

Emmanuel Macron: A Media Fit for a King - Challenge to the freedom of the press in France

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Emmanuel Macron is clearly determined to continue his attacks on civil liberties. The first salvo came with the so-called “anti-hooliganism” law, in a grave move that will impose enormous limits on the right to demonstrate. The second salvo now appearing on the horizon could pose a serious challenge to the freedom of the press in France.

This threat is all the more serious considering the fact that a small handful of billionaires have already gobbled up most of the media over the last few years, trashing its independence. And since the beginning of Macron’s spell in office there have already been a series of laws dealing a death blow to our liberties, and which represent so many challenges to citizens’ right to information.

There have been several recent indicators of Macron’s desire to put the press under control. The latest one — the attempted raid on *Mediapart*’s office last Monday, as part of an inquiry including (in particular) claims of media intrusion into the private life of Alexandre Benalla [Macron’s former bodyguard, filmed illegally dressed as a policeman as he beat protesters], is not the least worrying.

Driven by the public prosecutor, which is under direct government authority (the president himself would have been informed in advance) this raid — which we repulsed — constitutes a grave threat to the secrecy of journalists’ sources, one of the foundations of the freedom of the press.

But there are other indicators, too, which are just as telling: take what the head of state said last week, when he spoke with a clutch of handpicked journalists to inform them of his plans in various fields. And among the points he divulged, many tell us one and the same thing: Emmanuel Macron dreams of imposing a “supervised” press and control over the news.

Truth

Among the media he invited to the Élysée Palace (and who thus let on what the president is thinking) was *Le Point* magazine. [On its website](#) it reported such tidbits as:

Emmanuel Macron says he is “worried about the state of information and the truth” in our democracy. He says that there is an urgent need to re-establish “levels of

confidence” and “accept the hierarchy of who is speaking.” “A mayor, an MP, a minister, cannot be put on the same footing as X citizen wearing a yellow vest, which ends up saying that ‘everything is only as true as anything else.’” He was of course alluding to the litany of *gilets jaunes* we’ve all seen on the news channels, who have been allowed to say all kinds of unverifiable “truths” without journalists being able to say which are most reliable, to verify and categorize them.

According to several other outlets who were invited, Emmanuel Macron then went on to express his anger at certain channels giving the *gilets jaunes* too much space to say what they wanted. *Le Point*’s own report continued:

“How can we make the media credible again and draw the proper separation between true and false?”, he was asked. Emmanuel Macron thought for a moment and then invited the media to do the same. Thinking out loud, he replied “Information is a public good. And perhaps it’s up to the state to finance it. The public good is not just the cameraman on [state-owned] France 3, but the news on [private channels] BFM, on LCI, on TF1, anywhere.

We need to make sure that it is neutral, and finance bodies that will ensure this neutrality. There has to be an open form of public subsidy, with journalists as guarantors, to make sure the news is verified. This remuneration should be separate from any other interest. But part of all this also has to come from within the profession [of journalists].”

The interesting thing about Macron’s remarks is that they clearly display his understanding of what the media is meant to be: that is, one that has been pulled into line. We understand that the press’s role is to make the “truth” heard in order to suppress the false. So, the right newspaper would be the one that propagates the truth — the Russian word for it would be *Pravda*. Not the kind that investigates, that conducts inquiries, that reveals the facts that the politically and financially powerful (of whatever stripe) would like to hide from citizens. No, one of that, but the press that doesn’t cause trouble.

And the unspoken part here is: this necessarily means the truth as the regime sees it. And at the same time the good press has to be “neutral.” Too bad for press pluralism, which allows citizens to choose one title over another on the basis of its editorial choices, the facts that they choose to highlight over others. The head of state has made clear his own preference: a uniform press.

His argument is even a lot more threatening than that, for Emmanuel Macron goes so far as to imagine that the state could “finance bodies that ensure the neutrality” of every publication. In short, the state would interfere in all the media — even private ones — to orient or certify the means of information, with the help of those journalists who agreed to collaborate in this system of directed information.

Of course, not all of Emmanuel Macron’s remarks are explicit or developed in full. Has this system of state-financed “bodies” designed to certify information anything to do with the plan for a press ethics board that the government is working on, which has sparked so many worries and concerns among journalists’ associations and unions? Or is this a project coming in addition to this board, which will mean stronger supervision over papers’ editors?

To no great surprise, the president’s remarks have sparked sharp criticism, from multiple

viewpoints. Another article in Le Point [set the tone](#):

No, you're not dreaming things. The president of the republic is proposing that the state should pay certain journalists in each editorial team. Without batting an eyelid he is imagining what looks like a partial nationalization of the press. We'll pass over the wild claim that there is a "part" of journalism that demands "verification": would the rest then be authorized to say just anything? But the essential thing is right here: nothing more than a program to impose control over the press. Does the president realize this? He also refers to approaches which he doubtless considers a softer touch: "This also has to come from within the profession," he says, speaking of "journalists as guarantors." Yes, of course ... Aware of the infinite wisdom of our infallible Jupiter, the papers are doubtless spontaneously going to hand him power of decision over the truth, via a system financed by him, all in the people's best interest ...

In a widely shared column on Slate.fr entitled [Emmanuel Macron, le journalisme de cour, et le contrôle des médias](#) [1] the journalist Claude Askolovitch made even more cutting remarks:

The president wants to reorder our world: there's a lack of truth so he is going to sort that out. He wants to "ensure neutrality" and "verify information" in the media by creating state-financed "bodies" that would control both private and public media — bodies stuffed with journalists who would be the "guarantors" of the whole thing. Our president — let's put it simply — wants to put journalism under supervision, like some social category under surveillance whose "excesses" it was necessary to put a lid on, like the supposed hooligans whose demonstrations need banning. Will freedom flourish under constraint? Will his verification body impose itself on the press? Will the journalists enlisted in his cause become our superiors and our guardians, our censors, the auxiliaries of the state and government?

Secrecy: A Precedent

Of course, even before Macron came to power, citizens' right to information had already been seriously undermined. During Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande's terms, a dozen billionaires bought up all the big French media, including the last independent newspapers. Massive press conglomerates were created. Patrick Drahi's (*Libération*, *L'Express*, RMC, BFM Business, BFM TV); the one owned by Xavier Niel and Matthieu Pigasse, recently tying in with the Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky, who also owns *Marianne* magazine; the one controlled by Bernard Arnault, owner of *Échos* and *Le Parisien* ; or indeed Vincent Bolloré's, with Canal+ and CNews ...

As *Mediapart* has chronicled across these years, this economic normalization has resulted in a troubling editorial normalization, added to a volley of moves to censure or instrumentalize information, not to mention the powerful self-censorship produced in numerous editorial teams thanks to this harmful environment in which the press lies in the hands of big money.

When he reached the presidency, Emmanuel Macron did not add his own touch to this concentration of the press — a process which, indeed, bears many threats to pluralism. But the reason for that was simply that the private capturing of the means of information was already very well-advanced.

Macron did however take care to advertise how close he was to some of the oligarchs who have recently taken possession of the big French media, and especially one of them, Xavier Niel — co-owner of *Le Monde* and *l'Obs*.

In return this same Xavier Niel has proclaimed his strong support for Emmanuel Macron amidst the turbulent currents of the social crisis. He told Europe 1 radio in a December 6 interview: “Even if it isn’t popular to say it, I think we have a super president who is capable of reforming France. He is introducing fantastic laws like the one allowing for the redistribution of wealth.”

The stranglehold on the means of information was almost complete already before he became president. Yet Emmanuel Macron did himself contribute to this grave, historic setback to the right to be informed, through two major bills on business secrecy and “fake news.” The point these two texts had in common was that they tore apart the great progressive Law on the Freedom of the Press of 29 July 1881. This law, which has framed press activity for 138 years, declares its liberal intentions from its first article, “The press and book publishing are free.” The law thus began by clearly setting freedom and transparency as the main principles framing the press’s activity, and then defined sanctions if this freedom was abused.

With Emmanuel Macron, we have seen things turned on their head: these texts on “fake news” and business secrecy destroy the principles of the 1881 law and opacity instead becomes the rule, which the law then defines just a few exceptions to.

There is thus a continuity from these texts — organizing a serious democratic regression — to Macron’s recent talk suggesting press certification controlled by the state. From the progressive liberalism delivered by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and which inspired the great law of 1881, France is now swinging toward an illiberal system, not to say the death knell for freedom itself. Yesterday, as Camille Desmoulins prettily put it, the press was conceived as the “sentinel” of democracy. Today, Emmanuel Macron dreams of a state-appointed “sentinel” to give orders to the press.

Laurent Mauduit

P.S.

- “A Media Fit for a King”. Jacobin, 02.13.2019:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/macron-press-fake-news-benalla-mediapart>

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Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 47722), [Emmanuel Macron, le journalisme de cour et le contrôle des médias](#).