



**Document Category:** Article in *Obodo Oyindo*

**Date:** November 30, 2009

**Author:** Abel Ugba

## **Bondy Bloggers tell the story from below**

The weekend (November 13 -15) of International Media Dialogue on Covering Immigration organized by the French-American Foundation provided an auspicious platform for European journalists and experts to exchange ideas and form links with their transatlantic colleagues.

Hamid Senni's keynote speech on the first day provided a justification of why Paris was a suitable location to launch the dialogue. A highly educated French citizen of immigrant background, he recounted the multiple rejections doled out to him by the French society every time he attempted to find a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Frustrated he emigrated to Sweden and then to the United Kingdom. In both places he thrived, securing management positions with industry giants like Ericsson, British Petroleum and Philip Morris.

In between he returned to France for family reasons and attempted to get a respectable job. Not unexpectedly, his experience and additional qualifications counted for nothing. The only job he was offered was a door-to-door vendor of vacuum cleaners. It was for him the loudest statement of the unwillingness of white and Catholic France to accept the likes of him.

He returned to continental Europe where he is self-employed as a consultant on diversity in employment places. His keynote reiterated the content of *De la Cite a la City*, a detailed account of his encounters with racism and discrimination, published in 2007.

Curiously, racism and racially-motivated discrimination did not feature much in other presentations as speaker after speaker strenuously sought to explain mainstream (white-dominated) media often negative coverage of immigrants and ethnic minorities without mentioning race, social hierarchy and unequal power relations.

It was a futile attempt and the hypocrisy and nonchalance of a few speakers were plain to see. A tiny minority showcased their ignorance loudly. They were there simply to discharge official duties or to enjoy a weekend in the city of romance.

Claude Grunitzky's closing keynote on the last day and Sandy Close's contribution were notable exceptions. The founder and chairman of Trace Magazine and True Agency, Grunitzky is the son of a Togolese ambassador who grew up rubbing shoulders with the elites of the diplomatic corps.

But his narration and attitude was down-to-earth. He painted a vivid picture of the struggles of ethnic minorities who have mingled in the heavily-racialised media industry of Europe.

While admitting that his rise has been helped by his background and unforeseen occurrences, he underlined the connections between race and self-representation. Grunitzky's personable disposition and matter-of-fact narratives left participants in a good frame of mind for the closing dinner.

Without doubt the highlight of the entire programme for me was a visit to the offices of Bondy blog on the outskirts of Paris. The visit provided desperately-needed assurances that there could be a silver lining at the end of the dark tunnel of France's colonial misadventure in Africa.

Bondy was one of many suburbs where the 2005 riots in France were most violently played out. The blog is the brainchild of the Swiss weekly L'Hebdo. Frustrated by the inability of its reporters to file detailed and robust reports of the riots, the newspaper decided to employ the services of the residents of Bondy who had experiential and historical knowledge of the crisis.



That bold and unorthodox approach to news reporting gave birth to Bondy Blog, which transferred to the local residents after the riots when the newspapers staff returned to Switzerland. During our visit we met activists, community of bloggers and the management. The majority are children and grandchildren of immigrants from north and west Africa.

Nordine Nabili (pictured above speaking to reporters), the current editor-in-chief, welcomed our party and provided information on the history, aim and operation of blog. No fewer than 12 bloggers were present. They were of different ethnic background, including a university professor, a former mayor, a town council official and a few young but purposeful women.

The growth and popularity of the site was helped by the presidential contest that brought Nicolas Sarkozy to power. Sarkozy and other politicians played the race card and engendered wide-spread public debate on ethno-racial issues.

Bondy bloggers found instant recognition because they provided an alternative to the dominant discourse that took place in the mainstream media. Nabili told our visiting party that the blog was still very much in the business of representing alternative/suppressed voices and of telling the story from below.

To be sure, alternative discourse had existed in France before the birth of Bondy blog but, as Nabili and his colleagues emphasized, the medium of blog has amplified their voices and made their intervention more impactful. To buttress this claim Nabili said that the blog is visited mostly by journalists working in mainstream French media and politicians.

In total it is visited by over 200,000 users a month and the day before our visit there were 26,000 visitors. The publishers are targeting an average of 400,000 monthly users by the end of 2010. Nabili was optimistic that the goal would be achieved although it would pose new technical challenges relating to capacity and speed.

The crew of bloggers consists mostly of enthusiastic and committed persons, some of them without a background in journalism. The management has therefore arranged for fortnightly journalism writing exercise. It also has weekly editorial meetings.

Bloggers are part-time contributions who receive about €40 per contribution. The main motivation for participating is a keen desire to contribute to public discourse and to tell their stories in their own words.

As one blogger put it: "The French elite have refused to recognize the changing nature of France's demography and ethnicity. Bony Blog enables us to not only live and endure our situation but also to fight it." And a good and worthy fight it is!

(URL: <http://www.obodo-oyinbo.co.uk/headline-details.php?story=Rachel>)

---