

OSSIGENO TRAINING FOR OBSERVERS OF THE VIOLATIONS OF PRESS FREEDOM

All decent people defend the freedom of press and expression and consider it a fundamental right. But few people know that this freedom includes the right to be properly informed and the right to criticize (even harshly) those in power. Consequently, while everyone knows how to recognize the most egregious and blatant violations of freedom of the press and expression, few people know how to recognize the subtle violations, which are the most frequent, the most dangerous and the most difficult to counteract.

In this field there is a real gap in the training and educational facilities, among the media operators themselves and even among college students.

This is a weak point in the defense of press freedom and the freedom of expression system, since the primary requirement of a defender of press freedom is the ability to recognize violations.

Thus Ossigeno per l'Informazione NGO proposes training seminars in this matter to the students of the European University.

Workshops have also three longer-term objectives:

- 1) promoting researches and thesis on the theme of limitations of freedom of the press
- 2) forming skilled observers of the violations of press freedom and freedom of expression, a kind of expert that is needed to create specialized monitoring centers in each country, as requested by the Council of Europe.
- 3) forming a European task force of university teachers specialized in this field.

Training courses like this have been already held in Madrid (in 2016 and 2017) and in Rome and other Italian cities since 2014.

From September 2017 to January 2018, Ossigeno per l'Informazione, together with the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (see www.ecpmf.eu) is promoting the replication of courses in Spain, Belgium and Italy, with the support of the European Commission and involving NGOs and international institutions.

The main purpose is to raise awareness, among journalists, teachers, media operators and college students, about the fundamental right to be informed. Inter alia, it will be achieved by spreading, as best practice, knowledge of the monitoring experience (practical and theoretical) on threats to journalists and on other press freedom violations, successfully conducted in Italy by *Ossigeno per l'Informazione* over ten years unveiling more than three thousand names of victims and talking about threats that occur in the host country with journalists, bloggers and citizen journalists under fire.

Each workshop is structured as a four hour meeting. It involves teachers from the Ossigeno staff in Rome and other locals. Representatives of EU institutions, UNESCO, OSCE, Council of Europe will be invited as guests, experts and rapporteurs. Written and graphic documentation is released for each session.

Each workshop is conceived as the first step of a program to be developed further and in more depth in subsequent meetings.

BACKGROUND - Ossigeno's experience in the training of journalists and students

In addition to the monitoring of intimidation and taking initiatives to defend press freedom, **Ossigeno per l'Informazione** has been developing for a long time an intense training activity with courses organized in collaboration with the Italian *Ordine dei Giornalisti*, journalists' trade unions, universities and cultural institutions. These training courses are aimed at journalists, students, educators and social communicators. They have been held all over Italy and abroad.

From this experience **Ossigeno** has developed a project that involves repeating such training in other Western European countries in collaboration with local universities and organizations representing journalists.

The main mission is to encourage universities and research centres across Europe to create teaching courses to train experts in the monitoring of press freedom violations.

These experts are ever more essential because violations are spreading widely. Many institutions - the Council of Europe above all - are encouraging individual countries to create public agencies to keep under observation the phenomenon on the ground and at the same time to provide reliable and consistent data to the Platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists. The Platform, begun in 2014 to serve the CoE 47 countries, is still “undernourished”.

The **Ossigeno** project also includes initiatives to form a close-knit group of trainers from various countries.

The most direct result of such training is to make students aware and attentive about their right to be informed in a correct and fair way and to make journalists more aware of both the law and the lack of legislation to protect freedom of information whilst at the same time showing the limits that modern societies can reasonably put on the freedom of expression to prevent unjustified harm to other important rights.

Course participants learn also to recognize not only the usual violations but also those subtle and misleading violations - the so called “hidden censorship” - that is spreading in modern countries, often, it is claimed, to protect other rights judged as more important.

The training courses are intended to be free of charge for participants. They include four hours of formal lessons that can be integrated with more hours of practical sessions. The instructors are journalists with lengthy experience having been trained in law and with direct knowledge of the effects of violations of press freedom. There are also lawyers expert in the topic, university teachers and observers engaged in monitoring on behalf of **Ossigeno**.

The training courses for university students meet the need to spread knowledge and mastery of this fundamental right as part of the civil and cultural formation of the individual. The right of information is stronger if citizens know they have this right and demand that it must be respected. In Italy a big opportunity is provided because training courses for journalists are recognized by the *Ordine dei Giornalisti* which gives participants the credits needed each year by a registered journalist to fulfil the requirements of their professional development imposed by law.

In recent years **Ossigeno** has organized all over Italy more than 40 courses on how a journalist, a reporter, a blogger can better defend himself/ herself from lawsuits presented only to intimidate and prevent the publishing of unwelcome news. The courses highlight the threats and retaliations against journalists and the political, economic and criminal powers used to justify undue pressures and vexatious legal actions. Special attention is given to intimidation and attacks faced by local freelance reporters.

<http://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/the-platform>

Ossigeno's training courses achieve resounding success because they are not restricted to listing the constitutional rights or the contents of Italian law, but they develop the issues with concrete examples both historical and current, in a particular way that brings the participants to empathize with the problem.

The analysis of concrete situations studied by Ossigeno is presented and journalists can discuss it as well as the daily problems they have to tackle. Moreover, in this way it is possible to highlight the paradoxical situation of Italy: a free and democratic country where dozens of journalists live under armed police protection; where every year thousands of journalists suffer retaliation because of their

work, and where media outlets do not inform about it. Journalists attending **Ossigeno** courses have the opportunity to discover the large extent of this problem and to learn how important it is to monitor intimidation both to protect victims and to repair the legislative vacuum on this matter.

Over four thousand participants from 2014

In 2014, 2015 and 2016 substantial number of journalists, over 5000 in total, participated in **Ossigeno's** training activities. Between May 2015 and November 2015 the course “*Corrections and libel: A positive practice to fulfil rights and duties*” has been repeated six times, with the participation of 700 journalists to whom the Order of Journalists awarded 400 course credits.

Between May 2014 and April 2015 the course has been repeated 23 times in 8 different Italian Regions with the participation of 2600 journalists, to whom the *Order of Journalists* awarded about 20,000 course credits. In December 2015 **Ossigeno** held two more very demanding courses, one on defamation in Terni (Umbria) and the other in Rome. The latter entitled “*Hidden censorship: How to identify, recognize and fight*”, promoted in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Roma Tre University, was followed by 900 people (656 registered journalists, 51 registered students and others non-registered) and was held in a prestigious venue at the National Library. It represents an innovation in **Ossigeno's** educational offer and it is the forerunner of a new training activity that the **Observatory** intends to carry out throughout Europe in 2017. The first positive test was on April 14th, 2016 in **Madrid**, at the campus of the **University Rey Juan Carlos** with a mission to spread among journalists and students an understanding of new underhand forms of censorship and to train observers of these violations of press freedom. Another one was held in Madrid in March 2017 at University Complutense.

The Italian basic course is structured into four teaching modules each of four hours over two days and it was held by Ossigeno, the Italian National Library, the Bachelor's degree school in the Information Science Department of the *University Roma Tor Vergata*, the *Ordine dei Giornalisti* and the *Associazione Stampa Romana*. **Ossigeno's** training is now involving universities of other cities and other countries.