimed at upholding basic rights), freedom of speech can be restricted. However, there is at present in Belgium no law or legal text a judge can take as a basis in order to prohibit before the event the publication or broadcasting of texts, sound or pictures: this is the meaning of the judgment delivered by the European Court of Human Rights on 29 March 2011 in the case of RTBF versus the Belgian State. Prohibiting publication before the event therefore violates the Belgian constitution (articles 19 and 25) and the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 10 (1)). However, penalties can be imposed after the event, notably in cases of incitement to hatred, discrimination, segregation or violence on the basis of protected criteria²¹ and revisionism. Lawsuits in this context are heard by the ordinary criminal court, whereas offences committed in the press (i.e. via any channel of publication) are, in theory, dealt with by the assizes.

²¹ Cf Chapter One on the Definition of hate speech



As Benoit Frydman, Professor at ULB and head of the Perelman Centre for Jurisprudence, wrote in a paper on freedom of speech published by the Human Rights League: “The question of the status of speech inciting to hatred in democratic societies is a classic one which is both difficult and dangerous (...) because it requires us to probe deep into our system and our democratic passions. Traditionally classed under the philosophical question of whether freedoms should be granted to the enemies of freedom, the dilemma of the status of hate speech comes up in very concrete terms in the realms of politics and law” (Frydman, 2013). In this article Benoit Frydman explains the different concepts Europe and the United States of America have with regard to freedom of speech. He uses the terms ‘slippery slope’ and ‘fatal slope’ to describe that difference. In Europe, our laws are based on the premise of the ‘fatal slope’ which “maintains that hate speech often, even inevitably, leads to acts of violence and sometimes to mass murder and it must therefore be punished to prevent or limit such violence” (Frydman, 2013). The ‘slippery slope’ argument, on the other hand, which underlies the American position, “maintains that, in the absence of a precise criterion for determining what comes into the category of hate speech, [prohibiting hate speech] is likely to cover an infinitely extendable field, thus threatening public debate” (Frydman, 2013). As they state on their embassy website, “the United States consider the most effective weapon against hate speech is not eliminating it, but having counter-speech which is tolerant, sincere and intelligent” (Embassy of the United States, 2013). Both of these concepts are discernible in most of our interviews and in the journalists’ opinions and questions about freedom of speech.



While the limits to freedom of speech appear straightforward, in practice it is more complicated than it appears to differentiate between an opinion and incitement to violence. Moreover, some editors decide to go further than the law, notably in their newsgroup rules, where abuse, bad grammar, the use of capitals and links to external sites are all prohibited. Most of the journalists we spoke to said they were regularly accused of censorship and infringing freedom of speech by users whose comments they had taken down. This perception on the part of users is thought to show a lack of understanding of the limits to freedom of speech and also of the framework within which journalism operates. Also, Nicolas Bossut (Pax Christi) explains that the word ‘censorship’ is misunderstood by most people and is often used by those most inclined to censor others. As Vincent Genot (Le Vif) points out, it is also important for readers to realise that it’s the editors who make the rules on media websites and the comment facility is not a right, but a service provided by the medium concerned. In its newsgroup rules Le Vif also stated as follows, “The moderation and editorial teams do not respond to messages concerning banning, removal of an entry or taking down of comments. The moderators’ decisions are based on this rule. Nor will questions relating to individual decisions be answered.” That rule does not prevent them from regularly receiving protests from users about ‘censorship’ of their comments.

In the opinion of André Linard (CDJ), some of the accusations of censorship made against journalism are based on a misconception of the nature of journalism and the limits to freedom. Journalists are bound to comply with rules that are justified but which restrict their freedom of speech, and this is something the public is often unaware of and it also fuels some conspiracy theories. André Linard explained that in fact, journalists are not liberty to say whatever they wish, quite simply because journalism is not a matter of saying whatever one wants! In his view, journalism is not to be equated with saying anything and everything, or simply exercising one's freedom of speech. He believes a journalist has a specific social function as an intermediary between whatever happens in society and the public, who have the right to know about things of relevance to society. Journalists are thus the medium between society and the public, but their job is not merely to relay everything that happens in society: they must assess, select, decide what is of general interest and check the details, because a lot of the information going around is false. Therefore, putting a halt to such false information is not an infringement of freedom of speech, but a socially useful thing to do. That journalists' role of intermediary has been strongly challenged: it has often been interpreted as a power, rather than a service to society. The public demanded the right to know the things the media and the journalists did not tell them. A section of the public therefore sought to make them known, with all the attendant ambiguities and risks. This was the background, in particular, to the emergence of web users starting to voice their opinions in the public arena, in newsgroups for example and also in blogs and citizen journalism. Among the limits imposed on journalists, there is the journalistic function, i.e. sorting, checking, putting things into perspective, etc.; the limits originating in the law, such as not identifying minors involved in court cases and not spreading hate speech; and lastly, the limits deriving from the code of ethics, such as sticking as closely as possible to the truth (not spreading rumours or unchecked information are limits to journalists' freedom of speech that are entirely justified) and respecting other people's privacy. André Linard considers it important to inform the public about these lesser known aspects that are nevertheless the foundation of the journalist's profession.

About greater responsibility on both sides

When we asked editors what progress they would like to see in terms of online moderation, most of them answered that more human resources should be deployed to manage moderation. However, many journalists also stressed that readers need to be given responsibility and educated in order to counter hate speech. The latter stance tends to give readers more responsibility, but in a way it also serves to absolve the media from having to take responsibility for hate speech online. What issues are involved in this tension between the two sides' responsibilities?



In the opinion of Jean-François Dumont (AJP), journalists should proactively deconstruct racist remarks, although he regrets that this is no longer really a priority for editors nowadays, especially when such racist remarks are inspired by religion, like Islamophobia. He believes the journalist's job is put the news delivered to the public into context by providing background explanations based on figures, facts and legal texts. The journalist's role is to avoid aggravating hate speech by 'fanning the flames' but instead to be careful what information he or she provides. For example, disclosing the nationality of someone who has committed a crime is something journalists need to take care over and give some thought to. Thierry Dupiereux (L'avenir) also explained that readers' hate speech often stems from prejudices and misconceptions, which may be unintentionally promoted by the media. For example, the flood of refugees arriving in the summer of 2015 received heavy media coverage, partly because there is less happening to report on during the summer, and that gave readers the impression of being invaded by refugees. Now, although the number of refugees arriving was fairly exceptional, it is no more than a very small percentage of all the refugees taken in by countries outside Europe. The editors of L'avenir, along with other editors, therefore published articles giving a more detailed explanation of what was going on, with figures and computer graphics to put the story into context and enable readers to be a bit more objective.

When we asked the journalists if they thought the content of their articles could affect the number of hate comments, most of them replied that, sadly, hate speech needs no encouragement to appear. Sometimes there are outbursts which the journalists don't see coming, as Dorian de Meeus (Lalibre) explained, giving the example of a new television programme with a presenter known to be homosexual, where the launch announcement triggered a lot of hate speech which the editors were not prepared for, even though the presenter's sexual orientation was not mentioned in the article.

Journalists do not generally adapt the content of their articles according to the hate comments they might attract, but they do handle certain topics with caution. Debates take place at the l'avenir offices about the use of the words 'migrants' or 'refugees' or the photographs used to illustrate their articles. For instance, they avoid showing videos or photographs of Daesh, so as not to become part of their propaganda, and they take care not to select a picture of a burka to accompany an article about wearing the veil. At RTLinfo, they are careful not to mention the nationality of people involved in crime

reports unless necessary. As many pieces published on Facebook are commented on without the users even reading the article, the headline and the splash headline introducing the article are very important. A tricky balance therefore has to be struck between attracting readers' attention while avoiding descending into sensationalism, especially as articles are often published to a tight timescale. Aline de Volder (RTBF) therefore has no hesitation in amending some splash headlines after they appear on Facebook, if some users react and she realises that her splash headline is too provocative or not sufficiently neutral. However, the way journalists write should not be dictated by possible hate reactions from their readers, nor should they have to practise self-censorship or avoid mentioning over-sensitive topics for fear of over-the-top outbursts, as *Le Vif* stressed.

We note, however, that whereas the journalism sector sees itself as cautious overall in its approach to sensitive subjects, this is not necessarily the view of the associations. For example, François Deleu (Centre for Equal Opportunities) thinks the way some articles are worded by the journalists incites people to hate speech. He quotes the example of an article with the following headline: 'Mohamed, the telecoms repair man who burgles old ladies', which reinforced the stereotype of the 'shifty Arab'. This prompted the Centre for Equal Opportunities to contact the Council for Ethical Journalism to ask whether such a headline was legitimate. François Deleu found the reply rather disappointing, the CDJ taking the view that the forename Mohamed was too common in Belgium nowadays for it to pose any real problems. François Deleu nevertheless maintains that that forename always suggests the Arab and Muslim culture and is not neutral when used in a newspaper headline. He condemns the same thing with regard to the 'travelling people', a sector of the population who experience considerable discrimination. That description is often used with reference to a crime committed by one individual, giving rise to discriminatory remarks. And yet, in 1994 the AGJPB, the umbrella organisation for the country's three professional journalists' associations, published recommendations on information pertaining to immigrants, in which writers were advised "not to mention nationality, country of origin, ethnic background, skin colour, religion or culture unless that information is relevant" (AGJPB, 1994). The problem here therefore arises from the ambiguity of the forename Mohamed, which may indirectly refer to a country of origin and thus raises the question of the limit not to be breached with regard to the information provided by the journalist. As we saw in the case studies, the names of some towns or districts like Molenbeek are more likely to cause hate speech, because of their reputation: so should we avoid mentioning them at all? This question brings us back once more to the limits on freedom of speech and also to the question of ethical journalism.

This vision therefore tends to assign responsibility to the media, which should take care not to promote stereotypes and prejudices and to avoid publishing 'populist' articles that play on readers' fears. However, some journalists think that readers can also play a part in cutting down the amount of hate speech online. This is the case at *LaLibre*, where the thinking is that web users should step up to their responsibility as citizens by refusing to accept hate speech and reporting abuse to moderators. In their view, readers are the initial filter against hate speech, as they are the ones reading the articles and the comments. Using that 'social control' factor, in other words, relying on interactions between readers to moderate, self-check, denounce racist remarks and report abuse, needs to be put into perspective though because, as indicated above, it is more complicated for users to report problem comments on

Facebook than it is on the press websites that have their own systems. Moreover, as François Deleu (Centre for Equal Opportunities) points out, if someone reports remarks that break the law to the media, the media are bound to respond. Now, if it is not easy for the user to access a channel for reporting problem content, that removes even more responsibility from the media, which can always claim they were unaware that they were hosting illegal content. It is thus clear that a balance needs to be reached, as both the media and the readers have a share of responsibility with regard to hate speech appearing online.

Lastly, there is an issue of media education and citizenship education. Many journalists observe that a considerable proportion of their readers lack fairly basic literary skills to enable them to understand the news. What is more, various more abstract concepts relating to journalism, like the code of ethics or freedom of speech, should also be addressed and better explained to the general public. Nicolas Bossut thinks that a lack of understanding about freedom of speech and the journalist's role gives readers the impression that journalists can say anything at all, which is obviously not the case, as journalists are bound to follow the code of ethics. Readers therefore sometimes imagine that journalists are hiding things from them, whereas all the journalists are doing is sticking to the code of ethics. Both André Linard (CDJ) and Nicolas Bossut therefore stress the importance of educating readers about what the code of ethics is. Nicolas Bossut also explains that readers sometimes think that being able to comment on articles is a right, which they liken to freedom of speech, whereas it is in fact a service provided by the website. There is no obligation for publishers to create a space for interaction, and this is something readers need to bear in mind when posting comments.

Other journalists make the point that a great many web surfers do not know how to state their opinions and back them up by rational argument in the comments they post. Yet those are skills that should be learned at school. Jean-François Dumont takes the view that ideally, children should be taught to express themselves in the virtual environment from a very early age and that they should learn what a debate is, what a newsgroup is, how moderation works, how to present an argument in a short comment and how to react constructively to an article. People would also need to be made aware that whatever they post on Facebook remains visible and can do them harm years later, and maybe that would make them think a bit more before reacting to articles.

Finally, many journalists emphasize that hate speech online is merely a symptom of various social problems such as racism, stigmatisation of certain communities or insecurity. That is why it is considered important to link media education to citizenship education so that people are better able to understand the dynamics at work in our society that are responsible for exclusion, racism and stigmatisation. That education can take place via the media, which can help to deconstruct stereotypes and place news in context, as mentioned above, and it can also take place in cooperation with civil society, including the media education associations and the anti-racism organisations like Pax Christi and MRAX (Movement against Racism, Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Whether via the inventory of moderation practices on online press websites, from the analysis of case studies or during our interviews with the different players in the world of journalism, we became aware of the many tensions at work through the issues of online participation, moderation, freedom of speech and the responsibilities of those involved. Those tensions give rise to many questions, but they also produce some good practices.

So, by way of conclusion, we will start by mentioning some examples of good practices noted in the course of our interviews before concluding towards the search for a balance.

Giving prominence to readers' comments

When they published their 'citizens' edition', aimed at highlighting their readers' reactions, the journalists at l'Avenir noticed a marked improvement in the quality of the comments and a drop in the level of hate speech. Rewarding well constructed comments is a way of setting an example for other users to follow and encouraging the more hesitant users to give their views. There are various ways of 'rewarding' or giving prominence to comments, such as having a vote for the 'comment of the week' or taking a screenshot of the most interesting comments and posting it on the social media. As mentioned above, from time to time the editors at RTLinfo put the spotlight on their readers' reactions by selecting the comments that contribute the most to the debate on their website. Caution is required, however, with regard to the perverse effect of 'ranking' comments: on what bases can it be said that one comment is better than another? Isn't there a risk of always seeing the same opinions given prominence (the ones that follow the media line)?

Showing oneself and refocusing the debate

On 11 August 2015 a journalist, Julien Vlassenbroek, posted a text on the RTBF Facebook page sharing his indignation and disgust at the hate comments that followed the publication of the article titled "Is Belgium facing 'a huge flood of refugees'? The answer in figures" (see opposite) on their Facebook page. Aline De Volder (RTBF) thinks this kind of reaction, as well as the moderators' interventions in the comments in order to refocus the debate, are a good thing because they show people that there is someone behind the media page, it's not a machine, and "so they can't just say what they like". When the readers realise that their comments are read, they think a bit longer before posting their comments and she notices a big difference in the standard of the comments. It therefore happens that the moderators step in to correct a statement, remind users of the forum rules, or thank readers for pointing out a mistake, but ultimately do not really debate the substance of the article with their readers.

Diversifying the forms of participation

There are other ways apart from press forums of giving readers' contributions prominence, such as the Opinions page at La Libre or Le Soir's Carte Blanche page, which allow readers to develop their views in a more structured format than a comment and their text is published on the website like an article. The RTL website also has its Alert us page where readers are invited to send in their first-hand accounts of events that concern them personally, and these sometimes form the basis of further stories.

It would indeed appear to be the case that allowing readers to share their experiences on specific topics encourages them to express themselves in a more constructive way. However, Jean-François Dumont (AJP) points out that it is important to clearly separate the content provided by the journalists from that received from the readers, as they do not have the same editorial criteria (notably in terms of the code of ethics and neutrality).

Enabling readers to send private messages

The options for participation mentioned above all allow readers to send in an opinion which is more sophisticated and better constructed than a comment. During our interviews, several journalists, including Vincent Genot (Le Vif), indicated that the private messages on Facebook and the e-mails they received were much more interesting than the mere comments, and the conversations via those channels were far friendlier. Also, Aline De Volder (RTBF) regrets the fact that RTBF had to close down its private messaging option on Facebook owing to a lack of human resources to read and reply to the messages, as that was the route by which they received the largest number of helpful comments (pointing out mistakes in articles, reporting hate speech, and also giving opinions on topics addressed by the editors). Although it does not contribute directly to cutting down the amount of visible hate speech, this type of online participation does promote an overall improvement in reader participation and it assists the journalists in their work.

Limiting the time allowed for participation

During our conversation, Jean-François Dumont (AJP) mentioned the ‘11h02’ feature on the Le Soir news site, which allows readers to debate a different topic for half an hour per day with an expert present to answer questions. At first sight this approach appears to produce less in the way of hate comments, probably because the topics chosen are not really controversial but also because a moderator is there for the entire half-hour to moderate. Discontinuing the practice of having forums open round the clock could be one way of cutting down the amount of hate speech: establishing times for participation would allow real-time moderation and could promote a more respectful dialogue, as the users would be aware of a human presence behind the computer. While this might solve some problems, such as the lack of a moderator outside office hours, it is nevertheless difficult to put this idea into practice for all articles. There would need to be a selection made of the most important topics of the day, the ones that ‘deserved’ to be commented on, and that goes against the policy of some editors like those at Sud Presse, who want their readers to be able to make their opinions known on any topic at any time. Finally, imposing a time limit on reader participation does not apply to Facebook.

Developing the community

From our various conversations with players in the world of journalism we can also note this recommendation supported by Damien Van Achter (an independent journalist) concerning the need for journalists to establish an ongoing dialogue between the media and the readers’ communities. As indicated above, he sees it as a social issue to finance journalistic activities aimed at raising the general level and developing intellectual value, relationship value and multiple identities, with feedback loops between online and offline.

These are some examples of good practices adopted by the different media which we could, in a way, raise to the level of recommendations. However, we still have to develop the role that civil society must play in combating hate speech. We believe the activities of organisations that combat racism and uphold human rights, together with the many educational initiatives in terms of media education, are vital if we are to combat discrimination in the views expressed in the media through a global approach that has added value (not merely a coercive approach). The cause we champion is certainly not new, but that makes it all the more vital. Cooperation between civil society and all the media concerned (not only the European ones) offers us a way forward towards equal rights for all.

In conclusion, among the many tensions identified in this report, we particularly want to emphasize the search for a balance and for solutions that the players concerned are engaged in. A balance to be achieved through changing role of the journalist, through the role of the media as the world's mediators, through civil society's contribution and through the relationship between media and users. And, last but not least, we would point out that the legal framework is likewise in the throes of a highly complex search for a balance.

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ANNEX 1 – LIST OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

People we met	Position/organisation	Date	Place
André Linard	General Secretary of the Council for Ethical Journalism	27 April 2015	Brussels
Vincent Genot	Editor in chief of Le Vif newspaper	29 April 2015	Brussels
Joël Tricart	Community Moderator at Sud Presse	30 April 2015	Namur
Nicolas Bossut	Pax Christi	29 June 2015	Brussels
François Deleu	Centre for Equal Opportunities	16 July 2015	Brussels
Jean-François	Dumont AJP	28 July 2015	Brussels
Jean-Jacques Jespers	Human Rights League	6 August 2015	Brussels
Fabrice Cecchi	Editor in chief RTLinfo.be	12 August 2015	Brussels
Dorian de Meeus	Editor in chief of Lalibre.be	18 August 2015	Brussels
Damien Van Achter	Web expert – independent journalist	19 August 2015	Brussels
Thierry Dupiereux	Editor in chief of L'Avenir	28 August 2015	Brussels
Yves Raisiere	Head of National News at L'Avenir	28 August 2015	Brussels
Laura Calabrese	Researcher at ULB	1 October 2015	Brussels
Aline De Volder	RTBF	6 October 2015	Brussels
Anonymous	Anonymous	30 October 2015	Namur

ANNEX 2 – SELECTED ARTICLES AS CASE STUDIES (IN ORIGINAL LANGUAGE).

Etude de cas 1 – La dernière Heure - Molenbeek: plus de 200 personnes commémorent Soulaïmane Jamili un an après sa mort. Un bel hommage.

Un an jour pour jour après le décès de Soulaïmane Jamili Archich, l'adolescent de 15 ans happé par un métro à la station Osseghem (Molenbeek) le 21 février dernier, plus de 200 personnes se sont rassemblées samedi après-midi sur le lieu du drame pour commémorer sa mémoire.

La famille de la victime a déposé une plainte pour homicide involontaire. Pour le parquet, tout laisse cependant à penser qu'il s'agit d'un suicide. Durant la cérémonie qui a duré deux heures, des textes et des poèmes ont été lus par la soeur de Soulaïmane, son cousin, son oncle ainsi que plusieurs amis et un film a été projeté. Un lâcher de ballon a également été organisé et une plaque commémorative en mémoire de Soulaïmane a par ailleurs été inaugurée.

La mère de Soulaïmane, qui devait participer à la cérémonie d'hommage, n'était finalement pas présente, pour des raisons émotionnelles.

Soulaïmane Jamili se trouvait le 21 février dernier dans la station de métro Osseghem avec deux amis. Lorsqu'un de leurs cartables est tombé sur les voies du métro, ils ont tenté de le récupérer et ont été interpellés par des membres du personnel de sécurité de la STIB et ensuite par la police des chemins de fer.

Selon les proches du jeune homme, Soulaïmane est décédé à l'issue du contrôle qui aurait mal tourné. De leur côté, la police et le parquet estiment que tous les éléments semblent démontrer qu'il s'agit d'un suicide.

La famille de l'adolescent a introduit une plainte avec constitution de partie civile pour homicide involontaire. L'affaire passera en chambre du conseil le 28 avril prochain.

Image : <http://www.dhnet.be/galerie/en-images-hommage-a-soulaimane-jamili-a-molenbeek-54e8eb8535700d7522b62145?image=13>

Etude de cas 2 – Le Soir - L'Etat islamique menace d'envoyer 500.000 migrants à la dérive direction l'Italie

La police italienne a intercepté des conversations téléphoniques de la branche libyenne de l'Etat islamique.

Le quotidien italien Il Messaggero s'est procuré des écoutes téléphoniques effectuées par la police italienne dans lesquelles la branche libyenne de l'Etat islamique menace d'utiliser les migrants comme « arme psychologique » contre l'Europe, et tout particulièrement l'Italie, si celle-ci décide d'intervenir militairement sur en Libye.

« Les djihadistes émettent l'hypothèse d'envoyer à la dérive direction l'Italie, des centaines de barques remplies de migrants, dès le moment où notre pays évoquerait une intervention armée en Libye », explique Il Messaggero.

Ces écoutes mentionnent l'envoi de « 500.000 migrants », soit la majeure partie des 700.000 migrants qui attendent de pouvoir embarquer depuis les côtes libyennes, d'après le quotidien italien.

L'Italie est sous haute tension depuis la publication par la branche libyenne de l'Etat islamique d'une vidéo montrant la décapitation de 21 coptes égyptiens. Et pour cause, quelques 350 kilomètres seulement séparent l'Italie de la frontière libyenne.

Dimanche, le ministre de la défense italienne se disait prêt à envoyer 5.000 hommes en Libye. Des propos toutefois nuancés par l'intervention du Premier ministre italien Matteo Renzi.

« Sur la Libye, il faut de la sagesse, de la prudence et un certain sens de la situation », a-t-il déclaré dans une interview à la chaîne de télévision TG5. « La situation échappe à tout contrôle, mais ce n'est pas le moment pour une intervention militaire ».



Etude de cas 3 - Le Vif - L'Occident en guerre contre l'Islam? Un "horrible mensonge"

Le président des Etats-Unis Barack Obama a vivement dénoncé jeudi l'idée, mise en avant par diverses organisations terroristes, selon laquelle l'Occident serait en guerre contre l'Islam, qui est un "horrible mensonge".

"Les communautés musulmanes, y compris les intellectuels et les responsables religieux, ont la responsabilité de lutter non seulement contre les interprétations erronées de l'Islam mais aussi contre les mensonges selon lesquels nous serions engagés dans un choc des civilisations", a déclaré M. Obama au dernier jour d'un sommet consacré notamment à la lutte contre les groupes djihadistes.

"L'idée selon laquelle l'Occident est en guerre avec l'Islam est un horrible mensonge. Quelle que soit notre religion, nous avons tous la responsabilité de la rejeter", a poursuivi le président américain devant

les représentants d'une soixantaine de pays réunis en sommet à Washington. "Cette notion est le socle sur lequel les terroristes construisent leur idéologie et sur lequel ils essayent de justifier la violence", a-t-il ajouté.

Rappelant qu'il avait lancé un appel en septembre 2014, lors de l'assemblée générale des Nations unies à New York, à éradiquer l'extrémisme violent, le président américain a appelé tous les pays à avancer "des propositions concrètes" en ce sens lors de la prochaine session, à l'automne. "Les Etats-Unis feront plus pour lutter contre les idéologies haineuses. Aujourd'hui, j'appelle vos pays à nous rejoindre" dans ce combat, a-t-il ajouté.



Etude de cas 4 – Sud Presse - Il se balade avec une kippa sur la tête dans les rues de Paris pour voir les réactions: crachats, injures, intimidations... (vidéo)

Histoire de sensibiliser les gens au fait que les actes antisémites se multiplient en Europe, un journaliste a été filmé, portant une kippa (terme hébraïque pour « calotte ») et marchant dans les rues de Paris pendant 10 heures. Les réactions sont... violentes, généralement.

851 actes antisémites ont été répertoriés en France en 2014, indique cette vidéo. Partant de ce constat, voulant le vérifier, cette vidéo a tout son sens.

Dans la vidéo, on voit clairement le journaliste se faire cracher dessus.

Des injures fusent (» Homo », « Pédé », « On rigole, le chien ne va pas te manger », « Il va se faire enculer, mon frère... »)



Un sale climat, malheureusement symptomatique de ce qui se passe actuellement dans certaines régions de France, et d'Europe.

Etude de cas 5 – Sud Presse - Dison: privée de formation car elle porte le voile, elle attaque l'école et la ministre Simonis en justice

L'ASBL Justice and Democracy a introduit, auprès du tribunal de première instance de Verviers, une action en justice qui fait suite à l'interdiction faite à une mère de famille portant le voile de suivre des cours de promotion sociale en août dernier à Dison.

L'ASBL Justice and Democracy a introduit auprès du tribunal de première instance de Verviers une requête relative à la lutte contre certaines formes de discrimination contre le gouvernement de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles en la personne de la ministre de l'Enseignement de Promotion sociale, Isabelle Simonis, ainsi que contre l'Institut d'enseignement de Promotion Sociale Wallonie-Bruxelles Enseignement de Dison-Waimes,

a-t-elle annoncé lundi. Cette action en justice fait suite à l'interdiction faite à une mère de famille portant le voile de suivre des cours de promotion sociale en août dernier à Dison.

L'ASBL considère que l'interdiction du port du foulard lors des cours du soir entre adultes « porte atteinte aux droits fondamentaux garantis par notre Constitution, par la Convention européenne des droits de l'Homme et par le décret anti-discrimination du 12 décembre 2008 ». « La victime a notamment subi une discrimination directe et indirecte sur la base de sa conviction religieuse, critère protégé par le décret précité », souligne Justice & Democracy dans un communiqué.

Cette mère de famille s'était vue interdire en août dernier le port du foulard lors des cours de promotion sociale dispensés en soirée à des adultes sur base du règlement intérieur de l'IEPSW-B Dison où elle s'était inscrite. Ce règlement a intégré le principe de neutralité depuis plusieurs années, a pourtant rappelé le directeur de l'établissement.

L'ASBL considère par ailleurs que le gouvernement de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, qui vient de faire adopter un plan anti-discrimination de 53 mesures dans des domaines multiples, « fait l'impasse sur des discriminations existantes et qui sont en lien avec une matière dépendant directement de ses compétences ».

Justice & Democracy réclame, contre chacune des parties, 1.300 euros de dommage moral ainsi qu'une astreinte de 250 euros par jour où la décision de justice autorisant le port du voile ne serait pas appliquée.

Mme Simonis (PS) a rappelé que tout comme les établissements de l'Enseignement obligatoire, les établissements de l'Enseignement de Promotion sociale sont autonomes pour décider, via leur règlement d'ordre intérieur, d'autoriser ou d'interdire les signes convictionnels ostentatoires.

« S'il appartient désormais à la justice de se prononcer sur ce litige, je tiens toutefois à rappeler que les cours et tribunaux ont déjà débouté ce type d'action car ces dernières ne ciblent pas spécialement le port du voile mais le port de l'ensemble des signes convictionnels ostentatoires », a-t-elle ajouté.

C'est d'ailleurs sur cette même base juridique que le tribunal de première instance de Verviers, siégeant en référé, avait déjà débouté, en décembre 2013, Justice & Democracy qui avait alors attaqué le règlement d'ordre intérieur des écoles communales verviétoises.



Contact:

Media Animation asbl
Avenue E.Mounier, 100
1200 Bruxelles - Belgium

e-mail : info@media-animation.be
telephone: +32 (0)256 72 33
www.media-animation.be