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MEDIA ANALYSIS

With all due respect to its leaders, CNews is indeed a far-right channel, here's why

Denying the transformation of a news channel into an opinion media, in the service of Vincent Bolloré's ideological crusade: this is the challenge that CNews leaders tried to take up in the Assembly on February 29. An operation that required big arrangements with the truth.

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TV sets to the solemn decor of the National Assembly, the figures of CNews have demonstrated a certain constancy in their relationship to the truth. On Thursday, February 29, during more than six hours of hearing, the leaders and main headliners of the Bolloré group channel applied themselves to twist the facts before the members of the commission of inquiry on the attribution, content and control of authorizations of digital terrestrial television (DTT).

In a much less casual and provocative tone than on their antenna, the Bolloré TV bridgers tried to prove that their channel is a model of pluralism, anxious to make all political tendencies dialogue, and not at all aligned with the ideological crusade of their owner billionaire. Objective of the operation: to convince the national representation that CNews is not an opinion channel and that it is doing everything possible to respect the agreement that binds it with Arcom, the audiovisual regulatory authority.

Pascal Praud, Sonia Mabrouk and Laurence Ferrari during their hearing before the commission of inquiry on the allocation, content and control of authorizations for TNT channels, at the National Assembly, on February 29, 2024. © Photo Thierry Stefanopoulos / REA

Originally, four representatives of the channel were summoned by parliamentarians - Maxime Saada, CEO of the Canal+ group, Serge Nedjar, boss of CNews, Laurence Ferrari and Pascal Praud. Finally, the channel sent fifteen emissaries, before Vincent Bolloré himself was auditioned on March 13, followed by Cyril Hanouna the next day. *"A Mexican army"*, the commission's rebellious rapporteur, Aurélien Saintoul, had fun.

If the group has not skimmed on the means, it is because the stakes are high. The call for applications has just begun to reallocate the fifteen TNT frequencies expiring in 2025, including those of CNews and C8. And the Bolloré media felt the wind turn for the first time since the Council of State asked Arcom to strengthen its control over CNews' compliance with its obligations *(read our article on the implications of the decision).*

A pressure further accentuated by the creation of this parliamentary committee, requested by La France insoumise, and by the launch of a petition by ecologist MP Sophie Taillé-Polian and the director of the Latifa Oulkhouir movement against the renewal of the approval of C8 and CNews.

Denying the transformation of an information channel into an opinion media, moreover on a frequency graciously granted by the State: this was the challenge of the auditiones. Obviously, the operation required some arrangements with the truth. Mediapart has scrutinized the statements of the fifteen representatives of the Canal+ group. Many of their claims do not resist the examination of the facts.

CNews, an opinion channel, from hosts to spectators

- **What the CNews leaders said**

Maxime Saada, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Canal+ group: *"News channels are very often watched by the same households because people want to have different versions of the same information or to see how the facts are related on BFM, LCI, Franceinfo.tv and CNews. There is therefore no doubt that in the spirit of the Council of State and the public, CNews is a news channel. »*

Sonia Mabrouk, star journalist of CNews: *"Our audience is extremely wide and plebiscites La France insoumise* [LFI], *like Renaissance, like the LR* [Les Républicains], *like the RN* [Rassemblement national], *it's really 100% of the French. »*

- **What the facts indicate**

Listening to the linchpins of the Bolloré media, CNews is aimed at all audiences, regardless of their political edge. They want as proof the record audiences recorded in recent weeks by the channel, regularly placing it as the leader of news channels, ahead of BFMTV.

While CNews is gaining ground on its competitors, it remains the channel whose audience is the most homogeneous, much more to the right than the average of viewers. This is the main teaching of a research note developed by Julien Labarre, a French researcher based at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Based on a vast opinion survey conducted in several countries, the researcher verified the scientific validity of a common place mobilized to describe the metamorphosis of i-Télé into CNews: Vincent Bolloré made CNews the French Fox News. Indeed, the American channel has become a case study of transforming a media into a hyper-partisan propaganda channel, relaying, despite the facts, Donald Trump's conspiracy delusions.

Laetitia Ménasé, Secretary General of the Canal+ group, Maxime Saada, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Canal+ group, Gérald Brice Viret, Director General of the Canal+ Group's antennas and programs at the National Assembly, on February 29, 2024. © Photo Thierry Stefanopoulos / REA

Above all, Fox News' ideological inclination is measured by the way its viewers vote: a large part of them and they had voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election - that was 19 points more compared to all the Americans surveyed.

Does CNews' anti-migrant and ultra-conservative bludgeon also meet a far-right audience? Doubt is not allowed, according to the data collected and analyzed by Julien Labarre. For example, in the second round of the 2022 presidential election, Marine Le Pen won an overwhelming majority of votes (67%) among CNews viewers watching the channel several times a day, 25 points more than all the French people surveyed in this study.

In the first round, Jean-Luc Mélenchon was largely shunned by CNews aficionados (8.5%, or – 10.3% compared to all surveyeds), when Éric Zemmour was highly acclaimed (25.4%, or + 18.4% compared to all surveyeds).

> “ If CNews' loyal viewers watch the channel, it's because they find their account and the way to reinforce their opinions. ”
>
> Julien Labarre, media researcher

The audience of CNews is also particularly homogeneous ideologically." *When we observe the public of France Télévisions or BFMTV, it is quite heterogeneous and is, on the whole, like the majority of respondents, near the ideological center*, explains Julien Labarre. *While CNews is mainly watched by viewers who lean to the right and very little by people on the left.* Results that also twist the neck at the idea that the public service would be the leftist counterpart of CNews.

However, it is not possible to establish a causal link indicating that prolonged exposure to CNews leads to the popular vote of far-right candidates. *"My study does not focus on showing that CNews is a partisan channel. It shows more fundamentally than on the other side of the post, its loyal viewers are largely far-right and say so,* concludes Julien Labarre. *And if they watch CNews, it is because they find their account and the way to consolidate their opinions. »*

A highlight, once reflected with the channel's slogan: *"Come with your convictions, you will make an opinion. »*

Immigration and Islam: CNews' great obsessions

- **What the CNews leaders said**

Thomas Bauder, Director of Information of CNews: *"I know that there is a kind of fantasy about reducing themes, we would only talk about four or five themes a day, we would loop on the same topics. [...] The choice of programming and subjects is made permanently according to the news and tempo of the show. »*

- **What the facts indicate**

During their hearing, the drafts of the Bolloré sauce news channel tried to demonstrate that their writing resembled any other, a horizontal editorial staff, where the subjects of the programs are determined collectively and according to current events, without any tropism for the favorite themes of the extreme right.

A speech that does not resist the examination of the facts, and particularly not the meticulous analysis of the channel's headline banners. The headline banners are a fairly faithful mirror of the editorial line of an all-info channel in that they provide a precise idea of the topics most often treated, and the lexicon chosen to discuss them.

With regard to CNews, the fine analysis of the headline banners conducted by Sleeping Giants confirms a treatment of the news dominated by two obsessions: Islam and immigration. The collective that fights against *"the financing of hate speech"* has scrutinized the CNews antenna throughout 2023 and drew edifying conclusions from it. The words "Islam" and "immigration" are thus present 335 days out of 365 on the channel's headlines.

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Immigration et Islam : ces deux thèmes sont présents 335 jours sur 365 dans les bandeaux-titres de la chaîne !

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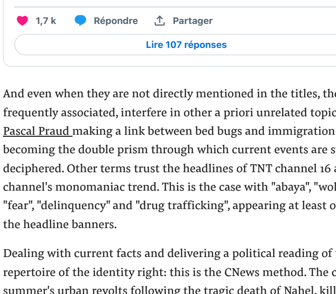

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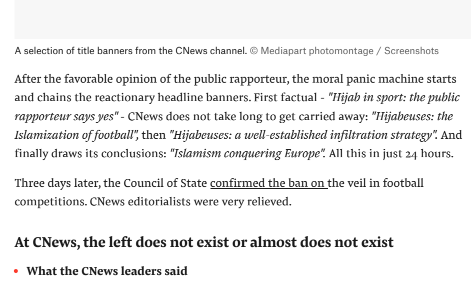
And even when they are not directly mentioned in the titles, these two themes, frequently associated, interfere in other a priori unrelated topics - we remember Pascal Praud making a link between bed bugs and immigration - to the point of becoming the double prism through which current events are systematically deciphered. Other terms trust the headlines of TNT channel 16 and support the channel's monomaniac trend. This is the case with "abaya", "wokism", "insecurity", "fear", "delinquency" and "drug trafficking", appearing at least once every three days in the headline banners.

Dealing with current facts and delivering a political reading of them drawing from the repertoire of the identity right: this is the CNews method. The chain's coverage of last summer's urban revolts following the tragic death of Nahel, killed by a police shot, gives an exemplary illustration.

"Riots", "violence", "looting", "arrests", "parents" and "order": during the ten days of uprisings, the words that frame the debates of the channel's debate trays take up the editorial choice to deal with the consequences without being interested in the causes of the anger of some of the young people from working-class neighborhoods.

Very shortly before Nahel's death established itself as the main title of the news, CNews offered on its antenna a disproportionate place to the treatment of the appeal before the Council of State of Hijabeuses, a collective of young footballers who campaign for the right to play veiled.


A selection of title banners from the CNews channel. © Mediapart photomontage / Screenshots

After the favorable opinion of the public rapporteur, the moral panic machine starts and chains the reactionary headline banners. First factual - *"Hijab in sport: the public rapporteur says yes"* - CNews does not take long to get carried away: *"Hijabeuses: the Islamization of football"*, then *"Hijabeuses: a well-established infiltration strategy"*. And finally draws its conclusions: *"Islamism conquering Europe"*. All this in just 24 hours.

Three days later, the Council of State confirmed the ban on the veil in football competitions. CNews editorialists were very relieved.

At CNews, the left does not exist or almost does not exist

- **What the CNews leaders said**

Thomas Bauder, Director of Information at CNews: *"To create debate, you need contradictory. If everyone agrees around the table, there is no debate. Our objective is to create adversarial and therefore to have a form of pluralism of points of view. »*

Serge Nedjar, CEO of CNews: *"We have the principle: we talk about everything with everyone, and that's what made CNews successful. [...] We claim to be the chain of all opinions. On each subject covered, we have a diversity of points of view and analyses. »*

- **What the facts indicate**

The CNews figures presented themselves in front of the deputies with a message in mind to hammer: their channel is pluralistic and gives the floor to everyone. However, the Bolloré Canal has been given several reminders to order by Arcom in recent years for failure to express the obligation to express different points of view: in April 2023, for example, for not having opposed an opponent to a speaker who made a link between Covid and HIV.

The CNews formula is a lot of extreme right and right, often up to the overdose, and a hint of something else: most often a representative of the presidential party, more rarely an intellectual or an elected representative of the left. To be convinced of this, it is enough to observe the composition of the trays of the chain's flagship programs.

> In six months, four left-wing guests out of 79 personalities interviewed by Sonia Mabrouk.

The independent site Arrêt sur images thus looked at "La grande interview", CNews' daily political meeting, co-broadcast with Europe 1 and hosted by Sonia Mabrouk, listing all the guests between September 1ˢᵗ 2023 and February 29, 2024. He found only four left-wing political figures in the 79 interviews conducted over the same period, or 7.6%. A starving figure given the weight of this political family in the National Assembly, which occupies 23% of seats in the hemicycle.

CNews leaders have tried to justify this gap by invoking the unanswered invitations and boycotts of left-wing elected officials. Except that at CNews, political speech, especially when it is of the extreme right, is often not carried by elected officials, but by editorialists and columnists.

In a study dedicated to CNews and carried out in 2022, media specialist François Jost detailed: *"While guests on the left represent 10% and those of LREM 4%, guests from the right and far right represent more than three quarters of the presences on set (78%). Among the guests, the extreme right is more represented by journalists than by members of parties (RN or Reconquest). The journalists of* Current Values *are the most numerous, then follow those of the editorial staff of* Causeur and L'Incorrect. *»*

CNews, the most sanctioned channel and recalled to the order of the PAF, and by far

- **What the CNews leaders said**

Gérald-Brice Viret, director of the antennas of the Canal+ group: *"We are, on all our obligations, good students since the start of our channels and we have not circumvented our conventions. [...] There is virtually no sanction from Arcom. »*

Maxime Saada, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Canal+ group: *"We have remarks that are not related to* fake news. *Ten remarks in two years is little. »*

- **What the facts indicate**

The Bolloré media, especially CNews and C8, often violate the rules on pluralism, professional ethics and journalistic seriousness. And it is the Arcom, the audiovisual gendarme, who says it. Since July 2019, Arcom has intervened more than thirty times to warn CNews and send it financial penalties. The same goes for C8, called to order more than twenty times, for a total amount of 7.5 million euros.

Failure to comply with the obligations of honesty and rigor, lack of independence of information, insufficient control of the antenna, false information disseminated and lack of rectification. The reasons are diverse, but make it possible to make an unequivocal statement: the Bolloré media are *"the most delinquent in the French audiovisual landscape"*, as mentioned by the media l'Informé.

And when CNews and C8 respect the rules, it is often with a clear desire to circumvent them. The Bolloré group's channels have made a specialty of exploiting the slightest breaches of the rules on pluralism. Thus, to compensate for the overflow of antenna granted to right-wing and far-right candidates, CNews engaged in nocturnal rebalancing and rebroadcast meetings of left-wing and executive candidates in a loop.

A Senate report estimated that 82% of the airtime granted to government spokespersons and 53% of the airtime granted to representatives of the left-wing LFI party was broadcast between midnight and 6 a.m. A method that has earned the chain several calls to order by Arcom. Another string used by the Bolloré media to get into the nails of the rules on speaking time: to invite left-wing personalities still inserted, but without an elective mandate and most often rolling for themselves, such as Ségolène Royal or François Hollande.

Sometimes, it is not only the spirit, but also the letter of the rules on pluralism that is not respected. The CSA, the ancestor of Arcom, had notably placed CNews on notice for favoring the RN in the speaking time in the 2021 regional elections.

Yunnes Abzouz

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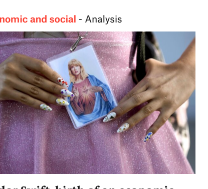
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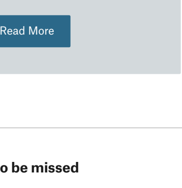
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