

France's low-cost media challenger

Ben Hall

The dry croissants and plastic coffee cups speak volumes about Alain Weill, France's most intriguing media entrepreneur.

There is no starched linen, porcelain or basket of pastries such as you might expect from a French chief executive. Mr Weill is a no-frills tycoon who is shaking up his country's stolid media industry from a modest office overlooking the Paris ringroad.

The 47-year-old Strasbourgeois has created a media empire from scratch, starting eight years ago with the purchase of Radio Monte Carlo, which was on the verge of collapse.

He has since added BFM, another radio station; BFM TV, France's first digital television news channel; and La Tribune, a business newspaper he bought from Bernard Arnault, the king of luxury.

Next month he will launch Le Sport 10, a cheap sports daily to take on the mighty L'Equipe, the country's biggest-selling national newspaper and the best-known sports paper in Europe. He has also embarked on some industry-leading innovation, notably his central sports news agency, which distributes sports coverage to all his channels and titles.

NextRadioTV, the umbrella company, is relatively small with a turnover of €130m (\$175m, £103m), but its fast growth is remarkable compared with its French peers. Mr Weill is a rare beast in France: a risk-taking innovator in a sector dominated by industrial conglomerates and public sector broadcasters.

"I am a media entrepreneur. That sounds banal, but it is something new in France," he says. France's snobbish media elite accuse Mr Weill of cheapening the profession with an output of com-moditised (read American) news journalism. The "low cost" tag, which he invented himself to impress his financial backers, plays directly into their hands.

Nonetheless he still believes the description is appropriate. He compares his business with Ryanair, the budget airline, saying both have broken into monopoly markets using new technologies to make them more productive while investing heavily in new services, but neither, he says, is a "shoestring" operation.

While Mr Weill may resemble Michael O'Leary, the Ryanair chief executive, in as far as he is an upstart outsider beating conservative incumbents at their own game, his manner could not be more different from that of the strident airline boss. Mr Weill avoids the limelight and is quietly spoken - his manner is as dry as his croissants.

His appearance sets him apart from others in the media and he wears the rimless glasses of an accountant, and boxy, stiff clothes. But he insists it is age rather than character or style that makes him different to others in his industry.

"I come from a younger generation than other media owners, particularly those in television and radio who came from the public sector. Often, the news media in France are run by journalists who come from that older generation. I am an entrepreneur who came to the media industry with the same approach as media entrepreneurs in other countries.

"So I introduced marketing of our journalistic content and a much greater focus on what our readers and viewers want, as happens abroad. I draw inspiration from abroad, whereas the other media players are more traditional and stuck in their Franco-French ways."

It is his focus on what viewers and listeners want - in contrast to the more top-down approach of conventional French media owners - that is key to his commercial success, Mr Weill says.

He believes this approach will see him through the economic slowdown. So far, Mr Weill says, his businesses have "not yet suffered much" from the tough market conditions but he expects a "difficult" 2009.

He insists that radio is well-suited to harder conditions because it has low fixed costs and advertisers are attracted by its relative cheapness. He also hopes that digital television, which is still a new media in France, will benefit from the scrapping of advertising on public television next year and should provide extra revenue to his channels.

Radio has encouraged him to innovate with new formats. He turned RMC into a talk radio station, modelled on those in the US. The other main French stations have now followed suit.

Mr Weill is scathing about his counterparts in the media industry, particularly those businesses that are part of larger industrial groups, which he describes as a "Franco-French peculiarity".

"It is not a very good system. The owners have different objectives. Development of their media businesses is perhaps not a priority, or not the only priority. A group like Bouygues has TF1 (television), Alstom (engineering), Bouygues Telecom, it is making trade-offs between one and the other."

If France has failed to develop a big pan-European media group it is not because of the weight of regulation at home - as many in the industry claim - but because owners are too distracted with other businesses, he says.

"Mr Arnault bought La Tribune 15 years ago but in the end it was not his core business. He concluded he didn't have the savoir faire that he has in his own field, where he follows his products and ranges day-to-day with uncontested competence."

A specialist in turning round failing news outlets, partly by cutting jobs, Mr Weill has acquired the reputation of a ruthless cost-cutter who has broken France's tradition of social partnership. But he is phlegmatic, saying he has created far more jobs than he has cut.

"None of this worries me. I'm perfectly at ease. It is the former owners who are to blame. I take no responsibility. I take decisions that are painful for some people but help save the economy."

Mr Weill, whose parents were doctors, wanted to be a journalist but ended up studying management at the Institut Supérieur des Affaires. He has spent his entire career in broadcasting, first with Compagnie Luxembourgeoise de Télédiffusion, which owns RTL radio, and then with NRJ, the first independent radio group, first as director of programming then as deputy chief executive. When NRJ tried to take over RMC, but was blocked by the regulator, he saw an opportunity and seized it.

While first and foremost an entrepreneur, he takes a close interest in his group's content, talking frequently with his editors.

"If there is an image I don't like, I say so. But my criticisms are not editorial or political, they are qualitative. It is a taboo in France. The owner is not supposed to interfere. I don't call up and say I've had lunch with a minister this afternoon who wants to come on. The only criteria are quality and the audience."

Has he ever come under political pressure to change a broadcast or article, like many other media owners? Mr Weill chooses his words carefully: "No, but interventions don't shock me either, if it is a question of complaining about one of my journalists, when false things are written."

Perhaps being a newcomer gives him more independence? It's a question of mindset, he replies. Many "excellent" journalists who spent their careers in public radio and television

"have been formatted to compromise with whoever is in power. We don't have a long history, which perhaps makes things easier for us."

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