

Where do we go from here?

Friday 16 October 2009, by [HALIMI Serge](#), [Le Monde diplomatique](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2009).

Le Monde diplomatique has been warning about an economic storm for 20 years, and that storm is now devastating the newspaper business. Understanding its causes is no insulation from its effects; *Le Monde diplomatique* feels the effects of the downturn, although less than other publications and in a different way. Neither our survival nor our independence is under threat, but we have no resources to grow. We're appealing to our readers, so that *Le Monde diplomatique* can continue to play its full part in the battle of ideas.

Textile, metal and car workers in northern countries first experienced structural change to their industries, and paid the high price of change as their jobs were relocated to the south. Now journalists see their jobs disappearing, as readers migrate to the internet. You could take the view that one economic model is succeeding another and say too bad, that's life. But there's the matter of democracy. Cars, we are told, are not an irreplaceable public good, but merchandise. They can be manufactured anywhere and anyhow or replaced by other forms of transport – no big deal.

But the press has an obvious trump card in the public debate: when it believes its existence is threatened, it can raise the alarm more easily than a worker whose factory is being shut down. To rally supporters, it only has to say “every time a newspaper closes, democracy dies a little”. This is ludicrous: visit any newsagent to confirm that dozens of titles could cease to exist tomorrow without any harm to democracy. That doesn't make the concerns of journalists invalid. But billions of people on earth are able to defend their right to a job without having to invent any justification other than that it pays them a wage.

Newspapers have been in decline for some time, but journalism has been in the doldrums for much longer. Editorial content wasn't so marvellous 20 years ago when most periodicals were publicity vehicles with a licence to print money. At that time those US mastodons, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Gannett*, *Knight Ridder*, *Dow Jones*, and *Times Mirror*, were making profits 20 times greater than in the Watergate era, the zenith of their “counter-power” [1]. Did profit margins that reached 30% and 35% produce daring, creative, independent journalism?

In France, did critical information reach the public when – with billions to spend – the Lagardère and Bouygues groups fought it out for control of the TF1 television station? Or when, vying with each other to reach the lowest common denominator, private channels multiplied and paid exorbitant salaries to a few tame journalists? A number of newspaper owners have now banded together to beg for financial help from what they would otherwise disdainfully call the nanny state.

If the public remains unmoved, it's in part because they have realised that the talk of freedom of expression is often just a smokescreen for media owners' interests. “By and large, down the decades,” says Alexander Cockburn, co-founder of the alternative website CounterPunch.com, “the mainstream newspapers have – often rabidly – obstructed and sabotaged efforts to improve our social and political conditions” [2]. The ever rarer reportage and investigative journalism serves to sustain an untrue idea of what the press is – while the other pages fill up with trivia, profiles, consumer reviews, weather, sport and the back-scratching of the books pages. And then there are the cut and paste jobs from press releases, done by rapidly de-skilling employees.

“Imagine”, says US academic Robert McChesney, “the federal government had issued an edict demanding that there be a sharp reduction in international journalism, or that local newsrooms be closed or their staffs and budgets slashed. Imagine if the president had issued an order that news media concentrate upon celebrities and trivia, rather than rigorously investigate and pursue scandals and lawbreaking in the White House... Professors of journalism and communication would have gone on hunger strikes... entire universities would have shut down in protest. Yet, when quasi-monopolistic commercial interests effectively do pretty much the same thing, and leave our society as impoverished culturally... it passes with only minor protest in most journalism and communication programmes” [3].

McChesney asks: “When, exactly, did Americans approve of the idea that a handful of corporations selling advertising were the proper stewards of the media or that it was inappropriate to ever question their power? ... When in American history had this debate taken place? When had the American people ratified the corporate media system as the proper one for the United States?”

In 1934 the radical French politician Édouard Daladier denounced the “two hundred families” who “appoint their own people to positions of power” and who “intervene in matters of public opinion through their control of the press”. Now fewer than 20 dynasties exert a comparable influence, but on a global scale. The power of these feudal dynasties – Murdoch, Bolloré, Bertelsmann, Lagardère, Slim, Bouygues, Berlusconi, Cisneros, Arnault [4] – often exceeds that of governments. If *Le Monde diplomatique* had been owned by them, would it have questioned Lagardère’s control of publishing or the Bolloré plantations in Africa? [5].

Serge July, recalling the way in which he left Libération, the daily paper he founded, after Édouard de Rothschild took a financial stake in it in 2005, said: “Rothschild... undertook to become financially involved on condition that I not only stepped down from my role, but ceased any involvement with the paper. I had no choice – I accepted at once” [6]. Yet his successor, imposed by Rothschild, presents himself today as a defender of the freedom of the press.

It’s not the internet

The internet has not destroyed journalism. It has been stumbling for some time under the weight of restructurings, marketing-driven content, contempt for working class readership, and under the influence of billionaires and advertisers. It wasn’t the internet that propagated the allies’ untruths during the first Gulf war (1991) or Nato’s during the Kosovo conflict or the Pentagon’s during the Iraq war. Nor can we blame the internet for the media’s inability to publicise the collapse of savings banks in the US in 1989 and the collapse of emerging nations eight years later, or to warn of the housing bubble for which we are all still paying the price. So if the press really needs to be saved, public money would be better spent on those who purvey information reliably and independently rather than those □who just hawk malicious gossip. Those who want to make money from investments or □from being pens for hire can find resources elsewhere [7].

Accusations against the internet often reveal more than legitimate concern about the ways in which knowledge is disseminated: the fear that the reign of a few powerful editorial figures is ending. Dispensing favours in a feudal style, they have created their own domains, arranged sinecures and had the power to make and break ministers and reputations. Unanimous approval greeted their projects and opinion columns [8]. Here and there a few irreverent papers held out. But then one day hordes of the unwashed appeared with their laptops.

At *Le Monde diplomatique*, we haven’t been exempt from turmoil in the industry. After a continuous rise in sales between 1996 and 2003, the newsstand sales of our parent French edition dropped significantly between 2003 and 2008. The number of subscribers, however, has continued to grow. In copies sold, the decline is real and takes us back to 1994 levels, when we staged a partial buy-out

of the paper. It's true that the general picture is substantially improved when you add in the 73 international editions (the first, in Italy, dates from 1994; the English edition *LMD* began in 1997), which together make for a world circulation of two million and hundreds of thousands of online readers.

But readership and revenue are very different. Newsstand sales and subscriptions are our two main sources of income [9]. Online readers contribute to the paper's influence but not to its existence. And readers who don't contribute to our income are like stowaways. The English edition *LMD - Le Monde diplomatique's* voice throughout the English-speaking world - is widely read on the internet and through syndication; it depends entirely on the parent edition, which fully owns it but cannot afford to promote it commercially, and it struggles financially.

To survive, some newspapers have decided to align their content more closely with the supposed tastes of their readers. "Our research shows that people are looking for more utility from newspapers," says Sammy Papert, chief executive of Belden Associates, which researches for American newspapers. "People want their paper to tell them how to get richer, and what they might do in the evening... At Zero Hora, a Brazilian paper owned by RBS Group, the circulation department asks 120 readers what they think of the paper every day and Marcelo Rech, the editor, receives a report at 1pm. 'They usually want more of our supplements on cooking and houses and less of Hizbullah and earthquakes', says Mr Rech" [10]. *Le Monde diplomatique* is probably not for them.

This fall from favour is like discouragement felt by those who have realised that, without means to spread the message and influence the political process, simply exposing the way the social and international order works has had little effect on the durability of that system. The question "what's the point?" has gradually replaced "what do we propose to do?" which, in our case, isn't really justified given the number of proposals in these pages over the years (the abolition of third world debt, reform of international institutions, the Tobin tax, nationalisation of banks, European protectionism, the development of a solidarity-based economy and of the non-commercial sphere).

The decline of anti-globalisation seems to have hit us harder than others. The intellectual hegemony of neoliberalism was questioned, but not for long. Criticism is not enough, and neither are proposals: the social order is not a text which only has to be deconstructed for it to reconstitute itself. Many ideas may chip away at the real world, but the walls don't collapse. However, we sometimes expect that events will bend to fit to our shared hopes, and when that doesn't happen, we are judged to be depressing.

Cause for hope

When it comes to the future of this paper, we base our optimism on the strong belief that we can count on your help. For the moment, we aren't putting our prices up. We will keep them lower in poorer countries. We shall encourage new international editions through low start-up costs. We shall keep well up with new technology, important if we are to reach the young and spread our paper's intellectual and political values. We will continue to commission major reportage and investigations from journalists, researchers and activists on current crises, conflicts and also on alternative solutions and new initiatives.

But our development depends in large measure on your direct involvement, by buying the paper more regularly or taking out a subscription. Compared to other publications, our losses may seem modest (for the French edition it was €330,000 in 2007, €215,000 last year), but no banker is likely to step forward to cover them since all of the staff are shareholders, our readers donate subscriptions to libraries and prisons that lack resources, and the directorship is an elected post.

But who, besides us, will go on funding general-interest journalism open to the world that can devote

a spread to Zambian miners, the Chinese navy or Latvian society? This paper has its faults, but it encourages its writers to travel, to ask questions, to listen and to observe. The journalists who run it are never invited to Davos or Bilderberg; they're not in bed with the pharmaceutical lobbyists or packaging companies; they don't have a place in the big media companies. Those companies, which retail every new offering from rival papers and always confine their press reviews to the same five or six titles, exclude *Le Monde diplomatique* despite its worldwide impact. That's the price of our uniqueness.

But we have many friends: the Friends of *LMD* (mainly in France but there is a group in the UK) who support the editorial independence of the paper and organise debates on topical themes each month; the newsagents who see that the paper remains visible on French newsstands; the teachers who introduce it to their students; the alternative press that benefits from our reporting and contributes its writers; many people who are curious, and the odd curmudgeon... and all the rest of you, without whom none of this would be possible.

Serge Halimi

* From *Le Monde diplomatique*, English Edition, October 2009:
<http://mondediplo.com/2009/10/01press>

Not the end of the media yet. Please

Exclusive

Serge Halimi's article "Where do we go from here?" in our October issue has provoked much thoughtful comment from our readers

14 October, by Rupert Read

The media has been a hugely powerful institution for several generations. It has achieved a level of influence, even dominance, in contemporary culture that would have surprised most citizens of the Victorian age. But is it time to write the media's obituary? As Serge Halimi's "Where do we go from here?" lays out, the media may be in decline, perhaps terminal. Its mediation of the messages we receive is threatened. A process of disintermediation (or simply dismediation) is underway; the ostensible products of the media are being made available free via the internet, broken down into bite-size chunks. (Finding the podcast means you don't need the rest of the programme or the series or the paper, and you don't have to watch the ads.)

I say "ostensible" products, for the real product of most of the media, the thing it sells, is an audience. But the ability of media to sell that product is failing; for consumers are going directly to the chunk they desire. Without mediation. Newspapers and channels are in danger of becoming platforms for chunks, for bites and bytes. And the platform is in danger of being unfundable, dissolving away into the internet. The process of dismediation is fairly widely, though by no means universally, seen as inevitable. Those who think it probable or inevitable worry about consequences (such as the end of newspapers, unless they can find an alternative funding stream, such as philanthropy, or an alternative *modus operandi*, such as the inclusion of citizen-journalists and/or user-generated content), but welcome its vehicle: consumer choice. It is seen as good that media

consumers can bypass media to go directly to the stories / information / infotainments they desire.

Halimi argues it is not a good thing when top quality organs such as *Le Monde diplomatique* are affected negatively, but he sheds no tears for the travails of mainstream media. I challenge that assumption, and the more general assumption of the goodness of consumer choice that underlies the netheads' praise for dismediation. While there is something democratic and levelling about dismediation, something empowering and even thrilling, I wish to suggest a powerful reason why the end of media would be bad. The reason this has not yet been widely discussed is that it is generally agreed that it is right that consumers can bypass media to go directly to the objects of their desire, because we assume without question that the maximisation of individual consumer choice must be a good thing. If media gets in the way of maximisation, we assume that media forms a barrier, and is just waiting to be bypassed. But there is sound reason to think that maximisation of consumer choice is not good. Excessive choice leads to extra time trying to make such choices; it involves a net loss of information; it leaves us less able to negotiate our world, and unsure what to trust.

There is a good reason, stronger than nostalgia, why people warn against threats to media and the loss of the *Guardian* or *The New York Times* or the BBC. These mediators have a style; they hang together; they help us know our way around. They embody a wisdom. They help us view, navigate, know the world. They make us feel at home. The welcoming of disintermediation as utopian and to-be-welcomed ignores a deeper truth: that the collective "social mind" of communities is often superior to the individual mind that consumerism as an ideology values most. The "social mind" of the *Guardian* or the BBC may be flawed, even systemically flawed, as argued by Noam Chomsky or Halimi; but it also contains much wisdom. Alternative media can sometimes contain still more — *Z magazine*, *Znet* (and indeed *Le Monde diplomatique*).

Wouldn't it benefit us all to lose FoxNews, or Zero Hora? No. It might be a good thing, but not a benefit, because even these help us know the world. They provide a lens. We come to know our way around them, and to understand their biases. Without media, there will only be the individual atom pitted against a vast array of sources of information and entertainment. Left and green critics of the media (such as MediaLens, with which I usually agree), and utopian post-media netheads might both dream of the end of media as we know it. But there will never be an end to media. Disintermediation will never be completed; because people will spontaneously create new media forms and vehicles, through their tribes, through new ways links between the bites .

My ultimate reason for wanting to keep media and believing it will continue is that I don't know what I need. I don't even know what I want. And nor do you, or any of us. It is a big illusion to suppose the individual to be always or even prima facie the best arbiter of their own wants and needs. The deeply wonderful thing about the *Guardian* or the BBC or Open Democracy or even Zero Hora, is that each brings me things that I didn't know I wanted or needed to know, and even things that I resisted or didn't want. (At least, at first). They also bring us things on a scale otherwise near impossible to sustain. The series produced by the BBC or HBO: these would be a terrible loss. As would large-scale documentaries. Public-service broadcasting still has a real role. Consider too the public service performed by the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK, exposing the MPs' expenses scandal. Media provides public goods that would not be paid for in the dystopia of an individualised, bite-sized, dismediated world. Public goods, like public information, and some news, whether you like it or not, (It is worrying that that people can now live almost immune to news, by watching just Sky Sports, for example; compared with that, the *Sun* or even the *Daily Star* is a news goldmine.)

As a colleague put it: "I was thinking about why I still like printed papers... and decided it's partly because they bring together all that they've decided is worth looking at in one place, and force me to be aware (at least briefly) of a lot of stuff I wouldn't have gone searching for on the web. They make me step outside my information comfort zone a little." Mediation helps us to understand and

navigate our way about to a greater extent than we could ever do as isolated individuals. The media must not and will not end, for that reason. We are wise enough to know that we are not wise enough to know all that we need to know about.

Footnotes

[1] Revelations in the Washington Post from 1972 concerning the burglary of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate Complex in Washington led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in August 1974. Between 1975 and 1989 the New York Times Co's annual profits rose from \$13m to \$266m; those of the Washington Post Co went from \$12m to \$197m. In 1989 Gannett earned \$397m, Knight Ridder \$247m, Dow Jones \$317m and Times Mirror \$298m. (See Howard Kurtz, "Stop the Presses", *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 3 May 1993.).

[2] Alexander Cockburn, *The Nation*, New York, 1 June 2009.

[3] Quoted in *Columbia Journalism Review*, New York, January-February 2008.

[4] In May 2008, Bernard Arnault, the second-richest man in France, CEO of LVMH luxury goods conglomerate and owner of the economics weekly, *Les Echos*, appointed his son Antoine to the "editorial independence committee" of *Les Echos* group. Previously Antoine Arnault was communications director for Louis Vuitton.

[5] See Thomas Deltombe "An emperor in Africa", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, April 2009.

<http://mondediplo.com/2009/04/09africa>

[6] Serge July, Jean-François Kahn and Edwy Plenel, *Faut-il croire les journalistes?* (Should we believe journalists?), Editions Mordicus, Paris, 2009, p 67.

[7] In October 1984 Claude Julien, then director of *Le Monde diplomatique*, proposed that state aid for the press, which in France amounted to 10% of turnover, should be reserved for not-for-profit companies. Their profits should be "rechannelled into work of public value. Thus newspapers which opt for this status would have no chance of appealing to wheeler-dealers."

[8] See Glyn Morgan, "The where but not the why", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, March 2006.

<http://mondediplo.com/2006/03/13bhl>

[9] In 2008 the international editions contributed €350,000 in royalties to *Le Monde diplomatique* - around 3% of its annual income.

[10] In "More media, less news", *The Economist*, London, 26 August 2006.