

Samir Douaihy

Candidate for the Post of **Journalists'** Representative on the Board

AFP Is Special – Let's Keep It That Way!

Dear fellow AFP journalists,

Between June 10 and 20 this year, you are being asked to elect the journalists' representative on the AFP board¹.

This election, which takes place every three years, is **very important**, because:

- It decides who will be the **sole AFP journalist to sit on the body that runs the agency**².
- It is the only election³ that is open to **all AFP journalists around the world**⁴.

I have the honour of asking you to vote for me, on the basis of the following **ten points**:

- 1.** AFP is one of a kind: the only global media company - covering the whole world without interruption - that is **free of both private funding and state influence**. We owe that privilege to a small group of enlightened visionaries who drew up AFP's statutes in the 1950's,⁵ and who thereby placed us under the legal obligation to be free!⁶
- 2.** AFP's statutes amount to a legislative miracle that we must defend, but without excessive dogmatism. The statutes are not an end in themselves, but a tool we can use to protect our independence. **Any changes made to the statutes should above all protect our independence and increase our freedom.**
- 3.** As laid down in its statutes, AFP is not a company but an "*autonomous civil entity*"; it creates "*services*" rather than products and works for "*users*" rather than customers. **To seek to run AFP as though it were a mere private company therefore goes against the spirit of the law.**
- 4.** AFP's special status is continually being threatened. From outside, by free-market ideologues who refuse to tolerate any exceptions to the law of the market and see news as a simple commodity, despite the fact that the right of the citizenry to be informed is the central pillar of democracy. And from the inside, by those who want to force the agency into standardised criteria of profitability and performance, ignoring the specificities of its mission and imitating the methods of the big private media firms. While in fact, **we should be proud of AFP's specificities and do all we can to protect them.**
- 5.** **AFP as a whole constitutes a "general interest mission"**⁷. It is not expected to carry out a variety of such "missions" as part of a range of other activities. AFP has purely and

simply no other task than to honour the “obligations” laid down in the statutes, which are all “general interest missions”. This means that it has no business getting into purely commercial activities. Firstly, its statutes forbid it to do that, and secondly nobody is asking it to generate profits since it has neither owners nor shareholders, and the law demands only that it balance its budget. We should never accept the fragmentation of AFP’s activities into some that are seen as general interest missions and others deemed to be commercial. All of AFP’s activities should take place within the legal framework of the parent company: no subsidiaries and no commercial services.

6. AFP enjoys a worldwide reputation, unique know-how and vast potential. But it finds itself sailing without a compass and following projects that lack overall coherency. **AFP should have a real vision, an ambitious strategy.** Needless to say, that strategy has to take account of new technologies, but at the same time it must be centred on our core activities, and comprehensible to all staff.

7. **AFP needs to be fundamentally rethought and refounded.** Basic changes are needed in overall working methods, geographical deployments, job descriptions, the relationships between working languages, the policy of decentralisation, assessment and evaluation methods, etc., to create a more professional and effective organisation. As part of the reorganisation, questions need to be asked about the pertinence of each of our activities, so as to end those which are not linked to our general interest mission.

8. AFP suffers from a deep-seated ailment: **a lack of trust between management and staff.** Until that trust has been re-established, no reform can be successful. Only a virtuous circle of interaction between management and staff can remobilise all the agency’s energies.

9. It is thanks to the devotion of its staff around the world that AFP goes on operating, day in and day out. AFP staff are neither an “expense” nor a “wages bill”, but the incarnation of the agency’s know-how and the guardians of its general interest mission. Staff should be respected and protected. **AFP should move progressively towards a harmonisation of the rights enjoyed by all its staff around the world.** That means the creation of a worldwide works committee and the drawing-up of a social charter to be applied everywhere and gradually improved.

10. **Working methods and practices inside the company need to be placed on a sound moral footing,** providing more transparency and equity. AFP should respect the law, everywhere; it should call a halt to cronyism in its human resource management and end a certain number of shocking disparities in salaries.

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The task of the journalists’ representative on the AFP board **is not to act as a passive observer; it involves making full use of the mandate to influence events.**

In reality, the staff representatives on the board of governors are the only two members of that body, out of the total 16, to be **members of AFP’s staff and to therefore have full knowledge of its culture.** The 14 other board members, including the chief executive officer, are figures brought in from outside, appointed to their posts for a set term and destined to go elsewhere at the end of that term.

In all of its press statements, AFP proudly points out that its staff *“include people of over 90 different nationalities.”* Despite this, to date only French nationals have been members of the AFP board. If you elect me, I will be the **first non-French person to serve.** Indeed, my

candidacy is also motivated by a desire to pay homage to all of the “foreigners” who make up AFP, and who often work in conditions that are difficult and even dangerous.

Since I joined AFP in 1986, I have taken part in all the mobilisations aimed at preserving the agency’s independence and defending its statutes. The conclusion I draw from this long experience is that **the more AFP’s journalists are united, the better able they are to defend our agency against the threats it regularly faces.**

My candidacy has notably received **support from three of the main trade unions that represent AFP journalists: the CGT, FO and SUD.**

I am a founder-member of the AFP Society of Journalists (SDJ) and a member of the Association to Defend the Independence of AFP (ADIAFP). Although not a member of any trade union, I consider the unions’ role within the agency to be essential. **If elected, I promise to consult regularly with the unions and other journalists’ bodies within the company.** And I also hope to work closely with the representative of non-journalist staff.

I am convinced that AFP has a lot going for it. But **we need to create new synergy within the agency**, and give it back its self-confidence. You can count on me, if I am elected, to work tirelessly to that end.

Very best wishes to each and all of you

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- ¹ AFP’s statutes call for two of the 15 seats on the board to be set aside for staff members, one representing journalists and the other non-journalists. The 15 members of the board elect the CEO, who thereby becomes the 16th board member.
 - ² AFP’s founding statutes state that “*The board of governors is vested with the broadest powers to manage and administer the agency.*”
 - ³ In all, three staff elections take place within AFP, all of them on a three-yearly basis. Two of those elections, which decide who will sit on the Works Committee and who will serve as trade union shop stewards, are open only to staff with French labour contracts, who make up only around 60% of the total worldwide payroll.
 - ⁴ Between 1957 and 1996, the election to the board was open only to staff of French nationality. Then, starting with the poll of 1999, it was enlarged to include all nationals of European Union states. Then, thanks to a courageous lawsuit brought by a staff member, the French Constitutional Council ruled, on May 6, 2011, that the nationality clause was discriminatory and therefore unconstitutional. Since then, the election has been open to all AFP staff.
 - ⁵ AFP’s statutes are enshrined in a law adopted unanimously by the French parliament and which came into force on January 10, 1957.
 - ⁶ The statutes clearly indicated that “*The activities of Agence France-Presse must comply with the following [three] fundamental obligations,*” the first being that: “*Agence France-Presse may under no circumstances take account of influences or considerations liable to compromise the exactitude or the objectivity of the information it provides; it may under no circumstances fall under the control, either de facto or de jure, of any ideological, political or economic grouping.*”
 - ⁷ The term “*general interest mission*”, which has reflected the spirit of the statutes since their introduction in 1957, was explicitly added to article 13 of the text in 2011.