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**Framing Françafrique: Neo-colonial framing practices in *Le Monde*'s coverage of the French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic**

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MSc in Media, Communication and Development

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# **Framing Françafrique: Neo-colonial framing practices in *Le Monde*'s coverage of the French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic**

**Lucie Gagniarre**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is intended to unearth potential neo-colonial framing practices used in French newspaper *Le Monde*'s coverage of the military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), two of France's ex-colonies. It is informed by the theory of framing as the ideological packaging of communicative events, as well as by theories of post-colonialism. The methodology employed is Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis, which was applied to a sample of twelve articles, six concerning each conflict, published within three months after the start of the military operations. Each article was coded according to four main themes: depiction of France's involvement, representation of targets of intervention, causes of conflict, and appeals to readers' fears/nationalist sentiment. Evidence found throughout the sample suggests that operation Serval in Mali was portrayed as a 'war on terrorism' and operation Sangaris in the CAR as a 'mission of interposition'. Nonetheless, results indicate that the coverage of both events is inscribed in neo-colonial narratives whereby the involvement of France is framed as a heroic and humanitarian endeavor meant to protect helpless victims. This dissertation aims to contribute to the debate surrounding the possible implications of a text's potential to foster hegemonic ideologies, which in turn may serve to reinforce systemic power inequalities.

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## INTRODUCTION

The era of what we referred to as ‘Françafrique’ has come to an end. There is France and there is Africa. There is the partnership between France and Africa, with relationships grounded in respect, clarity and solidarity – current French President François Hollande <sup>1</sup>

The year following this promise of more transparent and egalitarian ties between France and its ex-colonies began and ended with French military interventions on the African continent. On January 11<sup>th</sup> 2013 operation ‘Serval’ began in Mali and on December 5<sup>th</sup> the French army entered the Central African Republic (hereafter CAR) as part of operation ‘Sangaris’. While the first garnered 63% of public support according to a poll by the Institut Français d’Opinion Publique (Ifop, data from 12 & 13 January 2013), almost half of the French population was opposed to the second intervention in the CAR (Ifop, data 6 & 7 December 2013). The fact that operation ‘Sangaris’ was the second in less than a year may have affected people’s opinion especially in a time of recession where military spending may not be considered a priority. Nevertheless, it seems possible that because “media discourse dominates the larger issue culture, both reflecting *and* contributing to its creation” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989: 3, emphasis in original), this significant difference in support for intervening in conflicts abroad may have to do with media framing. It is not to say that media discourse directly influences public opinion but rather that it is one of the many ‘tool kits’ through which audiences make sense of the world (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989: 10).

Although news is undeniably the fact-based coverage of real-life events, a branch of media and communication scholars contend that journalists do not simply tell the news but that they in fact influence it. Framing theory thus posits that news outlets are not neutral because the information they put out has been moulded for various reasons before being communicated to audiences. News production takes place amidst a particular environment where the emergence of quite straightforward economic, socio-cultural and organizational constraints affects the journalistic field. But framing can also mean the ideological permeation of a news text, and the recounting of a communicative event through discourses that reinforce dominant ideologies.

Media scholars have argued that the representation of conflicts on the African continent are rarely if ever neutral and accurate (Atkinson, 1999; Mamdani, 2007; Nohrstedt, 1986; Shaw,

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<sup>1</sup> This is an excerpt of President François Hollande’s speech in front of the National Assembly in Dakar, Senegal on October 12, 2012. The full speech can be found at <http://www.ambafrance-bw.org/Discours-de-M-Francois-Hollande>

2006). Arguably, the Western media industry has a propensity to inscribe coverage of such issues in enduring neo-colonial ‘packages’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), which serve to reinforce systemic power inequalities. France has always attempted to preserve a particular relationship with its ex-colonies in West Africa, one that is in large part based on a desire to protect French culture abroad. And while these controversial Françafrique ties have seemingly become entrenched in the national construction of history, “framing effects are inscribed in socially shared cognitive structures [...] that people use to make sense of the world” (D’Haenens, 2005: 379). As a result, despite advocating for professionalism and objectivity, French journalists interacting with readers amidst these ‘structures’ may fall prey to slanted representations in their coverage of conflicts such as those in Mali and the CAR.

The following chapter will attempt to theoretically situate this issue by offering an overview of relevant literature concerning framing theory and how it may affect the Western media coverage of conflicts on the African continent. The aim of this discussion is to demonstrate how the white male heroic narrative is potentially present in media discourses of the French military interventions in Mali and the CAR, further reinforcing a neo-colonial dominant ideology. This hypothesis was subsequently tested by applying critical discourse analysis to a sample of *Le Monde*’s coverage of both conflicts and the conclusive results are outlined thereafter.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory has ignited tension between media scholars and journalists, as the latter consider this debated concept offensive to their profession (Schudson, 1989). But, Schudson rectifies, scholars like him did not say that “journalists *fake* the news, we said journalists *make* the news” (263; emphasis in original). Indeed, framing theory originated with the notion that only part of the events happening worldwide make it on television, the radio, or newspapers and that certain facets are emphasized at the expense of others (Entman, 1993: 55). The power of news corporations would thus lie in their role as gatekeepers. But this concept does not account for the influence of journalists on the actual interpretation of communicative events because it relies on a black-box model of news whereby stories arrive ‘prefabricated’ at the gates, only to be handpicked by journalists and passed on to audiences (Schudson, 1989: 265).

While the term has been used to refer to different practices (Scheufele, 1999), Schudson (1989) proposes three categories of framing. The first, which can be referred to as the ‘news value approach’ (Nohrstedt, 1986) is based on the political economy of the media; the news industry is like any other: profit-seeking. Its economic structure is such that that it keeps producing ‘system-maintaining news’ (Schudson, 1989: 268). As such, news outlets choose stories based on whether or not they are likely to attract readers and audiences in order to increase revenue. The second type of framing is more sociological and concerned with the organizational structure of the news world, the relations between journalists and editors, reporters and political officials (Nohrstedt, 1986; Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 1978; and see Gitlin, 2003). Here, questions of structural power and journalistic autonomy are central. To be sure, the argument whereby administrative restrictions and physical constraints affect the coverage of an event can hardly be questioned. In fact, this is very often the one put forth by journalists reporting on the ‘Third World’ to justify the ‘distortion’ of facts; they claim that “restrictions on the freedom of journalists in some of these countries make it impossible to give a fair and correct image of events taking place there” (Nohrstedt, 1986).

The third type of framing, and the one this research project is most concerned with, is determined by ‘cultural symbol systems’ (Schudson, 1989: 266). In this case, macro or micro organizational constraints are not so important. The argument goes that journalists evolve in a social world where news is constructed through the filter of the ‘cultural air’ (ibid.: 278), alternatively referred to by post-structural theorists as discourse, ideology, or symbolic order (Foucault, 1969; Hall, 1997; Lacan, 1966; Said, 1985). Hereafter, we will take ideology to mean “the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Hall, 1996: 25–26). Framing an event in a way that might be somewhat ‘distorted’ is thus “a question concerning different world views, cultural differences and ethnocentrism, entangled with the very kernel of self-image and ideals” (Nohrstedt, 1986: 422). For Gamson and Modigliani (1989), media framing of an issue is part of an enduring package which, “if they are to remain viable, have the task of constructing meaning over time, incorporating new events into their interpretive frames” (4). In other words, the media incorporate issues into a particular ‘story line’; they interpret events through a certain lens that is consistent with the pre-existing frame. Thus, framing is a process of ‘metacommunication’ because the media link communicative events to certain other societal themes, beliefs or notions, thereby providing not only factual information but most notably a framework for its interpretation (Van Gorp, 2007: 65).

Edelman (1993) asserts that this framing or 'categorization' is driven by ideology especially with reference to politics in the media and, more particularly, news about conflicts. When a reporter characterizes a conflict, even when this may seem like a straightforward description of facts, the terms chosen have a political significance for readers and audiences regarding its root causes and potential consequences. According to him it is not propaganda that most effectively influences public opinion but rather news that tends to subtly reinforce and speak to the already present fears and hopes of audiences. He believes that the most ideologically powerful discourses used are those that are perceived as factual and rarely contested by readers, thus reinforcing the status quo of policies. Analyzing the way that a conflict is characterized in news accounts is thus crucial in understanding how it may affect people's responses to policy decisions regarding such events. Moreover, according to the conflict-knowledge hypothesis explained by Tichenor et al. (1999), although increased publicity of a conflict does not directly impact the level of knowledge of events, it does so indirectly by heightening the intensity of the conflict itself. The more intense the conflict, the more people want to learn about it and discuss it with others. Arguably, newspapers thus have a direct effect on the development of a conflict itself.

Finally, based on the dependency theory, people rely on the media more when they cannot gather their own information through first-hand experience (Baukus, 1999). This phenomenon increases during conflicts, especially abroad, when readers are more dependent on the media for information about foreign events. It seems clear then that it is necessary to look at how a conflict was characterized, which terms were used to describe it and what sorts of narratives are embedded in its depiction to understand how it has been framed for a particular audience.

### **Conflict in the media**

According to Allen (1999), the term 'war' has come to hold relatively little meaning since the 1990s as a result of its excessively liberal use in describing a variety of armed conflicts. He questions whether it is repeatedly employed to make events seem grave and worthy of external attention, if not intervention. Because the word's true meaning is not straightforward, he believes it is through context and the description of events on the ground that readers understand what is meant by 'war'. But it is this very contextualization of conflicts that Edelman (1993) finds problematic and even misleading. He notes that generally the news tends to highlight and address issues separately, whilst in reality he believes that a broader understanding of all the societal dynamics and their historical, economic and cultural facets is needed to face challenges effectively. Hence speaking of a war as 'foreign'

minimizes the perception of its potential domestic causes and consequences. Oddly, or perhaps consequently, there is an increasing 'domestication of foreign news' (Carruthers, 2011: 172) whereby the media highlight how nationals are involved in a conflict in order to transform stories about 'others' into stories about 'us'. While the war remains evidently foreign, news outlets will focus on how it affects expatriates on the ground (Atkinson, 1999), military troops or aid workers.

For Mamdani (2007), the journalistic 'naming' of a conflict holds moral value. He perceives a 'depoliticization' of violence that detaches readers from the real implications of a conflict and simplifies events through a good/evil binary. For example, campaigns using words like 'genocide' demonize the enemy and perhaps indirectly justify external interventions, humanitarian or military, by positioning that country as a sort of saviour. Similarly, Hammond (2007) believes "the genocide frame is highly selective in deciding which groups may be considered 'worthy victims,' and it allows violence even against civilians associated with groups defined as evil to be ignored, minimized or justified" (218).

African conflict-related news pieces have increasingly become simplistic and sensational. Hamelink (2011) argues that the media play an important role in the way that they cultivate a sentiment of fear and a feeling of anxiety about the future. Because of the necessity to provide news quickly and 24 hours a day, journalists are inclined to "capture the complex world in easy, fixed frames and interpretation schemes in which emotions and personalities tend to be ever more central" (D'Haenens, 2005: 378). The pace of the profit-driven news cycle leaves little time for comprehensive analysis and thorough understanding of conflicts by journalists who therefore rely on stereotypes, summarization and oversimplifications to safeguard competitiveness (Allen, 1999; Atkinson, 1999; D'Haenens, 2005; Wall, 2007).

Governments and political officials often solicit the media for their war efforts and what starts out as political discourse soon becomes media discourse (Hamelink, 2011). During war times and foreign interventions like the 2001 involvement of the United States in Afghanistan, the media may at first be a threat to governments who do not want the atrocities they might commit to be broadcast (Knightley, 2002). However, quite often because of the difficulty of putting reporters on the ground in such dangerous situations, journalists tend to turn to government officials for information and thus recycle their discourse. Knightley (2002) goes so far as to argue that the scarcity of facts entices newspapers to simply invent stories, or speculate, on what is actually going on abroad. For Gamson and Modigliani (1989), packages are supported by certain sources, which in cases like foreign conflict are largely government officials. Because they are in close contact with reporters, "smart sources are well

aware of the journalists' fancy for the apt catchphrase and provide suitable ones to suggest the frame they want" (7). As a result, journalists have a "tendency to fall into official definitions of an issue" (ibid.: 8).

Wars on the African continent are frequently associated with stereotypical images of "savagery and even cannibalism, [which help] to obscure critical political and economic factors driving the violence" (Atkinson, 1999: 192) and reinforce the idea of Africa as "unstable and chaotic, cruel and inhuman, underdeveloped and backward" (Nohrstedt, 1986). McNulty (1999) speaks of a 'mechanical ethnicization' (270) in African conflict reporting since decolonization because few Western journalists have expert knowledge of the country they are 'parachuted' into (Wall, 2007: 261). The need to label each fighting faction may lead to an overwhelming and faulty characterizing of conflicts as ethnic or religious strife even where this is only part of their root causes (Kim, 2009). For example, McNulty (1999) notes that in Rwanda, "the Western media swallowed the ethnic interpretation of conflict promoted by interested parties locally" (p. 283) therefore reinforcing local propaganda and making it difficult to consider alternative views of the crisis. Also basing her analysis on the Rwandan crisis, Wall (2007) argues that "with the end of the East-West rivalry, the Cold War framework has been removed and now the coverage seems to suggest that violence is simply tribal or inexplicable" (p. 271). Moreover, even where their approach to reporting on African wars is 'diagnostic' or analytical – as opposed to 'evocative' or descriptive – Western journalists tend to focus on the internal causes of the conflict, thereby "put[ting] the lion's share of the blame for Africa's wars, and by extensions, predicament, at the doorsteps of local players" (Shaw, 2006: 39).

While they cannot alone be blamed for policy failures, journalists in fact have a significant moral responsibility in the way that they depict a foreign conflict (Atkinson, 1999). This is especially the case for conflicts occurring on the African continent for which news organizations are quite often the only source of information for Westerners who know little about the region (Wall, 2007: 271). By simplifying the complex root-causes of a foreign conflict and appealing to readers' assumed identity, news organizations often tend, purposefully or not, to legitimize an intervention. The justification of violence comes in large part from this tendency to reproduce official rhetoric that relies on 'othering' (Hall, 1997) the enemy through a 'dehumanizing discourse' (Hamelink, 2011: 46). In 1994 "the Western media, by swallowing the deliberate disinformation that the Rwandan war was ethnically-driven, legitimized that view. Thus the media became accomplices in the power politics of external actors with interests in the region" (McNulty, 1999: 268). At the same time, the Western news consumers positioned themselves in contrast to the 'tribal' or 'backward'

perpetrators of a conflict which “generally fitted into the typical African mould of biblical catastrophes” (ibid.: 270). As previously touched upon, news corporations increasingly rely on such ‘superficial and sensational’ information that they are fed by governments and other influential societal actors, and investigative journalism is slowly disappearing (Allen, 1999). Although “the political spectacle [...] is an arena of delusions [..., the] media hide these chimera from the public eye by creating a symbolic universe that suggests responsibility and genuine concern” (Hamelink, 2011: 47). This was very prominent in the US media post-9/11 through the narrative of the ‘war on terror.’ By speaking of the American people in opposition to the ‘others’, journalists defined and demarcated a relationship that was solely constructed through mediation (Silverstone, 2003).

Carruthers (2011) goes so far as to argue that with respect to foreign crises, the media don’t merely mimic official rhetoric but actually become an obstacle to debate and deliberation surrounding policy decisions by “muting cautionary voices and allowing the rationales of leaders intent on war to pass largely unchallenged. Media thus acquiesce to the ‘war option,’ if they don’t more ardently embrace it” (27). Simplified accounts of events, exaggerations of foreign crises and ‘crude pre-shaped templates’ (ibid.: 172) to mobilize public opinion in favour of intervention in ‘people’s wars’ (ibid.: 142) has since the 1991 Gulf War been labelled the ‘CNN effect’. Contrarily to those scholars who link such a phenomenon to the exponential growth of live news, Carruthers (2011) contends that it is the emergence of the ‘discourse of humanitarianism’ which gained importance during that time and “legitimated, enabled, and valorized interventions” (173). Arguably, the simplistic portrayal of African conflicts could cause readers to become detached, thinking there is no legitimate cause for them and thus that there is nothing the West can do other than send humanitarian aid (Atkinson, 1999). In practice, however, describing a conflict as chaotic and resulting from a country’s backwardness can actually serve to justify an intervention on the grounds that this country requires help with ‘nation-building’ (Hammond, 2007: 217). As we will see in the following section, despite having different targets, most interventions are presented as humanitarian through the discourse of the hero.

### **Humanitarian discourse: Neo-colonialism in African-conflict reporting**

The camp of peace needs to [realize] that peace cannot be built on humanitarian intervention, which is the language of big powers. The history of colonialism should teach us that every major intervention has been justified as humanitarian, a ‘civilising mission’ (Mamdani, 2007, para. 31).

Humanitarian discourse used in conflict reporting to justify interventions is increasingly reliant on the discourse of the hero (Orford, 2003). Characters and plots “serve to make plausible a conservative ending to the serial humanitarian and security crises for which military intervention is proposed as a solution” (ibid.: 158). Readers ideologically identify with the international community and its supposed core values of “peace, security, human rights, justice and freedom” (ibid.: 165) and thus overlook the historical context and power dynamics that surround external intervention in such conflicts. Crucially, the international community is portrayed as having agency, unlike the rogue target states of intervention, which are portrayed as passive or capable only of asking for external aid. What is more, there is no attention given to the fact that the international community might in fact be somewhat responsible for the ‘failure’ of these states. Orford highlights the link between intervention narrative and colonial discourse whereby “difference, particularly ‘racial’ difference, becomes a way of making sense of exploitation” (ibid.: 179). Indeed, while the international community is represented as a white male, the target of intervention has characteristics commonly attributed to black females: “While blackness represents ungovernability and inferiority, femaleness represents lack of agency or potency” (ibid.: 179). Those states remain excluded from the heroic narrative because of characteristics they have been historically associated with: “individuals and groups whose presence disturbs the images of the white male knight are not allowed to share in the identity and agency of the international community by virtue of their presupposed ‘impotence’” (Benedicto, 2013: 110).

This paternalistic ‘heroic narrative’ leads the humanitarian aspect of an intervention to obscure its military and economic facets because it justifies the use of force to come to terms with “racist and ruthless dictators, tribalism, ethnic tension, civil war and religious fundamentalism” (Orford, 2003: 164). Thus, military force seems reasonable and even necessary to deal with foreign conflicts, rendering it a ‘civilizing instrument’ (Carruthers, 2011: 174). Despite being an oxymoron, the term humanitarian war has become equated with humanitarian intervention (ibid.). Gilroy (2004) argues that this “benign and seductive language of humanitarianism” has “even recast the ideal of imperial power as an ‘ethical’ force which can promote good and stability amidst the flux and chaos of the post-colonial world” (66). Indeed, post-colonial scholars would argue that the gravity of the heroic narrative rests with its entrenchment in power structures and how it constantly reaffirms the superior position of Western actors through their portrayal. In Benedicto’s (2013) words:

Acknowledging that the very reading of cultural texts cannot be treated as distinct from their active (re)creation necessitates an examination of the privileged enunciative positions occupied by global media and transnational activist groups and their failure to problematize

the material conditions which make possible the continued use of colonial representations. Responsibility for the entrenchment and popularization of the heroic narrative, its stereotypes and conservative repercussions, is thus dispersed, a product of the agency of multiple actors who serve simultaneously as authors and readers of 'disaster pornography' (108).

It is through the superior position of Western states in terms of knowledge-production that a neo-colonial intervention narrative based on humanitarian discourse flourishes. For Lang (2002) "intervention relies not just on power differentials but on interpretive strength" (197). Western states are affected by a specific recounting of the history of colonialism and have a particular point of view with respect to African conflicts, one that permeates news production. As a result post-colonial critics argue that "news reports are ideological products of Western self-image and superiority which reinforce Western hegemony" (Nohrstedt, 1986: 423). News audiences are familiar with a particular understanding of history and 'imaginative geography' (Benedicto, 2005: 108-109) in which certain states, especially those ex-colonies, are unquestionably and intrinsically thought of as less powerful and constantly portrayed as helpless. Through the previously mentioned practice of 'othering' (Hall, 1997) or 'Orientalizing' (Said, 1985), news stories very rarely challenge this narrative (Benedicto, 2005) and thus reinforce the West's 'cultural imperialism' (Nohrstedt, 1986: 423). Intervention becomes a legitimate and even noble solution to help 'backward' states and McNulty (1999) even argues that "It is not too far from this new media-driven agenda of humanitarian intervention to the argument that decolonization was a mistake, that Africans are unfit to govern themselves" (270).

### **French colonialism and Françafrique**

History and especially that of colonialism affects our everyday understanding of international relations through the ever-evolving formulation of ideology (Nohrstedt, 1986: 431). Nohrstedt's (1986) study on the coverage of the Biafran war found that (i) "for newspapers and magazines in countries with clear policy interests in the conflict, these interests are decisive [because] when their own country's interests are involved, journalists will pay attention to this fact to a considerable degree" (430) and (ii) "colonial ideas still constitute an important part of the way Western journalists understand conflicts in the Third World" (443). Moreover, the frame used to discuss an issue can be more or less easily accepted by the wider public because of its compatibility with 'larger cultural themes' (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989: 5). Indeed, "a package's resonances [...] facilitate the work of sponsors by tuning the ears of journalist to its symbolism" (ibid.: 6). Journalists are thus more likely to inscribe an

issue within an already popular package that may be better established among audiences (ibid.: 9).

Different readers do not encounter an article about a foreign country with neutral eyes; instead, their existing understanding of that country or issue affects how they interpret news. Indeed “individuals bring their own life histories, social interactions, and psychological predispositions to the process of constructing meaning; they approach an issue with some anticipatory schema” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989: 2). And journalists, consciously or not, speak to this particular perception of national and international history, or ‘collective memory’ (Halbwachs, 1968), rather than questioning and confronting it. In fact, “our embeddedness in the history of colonization [...] makes it easier to sustain the ‘imaginative geography’ – to depict images of the helpless of ‘colonial’ subjects rather than of complex webs of complicity and exploitation which would contravene our (modern) view of places as bounded and equipped with ‘internally-generated authenticities’” (Benedicto, 2005: 108-109). It is therefore important to explore France’s relation to its ex-colonies in order to better grasp the history that readers indirectly consent to when they come in contact with news.

France’s colonial system was quite unique in that it considered its colonies to be an integral part of the country. While the colonies were incorporated into the national political system, the ‘mission civilisatrice’ (Lang, 2002: 134) ensured the spread of what is now commonly referred to as the French cultural exception. The colonized were supposedly considered equals with the metropole nationals as long as they fully embraced French culture, which was considered superior and exceptional (ibid.). Thus, “this conception of its empire reveals how an attack on the colonies was not unlike an attack on France itself” (ibid.: 135). Since decolonization the relationship between West African nations and their ex-colonizers has somewhat evolved from a colonial debt, whereby the colonized peoples would owe empires for the ‘gift’ of civilization, to a blood debt (Mann, 2007). The latter refers to a certain feeling of responsibility to repay the colonized for sending troops to fight in the World Wars – such as the well-known *tirailleurs Sénégalais*– and more generally for profiting from colonies’ resources in the past. This form of ambiguous relationship between France and West African countries that used to form its colonial empire is called *Françafrique*. The term first emerged in 1955 and gradually came to be associated with the corrupt, informal and clientelistic relationships between both African and French political leaders and influential businessmen (Bovcon, 2011).

Today, the meaning of *Françafrique* remains unclear but the term is largely used to refer to France’s ‘sphere of influence’ (Bovcon, 2011: 6). For Bovcon (2011), it represents a regime

that, like all others, is constituted by norms and values as well as rules and procedures. The former is “de Gaulle’s overarching political ideology of preserving France’s grandeur” (ibid.: 10; emphasis in original) and the latter “involved institutional, semi-institutional and informal levels, and comprised political, economic [CFA franc zone and trade agreements], military [defence accords] and cultural spheres [Francophonie]” with much of the decision-making lying in the hands of the president (ibid.). France’s cooperation agreements which lead to repeated military interventions in West Africa since decolonization – in 1994, there had already been 35 (Rouvez, 1994) – as well as the Francophonie network which serves to maintain its cultural and linguistic influence in former colonies can be seen as part of a neo-colonial agenda (Glaes, n.d.). In fact, according to Mann (2007), “in Africa as in France one can recognize in recent political-historical discourse a singular obsession with a static yet all-powerful colonialism” (para. 21). Lang (2002) argues that three norms can motivate intervention: liberalism, colonialism, and humanitarianism. As we have seen, historically, the lines between humanitarian and colonizing norms have always been blurred with respect to France’s relation with its (ex-)colonies.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This research project is grounded in theories of framing and post-colonialism. It understands framing in the terms set out by Gamson & Modigliani (1989), whereby events are made sense of through certain packages communicated by media discourse. Within this concept it aims to question the persistence of neo-colonial heroic discourses present in the media’s use of an intervention narrative. A branch of media scholars have advocated for audience reception studies in order to move beyond the pre-eminence of a text and account for readers’ agency in interpreting it. Hall (1980) has accordingly argued that while encoding does in fact affect its production, a text cannot be fully analysed without attention to decoding practices. In other words, a text assumes meaning as a communicative event only within a certain social context. Nonetheless, readers cannot interpret words completely freely; they are somewhat constrained by what the text itself proposes (Fairclough, 1995: 16). Readers are intended to interpret a text based on an assumption by the producer of a shared ‘common sense’ (Fairclough, 2001). Crucially, this common sense is created by the ‘naturalization’ of certain dominant ideologies, which are henceforth perceived by readers as devoid of any ideological penchant that may sustain power inequalities (ibid.). Arguably, this process can be sustained especially in texts that are generally considered neutral, such as news accounts.

Accordingly, this study is intended to decipher the potential discourses that might foster a particular hegemonic ideology within a supposedly impartial, fact-based text, and does not claim to establish causality in terms of readers' perceptions of them. In other words, the focus is on whether or not these texts foster a certain ideology rather than on its potential effects on readers. Textual analysis, which is the methodology hereafter employed in this research, thus remains a crucial part, if only the starting point, for considering the neo-colonial framing process of these particular media events.

## **Research Question**

*RQ: To what extent were neo-colonial frames used in Le Monde's coverage of the French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic?*

In order to resolve the above research question, the methodological application of critical discourse analysis was specifically designed to answer the following sub-questions for each conflict:

Q1 – How was the role of France in each intervention portrayed and explained to readers? Is the discourse of the 'hero' utilized?

Q2 – How is the 'other' portrayed? How is the enemy described? How are the targets of intervention described? (Are Mali and the CAR portrayed as failed states? Are their populations represented as helpless victims in need of external help?)

Q3 – Is the nature of each crisis in both states explained? Are their causes made explicit or on the contrary are they simplified and brushed over?

Q4 – Is there any appeal to readers' fears or nationalistic sentiment? Is the reader invited to relate with one side in a way that may justify the intervention?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Approach and research design**

In order to answer the research question and sub-questions outlined above, twelve articles – six pertaining to each military intervention – published in the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* were studied using Fairclough's method of critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA). An alternative way that framing can be analysed is through quantitative methods such as content analysis. While it enables the researcher to unearth general trends in the coverage of

an event – e.g. continuous use of particular words and images or partial citing of sources – it does not permit in-depth analysis of discursive practices used to describe events. The media has a ‘signifying power’ which in large part is based on language (Fairclough, 1995: 2). In other words, through their representation or ‘packaging’ of events, it gives them meaning by inscribing them in a larger conceptualization of the world. Newspapers thus have the power to foster certain ideologies over others, especially because journalists are often considered as a legitimate, neutral and trustworthy source of information (ibid: 4).

One of the potentials of CDA is to bring to light these ideologies, or “propositions that generally figure as implicit assumptions in texts, which contribute to producing or reproducing unequal relations of power, relations of domination” (ibid.: 14). Indeed, packages within which media discourses are organized are usually identifiable through ‘framing devices’ such as “metaphors, exemplars (i.e. historical examples from which lessons are drawn), catchphrases, depictions and visual images” and ‘reasoning devices’ such as possible root causes, potential consequences and ‘appeals to principle’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989: 3). The aim of this research is in fact to uncover the possible neocolonial discourses present in *Le Monde*’s coverage of the two interventions. Through CDA, this study is concerned with bringing to light a potential power imbalance between France and Mali and France and the CAR, which may or may not be perpetuated through language even in those texts that are meant to be objective and factually based.

But the significance of textual analysis also emanates from the idea that texts do not only shape ideologies but are also a product of them. According to Scheufele (1999), framing can be either an independent variable – framing has some effect on public opinion – or a dependent variable – framing as the result of another process. While some of the five factors that she cites as potentially influencing framing can be categorized in political economy or organizational constraints, she believes “social norms and values” and “ideological or political orientations of journalists” (ibid.: 109) may also play a part in the way that reporters frame events. Similarly, Matheson (2005) claims that “if [news] acts at all like a mirror, it reflects preoccupations within that society, and when it constructs a picture of the world, that picture is often very close to what members of that society already know” (15). As such, if there is indeed in these texts a particular framing of the Mali and CAR conflicts, they are themselves symptoms of a pre-existing packaging of conflicts on the African continent.

It is essential to be mindful of discourse analysis’ drawbacks as a qualitative methodology. Because it relies on interpretation by a single researcher, it cannot in any sense be considered exact and objective. Indeed, just like pre-existing ideologies may influence a journalist’s

work, the researcher's worldviews or 'member's resources' (Fairclough, 2001: 118) also come into play when interpreting a media text. It is thus necessary to note the researcher's background where it may affect a study. In the case of this particular dissertation, my identity as a French national is noteworthy. I had read, viewed and listened to news concerning the conflicts – which actually led to my topic choice – long before starting this research and thus had pre-existing knowledge and an *ex ante* conception of the crisis. My interpretation of the texts hereafter presented may thus have been affected by my beliefs and will undeniably be different from that of someone else's, especially had they no prior understanding of French colonialism, *Françafrique* or the present situations in Mali and CAR. The fact that all articles were published in French proved another challenge to textual analysis because certain words, phrases or metaphors that stand out to French readers might find themselves lost in translation. CDA was applied to the sample in its published form – i.e. in French – and relevant passages were only then translated to illustrate the findings.

Despite its shortcomings, Fairclough's approach to CDA is comprehensive and thorough in that it encompasses three multi-level dimensions of a 'communicative event', from the text itself to discourse practice and socio-cultural practice (1995: 57). It therefore includes not only linguistic analysis but also takes into consideration the production and consumption practice of a text as well as the social environment that surrounds it. For this, there are three stages to Fairclough's CDA: "description of text, interpretation of the relationship between text and interaction, and explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context" (Fairclough, 2001: 91; emphasis in original) which were applied to the articles sampled from *Le Monde*. Fairclough (1995) notes that a researcher may choose to focus on one level of analysis in undertaking CDA. Here, the emphasis will remain with discursive practice – i.e. force of utterances, coherence of texts, and intertextuality – and textual analysis – i.e. vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text structure (Fairclough, 1992: 75). Because these two levels of CDA significantly overlap (Fairclough, 1992: 74), they will be undertaken in conjunction with one another. In other words, description and interpretation results are outlined together in the following section. Sociocultural practice will not be further analysed, as it has already been touched upon in the theoretical chapter on *Françafrique*.

According to the latest report of a yearly study by the media market research firm Audipresse, 43% of the French population aged 15 and over read at least one daily newspaper every day to keep informed (data from 2012-2013). The printed press therefore remains one of the main sources of information for the French. *Le Monde* is the sixth most-read daily newspaper in France (ibid.) and the first if regional, sporting and free newspapers are excluded from the survey results. Importantly, it is the most well-known and established generalist newspaper

in France that vows to uphold “the essential principles of independence, freedom and reliability of news” (*Le Monde* website). Although it would be false to conclude that *Le Monde* represents the totality of what may be found in French newspapers, it was nonetheless chosen because of its reputation as the archetypal French newspaper. The aim of this study is not to generalize the results to all of the national printed press but rather to provide a snapshot of the coverage of the two military interventions by *Le Monde*.

### **Sampling of Data**

The database LexisNexis was used to sample six *Le Monde* articles written about each conflict. The time frames were of about three months from the start of each intervention – only one selected article, concerning operation ‘Sangaris’, was published a day prior to the official announcement of the start of the intervention. The aim of the study was to detect particular neo-colonial frames in the coverage of both conflicts but also crucially of France’s involvement in them. As a result, articles were selected from the start of each military operation and not before they began as little reference would have been made to France’s operations. Articles also needed to be those published closest to the start of the interventions because they are those that would have been most comprehensive in their description and explanation of France’s role in the conflicts, which is what this study is concerned with.

In order to sample Mali-related articles, the search terms which had to be included in the body of the text were: ‘Mali’ and either ‘opération’, ‘intervention’ or ‘Serval’; for the CAR conflict search terms were ‘Centrafrique’ or ‘RCA’ and either ‘opération’, ‘intervention’ or ‘Sangaris’. The aim of the study was to detect potentially ideologically partial framing in supposedly factual and objective news reporting about the conflicts and not to look at journalist’s or other contributors’ personal opinion pieces. Therefore, articles such as editorials, features (‘reportages’) and debates were excluded from the search, as were articles of fewer than 100 words, which were considered too short to be pieces aimed at explaining the conflict to readers. Subsequently, for each conflict, I selected the first six articles related to the crisis and the progress of France’s military intervention in the country. I omitted articles with headlines that did not make an explicit reference to France’s involvement in these countries as well as those written about both conflicts together. All twelve articles were then critically analysed in order to specifically answer all the sub-questions. I annotated the texts and chose passages after coding the articles according to the following themes: ‘France’s involvement’, ‘representation of targets of intervention’, ‘causes of conflict’, ‘appeal to readers’ fears/nationalistic sentiment.’

## RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Following the application of CDA to the sample coverage of each conflict, the results appeared very similar for both and are outlined conjointly in the following section.

### Evidence regarding Q1 – French heroism

The first finding concerns the portrayal of French military troops. At the textual level, elements found in both sets of six articles enabled me to distinguish the framing of France and its troops according to four main themes: France as engaging in humanitarian action, being in control, caring for the local population, and commended for their actions. At the discursive level, it can be said that the texts' portrayal of France is embedded in a heroic narrative.

#### Excerpt #1 (Mali)

Paris has insisted, through M. Le Drian, that Bamako speeds up the installation of its officials in the liberated cities. There must be “actions”, maintains the minister's entourage. In Gao and Tombouctou, it is the International Committee of the Red Cross that brings gas, water, electricity. “The local populations must not have worse living conditions after the French intervention than before” says a defense expert. (*Le Monde*, March 10<sup>th</sup> 2013, translated from French, emphasis added).

Despite not stating it clearly, the excerpt above establishes a link between operation ‘Serval’ and humanitarian intervention. Nowhere does the paragraph evoke the direct involvement of France in bringing humanitarian aid and yet its structure leads the reader to associate the French army with altruism. After establishing that certain cities have been *liberated*, the article evokes the arrival of basic needs (*gas, water, electricity*) to *local populations*. ‘Serval’ thus appears to be enabling such NGOs to sustain their activities, thereby appearing indispensable. More than simply providing such needs that may be sparse during wartime, the French appear to be actually improving the living situation of people despite the war. Indeed, the use of *worse* and *before* without the explanation of the prior situation seems to mean that France can quite literally do no wrong, considering that conditions were already bad before ‘Serval’, and that African's were devoid of even rudimentary necessities.

#### Excerpt #2 (CAR)

With ‘Vasako’, it is no longer solely about going from one seat of fire to another, all the while patrolling in the most sensitive neighborhoods of the Central African capital. But to begin a real “sweep” of the zones set ablaze by hatred: the third district

(ex-Séleka) is targeted, to the south-east of the airport. There, barricades have been erected on the night of January first, despite the imam's appeal for calm. President Djotodia asked 'Sangaris' to protect the De Roux camp where he is barricaded. The operations also focus on the Boeing quarters, to the west of the airport (anti-Balaka), and the fourth and fifth districts (mixed). The aim is to, as quickly as possible, convince the frightened refugees of the makeshift camp in M'Poko airport, whose numbers have reached 100 000 today up from 30 000 early December, to go home. But violence has not sufficiently decreased. So much so that Doctors Without Borders has announced, Thursday, its need to "considerably" reduce its activities at the airport. In addition to this internal exodus another is taking place: the country is drained of its foreigners. The 'Sangaris' force has thus been solicited to protect 900 Nigeriens ready to leave, from the 1st to the 4th of January. Paris has also evacuated 3000 Chadians in French planes upon the request of President Idriss Déby. (*Le Monde*, January 4<sup>th</sup> 2014, translated from French, emphasis added).

The above excerpt refers to the latest operation of France's intervention in the CAR. The role of France in the CAR is similarly associated with humanitarian actions. The information concerning the NGO's difficulty in pursuing work amidst news of French activity in the region creates a subtle link between both. The use of *thus* (line 11) then implies causality insofar as 'Sangaris' is deemed a solution to the exodus problem. French troops are also explicitly painted as a protective shield for the locals. While this excerpt informs readers that they are *protect[ing] 900 Nigeriens*, other articles quote French President Hollande as assuring that "France has no other goal than to save human lives" (*Le Monde*, December 7<sup>th</sup> 2013) and explain that the operation is meant to "intervene in case of aggressions perpetrated against populations" (*Le Monde*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013).

In excerpt #1, France takes on a role of commander through the use of verbs such as *insisted* or *maintains* that evoke action and assertiveness. This idea that France is in control is apparent in every article about Mali, as the French army is generally the subject of action verbs. Excerpt #2 also provides the image of French troops being active on all fronts, lending a helping hand to everyone in need. This is made clear in the very beginning with the phrases *no longer solely about* and *all the while*, which imply a multiplicity of activities; France is at once *sweeping, targeting, protecting, convincing, and evacuating*. The troops are further referred to as 'the new French policeman' (*Le Monde*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013), a phrase that evokes an established commanding position. Finally, in Excerpt #1, M. Le Drian, minister of defense, speaks for *Paris* altogether. The capital cities of France and Mali are personified, which creates the image of two people interacting. While the former is proactive and providing instructions, the latter is rather passive, receiving help lethargically (implied by *speed up*). This is also evidence for the following finding, that of both 'Serval' and 'Sangaris' troops being portrayed as caring and nurturing.

According to Fairclough (1995), a metaphor is "significant in terms of the newspaper's

implicit claim to a relationship of solidarity and common identity with the audience. It draws upon [...] an evocative theme of popular memory and popular culture, claiming to share that memory and culture” (71). Here, the readers are likely to relate to France’s role as caregiver, thereby legitimizing its involvement. Throughout the whole sample concerning the intervention in Mali, France’s role is described as “put[ing] in place inter-African forces” (*Le Monde*, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2013), “accompany[ing] a rebuilt Malian army” (ibid.), or “leaving a security situation that is manageable by the African force mandated by the UN” (*Le Monde*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2013). Such patronizing phrases are also found in the articles about the CAR. The aim of the intervention, readers are told, is in part to “give the Misca time to get stronger” (*Le Monde*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013) while “Almost 1500 residents of Bangui had already sought refuge with the French contingent” (*Le Monde*, December 7<sup>th</sup> 2013). These images are part of a paternalist neo-colonial narrative whereby Western states takes it upon itself to ‘civilize’ and care for a ‘developing’ country. The metaphor of nurturing is further apparent in the following excerpt.

#### Excerpt #3 (CAR)

France, says the President, answers to a “country that cries for help.” Before entering unilaterally in Mali on January 11<sup>th</sup>, Paris had asked that interim President Diocounda Traoré present a formal call for help, a letter which he had written per the Elysée’s demand.

Mid-day Thursday in Paris where the executive was preparing itself for the UN’s approval, the Central African prime minister Nicolas Tiangaye has, too, requested the “immediate intervention” of France. (*Le Monde*, December 7<sup>th</sup> 2013, translated from French, emphasis added).

This passage evokes the imagery of an adult caring for crying children. Fairclough (1992) notes that the “choice of representing verb, ‘speech act’ verb, is always significant [...] it often marks the illocutionary force of the represented discourse, which is a matter of imposing an interpretation upon the represented discourse” (120). Although it has multiple meanings, the verb *requested* in French (*réclamer*) is often associated with the pleading demands made by a child to a parent.

Textual evidence found throughout the sample also suggests France’s involvement as both sacrificial and appreciated. Indeed, while an article mentions that Paris has “thrown itself alone in the battle” (*Le Monde*, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2013), the following excerpt depicts the French army in Mali as acclaimed by locals.

#### Excerpt #4 (Mali)

As it left Bamako, the line of tanks of the French army was applauded one last time by

the bystanders of the Malian capital, on the afternoon of Tuesday January 15<sup>th</sup>, before going north. One last encouragement for the road, in the atmosphere of general relief that reigns in the city ever since the progress of Islamist armed groups was stopped in Konna by French airstrikes. (*Le Monde*, January 17<sup>th</sup> 2013, translated from French, emphasis added).

This paragraph is the beginning of an article that demonstrates the indistinctness of the media's 'order of discourse' (Fairclough, 2001: 23). For illustrative purposes, it is useful to note that the following sentence of the article begins with: "Now, operation 'Serval' is entering its land phase starting with the city of Diabali, 400 kilometers to the north, where an Islamist breakthrough took place Monday [...]" (*Le Monde*, January 17<sup>th</sup> 2013). The 'style' of the article is very ambiguous: its 'mode' is evidently written, but its 'rhetorical mode' can be regarded as descriptive and explanatory while its 'tenor' varies between formal and casual (Fairclough, 1992: 127). Indeed, Excerpt #4 seems to be telling a story as readers are painted a picture and faced with a general positive atmosphere rather than given hard facts. There is a sudden break in writing style marked by *now* as verb tense switches from past to present. The following stage of the intervention outlined in the next sentence seems evident and justified by the recounting of the operation's aforementioned positive outcomes.

Moreover, the repetition of *one last* not only implies that the French troops have been acclaimed multiple times prior but also evokes a sense of nostalgia on their part at the thought of leaving. This sense of closeness and supposed affection that the people of Bamako are described as having for the French army is also suggested through the use of the colloquial phrase *for the road*. In French it immediately recalls the well-known spoken expression *un dernier pour la route*, which refers to having one last drink with friends before leaving. Overall, the French intervention is portrayed as appreciated rather than forceful.

### **Evidence regarding Q2 – The weakness of 'others'**

Textual analysis of the sample suggests that the portrayal of non-French actors in the conflicts operates at a discursive level, inscribed in a victim narrative using practices of 'othering.' The description of Malians, their military forces and the inter-African troops of the Misma (African-led International Support Mission to Mali) stands in stark opposition to that of the French troops as it often evokes weakness. The following excerpts illustrate this finding.

Excerpt #5 (Mali)

If the Malian army collapses facing lines of pick-up trucks accounting for not even 2000 men, the consequences could be dire. Konna, overtaken by the Islamist coalition, is nothing but a big hamlet. (*Le Monde*, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2013, translated from French, emphasis added).

#### Excerpt #6 (Mali)

But the Misma lacks everything: shoes, food, pick-up trucks, weapons. In Bamako, its operation PC is lost in the middle of a large room. A dozen officers work with a handful of laptops. (*Le Monde*, March 10<sup>th</sup> 2013, translated from French, emphasis added).

The incompetence and deficiency of Malian forces is made quite explicit in both passages. Excerpt #5 hypothesizes what is likely to happen to the Malian army despite there being no factual evidence put forth to justify its *collapse*. It is pure speculation that is made to seem highly plausible despite the technical simplicity of the task ahead. Indeed, the derisory enemy is described as merely *lines of pick-up trucks* capable of attacking *nothing but a big hamlet*. The use of the term *hamlet* in French (*bourgade*) is belittling if not offensive and seems to reinforce the absurdity of an army not being able to protect it. Similarly, the Misma is portrayed as devoid of even the bare necessities (*shoes, food*). Rather than exact figures, the imprecise terms *dozen* and *handful* imply disorder, a trait contrasting with what is expected of the military. The logistical disparity with the French army is constantly touched upon throughout the six articles as the Malian and Misma troops are regularly described using terms associated with desolation: ‘worrisome void’ (*Le Monde*, March 10<sup>th</sup> 2013); ‘remained bare’ (ibid); ‘non-existent’ (*Le Monde*, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2013).

Similarly the Misca (African-led International Support Mission to the CAR) is described as undersupplied and unskilled as can be seen in the following passages.

#### Excerpt #7 (CAR)

The Misca has reached about 4000 men; Burundi, Morocco and Rwanda have just sent soldiers. But she still has neither a chief of staff capable of coordinating these contingents nor logistical support. (*Le Monde*, December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013, translated from French, emphasis added).

#### Excerpt #8 (CAR)

Stationed in the Central African capital much longer than expected in the initial plans, the 1600 French soldiers have still not been able to be deployed in the rest of the country, except in Bossangoa and in a few areas covered by the special forces. The arrival of 900 Burundian soldiers in the Misca should soon enable to send Sangaris in other areas of the country, the chief of staff hopes. (*Le Monde*, January 4<sup>th</sup> 2014,

translated from French, emphasis added).

Just like the description of Malian forces, the approximation of the number of Misca soldiers to *about 4000 men* reinforces the image that they are disorganized and ill-prepared. At the same time, the construction of the second sentence of excerpt #6, using the negative form ‘neither/nor’ further emphasizes the deficiency of these troops. According to Fairclough (1992), “negative sentences are often used for polemical purposes [and] carry special types of presupposition which also work intertextually, incorporating other texts only in order to contest and reject them” (123). Here, the phrase assumes readers’ presupposition concerning basic military requirements (*chief of staff* and *logistical support*). The Misca’s inadequacy is not stated directly; it is implied by challenging this presupposition – i.e. pointing out the absence of such requirements.

In excerpt #7, the emphasis is placed on informing the reader of the negative side effects of the Misca army not being ready. French troops are unable to carry out their work correctly and according to schedule (*much longer than expected*). Moreover, by using the hypothetical *should* instead of *will* as well as *hopes* instead of a more neutral term such as *said*, the article implies uncertainty and the unreliability of the Misca forces.

Finally, the Malian army is portrayed as untrustworthy and even harmful. The following excerpt describes Malian forces as taking part in looting.

Excerpt #9 (Mali)

Abuses on the part of military men are the other important potential menace. A humanitarian source, in Bamako, whose teams are very present in this area, expressed his ‘fear of seeing bloody score-settling happen, particularly in Gao’, and adds: ‘The Malian forces will need to be controlled by their superiors when they head north. We know their ability to loot and rape, comparable to the Islamists.’ (*Le Monde*, January 17<sup>th</sup> 2013, translated from French, emphasis added).

The extract portrays the Malian forces as criminals themselves. In doing so, it ‘essentializes’ (Hall, 1997) all parties in the conflict, showing them as one and the same and attributing behavior to their very identity; *we know* implies a recognized truth. Because the source is *very present in the area*, the reader is inclined to trust that he/she is knowledgeable and the fact that he/she takes part in humanitarian action leads to believe that he/she has good intentions, thereby legitimizing his/her account.

**Evidence regarding Q3 – Elusive reasons behind conflicts**

Passage #8 also reveals the general trend in the coverage of the Malian crisis with respect to the causes of the conflict. Few textual elements point to an in-depth explanation of the reasons behind the situations Malian and CAR. These are never addressed directly, hardly explained to readers and seem to remain very unclear even to the journalists themselves. The first article (chronologically) attempts pedagogy concerning the conflict but mentions a situation ‘hard to understand’, ‘hazy’ and poses unanswered questions about the possible scission of the Ansar Eddine enemy faction (*Le Monde*, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2013). Hardly any explanations about the nature of the crisis are offered except for the occasional mention of an ‘increase in intercommunity tension’ (*Le Monde*, March 10<sup>th</sup> 2013). Similar if not identical phrases are used to describe the CAR conflict. While one article states that the ministry of defense believes the ‘level of intercommunity hatred has been underestimated’ (*Le Monde*, February 13<sup>th</sup> 2014), another talks of ‘score-settlings between pro and anti-Séléka militias’ (*Le Monde*, December 7<sup>th</sup> 2013). Causes of the crisis remain unclear despite allusions to ‘Christians against Muslims, criminal gangs against farmers’ (*Le Monde*, February 13<sup>th</sup> 2014), ‘ethnic cleansing’ (ibid) and a ‘denominational turn of the conflict’ (*Le Monde*, January 4<sup>th</sup> 2014), which seem to attribute the fighting to religion. At a discursive level, these elusive descriptions of the causes of each conflict are part of a set of narratives that package African conflicts as inherently tribal, ethnic or religious by ‘stereotyping’ the other and ‘naturalizing’ difference (Hall, 1997).

#### **Evidence regarding Q4 – Appeal to readers’ fears and nationalistic sentiment**

At the textual level, evidence shows that readers are assumed to share the journalists’ presuppositions. At the discursive level, by establishing this link the producer appeals to and in a sense activates audiences’ French nationalism for the text’s interpretation, thereby facilitating their acceptance of the military interventions. To begin, one article about the second phase of the Malian operation states that “France has accelerated the mobilization of its European partners, of the African forces in the region, and of its north-American allies, in a ‘war against terrorism’” which, the journalist notes, means the conflict has become ‘a global war’ (*Le Monde*, January 19<sup>th</sup> 2013). The use of quotes around ‘war against terrorism’ without actually attributing these words to anyone enables the writer to distance herself from a term that immediately evokes American President Bush’s controversial ‘war on terror’ discourse (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 119–120). And yet its mere mention plants the idea in readers’ minds and inscribes the events in a pre-existing frame, through intertextuality, that has been used in the past to justify foreign policy decisions. The reader may be more inclined to relate to the fear of a ‘global war’ and deem the intervention legitimate.

The appeal to readers' anxieties is also present in an article that begins by informing audiences that "the Islamist sect Boko Haram [has abducted] seven members of a French family including four children" (*Le Monde*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2013). This type of 'domestication' of the conflict (Carruthers, 2011: 172) is similarly discernible in the coverage of the CAR intervention. One of the articles quotes M. Le Drian as saying: "African countries must ensure their security on their own, but we cannot let them face alone threats that could directly concern us" (*Le Monde*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013). All the while attributing 'threats' to a generalizing group seemingly encompassing all 'African countries' this also serves, purposefully or not, to instill a sense of fear in the readers.

Finally, in the coverage of the CAR conflict, explicit references are made to the Rwandan crisis: "memory collides with news as the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide gets closer" (*Le Monde*, February 13<sup>th</sup> 2014). Not only does this sentence assume that the reader has prior knowledge of France's role in the Rwandan crisis but it also relies on presuppositions – the fact that it was in fact a *genocide* – that must be taken at face-value by readers if they are to make sense of the article. These are "effective ways to manipulate people, because they are often difficult to challenge" (Fairclough, 1992: 120); they "postulate interpreting subjects with particular prior textual experiences and assumptions, and in so doing they contribute to the ideological constitution of subjects" (ibid.: 121). Readers are thus more inclined to understand the reasons for intervening, namely to not relive a 'new' Rwandan *genocide* and be accused of 'laissez-faire' (*Le Monde*, February 13<sup>th</sup> 2014).

In sum, the intervention in Mali is overall framed as a 'war on terrorism' aimed at combatting Islamists and jihadists while the role of France in the CAR is framed as a 'more modest' (*Le Monde*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013) 'mission of interposition' (*Le Monde*, February 13<sup>th</sup> 2014) where French forces are merely a buffer between the two fighting factions. Nonetheless, elements present in both sets of texts constitute evidence of underlying neo-colonial discourses. The targets of intervention are labeled as 'failed states' (*Le Monde*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013; *Le Monde*, march 10<sup>th</sup> 2013) whose leaders plead for France's involvement; France's role is inscribed in a heroic narrative. French troops are similarly portrayed as in control of difficult situations, facilitating humanitarian undertakings and 'cleaning-up' (*Le Monde*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013; *Le Monde*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2013) until the Malian/Misma and Misca forces are capable of taking matters into their own hands. What is more, description of the fighting factions fall prey to 'essentializing' and 'othering' practices while the causes of both conflicts are brushed over or oversimplified despite mentions of inter-group friction, religious strife and acts of revenge. Finally, reference to the conflict spreading and threatening the French community, be it by

affecting innocent nationals or becoming a global war, may increase readers' concern and, if not justify the interventions, at least rationalize foreign policy reasoning.

## DISCUSSION

The use of neo-colonial heroic narratives in the coverage of military conflicts in French ex-colonies is one that requires attention because of its potential impact on the naturalization of dominant ideologies that sustain systemic power inequalities. In the production of news texts, “the stake is more than ‘mere words’; it is controlling the contours of the political world, it is legitimizing policy, and it is sustaining power relations” (Fairclough, 2001: 75). Despite it being certainly unintentional, the (often not so) subtle portrayal of France as heroic in parallel to practices of victimization of the Malian and CAR states and ‘essentializing’, ‘othering’ and dehumanizing tendencies in descriptions of enemy groups serve to render commonsensical the dominant ideology of France’s neo-colonial influence on and ascendancy over its ex-colonies. As a result, this worldview becomes hegemonic in the Gramscian sense of the term, potentially leading to consent regarding the legitimacy of foreign policy, here the military interventions. Indeed, this ‘packaging’ of the conflicts renders it ever more difficult for readers to conceive of the issues in alternative, counter-hegemonic ways.

This study does not seek to question journalists’ objectivity and professionalism, nor to disregard as futile the physical constraints that are often said to be the cause of framing and that surely come into play ever more in reporting on an armed conflict. But most importantly, nowhere does it imply that journalists are unaware of or indifferent to the fact that their work may be somewhat biased. *Libération* journalist T. Hofnung in fact acknowledges that with respect to the African continent, French journalists tend to cover conflict-related issues disproportionately compared to other events; it is a “flaw that we have difficulty ridding ourselves of, one that is heightened in the case of French ex-colonies” (personal communication, July 29<sup>th</sup> 2014). Similarly, a journalist from *Le Monde* concedes: “francophone countries, former French colonies, are evidently topics of interest, because their news resonates strongly within collective memory” (personal communication, June 17<sup>th</sup> 2014). Nonetheless, the findings of this research project are meant to go beyond framing as a gatekeeping practice and shed light on the presence of dominant ideologies sustained through language itself. In fact, “frames often are unnoticed and implicit, their impact is by stealth [and] may, in that respect, be regarded as a power mechanism in their own right” (Van Gorp, 2007: 63). The focus of this project is on this ‘invisibility’ of underlying ideologies which “are brought to discourse not as explicit elements of the text, but as the background

assumptions which on the one hand lead the text producer to ‘textualize’ the world in a particular way, and on the other hand lead the interpreter to interpret the text in a particular way” (Fairclough, 2001: 71).

If systemic power inequalities are ever to be challenged, the use of language is not to be overlooked as a place of struggle in which dominant ideologies are reproduced. Benedicto (2013) contends that this requires in part a thorough revision of the West’s portrayal as it “is only by presenting the role of the international community in producing the material basis of suffering that the performance of the hero-subject can be unsettled and his/our bankruptcy exposed” (109). In other words, there must be at once self-reflexivity on the part of Western states who must denounce a selective recounting of history to acknowledge the colonial roots of current African conflicts, a rejection of dichotomous characterizations of the West versus ‘the rest’ along simplistic good/evil binaries (ibid.) and a decline of state-centrism in favor of micro-level human-centric narratives (Lang, 2002). Remaining wary of technological deterministic claims, I would further like to suggest that the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) would also prove valuable in the dismantling of neo-colonial discourses by providing an avenue for ex-colonies to counterbalance the hegemonic knowledge-production of Western media by improving their power of representation.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a desire in France for the nation to rid itself of the polemic that surrounds its arguably neo-colonial influence over ex-colonies since their independence. Whatever policies she may put forth in order to prove the good intentions verbalized by the French President in Dakar may not be sufficient to combat power inequalities that persist. Indeed, analysing the framing of communicative events on the African continent by Western media can also shed light on the persistence of deeply embedded neo-colonial discourses. As this research has attempted to demonstrate, *Le Monde’s* coverage of the recent French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic largely portrays France as a hero intervening to save deprived victims from the Islamist threat or a seemingly religious feud. The sample articles contain little in-depth explanation or contextualization of the conflicts and in conjunction with an appeal to readers’ feelings of fear and nationalistic sentiment, seem to justify France’s decision to get involved.

Importantly, the fact that these ideologies are present in newspaper articles, apparently objective sources of information, may reinforce their naturalization and further cloak them as

common-sense. They may then have implications that lie in the potential real-life consequences of such persistent ideologies. Indeed, conceiving of France as legitimate in its involvement in ex-colonies may perpetuate the modernization approach to development, whereby countries require external help to move through the linear steps of development and achieve the status of Western ‘developed’ states. This conception of development could in turn affect development programs on the ground.

The methodology employed in this project does not enable one to generalize the results and assume a persistently neo-colonial ideology is extant within all French news coverage of African conflicts. It provides evidence for their presence in this particular snapshot of the coverage of these specific events. The effects or causes of such packages employed can thus not be incurred and further research is required to prove their actual implications taking into consideration audience reception theory. Using framing as either a dependent or independent variable in multi-method studies – e.g. combining critical discourse analysis with in-depth interviews – could shed light on a causal relationship between framing and opinion formation.

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