

Essay

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France's very own Murdoch

Money, media, and campaigning

Abstract: In recent years, France has not only seen an upheaval of its party system, but also changes in its media landscape. The influence of large corporations and entrepreneurs might endanger internal freedom of the press and reinforce a political shift towards the right. This article analyses current developments on the French media market as the election campaign gets underway, with a particular focus on the conglomerate TF1 and billionaire Vincent Bolloré.

France ranks 34th on the latest Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. The Scandinavian countries and Costa Rica are in the top five, Germany is in 13th place. What are the reasons for France's relatively poor rank? One is police violence against journalists during protests, especially those against the Global Security Act (cf. Balmer 2020; Pantel 2020). This law has now come into force, but without a paragraph that would have made it a criminal offence to publish footage of police operations with the intention of psychologically or physically harming police officers. Journalists' organisations as well as numerous members of parliament considered this regulation an encroachment on the freedom of the press because it would effectively have prohibited filming any police operation. Now the Constitutional Council has overturned the paragraph, but only because it was too vague; the Council did not cite freedom of the press in its reasoning.

Reporters Without Borders (2021), however, also expressed concern about internal press freedom: »Editorial independence continues to be a sensitive issue because media ownership is concentrated, and there is a tendency to incorporate media outlets into commercial enterprises with other economic interests, which encourages conflicts of interest that feed mistrust of the media.«

To understand the situation of journalism in France, it is necessary to consider ownership structures, the power of industrial groups, and how they are intertwined

ned with the state and politics. This also explains the success of new media such as »Mediapart«, which advertise independence from corporations and advertising as their identifying feature (Robert 2011: 128-129). To illustrate the interdependencies within the triangle of money, media, and politics, I will focus on three important players, namely the conglomerate TF1, billionaire Vincent Bolloré, and President Macron. A topical occasion for such an analysis is the (partial) withdrawal of the German Bertelsmann group from the French market, which has left it in turmoil.

Prisma Media, a former German publisher

France's largest magazine publisher Prisma Media was founded by Gruner + Jahr in 1978 and has left a strong mark on the French market (see Robert 2013: 367). The publisher has now been sold to Vivendi, of which Bolloré is a major shareholder. Bolloré's own corporation is actually a transport and logistics enterprise (the largest port operator in Africa), but it has spent the last 15 years investing heavily in media, such as television, radio, magazines, and free newspapers. Through Vivendi, Bolloré determines the programming and general direction of Groupe Canal Plus, which includes not only pay tv channel Canal+, but also, among others, the small channel CNews.

In television, the Canal Plus group holds a market share of 7.2 percent, CNews has 2.2 percent, behind BFMTV, the ever less dominant top dog among news channels, which holds 2.6 percent (BFM, by the way, is owned by billionaire Patrick Drahi, main shareholder of the telecommunications group Altice). As main shareholder of the Lagardère group (originally an air travel sector company), which also owns a number of media, Bolloré also *de facto* controls the radio station Europe 1 (cf. Garrigos/Roberts 2021b). Europe 1 has recently seen ratings drop and is in crisis with a market share of 4.5 percent. However, the radio station remains an important brand and is already contemplating possible synergies with CNews. A political transformation is also underway.

An engagement

Bertelsmann originally also wanted to sell its shares in Groupe M6, which includes M6, France's third television channel with a market share of 9.1 percent¹, as well as smaller channels and the RTL radio family. Numerous media groups had offered to buy it: Bolloré with Vivendi; Czech coal billionaire Kretinsky, who

1 The figures stem from surveys conducted by the Institut Médiamétrie (in May 2021 for television, in January-March 2021 for radio).

already owns several magazines and has an indirect stake in *Le Monde*; telecommunications entrepreneur Xavier Niel (along with Matthieu Pigasse and Pierre-Antoine Capton; Niel and Pigasse are major shareholders in *Le Monde*, and Niel also owns several regional newspapers); and the Italian group Mediaset. In the end, however, Bertelsmann changed its mind and Groupe M6 is now to merge with the TF1 television group. The latter holds a market share of 27.5% in the television sector. Its flagship is France's first television channel with a share of 19.9%. TF1's main shareholder is the global construction company Bouygues, which is to control the new group, while Bertelsmann will remain represented.

The »engagement« of those two long-standing rivals in French free-to-air television is still subject to scrutiny by the Competition Authority and regulator CSA, as the new entity would have a 42 per cent share of the television market and thus dominate a large part of the advertising market. Public broadcasters have a total market share of only 28.2 percent. Presumably, Bouygues and Bertelsmann also hope to push through a new course in concentration limits, which they consider necessary in the face of dominating new players like Netflix (see Renault 2021). While the stations TF1 and M6 are to continue to exist, each with their own programming, pluralism in political reporting could be endangered – for example, by TF1 exerting influence on the radio stations of Groupe M6. Among them, RTL, with a market share of 12.4 percent, is the second major radio station in France after public broadcaster France Inter (13.3 percent).

Apart from Bertelsmann and Mediaset, all other players in this game of »media monopoly« (Klimm 2021) were industrialists from other sectors who invest in media. This intertwining of information and economic interests is a potential threat to both internal press freedom and pluralism (cf. Chupin et al. 2012: 105, 110; Robert 2011: 68, 156). Industrialists influencing reporting in their media in their own interest is a phenomenon we know from Bernard Arnault (LVMH) or Dassault (the armaments group which owns *Le Figaro*). In some media, such as *Le Monde*, the editorial board is legally protected from interference by its main shareholders, but this is an exception. The fact that such statutes are considered necessary in the first place betrays a lack of journalistic autonomy in France.

The French state (or even other states) is a major customer of some of these groups, which means: »Media acquisition indeed appears a means to influence certain governmental decisions with politicians who seek positive media coverage.« (Chupin et al. 2012: 109f)

Bolloré's media empire versus TF1, the old bogeyman

As disquieting as the merger of TF1 and M6 may be, the steady growth of Bolloré's media empire is a far greater concern for public and political life in France.

Just a decade ago, no one would have thought that the news of this merger would be met with a sense of relief, because things could have been even worse, namely a takeover by Bolloré. When the public broadcaster TF1 was privatized in 1986, it was sold to the large construction company Bouygues. It quickly became clear what Bouygues hoped to gain from this purchase: Profit, for sure, but also political influence.

TF1 developed into a conservative channel that engaged in election campaigning with fear-mongering pieces on security and crime, which favored the political right. TF1 continues to follow this line, but people have become accustomed to it. Compared to Bolloré, TF1 is now perceived similarly as Jacques Chirac was in comparison to Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 2002 Presidential election: the lesser, familiar evil.

With Bolloré, there is no inner freedom of the press. Instead, there are witch hunts. Fear reigns amongst the staff of Groupe Canal Plus. Criticism is unwelcome (cf. Garrigos/Roberts 2021a). In the spring of 2021, more than 20 (out of 120) journalists were ousted from the sports department for »disloyalty« after they expressed solidarity with a journalist who was fired for making fun of Pascal Praud (CNews). Externally, Bolloré fights any attempts at critical coverage about his group by filing defamation lawsuits, which puts considerable pressure (also financially) on investigative media (cf. Aveline 2021). Bolloré's own media, of course, never criticize his dealings or business partners, but always cover them in positive terms. At Prisma Media, especially its business magazine *Capital*, journalists fear editorial intervention and a »CNews-ization« of their outlet (Cohen 2021).

CNews, an »opinion news channel«

The news channel CNews emanating from former channel iTélé in 2016. A large part of the editorial staff went on strike for weeks, protesting the hiring of a show host who had been accused of sexually exploiting minors. Three quarters of the journalists had to leave. Bolloré was rid of rebellious staff members and free to implement his guiding principles: savings, profit, politics.

There are numerous news channels in France, including CNews, BFM, and LCI from the TF1 group. All feature more or less the same characteristics: News in real time, hardly any background or costly investigative pieces, but instead, inexpensive talk shows (cf. Eustache 2021). Media historian Lévrier speaks of »commentary channels« (Lécuyer 2021). CNews program director calls them »opinion news channels« (Ubertalli 2021). Polemics and pointed phrases are being recycled, adopted by others, especially on social media, and take on a life of their own, boosting the profile of both the guests and the channel, leaving both in a state of mutual interdependency (cf. Eustache 2021).

At CNews, it's also talk shows that generate ratings and brand the network's identity: *L'heure des pros* with former sports journalist Pascal Praud, airing every day at 9 am and 8 pm, and *Face à l'info* with Eric Zemmour at 7pm. Both follow the mantra: »The more provocative and hateful the attacks, the better« (Schwarz 2021). Thanks to this strategy, the channel increased its market share by 0.8 percentage points within a year. In May 2021, it first began surpassing BFM's market some on certain days. At times, *Face à l'info* with Eric Zemmour attained 4.9 percent. Praud's show often achieves ratings of around 10 percent. The media response to these shows also contributes significantly to the channel's visibility.

»Competitive symbiosis«

CNews is often compared to Fox News because it trivializes far-right ideas (see Cassini 2021). It rails against the usual pet peeves of right-wing populism: Islam, so-called »Islamism«, (immigrant) crime, which is allegedly bringing the country to the verge of civil war, political correctness, the supposed »Cancel Culture«, feminism, decolonialism, gender, etc. The station presents itself as a »thermometer of society« (Sallé 2021) and the mouthpiece of a »silent majority«, a champion of freedom of expression fighting a supposed language and thought police. On the other hand, they welcome actual restrictions on the freedom of the press when they are imposed by the state and the police, since they only affect alleged Leftist or »Islamist« agitators.

One of the stars at CNews is publicist Eric Zemmour, who »conjures up a civil war against Muslims in barely veiled terms« (Minkmar 2020) and obsesses over the supposed downfall of France due to the whimsical notion of a »Great Replacement«. Zemmour has greatly increased the market share of CNews: »Ratings are rising thanks to hate and incitement of hatred« (Garrigos/Roberts 2019). He seems immune to the fact that the publicist has repeatedly been convicted of inciting racial hatred – he is there because Bolloré personally wants him to be (see Garrigos/Roberts 2019).

Thus, CNews has become a political player that makes no secret of its ambitions to play a major role in the upcoming election campaign. Does that make it »a thorn in the side« of French President Emmanuel Macron (Wüpper 2021)? Only partially. Sure, CNews is spreading far-right talking points, but that is not exactly an inconvenience to Macron. Right-wing extremism must be vociferous so that Macron can present himself to left-wing or moderate right-wing voters as the last bastion against it and thus the only alternative, as he did in 2017. And CNews provides just that. Media historian Alexis Lévrier comments: »Macronism, that's Anti-Lepenism. This is why Macron needs Le Pen to exist.« (Lécuyer 2021)

At the same time – «en même temps», as the President likes to say – Macron's government is occupying Le Pen's themes, such as homeland security and Islam, and he needs CNews for that, too – to reach right-wing voters. The relationship between Macron and CNews can be described as a «competitive symbiosis» (Lachenmeier 2007: 62). Incidentally, Macron is in contact with CNews journalists, and he even exchanges text messages with Praud (see Chemin 2021). It is undeniable that the public debate is drifting strongly towards the radical right. But that is not just due to obviously far-right media such as *Valeurs Actuelles* or CNews or *Le Figaro*: Macron's government is also doing its part, especially Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin.

«Our regulars' table»

Members of the government and Macron's party are ever more frequent guests on CNews, even on Zemmour's show. Their reasoning is this: «CNews is the channel of 2022. Think what you will of Praud, but it's our regulars' table, so we have to go and face the debate.» (Le Courrier picard 2021) Boycotting the channel is becoming increasingly difficult for any party. Even the radical left-wing party LFI often appears on Praud's show. The Greens only avoid Praud's and Zemmour's shows. Conservatives, on the other hand, welcome the fact that «right-wing voters finally have a channel that appeals to them» (Vigogne 2021) – as if that hadn't already been the case with TF1 and BFM.

By the way, CNews is not the only channel among Bolloré's media that has become a watering hole for politicians. On channel C8, the nightly show *TPMP*, which reaches up to 1.5 million viewers, is a hot ticket. Host Cyril Hanouna is known for stupidly vicious, misogynistic, or homophobic jokes; the channel was even fined to the tune of three million euros. Nevertheless, Bolloré is holding on to him. He has become an inevitable stop on politicians', and especially Macronists' talkshow rounds as they hope to connect with young voters and «everyday» French people. Minister of Citizenship Marlène Schiappa is virtually a regular on *TPMP*. She even thinks that Hanouna ought to moderate the traditional televised debate after the first round of the Presidential election.

Macron also has a hand in all this – as a former investment banker and former Minister for the Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs, he knows his way around the industrial groups involved and is very well connected; he can count on billionaires like Bernard Arnault and Xavier Niel, among others (Cassini/Faye 2021). In the context of the upcoming election campaign, the Macron administration is trying to stop Bolloré's empire from growing any further. Thus, the option of a merger between TF1 (a group that is favorable to Macron) and M6 received support behind the scenes. Even if this merger ends up not going through because of

competition authority concerns, M6 and RTL are protected from Bolloré for the time being. However, Macron has failed to save Europe 1 from Bolloré (Rose et al. 2020), and it remains to be seen whether the Lagardère media *Le JDD* and *Paris Match* will also fall under Bolloré's sway. This would be a painful loss for Macron, since the Sunday newspaper *JDD* has become his unofficial mouthpiece in recent years (cf. Klimm 2021).

So what drives Bolloré? Profit or conviction? Surely, it is both. The political line of his media cannot be explained by economic calculation only, but is undeniably also driven by political ambition (cf. Eustache 2021). There is no doubt that Bolloré wants to influence the election campaign in favor of the far-right. It remains to be seen whether he would prefer Marine Le Pen or possibly support the even more radical Zemmour (according to a poll from February 2021, the latter could garner as much as 13 percent of the vote). In any case, France now has its own Murdoch – or even its own Hugenberg?

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