

French desk reform: The ship is taking on water, the crew mistreated, but management maintains its course



Management presented its plan as simple and plain sense: uniting all of the French-language desks in Paris into one entity, a big "Desk Unique" where "simplification", "versatility", and "task-sharing" would reign supreme. But three months after its launch, it is now obvious that the fusion of the International and French domestic desks, each with their economics teams, has instead installed confusion, unease and a feeling of a loss of purpose among editors. A result which risks being repeated elsewhere in the newsroom, if not all of the Agency.

Don't say we didn't warn you

The latest incident: Kills on two stories on May 17 due to validation errors. Officially the error was attributed to the complexity of Iris and communication and coordination difficulties due to remote working. That's possible... But it has also been weeks since *SUD* warned management about the problems on the Desk Unique, in particular about an insufficient number of managers, managers sometimes being seen as authoritarian, a lack of real training, and the risk of workplace distress and editorial disasters.

If the majority of the journalists on the Desk remain silent, many think and some have put into words what they feel is wrong: "**too much work**", "**contradictory instructions**" from four different redchefs, an "**avalanche of notes**", "**continuous improvisation**" and a "**brutal management**" style (which dates from before the reform). Add to this the increasing technical complexity of tasks with pendings and sub pendings where stories to be edited land, a myriad of validation options for various clients, and last but not least the regular breakdowns and bugs in Iris.

The **economics editors** have been particularly hard hit with the suppression of the duty editor and a general lack of staff. An "economics referent" exists, but does not have the authority to distribute copy and is submerged by requests for assistance.

Remote work is the only root of the problem?

Management refuses to see that the ship is taking on water and apparently only hears the explanations of the managers it appointed: all the problems are due to remote working which makes communication and coordination among 65 journalists difficult.

Yet, **it was management that chose to launch the creation of the Desk Unique in February in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic** and as AFP was readying for a long period of extensive remote working due the renovations of the HQ building.

Another mistake: the reform was launched with an insufficient number of managers. The two heads of the former desks are running the Desk Unique with one deputy, instead of a team of one chief and three deputies.

When questioned about this at the end of April by staff representatives, management downplayed the situation and played for time. It was out of the question admitting that anyone is overworked. Instead, management talked of someone who supposedly

complained of validating just three papers per hour. Up is down. Down is up. And no question of finding a temporary deputy as management claimed it can't find anyone. (Apparently no reflection as to why.)

Management sees the only option as waiting until a new management team takes charge... in September!

In short, management is happy to let the ship drift for months and too bad for the suffering crew.

Meanwhile, journalists on the desk will no doubt continue to get dressed down like pupils for a misplaced comma in an essay, duty editors will be hassled from the instant an alert arrives and remote workers urged to signal every momentary absence from in front of their screen.

On the contrary, there are no editorial debates and no discussion of organizational problems and the increased tasks journalists are being charged with.

The Desk Unique was charged with the work that used to be done by the **Bureau de Paris** to adapt copy on France for international audiences, but only two people have been assigned to this and only during the work week.

And for the Agency's showcase, AFP Stories (**Internet Journal**), only two shifts daily are planned, leaving a hole of two hours during the middle of the day.

We're far from the promised reform by management to even out workloads.

And as we saw with the dismantlement of the Economics Desk in 2018, the creation of the Desk Unique has not led to a greater "versatility" among journalists on the desk. Unsurprisingly, each continues to work more or less in their former specialization (France, international, economics or web and mobile) with very different missions.

Same arguments for newsroom reform

The **difficulties of the Desk Unique** should give rise to concern among **production journalists** as the newsroom reform will take place once renovations to the HQ building are completed later this year.

To justify reshuffling the production services, management argued it will create "synergies". *SUD* opposed in vain this reorganization which results in the disappearance of the **Social Service**, while others swallowed the argument that the culture of the service will be "diffused" throughout the newsroom. On the contrary, it will likely turn out similar to the Economics Desk with the illusion of generalized versatility.

But management unlikely cares as its **idée fixe** is a **reduction in jobs and the wage bill**. That is the main objective of "Plan Fries", which was enshrined in the Aims and Means Contract for 2019-2023. It will allow the state to reduce its financial contribution to AFP in future years.

***SUD* calls on all staff to reject this accounting-driven reform of the agency and defend our public interest mission.** Also at issue are our work conditions and our future.

Paris, May 20, 2021

***SUD*-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)**



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