

After the Bouygues Affair

Time to Go Back to Basics!



A catastrophe foretold. For years we have denounced the gradual abandonment of the principles upon which the agency was founded as well as a deterioration of both working conditions and editorial standards, while CEO Emmanuel Hoog had his sights set more on promoting the “AFP brand” and supposedly bringing the agency into a brave new digital age. And voilà. **A series of errors, both individual and systemic**, occurring on a weekend during the French school holidays led to an “*industrial accident*” that has in one fell swoop destroyed management dogma and the CEO's laborious PR efforts.

The agency failed to get it right and failed in its public service mission in wrongly announcing the death of French business magnate Martin Bouygues, based on incorrect information and a weak source.¹ **The false scoop was not “above all the result of individual errors”² but the product of a media sector in crisis. The main symptoms at AFP are:**

- **Limited independence vis-à-vis economic interests:** Is AFP sanctioning journalists because they made a serious mistake – or because the person whose death we falsely reported happened to be the head of a top French company, and a major media client to boot? Other such errors have made less waves, and we daily see media stories—some of them even produced by AFP—which are closer to PR jobs than true journalism, without anyone making much of a fuss.
- **Bad habits.** Experienced journalists, even those in Bouygues's own TF1 television station, didn't think to check the veracity of AFP's report.
- **An obsession with internet “buzz”.** Under pressure from management to match information on Twitter and other social networking sites, journalists are tempted to cut corners. On Saturday February 28, AFP apparently had an exclusive break. What did our competitor Reuters do? They too were under pressure to match, but without a source to confirm, they got themselves out of the jam by quoting... France-Info radio station, which itself was quoting AFP. News agency staff are all too familiar with the processes that lead to such mistakes.
- **A loss of bearings.** “*We shoot off urgent alerts on just about anything, while really important information doesn't always get followed up,*” note many journalists. We are collectively submitting to a commercial vision of our profession, and a form of corporatist personnel management that sidelines anyone who speaks out.
- **Inhuman resources.** Cost-cutting in the media industry has led to understaffing and worsening working conditions, not to mention stagnating wages and job insecurity. While job insecurity may not have played a role in the misreporting of Martin Bouygues's death, understaffing and worsening work conditions certainly did as the incident took place on a weekend, when staffing is at its thinnest. AFP has not only largely dismantled its French news gathering network, it has pushed through an absurd reorganization of the Paris editorial operation, splitting it in two. That must be reversed, and the editorial teams reunited in the headquarters building on Place de la Bourse.

A Logical Result of Emmanuel Hoog's Reforms

“In an age when news can be continuously updated on the Internet, the advantage of being the first with a story is no longer primordial; it is infinitely more important to be reliable”³ That warning in defense of AFP's founding principles appeared five years ago, just as Emmanuel Hoog was being elected to his first term as CEO. If those principles have been continuously undermined since, M. Hoog himself is mainly to blame.

¹ Some reactions (in French only): <http://m.canalplus.fr/?vid=1224684> and <http://u.afp.com/echos>

² The quote is from a statement by the AFP Society of Journalists: <https://afpsdj.wordpress.com/2015/03/06/surmonter-laffaire-bouygues/>

³ From a SUD-AFP activist's March 2010 candidacy for the post of CEO: http://www.sharp-words.com/?item=afp_ceo (The quote is from the accompanying text in French).

M. Hoog has been the constant champion of “buzz”. He endorsed the agency’s strange decision to break the law in May 2012, by publishing the results of the French presidential election before polling stations had closed, going so far as to let himself be photographed in the newsroom as the story was going out.⁴ SUD took the matter to AFP’s Supervisory Board, which criticized Hoog’s “*regrettable*” attitude without formally upholding our complaint.⁵ Since then the pressure for speed has only increased, paving the way for the false announcement of the death of Martin Bouygues, the nadir of M. Hoog’s presidency so far.

However the CEO, who has led AFP since 2010, did not take responsibility for what he called an “*unacceptable mistake*”. Instead two members of middle management have been moved to other jobs, and one or more journalists could be reprimanded. Management’s probe is taking place in a distasteful climate of score-settling between factions.

Take a stand on editorial rigor

A reorganization and reinforcing of editorial procedures and standards is needed. SUD is concerned that even such changes, if current management implements them, will be as ineffective as reprimands in reversing the slide in standards. If the Bouygues disaster was foreseeable, then the negative trends buffeting AFP only augur for worse to come:

- At a time when AFP should be focusing on its public interest mission, the French parliament is about to adopt a reform of the agency’s founding 1957 statute under pressure from the European Commission. The change will legalize Hoog’s strategy of developing purely commercial activities that do not fall under the public interest mission.⁶
- The Bouygues affair shows that AFP needs to reinforce its independence vis-à-vis corporate heavyweights, but the commoditization of information will lead in the opposite direction, and the changes to AFP’s statutes mean it will be subject to bankruptcy proceedings like any other company.
- At a time when AFP should be reinvesting in rebuilding its news gathering network, indispensable for true independence, the budgetary straightjacket is in fact tightening. Management’s objective in the negotiations for a new social contract (which should have opened on March 9 but were postponed to the 18th after the eruption of the Bouygues affair) is to limit the increase in the wages bill to 1.0 percent annually.
- A rich democracy rests on media pluralism, and if the French state subsidizes the sector it should help alternative, non-profit media as well as public broadcasters and AFP. However the government’s austerity policies and budget cuts run in the opposite direction -- favoring private media groups that serve their owners’ desire for both political influence and profits.

To reverse these nefarious trends and restore hope for a return to greater democracy, quality news and decent social benefits, employees and citizens alike have to take a stand. SUD is ready to take part in any movements supporting these goals at AFP, and elsewhere.

Paris, March 12, 2015

SUD-AFP (Solidarity - Unity – Democracy)

⁴ The resulting blog article can still be viewed at <http://www.afp.com/fr/node/97658/>

⁵ Our coverage of the case (French only) is at <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article5>

⁶ See our statement in English at <http://www.sud-afp.org/spip.php?article324>