

Election of Agence France-Presse's Chief Executive Officer

A Candidacy to Defend the Company's 1957 Statutes, its Independence and Founding Principles, and the Interests of its Staff

Background: The Story So Far

- **1956:** Both houses of the French parliament unanimously adopt a law giving Agence France-Presse, a news agency reborn from the struggles that led to the country's liberation from German Occupation in 1944, an independent status, which comes into force in January 1957;
- **May 2007:** Nicolas Sarkozy is elected president of France;
- **May 2008:** A number of right-wing French politicians, including a spokesman for M. Sarkozy's ruling UMP party, launch virulent attacks on AFP, questioning its reliability and in one case calling for its outright privatisation;
- **October 2008:** The government officially announces that AFP CEO Pierre Louette is "*mandated*" to propose changes to the statutes which would notably "*provide the agency with a stable shareholder base*" and "*boost its stature on the international and European levels*". M. Louette, who has previously stated that there is absolutely no need to change AFP's statutes, immediately agrees to do so;
- **November 2008:** AFP's trade unions unanimously agree to launch an online petition which notably rejects "*any change which would have the effect of either turning AFP into a government agency, or handing it over either wholly or partially to private companies of any type and in whatever form*";
- **March 2009:** Pierre Louette publishes his proposals, which notably call for AFP to be transformed into a "*national publicly-owned company*". The unions denounce this as a nationalisation which could easily open the door to a subsequent privatisation.
- **December 2009:** French Culture Minister Frédéric Mitterrand announces the creation of a "*group of experts*" to study AFP's future. It is to be chaired by Henri Pigeat, president of the main Paris journalism school and a former CEO of the Agency;
- **February 2010:** With his plan increasingly bogged down and the number of signatories of the "SOS-AFP" petition reaching 21,000, including many leading personalities and politicians, Pierre Louette abruptly announces his resignation, to move to a senior position at the partially privatised France Télécom company;
- **March 8:** The AFP board calls for candidates to replace M. Louette, setting March 25th as the deadline.

Statement by David Sharp, Journalist and Elected Member of the AFP Works Committee:

I have decided to apply for the job of AFP's chief executive in order to:

- **Defend** the values of independence expressed in the www.sos-afp.org petition and **fight** for the preservation of the company's 1957 statutes;
- **Show** that a development path different from the one-dimensional plan laid out by the outgoing CEO is not only possible but also necessary;
- **Put forward** ideas to help AFP meet the challenges of both the Internet and globalisation;
- **Promote** the overall interests of AFP staff, whatever their employment status and wherever they work around the world.

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David Sharp - <http://www.sharp-words.com> - Thursday March 18, 2010

Below is a translation into English of the letter I have delivered this day to the pre-selection committee set up by the AFP board.

The present document is also available, with links to related information and a brief background note on the situation at AFP, on my personal web site at <http://www.sharp-words.com>.

Candidacy

For the attention of the pre-selection committee

Thursday March 18th, 2010

Dear Madam, dear Sirs,

I am writing to apply for the job of chief executive officer of Agence France-Presse.

I am doing so because I believe that a different path is both possible and necessary for AFP than the one laid out, at the request of the French government, by the outgoing CEO.

I am a British-born journalist, aged 62.

Since joining AFP in 1983 I have mainly worked as an editor on the Paris English Desk, in the Graphics and Multimedia Departments and in the General Documentation Service, the latter being my current post.

In 1995 AFP management put me in charge of an exploratory mission on the Internet, which led to my appointment as company webmaster within the then Multimedia Department, a post I occupied until 2000.

During those five years I carried out studies into the Internet and media, managed the Agency's institutional web site and took part in the creation of its first web products, notably the Internet Journal.

I am an elected member of the Works Committee and a member of the SUD-AFP trade union. In October 2008 I created the sos-afp.org petition for the joint unions, and have managed the site since then. In July 2009 I also took part in the creation of the "Association to Defend the Independence of AFP" (ADIAFP).

The following are the main aims I will pursue and the proposals I will implement if the AFP Board of Governors decides to appoint me to the job of Chief Executive Officer:

AFP's Founding Statutes

- AFP must retain in full its 1957 statutes, which ensure its independence and affirm its unique characteristics as a company operating in the general public interest;
- A few minor changes to the 1957 statutes could nevertheless be envisaged, notably concerning the relative influence of staff representatives and the various categories of users who sit on the Board of Governors, the make-up of the Higher Council, and the conditions of nationality for the staff election of reps. to the Board. Any such changes should only be made subject to prior approval by staff as a whole;
- In the event of the make-up of the Board of Governors being changed, the founding principle according to which board members represent categories of users, and not specific clients, must be retained.

The Agency's Missions

- AFP should give up all non-journalistic and non-core production to concentrate solely on the supply of "exact, impartial and trustworthy information" as laid down in Article 2.2 of the 1957 statutes, and on the technical, administrative and commercial activities which that mission entails. The company should also recalibrate its production to halt the drift towards types of coverage that are closer to entertainment than serious journalism, to focus on news which is indispensable to the effective functioning of democracy. To borrow the expression used by one of the founders of the 1957 statutes, Paul-Louis Bret, the Agency should above all defend "the right to the facts";

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- The plan to place so-called “*multimedia*” or “*rich media*” production upstream of the Agency’s entire production process must be dropped. Progress towards greater cross-media harmonisation of output is essential, but it must be made progressively, and not via a sudden wrenching change which could have serious and unforeseeable consequences;
- While working to better integrate its output between different media (text, photo, graphics and video), notably via its “4XML” technical programme, AFP should clearly assert the primacy of its text service, without which there can be no meaningful news production, and also the unicity and the permanence of all its production. The wire dispatch should remain the basic building-block of AFP’s output ;
- The Agency should reappropriate the rights to all of its text archives, and devote more resources to the digitalisation of its older stock. The company’s past output is part of the overall cultural heritage, on a par with that of libraries;
- The bringing into service of new Parisian premises in rue Vivienne, across the street from the main HQ building, should take place without destroying the unity of the company’s editorial team, in other words while keeping the latter firmly anchored in the historic building on Place de la Bourse. The office space rented in Rue Vivienne could be assigned to the technical and administrative services that are currently housed in other premises outside the HQ building, and/or to production services which do not need to be in permanent and direct contact with the editorial team for general news;
- AFP should henceforth refrain from all activities that are either wholly or in part, financed by direct income from advertising. All current contracts which provide for such revenues should be either abandoned or renegotiated.

The Aims and Means Contract; Finance

- The Aims and Means Contract (*Contrat d'objectifs et de moyens*, or *COM*) signed with the French government for 2009-2013 should be either renegotiated or amended to take into account the aforementioned considerations. In particular it should be made clear that AFP’s aim is not to be “profitable” and even less to restrict or to adjust the perimeter of its activities for purely commercial reasons;
- In its financial clauses the COM should provide not only the funds needed to modernise the Agency's technical infrastructure (notably via the “4XML” development plan) but also those required to refurbish the historic headquarters building on Place de la Bourse, which symbolises the unity of AFP staff;
- The French government should also agree to make up the shortfall resulting from its unilateral decision to withhold, in 2008, the agreed annual increase in the rates it pays for AFP services;
- With the main stakeholders represented on its Board of Governors, AFP should draft a definition of its mission as a service operating in the general public interest in order to both regenerate a relationship of mutual trust and provide a durable basis for the financing of its activities. The said mission should cover all the Agency's production in all its working languages, and take into account the essentially non-mercantile character of those activities;
- Within the framework of a COM renegotiated along these lines, AFP could commit itself to withdrawing from certain activities which place it in a situation of direct competition with its historic stakeholders, without renouncing the right to provide certain services directly to end-users.

Labour Relations

- AFP should work to improve the living standards of its staff, bring to an end precarious and insecure labour contracts, and encourage the hiring and training of young people. It should lay the foundations of a worldwide framework deal to cover all employees and including guarantees on salaries, democratic rights, working conditions, insurance and pensions for all.

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Changes to Products and Services

- The Agency should explore the potential for broadened coverage of its home country in languages other than French, and notably in English. This could help the French media to become less monolingual, thereby facilitating better understanding of France abroad, and notably in other European Union countries;
- To extract more value from its archives, AFP should set up a system of short URL's aimed at providing a unique identifier for all its documents in its future database;
- The “Newzwag”, “AFP Relaxnews”, “Citizenside”, “Paris Modes” and “AFP Services” projects should be abandoned, as they are at odds with the 1957 Statutes and/or AFP's basic missions, and are seriously detrimental to its reputation. Some of these services have also incurred major losses;
- As CEO, I would immediately appoint someone to oversee AFP's overall presence on the Internet and to prevent anomalies such as orphan web sites left online even though the products they represent do not exist, sites that are not updated, an unsupervised blog which allows spammers to gaily post illicit advertising messages, a “Facebook” group which has been left to its own devices and is full of strange ads, not to mention “Twitter” accounts that are managed without any coordination, etc.
- AFP should abandon the blogs it currently maintains in French and English, as their contents and/or commercial status are ambiguous. These services should be replaced with interfaces that promote honest dialogue between AFP and its users, be they commercial clients or members of the general public. One such service could be blogs in the company's various languages which allow users to comment on, and question or correct, news provided by AFP.

These then are my main proposals. On Thursday March 25th I propose to send you a somewhat longer document outlining my ideas for AFP. Please do not hesitate to contact me for any further information.

To promote wider debate on these proposals, I am taking the liberty of publicising the present text, both in the original French and in translation.

Yours sincerely

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