

Be a journalist within the French regional press at the Web age.

Example of the *Dauphiné Libéré*

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Abstract

The technological revolution affects today also French regional press sector, until then relatively preserved in comparison to the national print media. Facing new competitors, the French regional daily newspapers (*presse quotidienne régionale* – PQR) need to reinvent themselves to face up to an uncertain future, for which there is no long-term viable economic model. It's also the case of *Le Dauphiné Libéré* (DL), the big daily paper of Southeast France, which is trying to negotiate the bend of digital era launching *GREnews*, an information-based product of multi-level platform available in the city of Grenoble. How the new tools affect the professional practices and the perception of their professional role of journalists working for this multimedia platform? We try to answer this question through a survey based on the sociological comprehensive approach, conducted with the journalists of *GREnews*.

Introduction

The French regional daily newspapers have been family businesses for a long time. Much smaller than the German or British press companies, they suffered from a chronic undercapitalization and from insufficient profits that slowed down their modernization. The arrival of the big media groups in the sector since the 70s (the Hersant group then the Hachette group) with their more rigorous management methods, and the concentration which followed in the regional press meant rationalizing the functioning of those companies.

However, it turns out that, faced with competition from free newspapers (which nibbled at the overall advertising revenue), and with regional press readership becoming older, and the general decline of newspaper sales, these consolidation efforts were insufficient. (Martin, 2002) The technological revolution, which, thanks to "telematic" tools then the internet, allowed multiple sources for regional and local information, also affected French regional press sector, which, until then, had been relatively preserved in comparison to the national print media.

Therefore today, thanks to these factors, regional daily papers (*presse quotidienne régionale* - PQR) need to reinvent themselves to face up to an uncertain future, for which there is no long-term viable economic model.

PQR journalists are very concerned by these developments. We wanted to know how the journalists are coping with the new electronic ear, at both a practical and philosophical level; how is it affecting their behavior and professional practice? We also wanted to grasp the context of changes for traditional newspapers following adoption of the new electronic landscape, as well as to try to understand the impact of these changes on professional journalistic practice.

To answer these questions, we chose *Le Dauphiné Libéré* (DL), the big daily paper of Southeast France, and particularly one of its "children" of the Internet generation

GREnews, an information-based product of multi-level platform available in the city of Grenoble.

For that purpose, we led a semi-directive survey of all three members of the *GREnews* editorial staff, and Jean-Paul Fritz, DL "New Media" Department Head. The objective consisted of capturing their professional role, but also their specific professional practices and their position within the company, such as they perceived it themselves. We also wanted to know if the work within multimedia platform had altered their perception of professional journalistic purposes. This sociological comprehensive approach was completed by analysis *GREnews* creative development contexts well as by analysis of the product itself.

Le Dauphiné Libéré new media diversification strategy

Le Dauphiné Libéré, is a regional daily paper which covers nine French departments. It has a daily circulation of around 250 000, and the main stages of its development during sixty years of existence remind those of its competitors. It was born from the French Resistance movement after WW2, and it was originally a family concern which fell into the hands of large publishing conglomerates. Firstly taken over by Robert Hersant (1983), then the EBRA group ("East Burgundy Rhône-Alpes", 2006 which had been established by Mutual Credit bank).

The Dauphiné daily paper benefited from a virtual monopoly in its distribution area, and was practically the last big French daily title to invest in the Web: its site was launched only when the formula changed in 2005. Confronted with greater competition from new players, as well as with the constant decline of its aging readership, *Le Dauphiné Libéré* was forced to react.

The first attempts at diversification onto the internet can be traced back to the middle of the 90s. *Le Dauphiné Libéré* tried to make a niche on-line business named *Dauphiné Network Services* (DNS). However, this attempt failed, as happened elsewhere to similar examples, simply because the public was not ready to embrace the online revolution at that stage.

However the next attempt by daily papers to take their position on the net should be more successful. It started with the experience of creating a participative site for the French presidential elections in 2007. Launched on February 12th of that year, the site mixed journalistic information with interactive feedback: Internet users could publish their own comments without preliminary moderation. This experience ended with the presidential election, but turned out decisive enough to tempt other ones.

GREnews, a multi-platform media

So in February 2008 *Le Dauphiné Libéré* launched the tri-media *GREnews*: a free weekly paper, a website, and a daily webtv news channel. Indeed, given the current general context of the print media, the development of new arms became an economic major investment for the Dauphiné newspaper, as Patrick Peltier, chief development editor explained (www.ledauphine.com, on February 06th, 08). At the start, the team consisted of just nine people: an editorial coordinator, three multimedia journalists, a photo-video journalist, and a team of four to produce the webtv news (as well someone responsible for advertising).

The diversification of *Dauphiné Libéré* onto these new platforms was specifically conceived of to seduce a younger audience (between 18-35 years), most of whom had been avoiding traditional newspapers (and in particular the regional daily's), because they had been perceived of by younger readers as not taking enough interest in their lifestyle and how they find their news (ie getting their news online). *GREnews* weekly and

grenews.com, by using a formula centered around entertainment programs and sport ingratiated themselves to urban young people from the Grenoble area. It is worth stressing that the demographics deserve to be taken into account because Grenoble prides itself on being a "young" city par excellence. It is home to 60,000 students, who represent almost 50% of the "intra-muros" (metro-area) population of Grenoble.

In addition to the journalistic content (articles, files, slide shows, videos), the electronic version of *GREnews* (grenews.com) places an important emphasis on facilitating readers participation using the interactivity of Web 2.0 technology. This includes links to social-networking sites (Facebook, Myspace), content-sharing platforms (YouTube, Dailymotion etc) and to the increasing role of readers comments, mini-polls and votes (eg: for sports personalities, politicians etc), which are all utilized to increase active online interactions. The "young" character of the site is heightened by various design elements (video testimonies, for example the Saint Patrick's Day parties) and by the language used, in particular that used in the poll questions. The objective being to create loyal communities at various points around the site, although at the moment, the editorial staff have no money to do it. The site has between 1500 and 3500 unique visitors a day.

Specializing in hyperlocal information, grenews.com obviously appeals specifically to the region. However, its creators hope to increase national share from "search traffic" (currently quite low because of the lack of sufficient referencing) because Grenoble, considered to be a centre for new technology, and situated in the heart of the Alps, interests not only the local inhabitants but also has a wider regional and national significance.

The free 30 page weekly *GREnews* reproduces some content from the website. It distributes 40 000 copies every Wednesday from around 800 points throughout the city.

According to Peltier, *GREnews* would have generated a turnover in its first year of

500.000 euro (AFP, December 2, 2008). Head of New Media Jean-Paul Fritz claims this has put the company back into profit. However, he admits that they had to give up incorporating daily television news on *grenews.com* because it was too expensive to produce. He also admits that the online success would not have been possible without the backing of the printed newspaper and if they had not already been a well respected news organization, without direct competitors in their region, and by being a member of the biggest regional press conglomerate in the country. As additional proof of the power of a big player, we can cite the recent disappearance of the only direct competitor to *GREnews* another free weekly called "*Grenoble and I*".¹

- *other DL experiences on the Internet*

This formula of a website plus free printed weekly was created in October 2008 in Avignon, in the south of the Dauphiné Libéré distribution area. Here there is a daily paper *Vaucluse Morning*, a local version of DL. The context is however very different because Avignon is a city of only 160,000 and *Vaucluse Morning* is confronted by competition from daily paper *La Provence* (Hersant Média group).

A similar experience was tried in Annecy, (a city of more than 50,000 inhabitants in the North French Alps) from December, 2008. A website was started there under the name of *Arvnews*, but continued only five months owing to the lack of a sufficiently large market.

The *Dauphiné Libéré* group also created a multimedia product dedicated to skiing: the *Ski stopwatch*, a paid-for magazine (with 7 issues a year) plus a website launched at the end of 2006.

Jean-Paul Fritz insists however that DL has no predetermined new media strategy other than successive trials to see what works. Other journalists of *GREnews* hold the same

¹ Distributed in the capital of the Alps in 40 000 eg (45 000 eg for *GREnews*) since 2006, *Grenoble and I* is not available any more in paper version since the end of 2009 but survived on the Web.

views, without going into details. This is not surprising in itself because strategic company information is probably confidential. These assertions give weight to the observation of Yannick Estienne, author of a work on professional practices in internet journalism.

Indeed, Estienne says: *"the online journalism works as a laboratory where a whole journalistic generation, acclimated in the new media, experiments the another relationship to their profession"*. (Estienne, on 2007, p. 291) The next evolution will need to improve upon what already exists, as well as optimizing all the means available within the entire EBRA group. So, the DL website is soon going to upgrade to a new software version, putting it onto the same platform as *Le Progrès* and *L'Est Républicain* (other newspapers of EBRA group). In any case, the mobile phone market, which is still not yet mature, would not be concerned at the moment by the news projects of DL. On the other hand, the "mother newspaper" is also preparing to jump to multi-platform by training editorial staff to use web tools.

So who are the models for this online evolution? Jean-Paul Fritz says they are Anglo-Saxon; for example *The Guardian* website in particular, which generates a worldwide traffic. To paraphrase Fritz: *"This relatively small British national newspaper has everything online: the navigation is magnificent, the basic graphics are superb; podcasts work well and their iPhone application is excellent"*.

However, Patrick Peltier the *Dauphiné Libéré* chief development editor said at the beginning of 2008, the group's objective was to make it so that products other than the daily newspaper should represent 50 % of the turnover figure in the space of five years (*Tribune*, in February 6th, 2008). He did not specify if that figure is for the entire EBRA group or only *Dauphiné Libéré*.

Being a GREnews journalist

After webtv news was abandoned, the *GREnews* editorial staff consisted at present of barely three journalists. An insignificant number in comparison with more than 250 journalists working on the DL main desk (around forty journalists on Grenoble alone). Added to that figure, DL employs four local correspondents, as well as some students from the local school of journalism who have a partnership with the company. The supervision of the students is part of tasks of the editorial staff. To explain the lack of editorial staff on *GREnews*, one of our interlocutors accuses the companies profit motive thanks to the gloomy prospects in the print media.

- continuity in stimulating environments

Three *GREnews* journalists come from the DL desk. They followed classical professional paths to enter the regional press: a training course, a period as local correspondent, recruitment under limited-term contract, passage via a local agency... before becoming promoted to the central desk. None of them is graduated as a journalist, or did any specific training course in web techniques before being hired. All of them are said to have learnt and been formed "on the hoof", as one goes along, just by working in the job.

They are all about thirty years old, close to that of their target readers. Their personal qualities were a determining criterion in their recruitment for this multimedia project. This may be even more relevant than any master's degree connected to the web, as three members of the editorial staff confess freely. Only the leader of the New Media project admits to being an unconditional geek and as such, he constitutes the human resource for his colleagues.

Working both for the Web platform and for the paper, they consider themselves as multimedia journalists and not simply as online journalists. They all insist on the notion of continuity with regard to their previous professional practice. *"I do exactly the same*

work as I did before ", says Fritz. He takes an opposing view to common opinions and considers that even the writing remains the same online as it is in print: there is no specific writing style necessary for this platform - in fact it requires better legibility.

What has changed, on the other hand, is that much more versatility is required. It is necessary to research the information, to verify it, to shape it, to put it online, to manage the contact with the users and with the other stakeholders (like the announcers), to supervise the school of journalism students... Our three journalists have to achieve all these tasks, normally taking some of other professional functions or even of different professions.

Considering the level of professional skills required, having this degree of versatility is difficult to manage, especially given the extremely reduced number of editorial staff. Consequently, the work within *GREnews* is characterized for everyone by a constant series of deadlines. *"To work on a multi-platform demands constant energy and an obstinacy "*, admits one of the journalists. *"We scatter a lot, we are not well formed, we haven't enough time to do everything, schedules are impossible "*, says the other one. Reminding us of the fact that the biggest amount of financial investment is concentrated on the daily news. Yes, experimenting with new businesses is good, but on the condition that everything is in balance.

The Web beats with the immediateness of information - which is not always simple to manage: demanding a huge ability to react quickly and usually to do so with insufficient resources. Interactivity is another specific element to be considered, with its appropriate advantages: readers can introduce new topics and their reactions allow the editorial staff to know better their opinions and their needs...

However, in spite of the workload and the availability demanded, the experience is considered stimulating, even very positive, by *GREnews* journalists. They are aware of being in the forefront of innovation, they appreciate integrating new skills which they anticipate as the standard tomorrow's reporting. And in fact: *"to be much more in sync with the evolution of the job"* must be perceived as reassuring in the context of general anxiety about the future of the print media.

With a fairly autonomous work life and relative job security (all three are under permanent contract), the journalist-writers of *GREnews* consider themselves to be well paid according to their professional seniority (ten years on average), a not insignificant feat at the time of economic instability with unemployment rate touching in France 10 %. Having said that, they remain conscious of the fragility of the experience and nobody risks betting on tomorrow.

- *a traditional concept of professional aims*

Given what has been said, we should not be surprised that multi-platform journalism has not enormously changed *GREnews* journalists vision of practical experience. On the contrary, in a professional context, they consider it necessary to refocus on the fundamental role of the profession which they summarize in the following way: *"to inform", "to know how to collect information and treat it ", "to tempt readers ", " do not cloud the facts with ones own opinions "*. One of our interlocutors tries to give himself some time to understand *"complex situations where the part of the human is important"* and admits to us: *"I always considered that our job is to decipher multiple nuances of grey on a beautiful black and white picture"*.

Recited as a belief, and with a certain youthful naivety, these words can only prove an attachment shown by these journalists to traditional journalistic doctrines. Doctrine that sees journalists as some kind of guardian of democracy because their main objective is to

be impartial or is going to enlighten citizens' choices. (Mathien, on 1999) Naturally, on no account, can this be confused with the reality of daily journalistic practice. For these young reporters, journalism remains a pure mission, no matter the platform on which they are brought to work.

Conclusion

To summarize, the results of our survey above all highlight a continuity of professional practice by the journalists brought to work online. This report confirms studies on the evolution of journalistic practice before the Web, made in France already in the beginning of the 2000s (Cf. Damian, Ringoot, Ruellan, Thierry, on 2002; Pélissier, on 2002, 2003; Ruellan, Thierry, on 1998) according to which the Internet appears more as an accelerator of observable professional changes in the media since the 1980s. Turnover which, moreover, touched first of all media economy, before it began affecting professional practices. (Pélissier, on 2003).

The example of *GREnews* also allows us to believe that even if the internet requires behavioral evolution, the practices and mentalities of establishing new social relationships in the workplace, is maybe less painful for the employees of the big French regional newspapers (of which *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, is one) than for other categories of journalists. Indeed, these newspapers, in spite of the unpredictable perspectives, remain solid enough to face the digital era without abrupt breaks, in particular when it is a question of bringing their employees, the journalists in this case, towards new standards of professional practice. It is evident however, that the results of this investigation, obtained on the basis of the study of only a small desk, should be confirmed by the other studies of this kind to eventually aspire to some generalization of the effects.

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