



Laurent Mauriac, Pascal Riché

Online journalism: Transposition or transformation?

An interview with Laurent Mauriac and Pascal Riché

Print publications moving online have often failed, some for financial reasons, others through misunderstanding the new medium. A few still try to use the Internet as a broadcast medium; many, seeing the rise of blogs, "citizens' journalism" and other participatory structures, worry about the future for the professional journalist. Laurent Mauriac and Pascal Riché, members of the team behind French politics website *Rue89*, explain how they attempt to bridge the gap between print and the Internet by encouraging contributions from experts and web users, but using journalists to coordinate, direct and edit this participation.

Esprit: The effects on the press of the rise of the Internet are no longer simply a matter of speculation or fleeting fashion. Its impact is being felt in every area of the media, but journalists are, as yet, unsure about just how it will affect their work and their relationship with their readers. When you launched *Rue89* in May 2007, with Pierre Haski and Arnaud Aubron, you were gambling on being able to invent a new kind of medium that would not just transpose an existing model onto a new technological platform.

Laurent Mauriac: Yes, it's true that what we are trying to develop is a hybrid that brings together the work of newspaper journalists with guided participation by experts and Web-surfers. It's what we refer to as three-way information. We are thinking of a new format that falls somewhere between information entirely produced by professionals, such as you find on news sites produced by the media, and information entirely produced by surfers, such as you find on interactive Web platforms, sometimes known as Web 2.0. Journalists no longer have a monopoly on information and we have to learn how to respond accordingly.

Esprit: Is this crisis specific to the French press, which has always been vulnerable, or is it a phenomenon linked to the Internet and therefore worldwide?

Pascal Riché: The traditional press is being shouldered aside by the Web all over the world, even if the decline in daily newspapers is not a result of the Internet. (Some people would claim that it began back in the 1920s!) But in France, the extent of the impact of the Internet has been increased by the wider context: newspapers are suffering more and more and, when we began to think about our project, what we had in mind was the situation that they were in; we were thinking in particular about *Libération*. This crisis is not solely to do with high manufacturing and distribution costs. At its heart there is the problem of a loss of confidence in the traditional model. People still want to be informed but the media are not fulfilling their expectations. People want to get their

information in a different way. The Internet has changed the balance of power; readers are trying to find a new relationship with the media; they are more critical, they want to conduct a dialogue or sometimes to bypass the medium altogether. Young people have already adopted this Internet culture and that's the way that we have decided to go.

Esprit: How did the traditional media get into the Internet?

LM: You have to look at the history of online media, which now goes back 15 years. In 1994, the first site in France linked to the traditional media appeared. It belonged to *Le Monde diplomatique* and was quickly followed by one set up by *Libération* in April 1995, which was actually nothing more than a multimedia dossier. These were just initiatives launched by small teams and not part of any strategic planning by the papers' managements. *Le Monde* joined in towards the end of 1995. At the time, the Internet seemed like a device for the initiated, whereas Minitel was still going strong. As far as the public at large was concerned, the Internet was a fiendish contraption, associated with paedophiles and scandalous operations such as the online publication of Dr Gubler's banned book about President Mitterrand. Paid online services, such as CompuServe or AOL, appeared to be a place of refuge for the media faced with the jungle of the Internet. Webzines began to appear: *Scarabée*, *La rafale*, etc. In 1998 we had the Internet "bubble": new initiatives followed thick and fast, advertising appeared to be manna from Heaven, all the media groups stepped up their initiatives and their investment in technology. But households still had very little in the way of Internet access: they had to use dial-up modems and there were few high-speed connections.

And then the bubble burst. Between 2001 and 2005 there was a retreat: plans were put aside. Web publication became the media's poor relation. Web journalism became discredited; all it amounted to was repeating agency stories. It involved no investigation, no reportage and was not considered to be very creative.

Things picked up again from 2006–2007 onwards. High-speed broadband had grown, new services had appeared but so had new ways of using them. For example, blogs brought together multimedia (sound and video) with articles that were open for comment. Alongside this, user-generated content developed with online video sites such as *Dailymotion* and *YouTube*. The idea of "citizen journalism" appeared on platforms such as Agoravox. All this is part of what is called Web 2.0, an interactive Web in which everyone potentially produces and diffuses content. The traditional media were beginning to feel as if they were being shouldered aside.

But this potential was already there at the outset of the Web. The media still find it difficult to grasp that the Web was not invented as a means of publication but as a tool for communication. The aim at the outset was to enhance collaboration between engineers at CERN, to enable them to communicate by sharing information. In the early stages the media took over this tool and imposed their traditional framework on it; this consisted of a producer, a receiver and one-way distribution. In fact, the Web is able to do something quite different. It is essentially a horizontal, two-way medium. Every receiver is also invited to become a producer.

Today the media still do not see the Internet as an area for innovation, a different way of working and presenting information. They approach the Internet gingerly, merely to avoid leaving the whole area of on-line

information open to new competitors. However, the decline in printed news media, and even in other information media, ought to lead them to give more serious thought to the revolution that the Internet has brought about. They should be seeing it as an opportunity to renew their link with their readers rather than as being some kind of constraint.

A variety of economic models

Esprit: How would you describe current strategies that try to take account of new technology?

LM: I would say there are three different attitudes. First there are the traditional media that use the Web as a new channel for diffusing the information that they are already producing. Little by little and very warily they are including some degree of participation. The possibility of reader participation was already there, in the form of readers' letters, for example, but this was very circumscribed in that it was under a separate heading that had no impact on the content of the newspaper or how it functioned. And yet *Libération*, when it was first set up, had already proclaimed: "By basing itself on the voice of the people, *Libération* will provoke discussion". In the 1980s, radio and television had responded to the demand for listener and viewer participation right across their programming, with phone-ins, talk shows that involved listeners, panel discussions such as *Ça se discute*, and even reality TV in its various forms. The printed press played no part in this process of evolution. At best one can point to the appointment by some publications of "readers' editors", who would produce journalism based on readers' letters. But for the most part, the profession stuck with the idea that only journalists themselves were competent to provide information. And this divide probably contributed to the crisis of confidence that developed throughout that period between readers and their newspapers. The media are largely seen as the voice of the powers that be and not as a counter-force. The perception of journalistic independence in relation to political power, and indeed to financial power, worsens year on year.

Another attitude consists of "non-journalistic" information. But the truth is that what has been called "citizen journalism" — an expression that doesn't mean very much — is not terribly convincing as anything more than a passing trend. An endeavour of this kind relies on the idea that the Web means that the monopoly on information traditionally exercised by the media is no more — which is perfectly true. But it also relies on another idea, one that isn't true, namely that this development makes journalists superfluous. Now you cannot just turn yourself into a journalist any more than you can turn yourself into a bricklayer merely because someone shoves a trowel into your hand. The real question is how journalists will have to redefine their role by including and guiding the contributions and participation of non-journalists, for example by locating and promoting some of the excellent blogs produced by specialists in their area. In this regard it is comforting to note how some journalists have taken the initiative and developed their own blogs; by doing so they have reinvented their approach to information and to writing, found a different tone and brought themselves closer to their readers.

The third area then lies between the first two. This is where you find sites which, like *Rue89*, are trying to create a synthesis between the culture of journalism and the culture of the Internet, sites such as *Médiapart*, *Bakchich*, *Arrêt sur image*, *De source sûre*, *La télé libre*, and *Slate.fr*. From our point of view, what this amounts to is a kind of cooperation between journalists and

non-journalists, but where the journalists are responsible for the editorial framework.

Esprit: But is there an economic model for the sites that are backed by the traditional media and for these independent initiatives?

LM: We're beginning to get parts of an answer. As the founder of the Talking Points Memo site, Josh Marshall, says: "The changes that arise from the new technologies are bad for journalists but good for journalism". The transition is difficult because the traditional press is losing money whilst the online press is not yet making any, so it is difficult to move from one model to the other. Those who succeed are those who have the capacity to invest. The need for information remains strong and I expect that we will find an economic model that will make it possible to pay for the work that journalists do, work which will continue to be essential. But we still have to live through this transitional period and just at the moment the end is not in sight.

In the meantime we are witnessing a large number of different models: free, paid, multi-sponsored, and so on. Some sites, though not many, have already found an economic model involving advertising: *Aufeminin.com*, *Doctissimo.com* as well as the *Benchmark* group that produces *Le Journal du net* and *L'Internaute*. These sites pay because they have won a substantial audience and target a particular niche: women's press, health advice for the general public, specialized information on the net, and so on. But when it comes to the general press in France, there is not a single site that makes money. In the US, *Slate* is one example of a free site that relies on advertising.

There is also the option of the paying site. Up to the present time, in the field of general information, every attempt has been a failure. In France, two projects were launched: *Médiapart* and *Arrêt sur image*. It is too soon to draw any definitive conclusions. The problem is that these sites are competing with a profusion of free information. People do not sign up so much in order to have access to the content as to show their support and their agreement with the project to provide an independent source of information. In addition, the Web relies on hypertext links: in order to bring surfers to your site, other sites have to provide links to yours. But, if you have a paying site and put up that kind of barrier to entry, few sites will provide feeds to yours. On the other hand, in more specialized areas such as the economic press, it is possible, as in the case of *Les Échos*, to have a paying site that works well. In such cases, the market involves companies rather than individuals.

PR: At the moment we are still not earning any money, which is normally the case for an Internet site that is just starting out and, on a wider scale, for any start-up company. We hope to be in profit from next year onwards. But with the crisis we just don't know how the advertising market is going to behave. It is probably the case that, in the short term, it won't be sufficient to ensure that we stay in balance. At the beginning of 2007, when we were setting up, the specialists in the market promised us: "Once you get a million individual visitors per month, you'll have an income from advertising of a million euros per year." We have passed the million of individual visitors mark (according to the Nielsen Institute) but we're quite a long way off the million euros per year from advertising. The form and the price paid for advertising are changing. But we are still confident: we have decided to construct our project in a different way and to make more room for other sources of income by relying on our technical and journalistic know-how. We are designing sites for other media or organisations (Bibliobs, VIH.org, CG34, Informilo, etc); we have launched

into the training of journalists in writing for the Web and Web tools; we intend to develop the resale of articles or videos, and so on.

Reinventing the job of the journalist

Esprit: In what ways has the journalist's task changed? Has the format of articles also been affected by the technical possibilities and the readers' expectations? Isn't instant reaction going to become more important than analysis?

PR: The Internet always seems to be associated with words like "instant", "reactivity", "short articles", "raw information" and so on. The truth is that it is an extremely rich medium that can be used in a great variety of ways. You can publish short articles on the Web, but you can equally well produce in-depth analysis or even very lengthy documents: a report, for example. You can produce a mixture of different means of communication: for example, you can insert a video or sound between two paragraphs of text. Our journalists are multi-skilled: we can ask them to produce writing, sound and images as well. The constraints represented by instant reaction are not peculiar to the Internet; they were already there for agency or radio journalists. There are three new techniques that are peculiar to the Internet: first, there is the fact that people look for the information themselves using search engines and so they feel less dependent on traditional media. Second, they can put out information themselves by means of blogs, comments or forums, and what they say can be read anywhere in the world. And third, there is the ability to "cut and paste" and that means that they can send information very rapidly to their family or can copy it into other media. It is the bringing together of these three techniques that is impacting on the traditional media.

Admittedly, the traditional media still have major resources to call on when compared to poor little sites like ours. But quite often our model enables us add our input by relying on our surfers. For example, take the case of the recent crisis in Guadeloupe. The traditional media did not see the crisis developing because they had no correspondents in place. During the first few days it was surfers on the spot who told the story of what was happening on the island, either through their blogs or in our columns. We were able to gather many statements from first-hand witnesses and to describe the setting up of the blockade on the island.

LM: But it is actually the concept of the article itself that is being transformed. As Jeff Jarvis, one of the best commentators on developments in online journalism, said, it is no longer a form that is closed in upon itself; it is becoming a process. An article on the Internet can be modified, updated or enriched at any time. What is more, an article is no longer written by a single author. It can be the outcome of a collective effort and enhanced with commentaries. But even before that stage the idea might have come from a surfer asking a question, drawing attention to an event or requesting a follow-up to an earlier inquiry.

Another dimension of our work can also be seen in what we call "link journalism", which consists in picking out the best sources on a particular subject. It means that we can direct a surfer to the essential information and be sure that he is going to find all the information he needs on our site. Rather than rewriting what has already been done elsewhere, we provide a link to the best of the Web.

Esprit: How does your "guided participation" actually work in practice?

PR: Despite the myth, surfers do not send us articles such as journalists would write. They don't even ask to do so. What they do send is ideas, comments, expressions of opinion, analyses, accounts of events, information that they have found perhaps in a blog, perhaps in a foreign newspaper or maybe in their own environment. They are not interested in doing the job of a journalist in the sense that we understand it: checking information, comparing sources and so on. We are determined to hang on to that role: it is the editorial body that authenticates, prioritizes the content of *Rue89* and puts it into perspective. We are still first and foremost journalists and our business is making sure that the information is authentic.

Esprit: Do you often cut out comments?

PR: It depends. Under normal circumstances, very rarely, but during the Israeli army operations in Gaza, for example, it was very hard work. We only cut out any messages that are racist, incite hatred or are defamatory. We keep all the rest, even where they are extreme. But the main thing is that, since we monitor all comments, we choose to give prominence to the ones that are really pertinent by placing them directly below the article. Those are the ones that surfers are going to read: they can have access to all the comments if they wish, but only 7 per cent of surfers go beyond the "selected comments" heading.

We also ask our journalists to reply to questions and to criticisms and to monitor comments themselves, correcting anything as required and perhaps adding to their own writing information that has come from surfers. It is what is called "conversational journalism" as opposed to "vertical journalism" where the writer hands out his information without any real regard for who is going to read it. Our weekly editorial conference is participatory too: surfers can follow our meeting, using chat to have a dialogue with us and offering us ideas about the subjects to be followed up.

Esprit: What happens to the rate of production? Do you prefer to have a continuous flow of information or is it a good idea to have specific deadlines?

PR: We are free from the constraints of paper, printing or sales kiosks, but also, to a great extent, from formats, deadlines and editions. The operation runs all the time: we slip in an article when it is ready. When it isn't running quickly enough we do get a bit nervous. It's true; we do have to have a headline. Because we know that people visit our site several times a day and they must always find a site that has been updated. But we do publish articles for which others have to make room: that's the logic of a blog. Only the headline story and the second article are fixed at the top of the column. *Rue89* is organized on the basis of a gigantic blog, a "metablog". You'll see that it has a central column which is usual in a blog. It's nothing at all like the way that newspaper sites looked when we first launched: they all presented themselves in the form of a mosaic of stories.

People often suppose that Web journalism is a new incarnation of print journalism. That may be true but, in many respects, our work brings us close to radio: the ability to react instantly, the absence of deadlines, the informal tone of the writing and even the interactive participation, which is, as Laurent said, something that was invented by radio.

Esprit: *Rue89*, is a little like radio with an archive attached, then?

PR: Yes; we leave a lasting trace, unlike radio programmes. Sometimes a radio programme will come up with a scoop but doesn't think of putting it on its Internet site. So we pick up the story, obviously giving credit to the radio programme, and suddenly we have become the reference source for the story. On the air stories tend to disappear into the ether. In the hard-copy press they get buried in inaccessible archives. On a Web site you can access years' worth of information in its entirety. The time scope of the site is pretty well limitless: search engines enable people to find articles that are very old.

But our relationship with time has been transformed above all by the fact that the very notion of an article has changed. It can happen that a journalist will publish a few lines on a topic and then, in the course of the day, he will add information to it. As Laurent said, on the Internet an article is, by definition, constantly evolving. If we make a mistake readers will notice it and we can correct it online. The subject of an article may start with an online discussion and then be debated during our editorial conference (in which anyone can take part, because it is open). Then the editorial team takes over and the investigation itself is also punctuated by conversations with surfers. Finally the article is published but it is still not finished. Readers will ask questions, make criticisms. The journalist has to reply again, sometimes he will have to correct or add to what he has written.

Esprit: Does that change the way you write?

PR: Yes, we write more informally. In any case, we have no choice in the matter; if we didn't, the surfers would make fun of us. For example, supposing a tree falls onto the motorway during a storm. A reporter from AFP is going to write: "According to one witness a tree is blocking the A6 motorway." In fact, everybody knows perfectly well that the witness is the reporter. We cannot do that. We would be asked straight away: "Who's this mysterious witness, then?" We have to be more natural: "I saw a tree that had..." That is why the first person pronoun occurs so often. Some people criticize the Internet, claiming that it is the realm of "I, I, I". It is true that many blogs do just focus on the writer's ego but, for us, it is just a way of being more precise and more concise.

Esprit: How do you choose your bloggers?

PR: We are not an open platform for blogs. We choose all our bloggers after a few test articles and we edit everything that they send us. Not all our bloggers are regulars: about forty of them are. Often they are experts in their field who complement our work as journalists. They are also people with courage: you need to have a certain amount of bottle to stand up to reactions from your fellow-citizens that are not always kind.

Laurent Mauriac and Pascal Riché were in conversation with Françoise Benhamou, Julie Lambert and Marc-Olivier Padis.

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