Social Media and the Freedom of the Press: a long-term Perspective from within International News Agencies (AFP, Reuters)

Michael PALMER

Professor, Director of the Research Lab. Communication Information Media (CIM, EA 1484), Université Sorbonne nouvelle Paris 3, France
michael.palmer@univ-paris3.fr

Jérémie NICEY

Post-doc, Media and Journalism, Université Sorbonne nouvelle Paris, Research Lab. Communication Information Media (CIM, EA 1484), France
jeremie.nicey@univ-paris3.fr

Abstract: Since the 1780s, discussions among news professionals on issues such as access to sources and the funding of "the media" are often at odds with issues debated by legislators, activists, the executive and the judiciary, in the USA, France and Britain. Is this the case today, with the debate on "social media", the "Arab spring", Internet, blogs, SMS, "Twitter" and the like? This is one issue that will be addressed. The authors have researched the history and present news-products and performance of AFP and Reuters (now Thomson-Reuters) for many years. The second issue addressed here is: how do news-professionals assess current geopolitical and technological "changes" with respect to their established canons

and practices of news-reporting? How do they access, filter, and select from the apparent abundance of sources emerging from "civil society actors", while respecting established practices of news-agency journalism? As the very notion of "mainstream media" encompasses an ever-growing number of actors (CNN is "mainstream", al-Jazeera has become 'mainstream'…), is the issue of access to an ever-widening number of sources to be reassessed in terms not only of the freedom of the media but also to that of the resources available to "seasoned, reputable" news-professionals and their organizations to check, cross-check the "images", "texts" and numbers emanating from these sources? Issues such as the freedom of the media are ever-more linked to that of the canons of international news-reporting. The authors argue that whereas the freedom of the media is still of central importance, the advent of communications technologies – and the commercial logics that underpin them – often linked to the Internet, radically modify how news-professionals go about their business, in an era of "globalization", "social media" and "democratization".

<center>***</center>

Les réseaux sociaux et la liberté de la presse.
Une perspective longue et des incises dans l'actualité' depuis les
agences d'information (AFP, Reuters)

Résumé : Depuis la fin du 18è siècle, les échanges entre les professionnels de l'information à propos de thèmes tels l'accès aux sources et le financement des « medias » abordent autrement, le plus souvent, les thèmes débattus à cet égard par les pouvoirs exécutif, législatif, judiciaire et « citoyen » – et ce, aux Etats-Unis, en France et au Royaume-Uni. Est-ce encore le cas aujourd'hui, où l'on débat, dans le désordre, des « médias sociaux », du « printemps arabe », de l'Internet, des blogs, des SMS, de Twitter et de leurs avatars? Cette interrogation sous-tend cet article. Ses auteurs explorent l'histoire des agences d'information, l'AFP et Reuters (devenue Thomson-Reuters), leurs produits et prestations depuis longtemps. Un deuxième thème sous-tend également cet article. Comment les professionnels de "l'info" pensent-ils les conséquences des mutations géopolitiques et techniques en cours par rapport à leurs critères et pratiques de collecte et de traitement de l'information?

***

'Social media': the term is something of a misnomer. Does it not reflect, in the period since 2000, some of the same factors that led around the 1950s to the promotion of the notion of 'mass-media'? Or, does it activate, more than the term 'mass-media', the search for a label that takes into account actors of civil society, militants of popular movements, who use an array of modern communication technologies to both protest established power-relations and take action in critiques of the societies in which they live? And what of the trans-Atlantic exchanges (London, Paris, Philadelphia-New York-Boston) about the freedom of the press back in the 1780s-90s? Some of the discourse of international associations that champion the cause of press/media freedoms today (and last century) bring to mind some of the arguments used in the above-mentioned cities when the daily press was in its infancy. We shall not answer these questions directly. But in raising them in these terms, we indicate where we think the answer lies.

Many activists and commentators debate some of these issues. Here, we shall focus at times on how news professionals, often located in long-established international news-agencies, respond to issues raised by 'social media', 'participatory journalism' and interactive exchanges on-line with users of their services. The material or corpus stem largely from work in the archives and on the web-sites of established international news-agencies – in particular Thomson-Reuters, AFP and (to a lesser extent) the AP. But, as a historian by training, and as an academic who has long tried to consider the development of international news and information media and geopolitics in France, Britain and the US over some 250 years, in conjunction with each other, I, Palmer, shall try to combine long-term and short-term 'visions'. Jérémie Nicey, my co-author, provides invaluable help in monitoring established news agency responses to 'social media'.

1. The cost of a free press

To begin with a paradox: 'To have a free press, one must first have news that is free' / '*Pour avoir une presse libre, il faut tout d'abord une information libre*' (*L'Echo de la Beauce et de la Perche*, 19/01/1950). This headline topped an article that discussed a crisis in the management of 'Agence française de presse' (a then current term), AFP being then a nationalized company: '*entreprise nationalisée*'. This is 'free' in the sense of 'independent'. Another article, dating from 2011, was headlined: 'News has never covered its costs' (*Les Echos*, 14/03/2011: 'Patrick Eveno: '*L'information n'a jamais été rentable*'). This pinpoints a blind spot: the

collection, processing and distribution of news – that is accurate, insofar as the pressures of speed so allow – costs money.

The freedom of the press – in the sense of a press untrammeled by controls, whether by the state, by the Church or other – is a long-held aspiration and demand. But the free news-flow is something else again. Indeed, free access to a diversity of sources, or a free access to a variety of news-purveyors are not the same thing. The collection of news, the news-editorial treatment of news by professionals and the distribution of news all come at a price. They cost money. News is a marketable commodity; already in 1626, *The Staple of news*, a play by the contemporary of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, pinpointed this fact (Palmer, 2011a). Today, and for a long time, media and non-media clients of news agencies know full well that 'news costs'; but they often seek not to pay the cost price. Specialist news agencies/vectors serving niche markets that are prepared to pay high prices or subscription-rates exist alongside general news agencies whose overheads are not covered by sales or subscriptions to general news services. This is not new: many news agencies in the 19th century and today operate(d) only because supported financially, directly or indirectly by the state or by others.

Have 'social media' and on-line interactive news-purveyors changed the ball-game? Yes and no. I would argue thus: 'citizen journalism' and 'participatory journalism' at the turn of the century, and 'social media' in the early 2000s, are *porte-monteaux*, 'umbrella' words that reflect a trend, a fashion, but also describe a 'reality'. Research into the phenomenon sometimes centers on social networks – on notions of 'friends' and 'contacts', and on the relaying/transmission of information about one's personal activities. This rekindles debates about issues of privacy, and the 'publicisation' of 'the intimate'. Issues relating to the private lives of public persons featured in the past (and still do) in debates over 'press freedoms' and the frontiers between the private and public domains. With 'social media', these frontiers shift and the domain of the private life of the ordinary individual, Mr. Everyman as he was called in the past, also becomes a contentious issue. Social media – e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia – enhance interaction and change the way organizations and individuals communicate: the circulation of news is modified, as well as the production with the growth of user-generated content.

These social media use up-to-date-communication applications (apps), or vectors where news, information and data streams are accessible. Some research data suggest that 'news-sites' are consulted, but that 'social' contacts – 'friends', colleagues, communities, etc. – represent significantly more page-traffic. Despite the continuing hegemonic position of television, news consumption indeed grew and still grow on social media, particularly among the young: 15% of all consumers, and 30% of the 18-34 year olds, get their news from Facebook in an average week (Lightspeed Research, 2011). A not unrelated issue is the freedom (and the

accompanying controls, constraints) to relate news in, or about, states with a strong tradition of state controls/censorship – China, Arab states (Maghreb/Machrek) included.

In this kaleidoscope of factors, this paper centres on how established, traditional international multinational news-media actors have responded and are responding; Reuters and AFP in particular[1].

2. News companies, the Internet and citizens

One apparently conventional view is that Internet developed in the early 1990s as an 'offshoot' or general application of an information-exchange network between researchers since the 1969 Arpanet. At a 1994 conference I attended in Washington D.C., while there was much reference to the metaphor of the 'information highway' used by vice-president Albert Gore, speakers stressed, *inter alia*, the educational potential of the internet and the issues of privacy and intellectual copyright that might arise. There was little attention paid to either the entertainment or the social exchange (chit-chat between individuals) potential of the burgeoning web networks. This was reminiscent in a way of how, in France, when the *minitel* and *messageries* developed in the 1980s, few of the main actors anticipated the growth of *le minitel rose* and the potential for soft pornography and 'adult' exchanges on the web. 'Users' may be motivated by concerns other that those that industry actors and established news-media first have in mind. When, in the early 2000s, the notion of 'Web 2.0' was bandied about, two aspects were highlighted – one technical, one societal. The thrust of the argument – with key-words such as: 'we the media', 'the users as co-developers', 'the long tail', 'crowdsourcing' and the like (O'Reilly, 2005) – is encapsulated, in a way, by the phrase 'an on-going electronic conversation'. In this, Internet users share the 'driving seat' along with established news-professionals. There may be times, indeed, where they appear the principal driver. If, as some say, there is an ideological commitment to strengthen the power of 'inter-netizens', the success of some web-sites due to user-consumer demand is reminiscent of that of the *minitel rose.*

---

[1] Since the 2007-08 reverse merger of the Reuters and Thomson companies – with the Thomson company the prime mover – one should write 'Thomson-Reuters'. In effect, for branding and promotional purposes, the trade name 'Reuters' has greater visibility and refers to the news-agency arm of a 'T-R.' company that has many other activities or assets related to professional news, information and data services. AFP: Agence France Presse, launched in 1944, is in some ways the 'successor' of the first French international news-agency, Havas, founded in 1835; like Reuters, launched in London in 1851, it may have greater visibility internationally by promoting its brand-name – AFP – without, in its case, stressing the 'France' aspect in it title. These agencies have long stressed their international dimension; in the era of globalization and brand-name recognition, Reuters minimized its British dimension just as AFP may find it appropriate to minimize its French dimension.

How do professional news-agency personnel respond to these developments? There are several types of answer. Much depends on the type of source-material used. The investigative journalist of *The Guardian*, Nick Davies, in his exposé of 'churnalism', argues that journalists of Reuters, like other media experiencing massive economic and technological change, are under such pressure to produce copy at speed that that they have little time to double-check the veracity of a story before they churn out the copy (Davies, 2008: 101-105). Their stories may be factually correct, at a given time 'T', but they may not be accurate. 'In the fullness of time' is not a luxury permitted to newsmen. And some news agency personnel have for many years been closer than was advisable to colleagues of other news-agencies – each monitor and some use each other's output – and that of other news-media, while trying at the same time trying to keep their distance[2]. Furthermore, press 'officers' and corporate public relations personnel inundate news-men with press–releases that newsmen under pressures to 'foreshadow' the news, to 'pre-write the story', may not have time to consider, double-check and complement the material that, as professionals, they would wish to.

Another answer is that some agency high-flyers, glimpsing the potential of the Internet, leave straight news-agency work and move on to other avenues it opened up: A. Nibley, a Reuters executive in the US, who once lectured (in 1998), at the university of Kent, on 'the internet gold rush' moved on the tap the potential of Internet's music-sites opportunities. This raises a point not often made: as international companies, 'at the cutting edge of technological change', leading news-agencies have both employees alive to job-prospects elsewhere opened up by the potential of the Internet and others who prefer to stay in a company that offers the possibility of different, successive, international postings, and where – it should be added – labor costs (the salary bill), sometimes 70% of total costs – encourage an ever-wider ethnic recruitment and the transfer of some activities or operations: operating across several time-zones, 24/7[3], Reuters, for instance, has moved some operations from a high-cost Western capital, say, to a lower-cost Asian location. A third answer is one that we shall develop later: agencies increasingly refine the means by which they measure the impact of their news-product, and the nature of that impact.

---

[2] Davies quotes the often-used remarks of the US journalist Edward Behr, recalling the period in the 1960s when he worked for Reuters in Paris: 'in London Agence France-Presse correspondents rewrote Reuters copy as fast as they could, and the finished copy ended up as part of the AFP news-service. In Paris, we shamelessly rewrote Agence France-Presse copy serving it up as Reuters fare', *op.cit*, p. 103. E. Behr, *Anyone here been raped and speaks English?*

[3] 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

3. News agencies adapt to social media: a slow process

Elsewhere, we have looked a news-agency style-guides/*manuels de style* and 'service notes' issued by news/editorial executives to personnel in bureaus and 'out in the field' (Palmer, 2003, 2004, 2006, and 2007). In the past few years, these discuss 'social media', 'crowdsourcing' and the like. It is clear that in the space of a mere 20 years, Reuters and AFP attitudes to 'the web' have changed radically. In the mid-1990s, Reuters was suspicious of news-stories circulating on the Internet (Palmer, 2011a, Palmer and Nicey, 2011). In the late 2000s, both Reuters and AFP launched pages on Facebook: AFP had a Facebook page, in French and English during the 2011 Cannes film festival; it was to showcase the agency multimedia production. This exemplifies the sea-change that has occurred. However, compared to Reuters and the AP, Agence France-Presse was a little slow to adapt to the rise of social media. It opened an account on video platforms, such as YouTube in January 2006 and DailyMotion in March 2010. It only opened an account on the two major social media in 2010-11: on Facebook during autumn 2010 (in October 2010 in French, in December 2010 in English); on Twitter only in July 2011. The same year, the agency published 'guidelines for using social media' for its own journalists. Although the document mainly refers to rules how to add value to AFP content and how not to compete against its own 'wire', they do underline the democratic aspects :

'*Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have firmly established themselves as both an essential part of the newsgathering process and a space where the news is shared and consumed. (…) The management also encourages AFP journalists to use social networks as a tool to interact with the general public (…) Journalists should ensure they remain fair and balanced when commenting on the areas, countries or governments they cover. They should also refrain from any comments that could harm the agency's image of impartiality. (…) As a result it is essential that journalists respect the agency's social media guidelines, the principles laid out in the AFP stylebook and laws relating to the freedom of information.*' (AFP, 2011).

In the late 1980s, Reuters revamped and updated its 'style-guide'. One version was published as a book in 1992 (London, Butterworth-Heinemann, 1992). In the 2000s, Reuters, AFP and AP produce and update electronic versions of these guides. Many agencymen refer to them – a little in the way that , in the US, journalists refer to the style-guides of *The New York Times* or the *Chicago Tribune*. Factual reporting and value-free words are of the essence. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, one Reuter version of the style-guide has, alongside the entry 'said': 'the newsman's favorite word'. By contrast, the use of the word 'terrorist' – 'an emotive term' (Reuters styleguide, 1992) – excited and excites untold comment. US Internet users attacked Reuters, after 9/11/2001 when it referred to those who perpetrated the attacks on New York and Washington D.C. as 'terrorists', i.e. in quote marks (Palmer, 2011b).

Agencies have to use the word, if only because some of the sources that they quote use it. The style-guides have many entries on the issue of sources. Since 2010, roughly, there appear guidelines on the issue of 'crowdsourcing'. What is meant here? Estellés and González (2012) analysed 40 specifications of crowdsourcing and help clarifyi the notion with their following all-encompassing definition:

'*Crowdsourcing is a type of participative online activity in which an individual, an institution, a non-profit organization, or company proposes to a group of individuals of varying knowledge, heterogeneity, and number, via a flexible open call, the voluntary undertaking of a task* (…)'

News-persons interpret 'crowdsourcing' and 'social media' more specifically. Consider the following extract for the Reuters styleguide (accessed on the Internet, in April 2012):

'Social Media: Basic Principles. *Social networks have been a great boon for the practice of journalism, on stories large and small, and Reuters journalism has been the better for them. Not only have they served as a conduit for primary- and crowd-sourced information, they have also given us new ways to report - finding stories and tipsters on Twitter, using LinkedIn to locate sources, mining Facebook groups for angles and insights, and so on.*

Social networks also raise important questions for us, especially when we are using them to transmit rather than receive. The issues around what we can and cannot say there are a subject of constant conversation among us, so as this is not our first word on the subject, it will not be the last. The online world is as full of pitfalls as it was when the Handbook was issued, but the issues are more familiar now, so it makes sense to simplify the guidelines.

Our wish is for people to benefit safely from social networks, not to muzzle anyone. Journalists are people too, with all the rights of citizens. If we want to tweet or post about a school play, a film or a favorite recipe, we are free to do so. When dealing with matters of public importance and actual or potential subjects of coverage, however, Reuters journalists should be mindful of the impact their publicly expressed opinions can have on their work and on Reuters. In our Twitter and Facebook profiles, for example, we should identify ourselves as Reuters journalists and declare that we speak for ourselves, not for Thomson Reuters'.

Consider some of the implications of the above: '*Journalists are people too, with the rights of citizens*'. One might interpret this to mean that with the development of social media, journalists almost have to justify the distinction between their activity as news-professionals and as citizens with views that they may wish to publicize, via blogs or whatever. Clearly the observance of the necessary distinctions is imperative. It is also clear that as applications of technologies grow continually – « communications apps » one might call them – so journalissts, themselves often communications 'geeks', enjoy experimenting with them. In the past few years, many AFP journalists – especially English-speaking journalsists – have developed

their own blogs on the AFP internal web-site (likewise BBC, CNN, etc.), some of which could be accessed by internet users. This was part of the high-profile promotion of brand-name journalists of the given news-media. Blogs may be more personalized than 'straight news-reports'. But the lines between them are sometimes hard to draw. A paper like the London *Independent*, for instance, carried under the by-line of its distinguished veteran correspondent, Robert Fisk, reports of his involvement in, and perceptions of, 2011 events in Libyan that culminated in the death of Khedafi, that might elsewhere have appeared in a newsman's blog. I monitored blog-pieces by AFP journalists covering the Israeli assault on Gaza, en 2008, early 2009. They recounted the difficulties, frustations and dangers experienced in accompanying the Isreali 'move on' Gaza. Similarly, there were some blog pieces from AFP stringers near Ramalah, reporting on the spot sas the dying and injured were brought to the Al-Mustaqbal Hospital hospital. Jounalists 'personalise' how they report events.

'Crowd-sourcing' gains in importance with the rise of social media. To put it mildly, it creates both *angst* and opportunities professional news journalists.

4. 'The Arab spring': freedom *per se* and freedom of news

A conventional journalist view of 'Arab spring events', and their interactions, as seen from Libya, is as follows:

'*For weeks, Libyans watched in awe as Tunisians kindled what became known as the Arab spring and then Egyptians declared Cairo's square liberated territory. In Benghazi, they only dared hop that such a thing could happen in Libya. As it turned out, the fuse was lit by the arrest of a lawyer acting on behalf of relative of political prisoners massacred by the military years earlier… That spark set off the most extensive revolution of the lot. While Egypt's military continued to manipulate the democratic process and the new Tunisian leadership attempted to purge the new order of the old, Libya's uprising morphed into civil war and a fitting end for Gaddafi, dragged from a drainpipe and shot without ceremony*'[4].

As to Tunisia, many have noted how the state-controlled Tunisian press gave little or no coverage to the events that led the fruit-seller Mohamed Bouazizi to set himself on fire, on December 17th, 2011 (Weslati, 2011). Slah Weslati,, a Tunisian university colleague, asks why a not dissimilar event, month earlier, did not generate the agitation that followed the burning and death of Mohamed Bouazizi. One can but wonder which event engendered more 'social media', smartphone and Twitter traffic. Weslati's book, and many academic accounts, do not stress the role of 'tweets', 'SMS', and the range of social media in the process. These played a part, as evidenced by efforts by authoritarian regimes to cut off internet communications.

---

[4] C. McGreal, 'In the crucible of Libya's uprising', *The Observer*, 1st April 2012.

It may be that images – TV, video, photo – played an important role as catalysts that, as they recorded what happened , impacted on activists, militants and civil society and thus helped trigger off further action. Some talked of 'people power' via 'social media'. The latter clearly were a contributory factor.

Professional news agency personnel had other concerns. First, they had to get into the different countries concerned. AFP celebrated in-house the fact that it had long had bureaus in Tripoli, Cairo and Tunis. Existing staff were supplemented by others, flown in from Paris and elsewhere[5]. An AFP journalist reported on how he criss-crossed aLibya monitoring events. What was perhaps more disturbing for 'western international' news-media was that Libyan insurgents, say, might prefer to grant interviews to al-Jazeera journalists than to them: al-Jazeera enjoyed a 'higher profile', and was perceived to have a greater impact on the Arab world, and perhaps elsewhere.

Mid-February 2011 proved a turning-point in AFP's perception of how the Arab uprisings came to be a on-going major international news story; they became '*dominantes*'. Reports of news-editorial conferences in Paris ran thus:

Feb. 12: 'The situation in Egypt since the departure of president Hosni Moubarak, ousted by the street on the 18th day of a popular revolt, heads the international news agenda. We had a very good multimedia coverage, vivid and well-edited from the Cairo bureau and Nicosia yesterday'…

Feb 16: 'the uprisings that are spreading across the Near East dominate the international news agenda. Libya is now involved: it was reported on Wednesday that 14 people were injured the previous day during clashed in Benghazi between demonstrators and the forces of law and order. We're ready to send a news-reporter to Tripoli if the situation worsens. We don't have a photographer in Benghazi but we have a stringer in Tripoli. AFPTV is to pick up pix from local TV stations.

In Bahrein, thousands of people attended the funeral of a demonstrator killed the previous day by security forces. Others continue to camp out in a square in the center of Manama demanding reforms.

---

[5] It is worth recalling how, during non-'turbulent' times, the number and nature of news-stories filed about Maghreb countries and carried on the 'wires' of western international agencies was much lower and differed. According to an AFP in-house study assessing the news-output from the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) in November and December 2002, Algiers produced on average 700 words per day, Rabat 1 000 and Tunis 1 200. The AFP, AP, EFE (Spanish) and Reuter agencies had, respectively, a total of 10, 6, 5, and 18 newspersons in the Maghreb (the Reuters figure included a team of 10 economic and financial news-journalists based in Casablanca). AFP, Direction de l'information, Alerte et analyse, 'Etude statistique sur la couverture de l'Afrique du Nord du 11 au 17/11/2002 et du 9 au 22/12/2002'.

Taleb Mahjoub (text, based in Dubai) is on the spot. Joseph Eid (photo, Beyrouth) is on his way to Manama and could also produce web-clips, in addition to the 'pix' taken by a stringer

In Iran, there were incidents during the funeral of one of the victim of the ant-government demonstrations on Monday. The bureau is working in difficult circumstances, because of an almost complete cut in communications.

In addition to the copy filed on each of the countries involved, we'll have a regional synthesis piece and a computer graphic on the different hot-spots.

We're also ahead of the competition on Egypt where on Tuesday the army gave a commission of legal exports ten days to amend the Constitution and warned that new strikes would be 'a disaster' for the country.

In Tunisia, our team in Djerba is due to meet families of people planning to go into exile. Furthermore, army reservists have been called up to conscription centers in the context of the fight against attempts to destabilise the new transitional government by those loyal to the previous regime.'

For news agencies, monitoring and using Twitter presents advantages and dangers. As the following two examples show:

Example 1/ Mexico. In 2011, a Reuters journalist in Mexico city picked up video images tweeted… of an oil explosion. RTRs celebrated in-house the 'beat' thus obtained:

'Cyntia Barrera's quick monitoring of the social networking site Twitter grave Reuters a huge lead in reporting an explosion at one of Mexico's largest oil refineries. Cyntia spotted dramatic photos from eye witnesses of plumes of black smoke billowing out of Tula refinery in central Mexico and then with the help of Mica Rosenberg made quick checks to Pemex officials and local emergency authorities to confirm first a fire… and then the blast in which two workers died. Reuter had the story even ahead of the Mexican media and was 43 minutes out front of Bloomberg on the first snaps…'.[6]

In this case: i) the event occurs; ii) eye witnesses take photos; iii) they tweet them (they transmit them on Twitter); iv) a news agency journalist sees the photo, double-checks the story and transmits her account before local (Mexican) media and a major rival agency, Bloomberg. This is not unsymptomatic. The social media relay the story first; news agencies and other media pick it up, check its veracity, and transmit an account world-wide.

Example 2/ The dangers of agencies using Twitter are exemplified by reporting from Haiti, following the earthquake of 12 January 2010; a Reuters editor remarked on the 13th, 'this catastrophe is the kind of story for which news agencies were invented'. AFP would doubtless not disagree but it fell a victim of might be called

---

[6] 'Snaps'… News-agencies monitor who gets out the first report, the 'snap'.

'an abuse of Twitter'. Its bureau and transmission facilities in Haiti suffered during the 'quake. The need to carry photos of the aftermath – '*le devoir d'informer*' – led it to use a photo taken by one 'Lissandro Suero'. This indeed was the by-line of the AFP credited photo that filled the front page of the Paris daily, *Libération* dated January 14. It subsequently transpired that the photo had been taken by another photographer, Daniel Morel; transmitted on Twitpic, it was picked up by someone else, who, under the name 'Lissandro Suero' sold it to international news media thereby depriving the first photographer of revenue and leading AFP to a court-case in New York, which the agency subsequently lost. *Le Monde* headlined a story on this thus: '*L'AFP n'avait pas le droit d'utiliser sauvagement des photos publiées sur Twitter*' ('AFP did not have the right to use willy-nilly the photographs published on Twitter', 04/01/2011).

This error increased AFP's commitment to the Citizenside social media agency.

5. AFP and Citizenside: citizen content and social media

Web innovations and online competitors prove challenging for international news agencies (Boyd-Barrett, 2010; Palmer, 2011a). As many traditional news actors, Agence France-Presse was first hesitant to online transformations, between 2000 and 2005: one of the issues was to protect its own production from copying and hacking. Since then, the agency has adapted to strategies developed by 'end-users' themselves; this means the integration of 'amateur' content, and corresponds to the trend of 'produsage' (Bruns, 2005). By acquiring 34% of Citizenside in December 2007, AFP moved in that direction: Citizenside.com a Web 2.0 press agency which checks and double-checks photos and stories submitted by 'eyewitnesses', and indeed trains AFP in journalistic skills of online checking.

When launched in Paris – as 'Scooplive' in 2006 – the website Citizenside aimed to structure the offer of user-generated images for professional media platforms It was spurred on by a major breaking news event: the London bombings in July 2005.Its co-founder Matthieu Stefani noted the public's demands for citizen images (eg. from the BBC) and the lack of a actors collecting such content. Citizenside was created as an agency, working 'B2B' – business-to-business – on news material; it avoided the publishing of the kind of images visible on YouTube, which had poor general news content and carried primarily topics such as family/private images, videos of cats; see Keen, 2007). Citizenside developed technical tools to certify 'amateur' news content. Its newsroom uses and analyses metadata unscripted in the images (Nicey, 2012). The journalists at Citizenside ask for original photographs or videos (neither framed nor 'Photoshopped') and track the data of any image that appears suspicious. With time, they learnt how to ascertains the origins of certain suspect images; for example, they identified Facebook codes in certain file names. They also use geolocation: pictures coming from Egypt or Japan are considered

suspect and ar not published if they are uploaded from a computer or a smartphone geolocated in France or in the United Kingdom.

Agence France-Presse has learnt a lot from its young subsidiary. The long-established agency refines its understanding of user-generated content ('UGC'). The 'democratised' potential of the latter is enhanced. Together, Citizenside and AFP help to certify citizen voices. AFP now considers citizens as potential actors of news production and develops adequate platforms (Teyssou, 2010); by doing so, it recognizes that the latter help greatly in 'accessing voices' that a traditional news agency, however great its own resources – 2900 journalists in 160 countries, to quotes its own recent figures-cannot do alone. (Palmer, 2011a; Palmer and Nicey, 2011).

The Citizenside/AFP initiative promises to go further than the usual practices of 'participatory journalism' (Lasica, 2003), and the Pro-Am model. The AFP subsidiary developed community management, in two ways. It first helps to alert its contributors when needed, when an event occurred nearby and needs to be captured. The second benefit is mutual: by asking 'members'/'witnesses' to provide precise textual elements about an event (contextualisation, main actors, etc.), the newsroom guarantees accurate information, and it can go further and advice contributors how to improve their content: how to write descriptions of the event they witnessed, referring to the 5W journalistic rule; how to enhance the quality of their images, not only for technical standards but also by varying angles, etc. Therefore, AFP and Citizenside participate in the global trend to the democratization of news – by 'doing it together' (Paulussen *et al.*, 2007) – and to 'empowerment' (Jenkins, 2006). In that sense, the contributors cannot be called 'amateurs' any longer: they ought rather to be called 'semi-professionals'.

Citizen production of news was particularly adapted to the rapid development of use of smartphones, and their implied capacity of 'convergence' (Jenkins, 2006). Slowly but surely, AFP adapts the new on-line 'landscape', composed of web-based wholesalers and end-users. Are international news agencies both losing the control over flows and selection of news – for which they were critiqued during UNESCO debates on a 'new world information and communication order' (NWICO/NOMIC) in the 1970s and 1980s (MacBride/UNESCO, 1980; Frau-Meigs *et al.*, 2012). The new modes of access to information, social media and participatory journalism, impose reactivity and force traditional news companies to adapt to online services, as studies (including the one mentioned above) show that this is where news consumptions grow. The increase of speed and scale of news proliferation via social media is undoubtedly a strength. Accuracy and substantial resources remain decisive factors. The Arab uprisings in 2011 are a case in point, as shown above. To check and double-check the accuracy and reliability of news remain primary consideration.

Quality and reliable content of international news agency services with a long established reputation or 'brand value' enhance the democratization process.

A Citizenside report to a AFP in-house seminar in May 2010 was headed '*Comment chercher et vérifier l'information sur le web?*'. Barely two years later, some argued that the impetus for social media (in the US at least[7]) as now no longer the web but mobile devices. Smartphones, etc. have moved centre-stage.[8] This, it seems, was often the case during the 'Arab spring uprisings'. Authoritarian governments interrupt or disconnect Internet connexions, and 'scrub' the Internet of contentious references more easily than they can certain mobile apps facilitating instant sharing. This affects journalists on the ground, in the field covering news 'hot-spots', just as it does their headquarters – London, Paris, New York or elsewhere.

6. Conclusion: press freedoms worldwide

Professional newspersons seek to use modern communications technologies and their applications to cover 'hot-spots' in the news and to both train and check social media contributors, who are often present,"on the ground", in locations from which they are absent; This trend has developed fast since the early 2000s. Established – often western-based – organizations that monitor 'press freedom' worldwide – Reporters sans frontières, the World Press Freedom Committee, among many others – provide data and information about what they perceive as the state of media freedoms, in Arab countries and elsewhere. But who really can or does monitor all the traffic on social media? Fortunately, no-one.

And what of press freedoms? There is general agreement that formally, and not just formally, mainstream media in many Arab countries where the 'Arab spring' occurred were not free: state control, direct and indirect, was substantial. An event, and the reporting of that event, at times proved a catalyst in stimulating the expression of unrest that led in Maghreb and Machrek countries to 'the Arab spring'. Weslati notes that an event that occurred a few months before and that was not dissimilar to that when Mohamed set himself on fire was little covered and provoked little reaction. Another Tunisian noted that Tunisian media barely covered Bouazizi's self-immolation in the day or so after the event. It was not a 'news-story' until others – social media, civil society – took it up. Of course, it is almost impossible to know how many people tweeted or otherwise relayed and discussed the story. One of the points about social media is that while the state and, with different objectives, researchers at large, monitor 'traffic' on the media, statistics are

---

[7] Not surprisingly, there is more up-to-date data and information available about the USA and certain other 'Western countries' than, say, about social media in 'the Arab world'.
[8] 'In move to mobile, Web is getting left behind', *International Herald Tribune*, 12/04/2012.

always incomplete and/or not available when the 'authorities' decide to take what they hope will be pre-emptive action.

As a media historian considering the debate on, and exercise of, press freedom in British North America/ the United States, France and Britain, in the 1780s and '90s (Palmer, 2006), one can but recall how 'journalists' (a relatively new term), '*hommes de lettres*', '*publicistes*' were more to the fore in that debate than 'civil society'. Often, simply, because few members of the latter could read or write. And, of course, there were not the technologies or 'apps' to 'click'.

One final point. In *Understanding media*, McLuhan stated: 'Our highly literate societies are at a loss as they encounter the new structures of opinion and feeling that result from instant and global information. They are still in the grip of "points of view" and of habits of dealing with things one at a time' (McLuhan, 1964: 342). 50 years later, one might argue that McLuhan identified salient factors but, insofar as news, opinion and instantaneity are concerned, the situation is different: in some respects, opinion permeates the news. Those who try to establish 'the facts' fast, and to relay them as news-reports – the credo of established international news agencies – themselves diversify into 'analysis, angles, interpretation' and some would say 'opinion pieces'. There lie many dangers. '*Dégage*'/'clear off' – a slogan of protesters in Cairo and Tunis – was a fact to be reported, an 'angle' picked up in news-analyses of events across the Arab region, as well – above all – as a political statement. Instant comment by all was the order of the day, or rather, of the second.

References

AFP (2011). 'Guidelines for using social media', http://www.afp.com/newsletter/new-social-media-guidelines.pdf

Behr, Ed. (1985). *Anyone here been raped and speaks English?*. New English Library Ltd : London.

Boyd-Barret, O. (ed.) (2010). *News Agencies in the Turbulent Era of the Internet*, Lexikon, Barcelona/Generalitat de Catalunya.

Davies, N. (2008). *Flat Earth news*. Chatto and Windus, London.

Estelles-Arolas, E., Gonzales-Ladron-de-Guevara, F. (2012). 'Towards an integrated crowdsourcing definition', *Journal of Information science*, XX (X), pp. 1-14, http://www.crowdsourcing-blog.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Towards-an-integrated-crowdsourcing-definition-Estell%C3%A9s-Gonz%C3%A1lez.pdf

Frau-Meigs, D., Nicey, J., Palmer, M., Pohle, J., Tupper, P. (eds) (2012). *From NWICO to WSIS, 30 years of communication geopolitics: Actors and Flows, Structures and Divides*, Bristol, Intellect Books, ECREA Series, July (in print).

Gillmor, D. (2004). *We the Media. Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. O'Reilly: Sebastopol.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press: New York.

Keen, A. (2007). *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture and Assaulting our Economy*. Currency: London.

Lasica, J. D. (2003). 'What is Participatory Journalism', *Online Journalism Review*, http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1060217106.php.

Lightspeed Research (2011). 'Hold the Facebook page: 15% logging on to the social networking site for news', Press release, London, 7th November 2011, http://www.lightspeedresearch.com/press-releases/hold-the-facebook-page-15-logging-on-to-the-social-networking-site-for-news/

MacBride, S. / UNESCO (1980). *Many Voices, One World. Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow. Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order.* Report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (known as 'The MacBride Report'), London: Kogan Page, New York: Unipub, Paris: UNESCO (Reprinted in 2004; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield).

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media. The extensions of man*. Routledge and Kegan Paul : London.

Nicey, J. (2012). 'Citizen contributions to professional news circuits: The case of the photo agency Citizenside', in S. Harrington, B. McNair (eds), 'The 'New' News', *Media International Australia,* n.144, August 2012 (in press).

O'Reilly, T. (2005). 'What Is Web 2.0', 09/30/2005, http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html

Palmer, M. (2011a). *Homo informans: L'urgence des* news *au fil des millénaires*. Editions de l'Amandier: Paris.

Palmer, M. (2011b). 'PRESS on the appropriate button in the reader's mind': News agencies cover 'terrorism', *Global Media and Communication*, December 2011, n° 7, pp.251-256.

Palmer, M. (2007). 'Nommer les nouvelles du monde', in J. Arquembourg, G. Lochard, A. Mercier (eds), « Evénements mondiaux, regards nationaux », *Hermès*, n°46, CNRS Editions, pp. 47-56.

Palmer, M. (2006). *Dernières nouvelles d'@mérique.* L'Amandier : Paris.

Palmer, M. (2004). 'Agencer l'urgence en Irak', in J.-M. Charon, A. Mercier (eds), *Armes de communication massive*, CNRS Editions : Paris, pp.122-7.

Palmer, M. (2003). *Quels mots pour le dire?*. L'Harmattan : Paris, 2003.

Palmer, M., Nicey, J. (2011). *Lexique subjectif de l'homme informant*. Editions de l'Amandier: Paris.

Paulussen, S., Heinonen, A., Domingo, D., Quandt, Th. (2007). 'Doing It Together: citizen participation in the professional news making process', *Observatorio Journal* 1(3), 131-154, http://obs.obercom.pt/index.php/obs/article/view/148/107.

REUTERS (2011), *Reuters styleguide*, http://handbook.reuters.com/extensions/docs/pdf/handbookofjournalism.pdf

REUTERS (1992). *Reuters styleguide*. Butterworth- Heinemann : London, 1992.

Teyssou, D. (2010). 'GLOCAL: Pro-Am collaboration in the news production', 6th Hellenic conference on artificial intelligence, *Events 2010. Recognizing and tracking events on the web and in real life*, Athens, May 2010.

Weslati, S. (2011). *Chronologie de la revolution tunisienne*. *Démocratie ou Guerre Civile*. Nirvana : Tunis, 2011.