



**André Schiffrin**

## Controlling words

Press and publishing concentration in France is extraordinarily high. Allegedly, French ownership sees off foreign competition; in fact, the owning corporations are international. Media monopolization is not only a French issue, however: throughout Europe and the US, profitability has become the bottom line. So why is there barely any protest from within the sector itself?

There are, I believe, two basic questions that, as publishers, we have to ask ourselves. First, why is there, in France, such a high degree of concentration in the press, in publishing and in the media? In my view, this is something quite unprecedented, especially since it was allowed to happen without any political protest, without any comment from authors and even without any reaction from the press itself. What I have seen happening in recent years in the course of writing my two books on controlling words was the consolidation of publishing houses. For example, Editis was almost bought by Hachette, which would have given one publishing house a two-thirds share of the French publishing sector. In other words, 90 per cent control of the publication of books. This operation was supported by Jacques Chirac but Brussels prevented it going ahead. Despite everything, a major part of Editis did end up being acquired by Hachette.

Secondly, when *Le Figaro* was bought by Dassault (an aircraft manufacturer — ed.), which did not even bother to conceal what it was doing, the government let it go ahead. Aside from a few articles in *Le Monde*, and some statements by the journalists' union, there were no reactions. At the present time in France, 70 per cent of the press and book publishing is under the control of groups that are basically arms manufacturers. Two-thirds of French publishing was, for a short time but with the support of the president, in the hands of Hachette-Lagardère. The pretext was that French culture made it a special case. This was simply camouflage: Lagardère is not French; 51 per cent of Lagardère shares are foreign-owned, as is quite usual for an international group. In a globalised world there are no longer any national companies. Hachette is just as much a major company in Poland, Britain, Spain and eastern Europe as it is in France. I have recently given lectures in Budapest and Barcelona. In both cities, in the underground, in the stations, you are aware of the presence of Hachette, just as you are everywhere in France. As I am sure you know, Hachette managed to gain its monopoly in stations by signing an agreement with Napoleon III's police. In exchange, Hachette was to play the part of guardian of public decency. During the same period, it was this publishing house that refused to publish Renan's *La Vie de Jésus* in 1863, or, on another level, libertine novels or other assaults on French public modesty. It is not difficult to conclude that, right from the start, the publishing network was linked to a network of censorship that still exists. In Britain, W. H. Smith played the same role. It too was a publishing network located in stations and working under a system of self-censorship. W. H. Smith refused to sell

newspapers that it considered too subversive, such as *Le Canard enchaîné* (Satirical newspaper established in 1915 — ed.). Even though the structures on which censorship is based were set up in the nineteenth century, they still remain today in twenty-first century France.

However, in the meantime, things have changed dramatically in the world of publishing. Until recently, you could read Balzac's *Les Illusions perdues* and gain a reasonably accurate picture of French publishing and the press. Things had not changed all that much since Balzac's time. It was still relatively traditional because it was so diverse. However, in recent years, huge conglomerates have formed in France, just as they have elsewhere, in Germany, America or Britain. They have been able to buy up a large proportion of the publishing industry in each of these countries. The average return in these countries was two to three per cent per annum. The same figure everywhere. It did not matter whether you were talking about more commercial houses or publishers of more intellectual works; you still found the same figures time after time. According to a recent survey by *Le Monde*, the profits made by Seuil and Gallimard amounted to three to four per cent per annum. I have been informed that, for Fayard too, profits did not rise above three per cent per annum.

Following the takeover by major groups in all these countries, things underwent a fundamental change. The simple reason is that they are not only publishers but also media conglomerates. They own the means of distribution as well as all the present-day mass media which are, in almost all countries, highly profitable. To give you some kind of yardstick, in America, a newspaper makes, on average, a profit of 26 per cent on sales. Television earns huge sums of money, in France as it does elsewhere, and the reason for that is very simple: almost every medium makes its money through advertising. It is not the fact that someone buys the newspaper that makes the newspaper financially viable. *Le Monde*, which is practically bankrupt, is a good example. *Le Figaro*, on the other hand, has more advertising and more readers and is doing very nicely. To give you some idea of the gravity of the situation, in Germany, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* has had to lay off half of its staff because of the reduction in the amount of advertising resulting from the economic crisis in Germany. Advertising and profitability are intimately connected but this is not the case in publishing.

The problem that arises in all these countries is: when you have bought a company that makes two or three per cent you want it to make ten or twelve per cent. Hachette wants ten per cent; Editis wants fifteen, as does Bertelsmann. The consequences can be felt at every level, beginning with the choice of books to be published, the print-runs required and, in the end, redundancies. For the first time in Western Europe, ideas are being evaluated, not in terms of their importance, but in terms of their profitability. Admittedly, new ideas are always dangerous and hard to understand. They only very rarely meet the requirements of profitability. When it is the commercial department that is deciding which books to publish, then we have really got problems. I have actually heard someone say: "Who is this Foucault guy, anyway? What has he written? How many copies are we going to sell?" Indeed, when Foucault was published in America, the first books did not sell, of course. It is not only the censorship of the market that is the problem here, the intellectual level of the universities is just as much to blame. No American university wanted to issue an invitation to Foucault. It was different later, but it took time nevertheless and if financial factors had prevailed, Foucault would not have been published, just as the Germans would not have published Kafka, whose

first book sold 600 copies, or Brecht, whose first book sold 800.

Take the example of La Martinière, which is purchasing Le Seuil and demanding that every book published by Le Seuil should be profitable right from its launch. This is a very serious situation for French intellectual life. Press response was surprising to say the least, calling this merger "a French solution". It was some time before the harmful effects of the operation became clear. It was a disaster for smaller imprints such as Minuit that were published by Le Seuil. It was only some time later that articles about this appeared in *Le Monde*.

Why are people not more concerned about this development? When I published *L'Edition sans éditeur* in 1999, there were articles in France and in Spain too, expressing pity for English-speaking readers.

Everyone thought that it could only happen to other people. At the present moment, my book has appeared in about twenty countries. The interest that people are taking in my work is evidence of the need to reflect on the whole question of publishing. All these countries already have or will have the same problem. All publishers want us to talk about this problem that has now become worldwide. It derives from globalization. In South Korea I encountered the same concerns. In Spain, Bertelsmann has bought all the *Priva* bookshops, the largest chain dealing in university publications. Bertelsmann is a company that has publicly stated that it needs to make a profit of 15 per cent per annum and achieve a growth-rate of ten per cent. But mergers are not always successful. Fortunately, Brussels has prevented the merger of two major publishing houses, Elsevier and Cougar.

In America, the consequences of this kind of merger have been dramatic. These publishing houses control not only books but newspapers. They have a monopoly. Consequently, they demand huge sums of money from anyone who wants to become a subscriber. A subscription to a basic economics journal now costs 16 000 dollars a year. By doing this they drain the budgets of university libraries, which are obliged to spend all the funds they have in order to subscribe to essential journals. The result: there is no money left to buy books published by the university presses, which used to sell something like 1200 copies per title. Last year, they were selling no more than 350 copies, which means that only 350 libraries across the world bought a copy. They were on the verge of bankruptcy. What is more, in the US, university presses have changed their lists. Now they are publishing books about baseball so as to balance their budgets. On the other hand, they have cut down on their scientific publications.

There are other solutions. We are beginning to see free journals on the internet trying to compete with the others, but it will be decades before people get into the habit of reading these journals. It is an example that illustrates how this kind of merger can have an enormous influence on knowledge at university level. And here we are only talking about a small part of publishing. When you look at the list of major publishing houses between 1950 and 2000 in America, you realize that many publishers who, once upon a time, published major works in the fields of history or theology, nowadays publish none at all or very few. The number of translations originating in Europe has been considerably reduced because the imprints that published them are now part of the large groups. Publishing a difficult book means that you lose money.

And it is quite true. When we publish Claude Simon we might sell 800 copies, as Gallimard did, or 6000 copies, as Le Seuil did. In either case, publication of

cultural works makes a loss within the framework of a capitalist enterprise that requires a very high level of profitability. This is a very serious kind of censorship and one that is very difficult to bypass. Nevertheless there is, in all of this, a note of optimism that I explained in my second book, *Le contrôle de la parole* (2005). This is the setting up, all over the place, of small publishing companies that welcome books which, for ideological reasons, have been refused by major publishers. In my book, I have provided three examples of our authors who were rejected by all the French publishing houses. The book by Eric Hobsbawm on the twentieth century, Annie Cohen-Solal's book on Sartre — everyone thought that Sartre had gone out of fashion and no one was interested in him any more — and thirdly, all Chomsky's books for the last decade that had been refused by all publishers in France. Amongst explanations that were given you could read that France had suffered so much during the war that it could not cope with books by a revisionist such as Chomsky. But, of course, he was not a revisionist. It was Parisian and French intellectual conformism that lay behind such ideological prejudice. Pierre Nora explains that Hobsbawm's book was not published because they thought that they were going to lose money on it. It became a bestseller in about twenty countries. But in France they were convinced that a book by a Marxist could not be of any interest to anyone. What is telling is that it was not just Gallimard and Fayard that took this decision but all the others as well. Nobody wanted to risk it, despite the success that the book had had elsewhere in the world. In the end it was published in Belgium.

There is a very powerful consensus that can be explained by reference to an intellectual conformism. It is to do with the ever-increasing requirements of profitability and the French government's policy of favouring monopolies. They are very fond of large companies that have policies that will support them and so they help such companies. Lagardère represents a guarantee: they are not going to publish any embarrassing books. This happens in other countries too. But in France the situation has become a matter for special concern. In conclusion, I should like to ask why all of that can happen with so little discussion. Why has no newspaper, not even *L'Humanité*, which belongs to Lagardère, called for an outcry against this situation? Not even publishers? The only ones to have complained have been booksellers. And they have only complained about the monopoly in distribution, not about control of the publishing houses. Authors and journalists have said nothing. It is claimed that it is due to cowardice or to opportunism, but this explanation only scratches the surface. On the contrary, you can find articles in *Le Monde* vaunting the advantages of this concentration of the press. According to them, thanks to this kind of concentration, France is supposed to be able to safeguard its place in international competition. It is a perverse kind of silence, it seems to me. It is dangerous and, as far as I am concerned, quite inexplicable.

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