Open letter on the public good and the role of generalist journals

Olivier Mongin, Marc-Olivier Padis
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Faced with public funding cuts, the editors of "Esprit" write an open letter defending the role of generalist cultural journals. When the academic world can communicate only with specialists, and the daily press can provide only superficial analysis, cultural journals are needed to balance depth against accessibility. "Esprit" can find the right questions to ask, write its editors, and can help create shared culture in a world fragmented by globalization. Self-consciously "international", it can bring French ideas into contact with those from elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

To Christine Albanel, Nicolas Sarkozy, Benoît Yvert and Bernard Kouchner, following two questionable public decisions concerning (among others) Esprit.

Esprit is an independent journal, generalist and non-specialist, not beholden to any publisher or publishing house. Its future depends on the loyalty of its workers, on the faith of booksellers, and on its readers, whether subscribers or otherwise. It is among those generalist publications, pluralist in spirit, which sustain themselves economically come what may, and which rigorously control their costs and their wages. Its profits have been invested in computerization and in the development of a website, after the decision nearly a decade ago to count on a synergy between the written and the electronic word, between paper and the web. The cultural commentators of the past, whether the philosophy professor recommending reviews or the journalist reading and citing them, have become rare. [1] Regrettable though this may be, the consequence is clear: Esprit's website is now the primary gateway into the journal.

Should a financially healthy publication refuse all aid from the state, as representative of the public interest? Esprit is no cultural giant; we have no billionaire patron to support us indefinitely. Hence we have never refused the annual subsidy from the National Book Centre (Centre national du livre – CNL), an institution financed by a tax on photocopies and reproduction. Recently, this subsidy has substantially increased after the inclusion of taxation on digital reproduction, albeit by an amount symbolic rather than substantial in relation to our budget and to the grants allocated to journals of "lesser" importance.
(understood in purely quantitative terms, of course). We have also accepted support from the Book Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which subsidizes journal subscriptions for foreign universities and cultural centres. Two recent decisions have called both these grants into question.

Firstly, the CNL’s commission on philosophy and social science, chaired by the philosopher Barbara Cassin, has decided not to renew its already-diminishing grant to Esprit in 2009. This arose from an unfavourable decision taken by Benoît Yvert, president of the CNL, somebody whom we cannot condemn for not understanding or liking books and journals. Yet this decision argues simply that a grant cannot be allocated to an enterprise that successfully makes a profit. Should there be no criteria beyond profit or loss? This is clearly poorly thought-through and unserious in terms of economic rationality. The CNL, which is funded independently of the Ministry of Finance, is spared the parsimony and indignity of the budgetary process. What makes this decision doubly shocking is that it advocates private investment during the current financial crisis. Staying solvent is not a failing, but precisely what enables the development of a small enterprise such as Esprit, whose long and rich history is indexed in a recent DVD collecting all Esprit articles published between 1932 and 2006. [2] Moreover, a glance at our long-term accounts would show how even placing advertisements in the press could tip us into the red. Finally, while a budget deficit can show real difficulties, it might also indicate management failures. We can only hope that CNL takes the trouble to differentiate between these two eventualities. If it bases its judgement on profit and loss, it risks punishing sound management and rewarding bad management.

The second decision comes from the Foreign Ministry, which has reduced subsidies for foreign subscriptions by a third – with further reductions planned for the years ahead. Since this decision affects a number of “generalist” journals such as Études and Les Temps Modernes, we cite the words of Pierre de Charentenay, editor of Études, who writes in the February 2009 issue: “This decision should stimulate a debate on the role of public policies in disseminating the French intellectual tradition […] Financial advantage cannot be measured against France’s loss of influence through the abolition of an intermediary for French culture.”

The internationalist journal: A way to increase the influence of French culture

We note that President Sarkozy’s wide interests encompass culture, and that he has placed Marin Karmitz, former film director, producer and cinema owner, at the head of a commission to investigate contemporary cultural creation, bypassing the Ministry of Culture. In this context, it is worth considering the role of generalist journals within French and international culture. The Foreign Ministry in particular should be concerned, since the large foreign readership of the French generalist reviews makes them a dynamic instrument for the dissemination of French culture (Esprit has been subtitled an “international journal” ever since its foundation in 1932). Above all they are meeting points in an era of globalization, enabling encounters between authors and publications across the world.

Generalist journals, whose role is not merely to connect networks of researchers, contribute to the decentralization that is so needed in France. Our links with numerous
foreign journals, strengthened by our participation in the Eurozine network, has enabled us to build up a large intellectual network, enabling numerous translations and the publication of joint issues. Moreover, the power of generalist revues is precisely their pride in being “generalist”. With the specialization of academia, and with the social sciences experiencing the constraints of a model of knowledge framed by the hard sciences, [3] there must be some response to the fragmentation of knowledge. If nothing else, the financial crisis teaches us to be critical of technical disciplines that follow their own internal logic! As globalization divides and fragments, our role is to imagine, with others, the possibilities for “general culture” in a world marked by rapid and deep cognitive changes, without being satisfied with complaints that “education isn’t what it used to be”.

In the 1970s and 1980s, science-obsessed academics attacked essayists, reducing them to the level of pundits. Only later did it become clear how this dogmatism, parading as science, had hobbled any reflection seeking to position itself within time and space and to pose the best possible questions. Paul Ricoeur liked to say that it is fundamental to “ask good questions”, and not to accept the mastery of theoretical tools as a solution in itself. Generalist journals, maintaining equidistance from the narrowness of academic specialization and the muddle of the media, support both the general interest and the spirit of the Republic. Still, it is necessary to understand the grounds for the mistrust with which general culture has been treated in France, and how this has affected politics. For this reason, Esprit will soon return to the question of general culture, which is itself directly affected by judgements formed on the model of the hard sciences. The latter, incidentally, prize articles above books, taking account of nothing other than specialisation – a fact with consequences for the world of journals and of books. [4]

**Promoting general culture in a world of specialists**

We must make the link between the public interest and the role played by generalist journals. Paradoxically, Esprit and similar generalist journals are legally considered specialist publications inapplicable to the general interest. Thus, Esprit is a member of the Syndicate of Cultural and Scientific Press (SPCS). This means that a non-specialist journal has been subsumed within an organization dominated by scientific journals, whose lobbying power is enhanced by their membership of groups such as Elsevier.

As for the general interest, generalist journals have been overlooked by the States General of the Press, [5] recently launched by President Sarkozy. Beyond being surprised at the non-renewal of subscriptions and grants, we find it scandalous that generalist journals are not considered to be institutions participating in the public sphere, as is the case with the “opinion-forming” press. [6]

This, even though that category, thanks to lobbying orchestrated by the major media groups, has come to encompass magazines, some known more for their sensationalism than for their contribution to the civic spirit. We are not demanding “our” subsidies, “our” customary benefits, but we will not accept Charles Péguy’s argument that a good journal should lose subscribers.

No, we are above all shocked by the superficiality of these hasty decisions that treat
Esprit or Études as businesses like any other, as if cultural goods were merely market goods. This relates to our understanding of the general interest and the general culture, which is part of the French intellectual tradition. Unless, that is, the state has given up thinking entirely.

President Sarkozy, President of the CNL, Ms Albanel, Mr Kouchner, we thank you for taking into consideration what is not another complaint addressed to the benevolent guardianship of the state, but an invitation to reflect and to bear in mind the public interest. It is an invitation to recognize the contribution of the (mostly monthly) generalist journals for their contribution to public good.

We have no desire to start a pointless trial of strength, nor to spend our lives in the corridors and waiting-rooms of the institutions concerned. We appeal above all to our readers and colleagues, near and far, to students and professionals, entrepreneurs and teachers, writers and web-surfers, to subscribe to the journal and to visit the website. Finally, we must reflect more deeply on a crisis that cannot be allowed to lead to a return to disciplinary fiefdoms, ivory towers, over-specialization, administrative control, cultural protectionism or political closed-mindedness. We must think of what will become of the general interest in an era of uncontrollable globalization.

Footnotes

1. Though thankfully not extinct. One example: Nicolas Demorand, morning host on the radio station France Inter, at the end of December cited that month's edition of Esprit as the publication of the day. This had an immediate effect in visitors to our site and interest in that issue.

2. We received CNL assistance for this project. The Mac version of the DVD will be released during the first half of this year.

3. On how disciplinary specialization is contributing to the crisis in academia -- and even, in a stronger sense, to the academic project of knowledge -- see Alain Renaut's article in the issue "Quel avenir pour les études en sciences humaines?" [What future for the humanities?], Revue internationale d'éducation, December 2008.

4. On this question of the evaluation of journals, see Maya Beauvallet, Les Stratégies absurdes. Comment faire pire en croyant faire mieux [Absurd strategies: doing worse while aiming to do better], Paris 2008, 119-128.

5. A government working group, leading to planned reform of the French print media --

6. To qualify for the label "general interest" (and the subsequent funding), a publication must have a daily or weekly schedule and not be targeted at a specialist readership. Comparing a list of weekly and of monthly journals, one can only marvel at this "periodic" discrimination!

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