

The Yellow Vests Manifestation: Media Framing on Political Articles in Online French Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, the French media has been filled with news about the demonstrators who were later called the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests). The demonstrators took to the streets in order to protest the policies of the government of Emmanuel Macron. Articles that appeared in various French newspapers preached the event from various perspectives according to the political ideology carried out by each newspaper. This paper focused on media framing in French newspapers regarding the demonstration of the *Gilets Jaunes*. The Critical Discourse Analysis approach from Norman Fairclough critical theory was used as the analytical knife in this study. Articles used as data sources were analysed to trace the causal relationships that were not seen between practices in discourses, relations, and social-cultural processes. The process of social interaction in question refers to the process of producing text and the process of interpreting texts, which are related to social practices. The media frame of the leftist political ideology newspaper, which reports on the demonstration of the *Gilets Jaunes*, was used as a primary reference to explain the relationship between language, ideology, and identity that is often hidden.

Keywords: *Gilets Jaunes, Ideology, Media Framing, Newspapers*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Yellow Vests is a revolutionary political grassroots movement demanding an economic justice that started in France in October 2018. The online petition that was posted in May has gathered almost one million signatures and was followed by a mass protest on 17 November. This movement was instigated by the rise of fuel prices and high living costs. The claim made by the protesters is that the government's tax reform disproportionately burdens the working and middle-class people, especially those living in rural and suburban areas. Protesters called for lower fuel tax, the reintroduction of the solidarity tax on wealth, higher minimum wage, referendum, and the resignation of President Emmanuel Macron.

Several previous studies relating to the Yellow Vests movement have been done by scholars. Their researches focused on the conversion of social movements by asserting the postmodern aspects of the Yellow Vests [1]; The signification of wearing a vest as a tool of doing and creating political actions [2]; The Yellow Vests within the balance of political forces and their novel spatial dynamic of mobilization [3], and; The key phases and aspects of the *Gilets Jaunes* protests that also pointed to a theoretical perplexity because the *Gilets Jaunes* mobilised without

institutional and third-party support [4]. As a social movement, the Yellow Vests are very appealing to be analysed, especially in relation to the topic of media framing. Carter argued frames can be organized around larger themes that can influence the interpretation of individual events [5]. Furthermore, Weaver stated that "frame" can be applied to many aspects of messages and to many types of messages. It can also be studied by means of systematic content analysis or more interpretive textual analysis alone [6]. Entman argued that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." [6].

Some research can be found about media framing and social movement [7, 8], framing processes and social movements [9], media and social movements in Turkey [10], framing social conflicts and social media in Singapore [11], framing as a theory of media effects [12], and framing in mass communication [13]. However, research on media framing in the Yellow Vests movement has not been found.

This paper is written with two articles from two online news portals, *lefigaro.fr* and *lepoint.fr*, as sources. The news article titled *Il manque la justice sociale: paroles de gilets jaunes recueillies lors de l'acte X* was published on 19 January 2019 [14]. This article was published in the

news portal *lefigaro.fr* and found in the Société section. The writer, Stéphane Kovacs, is a reporter at the newspaper, Le Figaro. This newspaper is a rightist or liberal-conservative media. Meanwhile, the news titled *Loi anti-casseurs : interdiction de manifester pour « une centaine d'individus »* was published on 22 January 2019 on *LePoint.fr* [15]. This media tend to be oriented to social-liberalist ideas, in other words, it tends to support the leftist politics in France. This text is sourced from Agence France-Presse (AFP), meaning that other media outlets may use the same text in their reportage. This research aims to uncover how the two major media in France had applied media framing in writing the news.

2. METHOD

According to Fairclough [16, 17], CDA is used to assess text and context, sequence and intertextuality, construction and strategy, social cognitive function, rules of use of analysis categories, and interdiscourse. This study is done from a linguistic point of view, textual and social context, as well as the reader's basic knowledge. Fairclough also defined CDA as a discourse analysis that aims to trace the invisible causality between practices in a discourse, events, and text that is micro in relation to structure, relations, and wider social and cultural processes that are considered macro. Fairclough differentiates text and discourse. Text is the product of discourse, that is a social interaction process.

The focus of this study is the articles on two French online news portals, *lefigaro.fr* and *lepoint.fr*, encompasses textual structure and reading text as a discourse. First, the text is analysed through verbal narration identification and identification of pictures that form a textual structure. The analysis then reads how the textual structure uncovers the media's positioning of the news' content.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Media Framing in *lefigaro.fr*'s reportage

The article *Il manque la justice sociale: paroles de gilets jaunes recueillies lors de l'acte X* (There is no social justice : said the Yellow Vests on Act X), 19 January 2019 [14], utters various reasons the Yellow Vests protesters have for holding a protest. The title of the article is a citation of a Yellow Vests protester's statement. The choice of title in which such meaning indicates social demands from the 19 January protesters that were a response to the *Grand Débat National* (Big National Discussion) that was held at the initiative of the government to appease the protests that took place in the entire country. The absence of social justice that is indicated by the title creates an active, real, and urgent narration of the situation in France. The narration represents the demands of the Yellow Vests protesters.

The first part of the article is an opening that explains the acts of protest that have been carried out throughout ten consecutive Saturdays. This part also contains

information on the number of masses that took part in the protest. The second part of the text, that consists of several paragraphs, displays testimonies and demands of the protesters. This part shows critics towards the French government. While the third part, which is the last part, explains that a victim was wounded during the protest and he was accompanied by a first aid team.

There were three parties involved in the reportage, the Yellow Vests protesters, the French government and the police that is shown as a part of the government's side, and the pers or media who are reporters who gathered and wrote protesters' testimonies. The article in *lefigaro.fr* attached several pictures of the protesters who gave their testimonies as shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Max, Waël, François: 3 Yellow Vests protesters

As seen in Figure 1, the selection of three protesters and their testimonies into the article can be seen as a way to distract the readers from serious criticisms and demands to the government. This can be seen from Max's costume, one of the Yellow Vests protesters (left). He wore a cow costume to create a metaphor for cow-milking workers in France. The second protester, Waël, is a student with disability (center). He said that from the government's point of view, the people must tighten their belt, while the government does not limit their spending, and instead they are increasing their tax income. The decrease of pension funds, the rise of fuel tax, the tax cut for the rich, and the increase of university tuition for non-European students are being protested.

The image of the Yellow Vests that is represented by Waël highlights that President Emmanuel Macron has not fulfilled his campaign promises that he announced in his speech in Bobigny, 2017. Bobigny is where the student with disability resides. There was also François, whose profession was not mentioned (right). According to him, there weren't enough polices during the protest, so he considered the protest as something like a visit to the café. Aside from those three people, the article mentioned four women who chose to go home because of the rain that fell during the protest. Even though there were statements that criticize the government, the profile and behaviour of the protesters that are described in the article seem to show how the media positions and gives the impression that the Yellow Vests protest is a serious act.

The portrayal of the three protesters –as seen in Figure 1– is a part of the text's narration that shows *lefigaro.fr*'s positioning. While on the other hand, the social justice that is demanded by the protesters was not specified. Social

justice is only portrayed as equality and fair wealth distribution, and not the fair distribution of opportunities that are the right of all citizens. Grand Débat National, that is the government's version of the Yellow Vests protest, was just an effort for the government to collect data of the protesters' demand. The data was collected through an online survey, as it was during Macron's presidential campaign. However, the collection of data that should become the basis of decision-making has not resulted in anything.

The portrayal of the wounded protesters who were hit by a flash-ball, including a badly wounded protester who was hit in the thorax, portrayed a physical struggle. However, the last sentence in the article seems to see the incidents as nothing serious. This was shown in the sentence that concluded the article, "On Saturday night, there was no incident recorded in The Capital."

The last sentence emboldens the statement in the beginning of the news article, "À Paris, la police parlait de 7000 manifestants en fin d'après-midi. Le cortège s'est élançé dans le calme en début d'après-midi" (In Paris, the police talks about 7000 protesters at the end of the day. The parade of protesters walked calmly in the beginning of noon). The beginning and the end of lefigaro.fr's news article can be understood as media framing that narrates the condition of peaceful demonstration that the police have under control.

3.2. Media Framing in lepoint.fr's reportage

The main issue raised in the news article in *lepoint.fr* is the drafting of the anti-riot law [15]. The bill was proposed by Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and Republican Senators. This bill is aimed to give the government an authority to forbid involvement in protests that cause acts of riots. It also gives the authority to search belongings and vehicles that are within the protest area as a security measure.



Figure 2. Illustration of the Yellow Vests protest on *lepoint.fr*

After the title, the *lepoint.fr*'s news is followed by a picture of a burning motorcycle on the side of the street as seen in Figure 2. This picture was taken by Laure Boyer, a documentary photographer from Paris and it was captioned "Le gouvernement déplore depuis la mi-novembre près de 2 000 blessés côté manifestants, et 1 000 chez les forces de l'ordre" (After mid-November, the government deplores the 2000 wounded protesters and 1000 of which who were law enforcers). That picture shows two important actors who are discussed in this article, the Yellow Vests protesters and the police. Someone on the left side of the street is seen to be wearing a Yellow Vests, and the other was seen wearing an all-

black attire while facing the burnt motorcycle. Through that picture, the portrayal given by the text's title can be seen, which is the anarchic protest of the Yellow Vests protesters. This destructive behaviour of the protesters is what instigated the anti-riot bill. The selection of that picture creates an image of the protesters as destructive and dangerous, thus giving an impression of urgency for the anti-riot bill to be enacted.

In the title, the writer structured the sentence as "interdiction de manifester pour « une centaine d'individus » ?" (a ban on protest for "a hundred protesters"?) that refer to the words of Christophe Castaner on 22 January at the Assemblée Nationale. This form of title aims to question the factuality of the statement. Along the text was found several portrayals of the issue arisen: the anti-riot law and the use of flash-ball by the police.

In the fourth paragraph of the text that was split into two parts, the main issue discussed is the anti-riot bill. The first (two first paragraphs) gives an explanation of the drafting of the bill by the Prime Minister that was supported by the internal affairs minister, Castaner. The following part (third and fourth paragraph) is found as the main target of the bill. It is mentioned that this bill will take action on rioters in ways acted upon hooligans who are banned from watching a match. In the context of protesters, this is manifested in the law to raise the punishment to rioters. This part has the tendency to show the rightful intention of the government to control the riot of the protesters. However, the end of the fourth paragraph shows how the Yellow Vests protesters always refuse to be considered rioters that are referred to by the bill makers. That part questions if the government intends to averse riot or to prevent the entire protest from happening. This has again raised the impression that was on the title of the article, are only rioters being banned or are the entire Yellow Vests protest. It also seems that the quotation marks that enclose the statement "protecting rights to protest" intend to create doubts on government's intentions and justifications. Therefore, the text seems to oppose the anti-riot bill from the usage of quotation marks and the defense of the Yellow Vests protesters as non-riotous protesters.

The next parts of the text are subtitled with sentences that highlight the harms of the usage of flash-ball. Flash-ball is being used in small parts Europe, including France, but has harmful consequences. This was shown by how there was a complaint on a victim that experienced an injury in his eye area. There are two parties that oppose the usage of flash-balls: Jacques Toubon as a human rights advocate and the Yellow Vests protesters. Even so, the government, represented by Castaner seems to insist on continuing its use.

In this case, the text does not position itself in an agreement with the government. In the last paragraph, the accusation that the usage of surveillance cameras as a measure to prevent arms usage is refuted because the camera was not used during the protest. It can be seen implicitly that the text attempts to show the government's argument in defending the use of flash-ball. This way the article shows its ideology that tends to defend the protesters by rebuttals to the government.

In terms of the anti-riot bill, the text seems to side with the protesters that suspect the bill has the potential to limit

not only riots in general but the Yellow Vests protest in specific. In the meantime, the usage of flash-ball is shown as problematic.

However, the text has instead shown the government's attempt to maintain the usage. Implicitly, this becomes the text narration to portray the French government as a party that limits the freedom of protest. The solution that the government offered to address the violence was simply to put cameras to surveil polices' usage of flash-ball, but the cameras are, in fact, turned off during aggressive situations. Generally, the narration by *lepoint.fr* is about the inefficiency of the government in handling the Yellow Vests problems so that the text positions itself against the government in the issue of the anti-riot bill.

4. CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be seen that in both news portals, media framing becomes a tool to side with their respective political belief. *Lefigaro.fr* tends to show a rightist, pro-government stance. While *lepoint.fr* tends to voice the left or opposition's concerns.

In the article of *lefigaro.fr*, the issue of the Big National Discussion was brought up, while on *lepoint.fr* the anti-riot bill was discussed. The discussion that the first media shows is the government's attempt to control the riots. It is positioned as an invite for all France to seek for a solution. While *lepoint.fr* emphasized on the need of law to prevent riots. This has brought the impression that the Yellow Vests protest is riotous in its nature.

The same problem, in the context of this writing, is the Yellow Vests protest in Paris, which can be framed with textual elements that shape the textual structure to form different discourse. On *lefigaro.fr* it is used to build the profile of three Yellow Vests protesters. All there were showing different backgrounds: retirees, a student with disability, and a person with unclear status. The text frames the protest as something that is filled with unusual things in France. The beginning and the end of the text built the narration. While *lepoint.fr* builds an uncertainty impression around the problems faced by the protesters. The government put forward certain actors that are violent and disturbing, but the text shows the violence done by the police towards the protesters instead. The text also showed that the government is giving a mismatching solution in addressing the problem, that is by banning certain actors from protesting.

Of the several things that have been drawn as conclusions, there are several attitudes that must be considered when reading news from media with different political lines. The framing of the news, of course, is adjusted to the political direction adopted by the media. For this reason, the reader must know the political direction of media so that he can understand this alignment with the issues reported. Readers must also be critical in responding to the news and alignments in certain media. Critical discourse analysis can be used as a presence of distance between news media and readers so as not to get caught up in one-sided understanding.

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