



Jean-François Julliard, Roman Schmidt

Too close for truth

Political interference in the French media

The present French government has a profoundly ambivalent relationship with journalists and the press. President Nicolas Sarkozy has encouraged the public to treat journalists with mistrust; at the same time, his relationship with those who own the press is far too close, says the secretary-general of Reporters Sans Frontières.

For some time now, "the country of human rights" has suffered from the close relationship between politics and the media, in which the state's presence is felt through direct and indirect subsidies for the press, and through a wide array of state-owned television and radio networks. Jean-François Julliard, secretary-general of Reporters Sans Frontières, outlines the recent scandals, changes in ownership and government intervention in the media since President Nicholas Sarkozy assumed power in 2007. His knowledge of the state of the media globally gives his comments on France's "particularities" added point. Eurozine will investigate further aspects of France's changing media landscape through interviews with key players, in the weeks that follow.

Roman Schmidt: Let's talk about the condition of the press in France. In Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) ranking of press freedom, France is in forty-fourth place. Given France's historic claim to be the "country of Human Rights", we might have expected a better position. Indeed, eight years ago it was eleventh. Why? What particular problems exist between the French press and political and economic authority?

Jean-François Julliard: There are several issues. The first is a general climate which is very tough, very aggressive towards journalists. This is in part because of statements by Nicolas Sarkozy. France has never before had a president or a government so critical of journalists, so aggressive and hard on them. Sarkozy never stops making comments reproaching journalists. All this makes for a climate of mistrust towards them. In addition, there is a real problem in France with the protection of journalists' sources. A law on this was introduced in 2010, but it seems to be inadequate: it isn't protecting journalists' sources sufficiently.

RS: What's the story behind this law? Seen from abroad, what is disturbing is that the Left voted against it.

J-FJ: Certainly, that's part of the political game. This law began as a campaign promise by Sarkozy. Once elected, he began work on strengthening the protection of sources. Before that there had been no law, nothing except a brief mention in the Civil Code. Freelance journalists, for instance, were not protected; there was no way to object to the seizure of a document, to a search

in editorial offices, and so on. This law is an improvement in comparison to the previous situation, but it does not go far enough. Above all, the problem today is that apparently, although the law was demanded and voted for with the support of Sarkozy, it may first have been violated on his orders, namely in the Woerth–Bettencourt affair and the complaint made by *Le Monde*.

To summarize: *Le Monde* brought a complaint against the Elysée — they can't yet prove it, but they believe it came from the Elysée — for having asked the French intelligence services to investigate a *Le Monde* journalist and, in particular, his sources within the administration. As a result, one individual, a certain David Sénat, who had been a close associate of the Justice Minister Michèle Alliot–Marie, was transferred to a new job because he had contacted Gérard Davet, a journalist at *Le Monde*. As we speak, the case is at the stage of preliminary investigation; there is not yet any proof of what happened.

We are cautious about this at RSF. We've supported *Le Monde* in their complaint and asked the courts to see this through to discover precisely what happened. If the Elysée — Sarkozy or somebody around him — really gave an order to investigate a source, then it's serious; that would already mean that the intelligence services are being used for a purpose unrelated to state security. Above all, it's serious because it is a very strong signal aimed at journalists' sources. Today, somebody in France working in a ministry or in the government, who has confidential information to give to a journalist, will be telling himself that he risks losing his job, perhaps also finding himself under legal attack. That creates an enormous pressure on journalists' sources; and without sources there is no more journalism, especially not investigative journalism. This is what worries us.

RS: Then there's the risk of finding yourself five years later in a cable released by WikiLeaks...

J–FJ: Indeed, that's possible... Finally, there is another problem in the judicial procedures, which are very tough. A few months ago, RSF conducted an analysis in which we found that France holds the record in Europe for the most journalists investigated and remanded in custody, and the number of media outlets searched. That is to say, in France it is very easy for a judge or an investigating officer to order the arrest of a journalist at home, or to order a search in a media outlet. Admittedly, such things are not so serious in the global context — France clearly isn't comparable to Burma — but they shouldn't be happening in an established democracy such as France. As a founder member of the European Union, France should be one of the countries which scrupulously respect press freedom. Unfortunately, this no longer appears to be the case.

RS: You say it's no longer the case; does that mean there's been a change?

J–FJ: Yes, it's clear that there has been a change for the worse. Surveillance of journalists has happened in the past, so has harsh public criticism of them. President Mitterrand didn't like journalists either, and made sure they knew it. But today, everything seems to be happening at once. There is the political pressure, there is a law which doesn't adequately protect journalists and, in addition, there's currently the issue of Sarkozy's close links with the leading media owners. He's their friend and that's his right, but it is a fact that he is very close to the principal patrons of the French press.

All in all, it makes for a difficult climate and things *have* happened. Several months ago, journalists from the daily *Figaro*, owned by Dassault, a large French industrial group which depends on government contracts and is also close to Sarkozy, made an official complaint. They were outraged by an instruction they had been given, namely, that all articles written about a country in which Dassault did business, or in which it was planning to invest, must be double checked: in effect they were to be censored. There was a list of countries in which Dassault had signed contracts — Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Libya, Switzerland — and all articles about these countries had to pass through an extra level of editorial control. That isn't right. In France today we haven't managed to erect an impermeable barrier between media ownership and the editorial side.

RS: You speak of links between Dassault and *Le Figaro*. I could add Lagardère, a French media group which owns a part of the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS). There is also Moët–Hennessy–Louis Vuitton (LVMH), another tricky situation in which a luxury goods group owns *Les Échos*, the most important economic newspaper in France. Industry and the press are far too close, but this isn't new. Hasn't this worrying proximity between industry, government and newspaper headlines long been a feature in France?

J–FJ: Yes, very much so. The unusual thing about France is the existence of press groups whose business isn't the press. They are primarily involved in some other industry: arms, telecommunications, building, things like that. And then they become owners of media groups. It seems as though, by buying newspapers and media outlets, these people are buying influence, that they aren't there to run a news business or to disseminate information. In most other European countries, media groups are involved primarily with media, that is their main activity. They diversify into book publishing or into communication, something like that. But in France, they begin as large industrial groups, often effectively dependent on state contracts, which then buy the media. That leads to a situation which is not very healthy. And the problem today is that the owners of these groups are, in addition to everything else, close to the head of state.

RS: Into this landscape the so-called "pureplayers" — new journals that exist only on the Web — have entered. Their main intention is to conduct investigations: outlets such as **Rue89** and **Médiapart**, or among the satirical press, **Bakchich**. How do you see the role of these new media, and what is their position in France today?

J–FJ: I think their position is something they are currently constructing. Everybody in France now knows Médiapart, thanks to the Bettencourt and Karachi scandals. Six months ago few people had heard of Médiapart, so that's a real success and so much the better. They first published the documents and obtained the recordings suggesting that there had been fraudulent financial transactions, including matters linked to the funding of political parties, namely the RPR, Sarkozy's party at the time. So yes, these outlets have a real place. As you say, they are "pure players". They don't have the same editorial constraints as the press, be those constraints of space, of printing deadlines, etc. The rules of the game aren't the same. And above all, for finance they haven't knocked on the same doors, they haven't approached the same people. They don't have any of these links to big industrial groups.

At the same time, that doesn't mean that everything is settled, because we don't know how the people who have invested in these sites will behave in the future. For example Xavier Niel, the founder of the ISP "Free", who has put a lot of money into Médiapart, into Bakchich and into *Le Monde*, of which he is one of the three new shareholders. So far he has always said that for him this is an investment, that he wanted to invest in the media business. As far as I know he has no particular connection with the political world, but it is unclear how that will develop over the years. Similarly, the three new shareholders in *Le Monde* are all seen as somewhat on the Left, but how will that play out if the Left comes into power in the future? Will Pierre Bergé, Xavier Niel and Matthieu Pigasse have particular links with power if power is held by the Left? We can only hope not: we can only hope that they will preserve the independence of *Le Monde*, but we don't know.

RS: This recapitalization of *Le Monde* by Niel, Pigasse and Bergé has been one of the major developments in recent months, ending *Le Monde's* particular situation, in which it was owned by its employees and its journalists. Is it perhaps too early to assess this change?

J-FJ: Yes, it's true we don't know what's going to happen. What is certain is that this recapitalization was made with the agreement of the journalists and that is what matters. The agreement between Bergé, Pigasse, Niel and the journalists of *Le Monde* does at least still include a veto right for the journalists concerning the appointment of editor.

RS: Let's get back to the relations between Sarkozy and the press. Since the Ancien Régime, France has had a system of special assemblies, the Etats Généraux (States General). The Etats Généraux of the press took place at the end of 2008. What happened, and what was the outcome?

J-FJ: Since Sarkozy planned to hold States General in many sectors, he wanted to hold one for the press. It is true that the French press is currently in a critical situation: fewer and fewer people buy newspapers, and production costs are still very high. France has extremely strong trades unions in comparison to other countries, which adds substantial costs to producing a newspaper. There was a real need to need to consider this situation, to think about it all. The press would have preferred to organize itself, yet it was Sarkozy who set things in motion. What was the outcome? I honestly don't know. For a start, RSF was not there. We asked to take part, but it was made clear that we were not welcome there. What was the outcome? Some very concrete measures for subsidies and assistance; for example, giving young people a free newspaper subscription.

RS: There is a new status for online publications...

J-FJ: Yes, and that was essential. Previously, the "pure players" we were discussing earlier didn't have the status of online publishers. France always seems to be behind the times with media development. We have media laws that date from the end of World War II: today's media are nothing like the media then.

RS: Do you feel the French blogosphere is of major significance?

J-FJ: No, I don't. There are almost no blogs in France that are well known or referred to regularly. There are some on particular themes in very technical areas. There are also blogs by lawyers or academics which are somewhat

known within a particular field, but which are not blogs broadly known among the general public. If you asked the man in the street to list blogs of general interest, I'm sure most would be unable to name even one or two. So this niche has been filled by the "pure players": Rue89, Médiapart, Bakchich and [Slate.fr](#).

RS: Sites which were often founded by former employees of the traditional media...

J-FJ: Precisely: the power of big names and their contacts remains important in France, even on the Web. At Bakchich, it's a former writer on the satirical paper *Canard enchaîné*, at Rue89 journalists from *Libération*. At Slate.fr it's Jean-Marie Colombani, a former editor of *Le Monde*, and at Médiapart Edwy Plenel, another former editor of *Le Monde*.

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