

# 'The market is detrimental to the free and independent production of information'

After 23 years spent working for the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*, in September 2013 journalist Ricardo Gutiérrez became general secretary of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), which unites 71 organisations from 43 countries representing more than 320,000 journalists. In the face of the major crisis hitting the European press, he pleads for new business models and practices better reflecting society's diversity and aspirations.

Interview by  
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In a recent survey (see p. 15), the heads of national journalists' unions unanimously stated that working conditions in the press sector have deteriorated over the past few years. How has this happened?

**Ricardo Gutiérrez** – Journalists are trapped by a pincer movement making their working conditions increasingly precarious. On the one side, the traditional press business model is under pressure through the rise of digital media. Kiosk sales have gone down and advertising revenues have collapsed. This has left us with a succession of redundancy packages. Editorial teams have been cut back – *Le Soir* staff numbers have dropped 40% in 15 years – with the consequence that workloads have increased substantially. Press companies are requiring journalists not just to write for the printed press, but also to produce articles for their company's digital platforms. We are witnessing a terrible work intensification in editorial teams.

Alongside the total breakdown of the traditional financing model, the legislative environment is becoming increasingly difficult, rolling back press liberty throughout Europe, even in long-established democracies. Anti-terrorist legislation is taking its toll on journalism. The adoption of laws permitting mass surveillance has had a clear impact on the protection of journalistic sources. The LuxLeaks process in which a French journalist and two whistleblowers have been charged is in this respect symptomatic of a very worrying development.

In the face of such attacks, all we can do is to denounce the apathy of the European Union which is not fulfilling its role. The Commission needed just a year to adopt the directive on protecting business information (trade secrets). But when we talk about protecting whistle-blowers or installing systems for boosting editorial independence vis-à-vis media owners, we often find European institutions dragging their heels.

As regards press freedom, should we not also be concerned about the concentration of the media in just a few hands? In France, for example, billionaires are buying up major newspapers and magazines one after another.

One expects journalists to play a role as 'watchdogs of democracy', acting as a counterweight. But this requires resources and time, both of which are increasingly less available to journalists. We are seeing a growing increase in precarious working conditions and a deterioration in journalists' pay, in particular among freelancers dependent on gigs. Practically one third of our members are now freelancers.

This is a considerable number, especially when we consider that in certain countries, and Turkey in particular, journalists' unions are forbidden to offer membership to self-employed journalists. This precariousness obviously has a negative impact on how journalists go about their work.

Unfortunately, I am not seeing many reactions on the part of journalists themselves when it comes to the growing breaches of press freedom and the deterioration of their working conditions. It's as if the profession does not see itself as legitimised to fight for its own rights. It's as if we are afraid of abusing our ability to access the media for fear of being accused of defending a corporation, although exactly the opposite is true: we are not talking about a corporatist fight but a battle to defend the right of citizens to free and independent information.

But journalists are not just having to fight to defend their independence. Many of them, especially the young ones, are having to fight to even make a decent living, to survive...

Here in Belgium, there are journalists who work as freelancers for digital platforms for € 50 gross for 10 hours of work. Under such conditions, how can they fulfil their mission as 'watchdogs of democracy'? Though the term may sound a bit bombastic, it's still one of the key roles of journalists. But at € 5 an hour, it's obviously impossible to achieve.

One symptom of the crisis in the profession is the explosion in the number of burn-out cases (see the article on page 12). A burn-out is not just the consequence of work-related exhaustion due to an excess of work, but also a manifestation of the feeling of no longer achieving one's ideals at work. A burn-out affects people driven by high personal ideals at work, for example employees in the medical sector. Journalism is one of those professions with an awful lot of personal investment, not for journalists' own particular benefit but for the community. But now, journalists are finding themselves in concrete situations at work which prevent them from attaining such ideals. This is worrying, not just for the

## Bio express

- 1966** • Born in Liege, Belgium
- 1988** • Degree in journalism from the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)
- 1990** • Joins *Le Soir*, the Belgian newspaper
- 2007** • Teaches in the ULB's Department of Information and Communication Science
- 2007-2013** • Board member of Belgium's Association of Professional Journalists
- September 2013** • Appointed secretary-general of the European Federation of Journalists

profession, but for society as a whole, as journalism is one of the key pillars of democracy. Without it, democracy goes down the drain – exactly what we are seeing now.

Ten years ago, a journalist working for a newspaper wrote just one article a day, while today they are having to write three or four. It is just not possible to write four articles a day and properly accomplish one's mission.

But what is causing this deterioration? New technologies? The social media invasion of journalism? Our just-in-time cult?

When I was a journalist, I observed the progressive change of in-house editorial production flows. In the old days when the journalist out in the field was the key figure in the editorial team, information filtered upwards through the hierarchy, i.e. a 'bottom-up' flow.

As a result of job cuts, more directive management methods have had to be introduced: editors-in-chief sit down together at the start of the day and, based on what they have heard on the radio or read in other newspapers, dictate to their subordinates what they are to write, without taking any account of what is actually happening on the ground. A

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gap has appeared between editorial production and reality. In some cases, journalists are given orders which are completely out of line with reality. But if editorial production stops reflecting reality, you'll lose your readership. If you stop being a mirror of reality, readers lose their trust in you, turning instead to bloggers who speak of things resembling their life.

This is a very dangerous phenomenon. If one of society's checks and balances loses its credibility, it becomes useless and senseless. We are seeing increasing societal anger with the media. Populist parties are already spreading the idea that all journalists are part of an intelligentsia out of touch with reality. Apart from a very small minority of 'star journalists', this image in no way reflects the reality of our profession. Our members are mainly like Benedictine monks wearing habits that scratch, freelancers who live hand to mouth, who work more and more gigs, yet see the rates paid for these gigs dropping everywhere.

In your view, several recent editorial developments, a priori positive for news quality, can be interpreted as a confession of weakness.

'Fact-checking', something very much en vogue in many top media is worrying for several reasons. Journalists who set out to uncover lies can be seen as an interesting cog in the check-and-balance role of journalism. But

## Our current media production, our current press companies, our current journalists no longer reflect the society they write about.

when publishers start setting up 'fact-checking' units, this is done to the detriment of all other journalists providing 'normal' news coverage. We can easily imagine a world where those in power produce fake news which is then thrown out to the journalist dogs like a bone for them to gnaw on. While these 'fact-checking' teams are busy verifying the information, subjects such as unemployment, climate change, etc. get put on the back burner.

Another worrying sign of the times is the profusion of editorial columns, with opinions and debates supplanting news. Again, this might a priori seem to be interesting. One could even say: look, the newspapers are starting to fuel the ideological debate. But in reality they are doing this because it is a lot cheaper than having to use professional journalists. Asking an external editor to provide, in most cases free of charge, a 'carte blanche', an opinion, is a low-cost way of filling pages. Paying a journalist to spend two or three days

researching the subject in question is obviously a lot more expensive.

What we are seeing is a shift from the world of journalism to the world of communication. The less we engage in journalism, the more communication will fill the gap.

In your view, which new media business model is needed to get out of this deadlock?

I am a great believer in citizens re-appropriating the task of editorial production. I defend Julia Cagé's<sup>1</sup> vision of the markets no longer being in a position to ensure the survival of the media. Advertising is no longer able to support newspapers. The 'free market' is detrimental to the free and independent production of information. It is leading to a concentration of media companies, reducing editorial staff and putting enormous pressure on journalists. I am a great believer in the rise of new business models, such as cooperatives, but backed by such modern arrangements as crowdfunding. We're not talking about those cooperatives popular at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One could imagine citizen-financed digital platforms where journalists could individually sell their articles without the intermediary of a publisher. I foresee journalism without publishers. A self-employed journalist, working in a specific field with a high level of credibility, could sell his articles straight to a customer, via platforms exchanging information between citizens who want to be informed and journalists producing the information they are looking for. This would be a way of re-establishing the tenuous link between citizens and journalists.

In the same vein, it would also be necessary for editorial teams to better reflect today's society. Caricaturing this, it would seem that what we have at the moment is a press dominated by white journalists producing 'mono-form' information mainly for a male readership. This is a finding that has emerged from the surveys conducted among our member organisations on diversity in editorial teams and content diversity. Strangely enough, there are parallels here. Our current media production, our current press companies, our current journalists no longer reflect the society they write about. ●

1. A French economist, advisor to Benoît Hamon, Socialist candidate in the French elections, and author of the book *Sauver les médias. Capitalisme, financement participatif et démocratie* (Seuil, 2015).

