The politicisation of news stories on social networks

By Sylvain Parasie, Antoine Machut
and Béatrice Mazoyer

Sylvain Parasie is a professor of sociology and director of the médialab. His work focuses on the transformations brought about by digital technologies in the ways in which people debate and engage in the public arena, particularly in France and the United States.
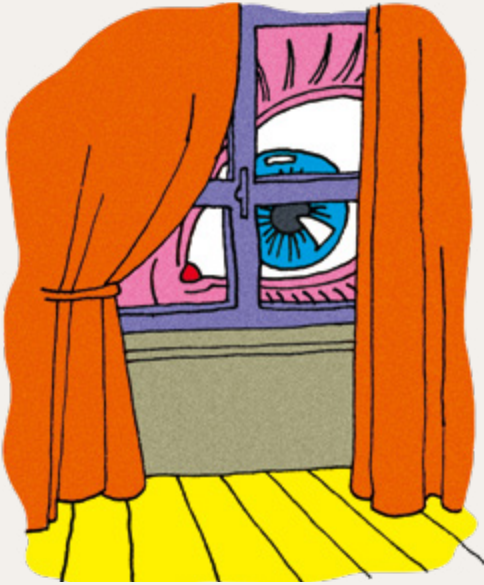
Antoine Machut is a postdoctoral researcher in sociology at médialab and holds a doctorate in sociology from the Institute of Political Studies in Grenoble (IEPG). He is a research associate at the Pacte laboratory at Grenoble Alpes University. He specialises in longitudinal and mixed methods for analysing digital data.

Béatrice Mazoyer is a research engineer at médialab. She works on the flow of information between social networks and traditional media, using natural language processing and data mining methods.

The media phenomenon of turning a
singular event into a public problem is nothing new,
but the digitalisation of information channels
seems to have amplified it. To assess the real role
played by social networks compared with other
public arenas, Sylvain Parasie, Antoine Machut and
Béatrice Mazoyer have developed a computational
survey method that they have applied to the
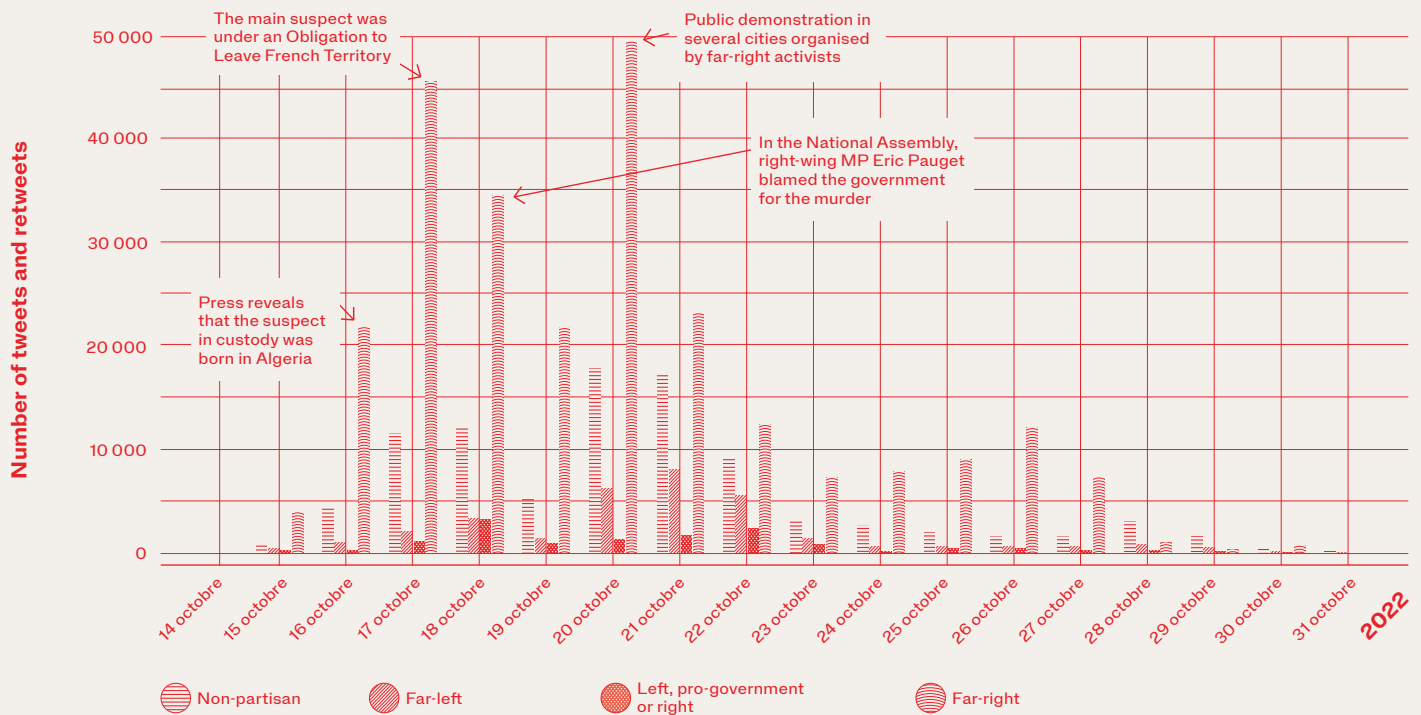handling of the Lola affair on X/Twitter.

Changes in the media landscape are amplifying the politicisation of news stories.

When, following the dissolution of the National Assembly, French soccer player Marcus Thuram called for 'a barrier' against the right-wing political party, Rassemblement National, Julien Odoul, one of its parliamentary members, criticised him for having 'never said a word to express his sadness when Thomas, Lola and all the other young victims were massacred by scum'. Using the first names Thomas and Lola he was referring to tragic events: the murder of a 12-year-old child in Paris by an Algerian national in 2022, and the murder of a young man in a village in the Drôme region in 2023, in which people of foreign descent were allegedly involved. Far-right activists and elected representatives widely used both of these crimes to denounce immigration to a public with little interest in party politics. On the other side of the political spectrum, first names are also regularly used to refer to different events: the deaths of young men of foreign descent following arrests by the police. Be it Adama, who died in 2016 while trying to escape a police checkpoint, or Nahel, who was shot dead by a police officer in 2023, left-wing activists have associated these events with a more general public problem: systemic police violence against racialised people.

The politicisation of what are usually referred to as 'news stories' consists of presenting a news item as not being singular or dependent on exceptional circumstances, but rather as part of a more general public problem. This phenomenon is far from new, but changes in the media landscape are amplifying it. Social media platforms enable activists, public figures and ordinary citizens to leverage public emotion or indignation to push their own political agenda. Historically, the political exploitation of a news story required resources accessible only to leading politicians and journalists. A case in point is the way in which, in 2011, Nicolas Sarkozy, then President of the Republic, accused the judiciary of the murder of a young woman, Laetitia. But social media platforms have significantly reduced the cost of politicisation. At the same time, 24-hour news channels are echoing opinion movements appearing on social media, in particular because they favour news commentary over reporting. This configuration is conducive to the politicisation of news stories that attract intense media coverage, but whose long-term effects on public opinion are poorly understood.

This phenomenon raises crucial questions for the quality of democratic debate, which the social sciences, particularly sociology, are helping bring to light. What role do social media play in politicising the news? Are there limits to the most extreme forms of politicisation, especially those that over-generalise certain news stories? Do the media amplify these processes? How can

**DISTRIBUTION OF TWEETS AND RETWEETS ABOUT THE LOLA AFFAIR
ACCORDING TO THE PARTY ORIENTATION OF USERS**

Source : Parasie, S., Machut, A. and Mazoyer, B., 'Legacy Media and the Weaponization of News Events. A Computational Study of the Lola Case', forthcoming.

the standards and practices of journalists protect the quality of public discussion of current affairs?

Answering these questions requires overcoming a number of methodological difficulties, including that of knowing how to describe processes that involve social media, media organisations and a large number of individuals who express themselves openly or anonymously. As part of a project funded by the French National Research Agency, we developed a computational survey method that allowed us to reconstruct the politicisation of a news event using digital traces from X/Twitter.[1]

A computational survey method

Our analysis focused on the murder of Lola, committed in Paris on 14 October 2022 by an Algerian woman illegally present on French territory. Éric Zemmour's nationalist party, Reconquête !, quickly organised an intense campaign on social media, in partisan media, and on 24-hour news channels. Politicians, activists and

Exchange of tweets between a Rassemblement National MP and a footballer about Lola's murder.
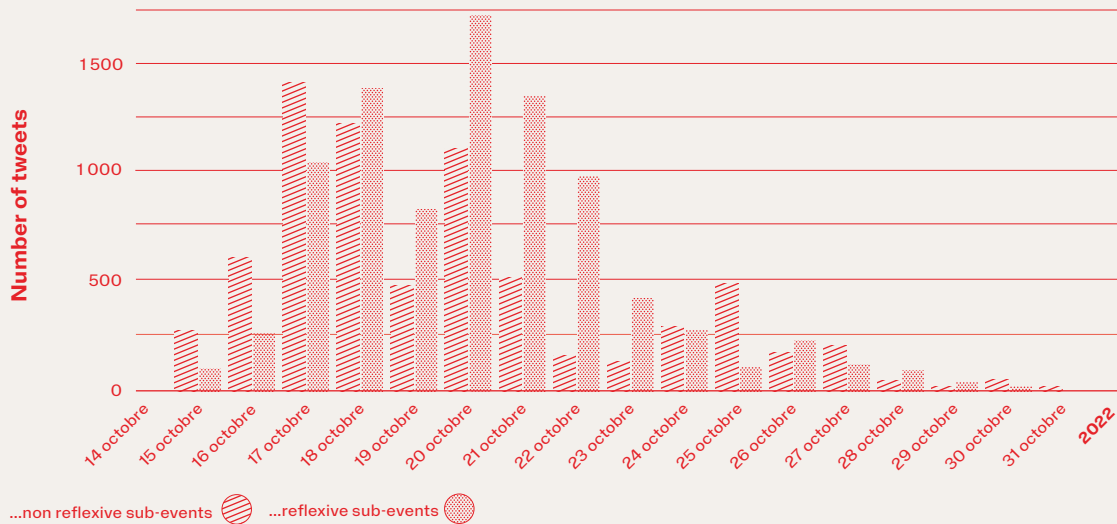
Demonstration by members of the ultra-right, Rassemblement National and Reconquête ! parties after Lola's murder. Valence, 10 October 2022.

journalists from the far-right media sought to impose their interpretation, describing the murder as a 'francocide', that is, a crime committed against a French person by a foreigner, in a context where 'French people' would gradually be replaced by 'foreign people'. For a week, the event was subject to much commentary on social media and was covered by most media outlets, while elected members of the Républicains party echoed Reconquête's interpretative framework in the media and even in the National Assembly, claiming that the government was responsible for Lola's death, as the main suspect was under an obligation to leave French territory.

To reconstruct the politicisation process of this dramatic news item, we developed an event detection algorithm and applied it to a body of 10 million messages published on X/Twitter during the months of October and November 2022. The algorithm grouped messages with strong lexical similarities. By selecting the clusters of messages containing the word 'Lola', we obtained a body of 19,047 clusters comprising a total of 449,130 tweets (retweets excluded), with each cluster centred on one occurrence: a factual element linked to the murder, the statement of a

politician, an activist, a journalist, an X/Twitter user, etc. The public discussion was thus automatically broken down into a large number of discussions centred on particular subjects that we call 'sub-events'. Each of these concentrated attention for a few hours or a few days, involving different actors (anonymous users, activists, journalists, politicians, among others) and different spheres (government, National Assembly, mainstream or partisan media, political parties). Two examples of these sub-events are described below:

• On 18 October, the Minister of Justice, Éric Dupont-Moretti, criticised a Les Républicains MP in the National Assembly: 'Using the coffin of a 12-year-old girl as if it were a footstool is a disgrace.' These comments were shared on X/Twitter by the BFMTV channel, prompting several hundred reactions up to 20 October.

• On 22 October, Stéphane David, an elected member of the Reconquête ! party, said on X/Twitter: 'I am very surprised by the lack of reaction from Muslims in France to the Lola massacre.' A few dozen messages relayed this comment, which was no longer discussed two days later.

**DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPATION ACCORDING TO THE REFLEXIVE NATURE
OF SUB-EVENTS LINKED TO THE LOLA AFFAIR**

* A sub-event is an online discussion centred on a particular topic related to the Lola affair.
It is said to be reflexive when it focuses not on the facts themselves but on the process of politicisation.
Source: Parasie, S., Machut, A. and Mazoyer, B., 'Legacy Media and the Weaponization of News Events.
A Computational Study of the Lola Case', forthcoming

The involvement of far-right supporters in X/Twitter discussions is clear. This is shown by the analysis of contributors' political preferences, identified and measured through the sharing of messages published by the main candidates in the 2022 presidential election.

For each of the 300 sub-events with the largest number of tweets, we identified the initial occurrence (reported fact or statement, declaration, analysis), the actors involved in its occurrence, and the actors who triggered the discussion on X/Twitter (anonymous users, activists, politicians, journalists, media outlets, etc.). We also checked whether any media outlet was behind each sub-event's initial occurrence. Three main findings emerge from this qualitative and quantitative analysis.

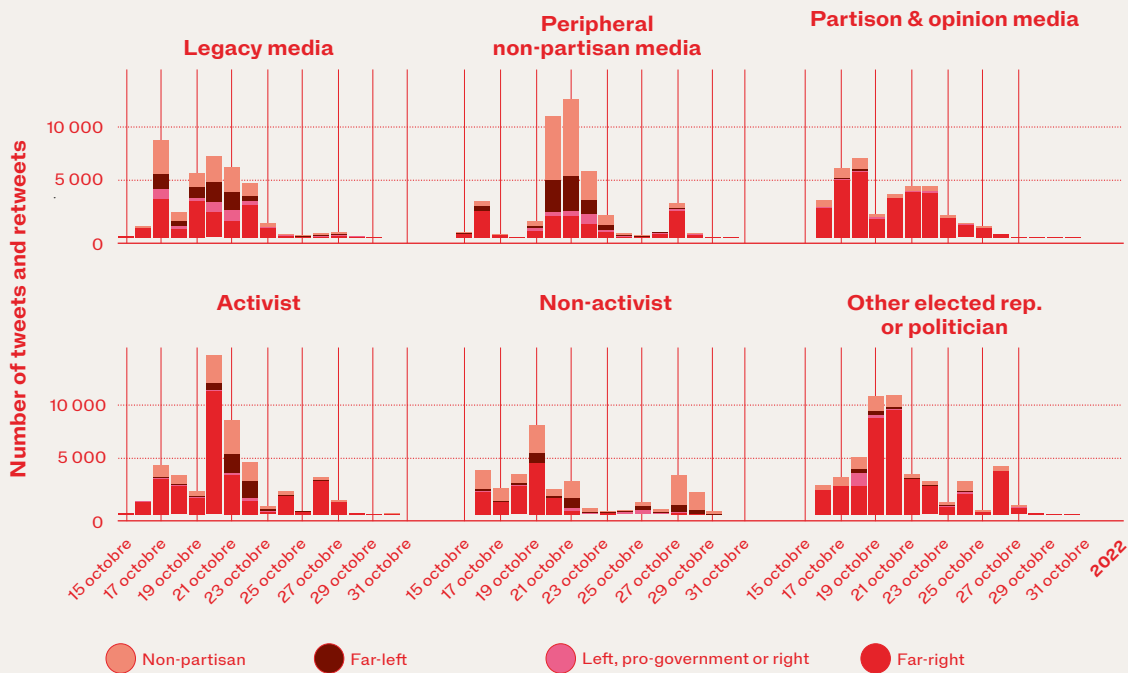## Social media do not dictate the media agenda

The first observation is that the extensive media coverage of the Lola affair is not the direct result of far-right activism on social media. While Reconquête ! was very active on X/Twitter from 16 October 2022 when it turned out that the main suspect was of Algerian nationality, this mobilisation does not explain the massive media interest in Lola's murder from 18 October onwards.

Rather, it can be explained by the intervention of several leaders of the Républicains party, in the National Assembly and in the media, accusing the government. The day before, on 17 October, several major media outlets were reporting that the main suspect was under an official obligation to leave French territory. 'Lola lost her life because you did not expel this foreigner who no longer had any business being here', declared MP Éric Pauget, of Les Républicains, in a question addressed to the Minister of Justice. 'If this obligation to leave French territory had been enforced, Lola would still be alive', added David Lisnard, a member of the same party, during a popular television programme. Henceforth, the politicisation of Lola's murder was no longer limited to far-right activists and politicians, who until then had expressed their views only on X/Twitter and in the partisan media. Right-wing politicians also spoke out on the subject, while the central broadcast media interviewed far-right politicians. The politicisation of the murder moved into the most legitimate spheres of public debate, such as parliament, the television news channels and media that can be described as legacy media, namely those most recognised by the journalistic profession and with the most significant economic and human resources (*Le Monde*, *Le Parisien*, BFMTV, etc.).

Although the elected members of Les Républicains did not explicitly support the

37

**TWEETS AND RETWEETS ACCORDING TO THE TRIGGER
FOR THE SUB-EVENT AND THE PARTISAN ORIENTATION OF USERS OF X/TWITTER**

Source: Parasie, S., Machut, A. and Mazoyer, B., 'Legacy Media and the Weaponization of News Events.
A Computational Study of the Lola Case', forthcoming

'francocide' theory, their contribution to the politicisation of the murder led to much greater coverage by the most established media after 18 October. The journalistic value of the murder suddenly increased as soon as opposition politicians took it up, provoking reactions from government members. Elected members of the Républicains party therefore played an essential role in this process of politicising the murder, by legitimising media coverage of a crime that would otherwise have remained a subject of discussion within the far right and on social media.

The legacy media retain control over the facts discussed

The second observation is that the legacy media retained a virtual monopoly on the account of events discussed on X/Twitter in connection with Lola's murder. This may come as a surprise given that anyone can express themselves on X/Twitter without any hinderance, and especially given that far-right supporters were by far the most active in the discussion of this news item. Yet it appears that the vast majority of factual occurrences discussed on this social media were reported and verified by legacy media.

These media were responsible for two-thirds of the reported facts or statements that generated

sub-events on X/Twitter. The opinion and partisan media played a less important role, having reported facts and statements in only 10 per cent of sub-events. Even more remarkably, only 22 per cent of sub-events mentioned facts that were never reported by the media.

We also note that sub-events based on facts reported by legacy media attracted more commentators than those based on unverified facts. Unsurprisingly, far-right supporters were the most involved in discussions based on facts reported by partisan media. However, they were also very present in conversations about the facts reported by the legacy media, which illustrates the paradox of populists, who criticise the legacy media while relying on them.

The effects of media coverage on social media

Third, the legacy media help to regulate the politicisation of news on social media, by producing 'reflexive' coverage of the news. Reflexive coverage refers to media coverage that does not focus on the crime itself — either the facts or the associated interpretations — but on the politicisation process. This can take several forms: documentation of the politicisation of the news item (by revealing, for example, that the Reconquête!

party bought domain names containing the name Lola); balanced presentation of the arguments justifying or contesting the politicisation of the news item by analysing the positions taken on the murder as political or electoral strategies; or criticism or justification of politicisation in relation to immigration.

Our analysis shows that media coverage became increasingly reflexive, not only in the print media but also on X/Twitter. Three days after the news broke of Lola's death, the discussion on X/Twitter focused more on reflexive sub-events: the very legitimacy of politicisation found itself at the centre of the debate.

However, the legacy media played a major role in turning the conversation on X/Twitter by initiating a large number of reflexive sub-events. They also helped to regulate the discussion by encouraging participation from people with a broader range of political preferences, unlike the partisan media, politicians and activists who triggered sub-events that were almost exclusively addressed by people on the far right.

The investigative methods presented in this article provide a fresh perspective on a phenomenon of growing importance. They help show that the politicisation of news stories is not just a social media issue, but also involves politicians and the legacy media. By helping to identify mechanisms for regulating public debate, they invite us to take a fresh look at the discussion of current affairs and its democratic implications.

The legacy media help to regulate the political weaponisation of news on social media by producing 'reflexive' coverage.

📖 **REFERENCES**

→ **Boltanski, L. and Esquerre, A.,** *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique?* Paris: Gallimard, 2022.

→ **Jablonka, Y.,** *Laetita ou la fin des hommes,* Paris: Seuil, 2016.

→ **Mazoyer, B., Hervé, N., Hudelot, C. and Cagé, J.,** 'Comparison of Short-text Embeddings for Unsupervised Event Detection in a Stream of Tweets', in F. Guillet, D. A. Zighed and H. Briand (eds), *Advances in Knowledge Discovery and Management,* New York: Springer, 2024, pp. 81–97.

→ **Parasie, S., Machut, A. and Mazoyer, B.,** 'Legacy Media and the Weaponization of News Events. A Computational Study of the Lola Case', forthcoming.

→ **Sécail, C.,** *Le Crime à l'écran. Le fait divers criminel à la télévision française (1950-2010),* Nouveau monde, 2010.