Disrupting journalism from scratch

Outlining the figure of the entrepreneur–journalist in four French pure players

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Abstract

This article follows on from previous research by questioning the *disruptive* character of four French online media: *Les Jours* (2016), *Le Quatre Heures* (2013), *Médiacités* (2017) and *Brief.me* (2015). In an attempt to identify what has changed and what may have settled to become standards of contemporary pure players today, this research investigates the way in which work is organized and revenue is made and, consequently, what this may mean for the journalistic profession in general. The findings suggest that building these pure players from scratch offers the opportunity for journalists to renew their skills in a framework in which they have control over the values and the means developed to maintain them. In a precarious professional context, it appears that journalists adapt by developing an increasingly entrepreneurial profile.

Keywords: journalism, online, pure player, entrepreneur, start-up

Introduction

Despite the common idea that the internet is "killing" the media, the past decade has seen ongoing renewal in journalism, particularly online. In a 2012 article (Christensen et al., 2012), David Skok, a journalist who was a Nieman Lab fellow, paired up with Harvard economist Clayton M. Christensen to encourage the media to "be the disruptor". Together, they adapted Christensen's original theory of disruptive innovation to the media, according to which businesses should regularly rethink their practice to match the evolving society and market competition. "Disruption" has since become a very popular word amongst the adepts of innovation in news, often quoted at journalism conferences and festivals as well as in experts' reports.[1] The word has been used both as a threat and as a goal for news

outlets. Consequently, in the same report, one can read the claim that "disruptive forces […] have *taken hold* of our industry" (*Innovation*, *New York Times* report, 2012: 12) and the question "should we be […] *disrupting ourselves*?" (ibid.: 16). Despite the plethora of contexts in which disruption is referred to nowadays, an implied common denominator can be agreed on: innovation. Disruption, according to those who popularized the concept, implies innovation.

This article will focus on a selection of digital native media, commonly called "pure players", in France. The first of such ventures to be launched were *Bakchich* (2006), *Rue89* (2007) and *Mediapart* (2008). Although such digital native news outlets may sometimes have been framed as disruptors by the traditional outlets, very few of them have succeeded in becoming serious competitors to existing corporate media. Of the three mentioned above, only *Mediapart* remains today and stands as a model of success for many digital media launched since. However, as pointed out by Nielsen (2016: 57), "even in countries where new journalistic ventures like Mediapart (in France) and Politico (in the USA) have been growing for years, their reach to an online audience rarely matches those of the largest established media". In 2009, the challenges for these newcomers were summarized as follows:

> Pure players can't compete with sites that rely on press companies supported by shareholders with greater financial capacity than their own. Moreover, they cannot produce the same economy of scale in terms of news production through the synergy of industrial, technological and editorial functions. Lastly, they do not benefit from the same recognition amongst financial investors, advertisers and sources. (Damian-Gaillard et al., 2009: 12-13)

Despite this diagnosis being shared by other scholars (Ramrajsingh, 2011; Smyrnaios, 2013), a strong diversity of "pure players" has continued to surface during the past decade, in France and abroad. These also include media created by journalists who have decided to leave their jobs in corporate newsrooms. According to these media's declarations of purpose and their promotional content, the founding journalists are motivated by the opportunity to create something from scratch and have control over both the business and the editorial processes – aspects that were missing from their previous job.

Building on this earlier research, this article attempts to identify what has persisted and what has changed, asking what kind of standards may have settled for pure players today. How is the journalistic work organized, how is revenue made and – consequently – what does this mean for the journalistic profession more generally? Furthermore, we ask whether the precarious conditions in the early years of a pure player's existence provide a context in which the journalistic profession is "disrupted" and begins to be shaped by more entrepreneurial ideals and values.

Methodology and field of research

This research focuses on a selection of four digital journalism start-ups that were established between 2013 and 2017: *Le Quatre Heures* (2013), *Brief.me* (2015), *Les Jours* (2016) and *Médiacités* (2017). Although constituting a very limited corpus, these four media were selected for several reasons. First, they were created by active journalists with varied lengths of earlier career tracks. Second, they are all national media. Third, all of them achieved considerable visibility due to a strong amount of media coverage and financial support when launched. These three criteria position these digital natives and newcomers as potential new competitors of the existing traditional media (print, radio and television). Importantly, all four of them also developed their editorial identity through explicit and particular critiques of the way in which legacy journalism has been practised.

Each pure player was subject to an analysis that entailed three complementary methodologies. An analysis of the meta-discourses (of and about the media in question) helped to outline their editorial identities: it considered the published declarations of intention (such as the column "Who are we?" or "About us", a manifesto or a blog and the reference to any awarded prizes or positive comments made by other media), the means used by the journalists to develop a relationship with their readers (newsletters, polls and events) and the content posted on their crowdfunding pages (project description, counterparts for funders and references to and by other media).

Interviews were also carried out with a founder from each of the pure players. The questions focused on personal training and professional paths, internal responsibilities, accounts of the media's creation, the team's organization, the working conditions, the business model and the future plans. Every interview lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. The interviews were conducted during the first year and a half after the launch and within the first six months of the interviewee's role as an editor-in-chief. A one-off interview with these founding journalists limited our ability to gather a broader idea of the company's dynamics in the long run. Nevertheless, it was useful for understanding the amounts of preparation and spontaneity that went into the project and how the necessary experience and competences were acquired. This shed light on several specifics regarding what it means to be a journalist in the constantly and rapidly evolving competitive context of online cultural industries and how these demands can be fitted to an attempt to re-establish the social role of journalism.

Lastly, field notes were taken during visits to some of the media locations. Observations about the way in which the work space was organized were not always possible (because there were no offices or because visiting was complicated). In these cases, notes were made according to the journalists' description of the internal organization. Far from being just a detail in the creation of these news media companies, the way in which the workplace is organized turned out to be very informative with regard to the contemporary conditions of journalism practice.

A short description of each medium follows. In order of creation, *Le Quatre Heures* (2013) stemmed from a student project at the French journalism school Centre de Formation des Journalistes (CFJ). It is the only medium in our sample that was not created by journalists who already had work experience. During the second year of their Master's course, the students had been asked to create their ideal medium. They decided that it should focus on fewer stories than the common news outlets and that, following other slow media, it should advocate immersive practices to write and publish long-form multimedia articles. As a result, *Le Quatre Heures* was created to publish one monthly story that articulated text, sound, video and illustrations. When the founding graduates decided to relaunch their medium in 2014, they were all working in successful job positions.

Brief.me (2015) was initiated by Laurent Mauriac, who had also been one of the founders of *Rue89* (bought by magazine *L'Obs* in 2011). His ambition was to create a pure player that specialized in filtering news and sending out a curated summary of the daily happenings via email as a means of fighting "infobesity". This is a common contemporary critique against the internet and journalism describing the abundance of news of all kinds that is published every day. To do so, he gathered three other co-founders: Damien Cirotteau, previously head of technical services at *Rue89* for seven years, Jean-Christophe Boulanger, the founder of a professional magazine focused on French and European politics as well as head of the *Syndicat de la Presse Indépendante d'Information en Ligne* (SPIIL), the online news media union, and Alexandre Brachet, the founder and head of the production company Upian.fr, specializing in online multimedia documentaries.

Les Jours (2016) arose from the discontent of a dozen journalists at *Libération* after a change in ownership in 2014 and an increasing blur between the newsroom and the marketing operations. This had given way to an internal crisis asserted under the campaign "*Nous sommes un journal*" (meaning "we are a newspaper"). It also motivated a group of journalists who had agreed on the voluntary departure plan to develop their own media project. As a "slow news" project, *Les Jours* was created to dedicate long periods of time to news stories. These stories, called "obsessions", are founded on "exclusive material collected by ourselves and not by a press agency of any kind. We are interested in writing what hasn't yet been written" (interview, Raphaël Garrigos, 2 May 2017).

Médiacités (2017) was also created by a group of journalists who were unhappy with the amount of time and attention given to news outside Paris. Moreover, they considered there to be a lack of investigative journalism at the local level in France due to the concentration of regional media in medium-sized and big cities. When *L'Express* changed ownership, these journalists agreed on a voluntary departure plan and created *Médiacités*: a national network of local investigative offices based in several French cities (Lille, Lyon, Toulouse and Nantes).

These four media perpetuate and strengthen the idea of pure players as being built on a specific critique of journalism's lack of independence (as remarked by Smyrnaios, 2013). However, this critique not only targets the journalistic defects

stemming from offline practices but also critically identifies a set of online practices that are considered to interfere with journalism's independence.

Results

These pure players were created in a highly evolutive and competitive context, comparable to the conditions known to high-tech start-ups (Stark & Girard, 2009). In addition, Coddington (2015) observed that these "startup news organizations" are characterized by the erosion of the business–newsroom boundary that is common to both the French and the USA context, albeit built on different histories and journalistic genre rhetoric (Coddington, 2015; Ruellan, 2011). Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for technology that commonly defines start-ups tends to be overshadowed in these pure players' rhetoric by the idea of quality journalism being liberated from certain technological specificities (automatization and live reporting). This sometimes entails choosing to be absent from platforms and deciding not to use certain tools that are said to create more visibility and subsequent advertising revenue (Smyrnaios, 2015), somewhat tempering newsrooms' increasing reliance on audience metrics (Anderson, 2011). This creates a challenging situation in which the journalists in charge attempt to balance the editorial independence with the ability to make a liveable revenue. To build their media from scratch, enabling them to have control over the editorial and economic dimensions, these risk-taking journalists strategically adapt (Pailliart et al., 2007) by acquiring new competences, accommodating new forms of internal organization and adjusting their rhetoric.

The pure player as a journalistic start-up

In seeking to create online media that correspond to their own professional ideals and that are adapted to, yet critical of, the latest technological developments, these journalists' pure players share several characteristics with high-tech start-ups. They continuously test their product to adapt to the changing context (Stark & Girard, 2009). They emphasize a low level of hierarchy, with everybody on the team holding specific yet evolving responsibilities (Dupuy, 2013; Stark, 2009). Their work environments are also organized in new ways: they are mobile, open and economical. Damian-Gaillard and colleagues (2009) had already observed this in 2009, yet the adaptability that highlighted the precariousness of these ventures now tends to be increasingly professionalized and institutionalized. Furthermore, despite the critical stance towards some effects of technology, the weakening of the boundary between business and news tends to be normalized (Coddington, 2015).

Trial and error: Testing the media with readers

One characteristic that defines both pure players and technological start-ups is the continuous testing of their product, both pre- and post-launch, with their readers. All four pure players experienced a pilot period that varied in length according to

the medium. In three cases out of four, this period was based on test interaction with potential future readers. This served promotional as well as research and development purposes. This interaction played out in various ways and sometimes persisted after the medium's launch.

In the case of *Brief.me*, the pilot period involved enrolling an initial cohort of funding readers to test the medium. In the autumn of 2014, a campaign was launched on the French crowdfunding platform, Ulule.[2] The subscriptions offered (between 5 and 1,000 euros) entailed being a tester for one to six months and being invited to debriefing evenings with other tester–readers. Thus, in exchange for a potentially small financial contribution, one would be able to receive *Brief. me* before it was officially launched and would be asked to provide feedback. Laurent Mauriac stated:

> We took the answers into consideration but did not always act upon them
> […]. The idea isn't to do what people ask us to do, it is to take their opin-
> ion into account in order to offer a service better in sync with our readers.
> (Laurent Mauriac, interview, 18 May 2016)

Other publications based this relationship on regular meetings with their readers. These happened before the launching of the media, as was the case for *Médiacités,* and then often continued throughout the pure player's existence. *Le Quatre Heures'* journalists (who did not benchmark their medium with testers before its initial launch) organized a monthly conference, open to all, in a café. Amélie Mougey (interview, 18 May 2016) reported that it served to promote the latest *Le Quatre Heures* story by introducing the media to potential new readers and strengthening the relationship with subscribers.

The relationship that these media developed with their readers helps in keeping track of the audience's satisfaction. Raphaël Garrigos, from *Les Jours,* believed that "being on the internet is an advantage in order to change easily and quickly, and constantly". This regular interaction with readers is comparable to the market tests that some publications carry out when they are in the process of changing their product (for example the layout). However, these tests are habitually expensive services led by benchmarking companies. In the case of these pure players, the journalists are in direct contact with the readers, performing the research and development themselves. Sometimes these practices are undertaken in less sophisticated ways than can be observed in legacy newsrooms (Anderson, 2011; Salles, 2018), allowing more attention to qualitative than quantitative, metric-driven, data. Nevertheless, this illustrates the journalists' embrace of market-driven practices. These are justified both rhetorically as not systematically having repercussions for their decisions and organizationally by promoting transparency with the audience, to which they lend a monitoring role of the way in which they function. This is part of readjusting the boundaries with readers (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2015) and empowering them as customers and advisers yet distancing them from journalists' specific competences: those of developing editorial content.

A small and adaptable hierarchy governed by affinities

The flexibility that defines start-ups is also identifiable in the pure players' internal hierarchy during the first few years of their existence. In her article focusing on "internet workers" in charge of innovative projects at Le Monde Interactif, Camille Dupuy (2013: 26) observed a heterarchical configuration (Stark, 2009) in the newsroom: "a flexible organisation in which hierarchical relations are diminished, thus favoring innovation in the logics of an ongoing project" (Dupuy, 2013). Heterarchy is described as dynamic in her article, evolving from one project to another.

All four pure players were created by more than one founder. *Médiacités* was created by six journalists and a journalism specialist. Although all are founders, and four out of the seven are editors-in-chief, the roles were distributed according to previous job positions as well as regions of origin. For example, Jacques Trentesaux is the oldest journalist on the team and was head of the Cities column at *L'Express*. He is the president and head of publication of *Mediacités*. Nicolas Barriquand, a native of Lyon, is now editor-in-chief of the Lyon issue; the same applies to Sylvain Morvan and the Toulouse issue. *Le Quatre Heures* now has a team of seven. Amélie Mougey explained that, once the team reassembled around *Le Quatre Heures*, the roles were distributed according to affinities with competences and availability. One of the team members had always been interested in programming and sales. He was given the role of head of publication, dealing with administrative paperwork, and of editing the site according to multimedia content. At *Brief.me*, they were four investor–founders. All four came from different backgrounds with different competences. Laurent Mauriac had the most journalistic experience and thus became editor-in-chief. *Les Jours* was set up by a dozen journalists who now practise somewhat heterarchical editorial management. Each writer of *Les Jours* is supervised by another journalist on the team. Hence, although the editor-in-chief has an overall view of the stories that are being written, and when to expect them, he does not have the responsibility for closely supervising each of the contributing journalists.

Turning an idea into a project from scratch considerably reduces the potential for disagreements and power struggles when it is undertaken as a team, because everyone endorses a decider's status or specific competences. The team grows according to the pure player's needs, making the newcomers essential. For example, during the interviews, all four journalists reported being in the process of including a new "associate" (an investor for some and a new co-founder for others) with entrepreneurial, financial or marketing competences. Amélie Mougey stressed the reciprocal relationship that this entails: "She's graduating from marketing school. It takes us four days to do what she does in just two hours. And she's also hoping to develop her career path in journalism." Nicolas Barriquand similarly described the need for specific competences but also highlighted the candidates' affinities with journalism:

> He's an entrepreneur through and through, but he's also a journalism man
> at heart because he understands that you do not sell the press the way you'd
> sell yogurts or cream cheese. We share the values that are conveyed by the
> project. He's a man who believes in media. (Nicolas Barriquand, interview,
> 3 May 2017)

New members' affinities with journalism and the media being built, whether they
are journalists, sales people or programmers, are secured not only by the size
of the team but also by the written outline of the medium's editorial identity.
This text, often in the form of a chart or a manifesto, is published on the pure
player's site before its official launch date. It establishes a moral contract with
the medium's potential readers. It also rhetorically backs up the context and the
values that bring the team together and contributes to normalizing the proximity
between specific market- and technical-driven competences and journalists' tradi-
tional editorial skills. Damian and colleagues (2009) mentioned the flexibility of
these ventures' hierarchy and associated it with the frustration and work overload
experienced by some of the newsroom's journalists. In contrast, most of the team
members of this sample of pure players are founders, giving them a managerial
role, rather than being subject to others' decisions.

A mobile, open and economical workplace

The workplace often plays a part in the identity of corporate media, whether
we are thinking of journalists referring to *Le Monde* as "Blanqui", the name of
the boulevard where it is located, or to "la maison ronde" when alluding to "la
maison de la radio". Such is the case for high-tech start-ups as well, although,
contrastingly, they are often described as having been created in the precarious
conditions of a garage or a college dorm room (like three of Google, Apple, Fa-
cebook, Amazon and Microsoft). Adapting to various workplaces according to
diverse situations already defines journalists to a certain extent: as field report-
ers, correspondents or freelancers. In the case of these pure players, working in a
mobile, open and economic environment, similar to start-ups, is the status quo.

The workplace descriptions varied between these pure players, but they all
highlighted the importance of the cost of rent in the company's budget. Two of the
four pure players did not have an office at the time of the interview. *Médiacités*'
co-founder, based in Lyon, was busy with many different tasks specific to the pre-
launch of the medium and mentioned that he was often on the move (whether for
appointments in Lyon, meetings in Paris or presentations across France), making
renting an office unnecessary. *Le Quatre Heures* did not have the means to rent
an office, so work was usually carried out from home. The pure player had been
a side project for most team members since the relaunch, and they simply did not
have the money to spend on costly rent. Fortunately, it was not considered to be
an essential component of the pure player's existence considering the relatively
few full-time employees. In addition, the monthly reunions with readers served as

a management strategy, providing an opportunity for the whole team to congregate in one place on a regular basis. Not paying rent can thus be a way of cutting costs to maintain the company, which can be both a short-term and a long-term situation. Laurent Mauriac from *Brief.me* highlighted just how dynamic this can be: "We were in an incubator, but it was quite expensive with very limited reason to be there. I have a big house and a big room was free, so we moved into that one. It is quite nice" (Laurent Mauriac, interview, 19 May 2016). The plan was to move out to a new office again several months later, when hiring a new employee. *Les Jours* also passed through several stages of office mobility:

> We first started meeting at my place, and then soon afterwards, we found a co-working location that was free for three months. When those three months were up, we left that noisy space and moved from one of our homes to another one until we came here in September 2016. (Raphaël Garrigos, interview, 2 May 2017)

With an 80 square metre newsroom, *Les Jours* is the pure player with the wealthiest set-up of the four media today. Nevertheless, it is described by its co-founder as a small and cheaply equipped open space, with personal laptops and Ikea desks. This simple and economical set-up is also characteristic of start-ups. Raphaël Garrigos stated that, in this way, "we are all on the same level. There is no closed office, and I do not want one because I need to be able to talk with people all the time." The open space is described as promoting transparency and discussion and reducing the symbols of hierarchy by decompartmentalizing some of the responsibilities that have traditionally been kept separate in the newsroom. This applies to including the person in charge of marketing and data analysis at *Médiacités* in "the core of the newsroom". At *Les Jours*, the two employees in charge of programming and marketing are also located in the newsroom, a set-up described by Raphaël Garrigos as being vital on an everyday basis.

These pure players' similarities to start-ups highlight the readjustment of the traditional newsroom–business boundary, often referred to as "the wall" (Coddington, 2015), through the normalizing of market-driven competences and postures in proximity to or in the hands of journalists. Coddington specified that the erosion of "the wall" is common in online media businesses due to higher competition, and it is particularly visible in the "use of tools to quantify audience interest [serving] to replace news judgment with a thin, incomplete view of the audience driven by commercial considerations rather than professional ones" (Coddington, 2015: 144). However, it is interesting to note that, in the case of our sample, the journalists in charge also rhetorically readjusted their distance with regard to metrics and the audience (through the critiques of online practices that appear in their project descriptions) to safeguard their traits of autonomy and independence.

Maintaining independence through multiple means of revenue

All four media share one common characteristic in their project descriptions: the will to be *truly* independent. This independence is described as acting on the choice of stories, the time devoted to documenting them and the decision to investigate. Furthermore, it is described in these projects as having a cost. Unlike several of the first pure players that offered free access to news, all four media quoted subscriptions as being their ideal model. Nevertheless, making revenue as a "new-born" medium in the extremely competitive and disruptive current context is challenging (Nielsen, 2016). It requires specific knowledge of the market and competences in making investments, both of which require a great deal of time and dedication and, again, are not common skills amongst journalists. This begs the following question: how are these pure players set up and maintained? As suggested previously, the journalists at the source of these new media often receive unemployment benefits based on their previous positions. Furthermore, crowdfunding campaigns can play a role. However, these funding avenues only allow for a limited level of contribution. It is therefore necessary for these multi-tasked journalists to source other means.

Public funding sources

When announcing that their media will be independent (including the funding model for three out of the four media), these pure players aim to depend on subscriptions in the long term, such as their quoted model *Médiapart*. During the first few months, however, pure players tend to be funded indirectly by the state or through various private means. The public funding comes in three forms that highlight the fragility of these companies.

Several of the journalists whom we interviewed said that they had invested most of their severance pay in the medium. The severance pay was allocated by the medium that they worked for previously, and, in France, this is calculated by multiplying their latest salary with the number of years spent at the medium. In parallel with their severance pay, journalists usually also receive unemployment benefits. Three of the four journalists interviewed stated that they were living off this allowance. One of the journalists said: "I have a certain financial security that is provided by my unemployment benefits. In this way, I can devote at least half of my time to the media."

In addition to unemployment benefits, French unemployed citizens are followed up by employment services on a monthly basis. These services offer training programmes for those with a concrete project. The founders of *Les Jours* benefited from some of this training in the context of a "contrat de sécurisation professionnelle" (professional securing contract). Nevertheless, the training, which in this case was focused on developing one's own company, encompassing entrepreneurial skills, was not journalism-specific.

Other means of public funding sometimes arise during the first few years after launching a medium. The French Ministry of Culture offers a selection of grants and awards[3] that can cater to emerging digital media. Some of these grants are directly aimed at the media, such as the *bourse pour les entreprises de presse* émergentes, which allocates up to 50,000 euros to each project. The Ministry also offers grants to businesses that are willing to act as incubators for emerging media. This encourages the creation of entrepreneurial nurseries, such as Media Maker[4] or Le Tank Media,[5] which offer to host and accompany projects for between six months and a year.

These direct and indirect means of public funding mostly serve during the launching of the project. The fact that they may not cater specifically to journalism or that they rely on criteria oriented by public policy leads to the question of just how independent these projects actually are from the start. This does not include the funding and support that private firms, such as Google and Facebook, provide, but, at the time of the interviews, none of the four pure players had submitted a project to these platforms.[6]

A crowdfunding campaign: A promotional stepping stone

All four of the pure players benefitted from a crowdfunding campaign, and all campaigns managed to exceed their targets. All except *Le Quatre Heures* ran it before their official launch. For *Le Quatre Heures*, the CFJ covered the cost of programming and graphics. However, the graduates organized a crowdfunding campaign a year after the pure player's relaunch to pay for a new internet site and a mobile application. Both *Les Jours* and *Médiacités* relied on crowdfunding to develop their site; *Médiacités* also used these funds for their first few investigations.

Table 1.   A summary of the four pure players' crowd-funding campaigns

	Le Quatre Heures	Brief.me	Les Jours	Médiacités
Date	July 2016	November 2014	June 2015	April 2017
Platform	KissKissBankBank	Ulule	KissKissBankBank	Ulule
Target	10,000 €	500 contributors	50,000 €	25,000 €
Total reached	10,850 €	886 contributors (23,070 €)	> 80,000 €	25,481 €

There are more benefits to be obtained from this operation than just a one-off financial gain. Indeed, it is a good promotional opportunity that generally receives good media coverage from peers. Furthermore, our analysis revealed that some of the contributors were journalists, among whom were founders of other pure players, suggesting solidarity within new media. As mentioned earlier in regard to *Brief.me*, a crowdfunding campaign is also an opportunity to test potential readers' interest in the project, usually starting with the members of the founders' close social networks, who are expected to initiate funding and promote the project. In the case of *Les Jours*, Raphaël Garrigos said that crowdfunding attracted

many new subscribers. Most of the time, the reward included a subscription to the medium.

Moreover, those who submit their projects to these platforms are given marketing advice (fed by the platforms' statistics) on how best to organize their campaign. This guidance is provided throughout the process, before the launch (in summarizing the project and planning the contributions), during its running time (to promote it in internal and then in external circles) and afterwards (when sending out the rewards). Again, marketing competences are introduced to journalists, entrusted by these platforms to succeed with their campaigning.

Attempting to maintain independence through multiple funding sources

Public allowances, emerging grants and crowdfunding can only provide so much financial security. According to Nielsen (2016: 64), the level of "competition is intense" and "the basic economics of digital media suggests that the market will sustain fewer people pursuing journalism as a profession". Whilst attempting to develop a large enough number of subscribers from which to exist "independently", pure players' founders look for other ways to secure capital, and investment remains a common method, as described by Smyrnaios (2013).

The founders are the main investors in all four media. The percentage of outside investment was argued to have been reduced to maintain independence. For example, Raphaël Garrigos from *Les Jours* explained that he and the eight other co-founders own 80 per cent of the medium's shares. Likewise, for *Médiacités*, only 20 per cent of capital was open for investment. With a 2.5 per cent share, *Les Jours* counted Xavier Niel among its funders; he is one of France's wealthiest technology and media moguls, who founded the telecommunication company Free. Among *Médiacités*' funders is Edwy Plenel, *Médiapart*'s founder, who provided 50,000 euros. Similar to crowdfunding, fundraising is also revealing of support among colleagues, other media founders and media investors. However, pure players have also recently started to open fundraising to readers, and this is supported rhetorically as well as having the potential to reduce the amount of power-driven investments. *Les Jours* created a "société des amis" ("friends' society") that allows readers to become investors with a minimum donation of 200 euros (four shares):

> It is not just about money, people will also be able to take part in decisive discussions as equals. They will be financial partners, as well as editorial ones. We will ask our "friends" to decide on a yearly story that we will investigate. (Raphaël Garrigos, interview, 2 May 2017)

Amendments to the French "Bloche law" were passed in 2016 to help with the creation of independent media, opening up the possibility for individuals to invest in media shares up to a maximum of 1,000 euros per person (30 per cent of this investment is tax deductible). The *Entreprise Solidaire de Presse d'Information* (ESPI, which means solidary news company) status was created in 2015 and

requires 70 per cent of the company's revenue to be reinvested in the medium. It also increases the tax advantages for investors with a 50 per cent deduction of up to 5,000 euros per person.[7]

Again, instead of focusing their rhetoric on the financial challenges encountered, these start-ups encourage their audience to move closer to the medium and play a bigger role in its existence, not only for consulting purposes but also financially, arguing that this is what will allow it to stay independent.

This stresses that, ultimately, the relationship that these pure players maintain with their audience is used to justify their acquisition of non-traditional journalistic competences, such as marketing or management, in the name of searching for the most independent means of existence possible.

The re-enchanted journalist

Guided by passion, the pure player marks an important professional turn for all four interviewees. This is reflected by these journalists' professional situation prior to founding the new media and their dedication to updating and developing their skills as well as accumulating responsibilities. In previous research by Isabelle Pailliart and Laurie Schmitt (Paillart et al., 2017), it was suggested that having a strategic posture was to be considered as having a part in what could be called the "journalistic capital", borrowing from Bourdieu's use of the concept. In this case, could these founders' strategic skills be feeding the figure of an "entrepreneurial journalist"?

Curbing career paths and training for new skills

The four journalists interviewed belong to different generations, and their career paths vary in length and experience. However, they all had to develop new skills for the pure player.

Amélie Mougey, the only woman amongst our interviewees, was a recent Master's graduate in journalism. Amélie Mougey had been employed on long-term and permanent contracts in a national newspaper and a monthly magazine. In January 2014, she and five other members of the Master's degree course decided to relaunch their school project professionally as a side project to their main journalistic positions. When the medium that she was working for closed in March 2016, she decided to dedicate more time to *Le Quatre Heures* whilst her unemployment benefits allowed it, and she was subsequently made editor-in-chief. This implied taking on a role with more responsibility than she previously had. She had to organize her time on a monthly basis and develop managerial skills. Amélie Mougey has since become editor-in-chief at *La Revue Dessinée*; the experience and competences that she developed at *Le Quatre Heures* would most likely have served her in her recruitment.

Nicolas Barriquand, one of the seven founders of *Médiacités*, was a freelance journalist for nine years, including two years as a foreign correspondent in

Vietnam. He wrote for several French and Belgian newspapers and magazines. Like Amélie Mougey, he stated that, as a manager, he is developing experience, skills and knowledge in areas that are new to him: "Technical, sales, marketing, communication competences are required".

As mentioned before, Laurent Mauriac, one of the founders of *Brief.me*, was new neither to journalism nor to media entrepreneurship when he decided to work on *Brief.me*. After graduating from a Master's in management, he created a news agency in New York. He was then hired by *Libération* to take part in creating a site for the newspaper and went on to write for and manage the Economics column for three years before becoming the newspaper's correspondent in New York. He left *Libération* in 2007 to create *Rue89*, of which he was the managing director for seven years. When *Rue89* was sold, he created *Brief.me*. Even after following this very entrepreneurial career path, Laurent Mauriac is continuing to develop new skills, some of which are self-taught, such as programming when working on *Libération*'s first online publication and marketing for *Brief.me*.

Both Raphaël Garrigos and Isabelle Roberts, the co-founders of *Les Jours*, were media columnists at *Libération*. As noted previously, the founding team's members received training according to the employment plan that they followed with social services. Raphaël Garrigos says that this was important for his understanding of how central computer programming, graphic design and marketing are to the newsroom. He also stated that, by working at *Les Jours*, he has learnt to become an entrepreneur and to deal with the subscriptions himself.

Multitasking in the name of journalism

When questioned, all the co-founders specified that they had extra responsibilities on top of being editor-in-chief. Nicolas Barriquand presented himself as "co-founder, associate on the *Médiacités* project, and editor-in-chief and coordinator for the Lyon edition". He described his occupation as follows:

> There is no daily routine. […] I'm still recruiting writers for *Médiacités* Lyon. […] I then had a meeting over skype […] And in the afternoon, I worked on the first article for *Médiacités* Lyon that I haven't yet finished. I spend a lot of time dealing with emails and coordinating other journalists' stories. Today I'm in Paris; we had a meeting with *Médiacités*' lawyer, and then with the marketer. (Nicolas Barriquand, interview, 3 May 2017)

Laurent Mauriac described his role as being "president of the company, one of its main funders, head of publication, co-founder and editor-in-chief". He added:

> There are days during which I am focused on technique […] There are other days during which I deal more with emails to the readers. […] I deal with marketing quite a lot, and other aspects of a company's management. (Laurent Mauriac, interview, 18 May 2016)

Part of Amélie Mougey's work is also dedicated to marketing, including designing brochures and prospecting places across France that could be interested in *Le Quatre Heures*. All three journalists spend variable amounts of time focusing on editorial matters and dealing with human resources, technical adjustments and marketing developments. The first reason for accumulating a multitude of tasks is the small size of a pure player's team during the early stages of its existence. To justify the proximity between traditionally incompatible roles in the newsroom (Coddington, 2015), such as content editing, marketing and business, our interviewees highlighted their project's journalistic essence through their status and their passion. Nicolas Barriquand justified the venture as "a journalists' project". Furthermore, working at *Le Quatre Heures* is what Amélie Mougey described as a "projet de coeur", meaning a project close to the heart.

Accumulating roles and jobs has become common for journalists several years after graduation before they reach a stable professional situation (Leteinturier, 2014). Working on "innovative formats" (whether in terms of editorial content, management or technology) in precarious work conditions, such as the web documentaries that were externalized by media corporations in the mid-2000s, are ways for journalists to develop and highlight sought-after skills borrowed from other professions (Salles & Schmitt, 2017). For these interviewees, creating a new medium from scratch offers various opportunities: developing experience in a niche area of journalism, becoming aware of the variety of tasks to be undertaken in a media company and that are traditionally foreign to journalists and controlling these in a context rhetorically justified as being "a journalists' project". Nevertheless, both the accumulation of tasks and the required flexibility are revealing of the precarious risk-taking context in which these journalists undertake these roles.

An entrepreneur–journalist?

Ultimately, it is the figure of an entrepreneur–journalist that looms in the practices of these pure player-founding journalists rather than that of an unemployed journalist. Indeed, these journalists take on the responsibility of founding their own company and make use of their precarious work conditions to be more flexible by trying and testing various formats, whether with regard to the editorial content, the management or the funding. These journalists are "heroical" (Schumpeter, 1911, 1990) risk takers in that they "disrupt the areas in which they intervene, break routines and subvert stabilised power relations and instituted hierarchies" (Bergeron et al., 2013: 264), deciding to do so rather than to stay in secure jobs in which they are not happy. Although entrepreneurial competences are not the norm when describing the journalistic profession, they are not exactly new either. Indeed, rarely described as required skills for the job, they are often inherent to being a freelance journalist who manages, coordinates and promotes his or her articles alone.

In this case, the journalists enjoy the additional empowering responsibility of being a founder of their own medium, making their precarious financial setting something that they have chosen for their own values over the status quo. These founding journalists thus correspond to the model of a worker who thrives on developing personally and maintaining certain values through professional activity, according to the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999).

In France, entrepreneurial skills are still formally separated from journalism, in schools by the CPNEJ (the French commission for journalists' employment) and professionally by the CCIJP (the commission devoted to attributing journalists' professional cards), which does not recognize those who are paid for journalistic work as having the status of an "auto-entrepreneur".

This figure of journalism, the entrepreneur–journalist, highlights journalists' adaptability to the constraining and evolving context in which they work. Regardless of whether these pure players will survive, these journalists have developed new competences that could open up new professional opportunities.

Conclusion

In an increasingly precarious professional context (Frisque et al., 2011), creating one's own medium is a way of attempting to regain control over the journalistic environment and reaffirm the classic professional values: independence and autonomy. These are referred to by the media as what protects editorial content – the "cultural capital of journalism" – from outsiders (whether investors, amateurs or technologies), who are the "economic capital of journalism", according to Bourdieu's analysis (1998; Benson & Neveu, 2009). Despite the persistence of these values in an attempt to safeguard editorial content through specific practices (immersion and investigation), several evolutions are to be noted. Firstly, these pure players' critiques of journalism's faults now include a set of online practices: click-bait, abundant and automatized forms of news. Secondly, this feeds the journalists' arguments that their pure player must be a journalists' project only, therefore justifying their "requisitioning" (Jeanne-Perrier et al., 2015; Salles, 2018) of responsibilities and skills that are usually foreign to journalists. Thirdly, although their medium has become paid for, the interaction with readers has intensified to the point of including them in research and development before and after the media's launch. This contributes to readjusting the boundaries with the audience in an attempt to increase the proximity and empower it in an area that does not *directly* affect the journalistic editorial content. Finally, through the journalists' attempt to keep control over as many aspects of their medium as possible, they develop a set of new skills in many different fields – management, marketing, research and development, business and computer programming – that not only articulate the economic and cultural capitals of journalism more directly but also end up reinforcing the existence of an entrepreneurial journalist. Guided by the ideals of challenging power and the quest for freedom and independence

from corporate media, these journalists are also insidiously bound by the new spirit of capitalism.

Notes

1. Some examples: *The New York Times* Innovation report leaked in 2014 and the Reuters Institute Digital Journalism reports of 2016, 2017 and 2018.
2. https://fr.ulule.com/briefme/ [accessed 2018, August 18].
3. For a list of these grants, see: http://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Presse/Aides-a-la-presse [accessed 2018, August 20].
4. http://mediamaker.fr/ [accessed 2018, August 20].
5. http://letankmedia.fr/ [accessed 2018, August 20].
6. As a result of a lawsuit against Google won by French authorities in 2013, Google had to pay 150 million euros to French media over the course of three years and decided to do so in the form of a grant that would award innovative media projects. This fund was made European in 2016 and renames the Digital News Innovation Fund.
7. https://www.la-croix.com/Economie/Medias/Les-avantages-statut-dentreprise-solidaire-presse-2017-02-07-1200822968 [accessed 2018, August 20].

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