

The Co-operative Movement and its Press

A Report from France

by

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In 1975, an original experiment saw the light of day in France: the newspapers and magazines with a national distribution formed a working group. The Editors-in-Chief, by meeting together regularly, have thus learnt how to get to know each other, to compare their problems and help each other.

They began by setting up a Directory which states the current position of their strengths and weaknesses. In comparison with the great trusts of the capitalist press, the weaknesses are considerable. In comparison with what the political parties, the syndicates and "disinterested" associations have achieved, one can speak without exaggeration of the strength of the co-operative press.

The list which we publish shows that each form of co-operative has its press organ or organs whose importance nearly corresponds to the economic importance and vitality (or lack of vitality) of the Co-operatives. /See list below "Press with National Distribution" ./

Three Observations

We shall make three observations with regard to this list:-

1. The magazine Amis-Coop /Co-op Friends/* is one of the rare scholarly co-operatives' magazines, perhaps the only one existing in the world. Produced with modest means, it yet achieves a quality comparable to the best magazines for young people. Its originality stems mainly from the fact that it is produced in great part by the young readers (8 to 16 years old) who do the reporting, the investigations and even the photos.
2. La Press Agricole /The Agricultural Press/ mentioned in the list does not of itself give an exact idea of the sources of information at the disposal of the agricultural co-operatives; even if the latter, which are numerous and powerful, have not any very important press organs, they find outlets very widely, on the contrary, in all sorts of big provincial newspapers or professional or friendly society magazines in which they have whole pages and regular columns at their disposal.
3. The list also includes the titles of the Presse Mutualiste which participates in the "working group". The "Friendly Society" is highly developed in France; historically it preceded social insurances. Co-operators look upon the mutualists as "cousins". Along with them and with all those who direct "disinterested" undertakings (holiday homes, leisure activities, cultural centres) and along with municipalities and enterprises in the public sector, they constitute the "non-capitalist" sectors of the economy and it is in their interest to group together again. Towards this plan for the press,

* The words in square brackets throughout are editorial additions.

it is the aim of several attempts to regroup all the newspapers of this so-called "social" sector into associations, in order to obtain from the State laws which compensate for its weakness in the face of the big capitalist press enterprises.

Press with National Distribution

A list of the French co-operative and mutualist press in 1976 with a national distribution is:-

Amis-Coop

Monthly magazine, 121,000 copies, organ of the young student co-operators.

Bulletin d'Information du Laboratoire Coopératif /Information Bulletin of the Co-operative Laboratory/

comes out every 2 months, 14,500 copies,
published by the Co-operative Laboratory.

Bulletin d'Information de la Mutualité Agricole /Information Bulletin of the Agricultural Mutuality/

Monthly, 85,000 copies for the local officials,
the staff and personnel of the Agricultural
Mutuality /Mutual Benefit Society/.

Les Cahiers du Crédit Mutuel /Mutual Credit Notebooks/

appears 5 times per year, 10,500 copies.

Cahiers de Documentation Coopérative /Co-operative Documentation Notebooks/

three-monthly, 350 copies, bibliographies.

Chantiers Coopératifs /Co-operative Workshops/

Monthly, 8,000 copies for technicians of co-operatives in building and public works.

Cités Coop /Co-operative Cities - or Housing Estates/

three-monthly, 6,000 copies for activists and technicians of housing co-operatives which are not H.L.M.* (see Coop Habitat, below).

Le Coopérateur de France /The French Co-operator/

Once a fortnight, 1,200,000 copies - consumer Co-operatives.

Coopération Agricole

technical monthly for officials and staff of agricultural co-operatives.

Coopération Consommation Distribution

monthly, 3,000 copies, technical studies.

La Coopération de Production

monthly, 13,500 copies, organ of the Confederation of co-operatives of production workers.

Coop Habitat

4 times per year, 5,000 copies, for members of co-operative societies for moderately-rented dwellings (H.L.M.)

/*Note: H.L.M. have some correspondence with British Council houses: the initials stand for dwellings at moderate rents./

Informations Coopératives

monthly, 4,000 copies, edited by the national co-operative grouping to give information about all the forms of co-operatives (inter-co-operation).

Liaisons Coopératives

monthly, 12,000 copies for activists of the consumer co-operatives.

Objectif et Actions Mutualistes /Mutualist Aim and Actions/
monthly (150,000) and three-monthly (400,000).

Révue des Etudes Coopératives /Periodical of Co-operative Studies/
4 times per year, 1,300 copies. Periodical of ideas and research, for university personnel and specialists.

Révue de la Mutualité /Mutuality Magazine/

3-monthly, 15,000 copies.

Union Agriculture

monthly, 2,000 copies.

In Consumer Co-operation

In this list, it appears that the press of the consumers' co-operatives is more developed and more structured than the others. It is the case in numerous countries that is explained by the very nature of these co-operatives which include a large number of members all having the same common factor: to be a consumer, to buy in the same shop, to benefit

from the same advantages. That is also explained by the indispensable need to inform members what is sold in the shops, at what price, and what are the new lines and the publicity.

It is in the interest of this consumer co-operative press to be at the same time a popular, "militant" and technical press: i.e.,

Popular, through the Coopérateur de France which reaches more than a million families every fortnight.

"Militant", through Liaisons Coopératives which appeals every month to the "activists" who are trying to uphold co-operative democracy and educate the co-operative masses.

Technical, through the periodical Coopération Consommation Distribution, which studies the problems of trade with a certain perspective and is aimed at an élite of readers.

One must take care not to forget the Information Bulletin of the Co-operative Laboratory founded thanks to the help of consumer co-operatives, but independent of them, and which broadcasts the workings of this Laboratory.

With these four publications, the Consumer Co-operative Movement covers the whole field which is appropriate to it and overflows from it quite widely.

Thus Coopération Consommation Distribution has ambitions to be recognized as a quality periodical by the personnel and technicians of commerce and by teachers who are becoming more and more interested in the subjects which revolve around consumption and who are entrusted with teaching them.

Thus the Bulletin of the Co-operative Laboratory is directed at the same teachers and also at men of science, doctors, activists of consumer associations, the general press.

In contrast, the other two publications are above all for "internal consumption". Their essential pre-occupation is to build real supporters and active co-operators out of people who at first are only "purchasers" like everybody else.

I shall not linger over the problem of the co-operative activist nor over the difficulty of building any. All political organizations, syndical, cultural or spiritual, experience the same difficulty, but fortunately for them they have at their disposal motivations which are more dramatic, more topical, based on more urgent needs. The co-operative ideology and co-operative economic solutions are not exciting at first approach and they compel co-operative journalists to deploy more ingeniousness than others.

Coopérateur de France

Without lingering over this point which would require too much development, it seems to me more instructive to study the case of the Coopérateur de France. It can be said to condense in itself all the problems and ambiguities of the co-operative press. Let us briefly recall what it is, where its financial resources come from and how it functions.

It was created in 1928 by the National Federation of Consumer Co-operatives. It succeeded the Action Coopérative which itself had taken over in 1917 from the newspaper "Les Coopérateurs Français" which already existed in the 19th century. Its rise in the years 1945 - 1970 was due above all to its "regionalism" - I

mean, to the fact that the great regional co-operative societies decided in turn to distribute it among their members. Indeed they had understood that it was an incomparable tool with which to advance their business figures. Each society had 2 or 3 or 4 pages at its disposal according to its needs. Thus the Coopérateur de France has had almost 40 regional editions. Concentration has lowered this number to 20. But it remains a very provincial, very "regionalized" newspaper.

For a long time it was financed by subsidies. The price of the annual subscription was held by a subsidy from each co-operative society and each society paid over to the Federation the sum corresponding to the number of copies addressed to its supporters. This automatic system of refund (or a club subscription) is now illegal in France. And each co-operative reader must voluntarily pay the amount of his own subscription. Hence an important loss of subscribers. But in this way one arrives at a greater reality. The readers who remain are true readers.

Question of Advertising

The other source of finance is advertising: internal (co-operative) and external (capitalist). It is evident that a co-operative newspaper cannot do without advertising matter. First because it exists to make know the CO-OP products. Next because without advertising the price of the newspaper would become prohibitive.

But it is none the less evident that the introduction of advertising creates a prime ambiguity. Indeed, it is not possible in France to do only CO-OP advertising; for that would be to acknowledge that the newspaper is the mouthpiece of a commercial undertaking and is therefore only a "house-organ", that is

to say an "advertising" newspaper, not a "real" newspaper. And it would be bereft of all the financial advantages accorded to the "real" newspapers, which are considerable.

Therefore one must accept capitalist advertising, with all the uncertainties and dangers that it implies. Consumer periodicals, such as 50 Millions or "Que Choisir", which have no advertising, have therefore their chance to say that the Coopérateur de France has its hands tied, and doubly so:

- by the advertisers
- by the Co-operative Movement.

First by the advertisers? Can a newspaper which produces an advertisement guarantee that it is true and honest? In numerous cases, it is difficult, if not impossible. How can one test each of the products or services offered? Now it is through the channels of publicity that charlatans and frauds try to reach clients. How can they be detected?

It is a serious objection. It must be admitted that it is an uncomfortable and even contradictory situation in which the acceptance of advertising is forced upon a newspaper which calls itself "defender of Consumers". We have to live with this essential contradiction: by exercising daily vigilance, by refusing advertisements which seem to us to be untruthful or suspect, by intervening in advertising agencies to make them modify certain texts or pictures, by proving that one may criticise a product or a service which is lauded in the advertising of the same paper, by not accepting, in any circumstances, pressure on the part of the advertisers on the articles in the newspaper.

All this does not prevent errors or omissions. Good advertising exists, but the dividing line between the good and the bad is more difficult to discover than the Loch Ness monster.

Second constraint - by the Co-operative Movement - on the periodicals of consumers' associations with which one includes a more general constraint addressed to the co-operative system itself? The "Coopérateur de France", like any other co-operative publication besides, has its hands bound by the co-operative undertakings themselves. It cannot lead an independent life like other newspapers (which also, nevertheless, have masters to serve), it cannot express different opinions, or even less publish unfavourable information. Thus it reflects exactly the ambiguity of the co-operative system itself. It publishes general points of view which implicate present-day society and sketch the future picture of "The Co-operative Republic" and, at the same time, it respects the behaviour of the co-operatives which live in the capitalist world, do business with capitalist suppliers, play the rules of the capitalist game, the prizes game, the exchange game and the money game.

Scope for Manoeuvre of Co-operative Press

Therefore the scope for manoeuvre of a paper like the "Coopérateur de France" is a narrow one. Its politics can only be those of the Movement of which it is the banner. It has no positions of its own. In their hearts the journalists and the Editor-in-Chief can therefore wish for only one thing, that is that the officials of the co-operative societies themselves should possess a margin of manoeuvre broad enough to apply great principles in reality, and that the mass of co-operators remains convinced enough to bring to these officials enough political and economic weight to constrain the great wild beasts of commerce, industry

and finance, which are always ready to swallow in one mouthful the co-operative patrimoney accumulated through more than a hundred years of toil and faithfulness.

The scope for manoeuvre of the consumers' co-operative newspaper nevertheless remains broad enough to interest journalists of a liberal mind. Objective information is a formidable weapon and nothing prevents a co-operative newspaper from going as far as possible on economic problems such as multinationals, prices, speculation, or from denouncing frauds, injustices, the sores of a so-called liberal society which is nothing but a society of violence. Nothing prevents it from setting up inquiries into consumer products and services which urge consumers to be more demanding with regard to the co-operative societies themselves.

It does not depend on the paper that these societies should be the true modern vanguard of the militant consumers, but it must make a contribution towards awakening and provoking the conscience of the best of its readers, so that they may, in their turn, push the Co-operative Movement on to become again that vanguard which it was at the beginning of this century.

This is not an easy task in the current climate of ultra-rivalry. Commerce has become a battlefield between giants, and the co-operatives, forced to reassemble all their resources in order to survive, no longer have the same affluence to finance education and the press. While dreaming of owning publishing firms, television networks, radio stations, important information magazines, which would counterbalance the mass media which are almost entirely in their adversaries' hands, they have to be content with doing the impossible to keep afloat the newspapers which they own. Did not Roger Kerinec and Nils Thedin declare in their report to the Congress of the International Co-operative

Alliance at Hamburg (1969): "There is no co-operative democracy without a co-operative press"? According to this principle, it is easy to judge where this democracy is alive and where it has died, on condition, of course, that in existing newspapers the editing applies the information as far as possible in two directions, from the summits (managers) to the base and from the base (readers) to the summits. Readers' letters have a considerable importance since they express the reactions of this base, and the greatest account must be taken of them, either in replying to them or in publishing them.

Exercising an External Influence?

It is another question to know whether this press has an external influence or not, whether other newspapers value it or not. I have already mentioned the magazine Coopération Consommation Distribution and the Bulletin d'Information du Laboratoire Coopératif, both dependent upon partly non-co-operative publics.

On the contrary, a magazine like the Coopérateur de France has only 3 or 4 thousand non-co-operative regular readers. Only the editorials and articles defining the official positions of the Co-operative Movement or stirring up a scandal or giving unpublished information are taken up by the "great press". Journalists who specialise in the problems of consumption and commerce do not need it, they are informed directly by the Public Relations service of the Co-operative Movement, which maintains a permanent contact with them.

It is through them especially, through press conferences, and through regional and local manifestations like the Consumers' Salons, not forgetting the Co-operative publicity campaigns, that non-co-operative opinion can be touched.

The ambition of the Coopérateur de France was only, and still is, to get itself recognized as a real newspaper by other newspapers and as a real newspaper in defence of consumers by the consumers' periodicals and not as the simple publicity paper of a commercial enterprise, which would remove all its credibility. It does seem that it has succeeded in avoiding such a danger. It is acknowledged and recognized as a true newspaper and as a consumers' newspaper.

For that it was necessary to call upon the services of professional journalists; it was necessary to show a great regard for objectivity and to give information drawn from the best spring, without, at the same time, harming the business figures of the Co-operative Societies. It was necessary to continue to propose changing society without being accused of making partisan politics at the same time.

To say that the co-operative press lives on "a razor's edge" or, in other words, in the midst of contradictions, is to state a truth of blinding obviousness. But it is also the destiny and pride of the co-operative enterprise. The most astonishing thing in this case is to succeed in surviving in spite of everything.