

Toward a Creative Activism With a Sense of Humor: An Interview With François Ruffin

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Sociologist Serge Chaumier interviews the influential French activist-journalist-documentary filmmaker and now member of French parliament François Ruffin, who was widely perceived to have played a major role in sparking Nuit Debout. His work holds additional interest for scholars of journalism, communication, and social movements in that he represents a version of journalism as activism (or perhaps a “post-journalism” as activism, in that he is a producer of multiple forms of content aimed at social change; a critical journalism emerges in multiple forms from the same journalist-activist). His work demonstrates both journalism and activism in transition: It negotiates relationships to emotion-, or, more specifically, empathy-driven multimedia storytelling in both areas of communication practice. He offers a critique of traditional forms of journalism, activism, and social movements, including Nuit Debout.

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François Ruffin has been recognized as the “godfather of Nuit Debout,” a French Michael Moore, and compared to the comedic activists The Yes Men (Mandelbaum, 2016, para. 2). Ruffin is, in addition to being a journalist and an activist, a documentary filmmaker and the editor-in-chief of the French independent bimonthly national newspaper *Fakir*, based in his hometown of Amiens (circulation 40,000; Durget, 2017). In 2017, he ran for a seat in the French parliament on the far-left ticket of presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s “An Unsubmissive France” (la France Insoumise) party, a turn foreshadowed in the following interview conducted several months before his entry in the campaign.

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Winning the election, Ruffin has occupied a seat in parliament since June 2017. His electoral success came after his surprise success as a documentary filmmaker and longtime journalist.

In winter 2016, Ruffin reached a large audience with the release of the film he directed, *Merci Patron!* (Mauriat, Silva, & Ruffin, 2016). An unexpected underground hit, the film focused on a family, the Klurs (les Klur). The Klurs had lost their lifelong jobs at a factory, which had been bought by a billionaire, Bernard Arnault, who promptly shut it down. By mid-2016, the film had sold 500,000 tickets. In 2017, the film was awarded a César (the equivalent of the U.S. Oscar) for best documentary film. Undoubtedly, the film's success is partly due to the freshness of a renewed activist approach, which satisfied a desire at the heart of the political gloom that, as Chaumier and Ruffin discuss, has haunted France for years now.

Just one month after *Merci Patron!*'s February 26, 2016, release, the French government proposed a heavily contested reform of the country's labor law (see Harsin, introduction to this Special Section). In response, just after the March 31 march against the law, the *Merci Patron!* team organized a screening of the film at Place de la République (Square of the Republic). Both events sparked the Nuit Debout movement that immediately followed. The film's screening, now a staple of activist gatherings, provokes a remarkable wave of enthusiasm at each viewing.

In the context of Nuit Debout, this interview aims to highlight Ruffin's trajectory as an activist journalist, his influences, his views on various media forms, as well as the way in which he approaches journalism from the point of view of social transformation. In this interview, one sees the emergence of a particular sort of activist journalist, one who is an outgrowth of exposure to sociology, foreign cultural encounters (the American muckraking journalists; novelists with a social critical bent, such as Steinbeck; and activist documentary filmmakers like Michael Moore), specific internships and mentors, and family background (working class). Those influences instilled a strong empathy that drove Ruffin's development of activist journalism, which also motivated him to move from an activist journalism focused on news media criticism to one telescoped to social struggles. The emphasis here is not simply on biography, however, but on its interplay with the theoretical development of activist journalism and, specifically, on an activist-journalist's strategic choices and outcomes. That portrait is important for understanding Ruffin's inspirational role in the mobilization, even intellectual formation, of other activists who became Nuit Debout (of which, ironically, Ruffin was both supportive and critical). Indeed, his example need not be viewed as a biographical marvel but as a kind of exemplar for contemporary repertoires of activist journalism.

Thus, Ruffin contributes to a critique of professional journalism and to a theory of journalism as activism. Indeed, Ruffin proposes that traditional activist repertoires completely reinvent their style of communication to those beyond "the movement of the square." Recalling historical and contemporary discussions of porous boundaries between documentary, journalism, and social criticism (Maras, 2013, p. 72, 92), Ruffin argues that activist art and journalism are ineffective when they are primarily pedagogical and revelatory, because much of the time people already believe or have heard of what is supposedly

being revealed, what they are ostensibly being educated about.² He claims that activist art, journalism, and movements of which they are sometimes a part must now try to practice empathetic storytelling and offer possibilities for action in response to the truths being presented. Again, these are controversial issues in contemporary discussions about journalism's impartiality and the limits of mere (perhaps elitist self-congratulatory) consciousness raising. Ruffin constantly points to reimagining a multiplicity of forms of protest, a reimagination that may point to resuscitations and reinvigorations of flailing or moribund struggles.

Finally, as an activist journalist, filmmaker, and now member of parliament who has attained the status of celebrity, Ruffin's example answers the questions scholars are asking about how such celebrities can leverage attention for activist goals (not just as part of their brands). Ruffin performs his critique of journalism and activism. He is unsparingly critical—of journalism, protests, unions, the labor movement, academics, *Nuit Debout*, and himself—but in an entertaining, empathic style, which generates discussion, and sometimes even laughter.

Activist Journalism: Ruffin's Critical Outlook

Serge Chaumier:

*For those readers who don't know you, or who don't know *Fakir*, the newspaper you've run for years now, can you tell us about your career thus far? How did you end up in journalism and what are the influences that took you there?*

François Ruffin:

Well, when I started *Fakir* in 1999—this is how it all began—there was a weekly paper from Amiens City Hall, the *Journal des Amiénois*, with the headline "Un carnaval fou et gratuit" ("A Wild Carnival, for Free"). In the same week, there was the relocation of the Yoplait [yogurt] factory, and not a word in that free weekly about the factory. Even if it was City Hall's weekly paper, I thought it should be reporting on local hardships. So, I started a newspaper. I had already read a lot of [Pierre] Bourdieu, Serge Halimi, François Brune³ . . . a number of authors that were critical of journalism, and so I threw myself right away into a paper critical of the media. From the first issue, I noted that it wasn't enough to want to destroy the local paper—16 years later and that still hasn't happened [laughs]. I quickly saw that I needed not only to be critical of what was in the paper but also to show what wasn't in the paper, and so that ultimately led me to socially critical journalism, with an article in the first issue on interns in the restaurant industry. It was a journalism critical of both social conditions and the media.

² Maras writes: "Pictured against a new backdrop, detachment begins to look like lack of attachment, critical disinterest, uninteresting. Current affairs with a twist of comedy, documentary or opinion, seems more informative than the 'straight report'" (p. 72).

³ The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is well known to readers of this journal. Serge Halimi is currently the editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. François Brune, the author of more than 15 books, is a contemporary writer and a media and social critic.

SC:

So it had a strong local orientation?

FR:

Yes, for 10 years, the paper was strictly about Amiens and its surrounding areas, even if there were quite a few subscribers from outside of the *département* [a French administrative district]. Because in the end, when you do a story on temp work in Amiens, temp work in Arras or temp work in Pau, it's not necessarily different. And you can say that the national press doesn't give much coverage to temp work, so there were quite a few people who saw the interest in this paper, even beyond local situations.

So, I went to journalism school in Paris. I very quickly became critical of it, since on the one hand I was a bit older than the others, I had more experience, and I'd already been reading . . . and then I'd already done a master's thesis in linguistics on the media, on the use of responses to questions asked by France 2 [television channel] journalists to politicians during the 1997 legislative elections [laughs].

An Empathic Journalism: Sociological, Literary, and Documentary Influences

SC:

You spoke about influences, you spoke of Halimi, . . . I suppose through Bourdieu.

FR:

Yes, even before. I had two big, let's say politico-aesthetic shocks in my university years, one of which was *Mythologies*, by Roland Barthes (Barthes & Lavers, 1970), the other being *Sociology in Question*, by Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Those are two works that, when I read them, one after the other, together shocked me into seeing the world differently. And with Barthes, I remember this sensation, like being punched in the face, and then being obsessed with what was sometimes a bit exaggerated psychoanalytic-sociological reading.

SC:

And Bourdieu's Weight of the World?

FR:

No, in fact, first it was *Sociology in Question*; it's quite specifically a text that made me radically question myself. It was "The Racism of Intelligence," the last chapter of *Sociology in Question*, where he talks about what class contempt is. In fact, you have to already understand the phenomenon, the why, and so that rattled me because being in a position of the judged made me more empathetic, and I think that these few pages radically changed me. Journalism, rather than being judgmental opinion journalism, became an empathetic journalism—you understand? But that was before *Fakir*.

SC:

I was wondering which investigative journalists had influenced your career path.

FR:

I'd read quite a few things—like the undercover method of the journalist Günter Wallraff,⁴ but above all, I spent a year in the United States and read a fair number of journalists that influenced me—the muckrakers, Upton Sinclair, lots of people like that—and I'm a big reader of novels.

SC:

Really?

FR:

If we're talking Americans . . . Steinbeck. Voilà, in novels, the form of empathy that you acquire, more than in sociology, or whatever, allows you, within the novel, to look inward, even if it isn't real, it still has some assumptions on the functioning of the human soul, and that leads you to empathy.

Activist Journalism Expanded: Documentary Film

SC:

Coming back to the film, since you went to the United States, was Michael Moore an influence?

FR: Oh, yes. Definitely. When I saw *Roger and Me*, I had never heard of the film but . . . I came across it by chance, and it was great! It's a film that I must've seen 10, 15, 20 times, and, in addition, in the United States I learned to speak English from audiocassettes of Michael Moore reading his book. I think that I'm one of the people in France that knows him best, not to brag, but . . .

SC:

*OK, and at the same time that *Merci Patron!* came out in France, one couldn't help but think of this influence, all the while thinking it's sharper, less caricatural.*

FR: First of all, I think that *Roger and Me* is less caricatural than what he did later. But even in his weaker work—for example, I don't like *Bowling for Columbine*; I think there are some very, very clumsy sequences—but even in Moore's lesser work, every three minutes, or every five minutes, there's an idea, and that's not too shabby! What I think I bring to the table in terms of structure, compared to Michael Moore, is that I'm not an omnipresent figure. I'm the thread; you can't say I'm absent! But the Klur family themselves took the spotlight, and then there's the chief of police as well; there's a trio there, where there's no need for me for 20 to 25 minutes. I think that's something that doesn't happen in Michael Moore films. The second thing is that I take a story from the beginning to the end. Michael Moore spends three minutes with a person, three with another.

⁴ Walraff is a German "undercover journalist." He developed a journalistic method whereby he would assume fictional identities to observe a subgroup and then write about it.

Merci Patron! (Thanks, Boss!): Activist Storytelling

SC:

About the film, even if it's always difficult when one is the author, how do you explain the success or the audience size compared with other films that take on social issues?

FR:

Well, I was convinced that it had a good chance of doing well, not necessarily that well, but I was aiming for 100,000 viewers, and all the cinema market pros told me that it was a difficult goal. First, because of the political context, my idea was that "we're wandering through a desert of gloom, and I offer an oasis of joy; there will be a lot of people wanting to drink up." So, in my opinion, the success of the film is based more on its form than on its substance. Regarding the film's content, a journalist from the *Courrier Picard* newspaper made a remark that I think is quite accurate. He said, "In content it's a Marxist film; in structure, it's libertarian." I think that's accurate. The content is about factories closing in my region. I've been following this [the closings] for 16 years. Films about social plight, the closing of businesses. At the same time, there have been a ton of documentaries, or fictional treatments of social suffering, the closing of businesses. How, with this material, do I give people the feeling that I have a fresh take, that it's new? I think that's what made the film succeed. It's that we manage to treat a subject as serious as that with an imaginative tone, which is also a victory. In editing, I organized the film a bit like a Scottish shower: You go from something serious to something funny, and then back to something serious. If you make something heavy, you know, sad from beginning to end, that's overwhelming for viewers. If you go from one to the other, from hot to cold, the contrast makes things remarkable. . . . The contrast between wealth and poverty, between the worlds of the billionaire Bernard Arnault and the Klurs, and the contrast between laughter and seriousness.

SC:

You have to attempt to create tension, suspense. It also relates to the viewer's surprise, and your own position.

FR:

I allow myself that as well, because I've been immersed in these stories. And, so, when you're immersed in it...

Renewing Activist Style: Depressive to Fun, Explainers to Empathizers

SC:

Yes, but it's still bold, because we feel that they're at the end of their rope, and you're making a bet, in every instance it's shown like that in the film . . . and the way of handling humor . . . You're saying that this is linked to the desire in this [sociopolitical] gloom to have something different, something that provides another vision. . . . Do you think these are a means for investigating how to overcome the weariness toward the classic means of unionism or forms of activist struggle? Is it a way to reach more people beyond Fakir, to renew the modes of collective action?

FR:

I'm still a supporter of protests, banners, signs, and all that. I'm not at all someone who says that the traditional means of protest must be rejected, but just that it is necessary to find ways of bringing fun back into them. Even in these traditional approaches, we can't be bored out of our minds when we're protesting. One of *Fakir's* mottos has long been "Fun, Creative Activism."⁵ And it's true that's what I try to do with the paper, but that's perhaps more complicated in writing. It's true that I'd like to be a consultant for the CGT union⁶ to figure out how to bring fun back into that the labor movement! [laughs].

SC:

But how do we explain the fact that the labor movement hardly ever develops this idea, to renew the protest genre and make it entertaining, in the positive sense of the word, to give it a theme, so that each protest is a unique moment, a different experience? Since 1968, we've had sound systems playing music that knocks us unconscious, that crushes everything, but very little for living together.

FR:

My analysis of the labor movement is that it's depressed. For 30 years, it's been getting whacked in the head. I really like Richard Wilkinson, an English epidemiologist, who wrote *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. One of the little things that he shows in this book is that when a mouse is repeatedly shocked, it gets depressed, it becomes withdrawn and all that.

A Film Against Activists and Explainers

SC:

*Yes, we also got that from Laborit, in his film *Mon Oncle d'Amérique*.*⁷

FR:

Yes, and the labor movement has gone on like that for 30 years, and so it withdraws into squabbling, into its internal struggles. Certainly, one of the points in my film is to get past all that. At the same time, it's about form, reexamining activism in its forms, that is to say, for example, the use of emotion. It's an anti-pedagogical film in substance. I knew I was making a film against bosses, but formally, I made a film against activists. If I'd asked them if I should make this film, they wouldn't have wanted it. Of course, because what you need to be politically left is to have professors. I wanted to make a film without a professor on the inside. I didn't want a sociology professor, an economics professor, a political science professor, you see, I didn't want . . .

SC:

Explainers.

⁵ "Militant sans être chiant."

⁶ A French labor union, Confédération Générale du Travail.

⁷ Henri Laborit (1976) wrote *Éloge de la fuite*, which was adapted to the screen by Alain Resnais in *Mon oncle d'Amérique*.

FR:

I didn't want explainers. I wanted it to be transmitted via the story, through feelings, through emotions, sadness, anger, laughter . . . that it be transmitted in that way. So in the first feedback from activists, I saw, well, that they were sulking. . . . Not everyone, but I think that one of the faults of the critical left is that there are too many with diplomas! They go straight to theories, instead of starting with emotions. I say to become a movement, people need to be moved. You see all this criticism, for example, regarding storytelling. I think that storytelling can be useful in moving people. . . . I remember one case where a union member criticized me. I'd written a book on protectionism, customs barriers, importation quotas, and all that, and after a meeting with the union, the guy told me that the problem with you is that you do storytelling. Well, shit, man, he should've said, "Bravo!" I managed to tell a story about import quotas [laughs] and he criticizes me for it! I made a movie that I think opens the door for discussion on plenty of things, on globalization, offshoring, on what poverty is, unemployment, inequality . . . it opens the door to plenty of political themes, but they're discussed after seeing the film. But for them [the experts and union leaders], the debate has to take place in the film. Yet, in fact, people intuitively feel such strong things; they feel a potential momentum, without being told what the moral of the film is.

SC:

Do you think that the new styles of media awareness express this need for renewal? The short form, for example, quirky little films that spread through social networks?

FR:

Well, you have to succeed in tying together content that stands up to scrutiny with a style that is attractive.

SC:

A style that surprises . . . that throws you off, that takes an opposing view, that destabilizes.

FR:

Yes, that's right, it's necessary to find a way to escape the humdrum. For example, a union once asked me to help them redesign their article, so I asked to have it sent to me first. It was full of material about destabilizing economic forces, job insecurity . . . and I told them that instead they should have editorials. There wasn't a single face, not a single person that you saw, who was talking about how we are hired through an array of regulations in labor law . . . such that finally you see how people are being treated. You need to tell people's stories, to first show a face. It's the form that you have to find, a form of expression that attracts people, beyond content, that matters to you, that makes you laugh, that ignites your neurons.

"Revealing No Longer Works"

SC:

Highlighting the human side—that's characteristic of your approach to journalism. It's in the article that you recently wrote in Le Monde,⁸ which is moving, and which first connects with readers' empathetically, through a life story. And then we become receptive. That's rather rare in the activist movement.

FR:

One of the things foregrounded in *Merci Patron!* is how rare attention is to "real life." We're inundated with news. It's constant. The cameras are already there, where you have 50 other cameras; the microphones are already there, where there are microphones. The real is so rare when it suddenly appears. But it can be the little testimonies of *On vaut mieux que ça* [a collective of creative activists], or the Klur family in *Merci Patron!*, which provokes a shock because "the real" is so rare. That's true of the activist world and television, but even perhaps of contemporary literature.

SC:

What's interesting in your work is the need for speech as well as an aesthetic approach to it, let's say an original style of expression, unique, which characterizes you, and that's what brought about the film's popularity. You were just speaking about a desire to get away from gloominess. Is that a means of political activism?

FR:

I don't believe in really "teachy" films, where they take you by the hand. Revealing no longer works today. Revealing is no longer politically relevant. Take the Panama Papers. People know that money goes into tax havens. If I say that there is outsourcing to Poland, people know that there is outsourcing to Poland. If you say, "Hey, there are pesticides in the apples," people know. So what works isn't that; it's that we offer them a path to action. That we manage to escape the feeling of helplessness.

Critique of Nuit Debout: Rhetoric of Inclusion, Practice of Exclusion

SC:

I come now to the question of Nuit Debout. You are rather critical of this movement in the latest issue of Fakir, saying that first of all you would never have imagined it being in this square [la Place de la Republique], because there wasn't enough social mixing; it is limited to a certain social milieu. I wanted to ask you how you see it compared with other movements that we have seen internationally and what you think about media coverage of the movement?

FR:

I don't know international movements that well. If they had taken place in Picardy, I would have a pretty good idea! [laughs] I think that the Indignados had a larger working-class foundation. They asked

⁸ Chaumier is referring to a recent article Ruffin (2016) wrote for the national daily newspaper *Le Monde*.

themselves very practical questions much more quickly, on housing and things like that. And also because the socioeconomic situation in Spain is clearly in worse shape than it is in France, in particular, Paris. So the social base of Nuit Debout is quite clearly too exclusive, and the Indignados were more In my opinion, Nuit Debout resembles more Occupy Wall Street. I remember the Thomas Frank (2013) article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* [regarding Occupy Wall Street]. It seems like a copy and paste of that.

I'm not a total fan of Occupy Wall Street. I don't mean to say that there's nothing to it, but when you live in Amiens and you are going to visit the Klurs, and your goal is to make the invisible visible, you see quite quickly the difference between the media's mirror that is held out to some and not to others. I asked some friends to do a little story in Flixecourt, where *Merçi Patron!* takes place, where there was Boussac St. Frères [the textile factory], and to simply go ask the people, "What do you think of Nuit Debout?" The people didn't know it, and there was someone who recalled vaguely, "Ah yes, the thing against the El Khomri law." Yes, there was a florist who was pro-Nuit Debout, but otherwise, no one knew it.⁹ I contrasted that with the words of Nuit Debout participants at Place de la République, who said that a general strike and revolution were necessary everywhere. This kind of silence from the French heartlands contrasted with the hyper excitedness of . . . well. that's a problem . . . it wasn't felt in Place de la République, it goes without saying, and so there's my continuing role: to include the activist minority.

SC:

At the same time, this lower class that you mention, where do they have access to information? Nuit Debout was covered quite a lot on France Inter news, but they don't listen to that radio channel.

FR:

Yes, there you go. I'm not saying that there isn't an obstacle there, but even if it had been covered, I don't think that the coverage would have resonated sufficiently with them to the point where it becomes widespread . . . that corresponds to their reality, and suddenly they say to themselves, "Exactly!"

SC:

Because the crises of the working sector are a world away from rewriting the constitution, for example.

FR:

Yeah, definitely. . . . When I saw that the movement was going in that direction . . . even if it's a rather legitimate point to raise the question of democracy right away, even if it's rather legitimate in the Nuit Debout movement and it showed itself twice as justified with the usage of Article 49.3 of the Constitution.¹⁰ Clearly, when people start rewriting the constitution, you say to yourself, "Oh, boy. . . ." But even just in terms of voices, there are students speaking, and that's good. They're calling for a general

⁹ Ruffin seems to assume local ignorance of the movement in Picardy is the fault of the movement's own communications and lack of outreach. However, Ruffin's locals and Ruffin himself could very well be prisoners of mainstream news frames and neglect. Gabriel Rockhill (2016), for example, claimed there was a "media blackout" on Nuit Debout.

¹⁰ See Harsin's introduction to this Special Section. The socialist government used an article in the French Constitution to bypass democratic debate in parliament, something like an executive order in the United States.

strike . . . but, OK, what if we were to bring in a cashier who's going to talk about her daily life and who is angry about her job? If people hear that on the radio, it's possible that it clicks with a certain number of them. Do you know what I mean?

SC:

Sure, but at the same time, if we go back to the analysis of media coverage, the way the media gives voice to people, first, actual people are not very present, and when they are present, they're often ridiculed.

FR:

Yes, but these voices coming from Nuit Debout didn't exist. It's like when I tell you who's behind *Fakir*. When I tell you that we are a group of little White bourgeois with diplomas, that's OK. We're not going to beat ourselves up about it every morning, but for me it's about showing the limits or the obstacles to overcome these obstacles. Because if we're satisfied with the way things are going, we're never going to surmount the obstacle. If we want to make a truly inclusive movement out of this, putting down roots in France, finding the path of the people and all that, there is a certain number of obstacles to get out of the way, and if we ignore them and we act as though they don't exist, well, we're sure to fail miserably. It's necessary to be nourished by dissatisfaction.

It's alright. We need this Nuit Debout group, even if its representativeness is limited. Emmanuel Todd¹¹ is right. He said to me that it's a good sign that educated youth are rebelling. But in addition, it has to be said about everyone, that the insecurity and lack of future that afflict educated youth has its counterpart in the working classes, with outsourcing, the end of industrial work. . . . And, finally, there is a common interest.

The Political Function of the Politicized Newspaper in Transition

SC:

I return again to the media, I've gathered that the press was important to you; the newspaper was an important means of politicization in the 19th century, but for you it wasn't an outdated model.

FR:

No, it *is* an outdated model. I knew, for example, while doing *Merci Patron!* that I wouldn't multiply the number of newspaper subscribers by three, four, five.

SC:

That's not what happened?

FR:

No, we were at 7,000 subscribers, 7,000 sold in kiosks. [After the film], we had 15,000 sales overall, my objective having been to surpass 10,000. But I recognize, and that's why I made a film, that the paper, moreover, the activist paper, is no longer possible, that it's mass media. It's over. It's over, and that

¹¹ French historian and essayist interviewed by François Ruffin in *Fakir*.

doesn't mean that it doesn't fulfill other functions. The people that receive the paper in their mailbox, they have the feeling of belonging to a group. For me, the subscriber, that's the first step between being a reader and an activist. The people then become the paper's activists, even a political project without us saying that this is the program. But *Fakir* has basic values; we are rather protectionist (economically); we pay particular attention to the working class; we try to connect red and green. You see, there is a certain number of themes, even if they aren't written out on a list. There are themes that recur, and so the paper is a tool for that, but it will never again be mass media. I never considered that for a second. However, what has been multiplied five- or sixfold, is our number of Facebook followers, we've gone from 12,000 to 80,000. And that gives you power all the same, because when you want to organize a public meeting or whatever, well, you automatically reach 25,000 people. If I'm doing a video on Myriam El Khomri [after which the French labor law is named—which Nuit Debout was protesting], that gets 300,000 clicks in a few days, that doesn't mean that they're watching it to the end. We have our resources tied to the paper, but in the end, the paper, in terms of logistics, between writing the articles, the layout, sales, is really time-consuming and takes a lot of energy, and it's not about that. In the end, if I post an article online, the article will immediately have more of a reverberation and more impact than what I would do for the paper, while it would be more complicated for me to do the one for the paper. . . . So there is a sort of paradox. . . . I don't know what we're going to do with the paper at the center of this universe, this little galaxy, with all the tools we have, the website, the little videos, Facebook, and all that, and public debates—what do we do with the paper in the midst of all that? It isn't clear.

Online Versus Off-line Activist Journalism

SC:

Yes—moving on to new forms of media in which it would be more effective to put one's energy, or does the paper remain an indispensable platform?

FR:

Now, the thing about the paper is that I often use it to write my books, because in writing a quantity of articles or radio reports, a thought forms, for example, on protectionism, and then I take off six months to write a book. But compared with what you do online, it's when you relax a bit. An article from the paper doesn't necessary get more attention online. The article that gets more views online is the more controversial one.

SC:

Or the shorter formats.

FR:

Yes, shorter formats. At the moment I'm doing a series about cherries, because there is a fly that arrived from Japan that hatches eggs in cherries, and until now, farmers had a product called dimethoate, and the government had what I find to be a rather positive reaction in saying that we will ban dimethoate but also the importation into France of cherries from every country that still allows dimethoate, so it's a protectionist measure as we understand it, which institutes a certain reciprocity. Obviously, it's on a relatively minor market, that of the cherry, but it's a potential political opening. If, I mean that, first of all,

it forces me to look more deeply into the subject, to have discussions with a guy from the Confédération Paysanne [Farmer's Confederation] and all that, and to pass that on to my readers, so that it attains long-term significance in people's minds. That might work better in the paper than online.

SC:

Yes, and that's maybe because there will be an article with thorough work, from which you can release a summary, a short-form online.

FR:

Yes, and it's going to develop differently, first in my mind, because I spent longer working on it. You see, I can distill it for you; I could've made it longer, but I can distill it for you in a clearer way than if I had just written a 1,500-word article online. And in a public debate I'll be able to use it. We need to find, and I haven't found it yet, a use for the paper in all that. I wrote a little article in the last issue of *Fakir*, the paper that finds itself halfway between information and action. So that was visible covering Nuit Debout, and it was also visible in *Merci Patron!*, where we aren't only going to hear people, but we ask ourselves how we're going to get out of this shit. But it's something that is absolutely recurrent in the paper to not only offer to our readers paths of action but to act ourselves to show people that it's possible.

Attention Capital of Celebrity Activists

SC:

Do you feel like this is working out, being an example for activist organizations and unions who could take inspiration from you?

FR:

I don't know. I know that the film and what has happened changed my stature, even if I was doing more or less the same thing before, but I have a reaction. . . . I'm finding what I was looking for; the movie attracts a relatively more working-class base. And that's already pretty good. Because before when you called the big CGT union, it took them six months to respond. I'm exaggerating, but it was nonetheless a bit like that, and now, well, it's faster—that's interesting.

SC:

Your audience is a facilitator. Without a doubt, it also gives you more voice in traditional media. . . . I thought of that because I'd heard you on Laurent Ruquier's popular show Si Tu Ecoutes J'annule Tout [If You're Listening, I'll Drop Everything],¹² where I learned that you had appeared in TV programs that I hadn't seen, but it's not easy responding to requests from traditional media without losing one's soul?

¹² The title of the show is a very inside French joke. It's a comment attributed to Nicholas Sarkozy at the beginning of the 2007 presidential campaign. In the midst of an affair with his now wife Carla Bruni, Sarkozy was said to have phoned his wife saying, "If you'll stay with me, I'll drop everything" (meaning that if she would not divorce him, he would end the affair with Bruni).

FR:

That's the thing that guides me; it's that my main fight today isn't a fight against the media, even if I know that the media is one of the arms of the oligarchy. How do I reach beyond a small audience? So if I'm invited on Ruquier's show where I know I'll have the good luck of being faced off with Pierre Gattaz, and when I did a whole film about meeting the billionaire Bernard Arnault, I can't say no!¹³ There I was on the show squared off with Pierre Gattaz, head of the employers' union, and I show up with a board showing a graph of dividends. I know that I'm reaching a lot more than the typical minority, and that counts. For me that matters a lot. That's pretty much the core of my battle: how to go beyond this minority. And I'm restrained, because when I drive my kids to school the next week, until that point I'm trying to be anonymous, when I do my persona things, but then there is a certain number of people that come up to me and say that I was great with Gattaz; I retweeted it to my sister, my brother, its' guys like you, and so forth. That matters, and you can't act like you're only doing things that speak to an insular community. It's complicated; I'm not sure how to tell you . . . what I'd like to help guide my future choices, it's what space they offer you, in what setting, but the fact of being rather in demand sometimes allows you to orient the framework in your favor in terms of how loud you want to be. Just being able to say no: It's not that I'm going around begging; they're offering, and I'm the one who decides.

SC:

At the same time, the system works in the way that the more you participate, the more you are invited, and there's also the fleeting aspect of it that it comes in waves, if you're invited the others want you on as well and if you participate you can stick around, but you run the risk of limiting yourself into becoming a regular in the media, and we all know people that have become unbearable from being everywhere.

FR:

One goal is to show other possible ways for the left. If I were offered the chance to become one of the representatives of this other left and to be an off-line spokesperson, sometimes you have to step up, and that's where we're headed . . . well, I'm not too sure, being careful not to publicly exist except in the way the media frame you, the fact of having one's own media, of being self-sustaining. . . . We've risen from invisibility to a point where everything that we do uses *Fakir* as a catalyst. *Fakir* isn't able to create something on its own. Yet being able to help make rail workers, Goodyear workers, students, teachers, all come together in North Amiens has a bit of magic to it. We have a camera from *France 3 Picardie* (a local news affiliate in Picardy) that comes by for two minutes, and then I go take a piss . . . and then there will be microphones in the toilets! No, I'm exaggerating, but you see things about you becoming public, which you don't want to become public. Where before we were completely disregarded; now, we're sometimes the center of too much attention.

¹³ Pierre Gattaz is the president of MEDEF, employers' union, and Bernard Arnault, the second richest person in France, is the president of LVMH, an international luxury goods conglomerate.

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