

OSSIGENO/2

Interpreting the data

Over the last five years Ossigeno has documented 925 journalists struck, directly and indirectly, by physical threats, intimidation, retaliation or serious legal abuses. The episodes are reported on the Ossigeno website. However, as we mentioned, there are at least ten thousand Italian journalists actually struck by these types of intimidation. This is the seemingly incredible number which emerges from the data collected by our Centre, taking into account the total dimension of the single episodes and considering that the phenomenon is mostly hidden, just like the episodes of extortion and usury. To give the real dimension of the phenomenon, or at least to get closer to reality, we must multiply the known episodes for a rectifying parameter. Ossigeno estimated that this parameter is roughly equal to ten.

To calculate the value of this rectifying parameter Ossigeno considered the following circumstances:

- The number of cases which Ossigeno was aware of but could not record and report because the people involved did not consent it: this number is higher than the number of verified and reported episodes;
- Many episodes of violence and abuse come out after many years, usually only after that a sentence is passed by a court;
- Some cases pass unseen by everyone;
- The investigative instruments of Ossigeno are insufficient to monitor everything that happens in every single reality;
- Institutions do not provide any data;
- There is no specific collection of statistical data.

These are the characteristics and the dimensions of the phenomenon. It is more widespread than one could possibly believe. Data reveal that in Italy threats and abuses against journalists are very common: they are used very frequently to prevent unwelcome news and inquiries from being published. These methods are so common because the authors of threats and retaliation have so far remained practically always unpunished. Such considerations can explain the increase of legal abuses, which bring low risks and limited costs to the abusers.

Threatened journalists? It's not news

Among the most underreported news stories of the last few years are those dealing, in fact, with threatened journalists. Even today, if a journalist is threatened, it is rare for national newspapers and TVs to report the news. Silently, with no previous announcement or notice, this practice found its way, even if it does not comply with the standards of journalism: each newspaper reports only its own threatened journalists, without mentioning the others, without saying that that the episode is not isolated. Only in very few cases the whole scenario is presented to the public opinion. And this is not a minor fact. It is one thing to say: "a journalist was threatened", but it is entirely different to say that he or she was one of the 925 journalists who suffered intimidation in 2011. It would have a deeper impact. Omitting that is a way to understate the situation.

A further way to understate this type of news is to confine it in the pages of local news, even if it has, with no doubt, general relevance. The circulation of the news exclusively on a local level reduces its effect and impact on public opinion. It is a technique of

misinformation used in authoritarian regimes and should be banned in every democratic country.

The Italian case

Violent conditioning of information is a widespread phenomenon all over the world. In Russia, over the last twenty years more than two thousand journalists have been murdered. In Mexico, in the last five years, there has been a slaughter of journalists. Threats, intimidation, censorship are very frequent in authoritarian regimes or in unstable democracies.

In Italy, luckily, we are far from these levels. That is because Italy is a democracy that practices and recognises human rights and fights for them to be exercised everywhere in the world. Yet, in Italy over the last 50 years, 11 journalists have been murdered by mafia and terrorism, the latest case being in 1993. Yet, in Italy there are hundreds of journalists who were censored and threatened. They are less than those who suffer the same treatment in Belarus or Turkey. However, people in Europe and in the rest of the world talk about the “Italian case”. They find the Italian situation strange, unusual, inexplicable for a stable democratic country. People talk about it because nothing comparable happens in other countries like Italy, in consolidated democracies with similar histories and legislations. The “Italian case” is caused by the incapacity to remedy such a widespread menace to information. If something remotely similar to this happened in the United States, in Great Britain, in France, in another western country, if in these democracies this kind of problem, even in minor proportions, happened, everyone would say that democracy is in danger and the problem would be taken very seriously. That is why the “Italian case” is so impressive for the rest of the world, it arouses questions, admonitions, warnings.

Italy lives through this condition with embarrassment and shame. This is demonstrated also by the inexplicable silence that surrounds the threatened journalists’ issue. An issue that people tried to chase away by denying it. When Ossigeno published its report in English, Spanish, German, and Chinese some journalists who were asked to circulate it in foreign countries objected: “It’s not good to make these problems known, since Italy would make a poor impression”. This objection reveals not only embarrassment for the situation, but also a certain degree of provincialism. Ossigeno considers useful and necessary for problems, including this one, to be known and discussed for what they actually are. Silence does not solve the problem. The first step to take is to talk about it, to break the taboo that hampers the discussion, to discover that other people also have or had the same problems.

To make the Italian case and its true implications known to the international community helps to break the taboo and – as Ossigeno’s experience testifies – it helps other countries to discover and cure their own illnesses in their latency or incubation period.

We can and must speak about threatened journalists without denying the merits of Italy and its journalism. Italy can legitimately boast quality journalism; it has great and historic newspapers, eminent journalists, a high level of professionalism, vital and dynamic newspapers deeply rooted in the territory. All this is Italy’s pride and nobody can deny it. But we need to talk without rhetoric and admit that the great Italian journalism has a few problems, too. First of all, press legislation is defective, outdated, contradictory, and punitive towards journalists, and puts newspapers and reporters in a disadvantaged position against all forms of power. Journalists must speak about it

and fight for reform laws to comply with the European standards and the norms of the great Western democracies, as the UN and the international centres like Reporters Sans Frontières, the IPI, and Article 19 are urgently demanding.

In Europe, the Italian information system is already under special surveillance, because of what is called for short the “Berlusconi affair” (concentration of media ownership and conflicts of interest with politics), for the high number of threatened journalists, for the substantial impunity of those who intimidate journalists by means of violence, for the abuses allowed by inadequate public behaviour and laws, especially the defamation law that led to resounding sentences that were later rectified by the European Court of Justice.

In January 2010, the Council of Europe discussed the Italian case. There, Rapporteur MacIntosh (see 2010 Ossigeno Report), in asking all member countries for a stronger commitment to ensure the journalists’ safety, named a few Italian journalists forced to live under police protection.

Another relevant document for the Italian case is the biennial Report of IPDC (International Programme for the Development of Communications) published on 25 March 2010 by UNESCO, reporting on the journalists who lost their lives in the course of duty. The Report lists 125 murdered journalists in 28 Nations in 2008-2009 (three more than the previous two-year period) and urges interventions and initiatives to end the substantial impunity of those who threat, attack or kill journalists.

UNESCO Report

The UNESCO Report allows us to understand three essential aspects:

- 1) Local journalists are the ones at greatest risk. As a matter of fact, the 80% of murdered journalists in 2008-2009 were not to war correspondents. Those journalists did not work in war zones, but in countries at peace like Italy, and they covered local news;
- 2) For each journalist killed there are many more who are threatened and exposed to serious violence. According to UNESCO, the substantial impunity of those who threaten or kill journalists must be defeated because it makes the reporters “an easy target”. In other words, if threatening a journalist carries a low risk, “whoever wants to prevent a journalist from investigating and revealing information of public interest” has fewer qualms about striking him or her.
- 3) The third aspect highlighted by the UNESCO Report deals with the effects of an intimidating climate: “The absence of threats against the reporters is the essential condition protecting the people’s right to be properly informed and, at the same time, to ensure the journalists’ right to tell the news without fearing for their life. A journalist’s murder, while being the most serious attack to press freedom, is only the tip of the iceberg. News professionals have to deal with many other forms of violence, such as threats, intimidation, kidnappings, harassment and physical assaults, as pointed out by the associations of journalists and the centres on press freedom like Reporters San Frontières, the CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists) and the IFJ (International Federation of Journalists). Those sources also reported attacks on media organisations and initiatives that aim to destroy their resources”.

These statements contradict erroneous, though deeply rooted, beliefs about who, among journalists, is most at risk. It is unusual that they drew very little attention, especially in Italy, where the problem is particularly grave.