

Samir Douaihy

Candidate for the Post of **Journalists'** Representative on the Board

For a More Independent, More Ethical & More Professional AFP

June 24, 2011

Between June 29 and July 13, 2011, you are being asked to elect the **journalists' representative on the AFP board**¹.

This election, which takes place every three years, decides who will be the sole AFP journalist to sit on the body that runs the agency. It is therefore **very important**.

Furthermore, the current election is a **historic first**. AFP's statutes, adopted in 1957, originally specified that only French nationals could take part in the election². That nationality clause has now been abolished³: henceforth all AFP employees can take part, whatever their nationality. The current vote thus becomes the **only election** in which AFP staff around the world are allowed to take part.⁴

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Although I have been an AFP journalist for almost 25 years, as I am from neither France nor any other European country I was until now among the third of AFP staff who did not have the right to take part in this vote⁵. My candidacy represents **the end of this discriminatory measure**.

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¹ AFP's statutes call for two of the 15 seats on the board to be set aside for staff members, one representing journalists and the other non-journalists. The 15 members of the board elect the CEO, who becomes the 16th board member.

² AFP management decided in 1998 to broaden the electorate to include most European nationals.

³ On May 6 this year the French Constitutional Council struck down the nationality clause, judging it discriminatory and therefore unconstitutional. That ruling, obtained after a long court battle waged by one of the AFP trade unions, removed the only ethical blot to be found in our agency's statutes.

⁴ Two other elections take place every three years at AFP, to elect the Works Committee and union staff delegates. However those polls are only open to staff with "headquarters status", who make up only around 60% of the worldwide payroll.

⁵ As a result of the Constitutional Council's ruling, the number of people qualified to vote in the current election has gone from almost 1700 to nearly 2600.

I am seeking your vote on the basis of a **three-pronged ambition**: to make AFP more independent, more ethical and more professional.

A more independent AFP. Thanks to the brilliant legal construct of its statutes, AFP enjoys a unique situation among worldwide news agencies. It is the only such agency that is both beyond the reach of private capital and yet not a state-owned body; it operates like a cooperative between its users but is at the same time invested with a general-interest mission via the conditions laid down in the first two articles of its statutes;⁶ it is protected by a law that was adopted unanimously by the French parliament but it is forbidden by that same law from falling under the control of any political grouping. *De facto*, however, the French government still has influence over the agency's management, notably via the choice of the CEO and the negotiations that set its financial agreement with AFP (this despite the continuing decline in the share of AFP's sales which come from the state: the figure was almost 80% in 1957 and is now around 40%). In recent years, moreover, the party in power in France has made several attempts to intimidate AFP. The political pressure brought to bear on the agency has not been unrelated to a certain number of sackings and appointments. We can therefore conclude that even if the agency's independence is real because it is enshrined in French law, that independence is not total and remains fragile. It therefore has to be defended through ceaseless vigilance.

A more ethical AFP. The journalistic principles that are part of our job, along with our agency's reputation for rigour and honesty, should go hand-in-hand with a very high level of professional ethics in AFP's activities. Unfortunately the real situation leaves a lot to be desired: we see clan-based appointments, a management selected from the same old in-groups, missions made-to-measure for the happy few, alongside ostracism and dubious social practices - sometimes even illegal - for the rest. Recent examples of the latter have included the treatment of people on casualised labour contracts, the failure to apply the law in calculating holiday pay for HQ-status staff and repeated bypassing of legal prerogatives of the Works Committee. Not forgetting departure deals disguised as sackings, the broadcasting of company PR releases mingled with genuine wire stories on certain services, activities on the Internet that violate the agency's basic obligations - the list could go on. We must not be afraid to denounce such ethical lapses, and exercise great vigilance in order to ensure both legality and equality throughout the agency.

A more professional AFP. The agency has unparalleled experience in the complex task of covering world news 24 hours a day and seven days a week in six languages. AFP has nevertheless found it difficult to adapt to new technologies such as video, multimedia and the Internet. Above all, it does not have a genuine company strategy.

⁶ Article 1 of AFP's statutes specifies that the agency's mission is "to seek out, in France... as well as abroad, the elements of a complete and objective information service".

Article 2 reads as follows: "The activities of Agence France-Presse are subjected to the following fundamental obligations:

1: "Agence France-Presse may under no circumstances take account of influences or considerations liable to compromise the exactitude or the objectivity of the information it provides; it may under no circumstances fall under the control, either *de facto* or *de jure*, of any ideological, political or economic grouping.

2: "Agence France-Presse must, to the full extent that its resources permit, develop and enhance its organisation so as to provide French and foreign users with exact, impartial and trustworthy information on a regular and uninterrupted basis.

3: "Agence France-Presse must, to the full extent that its resources permit, ensure the existence of a network of facilities giving it the status of a worldwide information service."

Projects are undertaken without overall coherency, and in recent years many have either failed or gone ahead too late. Some of the decisions taken seem to lack any conceptual underpinning, an example being the transfer of part of the Parisian editorial services into new premises, presented by management as an essential move. Others are poorly thought-out, such as the recently-touted “business to consumer” project.

AFP needs a new start on new foundations. Organisational methods, the worldwide network and its decentralisation, job profiles, the relationship between working languages: all need to be rethought. New evaluation processes, new criteria are needed to bring in a more effective, more professional commitment.

These three ambitions, which I have listed in order of importance and priority, are of course intertwined. Indeed, I am convinced that:

- Making AFP more independent is a necessary condition of its development, but that development will be held back if the company’s methods are open to criticism;
- More professional working practices can only be attained if the methods used are unimpeachable;
- Stronger growth and development will be the inevitable result of better professional practices.

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Beyond those three overall ambitions, if elected I promise to scrupulously respect the following **eight commitments**:

- 1. To reject any changes to AFP’s statutes that do not meet four basic conditions. Such changes must:**
 - boost AFP’s independence, by providing extra guarantees over and above those that already exist;
 - be linked to a genuine company strategy, laid out and validated within the agency and which is not applicable within the framework of the existing statutes.
 - receive prior approval from staff through an internal referendum, as was the case when the current statutes were enacted in 1957.
 - be passed by a very large majority in the French Parliament, approaching the unanimous vote that approved the 1957 statutes.
- 2. To refuse any segmentation of AFP’s activities** between some considered “normal” and others judged to be “missions” of general interest. AFP is in itself a single general-interest mission, and the company has no business embarking on any other activities.
- 3. To demand the drawing-up of a genuine company strategy**, which while catering for new technologies would remain firmly grounded in our **core activity**.
- 4. To work for ethical rules and working practices** within AFP, for more transparency and equity and an end to discrimination between different staff categories such as women and men or people with different labour statuses, etc.
- 5. To demand the creation of a worldwide works committee** structure, with sub-committees in each world region.
- 6. To defend the primacy of text** among AFP’s services and ensure that we retain control over our own **news hierarchy** (which means retaining the notion of a “wire” and the “push” principle).

7. To defend our role as a **gatekeeper**, ie as a **news certifier**. This means boosting the agency's independence and paying great attention to both journalistic and general professional ethics.
8. To defend the culture of our company, including its **symbolic aspects**. This means that the company's headquarters should be reorganised to reflect its core activity of journalism. In other words, the Paris editorial team should once again be reunited in the main building on Place de la Bourse.



I am convinced that AFP is perfectly capable of remaining in the top ranks of the world news industry. But if that is to happen, we have to create new synergies within the company, and above all to stop sowing doubts about our abilities. You can count on me to work tirelessly to that end.

Very best wishes to all,

Samir Douaihy

Journalist on the France desk in Paris
samir.douaihy@afp.com

Nota bene – My candidacy is notably supported by:

- AFP's CGT trade union branches.
- The SUD-AFP trade union.
- The Association to Defend the Independence of AFP (ADIAFP).
- Philippe Thébault, journalists' representative on the AFP board from 1987 to 1999.

I am a founder member of the AFP Society of Journalists (SDJ) and a member of the Association to Defend the Independence of AFP (ADIAFP). Although not a member of any trade union, I consider the unions' role within the agency to be essential, as was shown only recently in the mobilisation against the Hoog-Legendre proposal to change AFP's statutes. If elected, I promise to regularly consult the trade unions. And I also hope to be able to work closely with the non-journalists' representative.

Post scriptum – If you wish to know more about my positions on AFP the following texts, in French, can be downloaded and printed out from these web addresses:

L'AFP n'a pas un problème de financement mais de gouvernance – **March 31, 2010**
http://www.adiafp.org/douaihy_gouvernance_2010

Réforme du Statut de l'AFP : argumentaire contre le projet Hoog-Legendre – **May 26, 2011**
http://www.sos-afp.org/fr/argumentaire_douaihy

Réforme du Statut de l'AFP : réplique à la lettre de M. Hoog – **June 7, 2011**
http://www.sos-afp.org/fr/argumentaire_douaihy

The following text, which I fully agree with, may also be of interest:

ADIAFP : Lettre ouverte aux parlementaires français – **November 16, 2010**
http://www.adiafp.org/lettre_ouverte
