

# 'Be Very Afraid'

## Television and *l'Insécurité* in the 2002 French Presidential Election

■ *Raymond Kuhn*

### ABSTRACT

■ This article examines French television's news focus on the issue of *l'insécurité* in the run-up to the first round of the 2002 presidential election. The central argument is that despite the focus on *l'insécurité* in 'background news', television did not set the campaign agenda around this issue. The way in which the news coverage was framed did provide objective support for the campaign themes of Chirac and Le Pen. However, there is no evidence of any partisan bias on the part of newsroom staff, with the coverage driven by news values rather than party political considerations. ■

**Key Words** agenda-setting, French election coverage, French presidential election 2002, French television, *l'insécurité*

The result of the first round of the 2002 French presidential election was described as a 'bombshell' by Lionel Jospin, prime minister and defeated Socialist Party candidate, and as an 'earthquake' by one of the leading national newspapers, *Le Figaro* (Gaffney, 2004).<sup>1</sup> The unexpected passage of the National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, into the decisive second round sent shockwaves not just across France, where the date of 21 April has since entered the pantheon of political reference points, but also throughout the international community. While the elimination of Jospin guaranteed the victory of the incumbent, Jacques Chirac, in the 5 May run-off, the more immediate impact of the first round result was to serve as a powerful reminder of the appeal of Le Pen and his ideas to a

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Raymond Kuhn is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS. [email: R.Kuhn@qmul.ac.uk]

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broad cross-section of the French electorate – almost 5 million voters, representing just under 17 percent of the vote (Mayer, 2002).<sup>2</sup>

Given the importance of these first-order national elections,<sup>3</sup> the performance of the broadcast media would have been carefully scrutinized by politicians, journalists and the broadcasting regulatory authority among others, whatever the results at the polls. Le Pen's first round score, however, served to focus attention even more firmly on television's campaign role, with some channels fiercely criticized for their alleged contribution to the extreme-right candidate's spectacular, if short-lived, electoral success. More particularly, television news output, especially that of the leading free-to-air channel TF1, was attacked in some quarters for its alleged contribution to preparing the way for Le Pen's breakthrough by its unrelenting focus on the issue of *l'insécurité* in the months running up to the first round.

This article examines this charge as part of a broader assessment of television news coverage of *l'insécurité* during this election period. The argument put forward here is as follows. First, while television news output in the run-up to the first round did heavily emphasize the issue of *l'insécurité*, television cannot be held primarily responsible for setting the campaign agenda around this theme. Second, the dominance of this issue and the way in which it was framed by television news reinforced the campaign themes of some candidates, notably Chirac and Le Pen, at the expense of others, including Jospin. There is, however, no evidence of any partisan bias on the part of newsroom staff, with the coverage driven by news values rather than considerations of candidate preference.

The article is organized in three sections. The first examines the concentration of French television news on *l'insécurité* stories in the run-up to the first round of voting. The second section specifically addresses the question of television's campaign agenda-setting role. Part three concentrates on the framing of television news stories with an *insécurité* angle.

### Television news concentration on the issue of *l'insécurité*

Television has for many years been the dominant medium of mass political communication in France, well ahead of competition from newspapers, other print media, radio and, most recently, the Internet (Gerstlé, 2002: 94). Despite a huge increase in the number of channels on offer over the past decade, the established free-to-air networks continue to dominate audience ratings. For example, the main evening news programme on the commercial channel TF1 regularly attracts about 40 percent of audience share (approximately 10 million viewers) compared

with about 25 percent (around 6 million) for its main public service competitor France 2. The 2002 presidential campaign was to a large extent fought out on television, with the news output of the free-to-air channels the primary source of information for most voters. In his television interview to talk about his newly declared candidacy, for instance, Chirac attracted an audience of over 8 million viewers on the TF1 evening news; later in the campaign, a Le Pen interview in the same news programme was watched by an audience of over 9.5 million (Kuhn, 2004).

Yet while no other medium could compete with the sheer pulling power of television, the two largest mass audience channels, TF1 and France 2, devoted significantly less time to election news and debates in 2002 than in the previous presidential campaign in 1995 (Mercier, 2003: 54–5).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while the public service channels provided more coverage of the campaign than their commercial rivals, they were by no means immune to this editorial disenchantment with election content. This confirmed a trend of disaffection for political stories on the part of television news that had been evident throughout the second half of the 1990s (Risser, 2004: 219–50). For instance, in the few years before the 2002 elections, the commercialization of the medium combined with broadcasters' perception of a citizenry less enthused by politics than in the past had marginalized the scheduling of political debate programmes on the mass audience generalist channels (Coulomb-Gully and Tournier, 2001). In addition, campaign news, particularly issue-based, was frequently not the lead story in television news programmes. As a result, 'background news' assumed a greater importance in the 2002 campaign than it might otherwise have done.

In the long run-up to the first round of the election, the dominant theme on the news agenda of French television, particularly on TF1, was *l'insécurité* (Petit and Blachas, 2003).<sup>5</sup> This topic included most obviously stories relating to crime and delinquency, such as drug trafficking, instances of violent assault against the person, robbery and petty theft. However, in the context of the politico-media debate in 2002, the concept of *l'insécurité* was vague, fluid and apparently infinitely expandable. It could apply to anti-social, but not necessarily criminal, behaviour; it was related to popular fear of terrorism in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 in the US (Moscovici, 2003: 170–5); it tapped into widespread concerns in some sections of society about the casualization of employment in a labour market that had become less stable as a result of broader economic trends such as globalization; it was associated with health scares related to food (mad cow disease, foot and mouth), illness

(AIDS) and the environment (pollution); and it was particularly linked to popular fears about the changing nature of French society, with some voters acutely aware and resentful that traditional values and modes of behaviour were apparently under threat with the result that France was losing its national distinctiveness. *L'insécurité* served, therefore, as a catch-all concept for the news media, politicians and opinion pollsters. It grouped together a host of public concerns, which seemed to be underpinned by a vague but widespread anxiety regarding the risks associated with social change. With its strongly negative overtones, *l'insécurité* was also a concept that lent itself to emotional exploitation: it was clearly not value-free, nor, as was to become evident in the campaign, politically neutral.

On the specific aspect of television news coverage of crime, a detailed survey by TNS Media Intelligence revealed that between 7 January and 5 May 2002 there were 18,766 stories with a law-and-order theme in news programmes, giving an average of 987 per week (Amalou, 2002). Across all French media (press, radio and television), stories on *l'insécurité* increased by 126 percent between February and March 2002; television accounted for 60 percent of all media coverage on this theme; and the main evening news programme on TF1 had about twice as many relevant stories as France 2. Moreover, in addition to news coverage, other prime-time television programmes – *Ça peut vous arriver*, *Droit de savoir*, *Appels d'urgence* – prominently featured the topic of violence in society (Cohen and Salmon, 2003: 296–7).

In addition to the daily diet of small-scale crime stories, some specific incidents of violent crime featured prominently in news media coverage in the early months of 2002. These included the brutal killing of a father in Evreux, who had apparently gone to the defence of his son against a violent attack by a gang (though this version of events was later disputed) (Schneidermann, 2003: 51–4); the slaying of eight town councillors in Nanterre by a mentally deranged man, who later committed suicide while in police custody; and the killing of a senior police officer in Vannes. One news story, the unprovoked assault on an elderly man in Orléans by two youths, received massive television news coverage immediately prior to the first round of voting. Television pictures of the injured face of 'papy Voise' took on an iconic status, representing a bruised and battered French society under siege from uncontrollable criminal elements (Cohen and Salmon, 2003: 282–302; Guyotat, 2003).

Gautier recounts how the French news media covered the story of 'papy Voise': the first pictures broadcast and repeatedly rebroadcast on the

rolling news channel LCI (which has close organizational links with TF1) on 19 April, the take-up of the story by TF1 in its main news programme that evening, France 2 belatedly jumping on the media bandwagon the following day and TF1 returning to the story in the evening news programme of 20 April (Gautier, 2003: 15–45). A relatively banal, if shocking, violent assault was thus given extensive coverage on national television news in the hours running up to the first round of the presidential election, the campaign for which had itself been dominated by the issue of *l'insécurité*. It is safe to say that on many news days the 'papy Voise' story would never have made it on to national television news and, even if it had, it would certainly not have had the same impact in terms of its notoriety.

Not surprisingly, in the post-mortem following Jospin's shock elimination in the first round, television's concentration on stories with an *insécurité* angle was called into question, especially by various figures on the left, with some wondering whether television had not helped consolidate and even increase the electoral score of Le Pen (Agacinski, 2002: 108; Mathus, 2002; Sinclair, 2002: 344–5). For example, the Socialist Party deputy, Julien Dray, castigated TF1, calling it first 'TFN' (Télévision Front National) and then 'TF-haine' (TF-hatred). While Dray accepted that there was a genuine problem of *l'insécurité* in France, he argued that television news had decontextualized, sensationalized and accorded disproportionate attention to the issue. As a result, according to Dray, television news gave viewers the impression that 'the entire country, submerged by a veritable wave of violence, had been put to fire and sword' (Dray, 2002). Broadcasters responded to these accusations. TF1 anchorman Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, for example, argued that television news was reflecting a situation that existed in reality. According to Poivre d'Arvor, the news staff had provided their audience with the facts, and criticism of their role amounted to blaming the messenger for bearing bad news (Poivre d'Arvor, 2002). In similar vein, Etienne Mougeotte, vice-chairman of TF1, argued that it was not television that engendered insecurity, but rather the rising levels of crime that justified television's focus on the problem (Mougeotte, 2002). Thus, while one side in this controversy regarded television as partly responsible for Le Pen's success, the other strongly objected to the medium being used as a scapegoat for Jospin's humiliating defeat.

This settling of scores between supporters of Jospin and senior television news staff inevitably generated more heat than light. It is clearly unconvincing to argue that television news was merely reflecting the reality of *l'insécurité* in French society. Official statistics published at

the start of the year had revealed an apparently worsening crime rate across the country, with a recorded increase of 7.7 percent between 2000 and 2001 (Leclerc, 2002). However, on their own the statistics hardly justified the strong focus of television news on the issue of *l'insécurité* in the spring of 2002; in any case, it has been argued that by the time of their publication there was no noticeable year-on-year increase in the crime figures (Petit and Blachas, 2003: 198), further weakening the rationale for television's obsessive concern with this issue.

More pertinently, crime statistics are in any case highly unreliable indicators of 'reality'. Not only do many petty offences go unreported, but the official figures of recorded crime are open to statistical manipulation. For instance, police spokespersons may act as 'primary definers' on the issue in their capacity as official sources for the media and seek to influence news coverage as part of their attempts to gain policy leverage in decisions on resource allocation (Mucchielli, 2002). In response to the broadcasters' 'reflectionist' defence, it is axiomatic that rather than a mirror of events taking place in the 'real world', television news is the end product of a process of selection and construction by news staff, influenced by the interaction of various economic, organizational, cultural and source-related variables (Schudson, 1991). Moreover, there is considerable journalistic evidence that the focus on *l'insécurité* on television news in early 2002 contributed to – as opposed to merely reflecting – public concern. A climate of anxiety is then picked up in opinion polls, whose findings can then be used by the news media to justify their coverage (Barnett and Gaber, 2001: 15–22). In this situation, broadcasters may amplify rather than simply reflect viewers' fears of a breakdown in social order.

In the context of this debate, one might note that by the autumn of 2002 the focus of French television's news agenda had shifted to the issue of *l'insécurité routière* (road safety), which the government had decided to make a high political priority. In the autumn of 2002, the news programmes of TF1, France 2 and France 3 ran 554 stories on road safety compared to 123 during the same period in 2001, a jump in coverage wholly out of proportion with any increase in the number of road accidents (Séry, 2003). This switch in the salience of topics on television's news agenda demonstrates that while television news does not function independently of real-world events, it is simplistic to argue that the former simply reflects the latter. It also suggests that French television news – on this issue at least – took its cue from the government's policy agenda.

## Television and the presidential campaign agenda

The analysis in this section starts from the premise of an interdependent flow of influence involving three sets of political communication actors – political candidates, news media and voters – in the campaign agenda-setting process. One of the problems raised by the agenda-setting literature – which purports to show ‘a correspondence between the order of importance given in the media to “issues” and the order of significance attached to the same issues by the public and politicians’ (McQuail, 2000: 455) – is the direction of the flow of influence between these three sets of actors. This question of influence flow is particularly crucial in the context of an election – a key symbolic and substantive event in representative liberal democracies – where the struggle to affect the campaign agenda is keenly waged and where the role of the media in structuring and shaping public and/or political debate is even more keenly analysed and evaluated than usual.

Various studies have concentrated on the media’s agenda-setting role in elections. While in the path-breaking studies the media are attributed a determinant agenda-setting role for voters (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Dearing and Rogers, 1996), more recent research on British general elections has found minimal or no media impact (Miller et al., 1990; Norris et al., 1999). It would appear that a combination of structural variables, such as the nature of the media and party systems (Swanson and Mancini, 1996), and conjunctural factors, including real-world events, influences the capacity of the media to set the campaign agenda in any particular national election (Semetko et al., 1991), including France (Gerstlé, 1996, 2002, 2003).

This section argues that in the spring of 2002 French television was not primarily responsible for setting the presidential campaign agenda around the theme of *l’insécurité*. Instead, the campaign salience of this issue was largely determined by leading candidate policy positions, to some extent supported by (right-wing) voter preferences as expressed in opinion polls. Meanwhile, the significance attributed to the issue of *l’insécurité* in television’s ‘background news’ coverage can be largely explained through a focus on the operationalization of news values.

The contribution from the main presidential candidates to the construction of the campaign agenda is evident. Ever since his televised address to the nation on 14 July 2001, president Chirac had made clear that *l’insécurité* was for him a major issue on which to attack Prime Minister Jospin and the government of the plural left. Indeed Chirac increasingly based his re-election campaign on this theme, which he

skilfully exploited on various occasions in the run-up to the first round of voting by visiting the scene of violent incidents to commiserate with victims, denounce the perpetrators and condemn the left for its lack of effective measures to tackle the problem of crime and delinquency (Allaire and Goulliaud, 2002: 677–89). These visits were highly mediatized under the supervision of Chirac's daughter, Claude, his communications adviser at the Elysée, to provide positive television images of the president as a candidate relating to the concerns of ordinary voters. In the months leading up to the first round, Chirac thus sought to gain 'ownership' of the issue of *l'insécurité* through a process which was later accurately described as 'the marketing of anxiety' (Cohen and Salmon, 2003: 85).<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, *l'insécurité* was not an issue 'owned' by the left and so Jospin might reasonably have been expected to be more on the defensive on this topic (Moscovici, 2003: 185–8). In part, this was because as the outgoing prime minister with undisputed executive responsibility for domestic policy, Jospin had to defend the record of his government in this area. That record was, to say the least, mixed. Indeed, some commentators had argued before the election that the left had betrayed their core voters by not adopting a more hardline stance on *l'insécurité* during their five years in government (Algalarrondo, 2002). Jospin would certainly have preferred to focus his campaign around the theme of employment, since on this issue the plural left government had a creditable record (Clift, 2003: 158–84), despite a recent rise in unemployment, and where opinion polls gave him an advantage over Chirac. Yet even though employment remained an issue of significant public concern (see later), Jospin never succeeded in firmly moving the news media or campaign agenda on to this territory (Jaffré, 2003: 238). In the agenda-setting battle between Chirac and Jospin, therefore, the former was the clear winner.

Nonetheless, one should also note that the theme of *l'insécurité* was not necessarily a definitive vote loser for Jospin, since opinion polls showed that his credibility with the electorate on this issue was reasonable. The problem was that the prime minister was unable to turn the agenda salience of *l'insécurité* to his partisan advantage (Pingaud, 2002: 169–75). While the fight against *l'insécurité* featured prominently on Jospin's list of campaign priorities and there seemed little to choose between the relevant policy proposals of the two presumed front runners, opinion polls nonetheless consistently favoured Chirac over Jospin on their capacity to tackle this issue effectively.



The campaign agenda-building input from Le Pen is more difficult to pin down, but it would seem to have been minimal. The news media emphasis on *l'insécurité* was certainly one which admirably suited the electoral interests of the National Front leader, who had successfully constructed his public image around a firm stance on the law-and-order issue over a considerable period of time. Le Pen was able to 'surf' on this theme in low-key fashion in early 2002 without having to bear the responsibility of being the prime initiator in bringing the issue to the forefront of the campaign agenda. In this he was aided by the fact that for some media outlets and sections of the audiences the issue of *l'insécurité* was linked to France's changing ethnic composition and in particular was associated with the behaviour of young males of North African descent living in housing estates on the outskirts of large conurbations. Thus, while immigration was not directly a major issue in the 2002 presidential campaign, a race subtext was apparent in at least some media handling of the theme of *l'insécurité* (Mucchielli, 2002: 14). However, while in according the issue of *l'insécurité* such salience and covering the issue within particular frameworks, television news may have given objective support to Le Pen's ideas in the weeks preceding the first round of voting, in its campaign coverage of his candidacy the medium did not accord any particular favours to the National Front leader. In fact, along with a host of other 'minor' candidates, Le Pen was severely marginalized by the news media before the first round as television concentrated on Jospin and Chirac as the two presumed front runners in the race for the Elysée. The short-term, direct influence of Le Pen in constructing the campaign agenda was, therefore, non-existent.

With reference to the relationship between voters and news media, it is noteworthy that during the weeks leading up to the first round opinion polls consistently showed that *l'insécurité* was the issue which most concerned the French electorate (Roche, 2002). By April 2002, 60 percent of voters considered that the struggle against violence and criminality should be the government's number one priority, while only 25 percent thought that it should be the fight against unemployment (Le Gall, 2003: 52–3). However, this changed issue salience on the part of the electorate was *not* a short-term response to the spring 2002 news blitz; rather it was part of a trend in changing public perceptions which can be traced back for several months beforehand. Thus, while the news media may well have reinforced the salience of the issue with the electorate during the early months of 2002, they did *not* set the voters' campaign agenda, at least not in the short term (Brugidou and Mandran,

2003: 53; Mercier, 2003: 74). Moreover, in the light of this evidence of issue prioritization by voters, French television executives could claim that they would have been failing in their public responsibility if they had not to some extent responded to popular concern about *l'insécurité* in their news coverage.

The question of voters' issue prioritization needs some further examination. First, during the 1980s and 1990s, the fight against unemployment had been regarded by a majority of voters as the priority issue for government action. Thus, the replacement of this issue towards the end of 2000 by the fight against violence and criminality as the number one public priority marked an apparently significant shift in voter concerns (Lefort, 2003: 144). Second, and somewhat ironically, it could be argued that the plural left government's success in reducing unemployment during the early years of its five-year term of office (1997–2002) contributed to the apparent reduction in public concern over this issue. Third, however, it should also be noted that while *l'insécurité* was the number one issue for moderate and extreme right-wing voters, including those of Le Pen and Chirac, it came behind unemployment for the supporters of candidates of the left, including Jospin (Le Gall, 2003: 60, 65). Finally, and to complicate the debate even further, not only did some poll evidence put unemployment alongside *l'insécurité* in voter concerns around the time of the presidential election ballots (Le Gall, 2003: 65), but when the more specific topic of crime/delinquency replaced the more imprecise notion of *l'insécurité*, then unemployment actually re-emerged as the number one priority (Cautrès, 2003: 104–10). Given the relative lack of news media attention to the issue of (un)employment during the campaign, these findings suggest first, that voters, particularly supporters of the left, were not primarily responsible for shaping television's news agenda and, second, that the news media certainly did not set the campaign agenda for voters on the left.

As far as the news media are concerned, there is little evidence to support the view of an autonomous media logic structuring campaign coverage in France, whatever the strengths of such arguments when applied to other liberal western democracies (Norris, 2000: 137–61). It is more tempting to attribute the primary role in campaign agenda construction to the principal candidates and to hypothesize that if they had not made *l'insécurité* such a key campaign issue, then television news might not have focused quite so much attention on this topic (Lemieux, 2003: 36). In short, the presidential campaign in early 2002 could be analysed in terms of politicians competing to establish the salience of

electoral issues, with the primary struggle taking place between the two favoured candidates, Chirac and Jospin.

The media focus on *l'insécurité* certainly compelled politicians to respond to the television news coverage; but it did not set the campaign agenda. Thus, when Chirac justified his campaign emphasis on *l'insécurité* with reference to events he had seen on television, this was not so much television setting the agenda for the presidential candidate, as Chirac using news media coverage to illustrate a central theme of his campaign strategy. To put it another way: television news coverage in the weeks prior to the first round may well have influenced Chirac's campaign at the *tactical* level. The events-driven nature of the news coverage was recuperated by Chirac in the context of a campaign where there were no strong ideological differences between the two presumed front runners. However, it did not exert a critical influence on the *strategic* focus of the Chirac campaign.

This raises the agenda-building question of who shapes the agenda of the news media (Brandenburg, 2002). The salience of *l'insécurité* as a 'background news' issue during the first round campaign was not driven primarily by politicians, nor was it politically motivated to assist one candidate at the expense of another. It was certainly not intended to help Le Pen's campaign; but nor was it explicitly designed to assist Chirac's re-election. Whatever the nature of the linkages between TF1 and the Chirac camp,<sup>7</sup> charges of deliberate partisan bias by TF1 television news cannot be substantiated. Moreover, while a higher proportion of viewers of TF1 news than the national electorate as a whole are right-wing and extreme-right in their political views (Peralva and Macé, 2002: 103), there is no evidence of news output being selected and constructed to reflect or bolster the politically partisan views of this large section of TF1's news audience.

The explanation for television's news focus on *l'insécurité* in the early months of 2002 lies elsewhere. The issue was a good news story because it was events-driven, conformed to news values – human interest, drama, sensationalism – could be supported by shocking visual images, attracted audiences in a highly competitive market and supported the brand image of 'the people's television' that TF1 wished to portray. In this context one might note that unfortunately for Jospin the issue of (un)employment conformed to media news values less well than that of *l'insécurité* (Méchet, 2003: 25). The prioritization of *l'insécurité* as a campaign theme by TF1 news can thus be explained with reference to commercial and organizational factors related to the functioning of news media outlets: media-rather than candidate-centred variables.

### News framing of *l'insécurité*

While French television did not set the campaign agenda around the theme of *l'insécurité*, its strong focus on the issue in 'background news' raises questions about how stories on *l'insécurité* were framed in the run-up to the first round of the presidential contest. Framing refers to media influence on the conceptualization of issues by audiences (Iyengar, 1991), whereby a frame selects 'particular aspects of reality (thereby excluding others), organizes those aspects around a central idea and, thus, puts emphases on how to look at and interpret those aspects' (Semetko et al., 2000: 137).

The first point to note in this regard is that for the most part television news stories on *l'insécurité* were not covered within the context of campaign coverage, nor were they dealt with from a policy perspective by specialist political correspondents of the newsroom staff. Instead, stories dealing with issues of criminality and social violence were largely events-driven and covered as general news stories (*faits divers*) by non-specialist correspondents. The organization of the process of news gathering and reporting within television newsrooms thus contributed significantly to the way in which stories with an *insécurité* angle were framed.

Second, the focus was largely on the personalized, human interest aspect of the event. The viewer was encouraged – sometimes explicitly through the mediation of the news anchor – to identify on an emotional level with the suffering of the victim. Thus, the viewer was invited not just to witness the consequences of the event but also to share the pain of the transgressed. Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, the news presenter on the main TF1 news programme on week nights, was particularly adept at drawing attention to the shocking nature of what had taken place, seeking to induce the viewer's outrage through a moralist framing of the commission of a gratuitous criminal act on a helpless citizen. For instance, in its coverage of the 'papy Voise' incident, television news showed M. Voise in his hospital bed with close-up pictures of the elderly man's injured face, while commentary stressed the apparently unprovoked nature of the assault. Moreover, the language employed by the news anchor often played up the horror of the act, frequently in excess of even the assessment made by the reporter at the scene, further feeding the anxiety of the viewer.

Third, the one-dimensional nature of much of the television news framing demonstrated a reluctance on the part of television news editors to highlight the complexity of the issue. Relatively small-scale events

were placed high in the running order, presented as a widespread social phenomenon and disproportionately sensationalized to generate moral panic on the part of the audience. With events-driven news coverage largely forsaking analysis and explanation, the complex sociocultural and economic contexts were ignored or marginalized. Expert opinion tended to come from the 'law-and-order' side of the debate, thus reinforcing the limited nature of the framing. This news framing did not depoliticize the issue of *l'insécurité* – rather the reverse. Treating *l'insécurité* as 'background news' allowed the news anchor to act not just as a commentator but also as an advocate on behalf of the viewer. The implicit – and sometimes explicit – message was that of a society out of control, with politicians apparently helpless to implement an effective response. Thus, although treated in an events fashion, news coverage of *l'insécurité* had an evident political resonance in the context of an election campaign. This was amplified by the failure of other issues to achieve significant prominence as campaign themes.

In the weeks immediately following Chirac's re-election on 5 May, the issue of *l'insécurité* made a return to television news. This followed a period between the two rounds of voting during which, in the wake of Le Pen's success, crime had virtually disappeared from television's news agenda to be replaced by stories demonizing the National Front leader. The news framing of the *insécurité* issue after Chirac's victory stood, however, in stark contrast to the dominant framing prior to the first round of voting. Now the emphasis was on the measures being taken by the new conservative government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin to address the country's crime rate. The hardline Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, orchestrated a series of media events to demonstrate to the French public that the conservative government was tackling the problem with wholehearted commitment (Perrineau, 2003: 218). Television journalists were invited to accompany police raids on suspected criminals, with footage of the authorities getting to grips with the problem provided for the nightly television news programmes. The dominant news framing was now one of a government firmly asserting its authority.

Did the pre-first-round news coverage have any impact in establishing or changing the criteria used by French voters to assess presidential candidates? Media priming (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987) posits that 'frequently covered issues also become the basis for citizens' evaluations of political parties, leaders and institutions' (Semetko et al., 2000: 136). *L'insécurité* was the issue that prior to the first round most preoccupied undecided voters and which they said would determine their voting

choice (Pingaud, 2002: 173–4). It is reasonable to argue that the night-after-night television news blitz contributed to establishing *l'insécurité* as a criterion by which voters judged candidates (Gerstlé, 2003: 40–7). If so, then despite the lack of direct coverage of his candidacy, the background news coverage was thus helpful to Le Pen and to Chirac, but not to Jospin.

In the light of the analysis so far, can one hold French television news responsible for Le Pen's relative success and the concomitant elimination of Jospin in the first round of the 2002 presidential contest? This is a complex question concerning the determinants of voting behaviour, a consideration of which goes well beyond the terms of this article. The main point to be emphasized here is that in any assessment of voters' partisan preferences the contribution of the news media has to be evaluated alongside – and certainly not in isolation from – a range of non-media variables (sociological, economic, cultural and political). With regard to Le Pen's first round result, it is worth noting that the absolute number of votes secured by the National Front candidate in 2002 did not represent a spectacular advance compared to his two previous first round presidential scores in 1988 and 1995 (Duhamel and Jeanneney, 2002). In any case, the shock of 21 April was less the success of Le Pen than the catastrophic failure of Jospin. It would have taken fewer than 200,000 votes for Jospin to have defeated Le Pen in the first round, votes which might have gone to the Socialist candidate if he had fought a better campaign, if the electorate of the mainstream left had not been considerably fragmented by the presentation of so many different candidacies, or if voter turnout had been higher (Cambadélis, 2002). The salience and framing of the issue of *l'insécurité* on French television news during the long campaign period certainly did nothing to assist Jospin's candidacy. But, it was not in itself fatal to his progressing to the decisive second round.

## Conclusion

This article has examined French television's news focus on the issue of *l'insécurité* in the run-up to the first round of the 2002 presidential election. Three main conclusions emerge from the analysis. First, notwithstanding the salience attributed the theme of *l'insécurité* in television 'background news' during the early months of 2002, the medium cannot be held primarily responsible for setting the campaign agenda around this issue. Second, the framing of the issue of *l'insécurité* by television news during this period is open to criticism for its tendency to

emotional dramatization, linguistic excess and lack of complexity in contextualization. In treating the issue of *l'insécurité* in a sensationalist, reductionist and decontextualized fashion, television news failed to act in a socially responsible manner. Finally, while the salience and framing of the issue in television news coverage during the campaign period objectively provided support for the candidacies of Chirac and Le Pen, it would be simplistic and misleading to attribute to television significant responsibility for Jospin's humiliating failure to proceed to the second round run-off.

## Notes

1. Jospin described the result as a 'coup de tonnerre' ('bombshell') in his resignation speech from his campaign headquarters on the evening of 21 April. For the full text of his speech see *Le Monde*, 23 April 2002. The headline 'Le Séisme' ('Earthquake') appeared on the front page of *Le Figaro*, 22 April 2002.
2. The other candidate of the extreme-right, Bruno Mégret, obtained over 650,000 votes in the first round, representing an additional 2.3 percent of valid votes cast. For a sociological analysis of the Le Pen vote see Mayer (2002).
3. The political stakes could not have been higher. Not only were these the most important elections since the 1997 parliamentary contest that had ushered in five years of executive *cohabitation* between President Chirac and a plural left government led by Prime Minister Jospin, but the electoral timetable ensured that 2002 was the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic that the presidential and parliamentary elections were scheduled in advance to take place within a few weeks of each other (see Elgie, 2002).
4. For instance, whereas during the pre-campaign in 1995 terrestrial channels had devoted more than 36 hours in total to direct access for the contenders, this figure dropped to only 26 hours in 2002 (CSA, 2002: 16). The decline was even more noticeable for magazine programmes: from 61 hours in 1995 to around 35 hours in 2002.
5. Other issues – such as employment, the economy, taxation, pensions and the 35-hour week – also featured in television's campaign coverage, but less prominently. In contrast, Europe, health and education never really became major campaign issues. Nor did Chirac's alleged involvement in various financial scandals during his period as mayor of Paris (1977–95) and President (1995–2002) feature prominently.
6. The theory of issue ownership suggests that it is easier for politicians to secure an electoral advantage on those issues they 'own', i.e. where over time they have built up a reputation in public opinion for competence (see Budge and Farlie, 1983).

7. The owner of TF1, Martin Bouygues, is a friend of the leading right-wing politician, Nicolas Sarkozy (Mantoux, 2003: 27–8), who was appointed Minister of the Interior after Chirac's presidential victory. During the campaign, Chirac was generally given kid gloves treatment during his interviews on TF1.

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