

THE ISSUE OF THE ITALIAN NEWSPAPERS' OWNERSHIP

In the world there are different models and several systems regarding the information industry. In most free countries media are independent and not influenced by politics and the economy. They act as the famous "fourth estate". On the other hand, in non-democratic countries the press is silenced or directly controlled by the power.

Italy has some peculiarities: democracy, freedom of speech and freedom of expression are in force. However, most of the media is controlled by economic and financial groups, entrepreneurs and companies, sometimes politicians and political parties. There is so a significant threat of influence over the reporters and the journals. This can adversely affect the quality of the Italian journalism and the independence of the media.

If the owner of a medium has prevailing economic interests in other activities we use to talk about "impure publishing" ("editoria impura" in Italian), as opposed to the "pure" one, where the publisher manages his media as his sole or main job. An impure publisher, for instance, has some industries or manages a bank, while a pure editor has just the media as his employ and activity.

An impure publisher uses to guarantee more available money for a medium, but this phenomenon can provoke influences to those who provide information to the public opinion looking for a honest information. It must be said, however, that not necessarily a newspaper handled by an impure publisher should be worse than another in the hands of a pure one. It is important to discern case-by-case.

Even Pulitzer already in the nineteenth century argued the inevitability of the business model and the economic logic inside the newspapers. According to Pulitzer a journal, even if it should have ethical features towards the public, acts as a company with its income statement, its profit and loss account, and its financing and earnings.

Today, these concepts are essential and taken for granted. So we don't mean to call into question the market rules, but only verify whether these rules are respected or not.

In Italy indeed the problem of the conflict of interest is often a subject of debate. This issue affects politics and the economy but also journalism. Frequently individuals related to a company or a bank are also linked with competing entities. Sometimes the power relationships, the contacts and the influences prevail on market rules, making the Italian social and economic system more fragile than a good part of the international scene.

Journalism doesn't make an exception; it is one of the areas in which we can trace this phenomenon. Several newspapers, including the most important nationwide, are managed by

impure publishers, who have corporations and are shareholders of big companies.

This raises many questions to the Italian newspapers: can they be regarded as free and independent? Are they able to offer their readers a product of quality? Can we argue that impure publishing have consequences for the trust that the public opinion has towards the media?

The data about the advertising revenues and the sales bare a trade in crisis even before the economic recession. While other media like television and radio have increased over the years the audience or the incomes, Italian newspapers have been involved in a slow decline over time, in terms of money, readers, and consequently influence on public opinion.

It must be said that this problem concerns an already weak system: the number of newspapers' readers in Italy is much lower compared to the rest of the developed countries. The market and the public opinion are narrow. Young people tend not to read journals, preferring internet on various platforms (PC, mobile, tablet) or television.

These factors have led to serious difficulties in the market of Italian newspapers that many of them have faced liquidity crises, ownership changes, bankruptcies and closures.

All these elements make impure publishers' life easier, since they have wide liquidity and are ready to invest in newspapers. As we have said, their investment, however, can turn into a risk for the journal.

Nowadays millions of Italians are informed by the newspapers, but the majority just watch television for the news. Until a few decades ago a significant portion of the population was even illiterate. In our country there has not been a significant increase of reading like abroad. Traditionally, it has been the lack of a widespread publishing but also the high quality newspapers have not been successful. The "omnibus" format prevailed, giving papers with content of every kind.

Historically speaking, investments in major newspapers by manufacturers must be dated back to the early decades of the twentieth century: the upper middle class of several towns began to invest in the media, looking for a support towards the public opinion for their activities.

If the issue of the independence of the press did not even arise during Mussolini and the fascist dictatorship, in the postwar the new Republic of Italy did not introduce weighty hurdles to defend the press. Indeed, instead of independence and autonomy, the ideas of pluralism and diversity were preferred, with the development of many journals controlled by political parties.

According to some academics, at that time the Italian journalism and the new political class lacked of courage in their choices, but in our country there has also been a lack of tradition of investigative journalism and of distance between the power and the press.

Over the decades the news became more and more a business for banks, insurance companies and entrepreneurs. The mass-media system we can see today, characterized by impure publishing, has its origins in the past, until the first decades of life of newspapers.

The Italian harmony between capitalism and relationships brings us back to the issue of the unfit connection among companies. Frequently the market rules are not respected, so as to promote relations of power and close agreements between subjects in theory competitors. This exacerbates the problem and loads it of social and economic consequences.

Italian journalism suffers because of the excessive closeness between the power and the press. If the power is not transparent and it administrates the press, how can these media appear independent and reliable?

In Italy hundreds of newspapers are being published every day but only some of them have a national coverage or a wide release. In the last few years only ten newspapers have overcome the average daily circulation of 100.000 copies. By comparison, the U.S. population is six times higher than the Italian, but in 2008 the papers above the threshold were 99, ten times as much.

Among the ten major Italian newspapers, none of them has a publisher that deals exclusively with the media business. Everyone represents some interests in other economic and social sectors: industries and banks, private health care or even the Catholic Church.

Therefore, the issue of impure publishing is not an exception among Italian newspapers but rather the established rule. Indeed not only the main newspapers are held by impure publisher but the vast majority has this kind of ownership.

It must be said that some of these papers have a single owner and are entirely controlled only by him, while others have more shareholders and there is not a literal unique owner. Regardless of the quality of the considered newspapers, the cases are different.

«Corriere della Sera» from Milan is the most sold newspaper in Italy and RCS, who holds the journal, is the main national media conglomerate; Gruppo l'Espresso (which holds «la Repubblica» from Rome, second national newspaper) is the main one regarding the daily copies of its several papers.

Just few media corporations or businessmen control a significant part of the whole sector: we also have Confindustria, the most important business association in Italy, and the Caltagirone family. As we are going to see, any owner of these corporations has some different economic interest.

RCS is a publicly traded company: the majority stake holds to several industries and entrepreneurs. They deal with many economic sectors: banks, mechanical industries, financial companies, fashion brands. Gruppo l'Espresso instead belongs to De Benedetti, which have several concerns: mostly the energy business, vehicle components, health care and financial groups.

The third newspaper is «La Stampa», which is totally controlled by Fiat company and the Agnelli family. Since its income and profit are based on the automobiles, the property can't be considered "pure". The same applies to «Il Sole 24 Ore» by Confindustria, «Il Messaggero» by Caltagirone, «il Giornale» by Berlusconi, and so on.

Among the most important newspapers, only the Monti-Riffeser family (which holds «Il Resto del Carlino» and others) can be considered as an owner with specific interests, limited to the media. However, this does not exclude the fact that there are actually several good journals, regardless of the nature of their owners.

Furthermore, we have to argue about another very important Italian publisher, that is the State. The Republic grants millions of contributions to the media publishing system, allowing de facto the sustenance to many newspapers. the most controversial aspect concerns the grant to newspapers belonging to political parties and associations. In this way, even the narrowest distribution newspapers make use of millions of euro.

Who benefits from this revenue has a competitive advantage, influencing the market. However, these revenues are increasingly reluctantly granted by the State, and this makes the financial statements of these papers an increasing risk.

In order to better analyze the Italian situation we should explore the specific situation in the rest of the world, so that we can make a comparison and find the Italian peculiarities as compared to other models of journalism.

News Corporation is one of the leading media corp. in the world. It manages amongst other some of the most influential and sold newspapers worldwide, such as «The Times» from London and «The Wall Street Journal». The Australian Rupert Murdoch, founder and current CEO of the holding company, has his main business interests in the media; he can surely be considered a pure publisher. This does not exclude the fact that many tabloids belonging to Murdoch are of lower quality. Furthermore, the scandal of his «News of the world» in 2011 (the interception of private phone messages) has showed how much is obscure, even in UK, the boundary between news and sensationalism, between information and gossip.

Despite this, it must be said that the Italian case is different from some models of journalism, such as the Anglo-Saxon model. The media's pure ownership is not a sufficient element but it is a

healthy symptom for the system and it can often be found in industrialized and culturally advanced countries.

This is not the case of Russia and China. In these countries we can notice serious problems of lack of democracy and freedom of the press. Not only the media are directly controlled by the power or under its influence, but dozens of journalists are being killed every year because of their work. In this case the impure publishing's problem is overshadowed by the censorship from the regime and its tragic consequences.

It is especially in Great Britain and in the U.S. that we can find those guarantees for publishing we are discussing about. Safety and clear procedures are common, making the transparency of the newspapers an essential element for their quality.

In the U.K. only the «Independent» is controlled by a Russian tycoon. All major newspapers have editors who deal exclusively with the publishing business (Murdoch included). «The Guardian» has also a trust to prevent the access to unpleasant funds.

The same applies for the United States: there is a safe distance not only between journalists and businessmen but also between the editorial staff and the interests of the property. «New York Times», «Boston Globe», «Chicago Tribune» and «Washington Post» have a strong tradition of transparency. The pact made by the journals with the readers requires this kind of clarity.

The rest of Europe shows different models, even if always respectful of the required transparency. The French case is the most similar to the Italian one. The impure ownership is not a taboo, in fact many entrepreneurs have invested in the major national newspapers. Another common feature is the presence of a considerable number of papers referring to movements, political parties or religious groups.

The German model is differently organized: it is characterized by journals born in the single towns, frequently independent or belonging to big publishing companies. However, a general autonomy, trusts and transparency rules come the German case near to the Anglo-Saxon model and in particular to the United States.

Finally, Spain does not leave this setting. The publishing houses just take care of their editorial products and among the most important newspapers there is no significant interference by politics and the economy.

In sociology, several studies have suggested a relationship between the setting of the news by the media and the resulting reaction in public opinion. The theory of agenda setting, by Shaw and McCombs, says that the public tends to consider or ignore certain news by the emphasis given by the media.

The Chomsky's propaganda model is even more radical. According to this theory the media, instead of being independent and rather than seek the truth, defend the existing order. So the media would be part of the power and would act consciously.

Like various sociological thesis of the past decades, even the agenda setting and the propaganda model have been criticized and revised. We have to wonder, however, what would have been the position of the authors in a social scenario such as the Italian one.

The U.S. in fact are widely regarded as an important model for the news making. How would have been considered the undoubted influence that the power had on the Italian press?

Another of the potential consequences of the phenomenon under consideration is an economic threat. In fact, an editor with other affairs besides publishing could easily be interested to spend and even lose money in the media to obtain an advantage in other areas, getting a good publicity for his business.

Newspapers can certainly be attracted by the funds that an impure publisher guarantees, but in the long term there is a risk of chronically passive financial statements, and continuous money losses. Then, when the publisher is no longer willing to pay off the debts, the journal will be in serious difficulties.

We should not even neglect that an editor who is not skilled enough to managing a big newspaper could be an economic problem in the first person, if he does not have the management abilities required

The most recent data show that the public confidence in media and newspapers is heavily collapsed, especially in Italy. Indeed they are perceived as belonging to the system, far from the news and the public and too close to politics and the economy. The readers' confidence, a key element for journalism, again becomes an important element in the information world of today.

It is no less important the role of key actors in the newspapers: the director and the journalists. A publisher can have the worst intentions towards information. It remains the case that the best guarantee for the readers is the ability of the reporters to resist to potential influences. So, we must seek the best possible coexistence, a virtuous compromise between the interests of the ownership, the work of the reporters and the quality of the newspapers.

We can draw our conclusions arguing that what we must never take for granted is the necessary respect for those who do daily and honestly their job, regardless the features of the ownership. The risk indeed is to generalize, without considering the people as a key element in media activities.

What instead emerges more clearly as one of the biggest issue of our information model is the distance that separates Italy from the rest of the world, regarding the transparency of the rules and the substantial independence of the press.

Italian journalism is adversely affected by the weight of politics, by economic and financial interests, and by the lack of such transparency.