

4 January 2019 - **Seul le prononcé fait foi**

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# New Year's greetings by President Emmanuel Macron to the press

Ministers,  
Madam President,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite what some say, it is my pleasure to meet you today for what is, as you have just recalled, a tradition, a tradition which, as we turn the page on a new year, enables us to reflect on what has happened, set a few resolutions and share certain convictions.

First and foremost, and before sharing any such convictions, I would obviously like to wish you a Happy New Year, good health, and success in your personal and professional lives.

I would like to share a few convictions with you because what links us, the reason why you are here today in this room, is the great democratic history which creates ties between France's press and its leaders. To fully recognize this and examine all the challenges, we cannot simply look at our daily life and its vicissitudes, but we should maybe start by taking a wider view; this is also something that you have mentioned.

In 2017, 67 of your colleagues died while doing their jobs. They died in theatres of war, they were assassinated by the criminals that they exposed, they died because they were looking for truth where lies often reign. While this figure has dropped since 2016, this is due to journalists realizing that in certain parts of the world they were seen as special targets, and thus many have given up going to such areas. I would like us to spare a special thought for Stephan Villeneuve and Véronique Robert, as well as for their Kurdish fixer, Bakhtiyar Haddad, all three of whom died in Mosul this year in a mine explosion.

There are also 326 journalists currently imprisoned because of what they do. Because censorship is not sufficient, some have gone as far as to hold incommunicado those who might write or speak. Freedom of the press is not a special freedom, it is the highest expression of freedom. This is why it is the first freedom to be removed by authoritarian regimes. This situation is under no circumstances acceptable and we must intervene at every possible moment to ensure that imprisoned journalists are freed.

This is why France must not stop dialogue with regimes that do not share our values, and I have always maintained this line to defend our principles, our freedoms, our demands, while continuing the dialogue which is necessary for obtaining results.

While it might be easy to hide behind the silence dictated by moral reprobation, this often does not help to achieve concrete and much-needed results. With Turkey, we have had two tests over the last few months with the arrests of the photojournalist Mathias Depardon and the journalism student Loup Bureau, as you will remember, Minister.

In both instances I decided to talk directly to President Erdogan to demand that they be freed immediately. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the entire profession for their effective and responsible work in both cases, which enabled us to obtain concrete results because we took action, because we maintained this dialogue. But this must not overshadow the fact that in Turkey there are still several other journalists, including European journalists, who are being detained as we speak.

With Turkey, I will continue to highlight the situation of journalists that have been detained and prevented from carrying out their jobs in a few days' time. I will do so respectfully but also with the intention of defending our values and interests.

Just as journalists must work in all situations to keep us informed, it is our task as political leaders not to maintain dialogue only with those who are in agreement with us. This is what I will continue to do, because it is in so doing that we will protect France's citizens and we will promote what we believe in.

This is also why I want this freedom, which is recognized and guaranteed by international conventions, to be genuinely protected and placed under the protection of the United Nations. During my speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September last year, I advocated the appointment of a Special Representative of

the United Nations Secretary-General for the Protection of Journalists. António Guterres heard my argument and shared my concerns and has already started to draw up this mission, which should come to fruition in the next six months.

We are living in such barbaric times, and as such, as Péguy would have written, writing the truth, seeking the truth, writing – if I remember his words correctly – “cleanly, on a clean sheet” is essential.

Freedom of the press is not just under attack by notorious dictatorships, it is also undermined in some of the world’s greatest democracies. It is undermined even here in Europe. Madam President, you cited several European countries that are indeed disrupting the freedom of the press and, when I spoke before the European Court of Human Rights, I determinedly advocated for Turkey and Russia, both signatories of the European Convention on Human Rights, to respect the commitments that their membership implies, notably as regards the freedom of the press.

In this, we must also guard against naivety. Human rights, including the freedom of the press, used to seem a shared cause between democracies, and asserting such rights was a way to lay claim to a long-standing, well-established common ground, a sort of common denominator which was always, like it or not, the subject of consensus, and this is no longer the case.

Excluding several of these countries from the European Convention of Human Rights, or in some cases the European Union, would be too easy. We must implement the sanctions set out in our treaties, which the European Commission has already started to do on behalf of the European Union. But we must lead this battle while keeping them in the demanding circle of its historical achievements. This battle has a name, it requires us to fully defend the effectiveness of all our democracies’ freedoms because there is a growing temptation, both within Europe and at its borders: the temptation towards illiberal democracies.

Our current crisis is unprecedented in the modern era, it is a break between a market economy, the middle classes, social balances, democracy and the attachment to the accompanying freedoms. This cornerstone, which since the 18th century has built the continuous progress of our democracies, is starting to crack and, in the name of protecting a State, sometimes in the name of fighting some such risk or foreign threat, of a nationalist fascination knocking at the door, several political regimes are tempted by political illiberalism and each time this happens, the press is clearly the first to come under threat.

When the system of checks and balances that the press constitutes starts to be muzzled, limited, regulated, when the independence of justice is called into question – and often, these reforms go hand in hand – the vitality and the long-standing values of our democracies are also undermined. Democracy is a fragile creation and we are starting to remember quite how fragile it is. What does democracy depend on? It depends on the standards of the people, leaders’ sense of history and the ability of neighbouring powers to set such high standards, too.

I would like to take the opportunity to tell you that we will not accept the slightest spinelessness within the European Convention on Human Rights or the European Union. We will not accept the slightest compromise on our founding principles, the primary freedom that is the freedom of expression, which is always accompanied by freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, and which is the foundation of the checks and balances upon which our democracies depend.

We should not take this illiberal temptation lightly and it will doubtless be a battle that France and the European Union will have to lead in 2018, sometimes against several of its own members.

In addition to illiberal temptations, the model of the journalistic profession is currently in question or, to put it more accurately, being abused with the explosion of “fake news” to use the English term, and media outlets that are spreading it. At a time when the figure of the journalist is more important than ever, where the work of the press has a fundamental democratic role, it has never been so easy to call oneself a journalist. Technology and money are covering up a lack of skill and the lack of distinction between words and opinions is leading to complete confusion.

We have collectively, gradually, surreptitiously allowed this confusion to gain ground. Our fascination with not making any distinctions has led us to consider that all words are indeed equal and that regulation is necessarily suspicious. This is not the case, however: all words are not equal and platforms, Twitter feeds, entire websites invent rumours and fake news which take their place alongside true events.

This would have no impact if fake news were just a global hoax, but the reality is that there exists a strategy and a funded one, too, aiming to nurture doubt, forge alternative truths, make people think that what politicians and the media say is always a lie to a greater or lesser extent. In a clever illusion, lies are dressing themselves as truth hidden from the people, intentionally shrouded from view by the elite, whoever they might be. The burden of proof has been reversed: while journalists constantly have to prove what they say – in accordance with the

or proof has been reversed. While journalists constantly have to prove what they say – in accordance with the ethics of their profession, they must show what they say or write to be true –, those spreading fake news shout out: “It is your responsibility to prove that we are wrong!”.

Because we have let quantity, the sharing of information, the ability to spread it as widely as possible and sow doubt almost everywhere, become synonymous with truth. Conspiracies and populism are leading the same fight, the fight to sap all confidence in the democratic system, to make it seem a fools’ game, a collection of false pretences, and it is you, it is all of us who are under attack from this strategy in favour of determined propaganda.

This rise in fake news now goes completely hand in hand with this illiberal fascination that I was talking about, because the funding often comes from the same sources, it is often used by powers who take pleasure somehow in the weaknesses of democracy, its extreme openness, its inability to sort, order and recognize a form of authority at the end of it all.

But what does authority actually mean from an etymological perspective? The fact of even recognizing that there is an author, the author of something which is invented or the author of a truth brought to light by investigative work. You are all authors and you have, in this world of global, ever-present, instant news, a certain authority. To deny this or consider its value as equivalent to that of any blogger, any publisher of propaganda, would be to deny your specificity and collectively accept to let mistrust gradually take hold within our democratic system.

The absolute relativism in which we are submerged is currently exploited by men and women who consider that you can say whatever you like and who will increasingly seek to manipulate our democracies. Sites with an official presence are the legal showcase of this propaganda, coordinated with thousands of accounts on social networks that can, in mere seconds, spread invented fibs across the world in all languages, smearing political leaders, celebrities, public figures or journalists.

We must not kid ourselves that it does not work. We know that it works, we have seen it at work abroad and also in France. Democratic process is thus profoundly distorted because the indignation that stems from this fake news is explosive and prevails over reflection. And that is the somewhat anthropological gamble made by those who manipulate these channels.

There is a danger of porosity between these fake news machines and professional media. Barriers have been raised but presidential campaigns in nearly all contemporary democracies have shown their weakness and our collective inability to bring responses equal to the scale of today’s threats.

You, as journalists, are those most threatened by this propaganda. It is adopting your tone, and sometimes your formats. It uses your vocabulary, and sometimes even recruits from your midst. It insinuates itself, sometimes even funded by certain illiberal democracies that we condemn regularly, it normalizes itself, and eventually it can play on the ambiguity that we have gradually accepted.

Your position as trusted intermediaries, so essential in a democracy, is thus deeply muddled and, through your person, liberal democracy is attacked. There are at least two possible responses that we can make, and that I would like us to make together in the coming year.

The first is for the government to undertake. That is why I have decided that we are going to adapt our legal arsenal to protect our democracy from such fake news. A bill will soon be submitted to this effect. In election periods, content on web platforms will no longer be subject to exactly the same rules. As you know, it is possible today to propagate false information on social networks for merely a few tens of thousands of euros, and that can be done under total anonymity. Platforms will now have tougher transparency requirements on all sponsored content so as to publish the identity of advertisers and those controlling them, as well as to limit the amount spent on such content. This is an essential corollary of the rules that we have established for our democracy and our political debate.

When false information is spread, it will be possible to seize a judge through a new injunction procedure in order, as applicable, to delete the content in question, dereference the website, close the user’s account, or even to block access to the website.

The powers of the regulator [Higher Council for the Audiovisual Sector, CSA], which incidentally will be overhauled profoundly during 2018, will be toughened to combat any attempt at destabilization by television services controlled or influenced by foreign States. That will allow the revamped CSA, for example, to refuse to authorize such services by taking into account all the content they produce, including on the Internet. It will also allow it, in the event of activities that could affect the outcome of the election, either in election or pre-election periods, to suspend or terminate the authorization.

If we are to protect liberal democracies, we need to be tough and to have clear rules. This new legal arsenal will involve a duty to respond on the part of technical intermediaries in order to take down quickly any illegal content of which they are informed. The content of this text will be detailed in the coming weeks. Its preparation will be considerable as none of the freedoms of the press may be undermined by this text, and in this respect your views will be very important. We will be holding consultations.

Beyond that, it is clear that we need to continue making online platforms and content hosts accountable. They cannot continue to mix all categories of information. They need to be made accountable for all forms of activities they host, as we have started to do with regard to terrorist propaganda.

But the second type of essential action is up to you. I know that many of you are reflecting on ethics in the profession of journalism, and the initiative by Reporters Without Borders to invent a form of certification for media outlets that respect the ethical rules of the profession appears not only an interesting one, in my view, but also a desirable one. It is up to you, in a way, to organize the rules of your profession if we are to put an end to the state of affairs where everything has equal weight and there is no hierarchy. The time is no doubt ripe for your profession to unite around strongly reaffirmed principles in a period of democratic fragility. And I strongly hope that 2018 will be the year of this substantive debate, because not all expression is equal and because there is even expression that is neither journalism nor innocent, that is propaganda and political material that is harmful to our democracies.

That is particularly necessary as the media system is in the midst of a transformation. As you mentioned, Madam President, the impact of digitization is continuing and shaking up practices and economic models. It is shaking things up and will continue, because this issue is not new, to shake up how the written press is distributed. In the coming year, this will involve essential actions from all stakeholders in the profession so that those that deliver the press, from press distributors to newsagents, can continue to enjoy a sustainable economic model that allows those of you who work in the written press to reach final readers and maintain the organization, logistics and local presence that ensures the effectiveness of your work.

A deep transformation is also needed to review the very organization of the media and production of content, because rules and trends, the habits we were used to, are changing. They are becoming delinearized, as they say nowadays. Choice is now the operative word, and citizens consume news, cultural content and programmes differently from how they did even five or six years ago.

This transformation is not a fatality. I am deeply convinced of this, and many of you here have reflected and made concrete proposals. It is an opportunity for a profound review of our collective organization but with a few simple principles. It appears essential to me that the sharing of value created should be conceived such that those who create content and verify information, who put together an editorial, who keep track of current affairs are rewarded. And it is also essential not to normalize all forms of news on the basis that the person that produced it is unimportant, or no more important than the person who took a screenshot or posted raw information without exercising the slightest discernment or demonstrating any professional ethics whatsoever.

That requires in-depth reflection as to the sharing of the value created between the various stakeholders. Reconsideration is needed of the share of value that has to go to journalists, authors and editorialists, to all those represented here who, regardless of their role, produce information content, sometimes artistic content or images, that has value and must give rise to reward. Yet the current economic organization of these media outlets in the midst of reinventing themselves overvalues the importance of distribution, and thus other industrial stakeholders, rather than those of the media themselves.

In 2008 it will be up to us at national and European level to address this subject, which has tax, economic and cultural dimensions and is an essential project if we are to preserve pluralism and reward those who produce, verify and invent.

In this most particular context it is clear that France and Europe need to take note of all the consequences of the decision by the United States to put an end to net neutrality. This decision will have economic consequences that cannot fail to affect certain stakeholders in your sector and will no doubt contribute, where net neutrality is abandoned, to increasing the negative trends that I have mentioned. It will give greater prescriptive power to platforms that can decide – no doubt even more tomorrow than in the past – the economic rules where they have become dominant.

So there is a media economy that needs to be profoundly reinvented, which will require collective reflection that I would like us to carry out in 2018. Part of this reflection will have national consequences, another will have European consequences. And just as we fight every day to defend copyright and all related rights, it is essential for Europe to promote a viable economic model for pluralism and the press.

Similarly – and this is another essential aspect of evolutions in your sector – the shake-up in media ownership

can sometimes raise tears for the freedom of the press. A number of editorial habits have been adopted to report possible conflicts of interest between shareholders and editorial teams, but that is no doubt not enough. Serious reflection is needed on a foundational system between shareholders and editorial teams so as to place between them a joint structure that guarantees total editorial independence, which should be institutionalized and thus protect both parties from the suspicion – as always – of interference.

The public sector broadcasters obviously are no exception to this shake-up and it is up to the government to draw all conclusions. The media sector is evolving profoundly and rapidly. It is currently based on a renewed use of images, text and sound. The organizational structures we have historically chosen are no doubt not adapted to the present day, and even less to our future. For all these reasons, it is important to deeply and most objectively review the grammar and rules of the public broadcasters.

By nature, the public service has to address all citizens. That means work is needed on content, usages, organization and supervisory structures which are too cautious and thus ineffective. These are subjects that the Prime Minister, the Minister and I have decided to put back on the table.

At the end of the first quarter of 2018, shared, costed and structured proposals, setting out a scenario of transformation to be implemented, will be published by the team which the Minister of Culture is drawing on. They will be the subject of a debate that we hope will be wide-ranging, with all professionals in the sector. It should thus help prepare a bill on public broadcasting to be examined by the Council of Ministers by the end of the year. This work needs to be the fruit not only of the interministerial group that has been set up and the ongoing consultation with the broadcasting companies under the Minister's authority, but also this extremely wide-ranging debate that will allow us to compare the various European and international models that have been used and which can serve as a source of inspiration for us.

A few priorities are already beginning to emerge, such as that given to quality news coverage, developing local news. And that of offering distinctive programmes that justify the resources they are sometimes allocated and also take into account the European dimension of creation and foster co-productions with our European partners, developing a digital offer capable of competing with digital platforms. But I do not wish to close any subject or pre-empt what the team and the Minister will be establishing in the coming weeks. The public broadcasting sector supports national cohesion. It is a mirror for the nation and has to be designed for all audiences and for all practices. It has to seek universal excellence: that is its mission in the public interest and its *raison d'être*.

In this global context, in the values which we want to uphold, the media has a clear role to play, and I have explained, Madam President, how I want our relationship to be, a point which you highlighted. Because I believe that in the modern world this relationship must be based on higher standards and the shared principle of democratic dignity. All too often, the authorities and the media have let themselves down by appearing complicit and sometimes consequently brutal, to the detriment of this democratic dignity.

That is why I believe it much more productive for each of us to fully carry out our roles in integrity, away from the temptations of castes and excessive squabbling, by going back to basics, starting with respect. You have never heard me speak ill of the press and you never will. Because nowadays, we are in essence not just living our daily lives but we are fighting a shared battle, as I said at the beginning. And this means a mutual requirement, as you reminded us, from the government and from all involved in politics, to be clear and to answer the questions posed, and there is no such thing as a bad question.

At the same time, there must be a requirement for truth, fairness, and a culture of questioning which cannot be based on suspicion. There is a legitimate distance between the government and the countervailing powers, and I believe that the close proximity to which we had sometimes become accustomed was not good for political power, nor for the profession of journalism. Because it sometimes involved paying more attention to backroom comments than official statements.

This is sometimes still the case when there are backroom comments, which is not a good democratic rule because the exclusive nature of this information confided at a given moment ends up becoming more important than the carefully deliberated public statements of political leaders. I will never have a problem with the genuine desire to raise questions about a bill or policy, but this obsession with rooting out context to such an extent that the bill or the action itself is never discussed is not legitimate. Finding out whether I write my New Year address during the day or at night, whether I will speak standing up, seated or lying down, is completely irrelevant and I think I can safely say that the French people have no interest in such matters.

Therefore, I don't answer such questions: I simply make my address to the people of France. This is a common-sense rule which we must follow. To each question, there must be a reply from the Minister or official responsible for implementing the action. When I talk to the daily regional or national press, or to TV journalists, whether French or foreign, your job is to deconstruct and verify the facts and statements. But that does not involve confidences that are a French speciality, and which literature tells us can also sometimes be false. nor is

more confidence that are a French specialty, and which therefore tend to be also sometimes so rare, not to its complicity.

So I know this healthy distance perhaps does not make your job any easier or help break the habits which have been picked up, neither does it make our jobs easier because I know it can sometimes create a hostile reaction. But it is at the heart of our shared standards to carry out clear actions which have been fully thought through, where what matters is what has been said and done, and not anonymous comments which have never been quoted or which have been heard in a passageway or which have been transcribed. Because this is ultimately what allows you to be what you are, people who analyse the reality of the information, and then transcribe its cohesion or lack thereof, carry out fact-checking, demonstrate when false information has been provided.

Otherwise, we are at risk of coming together merely to make comments, where your words no longer have anything to do with truth, since truth would be the words picked up in a specific confession or in other places in France. But these words are no truer than any others and could replace the official words, they could sometimes replace action. I think that such circumstances would be our downfall.

So this distance requires discipline and professionalism, and in this regard it is very important to me that you have at your disposal all the structures and tools which enable you to do your job as you have stated. This is an essential condition. Because I am well aware that reporting on the French Presidency and the work of the government and Parliament is no easy task: there are long hours, sometimes no set schedule at all, for many of you it involves travel, logistical and technical constraints, being available at a moment's notice. And for those who report on the French Presidency, I have heard that my very personal sense of punctuality can even make this daily exercise more difficult.

That is why this address is also an opportunity for me to thank you for the work you do every day. I pay attention to the fruits of this work, I read, I listen, I watch, not everything but a lot, and it is not enough to sing the praises of pluralism and freedom of the press. As political leaders we must be mindful of the opinions being expressed and which, but for you, would remain unheard, because they express concern, deep indignation from a journalist, or because they express part of public opinion.

It is our responsibility to take account of these perspectives, these opinions, these questions which you highlight, because they inform us. Because this encourages discussion, because this develops our ability to make judgments, which is at the heart of democratic vitality. That is why I wanted to state in this address my thanks for the work you have carried out in this context.

Because ultimately, what justifies my belief in the relationship which binds us is that neither political power nor journalists are what matter most. Collectively, we sometimes narcissistically believe this to be so, viewing people's daily lives as a secondary issue. But the very essence of what unites us is the daily lives of our citizens and the destiny of the country. Ultimately, that is all that matters.

At the close of our seminar this lunchtime, the Prime Minister set out our plans for the next six months, and the next six weeks in particular, so I will not repeat what has been said. You saw an illustration of this in the address to the French people a few days ago, that there would be no let-up in the intensity or the will to boost our country's strength and justice, to carry out determined and credible action in Europe and to constantly carry this voice which I mentioned, in your case around the world.

For all these issues, you will have the tools to fully carry out your role. So my wish for this new year is for you to perform your excellent work as journalists freely and independently, to seek the truth, to be able to tell the truth without interference, without being threatened, and to take a stand and change your minds when necessary. In short, to encourage debate and controversy, because this is what feeds our democracy and because, in various forms, sometimes differently, sometimes clearly, sometimes insidiously, this is what all enemies of democracy are seeking to deprive us of.

France is a great political and democratic nation. Our fellow citizens like sharing what makes up our daily experiences. So they like reading, listening, understanding, challenging, supporting and debating.

For all these reasons, your work as journalists is essential. The stronger and the more listened to and respected the French press is, the more France itself will be. The stronger and the more listened to and respected the international press here is, the more France will be understood, the more its ideas will be shared and the more influence it will have.

That is why my wish for you is also my wish for the country.

Thank you very much and Happy New Year.

