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France

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FRANCE

Overview

In 2017, Reporters Sans Frontières only ranked France 39th in the world regarding the nature and level of press freedom, since the country “doesn't provide effective protection for the confidentiality of journalists’ sources.” To an extent this number contradicts the myth of France as “homeland of Human Rights.”

The media landscape is characterised by two dominant trends that have been increasingly hardening: the central and key role of the state and a high concentration of ownership in print press, TV, and radio markets. However French news media outlets and industries are intellectually vibrant, in particular the print magazine and online press, and contribute to the political and intellectual life.

Among the news media outlets, hard-news dailies still operate as the matrix of French journalism as well as the news media landscape. In this sense the French journalism landscape is hardly shaped by political journalism, which attracts the elite of journalism, contributes to maintain the basic division between left and right parties, and is interdependent from politics.

The consumption of non-print media is gradually rising in France (around 66 million of inhabitants). In 2014, 86.6 percent of French individuals watched TV programs daily (compared to 85.7 percent in 2004 and 89.3 percent in 2009) through all different devices (TV set, computer, tablet, mobile phones) during 3 hours and 41 minutes. On average each household is equipped with 6.5 screens (TV set, computer, mobile phone, and tablet), and 30 percent of households (6.4 million) are equipped with TV set + tablet + laptop. Every day 43.3 million people in France listen to at least one radio channel during 3h, while 80 percent of inhabitants (43.5 million) are Internet users, and 23 million spend 1h16 each day on Internet. On the contrary, the circulation of print newspapers is declining while the audience of their digital outlets raises. In 1945, the market numbered 179 outlets with an average circulation of 12.1m issues a day; in 2014, only 76 outlets were left with an overall circulation of 8.8m dailies (including national, regional and local ones).

The conditions of consumption of media in France differ within markets and sub-markets. If the digital news media can be created and operate with no substantial constraints, other markets are affected by the central role played by the State as well as the ownership concentration. The launch of a radio station or a TV channel is not free; rather it requires a formal agreement under competition and upon substantial conditions. About print newspapers and magazines, their launch is legally easier but the costs for dailies’ printing and circulation are so high that they limit it.

In 1944, in order to limit the number of newspapers closures and maintain pluralism in the political and ideological orientation of hard-news dailies, the government established a press

subsidies system that allocates financial aids to newspapers and some magazines. However most of the daily national newspapers are not profitable through sole paid circulation and advertising revenues. More and more newspapers and print magazines are backed by wealthy businessmen or big companies that primarily operate outside of media markets. As an illustration, the most respected newspaper, *Le Monde*, was acquired by three associated French billionaires (Pierre Bergé, Xavier Niel and Matthieu Pigasse) in 2010.

Yet the French media outlets follow the more general trend of empowering (more) autonomy from politics, most news radio channels, TV channels, and more particularly news magazines and newspapers, still express a political orientation if not a partisanship backing or sponsor. Actually most news media can be identified according to a positioning mapping drawn with a horizontal axis ranging from far left to far right that exemplifies ideologies and competition of political opinions. This configuration is rooted in the social history of news media that quite shows how much each news outlet has been created to express and promote a political or ideological opinion, if not to officially support or back a political leader or a party.

Professional identity and journalism as a profession are still unresolved issues. Regarding the criteria defined by sociology to characterise what is a profession, some journalists and researchers argue that French journalism is an incomplete profession. As an illustration, even though journalists are supposed to agree and respect *la Charte d'éthique professionnelle des journalistes* (Charter of professional duties and ethics for journalists), French journalism is not ruled by an Order of Journalists that could for instance condemn failing professional practices; also, the entry into the profession doesn't require a formal graduation from a listed journalism school or university, etc. The ethics of journalism remains a hot issue especially when it comes to the discussion on the growing concentration of news media ownership in the hands of an evermore limited number of billionaires or private holdings, as well as the worldwide debate on fake news and post-truth reality that is significant in France.

Media markets are strongly interdependent with the central state and public bodies, especially since after the Second World War. Even though the French media landscape is affected by a background trend of economic liberalisation and privatisation of media and related bodies ownership, the State still acts as owner, shareholder as well as regulator and sponsor in the different media markets.

The state owns the biggest national TV broadcasting company (*France TV*) and radio broadcasting group (*Radio France*) and even recently launched a 24h breaking news TV channel (*franceinfo*). State-owned bodies also regulate the economics of TV and radio broadcasting markets: the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel* (High Council for Audiovisual - CSA) supervises the attribution of radio and TV frequencies.

The government still endures a huge press subsidies scheme that is both one of the most extensive and criticised subsidy systems. Created by the end of the Second World War, this system is characterised by a pile of grants built up over decades. Evidently, the newspapers' business model has come to automatically include these subsidies to such an extent that a cut or drastic reduction would trigger closures. Finally, French subsidies remain not effective at all since subsidies have done little to fulfil their original mission, namely to preserve a vivid, vibrant, and pluralistic press. The system is said to even worsen market failure effects by granting subsidies to print news outlets that do not need to be supported and concentrating subsidies to only a few newspapers.