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MEDIA: PRESS FREEDOM IN TAHITI

The editor of one of the best news and cultural magazines of the South Pacific, *Tahiti-Pacifique*, tells of the 18-month "freeze-out" of his publication by the Flosse Government in French Polynesia and how his editorial team finally came in from the cold.

By **ALEX DU PREL**

ON FEBRUARY 10, 1997, Tahitian President Gaston Flosse had me, as the editor of *Tahiti-Pacifique Magazine*, physically evicted by presidency guards from a press conference and gave orders to refuse my presence during other Government media conferences from that time on.

The eviction took place in the presence of journalists of both [Tahiti](#) daily newspapers, the RFO radio and television station and the correspondent of the Agence France-Presse wire service. None of them reported the event.

A week later, a journalist from one of the Tahiti dailies apologised for not reporting the incident, explaining: "As you know, there was no sense writing it, they would not have published it."

In the two months following my eviction, all efforts made by me as editor of *Tahiti-Pacifique* to try to "smooth out" the "misunderstanding" in a "Pacific way" were unfruitful.



Tahiti-Pacifique editor Alex du Prel.

Thus from February 10, 1997, until August 19, 1998 - a period exceeding 18 months - the only media accepted to press conferences held by the President of Tahiti or ministers of his Government were the two daily newspapers, the radio stations and TV stations of the French State-owned RFO, Radio 1 and some political FM "propaganda" stations, all known to only relay mostly news favourable to Flosse's Government and the majority political party.

The press service of the presidency, which centralises all media notification and information, was forbidden to give any information whatever to *Tahiti-Pacifique* and Radio Tefana, the political radio station financed by the independantiste party FLP.

It seems that a feature article published in the French *Evenement du Jeudi* magazine which denounced the control of the local media by the presidency of Tahiti - an article written by a journalist with no ties to *Tahiti-Pacifique*, induced a reaction which led to this breach of usual democratic traditions.

This is only one of many recent incidents concerning freedom of the press in Tahiti. The other are :

- Radio Te Reo O Tefana, the radio station of the city of Faa'a (mayor: Oscar Temaru, independence party leader) has been forbidden access to Flosse's press conferences since 1995.
- On March 25, 1997, the French administrative court of Papeete declared void the 1996 territorial elections in the Leeward and Marquesan Islands districts, putting in jeopardy the seats of 13 out of 42 territorial councilmen.

One of the major reasons given by the judges was that "Mr Flosse's Government and political party had five times more speaking time than the Opposition parties during the RFO news broadcasts in the four months period prior to the elections", thus confirming the "political fidelity" to Flosse given by the State-owned public service radio and TV station.

- On April 17, 1997, some 40 members of the OTAHI labour union staged a public demonstration and a sit-in in front of the RFO offices in Papeete, a first ever. This was done to protest against the refusal of RFO to let them explain on the air the reasons of the "citizen's strike" of public servants, while the Government apparently had unlimited air time to explain its point of view in the social conflict.
- During the second half of July 1997, the Government lawyer introduced three court cases against *Tahiti-Pacifique* - two for "defamation", one for "calumnious defamation" after the publication of an article exposing the unexplained doubling of the cost of construction in public housing. *Tahiti-Pacifique* was cleared in two cases and, strangely, condemned to only publish a court decision in the third case, with no fine or anything else.

People close to the Government admitted these briefs were filed in court to try to engage *Tahiti-Pacifique* into heavy legal costs. To avoid this, I as the editor handled my own legal defence, which is allowed under French law.

- At the end of September 1997, Peter Hasselroth, a Swedish journalist, was also evicted from a presidential press conference. The explanation given was: "The President does not want any European journalists". Hasselroth declared he would file a complaint with the European Court of Justice.

- In November 1997, *Tahiti-Pacifique* received a fax invitation to a press conference given by the Minister of Post and Telecoms. A few hours later, a panicked Government clerk called the news room and explained "the fax is an error, please do not come or I lose my job".
- Since August 1996, orders have been given in the newsroom of RFO, the Government TV and radio, that "the names 'Tahiti-Pacifique' and 'du Prel' are forbidden to be pronounced on the air".

In November 1997, Jean-Marie Cavada, president of RFO in Paris, visited Tahiti. He cancelled that order and Tahiti-Pacifique was again shown on TV when published.

This lasted two months, and then RFO radio and TV censorship was as tight as before.

The appointment of a new editor-in-chief of the RFO newsroom in May 1998 has since restored a more balanced news coverage and ended the boycott of *Tahiti-Pacifique*.

- In February 1998, some local businessmen who buy regular advertisement space in *Tahiti-Pacifique* got a letter from the Government "suggesting" them not to do so any more. Others have been approached verbally.

Beginning in March 1998, a Government adviser confirmed the existence of such a "pressure" campaign to the the person in charge of advertising for *Tahiti-Pacifique*.

- In March 1998, even though all of the usual ten "friendly" journalists accepted at Flosse's conferences are known to everyone, security tightened; these journalists had their identity cards checked twice, and since April, have also had to wear badges.

The daily papers published small articles expressing their astonishment to see such tight security measures on a small island, as the media community is very small where everyone is well known.

- On May 6, 1998, Daniel Sparza, director of communication of the Presidency of Tahiti, was fired and replaced by Marc Helias. Since that date, the extravagant security measures have been abolished.
- On August 19, 1998, Marc Helias called me to advise me that as of this date I was again admitted to assist all presidential and Government press conferences. No explanation for the 18-month boycott was given.

But the journalists of Radio Tefana are still forbidden access to these conferences. They have filed two motions in the civil and administrative courts, one for damages, the other for non respect of media liberties as specified under the French Constitution.

Tahiti-Pacifique, a monthly news magazine published since 1991 has never printed an article or a sentence which might have been considered insulting or demeaning to the Presidency, President Flosse or his function.

It has only at times published news features analysing, sometimes critically, political and economical decisions taken by the Government in documented and verified articles, which is the right and duty of any independent news media.

- *Alex du Prel is editor and publisher of Tahiti-Pacifique Magazine. Website:*
<http://www.tahitiweb.com/f/info/index.html>

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