

On the field

What happens in Sicily

By Dario Barà

Sicily is a goldmine of precious news, but it is difficult to extract and show it in full light. It is hard and sometimes dangerous, much more risky than in other regions. This is confirmed by the sad list of murdered journalists: 8 in Sicily over the last fifty years. An absolute record, without equal. It is confirmed by the long list of journalists threatened over the last few years. And it is also confirmed by the more recent monitoring work of Ossigeno. In 2011, 16 episodes were registered with 43 journalists involved. In the period of 2009-2010 there were 10 cases. A reality that is before everyone's eyes, especially the journalists who work on the island.

Working in small towns

«Threats and intimidation are real, they are sensed. Some are apparent. Others remain hidden. They strike especially – says Riccardo Arena, legal reporter for *Il Giornale di Sicilia* – those who work in the provinces, in small towns, journalists without a stable contract, who have few job guarantees and are underpaid. They are the weakest and the most exposed to being influenced. There is general climate of suppression that weakens the instruments of protection. In small towns this kind of suppression is undoubtedly stronger». Journalists who work in regional newspapers' offices or in RAI are part of strong organisations, which makes their working conditions safer. A correspondent who works in a little town and has to report unpleasant facts about someone knows that he can find himself face to face with the target of his investigation. In some places, moreover, criminal power is stronger and the distinction between crime and political or administrative power is thinner. That is why being a local reporter is difficult and sometimes risky.

Salvatore Maiorca, Rosario Cauchi, Saro Cannizzaro, Pino Maniaci

Local reporters are thus the most exposed on the island: from Syracuse to Palermo, from Caltanissetta, to Gela, to Modica.

Salvatore Maiorca is 72 and has been working at *La Sicilia* for many years. He has seen a lot of things and always managed to be safe. But now the climate has become heavier and he has had some problems. He wrote a few articles on property speculation in the old port of the city and in the Ciane river valley. He reported on the current battle between some builders and environmental associations like WWF and "Italia Nostra", that are decrying the increased level of construction in the city, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He wrote those articles with his usual carefulness and exactness. And he received threats. In March 2001, he received an anonymous letter that warned him against investigating the urban plan of Syracuse and the plans for building on the coast. «You have to stop looking into the Pirillina, the ports and the holiday villages, those are works which have to be done», these are the anonymous orders. It had happened to him before, a few years ago. He had received an anonymous phone call. A voice ordered him not to report on the bidders for a contract to clean the

trains. This time, like before, Maiorca reported the threats to Digos¹, which is investigating. The Provincial Committee for Public Order and Safety provided him with a surveillance service.

Rosario Cauchi, a 28-year-old freelancer, lives in Gela and works for several newspapers, including *Liberainformazione* and *Siciliainformazioni*. He reports with journalistic curiosity what happens in his city and the province of Caltanissetta: he usually writes about organised crime's business dealings and mafia inquiries, the battle against the mafia, the activities of associations and institutions. In July 2011, he found an anonymous, threatening message in his garage. This is what was written in it: «We read what you write and we don't like it, this is our last warning». There were also two saint cards, one of which was burnt. Rosario took an action against persons unknown. The *carabinieri* considered the threat very serious and are running investigations. Recently, Rosario has written some articles about fraud in the European Union and a contract that was awarded and then cancelled by the Municipality of Gela to an entrepreneur under investigation for mafia.

Saro Cannizzaro is 53 years old. He is the correspondent from Modica for the *Giornale di Sicilia*; he also works for *Ragusanews* and for the local radio Rtm. He has been covering crime and trial news for twenty years. He knows how to write a news story. Yet, his articles caused a really violent reaction. On the night between 14 and 15 September 2011, some anonymous arsonists set a fire in front of his main door. Saro and his family were sleeping. They were awoken by the heavy smoke and by a strong smell of burnt. While open the main door to get to safety, the journalist suffered burns on his arm. He reported the fact and a few days later the suspected perpetrators were arrested. It turns out that they lived in his neighbourhood. In the past, Saro had written some articles about one of them because he was accused of a few crimes, but there had been no personal problems.

Pino Maniaci is the head of *Telejato*, a small TV outlet broadcast out of Partinico since 1999. He reports on dirty business of the mafia and the dirty business of local politics. He has been assaulted and threatened more than once. The last episode was in September 2011. One morning, scrawled on the walls of the town was the following: «Long live the mafia! Pino Maniaci you stink!» with drawings of coffins and a series of curses. The message to Maniaci was really clear. This was only the last episode in a series of episodes. A few months earlier some threatening warnings were addressed to other people working at the TV broadcast. And before that, Pino had been physically assaulted and received threats addressed to him, his family and his co-workers.

A controversial bit of news

At the end of 2010, the *Fatto Quotidiano* and other newspapers wrote that Mario Ciancio Sanfilippo, the ex-president of Fieg (The Italian Federation of Newspaper Publishers), vice-present of Ansa and editor of the newspaper *La Sicilia*, is under investigation for external cooperation in the crime of mafia association, as part of an inquiry on a shopping centre. Ciancio Sanfilippo owns shares of the *Giornale di Sicilia* and the *Gazzetta del Sud* as well as of local TV and radio shows. He is considered by many people to have a monopoly on news in Catania and criticised for the concentration and control over regional information. In 2009, the inquiry “The Viceroy” by Sigfrido Ranucci for the TV programme *Report* talked about the

¹General Investigations and Special Operations Division

investigation and Ciancio's personality, upon which he used the programme for defamation, asking damages of 10 million euro.

The Public Prosecutor's Office was criticised for taking so long before investigating the publisher. Claudio Fava, the son of the late journalist Pippo Fava, murdered in Catania in 1984, said: «Over twenty years, we have been reporting, supported by the facts, that Mario Ciancio was protecting the criminal power system. Over twenty years we reported the lies written in his newspapers, the proximity with mafia, the daily omission of the truth». Sonia Alfano, the daughter of Beppe Alfano, another journalist murdered by the mafia in 1993, agreed, stating: «The Public Prosecutor's Office of Catania has finally opened its eyes on Mario Ciancio Sanfilippo, but this investigation comes terribly late».

Crime changes its face

When analysing the mafia phenomenon in Sicily, it is necessary to place the analysis in the context of the territory. Salvo Palazzolo, legal reporter for *La Repubblica* in Palermo explains: «Today mafia is not a unique body. Hence, the relationship between threats and journalists must be put in a certain context. We must evaluate case by case. In the province of Palermo, for example, there are two mafias: the more aggressive one, the one that shoots, and the more "urban" one, which is historically smarter, more devious, but equally dangerous». It is a business mafia «that has chosen a different approach» – Palazzolo adds – «and that has a different relationship with information, aiming at influencing it».

The mafia that killed 8 journalists in Sicily «doesn't kill anymore, but it threatens and intimidates», as observed by Giacomo di Girolamo, editor of *Marsala.it*, who has for some time been the victim of threats and intimidation. «We must think beyond the traditional idea that the journalist can be murdered. The risks must be contextualised according to the current times» – says Antonio Condorelli, copy-editor for «*S*» Catania. Of course, "classic" and easily recognisable threats, sent through anonymous letters and phone calls, are still used, as well as property damage and assaults, but the *mafiosi* now know that the less noise the better for them. Threats must be silent because the news about a journalist being threatened must not be known and must not pass the Straits of Messina, because it would cause a boomerang effect. That is the reason why threats have become more silent and devious, but not less effective. «The modern boss has got his own press and communication agents (the lawyer, a relative, a friend). They form a real network – explains Palazzolo – composed of people, seemingly above reproach, who try to suggest to the reporter how he or she should interpret the news. The risk of being manipulated by these "agents" is really high».

In the past, when a *mafioso* read a news story he disliked, he would go in person to the newspaper's office and complain to the editor or the author of the article. Today it's different. There are the intermediaries who request "meetings" and send letters to explain the position of the person concerned, to vindicate him.

Then, there is the big problem of the claims for damages «that more often are not excessively high – explains Palazzolo – but they are well targeted» and strike especially the little local newspapers who are almost pushed to self-censorship.

But threats against journalists do not come only from organised crime. Today, those who threaten freedom of information are the white collars, the professionals, the public administrators. The attacks against journalists' freedom to inform are many.

Is she an illicit journalist?

Miriam Di Peri, collaborator of the magazine of Palermo «S», could not realize her dream of becoming a professional journalist, despite all the work she had to do to achieve it. «After being accused» – she explains – «I actually doubted what I wrote. I've read the dossier again so many times and every time I get relieved». She is talking about the dossier on Sicily's public health service published by the magazine she works for. She wrote a few articles for the dossier. The Regional Councillor for Public Health, Massimo Russo, did not like the dossier and reported it to the regional Order of Journalists: «It is apparent that they wanted to decry, in a political way, the reforming action of our department [...]» – writes Russo – «I ask whether it is true that Miriam Di Peri, who wrote some articles for the dossier, is not a professional reporter and she is not listed in the Journalists Register. And, should that be true, I ask if that is not a clear example of illicit behaviour».

Thus, the councillor did not question the contents of the dossier and did not write what he considered wrong about it, instead he sent a letter to the Order to check on the legal position of one of the authors. Only later he sent a notice to say that the contents of the dossier would be discussed in a more «suitable place». The complaint will be evaluated by the Council of the Order that will decide whether to file it or take proceedings against Miriam.

In May 2010, Alfio Sciacca, a reporter for the *Corriere della Sera*, wrote an article about the “Iblis” inquiry of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Catania that led to the arrest of 48 people. The article stated that the Governor of Sicily, Raffaele Lombardo, and his brother Angelo were involved in the inquiry and were under investigation for external cooperation in the crime of mafia association. The news had already been reported by *La Repubblica*, arousing bitter controversy. The Governor decided to report the fact to the Public Prosecutor's offices of Messina and Catania since, according to him, some journalists had violated the secrecy concerning a preliminary investigation. «Lombardo wrote a “black list” of bad journalists» Sciacca says. Zinniti and Viviano of *Repubblica*, together with Condorelli and Sciacca himself, are in that “list”. Proceedings were brought against them.

«My colleagues and I obtained that news from the official registered acts of the inquiry, so they were not secret. Other elements came from other sources that were proven to be more than reliable. This made me think» – explains Sciacca. «In that story, there were other real violations of the secrecy of the investigation and I could tell some of them. But the Public Prosecutor's office, not one of the people accused, should have taken care of secrecy breaches. The prosecutor, moreover, made a mistake, since he summoned the editor De Bortoli and Sciacca, rather than the Judge for the Preliminary Investigation, who has the scope to remand the people accused.

«When we reported the irregularity, the acts were sent to the Judge for Preliminary Investigations and he cleared us of the accusation. The funny story is that the Public Prosecutor's Office acted fast against the journalists and failed, while it moved very carefully against Raffaele Lombardo. As a matter of fact, the trial is still at the beginning».

In December 2011, Alfio, along with the other journalists of *La Repubblica* Alessandra Zinniti and Francesco Viviano, was cleared of the accusation of breaching the investigation secrecy but he was remanded for the arbitrary publishing of documents of a criminal proceeding, along with the editor-in-chief, Ferruccio De Bortoli.

According to Sciacca, the problems of news reporting in Catania are apparent: «Journalists here have a really hard time because of the local monopoly of information. Those who strike a discordant note easily get in trouble».

The journalist becomes “cautious”

In a place like Sicily, some journalists become “cautious”, more than they should. Since they are aware of the risks they may run, if they are “asked” to take down a video from the Internet, they do it in order to avoid further problems. «When I receive strong warnings after an inquiry has come out, I give up writing on the same subject» – Di Girolamo confesses – «and I focus on other important news».

Some journalists avoid writing about certain types of news and subjects, because they do not want any problems with their publisher or “unpleasant” consequences.

«Sooner or later, it could happen to me: I might receive a threatening letter, a phone call or I could be approached, insulted». That is what many journalists think: threats and intimidation are part of their job and that is why they do not report them.

Filing a complaint, moreover, is often considered a waste of time: the lawyers, the hearing, all the questioning would steal time from the research and the actual writing of the news.

But when a journalist is good at doing his/her job, and does not bend to exploitation, someone could try to silence him/her.

When speaking about a bishop can cause trouble

«When the first article came out on *L’Isola* – tells Giuseppe Pipitone, journalist for *I Quaderni de l’Ora* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* – the bishop Miccichè called the editor Criscenti to know where we had found the news, but naturally the editor did not give him any explanations. But there were bigger reactions when the news was published on *La Voce delle Voci* of Naples».

The young journalist had investigated on the “Auxilium” and the “Antonio Campanile”, two charity organisations managed by the diocesan chancery of Trapani, writing about their merger in 2007 and areported cash deficit of about one million euro. In the articles Pipitone spoke about the nomination of the bishop’s brother-in-law as representative of Auxilium and about the role of the bishop’s driver, Orazio Occhipinti, in the organisation, which had come out from a series of anonymous letters sent to cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. Auxilium is one of the most important charity organisations in Sicily, it has 200 employers and signed an agreement with the Health Agency of the province of Trapani for 5 million of euro a year. «I was told that someone was looking for me» – continues Pipitone – «and was calling my family and friends to get information about me, then a man started to follow me and I later discovered that he was Orazio Occhipinti’s brother. Then, a professor called me and told me that the bishop wanted to talk to me, provided that I did not bring a recorder with me. I refused and I never met the bishop or received any request for a correction».

In February 2011, it came out that the Guardia di Finanza² was investigating the business of the organisations. In May, the Pope sent an “apostolic inspector” to the diocesan chancery of Trapani.

² Law enforcement agency under the authority of the Minister of Economy and Finance

«What really hurt me was that some, even a few co-workers, came down on me, questioning my working methods and writing that the investigations had started after the bishop's complaint» Giuseppe tells. «Since then, someone spread a rumour that I was under investigation for trying to extort money» and then the newspapers were asked to withdraw his articles about the Trapani affair.

Furthermore, an anonymous letter was sent to the *Giornale di Sicilia*. The letter asked journalist Gianfranco Criscenti and Pipitone to «Leave the bishop alone» and also mentioned journalist Giuseppe Lo Bianco, who wrote about the affair in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. All this was reported to the police.

The story does not end here. In October, some sources refer that two reporters from Trapani were presumably under investigation for defamation and libel. They say that the two reporters had received false information from a priest who was the former administrator of the diocesan chancery and that they wrote that the bishop was under investigation for withdrawing one million euro from the chancery cash. During a press conference, the bishop's lawyer stated that the bishop was never under investigation and that «for a year, things had been written that were not true». But reading Giuseppe's and Criscenti's articles it is apparent that they never wrote the bishop was under investigation and they confirmed it with a notice on *L'Isola*.

The affair is still unclear. Actually, the two reporters are not officially under investigation and they did not receive any notification. Vittorio Corradino, president of the Order of Journalists in Sicily, wrote in a notice that «In Trapani the climate is heavier than ever. A climate of insinuations and suspicions. Two colleagues like Gianfranco Criscenti and Giuseppe Pipitone, whose coherence and professionalism are undeniable, are suffering the consequences of this climate. Speaking of them as “conspirators” is part of a behaviour which I firmly condemn: their only “fault” was that of writing about a complex and obscure affair dealing with the chancery of Trapani». The notice ends with the president's wish «that the investigators cast light on the affair as soon as possible and that all those who commit themselves to informing the citizens can keep doing so without being attacked».

However, the investigations about the threatening letter did not go on and Giuseppe did not know anything more about it.

Catania. Every journalist must make some choices

Antonio Condorelli's experience as editor of *Sud* only lasted six months. Six months of hard working that led him to develop, along with his co-workers, investigations that proved inconvenient to some. For some of these investigations he received threats, which he always reported to police. «My experience at *Sud* shows that Catania desperately needs serious and thorough news reporting and that the consolidated habits need to be broken». *Sud* reported on Rita Cinquegrana's activities: she was the councillor for Tourism at the Municipality of Catania and supervisor at the Bellini Theatre, while her husband, Edoardo Gari, was a judge at the Court of Catania and an adjunct President of the Judge for Preliminary Investigation office, which among other things decides on judicial investigations of the city administration. «We noticed some conflicts of interest between her duties and we wrote it». A short time later, a strange association called *Amici di Sud* (Sud's Friends) came out using the name and the logotype of Condorelli's newspaper. «This association» –Condorelli says – «brought a complaint to the Public Prosecutor's office reporting a conflict of interest about Mr Gari's activity in Catania». Condorelli knew that something strange was going on and

immediately distanced himself from the association and asked his publishers to clarify their position about it. The publishers stated that they had nothing to do with it. «But that same night, investigating the association, I traced it back to Antonio Fiumefreddo, the publishers' lawyer». Fiumefreddo was also the predecessor of the judge's wife in the role of theatre supervision. Condorelli understood that he was being exploited and decided to resign. In his letter of resignation he wrote: «A newspaper committed to doing investigative journalism cannot be the symbol or the instrument of associations or politicians promoting collateral actions».

«The publishers reacted to my resignation» – says Condorelli – «with personal attacks. They said publicly that I was dismissed». On 13 February 2011, an article on the *Sud* website reported those statements and raised the following questions: «Who wanted to use our work and our money? Which sources are they using for their scoops? And what kind of protection must they ensure to keep on obtaining their famous “cards”? Investigation or prostitution?».

Today, Condorelli works for the Catania edition of the magazine *S* and continues his collaboration with the TV programme *Report* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* developing the investigations he started at *Sud* and working on new stories. Some of his inquiries were relevant for judicial investigations. He keeps on making what is called “pure journalism” while at the same time keeping a “low profile”. Antonio is trying to start up an audio-video press agency to allow young journalists to work and to be paid for it. «Meanwhile *Sud* goes on and I am happy about it because pluralism is important in a democracy» – concludes Condorelli. «Every journalist, while doing his or her work, must make choices. The choices we make are not always financially rewarding, but they give us a better reward: they give us freedom».

Modica. The social role of information

Il Clandestino is a local magazine born in October 2006 from the idea of ten young high school students who wanted to discuss the problems of their city, Modica, in the province of Ragusa. At the beginning the newspaper was printed on A3 paper photocopied, and distributed exclusively in schools and at concerts. No one of the founders had ever written on a newspaper. In 2008, they decided to register the newspaper and to distribute it at newsstands in Modica and in the province of Ragusa. «Today we have 15-20 reporters. We print 800 copies and we also distribute a PDF file on the Internet», says Giorgio Rutta, one of the most dedicated reporters of *Il Clandestino*.

Meanwhile, the group's activity has widened. Since 2009, it is enriched by the organisation of the annual festival of journalism in Modica, an occasion for exchanging views with citizens and other journalists working for national newspapers. Thanks to the festival, a lot of young people get to know the newspaper and some of them join it. «In February 2011, we heard that the major hospital of Modica was in very bad condition» – says Giorgio – «and we wanted to check it out. We found an appalling situation». Various types of waste was strewn along the corridor, also special waste like machinery and medical equipment were thrown among the garbage. The plumbing leaked and there was even water under the electrical panels, too. Anyone could have entered there and damaged the wiring. The reporters of *Il Clandestino* recorded it all on a video that was put on YouTube and caused great sensation on the web. The news on the conditions at the hospital of Modica was picked up by regional and national newspapers.

The hospital reacted and threatened to sue the newspaper and to report the authors of the video for breaking into a forbidden area and tampering with the chains at the entrance. «As everyone can see in the video» –Giorgio says – «we didn't force any door and we didn't break any chain. There weren't signs forbidding access to that area». Some associations and political groups showed solidarity with the newspaper and their report on the hospital, which had a high social value. The Mayor of Modica also supported for the young reporters. Finally, the Director of the hospital withdrew the complaint.

Enna. When only professional journalists are entitled to their rights

Giulia Martorana is 51 years old. She is a freelance journalist. She is the correspondent for *La Sicilia* and for the AGI agency in Enna. In October 2011, she was convicted in first instance to twenty days of prison, with a suspended sentence, for aiding and abetting, because she did not reveal to the judge her news source. In 2008, Giulia reported on a hearing for a trial for sexual abuse on two young sisters. «The judge ordered me to reveal my secret source – Giulia explained. As I refused to do it, the prosecutor accused me of aiding and abetting a person who was subject to professional secrecy, the person who revealed me the news».

Giulia had the same problem in another case. As a matter of fact, she faced the same accusation, along with her co-worker José Trovato, for news about the discovery of a burnt corpse in Armerina Square. José Trovato stressed the absurdity of Italian laws which do not provide professional secrecy for freelance journalists. «In Italy, two laws establish two opposite rights. The first one – the constitutive law of the Order of Journalists – establishes that the journalist has the right not to reveal the secret sources of information. The other one – article 200 of the criminal code on professional secrecy – ensures this right only to professional journalists. Thus, every freelancer that finds himself/herself in my position» – explains bitterly Giulia – «could be accused and convicted for aiding and abetting, an offence for which the code stipulates up to 3 years' imprisonment».