

## HOW FRENCH INFLUENCE IS RECEDING: THE MEDIA BATTLE AGAINST GOOGLE

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If we assume that one of the vectors of a country's influence is language and culture, then France may well see what remains of its influence recede further.

Unable to solve their own problem (inter alia, because of the 'dictatorship of the trade unions' in the newspapers distribution: note the series of strikes which during these past few weeks prevented the dailies from reaching points of sale), too often paralyzed by political correctness and stuck in buddy-buddy relationships which mean that we find the same authors and interviews everywhere, the bosses of the print media now have a new enemy: the bad Americans boys of *Google*.

The daily *Le Figaro* tells us that the French publishers - the Press Association of General and Political Information (IPG) and the Trade Union of the National Daily Press (SPQN) – have for months been thinking about how to make *Google* pay for indexing their contents so as to better 'benefit from the positive effects of the press online'. The Minister of Culture, Aurélie Filipetti, believes that this idea is '*extremely relevant*', while the Deputy Minister for Digital Affairs, Fleur Pellerin has spoken out on this subject together with his German counterpart, wishing thereby that '*Europe will move forward united*'.

The answer from *Google* arrived at the start of October in the form of a letter in which the American giant threatens to remove from its search engine all the sites of French newspapers if such a tax is adopted. The immediate result would be that the French press would lose an important part (30% ? 40% ?) of its audience and also at least as large a share of its advertising revenue. This is so because in a normal market the '*positive effects*' are all there. *Google* and the other search engines index sites and articles, and they generate a flow of readers who, in turn, make it possible to sell advertising space. And also to put ideas into circulation. Everyone wins by this...

But this calculation is too simple and the press prefers to hide in the kindly and protective shadow of the State, which will tax and share out among the lucky beneficiaries the income from this tax. Under threat of imprisonment and financial penalties (we hear about 3 years of detention and a 300,000 Euro fine!!) if there is '*failure to make payment*'...

The reaction of *Google* has left the publishers '*stupefied*' by this '*threat of censorship in contempt of the general interest mission of indexing*' (but if it is a mission of general interest, why do you want to tax it?), while Mme Filipetti is '*surprised*' by this '*threat*' (because brandishing the lightning bolts of the law and the spectre of prison have nothing of a threat about them, to be sure...)

It is time for both sides to come back down to earth.

France stopped being a great power a long time ago. The country can barely claim the (still enviable...) rank of a medium level power. And it is not the fault of the Americans, the Chinese, the Russians or of big capital. It is the fault of a State which (whether run by the Right or the Left) has never found another solution to any problem for the past 50 years than to create a commission, pass a law, get unduly involved in the conduct of business and/or turn on the tax machine.

And so this new conflict perfectly illustrates the French drama: that of government control, lack of initiative (or its being snuffed out) and regulatory and fiscal hysteria. The French daily press creates very little added value (whether intellectual or economic) but it will enjoy in 2013 some 516 million Euros of public funds... For all that, do we have in France a print media with worldwide influence (like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *The Times*)? No, to the annoyance of the great daily « *Le Monde* ». Why? No doubt for the same reason that in the authoritative *QS World Universities Ranking* France first appears only in place 34 (*Ecole Normale Supérieure*), behind two Swiss establishments, two from Hong-Kong, an Australian, a Japanese and... 27 American or British universities... And without doubt for the same reason that you will not find any French publication having the same aura and the same worldwide renown as America's *Foreign Affairs*, to take just one example. No doubt, this is also for the same reason that for the past twenty years or more the best scientific journals in social and political sciences (and some other subjects) are published in the United States or in Great Britain. Without doubt for the same reason that our most brilliant researchers leave the country and all too often we keep the rest. There is nothing new here: '*The researchers who are out looking, we find them ; the resarchers who discover something, we are looking for them*' said General de Gaulle fifty years ago...

In a Europe which is trying to find its voice and deal with an America which remains extraordinarily attractive and dynamic and an Asia which still has not reached its full cruising speed, France is dying. Gently and silently, it is dying. It is dying from government control, from heavy bureaucatic ways which restrain or choke initiative, from these millions of functionaries who do not create any added value but justify their existence by creating regulation after regulation, from an unjust and stupid fiscal system which overburden work and kill effort and imagination, from the permanent stigmatization of those who dare and undertake things, and from labour regulations (35 hours, prohibition of Sunday work, etc.) from another age which refuse to take into account the interests of companies (to sell), of workers (to be better paid) and of consumers (to receive offers which are tailored to their life style).

The results : our brains, the young people who do not want to be crushed by an all-powerful State and the entrepreneurs who are weary of being taken for 'suckers' are leaving. And our influence is declining.

The pathetic rear guard fight of the publishers who would do better if they worked at making good newspapers that readers buy rather than beg for charity from the State is just a new illustration of this sad state of affairs...