Plan Fries 2.0:

All pain, no gain

SUD AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

On November 10, AFP's Board of Directors reappointed Fabrice Fries as CEO for a second five-year term — without examining other candidates. Fries's second-term program was published on Aurore along with the announcement of his reappointment. **So what is Plan Fries 2.0[1] and what does it mean for AFP and its staff? Here are some preliminary observations.**

The program of almost any leader running for a second term is heavy on continuation of their policies. Here too, but **there are several important differences.**

We all know what **Plan Fries 1.0[2]** was: *increasing revenue* via developing our video service and *cost-cutting* that primarily hit administrative and technical staff via the "voluntary departure plan" (2019-2020).

The bet on video paid off (thanks to the hard work of our video journalists) but even Fries acknowledges the success came at the expense of reducing the number of text journalists. The "voluntary departure plan" reduced staff expenses but the costs to remaining staff in terms of extra workloads and stress have gone up, while AFP's internal capacities are diminished.

First observation: **Plan Fries 2.0 does not identify any product that will drive significant growth** nor does it set concrete revenue targets, unlike his first plan. On the contrary, it contains repeated warnings that video and fact-checking have largely exhausted their major growth opportunities.

Plan Fries 2.0 sets three "new" strategic priorities, but they are not really new.

Consolidate AFP's leadership position in the fight against disinformation and ***Make AFP the preferred agency of the media, and the one they cannot do without*** are defensive in nature. ***Increase the share of non-media clients in commercial revenue*** is playing offense, but it is not an activity that relates to AFP's public interest mission to inform the public. In fact, it often runs fundamentally against that mission, like providing communication services to companies and institutions.

No real new revenue streams

One thing is for certain: these strategic priorities are not really new. The one new element is to tap philanthropic foundations for money to support our journalism. At least Fries acknowledges that this should only be used for developing new projects and not filling holes in our coverage, and must be compatible with AFP's principles and values.

Without the prospect of significant additional revenue, AFP will naturally have to look at cutting costs to face its rising expenses, which Fries notes is largely due to increased staff costs as the Agency copes with strong inflation.

Plan Fries 2.0 has some disturbing hints about how he intends to cut costs via "*four priority internal projects*".

The first is to *create new room for maneuver by changing our organization and working methods*. This is classic Newspeak and there is ample use of words like *workflows*,

[1] http://u.afp.com/icLP (in French)
[2] See the 2018 Fries Plan (http://u.afp.com/3Qv3 in French) and our tract http://u.afp.com/ipym

modernization, *synergies* and *digitalization*. Wider use of machine translation (we already use it for captions when digitizing archive photos) can certainly create “new room for maneuver” if it allows management to cut staff. But does anyone really think we can do that without harming the quality of our coverage, not to mention the cohesion of the Agency?

Threats to AFP’s coverage

Another risk is when Fries says ***AFP must continue to question <u>the scope of its editorial coverage</u>*** (*his underlining*). He doesn’t hint at what may be cut but says no production language is threatened. But Fries warns that the deterioration of the economic situation means AFP must move quickly and *decisions will be made by the end of the first quarter of 2023*. In the presentation entitled *A New Roadmap for the Modernisation of AFP* which accompanied the question and answer session for staff, management indicated it wants to review coverage in Latin America, Spanish-language coverage globally, coverage in the Middle East including in particular Arabic-language production, as well as the Documentation and Infographics services.

Under those charges and the pretext of adopting *more effective work practices* we can reasonably fear more job losses are coming, even if management says it intends to *redeploy resources towards our priorities.* Otherwise, how will it compensate for declining media revenue when no source of replacement income is identified? We should also be concerned about AFP’s ability to carry out its mission to inform the public. Especially when cuts in coverage are parried with increased work for corporations and institutions.

To sum things up, Plan Fries 2.0 is full of measures that will be painful to staff while it is short on those that offer considerable financial gains. We’re all familiar with the phrase: *No pain, no gain*. But what we see here is *all pain and no gain*.

No request state pay full 2023 MIG cost

In the conclusion of his strategic plan, Fries acknowledges that the current method for the state subsidizing AFP won’t work in an inflationary environment. *SUD*, along with other trade unions, have warned since the adoption of the 2019-2023 COM (Aims and Means Contract) that fixing a maximum level of state funding for our public interest mission (MIG) over a five-year period with no mechanism to account for inflation is a recipe for disaster. Fries calls for creating such a mechanism for the next COM which begins in 2024. Excellent!

But what about 2023? AFP staff are already feeling the pressure of rising living costs. Unfortunately, Fries doesn’t have anything to say about this in the document…

But we know from other discussions with management that Fries doesn’t plan to ask the French state to fully compensate for the now higher cost of our public interest mission. That was undoubtedly a message which pleased AFP’s board members who voted for Fries’s reappointment.

AFP staff can count only upon themselves to defend their purchasing power which is under threat from unprecedented (for most of us) inflation. The annual wage talks for HQ-status staff open on November 30 and *SUD* intends to relay the concerns of staff about inflation and their legitimate demands for cost of living adjustments.

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