

The Journalism of the Future

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A famous Hungarian writer lamented about the falling revenues of the London Times although it was still „the most perfect newspaper of the world.” The information, as small as it is, belongs to the everyday history, wrote this novelist – not now, but more than 70 years ago, in 1938. And another example: „Change is in the air. A new communications technology threatens a dramatic upheaval in America’s newspaper industry(.) The great revolution will mean that some publications must submit to destiny, and go out of existence.” Believe it or not this doesn’t refer to the internet, but to the electric telegraph, and it was not nowadays but in 1845 when James Gordon Bennett, the editor of New York Herald – author of one of the earliest interviews in press history – so desparately defended newspapers in front of the discovery of the telegraph.

These are only examples just to put the present situation into a historical context. As a matter of fact newspaper (industry) had been challenged several times since its foundation back in the XVIIth century, and after the invention of the electric telegraph, between the two world wars, English newspapers wanted to prohibit the BBC to broadcast news in the early morning hours and forenoon. Radio – as we know – survived, as did the printed press with some changes, and roughly the same happened when television appeared; the very fact that it became superstar of the mass media had its impact on the printed press as well. But this latter survived although, according to Umberto Eco some Italian dailies began to look like weeklies, and weeklies like – monthlies. Ok, this is the past, but nowadays the „attack” on printed press seems to be much more intensive than ever, and General Internet is approaching to its victory, maybe it won’t be a knock out but still an easy victory, do say some analysts. Daily newspaper is dead, the only question is how long the agony will last – alleged a well known Hungarian professor of media studies.

Let me say that the opinions about the death of the printed press are not baseless. According to a lot of surveys circulation of the printed press, with an important distinction, of the quality press has been since many years falling all over the world, more intensively since the global crisis began in October 2008. But we can’t blame only the global economic decline because of this process. No, General Internet’s army is growing, without any doubt, and it is conquering more and more readers, especially from the younger generations. This is my own experiment as well, in a group of 20 students generally no more than five have ever read a quality daily. Not only young readers but cheap and expensive advertisements will be also conquered by the new victorious General in growing number, although in Hungary in terms of advertising revenues still TV is figuring on the first place, on the second is printed press, and new media only on the third, roughly with 1/6-1/7 revenue of the first two media types. As far as I know there is still only one country – UK – where in terms of ad revenues new media is leading before television and printed press. But the very fact is undeniable: in our countries we are witnessing a platform-changing process, in the center of which is the growing influence of the new media, the news sites and the social media, as Facebook, Twitter and so on. And the two main losers in this long battle are the quality newspapers and the public electronic media. As far as this latter concerns in my country - and I don’t think Hungarians are the only ones in Europe – there is a fierce professional and political debate about reforming or even eliminating the public media. And the weakening influence and relevance of these two very traditional media with some special values and missions is creating gradually a new kind of media landscape. For the older and even more old generations it does mean the sunset of the most important media in their professional life.

But still I dare to think that traditional printed press and public electronic media – which in my view in a certain way is an element of national identity and culture in Europe – will survive. And I think my trust is based not only on hope and sentiments but also on some solid lessons of the past and some new facts of the present. First of all the historic context proves that the quality press always tried to adapt to the new situation. Let us see some up-to-date examples. One newly appointed BBC-boss told his colleagues that they have to use social media – Twitter, Facebook, etc. – in their daily work. And if not they are free to leave. I think the younger generations will gradually learn to use the social media, as we did it when we got acquainted with the computer. But does it eliminate the work of a „traditional” journalist? Not long ago five French language radio stations sent their reporters to a village in Périgord (South France). They had the task to inform their audience exclusively on the basis of social media (Twitter, Facebook), without TV, radio, without daily or weekly newspaper, but with the help of an empty PC.

According to the first analysis in terms of information their reporting was not worse than that of the traditionals, and sometimes even quicker. But the colleagues participating in this experiment had some complaints as regards the interpretation and control possibilities of the information reaching them from the social media. We have to wait until the final evaluation of this experiment but it is suggesting that the two kinds of journalism do not exclude each other, and the tendency of interpretative journalism which was once intensified by the old „new” media – radio, TV -, will be again stressed, maybe even more, than before. And as regards the quality printed press, we see a lot of new models, especially in the UK and the USA, which may help the printed press. I think the era of free quality contents of online media is gradually over. The readers of the New York Times site will have to pay a kind of „flat fee” from the beginning of the next year. In the background of this decision we have the new facts: from 2007 even online ads began to decline, and online editions have the majority of the readers, but print attracts more advertisement. According to Arthur Sulzburger, the president of NYT Company, half-solutions are excluded, and this is a long process, but since 2007 they have realised online editions based only on ads had more and more financial difficulties. Some newspapers are already one step before the NYT: the Wall Street Journal has the practice to send some articles only to its online subscribers; the Financial Times’s method is differing: ten articles in a month will be charged. And obviously there are other examples and experiments as well.

Am I too optimistic and too audacious if I have the vision of a quality print media which will be helped – saved? - by the online editions? Like the telegraph internet has changed, and is changing the style of reporting and are forcing papers to be more timely and accurate. We can’t of course exclude that internet kills newspapers. I think that might differ from country to country, I can’t imagine for example the British and the global press without The Economist, with a circulation of 1.4 million, 57% of which is sold outside UK. But other countries, like Hungary, have no Economist and their newspapers are not written in English. And even if we know that one day every crisis is over, the fact remains that younger generations in my country generally don’t read quality dailies and weeklies. On the long term this kind of media can’t survive unless it finds its own way to younger readers. But the death of some printed papers is not the same as the death of news. And if news survive journalists are also needed maybe with some other skills than those of the „classical” generation, before the platform-change. Civil media and social media most probably will be a complementing, indispensably and integral part of the whole new mediasystem, but who else would launch and interpret the news than the journalist, and his or her task remains – as James Reston said almost 90 years ago – to tell the truth.

And here I don’t see any difference between the journalism of the future and the past.