

It's about more than just a name



The SNJ, SNJ-CGT, CFDT, SGJ-FO and SUD-AFP trade unions have appealed to the Agency's Higher Council concerning the commercial activities of the AFP-Services subsidiary. The text of our joint statement can be found here (in French): <http://u.afp.com/JvRE>.

The second-largest trade union among HQ-status journalists, *SUD-AFP* joined the initiative as it is a step in the right direction: criticizing the Agency mixing information provided to users under its public interest mission and public relations for private firms. Even if AFP-Services changes its name, as management has announced following our joint action, the Agency's development of private partnerships (notably with Facebook) is accelerating. **This production of content for certain clients** undermines the editorial independence of AFP, and also poses financial risks as operations are reliant on revenue from a single client.

However SUD-AFP wants to emphasize that this shift towards providing tailor-made content in order to raise revenue is anything but an aberration. It is rather the **logical consequence** of the 2015 agreement between the European Commission, the French government and AFP's management. This deal, which AFP's staff and trade unions did not oppose as strongly as they should have, has resulted in our 1957 statute, often referred to as our "statute of independence", becoming a dead letter. Here are excerpts from our April 2015 statement "Parliament Squeezes AFP into EU Straitjacket" on the main changes to the statute:

- The addition to the statutes of a paragraph authorizing AFP to **engage in commercial activities that are not part of its public interest mission**. This change is aimed at providing cover for the many non-public interest activities that AFP is already engaged in, in violation of the existing statutes. It is already clear that the said activities will provide an ideal excuse to further chip away at the state contribution.
- A change to the clause which previously protected AFP against the risk of **bankruptcy**. The agency is now subject to the same rules as a private company.
- The **end of AFP's structural independence**. Although article 2 of the statutes states that the agency "may under no circumstances fall under the control, either de facto or de jure, of any ideological, political or economic grouping", the pluriannual "Aims and Means contracts" that AFP has been signing with the French government are now to be written into law. In effect, the agency is being placed under a double tutelage, of the European Commission and the French state.

These modifications were made to bring AFP's statutes into compliance with EU competition rules, but this ends up treating information like any other commodity and drastically limits public support for the Agency. The result is that AFP is pushed to develop purely commercial activities such as AFP-Services or partnerships for content we would not otherwise produce **to the detriment of information under our public interest mission**.

"Plan Fries" (see our analysis <http://u.afp.com/oL7K>) is just a logical consequence of these harmful political decisions. The goal is to reduce public funding of AFP by developing business activities not related to our mission as well as keeping a lid on staff expenses (even if this means cutting HQ jobs and a pay freeze, except the SPQN pay hikes CGT, FO and *SUD-AFP* obtained following a long legal battle). Ultimately, this project to "transform" AFP aims to make it possible to privatize the Agency.

In order to save AFP over the long term we need to treat the disease and not the symptoms: the misguided political decisions and the free-market ideology they were based upon rather than actions taken to realize them.