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**THE PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE ON THE FRENCH  
MEDIA UNDER NICOLAS SARKOZY**

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## INTRODUCTION

It's January 8th, 2008 and in the Elysée Palace, President Nicolas Sarkozy is giving his first major press conference since his election the previous year. Everyone in the room is slightly in shock after the French leader has made an unexpected announcement that he intends to shake up French public broadcasting and to ban advertising on its TV channels. I'm sitting diagonally to the podium but I have a perfect view of the French journalist a few rows in front who's asking a pointed question about the President's seeming appetite for power. I can also see the fury on the Head of State's face as he responds to the reporter - not by answering his question but by mocking and sneering at him in what appears to be an attempt to humiliate him. But it's what happens next that floors me. Almost all of the 700 or so journalists in the room begin to laugh. And they're laughing conspiratorially with the President, while their colleague squirms. My British colleague and I look around the room in alarm but no one chooses to catch our eye. The questions move on swiftly to economic issues and unemployment figures, and then the French leader suddenly appears to feel confident enough among his newfound journalist friends to confide in us about his latest girlfriend;

"Me and Carla, you know" he smiles "It's really serious."

For me that single press conference triggered myriad questions about the peculiar relationship between President Sarkozy and the media. How could the French leader announce such fundamental sweeping changes to the French

public broadcasting service without having ever consulted the editors, executives or even his own Culture Minister? Why did the French press choose to side with the President while their *confrère* was asking a contentious, but perfectly legitimate question? And in a country where the Head of State's private life has long been accepted as being out of bounds to reporters, why did President Sarkozy invite journalists to speculate on his new relationship?

In this paper I hope to be able to answer these questions by explaining the paradoxical nature of President Sarkozy's media management style which is at once controlling and dynastic (for example the President's decision to nominate the directors of public broadcasting himself and the leaning on media owner friends to remove unflattering stories from their papers) and at the same time which is also apparently liberal (in that in opening up his private life to media scrutiny, Sarkozy has offered the French press a far greater transparency than it has ever previously enjoyed).

I'll be looking at three individual case studies to help me examine the communication methods the French leader has been using and to assess how successful - or indeed not - those methods have been in his attempts to influence the press to his own ends.

In case study 1, I will be studying the reports in the French press following the State visit that Nicolas Sarkozy and his pop star wife, Carla Bruni made to

England in early 2008. It's a classic example of the President's *pipolisation* of politics - a State visit becomes a celebrity show - but it was an event nonetheless which was reported favourably by the French press and which saw his popularity ratings rise. I'll be looking at how President Sarkozy uses his private life to distract the media from writing stories on more pertinent political subjects.

In case study 2, I'll be looking at how the press reacted to President Sarkozy's attempts to install Jean Sarkozy, his 23 year old, inexperienced son as the head of EPAD, the agency which runs Paris's wealthy and influential business district. In a recent interview with me, Eric Empatz, the editor of the satirical weekly paper, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, claimed this was the "turning point...the point of no return for the press." There was a media outcry following this event with both left-and-right leaning newspapers, decrying what they saw as a clumsy case of nepotism and an ugly attempt to return to a despotic political system. I'll also be looking at President Sarkozy's close ties to the business world during this chapter and what those ties mean when those business friends are also media owners.

And in case study 3, I'll be examining the unsympathetic press coverage of the President's angry reaction to the rumour which emerged earlier this year that he and his wife were having extra-marital affairs. " It's a bit late to weep," wrote a

journalist in *Le Monde* "You abolished the line between the private and public sphere...you've opened the door." <sup>1</sup>

It would seem that the rather sycophantic press corps of the notorious Elysée news conference in 2008 has become empowered by its new freedom to comment on the President's private life - and at the same time has become a little tired of it.

In my conclusion I hope that my analysis will provide enough information to make a fair assessment of where the balance of power really lies between Nicolas Sarkozy and the French media. Is the President exerting more influence than ever or has the French press really broken free of that traditional reverence which has kept it reined in for most of the duration of the Vth Republic? In the words of Laurent Solly, Sarkozy's former campaign manager:

"Reality has no importance. Perception is the only thing that counts." <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Qui seme le vent recolt la tempete" by Gerard Courtois in *Le Monde*, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Bonnet, O. "*Sarkozy, la Grande Manipulation*", *Dénonciation d'une Imposture* (Les points sur les I, 2008) p.27

## CHAPTER ONE: A NEW IMAGE

In an interview with *Le Point* magazine in 1987, the then French President Francois Mitterrand was asked about the importance of the media and particularly television in political life. It was indeed important he acknowledged but he insisted that the political reality of a minister was played out somewhere other than on the small screen. "An image," he explained "wears out quickly....an image is just an appearance." <sup>3</sup>

Yet Nicolas Sarkozy has spent the past thirty years of his political career carefully constructing his media image, and his focus has been particularly on his television style. The *leitmotif* of his election campaign, "*rupture*," meaning a break with the policies of the old guard, applies equally to his decision to abandon traditional Elysée media strategies. While Mitterrand made sparing appearances on television and Chirac tended to hide himself away, President Sarkozy has voluntarily jumped into the limelight even measuring his success by audience figures. When asked during an interview for *Le Journal Du Dimanche* in December 2003 what his greatest moment of the year was, he cited a TV debate programme he'd taken part in the previous month, saying simply "6 million, 600,000 viewers!" <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interview in *Le Point* magazine 21/09/87

<sup>4</sup> Nay, C. "*Un Pouvoir Nommé Desir*", (Grasset, 2007) p.321

In dominating the airwaves, Sarkozy has been following the advice of Thierry Saussez, his long term spin doctor. (Saussez was his communications manager when he was mayor of Neuilly and since April 2010, has been the coordinator of all his ministers' public statements). "There's always a competition between the media and the politician as to who will set the agenda," explains Saussez, "If a politician wants to win and to stay master of his own image, then he can't tag behind the media. He has to make them run after him." <sup>5</sup> And the media do run. Never before in the history of France has a French politician enjoyed such widespread coverage - at press conferences he gave as Interior Minister, he regularly attracted record-breaking audiences of more than 240 journalists. <sup>6</sup>

It's largely because Nicolas Sarkozy delivers the goods. He's repeatedly served up story after story to the media - and often on a plate. As Interior Minister when he was intent on making a name for himself as a law and order politician (insecurity was after all the theme which saw Chirac re elected in 2002), he orchestrated a series of police raids on suspected criminals to make sure his eponymous insecurity theme got plenty of airtime and space. Why go out looking for a story in this time-tarved world of 24- hour news when a government minister is already offering you fantastic footage and a sexy headline? And often not just one headline, but a choice of headlines. Former presidential contender, Francois Bayrou despairs of what he believes is the general inability of the French press to distinguish between real news and what's just offered up as a decoy. The

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with the author and broadcast on Today, BBC Radio 4, 12/01/2008.

<sup>6</sup> Charpier, F. "*Nicolas Sarkozy*" Enquête sur un homme de pouvoir (Presses de la cite 2007)

President, claims Bayrou, has organised a system of "democratic zapping" - forcing journalists to flit from story to story without pausing to contextualise or analyze the information they receive.<sup>7</sup> Place Beauvau (the seat of the Interior Ministry) pumped out statistics to show delinquency rates had fallen and in turn, the media obligingly pumped them out to the public as fact.<sup>8</sup> (The rude awakening for both parties came in November 2005 when sink estates across the country erupted into violence and France had to declare a state of national emergency). But President Sarkozy knows the ins and outs of TV – not only does he speak in snappy sound bites, he also knows how TV works and is fluent in the technical language of television. Editors, particularly TV editors, love him because he has boosted the ratings for all political shows. When he accepts to appear on a TV show, the show's editor rubs his hands with glee.<sup>9</sup>

Accessibility also initially made the French leader a firm favourite with much of the media. Even at the start of his political career, as mayor of Neuilly he was courting the press with regular lunches, and by the time he was Interior Minister, his close relationship with many journalists (he deliberately uses *le tutoiement*, the informal form of address) meant that France 2 felt confident enough to call him an hour before they went on air to ask him to plug a gap caused by the late drop-out of their planned guest.<sup>10</sup> It was a request to which Sarkozy agreed - air time is, after all, air time. It would have been unthinkable though, even in his

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<sup>7</sup> Bayrou, F. "Abus de Pouvoir" (Plon, 2009) p.19

<sup>8</sup> Merlant, P and Chatel, L. "Médias:" La Faillite d'un Contre-Pouvoir (Fayard 2009) p.61 and p.216-218

<sup>9</sup> Saint Cricq, R and Gerschel, F. "Canal Sarkozy," Le Président et la Télé Deux Ans D'Histoires Secrètes (Flammarion, 2009 p. 155)

<sup>10</sup> Charpier, F. "Nicolas Sarkozy" Enquête sur un homme de pouvoir (Presses de la cité 2007) p.129

Mayor of Paris days, that a journalist would call Jacques Chirac to ask him to fill a hole in a broadcasting schedule.

Sarkozy likes to give journalists the impression that he is far more approachable than his predecessors. De Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard D'Estaing, Mitterrand, and Chirac gave interviews in which they appeared only as the embodiment of their function, the Head of State, but Sarkozy doesn't try to hide his idiosyncratic personality. Through his long career, Jean Marie Pontaut, an investigative journalist with Le Point, has followed several interior ministers but says Nicolas Sarkozy stood out from the rest. "It's a pretty passionate relationship: he either likes you - or he really doesn't! He was matey with us...he had friends on the left and right, friends in all camps and he tried to create links that weren't overtly political but which were more direct. It was agreeable, this idea of proximity...because, of course in our line of work you have to mistrust and keep your distance, but you also need to get to know people or you can't write good articles on them!" <sup>11</sup> Jean Marie Pontaut also remarks that unlike his predecessor Jacques Chirac, who was reputed to have a violent temper but which he never showed publicly, Sarkozy's anger is very much in the public domain. "He's at least introduced a sort of transparency," says Pontaut "It's excessive perhaps but incontestably it's a new political image." <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with the author in Paris, 18/05/10

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

In his book published just before the 2007 elections, Thierry Saussez, warned that his client needed to humanise himself further if he were to be successful in the upcoming vote. Sarkozy, he said, needed to soften his image to work more on; "proximity, simplicity, humanity...he needs to learn to spend time losing time in listening to people." <sup>13</sup>

One way in which Nicolas Sarkozy has tried to make himself more sympathetic to French people - and more attractive to the media - is by making his private life public. While previous Presidents have fought against media intrusion into their domestic worlds, fearing that offering up too many personal details could debase their Presidential function, Nicolas Sarkozy has deliberately used the intimate details of his private life as a means of humanising himself and to try to make ordinary French people relate to him. Carla Bruni gave an early interview after her marriage to the French head of state in which she told reporters how she and her husband liked to spend their evenings "curled up on the sofa and watching telly together." <sup>14</sup>

Exploiting the growing influence of the culture of celebrity - "*le pipolisation*" - has frequently backfired on the President (such as when photographs appeared in Paris Match of his then wife Cecilia and her lover Richard Attias) but sexy personal stories can often provide a convenient smokescreen when things go wrong politically. The announcement that the Sarkozys had divorced came

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<sup>13</sup> Séguéla, J and Saussez, T. "*La Prise de L'Elysée*," Les Campagnes présidentielles de la Ve République (Plon 2007) p.259

<sup>14</sup> Machuret, P. "L'Enfant Terrible." *La Vie a L'Elysée sous Sarkozy*. (Seuil, 2009) p116

strategically on Black Thursday, the General Strike of 18/10/07, and the day before *L'Est Républicain* ran an exclusive interview with ex wife Cecilia.<sup>15</sup> The online paper *Rue89* ran the headline "*Le Timing Parfait de l'Elysée!*" pointing out that every major weekly news magazine in France (except *Le Point*) subsequently put Cecilia on their front page and not the strike.<sup>16</sup>

The French leader understands that attractive women make powerful media tools - newspapers and news programmes are suckers for a pretty face. Dutifully ticking the gender equality box, Nicolas Sarkozy's first cabinet was stocked with female ministers; yet only the photogenic got invited to accompany him on foreign missions - Rama Yade to Africa and the UK, Rachida Dati to Morocco and the UK, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet to Israel. The less aesthetically pleasing, one might say rather dumpy Christine Boutin for example, was not asked for her company!<sup>17</sup>

In light of Cecilia's exit from the Elysée and her swift replacement by Carla Bruni, it's interesting to note that Nicolas Sarkozy married Cecilia almost immediately after his divorce to his first wife came through. An unmarried politician is not a particularly alluring subject for the press and, until she became an adulteress, the ex-model Cecilia, was an excellent "marketing gadget" who served Nicolas Sarkozy very well in his political life, (even seemingly rescuing six Bulgarian medical workers held hostage in Libya - subsequently revealed as a pre

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid p161-2.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.rue89.com/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p.40

arranged EU deal).<sup>18</sup> The model-turned-pop star Carla Bruni however, described by France 3 journalist Patrice Machuret as "that well-oiled-media machine," was a trump card, having not only style and beauty but international fame as well. Her official entrance into the President's life appears to have been carefully stage managed: the pair were "stumbled upon" and "spotted" at EuroDisney with Carla's young son. The fact that a couple of the stolen photos from this private meeting were taken at extraordinarily close range made some press rather suspicious that the whole affair had been orchestrated, or, as Patrice Machuret puts it, the "discovery" bore the trade mark of a production "made in Sarkozy."<sup>19</sup> The fairytale romance, which came out (like all feel-good films) just before Christmas (16th December) also conveniently displaced the angry headlines of the past few days which had fiercely criticised the President for having controversially invited the Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi to Paris on an official visit.

Predictably, Carla Bruni and her relationship with the French leader immediately grabbed and held the headlines. From the glossy gossip magazines like *Point de Vue* to the BBC's flagship morning news show, the Today Programme.

"Everyone is only talking about the love story - why are you here talking to me?"

Colombe Pringle, editor of *Point de Vue* asked me in the BBC Paris studio.

"Each time something embarrassing happens for the government or where

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<sup>18</sup> Despatch by the author for BBC Radio 4 1800 news, 23/07/10

<sup>19</sup> Machuret, P. "L'Enfant Terrible." *La Vie a L'Elysée sous Sarkozy*. (Seuil, 2009) p.160-169

French people are starting to doubt - something happens in his private life. He's using it maybe. And he chose well because she (Carla) is beautiful she's well known over the world

" She's a perfect tool for the media manipulator?" I asked

"She's the *perfect* tool" confirmed Ms Pringle. <sup>20</sup>

But despite the couple's polished communication skills the press was not unilaterally favourable to Ms Bruni's arrival. After the "President's broken heart stories" which were prompted by Cecilia's parting, few journalists - or indeed French citizens - were quite ready for the miraculous healing that the introduction of Carla seemed to have prompted. Thierry Desjardins, the former *Le Figaro* editor, (a paper usually very loyal to President Sarkozy), wrote a particularly critical chapter in his 2009 book about the alleged engineered meeting between the pair, saying that the French President had introduced us to Carla "too quickly, far too quickly...and with the most horrifying vulgarity..." <sup>21</sup> Sarkozy's ratings fell further when he and Carla were jet-setting around the world on holidays sending enviable photos back home in which they appeared tanned and radiant. (Carla Bruni herself later publicly recognised this had been the wrong impression to give the press). Zapping through the French stations on my radio one morning around this time, I heard one commentator brilliantly (and with unmistakeably monarchical Louis XVI overtones) sum up the inelegance of the President's

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author in Paris on 11/01/08 and subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 4 Today programme, 12/10/08

<sup>21</sup> Désjardins, Thierry. "Sarkozy, Ses Balivernes et ses Fanfaronnades" (Fayard 2009) p.98

behaviour. "He gorged himself on happiness," said the commentator, "While the French people were starved of it."

Just as President Sarkozy's openness about his private life prompted accusations of vulgarity at home, abroad it risked causing offence. At the beginning of January, Saudi Arabia suggested that in respect for the Muslim faith it would be unwise for the unmarried couple to make an official state visit to their country together. A planned joint visit to India also left the conservative Indian authorities allegedly baffled over protocol.<sup>22</sup> But then on February 2nd 2008, the Elysée announced that Nicolas Sarkozy and Carla Bruni were married. Now a legal and official couple, (despite not publishing the marriage bans in accordance with French law)<sup>23</sup> Carla Bruni and Nicolas Sarkozy had just under two months to win back the affection of the press before the first official state visit of the French President and the First Lady to Great Britain. That visit is a good example of how "the Carla effect" paid off for Nicolas Sarkozy.

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<sup>22</sup> Despatch by the author, BBC Radio 4 1800 bulletin, 07/01/2008.

<sup>23</sup> Bonnet, O. "Sarkozy, La Grande Manipulation" Dénonciation d'une Imposture

## **Case Study 1- L'Effet Carla - ca marche!**

In the run up to the state visit, as I have already outlined, Nicolas Sarkozy was not enjoying favourable press coverage and his opinion poll ratings were continuing to slide. Not only was he failing to deliver on his election promise to boost spending power, he also appeared to be more interested in his own private life than his public duties, doing nothing to hide from media scrutiny his personal fondness for flashy friends and the trappings of wealth – (something which had earned him the derogatory press nickname “President Bling Bling”). In February, during a state visit to Romania, the French leader, having just signed an accord between the two nations, couldn’t resist pocketing the designer pen. The video was quickly circulated on YouTube where it was soon joined by other presidential howlers including an episode which occurred just a month before the visit to Britain where the President was caught on camera snapping at a bystander who had refused to shake his hand “Get lost then asshole!” Shortly after this incident, President Sarkozy appointed an internet advisor at the Elysée with responsibility for monitoring web content about the President.<sup>24</sup>

The state visit to meet Her Majesty the Queen would demand the utmost protocol and diplomacy and the left-leaning papers clearly expected their President to fail. In the edition of the 26<sup>th</sup> March, the day the couple were due to arrive in the UK, *Le Monde’s* London correspondent Marc Roche wrote an article which set out “the very strict ceremonial codes of the Court of Windsor” and which stressed

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<sup>24</sup> Kuhn, R “*Les Médias C’est Moi*”, *Président Sarkozy and News Media Management* p.22

how imperative it was that the French Head of State and his First Lady should obey them. The correspondent seemed so nervous that Sarkozy would embarrass France with a diplomatic gaffe that he even offered the advice that at table in royal circles, one “sits up straight....preferably with hands on knees.”

“It’s out of the question” wrote Roche “that he (Sarkozy) should be familiar (with the Queen), the way he is with Angela Merkel, nor can there be any slips of protocol such as we saw during the meeting with Pope Benedict XVI when he was playing with his phone.” His next line was almost a warning; “Elizabeth II has never compromised the majesty of her function.”

A suggestion of suitable dinner conversation followed with a warning that if the Queen smiled and said “How very interesting” it meant she wanted to change the subject. Carla Bruni was also offered the tongue-in-cheek advice that Her Majesty wasn’t really keen on fashion, dressed conservatively, wore very little make up and had known just one man in her life, Prince Philip.

*Libération* also had an opener on the visit (26/3/08) which started with the line; “48 hours of royal behaviour would seem like a very long time for Nicolas Sarkozy. But his advisors have promised that the President will be able to hold it together.” The paper also warned their head of state against sending text messages in front of the Queen.

The couple who got off the plane on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> however were the epitome of decorum. Carla Bruni (whose naked photo, a souvenir from her modelling days, had been splashed across the British tabloid press) was dressed demurely; while President Sarkozy's ubiquitous mobile phone was out of sight. The couple (who had both brought their mothers) were clearly on their best behaviour.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2008, after the couple had completed their official visit, *Le Monde's* title almost looked like an apology: "*Honni soit qui mal y pense!*" Taken from the motto of the English Chivalric Order of the Garter, it means "Let him who thinks ill there be shamed." A begrudging acknowledgement perhaps that the President and his wife had pretty much pulled it off? The article admitted that technically, Carla had been perfect ("perhaps too perfect"). It went on to criticise Nicolas Sarkozy for trying too hard and for going overboard in his speech (he spoke of an entente amicable rather than an entente cordiale) but then the author suggested such a trait was a collective failure of his nation. "That's the problem with the French," wrote Dominique Dhombres "They always want to do too much." The London correspondent of *Le Monde*, Marc Roche, who penned an elaborate portrait of the banquet, seemed to be struggling to find something to criticise in the President's behaviour; a dig at his long winded speech ( "...it seemed to please the English but less so those who understood French") was as good as it got. The day afterwards, when the paper had taken stock of the extremely favourable reaction of the British press to Carla Bruni, it published

another article in which it spoke of the astonishing “Carla effect,” noting how she appeared to have outshone her husband and how he seemed to rejoice in her success.

*Libération's* take on the visit was a little more sarcastic, remarking how the fairytale romance of the couple had begun in Disneyland but now they were off to a place where there was a real Queen and even footmen! The paper admitted that Madame Sarkozy had behaved impeccably but couldn't resist poking fun at her husband's nervous tics and shoulder shrugs as he met the Queen. “Luckily,” said the paper, “Carla was there ....with a smile, her curtsey, her light reverence...pure class.” In the royal carriage, the writer observed that the President however was “like a child...talking and talking...and then his face would tense and he'd clench his teeth.” The paper went on to acknowledge the enormity of the occasion and suggested that the private informal lunch that followed the Inspection of the Troops might have gone a lot better. This was the only article the paper published on the royal visit – the absence of any follow articles suggests there was little to attack.

*Le Figaro*, the newspaper that's very loyal to Sarkozy, also remarked how relaxed the elegant First Lady was in the presence of the royals, gently reminding her nervous husband of the correct protocol. He seemed “Very focused and rather uneasy, perhaps trying hard to avoid making a mistake,” the paper suggested. The paper praised the trip as being “a huge success for the

President,” reminding readers that just before his arrival in London Nicolas Sarkozy had promised to change his style.

By analyzing the reaction of the press after the state visit to England then, it's clear that the “Carla effect” paid off well for President Sarkozy. Carla's style and grace matched the demands of such a grand occasion and softened the impact of her husband's minor comportment shortfalls. Her dressed-down outfit deliberately broke away from the “look at me” image the couple had hitherto offered the press and showed that the First Lady recognised when to step out of the limelight and concede the number one spot to her hostess, the Queen. Her glamour was also useful in eclipsing all talk of politics – there was little press coverage of the content of any of Sarkozy's speeches.

Shortly after this visit, the President's popularity ratings rose slightly.<sup>25</sup> Having been constantly criticised by the press for undermining his presidential function during his visit to England, Nicolas Sarkozy proved that he could act in a presidential manner and could represent France without causing her to be subsequently ridiculed in the foreign press.

*Lepost.fr*, an online subsidiary of *Le Monde* had the simplest but perhaps the most incisive analysis of the visit. The title page read; *A visit to the Queen – What Nicolas Sarkozy Left Behind In France*. Underneath were simply five photographs of the President in compromising poses complete with five

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<sup>25</sup> Désjardins, Thierry. “Sarkozy, Ses Balivernes et ses Fanfaronnades” (Fayard 2009) p.170

subheadings – *his Rolex, his Raybans, his Wandering Hands, his Bad Manners, his Foul Mouth.*

Faint praise, yes, but praise nonetheless – the left-leaning paper reluctantly acknowledged that Nicolas Sarkozy had managed to suppress his low brow tastes during his UK visit and had, at last, behaved as a head of state. To take the words of Nicolas Sarkozy himself (recorded by broadcasters at the banquet table) the visit to Windsor had been “magnifical.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4vfi5\\_it-ize-magnifical\\_fun](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4vfi5_it-ize-magnifical_fun)

## CHAPTER 2 – ALL THE PRESIDENT’S FRIENDS

The state visit to Britain then was a triumph of form over substance. But if President Sarkozy could subtly manipulate the media with pretty women, soap opera style love stories and by creating such a seemingly accessible persona for himself, then equally he could force the press in a much more heavy-handed way. The French leader has never been shy about using his power directly (as he frequently has done with public broadcasting services) and nor has he ever shied away from seeking close ties with those in positions of influence. How very convenient then that the richest industrialists in France are both President Sarkozy’s best friends and own some of the most influential private sections of the French media. Seducing such media moguls has been a strategy which Sarkozy has been pursuing since his early political life in Neuilly.<sup>27</sup>

"France has produced a new model of media control," wrote one journalist from an independent newspaper, a few months after Nicolas Sarkozy’s election. "It’s somewhere between Berlusconi and Putin. Sarkozy does not need to emulate Berlusconi in actually owning the titles; his friends will do that for him."<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between the French leader and much of the privately owned press is perhaps best defined by the maxim "You scratch my back and I’ll scratch

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<sup>27</sup> He met many of them in the Neuilly Communications club he set up in 1985 – for example Nicolas de Tavernost, the chairman of M6 the private TV station) and he has succeeded in seducing all of them.

<sup>28</sup> "France’s New Model of Media Control," *Le Monde Diplomatique* 14/10/07 by André Schiffrin

yours.” A large majority of French newspapers and magazines are owned by Dassault and Lagardère, France’s leading arms manufacturers. Lagardère’s affiliate, Hachette, also owns the majority of the French publishing houses.<sup>29</sup> Arnaud Lagardère (whose key titles include the news magazine *Paris Match*, *Le Journal du Dimanche* and the commercial radio station *Europe 1*) speaks of President Sarkozy as “not my friend but my brother.” His father once explained why his family had become media moguls:

“A press group you see is a great asset for picking up contracts.”<sup>30</sup>

In a relationship based on mutual exchange then, it’s not surprising that when stories which don’t show the President in the best of lights - for example when his then wife Cecilia didn’t bother to vote in the second round of the elections - they get mysteriously edited out of the papers owned by the President’s cronies.<sup>31</sup> *Le Journal du Dimanche* not only pulled this story but two years previously, when another of Lagardère’s titles, *Paris Match*, ran photographs of Cecilia in New York with her lover, the magazine’s editor Alain Génestar became increasingly vulnerable in his post. After one of his journalists subsequently secured an interview with the tennis player Yannick Noah in which he claimed he’d leave France if Sarkozy ever became its President, Génestar ordered those lines to be edited out, fearing for his job. Unfortunately, the satirical paper *Le Canard*

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Halimi, S. “*Les Nouveaux Chiens de Garde*”, (Liber-Raisons D’Agir, 1997) p.35

<sup>31</sup> Article by author published in *Ariel* magazine 22/07/08

*Enchaîné* got hold of the cut and Alain Génestar was given his marching orders.<sup>32</sup>

Serge Dassault, a Senator in Sarkozy's ruling UMP party, bought *Le Figaro* in 2004, wanting he said, a paper to express his own views.<sup>33</sup> The paper is so supportive of the French leader that it's often known among rival editors as "Pravda." During the public outcry that surrounded Colonel Gaddafi's visit, Dassault praised the French leader for having invited him saying the visit was good for business. It later transpired that Gaddafi was in negotiations with Dassault for 14 of his Rafale planes.<sup>34</sup> As one commentator put it : "The Dassault group needs the President of the Republic to sell it's planes. The President needs *Le Figaro* to sell his policies."<sup>35</sup>

Martin Bouygues, another right wing sympathiser who owns the most watched private French TV channel TF1, has been a close friend of Sarkozy's for more than 20 years. He's not only godfather to the President's youngest son, he's even been represented by Sarkozy when the President was still a practising lawyer. During the elections Bouygues gave so much air time to the aspiring head of state that TF1 became known as "TeleSarko." After the elections he kindly managed to find a director's job at his channel for Sarkozy's former campaign manager Laurent Solly. And when Patrick Poivre D'Arvor, the anchor of his 20h00 flagship news programme, managed to insult the President during a live

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<sup>32</sup> Charpier, F. "*Nicolas Sarkozy*", *Enquete Sur Un Homme de Pouvoir* (Presses de la Cite 2007) p.168-178

<sup>33</sup> "France's New Model of Media Control," *Le Monde Diplomatique* 14/10/07 by Andre Schiffrin

<sup>34</sup> Bonnet, O. "Sarkozy, la Grande Manipulation," *Denonciation d'une imposture* (Les points sur les I, 2008) p.28-29.

<sup>35</sup> Portelli, S "Le Sarkozysme sans Sarkozy", (Grasset, 2009)

interview, despite audience figures never having been so high, he was, as one French commentator put it, “got rid of faster than a contestant on *Star Academy*” (the French equivalent of *Britain’s Got Talent*).<sup>36</sup> Bouygues also owns the biggest public construction company in France and it would appear that his support for the government has resulted in direct procurement orders - last year his company won a contract to build three extra prisons with more than 2000 places – just a year after he had been given a contract to build three others.<sup>37</sup>

Media owners who aren’t on side are viewed extremely suspiciously by the President as can be seen in the case of Matthieu Pigasse who is currently leading a bid to take over the cash strapped, but extremely influential paper, *Le Monde*. Pigasse, who already owns the cultural magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, is a top banker and left wing sympathiser who has worked closely with the Socialist politician Dominique Strauss Kahn (a possible Presidential contender in 2012) and Pigasse is also said to be hoping for a cabinet post if the Socialists win the next elections.<sup>38</sup> Pigasse is backed by the overtly left winger, Pierre Bergé, co founder of Yves Saint Laurent fashion house and Xavier Niel, a telecommunications entrepreneur who has already given financial support to *Bakchich*, the left leaning online paper which is highly critical of the government.<sup>39</sup> It’s understood that Nicolas Sarkozy has held fiery talks with the publisher of *Le Monde* (Eric Fottorino) (whom he ordered to the Elysée) to express his

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<sup>36</sup> St Cricq R, and Gerschel, F. “*Canal Sarkozy*,” *Le Président et la Télé Deux Ans D’Histoires Secrètes* (Flammarion, 2009) p. 44

<sup>37</sup> Bayrou, F. “*Abus de Pouvoir*” (Plon, 2009) p176-177

<sup>38</sup> Reuters despatch, 15/06/10

<sup>39</sup> Mediapart website 15/06/10 <http://www.mediapart.fr/>

opposition to such a takeover and has threatened to withdraw state funding for the paper's unprofitable printing operation if they win.<sup>40</sup> The former leader of the Socialists, Francois Hollande reacted angrily to the Presidential interference exclaiming that the President "wants to be master of the world including the newspaper world!"<sup>41</sup> A counterbid has now been launched by Stephane Richard, who only very recently took up the directorship of Orange France Telecom. Richard used to head the office of Christine Lagarde, the French Finance Minister, and although he has no media experience he is close to the President.<sup>42</sup> There is a strong suspicion that the Elysée is behind the counterbid and certainly if President Sarkozy intends to stand again in the 2012 elections (as seems increasingly likely) then he would prefer to have France's leading newspaper onside.

"For him" writes *Le Canard Enchaîné*, "a good press is a press which obeys orders."<sup>43</sup>

Having good friends in high places then, can often offer President Sarkozy a comfortable degree of influence over certain sectors of the privately owned media.<sup>44</sup> The public broadcasting sector however allows President Sarkozy to exercise a much more direct and personalised power. On France 2 and 3 programmes, the President expects a certain reverence and thus easy ride from

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<sup>40</sup> "Sarkozy pris la main dans *Le Monde*" editorial in *Libération* by Raphael Garrigos, 15/06/10

<sup>41</sup> Article in *Libération* 15/06/10

<sup>42</sup> *Bientot, Le Fin d'un Monde...* Article in *Le Canard Enchaîné* 16/06/10

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>44</sup> Of course not all his friends act as intermediaries de facto – Edouard de Rothschild, the owner of the left leaning *Libération* does not interfere in editorial decision making (Kuhn, R "Les Médias C'est Moi", President Sarkozy and News Media Management) p.8

interviewers (the deferential relationship between both public and private sector journalists and the President will be examined more fully in chapter 3 of this paper) and when he is tackled, he has no hesitation in complaining to a journalist's bosses.<sup>45</sup> In the summer of 2008 after the Elysée had requested France 3 to invite the President on the evening news programme to speak about the European elections, the President exploded when he saw staff members demonstrating against his broadcasting reforms and threatened to walk out. "This place has no manners!.. I will not be treated like this!" he yelled. The boss of *France Televisions* reminded his staff that France 3 was a public service, and thus owed courtesy to the French leader.<sup>46</sup>

The journalist Laurent Mauduit, editor of the independent news website *Mediapart*, believes that the French press is still stuck in the Gaullist tradition that ORTF (the predecessor to France Televisions and Radio France) is the voice of France and that President Sarkozy has played heavily on this Gaullist style control in public broadcasting.<sup>47</sup> One such example of this is the fact that the French leader recently decided to override the regulatory authority for broadcasting which is responsible for appointing the Director General of the two public broadcasting authorities, France Televisions and Radio France, and instead to nominate personally the new head himself.<sup>48</sup> The regulatory authority

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<sup>45</sup> Bonnet, O. "*Sarkozy la Grande Manipulation*," *Dénonciation d'une Imposture* (Les Points sur les I, 2008) p.22 and p 63-64.

<sup>46</sup> St Cricq R, and Gerschel, F. "*Canal Sarkozy*," *Le Président et la Télé Deux Ans D'Histoires Secrètes* (Flammarion, 2009) p.243

<sup>47</sup> Interview with the author in Paris, 17/5/10.

<sup>48</sup> 71% of French people surveyed said they were hostile to the President personally naming the head of public broadcasting (St Cricq R, and Gerschel, F. "*Canal Sarkozy*," *Le Président et la Télé Deux Ans D'Histoires Secrètes* (Flammarion, 2009) p .256

was established by Mitterrand in 1982 to try to break the umbilical cord that had tied broadcasting to the state for so long under the Vth Republic – Sarkozy’s reform has arguably put it firmly back under state control.<sup>49</sup> Laurent Joffrin, editor of the left leaning *Libération*, calls the policy “archaic” claiming there’s already an “excessive influence of the political executive on the media world.”<sup>50</sup> “If the editor chosen manages to stay independent, “he adds “then the damage is limited, but there will always be a suspicion that any director appointed by the President will be acting for the government...” He mentions Alexandre Bompard, currently director of Europe 1 and at the time of interview, the firm favourite for the post of DG France Televisions:

“Bompard was in Francois Fillon’s cabinet so he’s already in the family and will clearly be vigilant that TV programmes aren’t anti-Sarkozy. I don’t mean he’ll be at the Elysée’s beck and call but he won’t be very critical.”<sup>51</sup>

In January 2008, at the news conference I mentioned in my introduction to this paper, the President announced that he was going to ban advertising on public television. The news came like a bombshell (and of course was deliberately designed to do so to give the impression of new actions for a new year). Firstly the President had made the decision alone, without consulting his government. Two months after his election he had explained to a group of provincial journalists how he imagined the balance of power in the Vth Republic;

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49 Kuhn, R “Les Medias C’est Moi”, President Sarkozy and News Media Management p.9-10

50 Interview with the author in Paris, 15/05/10

51 Ibid

“The Prime Minister is just a colleague,” he said “The boss, that’s me.”<sup>52</sup>

It was events like these that led to the *Libération* editor, Laurent Joffrin to ask the President at the same press conference whether in running France as a one man show he wasn’t running an elective monarchy.

Secondly of course, the decision to ban advertising on public TV stations meant a massive funding shortfall for programme producers. The respect that the French leader had complained was so greatly lacking in the public stations like France 3 would now have to be paid to him, since henceforth their programme budgets would be at the discretion of the political majority of the moment and would be dependent on lobbying.<sup>53</sup> In the moments leading up to annual budget reviews, the stations would also have to make sure they had not blotted their copybook at all. After announcing the plan to sell off the advertising arm of French public television share prices at the private channels TF1 and M6 soared. *Le Parisien* ran the headline the following morning; “Public channels with no advertising – a gift for TF1 and M6.”<sup>54</sup>

President Sarkozy is by no means the first French President to have close ties with media owners and influential businessmen – in 1984, for example Francois Mitterrand created a new private TV Channel, Canal Plus, and gave it to Andre

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<sup>52</sup> Reported in *Sud Ouest*, 22/08/07 and cited in Bayrou, F “*Abus de Pouvoir* 9 (Plon 2009) p.222

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Erik Empatz, editor *Le Canard Enchaîné* Paris, 17/05/10

<sup>54</sup> Cited in St Cricq R, and Gerschel, F. “*Canal Sarkozy*,” *Le Président et la Télé Deux Ans D’Histoires Secretes* (Flammarion, 2009) p.227

Rousselet, his former cabinet leader<sup>55</sup> – but Sarkozy is the first President to be so open about those ties.

“Mitterrand and Chirac certainly had friends who were big bosses,” admits Laurent Mauduit, editor of *Mediapart*. “But those relationships weren’t flaunted...in fact, they were slightly hidden. Chirac was very friendly for example with Francois Pinault (one of the richest men in France) but you never saw the two together – that would have been unimaginable. But Sarkozy is always on holidays with billionaires – with Bolloré, with Dominique de Sene, with Rothschild.”<sup>56</sup>

Increasingly, in a country grappling with a financial crisis and a crippling public debt, photographs of the Bling Bling President holidaying in Bolloré’s yacht in Malta or in St Tropez, were leaving a bad taste in the mouth of the French people.

<sup>57</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy’s post-election celebratory dinner at Fouquet’s, the most expensive restaurant in Paris, has never quite been forgiven. <sup>58</sup> Sitting around his table that night was almost every one of France’s richest and most powerful businessmen and media owners – and the impression given was: “ that the forces of Money had come to get their due...this distant Republic which had always been out of reach now finally, belonged to them.” <sup>59</sup> Perhaps unwisely in the light of such an evening, one of Nicolas Sarkozy’s first acts as President was

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<sup>55</sup> Halimi, S. “Les Nouveaux Chiens de Garde,” (Liber-Raisons D’Agir, 1997) p. 16

<sup>56</sup> Interview with author in Paris 15/05/10

<sup>57</sup> When de Gaulle appointed Pompidou as his Prime Minister he warned him to stop holidaying in St Tropez as it wasn’t quite in keeping with his function. He suggested the lower key Brittany as a suitable alternative! ( cited in Joffrin,L “*Le Roi est Nu*,” Robert Laffont, 2008) p.79

<sup>58</sup> Bonnet, O “*Sarkozy la Grande Manipulation*,” Dénonciation d’une Imposture (Les Points sur les I, 2008) p.45

<sup>59</sup> Bayrou, F “*Abus de Pouvoir* 9 (Plon 2009) p.225

to drop the maximum tax level from 60% to 50% - to many journalists it appeared to be a gift of complicity to his wealthy friends.<sup>60</sup>

By October 2009, two and a half years into his Presidency, Nicolas Sarkozy was increasingly coming under fire from the French people for being too controlling and too concerned with courting the rich. A popularity survey the previous month had revealed that only 44% of the country still had a positive view of their leader.<sup>61</sup> Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, was rising sharply and in such a hostile economic climate, President Sarkozy's election maxim "Work More to Earn More" had gained a farcical ring. And this was the moment that the Elysée chose to announce that the French leader's son, Jean Sarkozy, a 23 year old student (who had recently failed his exams), was going to become the new head of EPAD, the agency that runs the premier business district in Paris. It was the same position that Nicolas Sarkozy himself had held between 2004 and 2006.

In my next case study I hope to show that despite their delicate relations with State power, the French Press, pretty much across the board, revolted over the Epad affair. Eric Empatz, the editor of the satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné*, describes the Jean Sarkozy story as "One of Sarkozy's biggest mistakes."<sup>62</sup> He continued: "It became ridiculous and it was a total catastrophe....it was unbelievable to see ministers and certain press trying to

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<sup>60</sup> Joffrin,L "*Le Roi est Nu*," Robert Laffont, 2008) p.90

<sup>61</sup> ViaVoice poll carried out for *Libération* 12/09/10

<sup>62</sup> Interview with the author, Paris, 15/05/10

stay loyal to him...in the end we (journalists) just couldn't let it go. It was the big turning point. ”

### ***Case Study 2 – Moi, mon Papa, il est President!***

On Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009, *Le Journal du Dimanche* website broke the story that Jean Sarkozy, a UMP (right wing) municipal councillor who was in his second year of law school, was set to take over the agency that manages La Défense, France's financial district and economic showcase. From the very start, with its headline “Jean Sarkozy, the Royal Road,” the paper set the monarchical theme which almost all other newspapers would subsequently pick up – the King was placing the Dauphin in a position of power to secure the future of the dynasty. The online paper also carried the barbed comment of the outgoing director Patrick Devedjian, who further illustrated the dynastical theme by quoting a 17<sup>th</sup> Century play;

“In souls nobly born, valour does not depend on age.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> According to *L'Express* newspaper, Prime Minister Francois Fillon was preparing a decree to modify the age limit to allow Devedjian to stay in place until the age of 65—a move that was blocked by the Elysée presidential palace.

*Le Monde* on that same day carried a short factual account of the planned takeover using material from the wire service AFP, at the same time giving facts and figures on the enormity of the job that the 23 year old student was supposed to assume. Two days later in an article headlined, “The Irresistible Rise of Jean Sarkozy,” *Le Monde* journalist Beatrice Jerome outlined the President’s locally unpopular expansion plans for the West Parisian district, pointing out that Jean Sarkozy would now be overseeing the project in the most strategic and economically powerful territory in France. By the end of that day an online petition calling for Jean Sarkozy to step down had collected more than 27,000 signatures.

Over the next couple of days, *Le Monde* subtly steered its readers to draw parallels between the ferocious ambition of the son and that of his presidential father. In an online article on 12<sup>th</sup> October, which gave space to both the views of Jean Sarkozy himself and his detractors, the boastful headline was a carefully selected quotation from an interview with Sarkozy Junior; “I’m paving my way.” In reproducing the section of the interview in which Jean Sarkozy spoke of his “determination,” his “motivation” and his “hard work”, *Le Monde* could be pretty confident that its readers would pick up the resonance.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> however, angered by the lack of comment from the President himself and by the support of his ministers (Valerie Pécresse, the higher education

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minister, had given interviews in which she said Jean was the “perfect candidate” for the EPAD post), *Le Monde* published a biting front page editorial in which it said the whole affair cast doubt on the impartiality of the ruling power. It was quite right that the affair had provoked such a backlash of criticism, the editorial argued, especially in light of how the head of state and his advisors had managed the controversy;

“Have we regressed to such a perverse court practice in which no one dares to tell the king he is wrong? Has such a terror been installed to the point that servile counsellors just jump to the king’s bidding?”

For *Le Monde*, the EPAD affair then showed the President in a despotic light – the absolutist King, exercising his divine right to govern unchallenged.

“What happened,” the article asked “To that candidate Sarkozy who in 2007 spoke with such conviction of an “irreproachable Republic”. Two days later another article claimed the affair summed up the “contradictions of Sarkozyism – that in the same breath (he) advocates democracy but practices heavy-handed power.”

Throughout the week, *Le Monde* had also drawn on the theme of the President’s fascination for money. An online piece on October 14<sup>th</sup> suggested the affair went way beyond nepotism and instead illustrated a “glaring alignment of politics and the entrepreneurial model.” The following day, that theme was developed in another article titled “The Nepotism of the Nouveau Riche.” The article reminded

readers of that infamous 2007 post election dinner with leading industrialists at Fouquet's:

"He chose those guests to send this message: that from now on the world of business will be at the heart of the French political system."

For *Libération's* Laurent Joffrin, who had caused such a stir in the 2008 January press conference by accusing the President of running an elective monarchy, the EPAD affair was a journalistic gift. His editorial, (13/10/09) titled "Prince Jean," and the supporting articles written by colleagues, were all peppered with monarchical and courtly language –"dauphin," "castles," "chevaliers", "prerogatives," "divine right". With heavy irony Joffrin suggested he perhaps should have asked the President whether he was running a "hereditary monarchy."<sup>64</sup>

"Who can believe for a second," asked Joffrin, that the appointment of a boy in his second year at law school to head a body entrusted with managing the billions of euros of La Défense owes all to his merit and nothing to his name?"

To hit the point home, the paper's front page carried a photograph of Jean Sarkozy smiling rather smugly with the headline "My Daddy's President!"

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<sup>64</sup> In fact Sarkozy had originally jeered at Joffrin because he had misunderstood his question and thought he was implying he had been running a hereditary monarchy, implying he was the son of Jacques Chirac.

*Le Parisien* took up the same line in its four- page spread the same day. A cartoon showed Sarkozy Father and Son looking at a UMP poster bearing the oak tree, the party's logo. "Look Jean" Sarkozy tells his son "It's your family tree!"

The paper pointed out that this latest controversy came hot on the heels of another ugly episode (in which the culture minister Frédéric Mitterrand had admitted paying for sex with young men in Thailand) and the sub-heading read like a trailer for a soap opera: "A new episode in Saga Sarkozy!"

In more serious analysis, editorialists ruminated on how the Elysée could have imagined that they could just get away with trying to install the President's inexperienced son in such a powerful position. Catapulting Jean to the board of EPAD made a mockery of his father's claim to support meritocracy and to break with the elitism of the past the paper implied:

"For the French," said one editorial, "who are so attached to the Republican principle of equality, this was too much." Echoing *Le Monde* and *Libération*, *Le Parisien* also called upon the President to break his silence over the matter and to face the music.

And what of *Le Figaro* in all this controversy? The newspaper's sporadic reporting at this time suggests it was in deep internal crisis over how best to handle the story which every other newspaper had unanimously and vehemently tackled. Initially the right-leaning paper, traditionally loyal to President Sarkozy, had simply written up the two sides of the story, allowing comments from supporters saying Jean had won his legitimacy through the ballot box like any

other councilor, but also citing his critics who suggested that getting elected in Neuilly was hardly a feat for someone with his surname.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> October Charles Jaigu wrote a piece entitled “The Elysée caught in Turbulence” which claimed that the Elysée team had acknowledged that it had made a few communication errors in recent weeks. The unnamed Elysée sources that Jaigu spoke to insisted however that the government had not interfered in the Epad election process and was “outraged” by suggestions that the French government was practicing “Berlusconism.” A secondary piece quoted the government spokesman Luc Chatel as being “extremely shocked” by what he believed to be a “man hunt.” There were quotes from five other supporters of Jean Sarkozy and three from his critics. But in the online editions of *Le Figaro*, readers were becoming enraged at what they saw as their paper’s inability to tackle such a glaring abuse of political power.

“My grandson is in his second year of kindergarten and loves aeroplanes. Do you think he has a chance of becoming boss of Air France next year?” commented one online reader ironically.

“Welcome back a few centuries before the Revolution!” joked one contributor adding “It’s scandalous.”

“Vomit!” wrote another, more succinctly.

On 16<sup>th</sup> October, *Le Figaro* took the extraordinary move of warning its readers to stop the mutiny. Etienne Mougeotte penned an editorial titled “The end of Play

Time” insisting that focusing so much attention on the story of Jean Sarkozy was wasting precious time that needed to be spent on addressing the real political issues of the day. The tone was decidedly that of a school teacher reprimanding unruly children and suggested that doubtful readers should study the interview it had just conducted with the President of the Republic (in which the President justified his son’s actions). It was normal, wrote Mougeotte, that the opposition Socialists should attack, but he warned;

“If certain ministers feel uneasy in the government, the door is wide open.”

The article misfired badly.

“This editorial brings shame on your paper and I’m a UMP voter!” exclaimed one online reader.

“You’re not fit to be called journalists!” wrote another. “You’re Pravda!”

Subsequently the website was closed with the following explanation:

“Le Figaro.fr has decided to block the commentaries on this article because there are too many personal attacks.” A couple of hours later, the site was reopened after some of the more extreme criticisms had been cleaned from the site. <sup>65</sup>

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> October, Jean Sarkozy appeared on *France 2*’s evening news programme to announce he was withdrawing his candidature for the Presidency of EPAD, claiming he didn’t want to embarrass his father any further. By

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<sup>65</sup> Article in Rue89 16/10/2009 <http://www.rue89.com/>

fortunate coincidence he was followed on the next news programme *A Vous De Jurer* by his godfather Brice Hortefeux, who was able to praise publicly Jean's decision. *Le Figaro* the next morning recounted the events but revealed that Jean had been planning a whole series of media interviews to outline his plans for La Défense. He cancelled them, said the paper, after talking to his father. "Many of the UMP MPs," admitted the paper "were finding it harder and harder to hide their spite." Today *Le Figaro* no longer tries to justify the EPAD affair - lead writer Charles Jaigu now refers to it as; "a political mistake with massive consequences;"

*Libération* responded to the stepping down of Jean Sarkozy with the dramatically biblical title "The Sacrifice of the Son." The paper claimed it was impossible for anyone to imagine that Jean Sarkozy had made the decision of his own accord. "It sounds like the President," wrote the paper, "is admitting he's gone too far in exercising personal power....Sarkozy is worried by the increasing protests from the right and the danger to himself." The paper concluded: "He sent his son to the guillotine to save his own regime."

In the Elysée, Nicolas Sarkozy remained unusually quiet. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> October he posted a short message on Facebook to say simply he was proud of his son and the decision he'd made. A new communication strategy had begun.

## Chapter 3 – All the President’s Enemies.

Jacques Séguéla once called Nicolas Sarkozy the “LCI made man<sup>66</sup>” – the man who is perfectly cut out for the demands of 24-hour television news.<sup>67</sup> Noting how Sarkozy repeated the same few maxims in a loop, Séguéla also warned that being ubiquitous on the small screen would backfire:

“Be careful – saturation is the first enemy of communication. If you appear too much you become invisible.”<sup>68</sup>

The reason that journalists like *Libération’s* Laurent Joffrin, give to explain why 66% of French people now disapprove of the President’s performance is overkill.

<sup>69</sup>

“If you have a President who is always present,” says Joffrin “who is always active, always there, always among the people, you cannot have the decorum, the solemnity that the Vth Republic intends. In fact he (Sarkozy) behaves more like a manager than a President.”<sup>70</sup>

As I have already outlined in Chapter 1, during the 2007 election campaign President Sarkozy’s willingness to appear constantly on TV and radio

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<sup>66</sup> LCI is the TF1’s 24 hour rolling news channel.

<sup>67</sup> Séguéla, J and Saussez, T. “*La Prise De L’Elysée*,” Les Campagnes Présidentielles de la Ve République (Plon, 2007) p.227

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ifop poll, published in Paris Match 20/5/10

<sup>70</sup> Interview with the author, Paris 12/05/10

programmes and his skill in directing those programmes to his own political agenda, won him many votes. But once he became President he continued to be omnipresent in the media. While his intricate knowledge of all aspects of the political agenda had won him plaudits as a presidential hopeful, when he became head of state, his continuing habit of commenting on each subject that played big in the media came to be seen as needless interference which debased his function. Previous presidents used television appearances to explain their actions but Nicolas Sarkozy uses television to act.<sup>71</sup> For the current French leader, TV is used as proof of his engagement - but the risk of appearing in so many televised debates and programmes is that the French people no longer view a President as someone who takes decisions, but rather as someone who arbitrates.<sup>72</sup>

“Sarkozy always puts himself forward,” explains Eric Empatz, editor of *Le Canard Enchaîné*. “...I mean if a kid gets bitten by a dog, he’ll be there, making new laws on dogs. It’s the President of the Republic who will speak about it. It’s a great way to get on telly but what does it say about the presidential role if the President of the Republic is talking about biting dogs?”<sup>73</sup> In other words, a President should be looking at the bigger picture rather than becoming involved in the minutiae of every day events.

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<sup>71</sup> D’Almeida, F and Delporte C, “*Histoire des médias en France*” de la Grande Guerre à nos jours (Champs histoire, 2010) p.316

<sup>72</sup> St Cricq R, and Gerschel, F. “*Canal Sarkozy*,” *Le Président et la Télé Deux Ans D’Histoires Secrètes* (Flammarion, 2009) p.150

<sup>73</sup> Interview with the author, Paris, 17/05/10

By default, the implication is that the President won't attend events that the Elysée believes don't particularly matter or which aren't dominating the news. In early 2009 for example when the French overseas department of Guadeloupe was crippled by a four-week old general strike, the French leader chose not to visit the country until the situation escalated into rioting and a trade union leader had been shot.<sup>74</sup>

At the start of his Presidency, Nicolas Sarkozy presented himself as a sort of superhero figure, making grand promises that were designed to impress. When Barack Obama was elected US president for example in November 2008, President Sarkozy announced that he couldn't wait for Obama to take up office so that he "could change the world with him."<sup>75</sup> Similarly he gave his word that the French Colombian hostage, Ingrid Betancourt would soon be freed "even if I have to go into the jungle and get her myself!"<sup>76</sup> By choosing to appear so frequently on TV and radio, President Sarkozy has had constantly to find new ideas and new promises – and there's a sense that he hasn't been able to keep up with his own programme. Elaborate philosophical ideas such as his January 2008 promise to launch a new "politics of civilisation" were never mentioned again. A deeply controversial plan to make French schoolchildren "adopt" a Jewish child who had been murdered in the Holocaust quickly fell off the agenda,

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<sup>74</sup> Désjardins, T. "Sarkozy, Ses Balivernes et ses Fanfaronnades" (Fayard 2009) p.354

<sup>75</sup> Ibid p.19

<sup>76</sup> Ibid p.22

and his promise to bend the rigid rules on the secular state to introduce a “*laïcité positive*” disappeared as quickly as it arrived.<sup>77</sup>

Saturating the airwaves then has not only resulted in the President’s message losing impact, it’s also provoked a loss of respect for the President himself.

“He’s got a pugilistic streak,” says the editor of *Libération* Laurent Joffrin. “He’s in the ring taking punches like a boxer and this gives the political figure a sense that he’s just an ordinary man. And people see he can’t take over the scene – he can only take care of it .... And so in the end people feel they have the right to treat him in a very familiar manner.”<sup>78</sup>

Yet traditionally the French media, particularly in the television sector, (both private and public) have had a very reverential relationship with the President. In 2005, presenter Laurence Ferrari temporarily sank her career by being aggressive with Sarkozy on TF1 – after the show, the then director of the Channel, Patrick le Lay, called her to remind her what being a *invite*, a guest, on a TV show meant and implied.<sup>79</sup> A guest in a television studio in France is afforded the same respect and courtesy as a guest at a private dinner party, which makes aggressive lines of questioning impossible. (I have already mentioned in Chapter 2 how TF1’s leading anchor, Patrick Poivre D’Arvoir was swiftly removed from his post after insulting Sarkozy live on air). Laurent Mauduit,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid p.174 -177

<sup>78</sup> Interview with author, Paris 12/05/10

<sup>79</sup> St Cricq R, and Gerschel, F. “*Canal Sarkozy*,” *Le President et la Tele Deux Ans D’Histoires Secretes* (Flammarion, 2009) p.61

editor of *Mediapart*, believes that the French press has little in common with its British counterpart:

“The history of the French press is connected very firmly to the history of the French institutions. The institutions surround a strong powerful Republican monarchy which doesn’t really have a counter-weight – our Parliament doesn’t have the power the British Parliament has for example. So our Press has a tradition of serving and it’s a democratically weak press....We’re still stuck in that servile tradition....and we have to think of progressively detaching from it.”<sup>80</sup> In fact, Laurent Mauduit left *Le Monde* to set up *Mediapart* with his co-worker Edwy Plenel to try to break away from the “old heritage of weakness and timidity.”<sup>81</sup> Other respected online papers including *Bakchich* and *Rue 89* were also set up with these goals in mind.

Serge Halimi argues that TV interviews conducted by the main anchors are necessarily subservient because of the enormous salaries the anchors are paid, which naturally place their sympathies and loyalties in the “boss- class”.<sup>82</sup> It’s certainly true that the main news anchors are not necessarily the best placed to conduct incisive interviews with the President since they may not be specialists in political affairs.<sup>83</sup> There is also a decorum difficulty in that it is often the Elysée who will inform the TV stations that the President will appear that evening on their programme rather than the stations themselves calling to request an

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with author conducted in Paris 17/5/10.

<sup>81</sup> Plenel, E. *Combat Pour Une Presse Libre* (Galaade 2009) p.3

<sup>82</sup> Halimi, S *Les Nouveaux Chiens de Garde* (Liber-Raisons D’Agir, 1997) p.63

<sup>83</sup> Kuhn, R *Contrasting Journalistic Cultures: The Political Interview on French and British Television* p.3

interview with the President. This allows the President the upper-hand; he can use programmes as a platform to air his views and policies instead of allowing the interviewer the opportunity to cross-examine or grill him.<sup>84</sup>

Compared to Britain, there is also little history of investigative reporting in France, where a political scoop is not seen as the sign of a free press by the political class, but rather as treason.<sup>85</sup> Jean Marie Pontaut, investigative reporter with *Le Point* magazine, believes it's a peculiarly French position:

“In France we've never been much good at finding the middle ground between being in the pocket and being extremely critical. It's a bit of a French thing. And the politicians don't get it. When we criticise (them) it's always for political reasons. But they don't talk about whether what we've written is true or not, they just want to know – who told you – was it the opposition? ....So the idea of having an objective press is pretty misunderstood here. They (politicians) always think there's some sort of political coup behind such stories.”<sup>86</sup>

As I hope I have already shown with the EPAD affair outlined in Case Study 2, the French press can nonetheless be extremely critical of their government. Satirical papers like *Le Canard Enchaîné* which describes itself as neither a left- nor a right -wing paper but “a paper of opposition,” have always attacked whoever was in government – Sarkozy may increasingly be portrayed in

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<sup>84</sup> In fact, very few of France's journalists have proper training - only 23% of some 37,000 registered journalists have attended a recognised journalist school. Evéno, P *Les Médias Sont –Ils Sous Influence?* (Larousse /à dire vrai, 2008) p.107.

<sup>85</sup> Charpier, F “Nicolas Sarkozy,” *Enquête sur un homme de Pouvoir* (Presses de la Cité,2007) p.172

<sup>86</sup> Interview with the author, Paris 18/05/10

editorials as the despotic king for example but in the early 1980s *Le Canard Enchaîné* ran a series of cartoons and columns which depicted Mitterrand as the aloof Sun King being crawled to by his minions.<sup>87</sup>

Yet across the French media, President Sarkozy is attacked on a much more personal level than his predecessors were. In April 2007 just before the Presidential election, the weekly news magazine *Marianne* devoted almost an entire issue to the allegedly poor state of Nicolas Sarkozy's mental health under the title "Sarkozy, is he mad?"<sup>88</sup> Ridiculing the head of state has become the norm and little appears to be off limits. There are frequent derogatory references (across a broad section of the press) to the President's short stature, his nervous tics and what's perceived to be his infantile behaviour. On the satirical puppet show *Les Guignols* (the French equivalent of *Spitting Image*), the editors broke their golden rule of never attacking a person's physical appearance and produced sketches in which Nicolas Sarkozy's puppet was shown wearing *les talonnettes* or built up shoes.<sup>89</sup> While the show's producers had no hesitation in poking fun at Jacques Chirac for being old or for being sparing with the truth (for a long time his puppet was dressed in a superhero costume and was called "Super Liar"), the tone was very different when caricaturing President Chirac. In fact in the 2002 elections the opposition Socialists complained Chirac had been re elected because of the Guignols' portrayal of him as a loveable rogue.

President Sarkozy is often portrayed in the show – and in many cartoons now in

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<sup>87</sup> *Marianne, L'Histoire*. May-June edition, 2010. p.84-85.

<sup>88</sup> *Marianne*, April 14 – 20, 2007, Issue 521

<sup>89</sup> St Cricq R, and Gerschel, F. "Canal Sarkozy," *Le Président et la Télé Deux Ans D'Histoires Secrètes* (Flammarion, 2009) p.121

the French press - as simply the devil incarnate. Unlike Chirac whose caricatures engendered affection, (opinion polls show that despite being investigated for financial irregularities, Chirac is now the most popular political figure in France) Nicolas Sarkozy is depicted with derision.

So, the President's over-familiarity and over-exposure had caused the stitching of his image to come apart. And so in March 2010, when the President threatened to hunt down the journalist who had betrayed him by spreading a press rumour that he and his wife were having affairs, the Press responded with less reverence than the French leader might have hoped for. In fact there was almost a race to see who could shout "The emperor has no clothes!" first.

### ***Case Study 3 – "Le systeme du pouvoir se décompose"***

The rumours that Carla Bruni and her husband President Nicolas Sarkozy were having extra marital affairs, were first buzzing around newsrooms in January this year.<sup>90</sup> It was, said *Le Monde's* website, merely standard coffee-time gossip and no one developed the tittle-tattle into stories. But at the end of February, the rumours had begun to spread across Twitter and various blogs and were even hinted at on a 24 hour news channel, *i>Tele*. In an interview with Sky News in

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<sup>90</sup> According to an article on the website of *Le Monde*, 8/4/10

the UK, when Carla Bruni was asked about the alleged infidelities of her husband based on those internet reports, she denied them vehemently. Meanwhile, the French press remained silent, as did the Elysée. And then on March 8<sup>th</sup>, a blogger, working for the website of *Le Journal du Dimanche* posted an article on the rumours on the website. The aggressive British, German, Italian and Swiss tabloids predictably put the salacious gossip on the front page. In London on March 12<sup>th</sup>, when *Le Monde's* correspondent Arnaud Leparmentier dared to ask the President a question about the story, Nicolas Sarkozy angrily replied he didn't have "a second, not even a nano second to lose on such flights of fancy." Perhaps the story would have simply blown over in France, but within a couple of weeks the Elysée was on the counter-attack, threatening a campaign of legal terror, speaking of elaborate "plots" by international financial markets, hinting at betrayals by former ministers and ordering the counter-intelligence agency to track down the original source of the rumours. The French press felt obliged to react too.

Before I consider how the papers covered the affair, I want to look first at why the majority of French journalists waited so long before commenting on it. French tradition, combined with the country's strong privacy laws, once dictated that the public interest stopped at the bedroom door – even when newsrooms were in the know. For years Francois Mitterrand had kept secret an illegitimate daughter whom he lodged at the state's expense.<sup>91</sup> When questioned once by an

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<sup>91</sup> *The Economist*, April 10<sup>th</sup> 2010

inquisitive journalist about his out-of-wedlock child, the President responded simply “*Et alors?*” or “So what?”

As I have outlined throughout this paper, Nicolas Sarkozy actively encouraged the growth of an American-style celebrity culture in politics, nonetheless he made it quite clear that it was he who set the limits. Intrusions into his private life which are not initiated by him are not welcome. Jean Marie Pontaut of *Le Point* magazine points out that Sarkozy is the first President to be so litigious: “Whatever it is, voodoo dolls, bags with Carla’s face on them, he goes to court...He always attacks. But then he has suffered some pretty bad attacks himself – it’s quite a big thing to say the President’s wife has run off (with someone else)...we’ve never seen such attacks before in the press.”<sup>92</sup> One of the first articles that *Libération* wrote on the rumour (7/4/09) included a list of people and papers the President had pursued in the courts for spreading gossip about his private life. French journalists knew they had to be cautious or risk what Francois Bayrou calls a *fatwa*. Bayrou claims fear reigns everywhere among the French press, and in an industry which is already struggling few people want to go looking for trouble.<sup>93</sup>

On 22<sup>nd</sup> March the editor of *Le Journal du Dimanche* wrote a letter to the President excusing himself for the hurt the internet article had caused him. The paper announced it was pursuing the culprits in court in what *NouvelObs.com* maintained was an effort to appease the Elysée

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with the author, Paris, 18/5/10

<sup>93</sup> Bayrou, F *Abus de Pouvoir*, (Plon, 2009) p170.

The blogger who had originally posted the rumour on the *Journal du Dimanche* site (and whose job spec was to increase audiences on the site) was dismissed, as was his boss. (*Le Monde*, 9/04/10). A few days later *Le Canard Enchaîné*, which hadn't touched the story until this moment, suggested that Rachida Dati, the former Justice Minister who had fallen out of favour with the President was suspected by the Elysée of being implicated in the rumour and consequently had had certain privileges, like her bodyguards, removed. Claude Guéant, general secretary of the Elysée later admitted giving the paper the information.

At this point the Elysée broke its silence. One of the President's chief advisors, Pierre Charon, gave an interview to *Le Nouvel Observateur* in which he spoke of a "plot";

"We are going to war on these ignominious reports. We want to take things as far we can to make sure this will never happen again. We want those who tried to spread fear to feel fear themselves."

The journalists association at *Le Journal du Dimanche* immediately protested at what it called the "unprecedented bullying and inquisitorial" attitude of the Elysée (*Le Monde* 08/04/10). Quite suddenly, France's newspapers were flooded with reports and editorials about the rumours that their President and his wife were having extra-marital affairs.

"Private life – the Elysée stirs up the rumour" was the front page headline of a four-page spread in *Libération* (7/4/10). Inside, the editor Laurent Joffrin tried to

explain to his readers the dilemma the newspaper had faced in deciding to comment on the story;

“If we do talk about it (the rumour) it means we believe the rumours. If we don’t, it means we’re hiding things from the public.” He was careful to distance himself from the gossip, pointing out the rumour had absolutely no foundation but going on to ask why, a month on, everyone was still talking about this affair. He spoke of the “direct and combative style” of Nicolas Sarkozy which he acknowledged did have some virtues but he insisted that style had also put the state into “a boxing ring” and had changed the spirit of France’s institutions. “The perverse effect,” he concluded “of an omni-presidency.”

The article on page 2 was more direct, calling the rumour a “farce” and dividing its commentary into acts rather than paragraphs. The paper used an incredulous tone to reproduce the words of Thierry Herzog, the President’s lawyer who had given a radio interview in which he spoke of “hotbeds” of resentment, “plots to overthrow” the Sarkozy couple and his fears of a conspiracy to start a Greek-style, financial speculation against French debt. Whether or not it had been authorised by Nicolas Sarkozy, it made the President look paranoid.

“The Elysée has now introduced farce into politics,” said the paper, likening the past month’s events to a soap opera. “And the new season which is just starting is hot stuff – breath-taking, sexy, brutal, trash; it plays on all levels at once.” The paper delights how the “stars of yesterday” like Rachida Dati are wiped off screen by the Sarkozystes, how the affair has been “spiced up” with the suggestion that

the secret services have become involved and might be tapping phones – “ just brilliant!” says *Libération*.

The paper also makes two much more serious points. Citing high unemployment figures, France’s struggle to emerge from the financial crisis and the poor voter turnout in the March regional elections (which were disastrous for President Sarkozy) the article says the rumour story is a great way to forget all that – “Sarkozysm is a formidable distraction machine for turning attention elsewhere.” The article concludes by suggesting that the showbiz Presidential style of Nicolas Sarkozy has lost him “whole swathes of voters from the right.”

Two days later and *Libération* had another four page spread on the affair after Carla Bruni had spoken on the radio station Europe 1 to defend her husband’s honour and to insist that there was no official investigation into how the rumours had been leaked.

“The birth of a new female politician?” asked Lauren Joffrin in his editorial, praising her honey-tongued rebuttal of the rumours. Unfortunately, just as she was denying the secret services were involved in the case, Bernard Squarini, the head of the DCRI (the French equivalent of MI5) was talking to another radio station confirming the Elysée had asked his officers for assistance! “An overdose of communication,” wrote Joffrin “...She cocked up...In a Republican monarchy, Caesar’s wife should never come under suspicion - particularly not for blundering.” The paper’s front page took a line from the Carla Bruni song “Someone told me” and ran the headline “Someone told me there wasn’t an

investigation.” The headline on the next page read: “The Elysée trips over itself on the rug of rumours....”

Half of page three was taken up by a close-up photograph of Sarkozy’s hand, pointing as if giving orders. Underneath the paper ran a history of the secret services, informing readers that President Sarkozy had reformed them in 2008 to regain more control over their activities. The article reminded its readers that the real purpose of the DCRI was to “fight terrorism” and to break al-Qaeda networks. In a bullet-point box the paper summed up the heart of the affair: under the heading “The Context” the paper explained how the Elysée was “desperate to turn the page” on the episode, while under the heading “What’s at Stake” the paper concluded that the “calamitous management of the affair has shown the weaknesses of the court around Sarkozy.”

*Le Monde* began its coverage of the affair on 6/4/210 with an article about Rachida Dati’s alleged involvement in the case, ending its article with a quotation from an unnamed Elysée insider who admitted that President Sarkozy “couldn’t stand” Dati (a close friend of his ex wife Cecilia) any more. But a couple of days later the paper ran a long article tracing the roots of the rumour and alleging that while Sarkozy himself was content to let the gossip pass, it was Carla who was livid and “humiliated” after her interview with Sky News and who became determined “to silence the stories.” The paper cast the First Lady as a sort of benign version of Lady Macbeth, reminding readers that Pierre Charon, who was called upon to help with the affair, was also responsible for managing a large part

of her public image, and suggesting that Sarkozy's lawyer had traced a computer server in the Netherlands which contained information "judged to be insulting" to Carla Bruni. The article ended with a statement by Mr Charon who again told *Le Monde* that an inquiry would find the source of the gossip and would make the culprit pay. "And (the public) already reproach their President for having debased his function," smirked *Le Monde*. "And once more he risks damaging public opinion."

The following day, after Carla Bruni and the head of the DCRI had given conflicting reports of the investigation process, *Le Monde* ran the headline "A cacophony at the Elysée between rumours and denials." *Le Monde's* chief cartoonist had illustrated the front page with a sketch of two secret service officers in a street, one saying he was a specialist in Afghanistan, the other claiming he was a specialist in rumours.

Another cartoon on page 13 showed a UMP party boss on the phone desperately reassuring someone that all was well at the headquarters. Above his head, a photograph of the President, spiked and holed with darts, had been used as target practice.

The accompanying article spoke of the unease in the President's party over the affair and reported how ministers were deeply concerned about the damage it was doing to the UMP electorate. The headline read "UMP mps really don't need this right now." Pierre Charon's assertion that there was "an organised plot" behind the gossip was refuted by a series of ministers *Le Monde* interviewed and

the paper speculated on how much longer Mr Charon (who Mme Bruni Sarkozy said had spoken “out of friendship”) would stay in his job. A separate interview was held with the former leader of the Socialists Francois Hollande who claimed; “The system of (political) power is rotting..... The instability of his (President Sarkozy’s) behaviour, this permanent zig-zagging, this incoherence shows that something is broken.”

A couple of days later (13/4/10) *Le Monde’s* website revealed that the Elysée’s communication service had had a makeover. “One of the pillars of Sarkozysme” wrote Arnaud Leparmentier, “the 08h30 meeting of the 14 of his principal advisors, has been axed.” It was to be replaced with “smaller, quicker and ...less systematic meetings”. The article explained how that meeting had been the making and breaking of political careers and that “if you were in it, it meant you were in favour with Sarkozy, and if you weren’t, then you were worth pretty much nothing.” The trouble was, *Le Monde* continued, people in the meeting thought they were “all powerful, just like Mr Charon who believed he had the right to speak in the name of the President.”

A harsh editorial published in the paper edition that day showed little pity for the fate of the President; “He who sows the tempest reaps the wind” read the title. “These are terrible times for Nicolas Sarkozy,” judged Gerard Courtois “And the only person he has to blame is himself.” Mr Courtois justified writing such a long editorial on the rumour affair by saying that it had become “a state affair” which

had left France ridiculed. “It’s a bit late to weep over this scandal,” he continued. “You so deliberately abolished the line between private and public spheres, you mixed up the genres without a thought you might trivialise things ...it’s been like a TV saga...”

The editorial evoked that first infamous press conference of 2008 (reminding readers that it was also the last he gave) in which Mr Courtois suggested the President’s behaviour had been “imperious, caustic, conquering, perhaps crazy.” All the promises given there, he said, had been little but “hot air” and the decision to ban advertising from public TV had been to benefit “the President’s mates.” His article included a survey published on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> April which showed that only 21% of French people thought the French leader was doing a good job and compared that score with former Presidents at the same moment of their term in office – 30% for Mitterrand, 27% for Jacques Chirac. President Sarkozy’s score showed, he said, “a record in disillusionment” and he asked if the President was capable of stopping stirring up trouble. “Nothing is less certain” he concluded.

For the paper loyal to the government, *Le Figaro*, the rumour affair was yet another story that had to be handled sensitively. Early on March 9<sup>th</sup>, as the rumour hit Britain, I was interviewing one of *Le Figaro*’s most prominent journalists on the up-and-coming regional elections and at the end of the interview asked him what he made of the gossip. He told me it was disastrous for the UMP party, and that if it were true, President Sarkozy would not survive a second divorce in office. Three hours later that same reporter was on the phone

to our BBC office, panicking at having commented on a story which at the news meeting that morning his editor had banned all his staff from talking about and begging us to erase the tape.<sup>94</sup>

Although cautious about editorials, *Le Figaro* did not shy away from reporting the story the following month. On the 6<sup>th</sup> April Charles Jaigu wrote a factual piece noting that both Rachida Dati and Dominique De Villepin had been mentioned in connection with starting the rumours

The paper noted that it was *Le Journal du Dimanche* and not Nicolas Sarkozy who was pressing charges against the blogger, and that, for a man who always got his lawyer on the case when his name or his wife's was defamed, this was something new. Jaigu chose to end his article with a quotation from the Socialist MP Manuel Valls, whose advice to the President perhaps reflected his own: "Attacking the press, attacking the rumours is not dignified for a President's position. (He should)...keep his distance, stay cool and not bother himself with anything that doesn't concern him...."

A second article that day also responded to the suggestion in *Le Canard Enchaîné* that Rachida Dati had been deprived of some of her privileges because she was under suspicion. *Le Figaro* pointed out that many other ministers had also lost their bodyguards in line with Elysée cutbacks (a story it had indeed run earlier on 31/3/10) and quoted Brice Hortefeux assuring the paper there was "nothing personal in it." Nonetheless the article ended with a quote from Socialist

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<sup>94</sup> We did erase the tape and his comments were never broadcast.

Malek Boutih who felt that Rachida Dati was being “politically executed.” The next day the paper ran a sizeable article in which it suggested the President and his wife were “angry” with their communication team particularly Pierre Charon who had spoken of an “organised plot.” The paper also revealed that the man who had fuelled the Dati rumours (by telling *Le Canard Enchaîné* that Dati had fallen out of favour with her former boss) was the general secretary of the Elysée Claude Guéant. Interviewed again, Mr Guéant modified his comments saying what he’d said yesterday didn’t necessarily hold true today....

Carla Bruni’s interview broadcast on Europe 1 was also reported at length, in which the First Lady explained that Pierre Charon had taken the affair “to heart much more than us” and that neither she nor her husband believed in any organised plots against them. “From now on,” said the First Lady “I’ll never believe any rumour again.” On the 8<sup>th</sup> April *Le Figaro* explained that, while the intervention of Carla Bruni had meant to kill the rumours story, it most certainly hadn’t done so and it revealed that Claude Guéant had sent all of the President’s closest advisors a text message which warned them not to meddle in the affair anymore.

By the following week, *Le Figaro* wasn’t trying to hide the damage the affair had done to the President but it did put the blame firmly on the shoulders of the French leader’s advisor Pierre Charon, announcing that he’d been put in a “sort of quarantine in his office.” (*Le Figaro* 12/4/10). Although Carla Bruni had tried to

excuse him said the paper, “in reality the President and his wife are furious with Pierre Charon and, to a lesser degree, Claude Guéant.”

A very tongue-in-cheek editorial by *Le Figaro*'s political writer Anne Fulda two days later showed that *Le Figaro* had also had enough of what the other papers were calling the “soap opera farce.”

“There are little signs. Little signs that look like nothing much but which show that this time the President of the Republic appears to have got the French people's message,” wrote Fulda. “It seems he's resolved to get rid of this Sarkozy Republic image which appears to be all about him.” The tone continued sarcastically “Oh, nothing concrete yet, but a few beacons of light. Some words, certain gestures....and they show that Nicolas Sarkozy has understood what the Presidential function demands.” Anne Fulda then reminded readers that Carla Bruni, during her interview on *Europe 1* had insisted her husband was only interested “In France and the French people” and that the President himself had tried to reassure voters that he knew their sole preoccupation was how he'd get them out of the financial crisis. “Obviously these words can't cure all ills,” snapped Fulda. “But they needed to be said.”

It was an editorial that could have almost been published in *Le Monde*.

## Conclusion

*“J’ai fait des erreurs, qui n’en fait pas?”* (Nicolas Sarkozy, press conference, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

In many ways, Nicolas Sarkozy has adapted to and indeed served the instantaneousness of a 24-hour news society extremely well. His boundless energy and activity has secured a steady supply of fresh stories and headlines for editors and his name and photograph now dominate newspapers and magazines from the politics and business pages through to the gossip columns. He’s dedicated huge amounts of time and money to developing his communication strategy ; for the year 2009, it was revealed that his 50-strong communication team had a budget of 7.5 million euros, 2 million of which have gone into commissioning polls and half a million on creating a website for the President of the Republic.<sup>95</sup> But his efforts haven’t won him many friends in the media – indeed they’ve helped him lose some.

“History,” warns Thierry Désjardins in his 2009 book (*Sarkozy, Ses Balivernes et ses Fanfaronnades*), “Loathes braggarts, boosters, big mouths, bluffers, show

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<sup>95</sup> D’Almeida, F and Delporte, C. *Histoire des Médias en France, de la Grande Guerre a Nos Jours* (Champs 2010) p.316

offs – and she shows them no pity.”<sup>96</sup> Désjardins was the former editor of *Le Figaro*, the newspaper loyal to the President and his government.

So where has he gone wrong? It’s often suggested that Nicolas Sarkozy ‘s unpopularity can be attributed to the all-absorbing economic crisis which knocked his programme of reforms off course. But Sarkozy’s popularity slump began in September 2007, long before the crisis bit, when in the course of six months he lost 23 points in the polls. <sup>97</sup>

Throughout this paper, I’ve been examining where the President’s media strategies have gone wrong – opening the door to allow the media to scrutinize his private life (and then being unable to shut it), saturating the media stage so that the Head of State became almost a character in his own badly-edited soap opera <sup>98</sup> and by forcing through didactic measures (such as naming the head of French public television himself) trying to ensure a loyal service from the French press. I have also mentioned that the very personal nature of the media attacks on the President suggest that at base there’s a fundamental clash with his personality. Nicolas Sarkozy’s biographer Catherine Nay says the President often admits that he’s his “own worst enemy”; <sup>99</sup>

“He was made to command...but his hyperactivity, his impulsiveness, his uncontrolled emotions, causes him to be sometimes too hasty in his judgements,

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<sup>96</sup> Désjardins, T. “Sarkozy, Ses Balivernes et ses Fanfaronnades” (Fayard 2009) p.8

<sup>97</sup> *Is It All Over For Sarko?* Article in *The Spectator* by Patrick Marnham 15/05/10

<sup>98</sup> *La Méthode Sarkozy Dans L’Impasse*. Editorial in *Le Monde* by Denis Muzet 10/0510

<sup>99</sup> Nay, C “Un Pouvoir Nommé Désir” (Grasset 2007). P.439

to suggest surprising things, to make promises he doesn't always have the means to keep.”<sup>100</sup>

Jean Marie Pontaut, senior investigative reporter with *Le Point*, agrees that Nicolas Sarkozy's very character provokes strong reactions from journalists but wonders if there hasn't also been a collective loss of objectivity;

“He has certain qualities. But if I say that at a dinner party people think I'm an alien or at least from the extreme right!”<sup>101</sup> Pontaut, also points out that in many ways Nicolas Sarkozy has simply been responding to the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> Century news;

“It's hard to say what is due to his personality and what can be put down to the times.... He has aggressive, uncontrolled outbursts but there ...are cameras all around permanently now and there never were in other presidents' days.. ...Sarkozy is responding to modern times and... you can't be a president of France today as de Gaulle was, just as you can't be a prime minister in the UK as Margaret Thatcher was.”<sup>102</sup>

The philosopher Régis Débray sums up the historical change even more succinctly;

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with the author, Paris 18/05/10

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

“For the first time, like the United States, the French have elected a star of the small screen and not a character in a novel.”<sup>103</sup>

President Sarkozy ‘s efforts to exert direct influence over the media have also been only partly successful. “Whenever people have been named in a post by Sarkozy,” says Erik Empatz of *Le Canard Enchaîné*, “They’re put in a difficult position....Take Jean Luc Hess of Radio France...he’s not really a right winger nor a Sarkozyste ...he comes from the satirical paper *Charlie Hebdo*. But the fact that he was nominated by Sarkozy and Carla Bruni means he can’t really do anything. The tiniest decision he makes, people will say “Ah, there’s the Elysée talking!” Hess has been put in a very difficult position and that’s the case for all direct nominations... It’s a power that no longer has any power. I think he (Sarkozy) has scored an own goal....”<sup>104</sup> Jean Luc Hess recently announced he had fired the comedians Stephane Guillon and Didier Porte who present a political satire slot on the France Inter breakfast show. It’s known that many leading politicians, including the President, have been calling for their dismissal for months – something the newspapers were keen to point out.<sup>105</sup>

Despite the increase in newspaper articles which are extremely critical about the President, and the setting up of serious independent online papers like *Mediapart* and *Rue89*, the French press as a whole remains somewhat reverential

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<sup>103</sup> “*Le Désir du Chef Apparaît Quand Une Société se Délite.*” Interview with Régis Débray in *Le Point* 19/07/10 by Francois Dufay.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with the author, Paris, 17/05/10

<sup>105</sup> Articles in *Libération* and *Le Monde* 24/06/10

compared to the British press. Laurent Mauduit from *Mediapart* blames that deference on the economic dependence of newspapers on big businessmen who are themselves dependent on the government.

“In the Anglo-Saxon press you point out conflicts of interest – you cannot sit on the fence. In France it’s a collusion of capitalism - you help me out and I’ll help you and we’ll get a mutual service.”<sup>106</sup>

He also fears the recent trend of articles and editorials which overtly challenge the President’s actions amount only to a superficial revolt.

“We (the French press) are less respectful now but that’s not enough to get to the heart of journalism which is investigation. You can’t just go on tone – we need to get to the essential. Yes it’s fashionable at the moment to do a bit of Sarkozy-bashing but we’re still a dependent press...You saw how Sarkozy made fun of Joffrin in that first press conference – and how the press pack turned on its own member.”<sup>107</sup>

Nicolas Sarkozy knows he’s made mistakes with the construction of his media image. *Le Figaro*, while listing all those faults, repeatedly assures its readers that this time the President really is changing and is now focused on “discretion,

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with the author in Paris, 17/05/10

<sup>107</sup> Ibid

keeping a low profile and reigning himself in.”<sup>108</sup> It’s not yet clear whether Nicolas Sarkozy will stand again in the next presidential elections in 2012 (he has indicated that he will not make an announcement before the end of 2011) but, if he is to do so, he knows he has just two years in which to reinvent himself. One of his new plans, *Le Figaro* tells readers, is to “listen more and justify himself less and ...to act first and speak afterwards. He’s going to stay away from the media...and his new objective is to reconstruct a more normal relationship with the press.”<sup>109</sup> Erik Empatz from *Le Canard Enchaîné* sees only another red herring;

“Yes, he knows his communication strategy is no longer working but the problem is instead of changing his policies and political ideas he just changes his communication strategy. That’s all there is to it.”<sup>110</sup>

At the start of this paper I cited part of a remark made by the former French President Francois Mitterrand about television and image. Here’s that quotation now in full:

“An image is just an appearance. An appearance is necessary. But if it’s only papering over an empty shell then it will seem empty. Television is ferocious. It shows exactly who we are.”

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<sup>108</sup> Article by Charles Jaigu, *Le Figaro* website, 11/05/10. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/>

<sup>109</sup> Editorial by Charles Jaigu in *Le Figaro*, 06/05/10

<sup>110</sup> Interview with author, Paris, 17/05/10

Like all the Presidents of the Vth Republic until Nicolas Sarkozy, Mitterrand believed in governing at a lofty distance from the people and keeping a sense of mystery. How interesting then that Nicolas Sarkozy, who advocated a rupture from the clandestine de Gaullist style of Presidency, is now telling his ministers:

“I need to become more and more secret.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Editorial by Charles Jaigu in *Le Figaro*, 06/05/10

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