

CHAPTER 10

THE *CANARD PC* ANOMALY: SURVIVING THE DISTRIBUTION CRISIS THANKS TO READER SUPPORT

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Abstract

In 2003, the majority of the team at *Joystick*, one of the leading French video game magazines at the time, left their publisher to launch *Canard PC*, a weekly magazine dedicated to computer titles. Despite a difficult start, *Canard PC* made its mark on the landscape of French video game magazines.

In late 2017, an unprecedented challenge presented itself when distribution company Presstalis, which has a virtual monopoly in France, withheld a quarter of the money it owed its customers, threatening the future of small actors. To recover from its loss, *Canard PC* used an original technique—it made the affair public and launched a participatory fundraising campaign with an alarmist title: “Save *Canard PC*”. It collected more than €210,000 and ensured the magazine's sustainability in the medium term.

We use this case study to question the future of paper magazines and identify some ingredients necessary to their survival. We postulate the longevity of this magazine articulates two elements: the long-term loyalty of a close-knit community attached to a specific editorial identity, and an irreproachable “professional ideology”. We analyze texts that dealt with the Presstalis crisis in order to determine the Reader Model (Eco, 1979). Through this analysis, we aim to make explicit the link between the relationship with the community and editorial autonomy. We will show that this link is based on the communication of the magazine's concrete difficulties and readers' ability to help overcome them. Meta-communication concerning the production of the magazine appears to be essential in making readers aware of the value of what they are paying for in an environment that has been shaken by the digitalization of information.

Keywords: Press magazine; video game press; distribution; community of readers; specialized press.

Introduction

In 2003, the majority of the team at video game magazine *Joystick* left their publisher to launch *Canard PC*, a weekly magazine dedicated to computer games. Despite a difficult start, *Canard PC* made its mark on the landscape of French video game magazines. Recently, the distribution company Presstalis withheld a quarter of the money it owed its customers, including *Canard PC*. This substantial loss threatened small actors' future. In order to recover from its loss, *Canard PC* made the affair public, to raise awareness among its readers, and launched a crowdfunding campaign which collected more than €210,000 and ensured the magazine's sustainability in the medium term.

This paper uses *Canard PC*'s case study to question the future of paper magazines and identify some of the ingredients necessary for their survival. We explain the longevity of this magazine with two elements: the long-term loyalty of a close-knit community and an irreproachable “professional ideology” (Deuze, 2005). In 2017, the magazine decided to communicate with complete transparency about the crisis it had encountered. This transparency largely helped the reader understand the ongoing difficulties faced by *Canard PC*. To understand this approach, we analyzed all the editorials by Presse Non Stop publishing director Ivan Gaudé that dealt with the Presstalis affair. By doing so,

we determine the Reader Model was constructed around how these editorials insist on the dependency of *Canard PC* on its readers. In order to raise awareness of the issues, it appears essential to engage in a meta-communication dimension concerning the production of the magazine. This meta-explanation thus makes the readers of *Canard PC* all the more aware of the value of what they are paying for in an environment that has been shaken by the digitalisation of information (this context has already been widely studied within media studies. See Shapiro, Varian and Mazerolle, 2001; Sonnac, 2009; Charon and Le Floch, 2011).

A word about *Canard PC*

In March 2003, the French subsidiary of British company Future acquired Hachette Digital Presse, which publishes, among others, *Joystick*, one of the most important French video game magazines (Dozo and Krywicki, 2018). For 13 years, *Joystick* had developed a corrosive sense of humor and an impertinent tone, and many of its journalists feared that this new ownership would reduce their freedom. As a result, about 90% of these contributors left the magazine, and four of them (Ivan “Le Fou” Gaudé, Jérôme “Lord Casque Noir” Darnaudet, Michaël “Gana” Sarfati and Olivier “Ackboo” Perron) went on to found their own company, Presse Non Stop,⁶⁴ financed by their redundancy payments, and publish *Canard PC* (whose name is a pun on a French brand of toilet cleaner, “Canard WC”).

Its first issue was published on November 26, 2003, and from the outset, it was determined to stand out from other specialized magazines: its paper is newspaper-like, and that ephemeral nature fits with its weekly publication rhythm. This weekly publication is underlined by the very first editorial as a differentiating tool and a means of providing “fresh news” and “reviews that arrive on time”. This desire to be in sync with the news is motivated by a great ambition: rivaling the immediacy of the Internet. They also vowed to capitalize on the prestige of the “Joystick alumni” who joined the new team (Didier Couly, Laurent “Monsieur Pomme de Terre” Sarfati...). Their style is notably found within the tone of the news, delirious and informal. The “news” dare to talk about subjects outside video games and to be irreverent (by addressing Sony, for example, as “Môssieur Sony Europe”,⁶⁵ an ironic formula for mocking the importance of industry leaders).

Since this first iteration, *Canard PC* has demonstrated the independence it claims, in many textual and graphic forms. Recent examples include the cover of #361, which scribbles over the logo of Activision's video game “Destiny 2” to claim that it is just a “1.5” version, or the announcement of the revival of the Tamagochi by Bandai (“to nobody's pleasure, nobody cares”)⁶⁶ in #369. We can also mention the “preview” of Moto GP 13 which, rather than promoting the upcoming game and participating in its communication, consists of a full page of engine sounds.⁶⁷ This particularly corrosive tone seems even more evident when compared to that of other French media specializing in video games. For example, in #364, *Canard PC* relays the rise in the price of Ark Survival Evolved by stating that its optimization of the game is catastrophic and doubts the developers’ official words,⁶⁸ whereas the site *Jeuxvideo.com* communicates the information without protest or mockery.⁶⁹ Above all, *Canard PC* is one of the only specialist French video games media to have carried out a long investigation of the crunch in the video game industry, cross-referencing more than 150 testimonials about Quantic Dream, Eugen Systems and others companies. Its independence is also illustrated in *Canard PC*'s business model: the magazine has only six different advertisers and less than 15% of its revenue comes from advertising (which is very uncommon, video game press being often mainly financed by advertisements; see Nieborg and Sihvonen, 2009) and 75% of the publishing company Presse Non Stop is owned by its journalists. This desire for independence seems inseparable from the “occupational ideology” (Deuze, 2005) constructed by *Canard PC*'s journalists, who regularly claim the confidence their readers have in them allows them great editorial freedom,⁷⁰ including in terms of editorial forms (the Moto GP 13 Preview mentioned above is just one example among many).

For Ivan Gaudé, co-founder of *Canard PC*, producing an alternative offer goes hand in hand with denouncing the mercantile and ephemeral practices of others,⁷¹ from the point of view of those who have chosen a path presented as economically more risky. By his own admission, pointing fingers at others and bringing to the public's attention what they should consider to be an aberration of the profession is an obligatory step, a stage in setting up an ambitious offer,

not only financed by advertising but also claiming to be worthy of the trust of its readers. The reflexive gesture is at the heart of the differentiation of offers and self-definition. Thus, for example, even when journalists investigated the crunch culture of video game developers as explained above, they published a sidebar questioning their own overtime.⁷² Ivan Gaudé's many public speeches⁷³ are thus an exception in the sub-field of the printed video game press (the French magazine *JV*, for example, is more discreet), and serve to explain the radicality of *Canard PC*'s editorial line (which implies some concessions that must be defended to readers) or, in this case, to inform the public of financial difficulties due to a crisis in the press sector.

Presstalis bankruptcy: the facts

Press distribution in France is a quasi-monopoly situation.⁷⁴ Only two players own 95% of it: Presstalis, which distributes three quarters of French press titles and MLP (Messageries Lyonnaises de Presse), which handles the rest. At the end of 2017, Presstalis was close to filing for bankruptcy, its financial year ending with a loss of 30 million euros, and a debt of 400 million. Back in 1945, MLP was created by publishers that wanted to become independent of Messageries Hachette, which until then had a monopoly on press distribution in the free zone.⁷⁵ In 1990, the MLP ceased to be a subcontractor of Presstalis. The “good health” of MLP is often put forward to argue that the Presstalis crisis is not a sector crisis. According to a survey by Arrêt sur Images,⁷⁶ this positive assessment of MLP could be explained by the fact that they do not deal with daily press but only with magazine press, which reduces costs. Employee salaries are also 30% lower than at Presstalis and, above all, MLP includes “small” publishers on their board of directors, which would allow the voice of actors who are not very visible at Presstalis to be heard.⁷⁷ In short, this discrepancy clearly shows that it is not the general situation of the press (in relative decline) that may have caused such losses for the distribution world, but rather a management problem for Presstalis.

In any event, given the number of press titles that would be impacted by the collapse of Presstalis, the press sector could not afford the bankruptcy of the distributor. In 2012, newspaper publishers were called upon to share in Presstalis' losses by paying back part of their revenue, and the company devise a redundancy plan that would decrease the number of workers from 2,700 to 1,200. In early December 2017, the firm decided to save itself from bankruptcy by withholding 25% of the revenues of each publisher it distributes for two months. Ivan Gaudé (*Canard PC*'s managing editor) confirmed to us that Presstalis finally repaid this amount (without interest) around May 2018. However, as this deduction was not enough to save the distributor, the decision was quickly renewed at the end of the following year and risked turning into a kind of recurring tax on all French press groups: 2.25% for five years for those at Presstalis; 1% for four years for MLP clients.⁷⁸ “We will seize the slightest legal opportunity to stop paying Presstalis. We have already been involved in a number of unsuccessful lawsuits”, says Gaudé. In parallel with this legal battle, on 12 March 2018, *Canard PC* launched an online crowdfunding campaign on the platform Ulule, aimed at “saving” the magazine “from Presstalis' claws”,⁷⁹ with a target of €100,000. Nothing is for sale, their purpose is to collect donations to ensure the magazine's future survival. And yet readers are particularly committed: €210,359 were raised in one month, more than double the amount requested.⁸⁰ We hypothesize that this financial support by the community, quite exceptional considering the difficulties the press has experienced in financing its content since the advent of the digitisation of information (see Charon and Le Floch, 2011: 15; Arrese, 2016: 5; Andreotti, 2016: 250), was made possible by the explanatory editorials regularly published by Ivan Gaudé in the “Au coin du jeu” section of *Canard PC* and the meta-communication it deploys.

Close reading: the “Au coin du jeu” column

“Au coin du jeu” is Ivan Gaudé's personal column. Started in 2010, its purpose is to offer a personal point of view of the economic state of the video game world. Claiming a critical point of view, Gaudé generally deals with video game business models (DLC, subscriptions, lootboxes), the launch of new consoles or the appearance of new services (Stadia, Google's remote gaming platform, or Epic Games Store, Steam's rival store). He also feeds his analyses of the video gaming field with current themes (for example, the question of the international uprising against police violence

has just been addressed in his article “The video game industry facing the Black Lives Matter movement”).⁸¹ Readers of the magazine are therefore used to reading comments that are out of step with the industry, with no jargon, generally sharp and incisive. This is illustrated by the irreverent animal characters in Didier Couly's comic strips, which serve as echo chambers for the text's arguments.

The column is also the place for an analysis of the specialized press and the situation of the magazine itself. In analyzing these themes, Gaudé reveals the behind-the-scenes workings of the magazine's production and the economic constraints with which the publisher has to contend. The Presstalis crisis has therefore been explained in detail in seven texts published between January 2018 and April 2020. These points of view are important for the magazine because, although they are written by Ivan Gaudé, they are, like any text published in the magazine, the responsibility of the editorial team as a whole (Herman and Jufer, 2001). We will supplement the analysis we are proposing with the consideration of other positions, such as tweets or interviews, which, for their part, come from individuals only (for example, Gaudé expresses himself on Twitter in his own name). From this corpus, we will question the editorial staff's strategy of enunciation to make the reader aware of the publisher's cash flow problems, we will propose a rhetorical analysis of these texts and we will examine the effects of this strategy.

Analyzing Gaudé's editorials

On January 10, 2018, in *Canard PC* #373, Ivan Gaudé expresses himself in “Au Coin du Jeu” about the 25% withholding tax on revenues claimed by Presstalis. Although there are several press articles that have already reported on these facts before,⁸² this first text by Gaudé immediately sets up two particularities that distinguish this article from the others.

First, the status of the enunciator (Charaudeau and Maingueneau, 2002). Most of the articles recounting Presstalis' difficulties are written by journalists who investigated the situation. They have sought to cross-check the information and gather both parties' points of view of. On the contrary, Ivan Gaudé speaks directly as a press manager, closely concerned by the events. He admits having an unequivocal point of view (he speaks in the first person plural) and in this sense uses terms evoking injustice to refer to the withholding of income by Presstalis (“confiscation”, “deprived overnight”, “weak or unenforceable legal remedies”, “hold-up”, etc.).

The second peculiarity stems from the first: where the articles in the daily national newspapers speak of consequences affecting “the press sector” as a whole (“a decision that threatens the whole sector” in *Libération*, “the sector is in a cold sweat” in *Le Monde*), Gaudé creates from the outset an opposition between the situation of the “small publishers” (he includes himself among them) and those publishing the major newspapers. Unlike the “giants of the press”, the company Presse Non Stop, which publishes *Canard PC*, would rely on its readers to survive, and explicitly appeals to them for help. Since then, Gaudé has continued to periodically remind people of this opposition, most recently on Twitter:⁸³

“One thing is already certain: our future cannot be written without the help of our readers. Read and buy our newspapers; spread the desire for a quality independent press; and stay tuned: we will soon be calling on you to help us reinvent magazines and a press group capable of surviving the coming crisis”.⁸⁴

This quotation closes the article, which thus sounds like an unstoppable demonstration, with the presentation of the facts, their consequences and their solution, presented as indispensable. Such a structure, coupled with its publishing context,⁸⁵ builds a Model Reader (Eco, 1979) that is both close to the magazine and wishing for an independent and self-financed press.

Whether they set out the twists and turns of the affair in a soap opera style⁸⁶ or intend to accompany the participatory fundraising campaign launched in March 2018, the following articles by Gaudé generally use the same

structure. They begin by explaining clearly the way print press distribution works, based on actual numbers (margins of press publishers, budgetary constraints...). The main purpose of these inaugural elements is to demonstrate the budgetary impasse in which *Canard PC* finds itself, and thus to strengthen the foretold drama that follows them. Whereas editorials are traditionally of the commentary type, embodying “the article of opinion par excellence” (Lagardette, 1994: 82), Gaudé’s texts produce an anticipation that systematically tightens, within the concluding paragraphs, around *Canard PC* and his potential doomed fate. This is not to formulate a general opinion on societal considerations, but rather to affirm the self-focused urgency of the situation, which is echoed in the “incentive headlines” (Ringoot, 2014: 89) of the articles (“Whether Presstalis is saved or liquidated, it is *Canard PC* that will sink”). Thus, the end of the text defuses the importance of the framing elements raised earlier to emphasize the impasse in which the journal finds itself:

“Basically, it doesn't matter to us: currently, *Canard PC* can't afford to survive in either of these two situations. This was not at all what we dreamed of when we were preparing our new formula, but in order to survive in 2018 by continuing to exist on paper, we're going to have to make a brutal transformation of the magazine and the way it works very quickly. To do so, we have no choice but to appeal to the support of all those who want to be able to continue to read us, during a participatory fundraising campaign in the form of support subscriptions”.⁸⁷

The Model Reader built by these editorials is ultimately only interested in the situation of the independent press because it sheds light on the troubles experienced by *Canard PC* in particular. The only purpose of the explanatory rhetoric deployed is to make this crisis tangible and to support Gaudé’s anticipations, continuing to assert that reader support is the only way out for the magazine. Contrary to the majority of editorials, which constitute “first and foremost a privileged position [...] from which power is recognized” (Herman and Jufer, 2001), the several *Au Coin du Jeu* about Presstalis place *Canard PC* in a position of weakness, at the mercy of this power of which it sees itself dispossessed and thus appears as the victim, unless its readers lend it a hand. In short, this rhetorical device constitutes an obvious channel of announcing participatory financing as the only possible salvation.

Through the accompanying speech of this participatory fundraising campaign, *Canard PC* is finally only seeking to reconvene the promise of independence and distanciation towards an environment pointed out as harmful. Just as it has angered most advertisers, just as it is blacklisted by several publishers because of its indocility, *Canard PC* assures the readership that it will prolong its desire for autonomy, this time seeking to separate itself from a major authority in the press sphere. Paradoxically, once the campaign objective has been reached (less than a week after its launch), the company Presse Non-Stop, which will gladly remain small, takes the opportunity to change its basic objective and offers donors to help it grow:

“We believe in paid press, and we are wary of dependence on advertising. For 15 years, with *Canard PC* and then *Canard PC Hardware*, we have already been a reference for paid and independent information in the fields of video games and hardware. We want to extend our activity to offer the same expertise and requirements in the field of current digital science, technology and culture. Bringing *Humanoid* to life would allow us to cover the entire world of technology: from the video game industry to the broader digital culture, including all the issues related to the hardware itself”.⁸⁸

Thus, as soon as this providential solution is announced, the deleterious lexical field used to qualify the situation of Presstalis (sometimes dark: “To bail out this zombie society whose deficits are abyssal”; sometimes martial: “These two measures, brutal and unjust, are largely sufficient to put us in great difficulty”)⁸⁹ leaves its place to that of rebirth (“a third life”, as stated on Ulule). The promises of extending the substance and improving the form are coupled with the inclusion of the readership in a common desire to “bounce back” for “making together an even better and more ambitious *Canard PC*”,⁹⁰ as if the community was itself a shareholder of Press Non Stop. The editorial introducing

the campaign presents some worrying news (a less regular publication of the magazine and the need to collect a minimum of €100,000 in donations) in a resolutely positive vein:

“The spirit won't change, but you'll get a thicker, nicer magazine, with a nice square, stiff back instead of two staples. The price will increase (but will remain less than two issues added together) and by bringing together occasional readers spread over several issues in a single issue per month, the magazine will be more economically sound”.⁹¹

That this ambitious and partially contradictory proposal was particularly well received by readers (the participatory fundraising campaign raised more than double the initial objective) can be explained in our opinion by the importance of the meta-communicational dimension of *Canard PC*, present both in the editorials analyzed and within the journal, in a more global way.

The meta-communication dimension and the building of a community

Communicating the practice of journalism in all its dimensions within a magazine to its readers (or what we can call meta-communication) was written into the DNA of *Canard PC* from the outset. This constant preoccupation has become a trademark, from the almost legendary foundation for the *Canard PC* community to the recent events related to COVID-19 and the current distribution difficulties, to which we will return below. The ultimate goal of this transparency is to create and maintain a strong bond with the community of readers.

From the very beginning, the magazine has worked to strengthen ties with its community of readers. Thus, one of the ideas behind the creation of *Canard PC* was the certainty that *Joystick* readers would follow the journalists they used to read. The founders postulated a strong link with their readership, to the point of committing all their savings on it.

The staging of the life of the editorial staff also contributed to this certainty: it is above all a trope of the French-speaking video game magazines of the 1990s, when the profession of video game tester was something the young teenage readership fantasized about. It was therefore common to find a “who’s who” or portrait gallery of the journalists (called “trombinoscopes” in French). But this legacy is much more subtly staged here: Didier Couly's comic strips are part of it, but also the intertextuality between articles, the references to other editors' opinions in the test’s introductory paragraph, up to the construction by accumulation of real “characters” (in the sense of La Bruyère’s “caractères”) defining each journalist. These accumulated means create a lively editorial style which the reader has the impression of observing on a daily basis. One of the running gags of this editorial life, at the beginning of the magazine, was the alleged presence of a webcam filming the editorial staff night and day. Its existence was debated at length on the magazine's forum: insiders claimed to know the URL of this webcam, which they hid from newcomers, whereas it was a hoax shared by former readers.

The forum is another example of the organic development of the link between journalists and the community of readers. *Canard PC* initially had a difficult relationship with the web: built as a paper-only magazine when all its competitors were developing web versions, *Canard PC* used to have a forum as its only web offering. However, thanks to this online discussion space, its community of readers got to know each other better, to the point that the forum became an important place of sociability, sometimes leading to IRL meetings. The editors themselves took part in the forum and their presence through messages was highly appreciated by the readers. Various initiatives were launched on the forum (such as the offer of a watch in the magazine's colors), which further strengthened the feeling of belonging to a community of readers. Video games are obviously not neglected: servers dedicated to certain multiplayer games exist, which are visited by both readers and members of the editorial staff alike.

However, there is one issue that raises the question: how to manage the identity of journalists? Traditionally,

French-speaking journalists working in the video game press use a pseudonym. Moreover, since the life of the editorial staff was represented in comic strips in the magazine and the editorial staff's webcam was only a hoax, few readers knew the faces of the journalists. A first breach in this policy was opened by the creation of a critical program in collaboration with *Arrêt sur images*, a pure video player specializing in media analysis in the form of on-set debates. *Canard PC* took part in twelve programmes with *Arrêt sur images*, followed by features in the magazine. The first show dealt with the ethics of the video game journalist. The stance that has always been adopted by *Canard PC* and which was explained during this program nourished the confidence of readers: it emphasized an uncompromising independence from game publishers which allowed them to present themselves as defenders of readers who consume video games.

After this first television experience, the need for a regular video program broadcast on the Internet became more and more important. After an experiment with the Internet TV channel O'Gaming, which initially specialized in e-sport, the format chosen by *Canard PC* is live streams on Twitch.⁹² This choice of format has a big advantage: the possible live interaction with the viewers via the chat panel of the show.

Each initiative would undoubtedly need to be detailed in order to better understand it and identify its specificities. Nevertheless, a common line can already be drawn. These actions are aimed at the same goal: to unite the community behind the magazine, whose identity is embodied in the privileged communication that each reader maintains with their paper friends and, more broadly, with the rest of the community of readers. These strong links should be reconsidered in the sense of Granovetter (1973) in a context of virtual community, following on from Antonio Casilli's work on *Les liaisons numériques* (2010).

This context of strong relationships allows for a transfer of interest: readers, by saving *Canard PC* during the distribution crisis, are not only making a philanthropic gesture in favour of a magazine they appreciate; they are also helping a community of which they are a part and which also defines them. You could almost say that they are helping friends in trouble...

For their part, the staff were expected to be fully transparent: during the crowdfunding campaign, it was compulsory for the magazine to be as clear as possible about the use of the funds collected but also about justifying the need to call on readers' contributions. To achieve this, a great deal of explanatory and educational work had to be carried out by the editorial staff, and in particular by the person within the editorial staff who embodied the figure of the financial manager and chief economist, namely Ivan Gaudé. By analyzing both his positions and the context of those positions, we hope to have contributed to the understanding of this mechanism for saving a magazine by its readers.

Conclusion

It seems important to specify that this campaign was not *Canard PC*'s first crowdfunding experience. In June 2016, the magazine had already raised €259,137⁹³ on Kickstarter to launch its online version, which allowed all its articles to be previewed online. Even if, in this case, something was up for sale (subscription pre-orders for the future site), many readers were already announcing that they were contributing to the campaign in order to support the magazine rather than out of interest in the product itself, without feeling a real attraction for the product obtained in return.⁹⁴ Seeing that a full support crowdfunding campaign launched just a year and a half later raised almost the same amount again confirms the immense disinterested and unconditional support that the magazine community is willing to give.

In fact, despite *Canard PC*'s continuous juridic struggle,⁹⁵ readership's support may be important a third time, regarding recent events: on 15th May 2020, the Paris Commercial Court placed Presstalis, which handles 70% of the distribution of the printed press, under court-ordered receivership with continuation of activity, i.e. a two months' respite. However, its regional subsidiaries, SAD and Soprocom, which employ just over 500 people, were not given this option: they were immediately liquidated by the judges. "After weeks of discussions, the newspapers and

magazines were unable to agree on a joint takeover of Presstalis. In the end, the dailies decided, on their own, to propose a rescue plan to the Commercial Court on Tuesday, May 12, at 10 a.m.,” says an article in *Le Monde*.⁹⁶ “On the other hand, none of the provincial custodians would be taken over, a fact that was confirmed by the Commercial Court, which ordered the liquidation of the regional subsidiaries. As a result of this partial liquidation, one third of France (the regions of Lyon, Rhône-Alpes, South-East...) no longer receives newspapers—including the double issue 405-406 of *Canard PC*, whose publisher was forced to switch to mail order.”⁹⁷

The Presstalis saga therefore seems to be set to continue well into the future. In addition, the crisis further exacerbates those problems linked to the containment, closure of printers, distribution and newsstand sales channels in March, April and May. Gaudé is well aware of the looming difficulties. As the good teacher he is, he has already begun to explain the economic stakes of the magazine's survival to the readership: his May column deals with subsidies and possible aid for the press. Who knows? Perhaps he is preparing the ground for a third crowdfunding...

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