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IDEOLOGY AS RESOURCE IN ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNALISM

The French online news startup *Mediapart*

Andrea Wagemans, Tamara Witschge, and Mark Deuze

The emergence of a startup culture in the field of journalism is global: since the early years of the twenty-first century, new independent journalism companies have formed around the world. Although setting up one's own journalistic practice is not particularly novel in the news industry, the last couple of years have witnessed exponential growth in the startup space. In this context we chose to look more closely at one of the more successful recent online news startups: the French site Mediapart. We were interested in the factors involved in creating and running a journalism startup, and how the professionals involved give meaning to what they do in the fast-changing journalism field. We found that, although one of the main unique selling points of the journalism professed at Mediapart is that it challenges and provides an alternative to mainstream French press, at the heart of it is a strong traditional journalism ideology. While Mediapart has in many ways challenged and inspired the ways in which other French news organizations operate, it does not challenge our understanding of journalism, but rather reinforces a traditional and homogenous definition.

KEYWORDS entrepreneurial journalism; French media system; journalistic ideology; news startup

Introduction

The emergence of a startup culture in the field of journalism is global: since the early years of the twenty-first century, new independent (and generally small-scale and online-only) journalism companies have formed around the world (for Europe, see Bruno and Kleis Nielsen 2012; for Australia, see Simons 2013; for some US cases, see Schaffer 2010; Coates Nee 2014). In the context of self-damaging business models (for print and broadcast), audiences migrating to the digital space, and an organizational context rife with atypical working conditions (International Labour Organization 2006), ongoing managerial overhauls, and declining editorial budgets, both newcomers and senior reporters choose, or see a necessity, to strike out on their own. Although setting up one's own journalistic practice—either within or outside of legacy news organizations—is not particularly new in the news industry, in recent years there has been exponential growth in the startup space.

The current shift in focus to entrepreneurial journalism has not only taken place within the industry. Researchers and educators have matched this attention with scholarly work and curricular innovation, which further urges journalists to take on entrepreneurialism as a core element in their identity (for a critical take, see Anderson 2014). Courses and degrees in entrepreneurial journalism have been developed in countries as varied as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Colombia, Mexico, and the Netherlands

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(Vázquez Schaich and Klein 2013; Mensing and Ryfe 2013). Emphasizing individual traits, skills, attitude, and mindset, such curricular interventions envisage the future of journalism in the form of journalists who (alone or in collaboration) are able to monetize content in innovative ways, connect to publics in interactive new formats, grasp opportunities, and respond to (and shape) its environment (Briggs 2012).

While the future of journalism is increasingly sought in both journalism practice and education in this entrepreneurial form of journalism, we have to recognize the startup space as profoundly precarious. Many, if not most companies fail to make it past good intentions. Financing is scarce, competition fierce, and costs can be high. Stress levels among workers in the media industry are high, among those more or less securely employed just as much as among independents (Ertel et al. 2005; Reinardy 2011). Diversification and cross-subsidizing editorial practice seem key to survival; the extent to which this contributes to a potential compromising of journalistic standards and values remains to be seen. What is clear is that journalism practice currently moves beyond traditional conceptualizations of the field as consisting of neatly organized core industries producing media products for mass consumption. The ways of practicing journalism include a wide (and widening) range of editorial, redactional, and curatorial settings taking place in all kinds of organizational contexts.

To understand the ways in which these new startups impact on the field and wider understanding of journalism, we need rich, in-depth descriptions of cases of these new forms of journalism, the new types of business models, and ways of practicing and perceiving journalism. To contribute to our understanding of the challenges and opportunities of new forms of journalism, we provide in-depth insight into one of the more successful online news startups: the French site *Mediapart*. It is one of the few news startups that have managed to develop a sustainable business model for their online journalism, whereas most other similar “pure players” in the field seem to struggle to establish or hold on to what tends to be a mix of different sources of revenue (if any; see Sirkkunen and Cook 2012).

The business model of *Mediapart*, that completely rejects the selling of advertising space to pay its bills, was unique when it was launched in 2007 and there was a good deal of initial skepticism about its chances of success. Alain Minc, who was president of *Le Monde's* supervisory board at the time, said that based on his experience in the media business he was sure that the *Mediapart* model would never work. In an interview with radio station France Info on October 10, 2008 he stated: “the model chosen by Edwy Plenel is an absurd one. The online press cannot work except when it is free. A paid online press cannot work.”¹

By succeeding, *Mediapart* not only challenges these industry preconceptions, but also scholarly ones: existing theories about business models in journalism suggest that newspapers always depend on cross-subsidies (whether from advertising or public funding) to some extent. According to Kaye and Quinn (2010), the revenues from selling content were never high enough to cover the expenses, and Briggs (2012, 15) adds “the most damaging misconception that still pervades the newspaper industry today is the belief that consumers used to pay for their news.” He claims readers have never actually paid for content and this is not going to be common in the digital age either, even though media have been exploring the options for charging content online.

Mediapart is an interesting case to investigate not only because of its unique and successful business model. We see that the subscription model is becoming more common,

though its longer-term success is not as clear in each of these cases as it is in the case of *Mediapart*—see, for instance, *De Correspondent* in the Netherlands, *Krautreporter* in Germany, or *The Atavist Magazine* in the United States. What makes *Mediapart* a particularly interesting case is that outsiders describe it as a unique case, while the company regards itself as a laboratory, as a *nouvelle presse* project that is exploring the digital age and might serve as an example for other journalism startups. By investigating *Mediapart* closely, we gain insight into both its uniqueness and the extent to which this forms a laboratory for other cases.

A Unique Laboratory for New Forms of Journalism

Mediapart was founded in 2007 by Edwy Plenel (former editor-in-chief at *Le Monde*), François Bonnet (*Libération*, *Le Monde*), Laurent Mauduit (*Libération*, *Le Monde*), Gérard Desportes (*Libération*), and Marie-Hélène Smiejan. These senior journalists wanted to create an independent online newspaper focused on investigative journalism and reinvent a business model for journalism based completely on paid subscriptions.

What sets *Mediapart* apart from other online-only platforms is first that it bills itself as an online *newspaper* publishing three daily editions (rather than continuous updates). The stories that are included in these editions are selected and prioritized on the basis of relevance, and not just the time of publication. The same story is sometimes republished in multiple editions. In addition to these newspaper-like articles, *Mediapart* also offers its subscribers video content in the form of Web documentaries, self-produced talk shows (*Mediapart Live*, *Objections*, *Contre-courant*), and a weekly video column of comedian Didier Porte. Second, an important part of the website is dedicated to what they call *Le Club*, the interactive platform where people can comment on articles, publish their own blogs, and engage in discussions with other people, experts, and journalists. *Mediapart* journalists also use this part of the website to publish stories that interest them personally. Third, *Mediapart* organizes events like offline debates, festivals, and rallies that further and extend the discussions held on the platform, such as an event to support Greece or the battle against corruption. Fourth, part of the newspaper and *Le Club* are also available in an English and Spanish edition. All in all, it becomes clear that *Mediapart* is a company with a diversified, multi-media strategy. In this article, we will discuss the ways in which these elements come together in a successful new type of news organization.

Key for this article focusing on the entrepreneurial aspects of new journalism is that *Mediapart* aims to be an independent medium that does not rely on advertisers for its business model. Full stories are accessible through a paid subscription at the relatively low price of €9 a month, while the homepage and *Le Club* can be accessed for free. As such, there are a number of aspects that set *Mediapart* apart from other digital media startups. In France, at the time, it was unique in the sense that it was a news medium that did not rely in any way on selling advertisement space. It was the only news site in France that did not, and still does not, have advertisements. Offline, there was already *Le Canard Enchaîné* and in the audiovisual domain there was also website *@rret sur images*. In the meantime, online media like *Contexte* (in 2013) and *Brief.me* (in 2014) were created that also denounce advertising.

Internationally, the idea of a paywall was still a rare policy in the media industry when *Mediapart* adopted this strategy. The *Wall Street Journal* had successfully installed the first online paywall in 1997, but was alone in that policy. According to *The Conversation*, the

paywall debate only took off in 2009, two years after *Mediapart* was created.² *The New York Times* introduced a paywall in 2011, *The Times* (London) in 2012, but this is all considerably later than the French startup. Moreover, in many of these cases we are dealing with metered paywalls. In the case of *Mediapart* all content except the homepage (with short introductions to the articles) was behind a paywall from the outset. In France too, this is a relatively unique feature, as is also remarked in research conducted in 2010 that examined 24 online media in France (Couve and Kayser-Bril 2010). The researchers concluded that the “freemium” model was by far the most used model, making special mention of the distinctiveness of *Mediapart*’s model.

Given these specific characteristics of the news platform, the following research question drove the research presented here: what are the factors involved in creating and running *Mediapart*, and how do the news professionals involved give meaning to what they do in their working environment? We deliberately chose a descriptive general question, since the space of news startups is relatively under-researched, and existing work tends to define survival and success more or less exclusively in business terms (Sirkkunen and Cook 2012; Naldi and Picard 2012; Küng 2015, 91ff).

The analysis presented here is based on interviews with the founders and a document analysis of the business plan, the annual budgets, the mission statement, and the *Mediapart Live* edition covering this subject (interviews and analysis conducted in 2014 and 2015). Together they offer insight into the creation of *Mediapart*, the events leading up to it, the choices made, and the difficulties faced. The analysis of business-related documents, like *Mediapart*’s budget, business plan, and mission statement, offered insight into the business creation, the steps taken, the objectives, and the choices made. This was also covered in the manifesto *Combat pour une presse libre* (in 2008) and the revised manifesto *Le droit de savoir* (in 2013), both written by co-founder and president Edwy Plenel. Semi-structured interviews with Plenel and two other co-founders further enriched this data with anecdotes, hesitations, challenges, and successes while creating and running *Mediapart*, while semi-structured interviews with journalists working at *Mediapart* and founders of other French startups gave insight in the day-to-day routines at *Mediapart*, how *Mediapart* differs from established media organizations, how the journalists give meaning to working in this new type of media organization, how this relates to their professional objectives and in what ways it affected French journalism.

The people we interviewed at *Mediapart* itself were: Edwy Plenel (founder and president), Christophe Gueugneau (editor-in-chief), Laurent Mauduit (co-founder and economics editor), Pierre Puchot (international editor), Stéphane Allières (political editor), Lucie Delaporte (education editor), and François Bonnet (editorial director). The founders of other French startups we interviewed were: Nicolas George (pigiste [Freelance] for *i>Télé*, *RTL*, and *Le Routard*), Jean-Christophe Boulanger (founder and president of *Contexte*), and Laurent Mauriac (founder of *Rue89* and *Brief.me*).

The 10 interviews were conducted between November 2014 and January 2015. Each interview lasted for about an hour (two were conducted over the phone, two in a cafe, one at the home of the interviewee, the other five in offices of the interviewees). As entrepreneurial journalism is still a relatively new field of study, we employed a grounded theory approach to code and analyze the results. The number of people we interviewed is limited, and the interview data only begin to explore the experiences, motivations, and emotions of the journalists involved. However, the variety of perspectives does provide a

diverse account of *Mediapart* as a journalism startup and the role it plays in French journalism. Furthermore, the analysis of the data clearly identified shared experiences, allowing us to venture beyond the case of *Mediapart* and reflect on wider practices of entrepreneurial journalism.

In this article, we will start by contextualizing our research of this case by situating it in our understanding of entrepreneurial journalism. We address the importance of a broad definition of resources in examining entrepreneurship and the need to consider the role that ideology plays in creative enterprises such as startups in journalism. We will then apply these concepts, resources, and ideology to the specific case of *Mediapart* and show the way that ideology becomes one of the most important ways to point out (and sell) the uniqueness of the organization. We critically interrogate the ways in which *Mediapart* argues it is different from traditional organizations, and reflect on the limits of the challenge that this entrepreneurial project provides to the understanding of journalism.

Setting Up a New News Organization

The direct event leading up to the creation of *Mediapart* was the acquisition of *Le Monde* by the investment group Lagardère in 2005 and the resulting departure of then editor-in-chief Edwy Plenel. He explains how he warned about the consequences of the acquisition, but during the general assembly only 36 percent of the journalists voted against the proposition and so *Le Monde* was purchased by the investment group. Plenel left the newspaper on October 30, 2005—remembering the exact date when talking about it in the interview.

Laurent Mauduit resigned as assistant editor-in-chief, but continued to undertake investigative journalism for *Le Monde* for another year. The direct event causing him to resign was the censoring of part of his investigative story on then president of *Le Monde*'s supervisory board Alain Minc. According to François Bonnet, it is a French peculiarity that all media are owned by companies whose main occupation is not information, but arms, telecom, concrete, or something else. These relationships between business owners, investors, government, and the media fueled the founders' wish to create an independent medium.

There was some momentum in 2007. First, key personnel were available—Plenel, Mauduit, and other journalists who had exited *Le Monde*. Second, with his settlement payment from the newspaper, Plenel was in a position to invest in the *Mediapart* project. The founders were experienced and renowned journalists who wanted to create an independent medium, by which they mainly refer to economic independence. An online venture was less expensive than setting up a print medium, allowed for interaction with readers, and gave them a first mover's advantage in 2007, as *Mediapart* was one of the first online media to succeed with a business model that completely eliminated advertisement sales as a source of revenue.

But although the founders had extensive journalistic experience, none had set up or run a business previously. As Laurent Mauduit recounts, this influenced their business decisions. For example, the initial team comprised 25 journalists, one technician, and one administrative employee. The founders saw themselves creating a newspaper and to do that they needed journalists. They were barely aware that creating an online business also requires a general manager, financial manager, marketing department, and a technical support team. When the website crashed because the first scoop increased traffic, they had

to hire more technical staff. It took three years before they hired Estelle Coulon who manages online marketing and who has expanded the marketing team. As Laurent Mauduit recounts:

We were crazy, crazy, crazy, it was madness. Madness because we said we are doing journalism, so we need journalists, but we didn't understand that we were creating a business, so we also needed a general director in charge of financial matters, a marketing specialist, etcetera.

The founders deliberately chose a business model and medium that were new to them, but that allowed for independent journalism, interaction with readers, and required less financial capital to create than a print medium. Despite their lack of business experience—and the way this biased their choices towards the journalism rather than the business side of the enterprise—they managed to successfully create and run this journalism startup. They benefited from the variety of resources they possessed as renowned journalists, as they could more easily access capital, manage their creative employees, and become visible.

Despite the absence of a marketing department, *Mediapart* became known and visible quickly, as becomes clear from the number of mentions in French media.³ The interviews conducted for this research (with people both within and outside of *Mediapart*) suggest this can be in part explained by the charisma and symbolic capital of founder and president Edwy Plenel. Already a public figure before starting *Mediapart*, he describes his own role as president of *Mediapart* as being the spokesperson of the business. Stéphane Allières explains how personification is something typically French and can be identified with all the big printed press institutions. According to other startup founders, it was a deliberate choice made by the founders to construct the newspaper around the personality of Edwy Plenel with his big moustache and reputation. It is a choice that was not without risk, because Plenel is a divisive personality, loved by some but hated by others. To gauge his role amidst the other features that helped make this case a successful case, we need to identify the features that help us understand entrepreneurship.

Understanding Entrepreneurial Journalism

To understand the way in which journalism startups function, in this case *Mediapart*, we need to look at the broader context of startups. For the purposes of this research, a startup is considered to be a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) with less than 250 employees (Powell and Ennis 2007, 376). For the *journalism* part of entrepreneurial journalism, we can further define it as a startup organization that identifies with journalism as it has historically been practiced, is not affiliated with existing media, and mainly operates online, while innovating journalism in some way (Bruno and Kleis Nielsen 2012, 3–4), for example, by producing a different kind of journalistic content or by creating a new viable business model. *Mediapart* claims to do both. In its 2014 annual report, Edwy Plenel writes:

In its six years of existence, Mediapart has become known for its original, new and exclusive information. But what is not sufficiently known yet is that this digital newspaper without equivalent is also an economic exception in the French press.

The term “entrepreneurial journalism” has attracted considerable attention, both in the industry and in academia. It marries two parts long seen as needing to be separate,

even at times in one individual, the entrepreneurial journalist: the business side of the enterprise and the journalistic side of the enterprise. Those two sides interact and influence the success of the startup. This combination often leads to tension, particularly in the case of companies and organizations within the broader field of the creative industries, of which the news industry is part.

Creative industries are “those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (Townley, Beech, and McKinlay 2009, 939). Creative industries face specific managerial challenges as the nature of their products is symbolic, experiential, and of non-utilitarian value (ibid). Because of those unpredictable aspects, creative businesses employ strategies to manage risk, and risk determines both aspects of the enterprise—whether that enterprise is the portfolio career of an individual entrepreneur or a large company. Creativity and commercial acumen thus both stand in equal service of managing risk and uncertainty in the production of culture and cultural work (Bilton 2007), particularly in the field of journalism (Naldi and Picard 2012).

For the news organization—whether that is a large-scale legacy organization, a collaboration of a few people, or constituted by one individual entrepreneur—one of the main challenges is how to balance the public service that journalism seeks or professes to provide and the economic interests (Picard 2005). Both of these aspects are important to consider when understanding entrepreneurial journalism: whereas studies in entrepreneurship tend to focus on the economic aspects, to understand the “journalism” part of the equation, we also need to consider the specific nature of the journalistic profession and its position in societies. Here we will consider more in detail two concepts that help our analysis, resources and professional ideology, as well as the relationships between them.

Resources

Crucial to understanding startups is to note that resources include, but are not limited to, the financial capital available to those setting up a journalistic organization. It also refers to different types of capital needed to create and run a business, as suggested by Naldi and Picard (2012). Capital is a useful concept when analyzing business formation in the news industry, because it allows us to distinguish between different types of resources, the relationships between those different forms of resources, and how possessing one type of resource makes it easier to acquire other types of resource. The role that resources play in business formation is especially interesting for the creation of *Mediapart*, because its founders had worked at and managed renowned French newspapers before establishing their own venture. This suggests they may have had better access to initial financial capital, a useful social network, and a reputation that gave them an advantage over young entrepreneurs in the same situation. Naldi and Picard (2012, 69–97) identify limited access to capital as one of the main reasons why startup enterprises ultimately fail, and though the existence of resources can never entirely explain the success of an organization, it can help us understand *Mediapart*'s endurance.

Resources entail social, economic, and symbolic capital. Social capital refers to the network that business founders can make use of, such as ties with journalists, sources, the business community, and community organizations (Naldi and Picard 2012). Johannisson (1988, 83) ascribes crucial importance to social capital when he states “the key to entrepreneurial success is found in the ability to develop and maintain a personal network. The

personal network is the vehicle by which the established entrepreneur exchanges information with and acquires resources from the environment." Also, founders have a head start when they do not have to build up this network, but can make use of the network they already have as capital is cumulative. It allows the entrepreneur to attract economic capital, which includes the initial financial capital the founders have at their disposal, their monetary income, and personal assets. Economic capital can also be accessed through a strong personal network. It is important to note that, contrary to the idea that anyone can now be a journalist by starting their own business, launching a digital medium still requires significant investment (Tessier 2007, 40; Curran and Witschge 2010). So even though the online production and distribution costs are much lower than those of a printed medium, economic capital is a financial precondition for creating a business (though not necessarily sufficient for making it run successfully).

Social and symbolic capital play a role in both attracting economic capital and running a startup as Johannisson (1988, 87) states, the "entrepreneur's organization is basically an extension of his personality, whether formally represented by his employees or by a personal network." Johannisson places great emphasis on the role of the entrepreneur and his personal traits in the ability to maintain a social network. These personal traits can be understood as what Townley, Beech, and McKinlay (2009, 944) call symbolic capital: "the legitimacy or respect proffered according to terms valued within the field; prestige reflecting knowledge of, and recognition within, the field." These can be acquired, for example, through prior entrepreneurial and business experience, prior experience in related industries or prior experience in other industries. Charisma is also a form of symbolic capital. Furthermore, intellectual capital (creative ideas) and cultural capital (particular knowledge and skills, the ownership of cultural goods, recognized authority or expertise) play an important role as personal traits allowing one to build and maintain a personal network.

Social capital and symbolic capital play an important role in addressing the managerial challenges faced while running a creative business like *Mediapart*. The central point made in theories about the specifics of managing creative business is that the goals and vision of creative businesses are the temporary outcomes of perpetual discussion between the managers and the employees (Powell and Dodd 2007; Townley, Beech, and McKinlay 2009). In the case of *Mediapart*, the founders' reputations and prior experience indicate a profound knowledge of how journalism works, providing them with some leverage over their journalists in these discussions, as we will discuss in more detail below.

Ideology

The managerial challenges faced by creative businesses like those in journalism can be softened significantly if the professional goals of creative employees of the organization relate to the organizational goals of the business. It is the tension between managing resources and upholding values that is central in analyzing entrepreneurial journalism. Many of these challenges come to the fore at the level of everyday practices: how do they manifest in the work and in the self-understanding of the professional? We therefore also looked at how journalists experience working at *Mediapart* and the extent to which the practices at *Mediapart* align with its employees' professional values.

One of the main critiques of entrepreneurial journalism is that it could exacerbate the trend in the field of journalism that suggests that professional values are increasingly set aside to meet more commercial goals in the face of declining revenues (Van Zoonen

1998; Witschge and Nygren 2009). The case of *Mediapart* is particularly interesting as certain market considerations—for example, expressed in seeking advertising revenues—are not a part of *Mediapart*'s business model. At the same time, there are commercial interests at hand: *Mediapart* relies on people subscribing. The question then is if, and in what ways, commercial decisions affect journalistic decisions.

When considering the balance between commercial interests and professional values—such as editorial independence and autonomy—that make up the occupational ideology of journalism (Deuze 2005), it is important to look beyond individual factors surrounding the journalism startup and consider the political and societal context of business formation that may either frustrate or spur business development. What is important to recognize is that, in the case of journalism, looking at economic motives and resources will not provide the whole picture.

As Naldi and Picard (2012, 69–97) explain, one of the main reasons for starting a new journalism business is the job destruction at existing media companies, the discontent with existing journalism, and the demise of legacy media institutions (notably newspapers). Journalism startups in France as well as in other countries are therefore more often than not framing themselves as a counterforce, renewing journalism with independent investigations (Küng 2015). As Sirkkunen and Cook (2012, 52) note: “several sites pride themselves on independent quality journalism that rejects the status quo—even one might say cashing in on a counter-culture that stands for independent, investigative journalism.”

The Relevance of Resources

When we consider both aspects of entrepreneurship in the case of *Mediapart*, resources and ideology, we firstly see the unique set of resources available to *Mediapart*. In the above introduction of how *Mediapart* was established, we discussed the set of actors who were involved and the type of capital they brought into the organization. The case of *Mediapart* illustrates how both economic capital and social capital are crucial in meeting the requirements for creating a startup. A network of friends and acquaintances who were willing to invest some money and the availability of the founder's personal financial assets allowed them to raise the initial capital needed to launch the online newspaper.

However, our case also shows how, in a way, they had to start all over despite their financial assets, extensive social networks, and reputations. They did struggle financially during the first three years, as their symbolic capital did not help them in convincing investors that *Mediapart* would be a viable business decision. Thus they were mostly reliant on their own capital and the goodwill of their friends and acquaintances. When *Mediapart* was launched, it had collected €2,939,000 in initial capital. The personal investments of the founders constituted €1,325,000. Next to that there were two bigger investors, namely Doxa and Ecofinance (each about €500,000, totaling €1,110,000). Third, the Société des Amis de Mediapart, consisting of about 40 friends, acquaintances, and other sympathizers that each invested between €5,000 and €50,000, contributed a total amount of €504,000.⁴

This combination of investors is key to understanding how *Mediapart* was able to launch. Given that the motivation of the founders was primarily located in its ideology, not in a business model, “regular” investors were difficult to attract. General director Marie-Hélène Smiejan, who handles the financial side of the business, explained:

We were not at all beginners, we had professional, editorial and management experience, so we went to see potential partners. They all told us no. It was either the press never makes any money, so it will always lose money. Or it was, but what exactly is your project, it's to earn a lot of money? But no. No, it's that the newspaper exists, develops, takes its readers into account, yes, well, but our goal is to make money ... It's risky, an independent newspaper, because why would you want us to invest in it?

So the founders were forced to rely on their own resources and decided to invest in the project themselves. A beneficial side-effect of this decision was that it gave other small investors more confidence in the project. If the founders were willing to invest in it themselves, maybe it was a project worth investing in. In addition, the small investors—the Société des Amis—invested more out of support for *Mediapart's* cause than for economic reasons.

Although creating and running an online medium is less expensive than creating a print medium, the venture still required approximately €5 million in investment in its first three years in operation. The choice of a paywall model (*modèle payant*) was especially risky, as it requires content to attract subscribers and thus needs a large team of journalists from the start to create this content. In 2010, the costs were €3.5 million, 70 percent of which was staff costs for 33 employees, of whom 25 were journalists (Couve and Kayser-Bril 2010). Of the initial team of 25 journalists, 19 were promised the same salary as the job they had to leave in order to join *Mediapart* and a three-year contract. This helped convince journalists who were hesitant to join *Mediapart* from the outset. François Bonnet recounts how there were not many applications, because people considered it a crazy project. However, for their business model to work they needed journalists with knowledge and expertise concerning investigative stories about politics, economics, education, and the police; and who were also willing to work differently from how they were used to at printed media. They found these journalists with a lot of symbolic capital by asking specific colleagues (*"par des reseaux professionnelles de chacun"*) in their networks. This in turn attracted young journalists like Pierre Puchot, Lucie Delaporte, and Stéphane Allières who were interested in working with these well-known senior journalists.

The venture grew from 25 people, mostly journalists, to an organization of more than 50 people, consisting of four elements:

- The editorial section with about 35 journalists, which is located in Paris and managed by co-founder François Bonnet as the editorial director.
- The technical department, with about 10 staffers, which is located in Paris and managed by Etienne Samsom.
- The marketing department, with about 4 staffers, which is located in Paris and managed by Estelle Coulon.
- Subscribers relations, which is located in Poitiers and managed by Marine Santain.

As this French startup was a relatively new type of organization, those involved faced legislative challenges, notably when it came to taxation policy. Until February 2014 the French government clearly distinguished between the printed press, on the one hand, and websites, on the other, for VAT purposes. The printed press enjoyed a reduced rate of 2.1 percent, while websites had to pay the normal rate of 19.6 percent. After the new press syndicate SPIIL lobbied for equal VAT rates for all media, including online newspapers, the government eventually equalized the rate. Now all media organizations pay 2.1

TABLE 1*Mediapart's revenues and profit per year (in euros)*

Year	Revenues	Net profits
2009	1,331,000	-2,133,000
2010	2,819,000	-1,355,700
2011	5,026,500	572,300
2012	5,968,500	702,900
2013	6,843,700	903,600
2014	8,761,800	1,484,253

Source: <http://www.societe.com/societe/societe-editrice-de-mediapart-500631932.html>.

percent. In the end *Mediapart* managed to become a successful organization, both in terms of profitability (the entrepreneurial aspect of it) and in terms of their self-classification as a journalistic success (which is discussed in the next section). After an initial loss, the organization reached financial equilibrium in 2010 and has been increasingly profitable in subsequent years (see Table 1).

Ideology as Resource

Being a new organization brought challenges and many resources were needed to address the challenges. But *Mediapart* became increasingly popular, in particular after what has become known as the Bettencourt affair. The organization grew to more than 10,000 subscribers in their first six months,⁵ then gradually doubled, and after the huge scoop about the Bettencourt affair in July 2010, the subscription numbers increased from 26,000 to 42,000.⁶ There was steady growth in 2011,⁷ in 2012,⁸ and in 2013, taking the number of subscribers to the 100,000 mark.

It is clear that the Bettencourt affair was very important in the growth of the number of subscribers. This involved the publication of secretly taped phone calls which implicated former UMP treasurer and then Minister of Employment Éric Woerth with having received €50,000 from L'Oréal billionaire Liliane Bettencourt through his wife, who was working for the 92-year-old Bettencourt at the time.⁹ *Le Monde* had passed on the recordings of telephone conversations with Bettencourt, as had *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Management at *Mediapart*, however, decided to go with the story. Between publication of the Bettencourt story in June 2010 and the end of the year 2010, the number of subscribers almost doubled (26,000 to 46,870). In their annual report of 2011, they wrote: "after two years of steady growth in terms of audience and subscriptions, the Bettencourt affair allowed *Mediapart* to pass a tipping point."

The tapes' controversy not only allowed them to break a big investigative story, it also strengthened their claim that the existing media in France were not doing their job correctly. By refusing to publish the information about corruption offered to them, *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* supported *Mediapart's* argument that they were keeping important information from their readers for the wrong reasons. As such, *Mediapart* is a clear example of a new entrepreneurial project challenging the status quo in the field of journalism, and ideology seems to be one of their strongest assets.

In its manifesto, *Mediapart* states that France is in need of a new press and *Mediapart* is this project. They refer to their belief that existing media are not doing investigative

journalism and are no longer independent, which limits them in performing their democratic duty to inform the public. *Mediapart* claims to be reinventing journalism in France. Borne out of a joint enterprise of journalists and Web specialists, the startup says it aims to respond to three crises: democratic, economic, and moral. The economic crisis refers to the lack of a viable business model as readers are leaving, advertisement revenues are falling, and debts are increasing. This is a crisis because a financially unstable press is a weak press (*"une presse fragile est une presse faible"*), according to Plenel.

Interestingly, through addressing this economic "crisis," *Mediapart* aims to address the moral crisis they identify in journalism. This crisis for them is connected to the economic crisis: as they see it, the fragility of newspapers causes a destabilization of journalistic values, morals, and professional culture when the economic dependence of newspapers on advertisers, corporations, or government limit them in their editorial choices. Which brings them to the final crisis, the democratic crisis, by which they mean the presidential system in France which, they argue, allows one powerful person to dictate the journalistic agenda. Through these evaluations of the press in France, Edwy Plenel argues that *Mediapart* might serve as an example for other journalism businesses in France and internationally both in the way they have organized their business model and in the way they do journalism.

Challenging the Status Quo

This strong ideological stance, which can be identified as a return to "traditional" journalistic values while challenging traditional media organizations, provides interesting insights into both how this entrepreneurial project perceives (and sells) itself, as well as how it considers other media businesses. By talking about what sets it apart, those involved provide an interesting dichotomy distinguishing themselves from others. Each concept used to describe *Mediapart* has a counterpart that describes the traditional press in France for them. These distinctions were made, both at the level of the organization (Table 2), and at the level of the journalism they produce (Table 3).

Towards a New Organization of Journalism?

Tables 2 and 3 show how *Mediapart* not only challenges the conceptualization of journalism in France, but also reinvents the way that a journalistic organization can be organized. In its self-conceptualization we can find many negations of the traditional press in France. Compared to the printed media the founders had managed before, *Mediapart* is a much smaller, more flexible organization and less hierarchical. The editors-in-chief state that they can primarily focus on journalistic work, because the combination of doing journalism online and relying on a business model that primarily gets its revenues from paid subscriptions eliminates the need to please advertisers, eliminates the production and distribution costs, and eliminates the need for a 200–300-person team.

The journalists also feel they are much less preoccupied with organizational issues like time, length, and revenues, which allows them to focus more fully on producing what they consider good journalism. Most of the *Mediapart* journalists had worked at other renowned media before joining the new startup, and a number had even left comfortable jobs for it. They reference the value of contact with readers, both virtually and in reality, the liberty that they experience and the time and space they get to produce their

TABLE 2

Differences in organizational features between *Mediapart* and traditional press according to people working at *Mediapart*

Organization features	<i>Mediapart</i>	French press
Income model	Subscriptions	Advertisement/investors
Business model: profitability	Profitable	Losing money/sold off to investors
Ownership	Independent	Owned by corporations
Production costs involved	Less expensive	Expensive
Type of organization: overhead	Slim	Heavy
Income flow	Stable	Unstable
Organization size	Small	Large
Type of organization	Horizontal	Hierarchic
Establishment of news agenda	Free choice by journalists	Appointed by editors
Organization of news beats and journalist work	Together, working with different colleagues in multiple domains	Divided, each journalist working on own news beat
Age of employees	Young and old people	Mostly old people
Culture	Dynamic	Established

TABLE 3

Differences in journalism produced between *Mediapart* and traditional press according to people working at *Mediapart*

Organization features	<i>Mediapart</i>	French press
Journalism model	Anglo-Saxon	French
Agenda set by	Investigation	Other media and the political agenda
Produced for	The public	The audience
Amount of articles	Few	Many
Type of questioning	Pugnacious	Polite/lazy
Differentiation	Unique identity	Homogenization
Aim of output	Quality	Quantity
Rhythm of publishing	Distinct editions	Continuous stream of articles
Editorial decision making	Selective, exclusive	Copy-paste culture
Affinity	Close to the public	Close to those in power
Sourcing of stories	Original sources	"Usual suspects"
Length of output	Long	Short
Depth of output	Profound	Superficial
Output on site ordered by	Most important	Most recent

work. Moreover, they state they are not limited by the institutional agenda as journalists at traditional media often are, but instead are completely free to choose their own subjects as opposed to media where they worked previously. There they were much more tied to the news of the day and to orders from the editor-in-chief. At *Mediapart*, the initiative is with the journalists. The journalists describe how they felt limited at their former employers. They were not practicing what they believed journalism should be. They were guided by external factors. More generally, they feel free to practice what they regard as good journalism. Lucie Delaporte states that she is completely free to choose her own subjects, as long as it is a story that is different from that which other media do.

However, it is important to note that, although there may be significant differences in practice, a lot of this pertains to discourse. For instance, the idea that *Mediapart* is a horizontally, democratically organized company is to a large extent more in discourse than in practice. In reality there are two chiefs, Edwy Plenel and François Bonnet, and there are others who perform “management” roles, though they are not necessarily named as such. Christophe Gueugneau, for instance, who is editor-in-chief together with Sophie Dufau, explained that his responsibilities are those of an editor-in-chief, but his title is journalist. Together they form the part of the organizational structure that is referred to as *le central* and falls under editorial director François Bonnet.

Equally, the *Mediapart* founders employ a strong type of public service discourse (Witschge and Nygren 2009; Sirkkunen and Cook 2012), referring to “the citizens’ right to know” and “for democracy,” which is not always equally performed in practice. It presents itself as a unique medium that is an “economic exception,” “unequaled,” with “original, new and exclusive content.” However, the journalists do not seem to agree with the founders about the larger goal of *Mediapart*. They are skeptical about the extent to which *Mediapart* is able to fulfill a civic responsibility. The people they are seeking to convince are the people who are interested in this already, says Christophe Gueugneau. According to the journalists, *Mediapart*’s goal is therefore not to reinvent journalism, but to simply do journalism as it has been ideologically supposed to be done. As such, it becomes clear that challenging the status quo by reverting to traditional values (such as truth-telling in the context of complete editorial autonomy and independence) becomes one of the most important resources available to *Mediapart*.

Indeed, what *Mediapart* produces—investigative journalism—is not new content wise. What they did do successfully is to repackage it in different formats, like videos and podcasts, and the online environment allows for more interaction. But here too, we see that the practice does not always live up to the ideal: journalists admitted that interaction with users was mainly useful in the starting phase of the new medium, when the readership resembled more of a community. As the startup grows, the relevant comments and suggestions from readers are usually only those sent to the journalists in an e-mail or private message, not those on the site. Indeed, like other organizations, *Mediapart* also upholds a clear distinction between content produced by readers and content produced by journalists, emphasizing the fact that these are two different things. As such, the status of the contributions of citizens remains up for negotiation (for a typology of the types of interactivity in online news spaces, see Peters and Witschge 2014).

Mediapart’s focus on what sets the venture apart is both a burden and a blessing in the daily work of the journalists. Journalists at *Mediapart* explain that they could be perceived as arrogant, because they are telling other journalists that they are not producing “proper” journalism. Lucie Delaporte, education editor, describes how education editors working at other media do not do investigative journalism in the education field, because that is not what is expected of them. At *Mediapart*, her argument goes, there is space for such investigations. Sources too, would notice such differences. Stéphane Alliès, political editor, describes that sources experience greater liberty at explaining their statements, because they know there is room for longer quotes in *Mediapart*’s articles.

What becomes clear is that billing the new entrepreneurial project as reinventing journalism is a clever technique to gain visibility and it has been useful in attracting readers and funding. The public service nature of the message has clearly spoken to ideological motivations of people to support the new business venture. It has proved effective

in capitalizing on the founders' social capital. This does not mean that the newcomer has not instigated some real changes in the field. They did provide impetus for investigative journalism, which is relatively uncommon in France (Kuhn 2013), driving legacy media like *Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and *Le Point* to invest in their own investigative units. *Le Monde* even rehired Fabrice Lhomme from *Mediapart* after he broke the Bettencourt story.

Mediapart also developed an online marketing strategy that legacy media adopted, and it changed the playing field for online journalism in France when it comes to rules and regulations, allowing them to compete more equally with legacy media. As another startup founder explained, *Mediapart* has been very innovative when it comes to marketing despite their lack of a marketing department during the first three years in existence. The most inventive is the €1 trial period, which *Le Monde* and other large newspapers also adopted. This suggests journalism startups can be an innovative factor in the journalism field that do not only change the ways in which their journalists work, but also the ways in which existing media work.

Conclusion

The case of *Mediapart* provides useful insights into the new ways in which journalism is produced, distributed, and conceptualized. One of the main findings offered here is how the new entrepreneurial news organization aims to challenge the status quo in journalism, both in terms of its organization and in terms of its ideology. At the same time, the ideology that is professed fits with the traditional conceptualization of journalism (Deuze 2005). All the journalists working at *Mediapart* describe how they wanted to work there because the practices at their previous employers did not match their view of journalism. The startup does not so much change the professional identity of the journalists, but seems to offer a place where they can work according to their own perceived professional identity. Put differently, the professional identity precedes the startup and the startup offers an environment within which the journalists can express this professional identity in their work. Both the founders and journalists of *Mediapart* argue that they feel liberated from organizational issues and unconstrained by space or time. This implies that journalists are treated more like "pure" professionals (adhering to a strict definition of reportorial autonomy) at *Mediapart* than they were at traditional media outlets.

There is an interesting paradox here: the organization professes (and is experienced as such) to provide complete liberty and autonomy of the journalists while at the same time there is a strong and homogenous work ethic and conceptualization of journalism. Although it is less hierarchical than traditional news organizations, *Mediapart* is not as democratically organized as the founders portray, nor do we find truly alternative understandings and practices of journalism. The symbolic capital that can be found in some of the key players in the organization allowed the organization (with strong-minded employees) to be managed effectively. This is mainly because the journalists working in the organization trust the decisions made by the two main leaders, François Bonnet and Edwy Plenel, even when they do not always agree with them. A shared set of values and ways of working was in part produced through the selection and hiring process, creating a group of like-minded staff, and an environment where people (want to) work together. In doing so, the inner workings of the startup do not differ from the relatively homogeneous working environments and examples of group-think in legacy newsrooms.

More generally, it seems like journalism startups in France are looking more at the Anglo-Saxon journalistic culture than French tradition in constructing their businesses (Reese 2001). This is to say that they are inspired by American businesses that already exist, and they propagate a fact-based, objectivity-driven kind of journalism. Together with their discourse of civic responsibility and the feeling of being almost completely autonomous as journalists, their references to journalism are distinctly ideological—that is, inspired by ideal-typical values (Deuze 2005). For all the freedom experienced in the organization in determining what news to investigate and report on, the journalists still expressed the need to address the biggest events of every day as one of the main challenges. As such, it seems that *Mediapart*, which in many ways, both financially and journalistically, is innovative, still follows traditional ideological values that have governed journalism for a long time (in this case immediacy). With a passionate return to traditional journalistic ideological values as their unique selling point within the particular French context, we may wonder whether—and if so how—entrepreneurial ventures, while challenging the status quo, in fact challenge conceptualizations of journalism. On the other hand, the journalistic innovation in the case of *Mediapart*—combining collaboration with an expert audience with an innovative business form, and an entrepreneurial organization of work—suggests that a return and confirmation of an ideal-typical core of journalism does not necessarily stand in the way of new forms of journalism developing and flourishing. Ideology can be a resource for innovation as much as it works as a moat to hold off invaders.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. All quotes translated from French by the authors.
2. See <http://theconversation.com/newspapers-ongoing-search-for-subscription-revenue-from-paywalls-to-micropayments-40726>.
3. Source: Wagemans (2014, appendix B), analysis of French media using a LexisNexis database search with the keyword *Mediapart*, which went from 25 in the first month of existence, to 537 in 2008 and 592 in 2009, to 2626 in 2010 (a rise that is mainly due to the Bettencourt affair, see below).
4. For all figures, see <http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/090308/comment-mediapart-a-construit-son-independance>.
5. Source: <http://www.cguitard.com/article-22849100.html>.
6. Source: <http://www.journaliste-entrepreneur.com/2010/11/mediapart-le-pari-de-l%E2%80%99enquete-et-de-l%E2%80%99abonnement/>.
7. Source: *Mediapart* annual report.
8. Source: <http://www.frenchweb.fr/le-succes-de-mediapart-en-chiffres-et-en-images/104113>.
9. See, for instance, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/jul/12/bettencourt-tapes-mediapart>.

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