French press, public opinion and the assassination of Franz Ferdinand (28 June-3 August 1914)

How French society entered the Great war?
Unlocking sources

• The aim of this communication is quite simple: how new ways of getting access to digital contents (through technical process such as OCR and NER) give us the opportunity to understand how French society entered the First World War in August 1914?

• Regarding this topic, I have studied both private archives and French press issues made available through the project Europeana 14-18 (chronologically from the 29 of June, the day after the assassination of Franz-Ferdinand, heir of the austro-hungarian monarchy in Sarajevo to the 3rd of August, the day of the declaration of war of Germany on France)

• I have used two different technologies I will come back later on: the optical recognition of characters and the named entities recognition, a process we have developed thanks to another European project, Europeana Newspapers
Unlocking sources

• One of the main concern for me was also to assess the impact of the use of these automated processes applied to historical sources

• This question is quite important as I strongly believe that the use of such technical process modify deeply our access and our understanding of historical sources (in other words how automated process lead to a new way of writing history)
Starting point

Emile
Spring 1914
Starting point

Letter sent to his family in law
31st of July 1914
French historiography

• J-J Becker, *How French entered the war*, 1977

• If we consider the succession of events from the assassination of the archduke Franz-Ferdinand the 28th of June in Sarajevo to the declaration of war on France the 3rd of August, the point of view promoted by J.J. Becker seems quite logical

• In July 1914, the European continent is in peace for 43 years (since the end of the franco-pussian war of 1870-1871)

• « The tragedy of Sarajevo will not lead to a major european crisis ». Sir Arthur Nicholson, 15th of July 1914
French historiography

• 20-23rd of July 1914. State visit of The French President (Raymond Poincaré) and the French Prime Minister (René Viviani) in Russia

• 24th of July. Declaration of war of Austria on Serbia

• 29th of July. Raymond Poincaré and René Viviani come back to France
  • Could easily explain why the French public opinion was not fully aware of the seriousness of the situation until the very last days of July
The sources

L’Action française
Front Page
29th of June 1914
The sources

L’ Aurore
Front page
29th of June 1914
The sources

La Croix
Front Page
30th of June 1914
The sources

Le Figaro
Front Page
29th of June 1914
Sources

L' Humanité
Front page
29th of June
Sources

Le Petit Journal
Front page
29th of June
Sources

Le Temps
Front Page
29th of June
Questioning the sources

• I have applied two different methods to the processing of this corpus
  • The Optical Recognition of Characters
    • By the mean of two separate key words
      • Assassination of Franz Ferdinand
      • Sarajevo
  • The Named Entities Recognition
    • a process which allows to create words categories
    • allows semantic relationships between different words or group of words within the same paragraph
• Applying the two methods, I performed a quantitative analysis of the occurrences of the words selected
Results
Results

• The first process (OCR)
  • The occurrences of the two words/group of words selected drop one week after the event in the French press
  • Fits quite well with the point of view promoted by Jean-Jacques Becker in his study
    • French society has been totally surprised by the outbreak of the war as they had no access to reliable informations

• The second process (NER)
  • Gives very different results
    • If the occurrences of the words/group of words decrease, the number of occurrences itself remain high
Conclusion

• At least in the cities where readers were numerous and the access to the press easy
  • The seriousness of the crisis could be known long before the return of Raymond Poincaré and René Viviani to France the 29th of July

• We can consequently draw a quite different portrait of the French society during the last month before the tragedy
  • Up to some extent, as for Emile, the French population was aware that the war became almost unavoidable
  • It also explains why the pacifist movement led by Jean Jaurès, very strong in France, was unable to prevent the war