

OSSIGENO/3
The weapons
Visibility, solidarity, public attention

Local news is the most exposed frontier of Italian journalism. As a matter of fact, the highest number of threatened journalists is represented by the reporters, copy-editors and collaborators of local newspapers, by the correspondents who pass the news to the central offices.

On the average, these journalists suffer more conditioning than those who work in the big cities. In little towns, the reporters who observe reality and tell the citizens what they see with their own eyes, run more risks because it is difficult to avoid direct and open conditioning. The abusers are often very close to the reporter and they act from a short distance. The reporter who reveals inconvenient truths is a personal enemy to them and their attacks are specifically aimed at defaming, isolating and neutralizing him or her.

The isolation of the targeted reporters can take different shapes. First of all, there is the lack of solidarity, or the false and poor solidarity shown by colleagues through official solidarity notes, which are sent late and without conviction, signed with the “left hand” and weakened by the behaviour of the signers. It’s easy to recognise false solidarity: it sounds weak, just like a false coin. The people who want to show real solidarity put themselves on the victims’ side, identify with them, defy the abuser to pick on them, share the danger, as the inhabitants of Locri did, in October 2005, when they demonstrated in the streets after the assassination of Francesco Fortugno with the slogan: “And now kill us all”. It is rare for journalists to do something like that for their threatened colleagues. Rare, but occasionally it happens. The most famous case was in September 2009, when hundreds of journalists came from all over Italy to join in a solidarity walk in Palermo for the reporter Lirio Abbate. It looked like the beginning of a more appropriate way to respond to intimidation, but it remained an isolated gesture, which was not repeated when other episodes occurred.

A threatened journalist’s colleagues find thousands of reasons not to take action, to deny the “media guard”, which has been often identified as the most effective defence that a threatened reporter could possibly receive.

People usually try to make distinctions. At first, threats are always put in doubt. Then, if the threat itself is considered believable, it’s the victim’s conduct that is put in doubt. Some openly ask the victim the famous questions: “You just had to report the news, didn’t you?”, leaving the rest of the sentence implied “You could have done like me, you could pretend not to know anything”. Sometimes, the victim who dares to question this point of view is attacked with other typical lines: “Who do you think you are? Don’t you see you put all of us in danger?”. As a result, sometimes the victim can be accused with a few pretexts and called to explain himself or herself in front of the disciplinary committee. It does not always end that way, but it happens.

Where journalism is weaker

We are talking about Italy, but Italy is a mix of many different realities, also when it comes to journalism. There is the central heart of the nation powerfully lit by journalism, while all around there is a vast peripheral zone hardly touched by light. In big cities there are the most important newspapers and television offices, where two or more media with a large audience compete to gain readers and listeners, where there

is a large number of professional journalists, where a reporter in trouble can go away and work for another newspaper, where (almost) everything that happens is put under the light by journalism.

And then there is the rest of Italy, that is the greater part of the country where the light of journalism is poor and leaves many zones in the shadow or in the dark. This vast periphery of journalism begins in the suburbs of the big cities. Every zone is under the influence of a prevailing publisher that, like a feudal patron, keeps the monopoly of local news, often after signing a pact with the other publishers, pacts that would be sanctioned by the Antitrust Authority if they were made in the well-lit part of Italy. The people who work for the newspaper of poorly lit Italy have to choose the news with criteria very different from those quoted in journalism manuals. The journalists who work in this “periphery” and for these newspapers do not have the same rights generally recognised to metropolitan journalists. The coexistence of such different areas is the source of many problems in Italy. And it is appalling that so little is done to make the rules of good journalism prevail throughout the nation.

Public money and good journalism

Much can be done, some even immediately. For example, we must update the regulation of public funding to publishers – the most powerful and effective public instrument in the publishing field, which should serve, above all, to encourage good journalism. While the budget difficulties of the State have led to a reduction in this funding and new rules for its allotment, these resources must be used to encourage good and brave journalism. For instance, publishers who request public funding should be required to make a few commitments: to respect free competition, information pluralism and people’s right to be properly and impartially informed, to work with the highest degree of professionalism, to function as a public service publishing news of general interest without omissions, especially local and socially relevant news. Those commitments will measure the results of public funding, which currently represents a generic contribution to the publishing companies’ expenses. The glaring violation of those commitments should bring the exclusion from further funding, especially for the newspapers that publish unilateral information, that censor, underreport and omit news of public interest. At this moment, trying to prove these kinds of violations would be unrealistic, but when there are explicit norms ensuring the people’s right to be properly informed and punishing those who breach this right, those commitments will be respected.

Weaker because of the temporary employment

One of the factors that weakens good journalism are the working conditions of many journalists who are defined “temporary employees”: many of them do not have a stable work contract, they are on piecework and their articles are shamefully underpaid. This type of employment scheme, especially outside of the great urban centres, created a sort of corporalship with poor reporters working only occasionally and trying hard to put together the minimum wage. Working in those conditions pushes everyone to think that deontological rules are optional, a luxury which few people can afford. Temporarily employed journalists, because of their condition, are particularly exposed to blackmail and threats. How could a journalist struggling for survival fight against powerful sources over inconvenient news? Who’s helping such a reporter when he or

she is threatened? Who's paying for his or her legal assistance when he or she is wrongly accused or sued for damages? Except for rare cases, these struggling journalists must manage with their own meagre means. All this falls both on their families' shoulders and on the quality of the information. Lawmakers must do something in this regard and the required reforms must be applied.

Like in the authoritarian regimes

As we mentioned above, local journalists, even those with a stable contract, are the most exposed to local criminals' harassment, which aims at silencing them. Let's see how these exploitations are performed.

The harassers can limit the freedom of the press by means of violence, arrogance and blackmail staying essentially unpunished. Their abuses narrow the journalists' field of action. The widespread climate of intimidation often pushes the journalists not to report on controversial issues and on what is going on beyond the arbitrary line traced by the abusers. In other words, the abusers impose a pre-emptive censorship by means of violence, just like what happens in authoritarian regimes.

Up until short time ago, this kind of things only happened in certain areas of Italy, which are under the strong influence and control of the mafia. Over the last few years things got worse. The "line of the palm" – as famous Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia defined the border between "hot" areas and the rest of Italy – has moved further to the north. The abusive methods employed by mafia have spread throughout all of Italy, just like a cancer that spreads throughout the body. What has also spread is the violent limitation on news reporting.

This violent and arbitrary limitation of information is present in all regions of Italy, both in towns and big cities, and it deals not only with mafia. It is performed by all types of power (political, economic, etc.) towards every kind of inconvenient news. Violent limitation of information is a social problem which everyone, not only journalists, must face. It is a problem for democracy.

News blackout, the armour of invisibility

The most effective defences for a threatened journalist are visibility, solidarity and public attention. It is difficult to deny and it is even more difficult to understand how anyone could claim the contrary by now. But some still think that keeping the threats hidden, not giving them strong publicity, would be safer for the journalist. This is true only in special cases and in certain moments: when the people involved request it or when the on-going investigations to identify the abusers could be compromised. But except for those cases, this is not true. When they overcome their fear, the victims themselves ask to go public because they do not want to be isolated.

It is hard to understand how someone could suggest, without being publicly contradicted, that a news blackout could be a solution to this problem. Whoever believes it, is wrong. Ossigeno per l'Informazione considers high visibility for the threatened journalists as the most effective shield to protect them.

Understatement

The understatement is a big curtain behind which we can hide everything, even a social drama as deep and widespread as that of threatened journalists. The ways of understatement are infinite.

One can understate, for example, saying that the threats are occasional, that they have no general relevance, that the threatened ones are, in part, responsible for what is happening to them... This is like giving false coordinates that do not reflect the right spot on the map.

How could one possibly define the threats as “occasional” when there are twenty cases a month? How could one possibly say that local journalists are second-rate when in fact they are all first-rate? Local journalists are often fundamental elements of information gathering system: they are like sensitive antennae on the ground, they are the historical memory, they are the “sherpas” who help the big newspapers correspondents.

However, the greatest form of understatement is the silence in the news when a journalist receives threats, assaults or unfair accusations. Sometimes threatened journalists’ colleagues – it must be said – try to keep the news secret. This is one of the problems we must face.

There is no reasonable excuse for silencing this kind of news. Yet, most newspapers and TV news do not report this news. Threatened journalist? That is not news! That is what many editors say, unless their own newspaper or a famous journalist is involved. In these last two cases, the news is put in the spotlight, but without mentioning that other, lesser known journalists suffered the same fate. In these cases the personality is the news. The problem is just an accessory circumstance. Not connecting the facts between them is another devious form of understatement, and a common one.

Some justify themselves by saying: «This is the umpteenth threatened journalist». Imagine if a sports commentator said: «This is the umpteenth goal of the match!». That is not journalism, it is crude reporting. It is a way to say that a repetitive event is not important and is not of interest.

Another way of reducing the impact of news is to keep it in a narrow environment: it is another way to understate the succession of intimidation cases.

When a journalist is threatened, the normal practice is that only the newspaper for which he/she works reports the news, and sometimes not even they will do so. Behind such behaviour there are various reasons and some of them are really pitiful: competition between newspapers, political or trade union issues, personal jealousy between journalists, fear of siding with the weaker party against the stronger party, the desire to show the harasser that the victim will not be defended, not even by his or her own colleagues...

The attitude of public figures also influences the understatement. Politicians could do a lot, but they seldom intervene. It is rare for a leading politician to show solidarity with a journalist. When he/she does it, it is almost always for a famous journalist or for a personal or political friend of the politician. Even rarer is political solidarity shown through a parliamentary inquiry, which, almost always, remains unresolved. During the last few years, the government has not even answered requests to know how many Italian journalists are living under armed guard and other types of police protection.

Elsewhere it is worse. But where?

Why do the newspapers, the Parliament, the politicians, the institutions not address such a serious, widespread and recurring phenomenon? There are many different auto-justifications, but the most common one was to deny the problem. Then, the ample, qualitative and quantitative documentation presented by Ossigeno per l'Informazione changed everything. Now the main justification is: «Okay, but in other countries it's even worse, far more serious offences are committed: journalists are deprived of their freedom, they are imprisoned and killed».

That is true, but many of those countries are ruled by authoritarian regimes or by new and weak democracies. Those are the only countries with something quite similar to the Italian situation.

The seriousness of the problem must be measured in proportion to the degree of democratic evolution of each country. As a stable democracy, what happens in Italy is really serious: Italy is the ancient cradle of Roman law, it is one of the five founding countries of the European Community, it has been, for sixty years, an example of freedom and respect for human rights. How could Italy possibly preach the European lesson to the new democracies that dream of entering the European Union, if one of the fundamental human rights, the right of expression and information, finds such incredibly high obstacles?