

What future for journalism?

by Elzbieta Cywiak

The advent of the new media is gradually transforming journalism and leading to a general upheaval, the consequences of which will only become fully apparent in the following decades. Many scenarios are still unforeseeable and, indeed, indefinable, although one thing seems to be very clear as of now, according to the research carried out by the Washington based Cato Institute, as summarised by Clay Shirky, a US media expert, the models of journalism set to be successful in the future will be based on new forms of creation; some will be the work of professionals, others of amateurs, and yet others of groups and even of machines.

Although the comment by Gavin Newsom, Mayor of San Francisco, that "if the world suddenly found itself without newspapers, many people under the age of thirty wouldn't even notice it" seems slightly exaggerated, the latest survey figures do show that the Internet beats newspapers for news. The Web ranks third as the most widespread medium for reading and looking into news items, after local TV stations and the nationwide networks. Television is still going strong, but the Web is gaining a bigger and bigger foothold at the expense of the press, at even faster rate.

Recently in Italy the Web has offered an important supply in political information which will be probably be recorded in handbooks on communication. Readers were able to follow on the Web page of an prestigious Italian newspaper "Corriere della Sera" the first Tv debate on regional elections practically forbidden in that very moment by the strict and complicated regulations of the so called "par condicio" which in effect strongly limited the political confrontation on Television national networks.

So, what does the future have in store for newspapers and how can they adapt to the changing situation in order to survive? This has been one of the most hotly debated issues in the United States for several years now, since the publishing giants found out they were standing on feet of clay. And it has become a big issue in the Old Continent too, where, however, the press still seems to be holding its own.

Two Italian journalists, Massimo Gaggi and Marco Bardazzi, in their recent book "Ultima notizia" (Breaking the News) show how communication in the future will be grounded on the so called "three C" : co-sharing, community and conservation, which, however, should be supplemented with another three factors: contents, credibility and creativity. There is no question as to the fact that the Web has changed readers as well, who are no longer satisfied just with reading the news, they want to produce journalism as well, in increasingly larger numbers. Hence, the phenomenon called "citizen journalism", an amateur journalism any Web user can make, which has its good and its bad points. For instance, how can one possibly verify the credibility of the people making news on the Internet? How can one prevent an anonymous blog from being perceived by a part of the readership as being on the same level as a prestigious daily? For the time being, news editors are trial testing forms of interaction, of cross-mediality between the press and the Internet. In any case, blog discussions always originate from what people read in the papers.

The latest experiments, such as the one made by the five professionals, who locked themselves away on a French farm, in the Perigord region, with no papers, newswires, telephone, radio and television, using Facebook and Twitter, and the web pages they found linked in the social network posts, as their only sources of information, and the research conducted by the George Washington University on a sample of US journalists, have shown that not even haste can help journalists forget that the conventional sources remain the most reliable. This is both because the channels that feed them are the most reliable, and because the people working there tend to check out the truthfulness of a story before publishing it.

Therefore, although looking for news stories on the Web has become part and parcel of a journalist's work, investigation and evaluation still play an infinitely greater role. And even

though journalism seems irrevocably destined to a future "on line", with various sources of revenue advertising, "ad hoc" content and applications for using contents on any platform – Jean-Marie Colombani , the former editor of the French "Le Monde" daily, assures us that the press won't die out. What will probably disappear are "the huge cathedrals, with their giant rotary machines and widespread distribution. But newspapers will continue to be sold at newsagents, maybe in the form of smaller local dailies". The larger nationwide dailies will probably evolve into quality information centres targeting any type of medium. And we mustn't forget the free daily newspapers that are still travelling on our underground trains and buses and being distributed in retail outlets.

One of the keywords in the future of journalism, therefore, seems to be "hybridism", according to Arianna Huffington, founder of the renowned Huffington Post. The conventional media will eventually embrace the keynotes of the new media (including transparency, immediacy and interaction) and the new media will adopt "the best practices of the old media, such as balance, accuracy and high-impact investigative journalism", promising the advent of a golden age which is already appearing on the horizon of the consumers of information, who, thanks to the Internet, have access to all the best features and articles worldwide, which they can comment on and interact with as well as create communities about. It doesn't matter whether it's the Press or the Web, as long as quality remains the focus.