

## DROPS THAT CARVE THE STONE

By Alberto Spampinato

A sticky and filthy liquid is dripping. It falls in drops. Little drops, sometimes big drops. One single drop can fall in two days, or many drops can fall in one single time. Recently, more drops fell. These drops damage our clothes. They inflame our skin. There is no way to take shelter. And this is a huge problem.

Up until recently, this was not the case. The dripping was there, but it was so slow and rare that only a few people noticed it. We noticed those strange stains on our clothes, on our skin, on our soil. Strange stains, really. Indelible. They leave iridescent marks on the fabric and little chaps on the skin. We noticed the first ones five years ago. We counted one every eighteen days. About twenty a year. Only later we linked the stains to the dripping liquid, which we still hadn't noticed. It was easy to connect the cause to the effect. When we started to talk what we discovered, other people reported to us the stains they saw. And the number increased. Three years ago we counted 54 strange stains in twelve months, in 2011 we counted 95. From 20 to 95. A big leap. But the problem is not the quantity. Ninety-five drops do not even fill up one glass. Even if a hundred thousand drops fell, we would not risk a flood. What is more frightening is the nature of the liquid, more corrosive than acid rain, more polluting than flue gas. The drops inflame the skin, carve the stone and contaminate the air. And down, around the stains, there is just death.

We cannot just keep watching. We must do something. We must find the origin and the nature of the phenomenon and a way to stop it. We must understand if actually, as some say, more drops are falling than we can count. It seems that many of them blur with rain and frost. We must definitely know why those drops are falling, and we must stop them.

In Italy, unsolicited advice, warnings, intimidation and threats keep falling just like contaminated and corrosive drops. It is one of the most urgent matters we must deal with in order to ensure true freedom of the press and expression. On 29 December 2011, at the year-end press conference of the Order of Journalists, the president Enzo Iacopino presented the matter in these terms addressing to Italy's Prime Minister Mario Monti, whose attention to this issue was a hopeful sign.

*Let it go. Don't publish it. What's the point?*

The problem is apparent. In Italy many journalists receive strange "advice" every time they cover inconvenient and delicate news, especially news disliked by powerful people. Often in these cases someone comes out and tells the reporter: "Let it go. Don't publish the news. What's the point?". It happens even if the news is clearly of public interest. There always is someone who questions if the news is worth publishing. Some go further: they ask the journalist to evaluate whether to publish a piece of news based on non-journalistic criteria, like personal convenience, the problems it could cause other people, and the trouble that it would create for the journalist... It's raining unsolicited advice. Some people give advice lightly. Some people give it with authority, with the best intentions and with sincere empathy. Others give advice to actually intimidate. We must be careful with this rain of advice. We must really understand, every time, why somebody gives us a piece of advice, what does it mean to follow or not follow it, why in Italy are hundreds of journalists victims of interested advice.

Whoever follows it is censored; whoever does not follow it becomes the target of retaliation, violence, punishment, denigration, exploitation, isolation.

The attempts to hinder the work of journalists by means of violence, with devious threats and unwarranted intrusion, have multiplied in the last years. The number of threats increased at an alarming speed, with the frequency and the effects similar to the falling drops we have described above. In the past, little attention has been paid to this phenomenon. Now, though, it is impossible to ignore. Intimidation disguised as good advice, real threats coming from organised crime, from public personalities who do not accept criticism and from those businessmen who work in the grey zone of misdeeds and illegality, have become a big problem for Italy – a problem that cannot be ignored. This problem affects not only journalists; it affects the public's rights and thus, society as a whole. As the threats silence important news, they endanger the citizens' right to be informed and to make informed choices. The present Report shows the alarming evolution of the phenomenon in 2011 and presents possible remedies, such as legislative reforms with zero costs, but high profits for freedom and democracy.

### **How Ossigeno works, how the cases are classified**

Ossigeno per l'Informazione keeps count of episodes reported directly by the people involved, or those reported to the trade union, to the Order of Journalists, to other organisations, entities, journalists or other people that work with our monitoring activity. Ossigeno verifies each case and discards those which cannot be proven true. The Centre publishes the verified episodes when the victims consent it or when the facts are already known publicly.

In addition to death threats, physical assaults, home break-ins, property damage – which are crimes regulated by the Italian Penal Code – Ossigeno also considers other forms of intimidation. For instance, the Centre considers intimidation:

- the investigations on journalists performed without judicial warrant;
- the seizure of files, computers and other instruments of work and memorization belonging to the journalists;
- the invasive searches, arrests, incriminations of journalists ordered by public prosecutors to force the divulgence of confidential sources which journalists want to keep secret, based on the prerogatives recognized to journalists under the law.

Ossigeno considers as intimidation also the serious insults addressed to journalists in public by the representatives of institutions, public administrators, politicians or those who represent the economic power. Moreover, intimidation includes a series of specific legal abuses:

- libel actions apparently founded on pretexts;
- the summons to appear in court to obtain financial compensation when based on pretexts or exploitation, aiming at preventing news and enquiries from being published;
- the requests to block blogs and websites, with similar intentions.

For each episode that falls into these categories, the Centre reports the names of the journalists directly threatened and counts the number of those indirectly involved, with a conservative estimation of the newspaper office or the news team.

We must clarify that Ossigeno looks after not only professional, registered journalists, but anyone who is threatened or intimidated while carrying out activities related to

journalism and reporting or the acquisition and diffusion of information with journalistic value. Therefore our statistics include bloggers, photographers, cameramen, TV programmers and directors engaged in news coverage.

Ossigeno keeps a tally, registers the names of the victims and, every week, tells their dramatic stories. For what they represent, for the rights that are jeopardized, the stories of threatened journalists affect not only the reporters themselves, but every citizen. In democratic countries, when a journalist is threatened, the freedom of the press itself is threatened and everyone loses part of that freedom. In democratic countries, preventing journalists from doing their jobs is the equivalent of interrupting a public service. In every democracy the press is a social infrastructure, an activity of public interest. The citizens have the right to be free and to be informed. This right is protected by Article 21 of the Italian Constitution, by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and by Article 11 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. To be informed correctly, promptly, without omissions, without partiality, without censorship is the necessary premise to make informed decisions and to make choices based on the knowledge of the facts.