Adequate Information Management in Europe

Paolo Mancini, Marco Briziarelli
With Marco Mazzoni, Rolando Marini, Alessio Cornia

The Case of Italy

University of Perugia
Department of Institutions and Society
February 2005
© AIM project

1. Information/news management

In Italy there is an abundance of data and research concerning the importance of the different sources of information, but very few studies have been conducted on the interaction between sources and journalists, that is on the actual process of news management. Data on the importance of different sources of information can be drawn from the large amount of research that has been conducted on the content of both print press and television, and that has been mostly funded by Rai.

From these studies hypotheses on the role that sources have played in defining the content of the news can be drawn. Sources at the head of the process of news production can be divided into two categories: journalistic sources, mainly constituted by press agencies, and non-journalistic sources (institutions, public relations offices, politicians, policemen, PR professionals). The former seem to be, from the journalists' point of view, one of the most reliable sources, since they apply to the informative material the very same criteria of newsworthiness that journalists would (i.e. news values). The latter, the non-journalistic sources, do not usually apply such criteria.

In order to understand which, between the two kinds of sources, is the more important it is necessary to examine the characteristics of journalism in Italy. Due to many different historical factors, political and cultural contingencies, mass communication in Italy has never really enjoyed such autonomy as to be considered as an independent system, free from influences from other systems such as the political or the economic. The superimposition of powers, political and economic ones over journalism, has determined in the past, and determines nowadays, a particular structure of media industries so that instrumentalisation becomes a major characteristic of the entire media system. Newspapers and television are instruments to reach particular goals, either in the political or economic arena; they are not just aimed at being profitable enterprises (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

In this context the political sources of information have always played a determinant role. The relationship between political sources and mass media is so solid and continuous that it can be described as structural. The high level of partisanship of journalists appears as a consequence of this framework of connections with political parties and economic forces. From this emerges, first of all, the prevalence of political information, both on the press and on TV. As stated, content analyses conducted in recent years on TV and newspapers have confirmed such a characteristic of Italian mass communication), compared to other kinds of information. In such a journalism prevails the party based perspective.

Starting with the well known article 'Millecinquecento lettori' (One thousand, five hundred readers), in which a famous Italian journalist confessed that the main sources and also the main addressees of his work were the politicians (Forcella, 1959), much research has stressed the importance of politics as the primary source of journalism coverage (Rositi 1978; Agostini / Fenati & Krol 1987; Bechelloni 1982 and 1995; Rositi & Grossi 1984; Marletti 1985; Roidi 2001; Sorrentino 2002; Mancini 2002)

According to Bechelloni (1982) political matters have conquered any aspect of the Italian civil society's life: politics entered in talks shows, TV fiction and advertising, all communication genres that can be related to the so called phenomenon of the dramatisation of politics.

On the contrary, few studies have been conducted on the process of news management. Mancini studied the interaction between journalists and politicians, pointing out the importance of production routines and group solidarity. This kind of production routine has determined common selection rules and therefore very similar newspaper content (Mancini 1993 and 1994).

For Sorrentino (2002) the process that determines the production of a given news item is characterised by two different kinds of negotiation. The first one, defined as situated negotiation, concerns the relationship between the journalists and their sources. The second one, defined as contextual negotiation, concerns the negotiation between journalists and the interests of the audience expressed through its feedback.

Here too the absence of studies in the field of news management has to do with the real conditions of news production. The ownership of news media organisations by large business corporations and political parties and organisations established dependency links by which owners (enterprises, political parties and other political organisations) were able to decide what to publish or not to publish. The se-

lection of news did not depend on its appeal and on the decisions of the journalists but on the framework of relationships established between media owners and media organisations. Only in recent years has this dependence weakened and the Italian communication system has been subject to a process of pluralisation of sources of information that has led, on the one hand, to an increased dependence on the so called non-journalistic sources of information, and on the other hand, to a larger autonomy of such sources from the mass media. This emergence of non-traditional types of sources is connected to their attempt to produce communicative actions effective enough to influence mass media output as far as news making is concerned. Mazzoleni (1998) defines news management as the totality of strategies addressed in order to pursue a favourable informative coverage.

The production of research and theoretical studies on news management appears to be greater if one looks at the field of public relations. Authors such as Pecchennino (2004), Invernizzi (2001), Roggero and Setaro (1994) and many other professionals maintain that the most relevant aspect of public relations is constituted by their relation with the media. One of the most important strategies consists on producing events of media relevance, in other words, events that can attract the media's attention. Cattaneo and Zanetto (2003) talk about a set of seven golden rules for news-management. These rules are able to give the politician, during for instance a political campaign, positive public visibility and the ability to conduct a political campaign with low costs. They are the following:

- to hire public relations professional (either journalists or professionals with whom they have good relations). These PR operators have the task to shape or adapt the politician's message to make it fit the media needs;
- to give a high number of conferences to focus the attention on the candidate positions;
- to plan meetings and events in advance so that the media are ready to cover it;
- to make sure that the media are always provided with informative material already processed and to always offer to the campaign correspondents the necessary mobility;
- to take advantage of media competition to sell news to the highest bidder;
- events and subjects must always meet the criteria of newsworthiness so that the media are always

willing to cover them. Candidates should join media events or even create pseudo-events.
- to attack political opponents.

Creating pseudo-events requires several capabilities such as creative competences and effective communication techniques. Grossi (1985) argues that an event becomes meaningful only under the condition of being situated in a meaningful context for the audience. In other words, the events must be connected to the social cognitive horizon of a community. The idea of inserting events into the social imaginary implies that the events cannot be considered as single fragments but rather as flows, which always need to be contextualised into symbolic and value systems, the very systems in which the media and their sources of information work.

According to Invernizzi (2001) public relations professionals must exploit the media by, on the one hand, considering the needs of the organisation behind their jobs and, on the other hand, evaluating the importance of the informative material they make available for the media. Pechennino (2004) points out that, in order to manage the media effectively, PR professionals must be very well informed about the specific feature of each medium. In the case of the press, they must be acquainted with the journalists' writing and be able to individuate the figure that best fits each situation. Muzi Falconi (2002) states that the relationship between the PR professional and the journalist is a conflictive one but still characterised by a close interdependence. It is a conflictive one because, on the one hand, journalists, by writing their article, can damage the interests represented by the PR operator, thus undermining his or her task. On the other hand, the PR operator can obstruct the investigative work of the journalist and 'stop fuelling' information. At the same time this relationship between the journalist and the PR is based on interdependence because the PR operator must be capable of converting events which are only relevant to his or her organization into news that will be significant for a much wider mass media audience.

Firms and institutions struggle to reach social legitimation through public visibility and that is possible only by gaining access to the media. Those subjects, in order to do that, try to constitute themselves as primary sources of information by producing pseudo-events.

2. National journalism culture

As for the other points of this 'state of the art report', it is not easy to define clear criteria to determine what journalism culture could mean in Italy. The discussion around journalism is very general and very frequently overlaps either with normative oriented discussion or with other research fields. In other words, it seems almost impossible to indicate books or even articles that deal only with what is usually meant by journalism culture.

This is impossible for different reasons.

1. A clear differentiation between the debate on journalism culture and journalism textbooks doesn't exist. As said, the discussion about journalism is very broad and general-putting together normative and descriptive approaches;

2. The debate on journalism culture very frequently overlaps with a critical/political debate on the role of journalism within Italian society. Here too, the discussion tends to be normatively oriented, juxtaposing the description of today's situation with what ought to be;

3. The discussion on journalism culture in Italy is strongly affected by the discussion and the books coming from abroad and essentially from the United States. An originally Italian view on the topic is hard to identify:

4. Empirical studies on journalism culture are very few and, what is more important, tend to decrease in the very last years. The discussion about this topic is mostly abstract or normatively oriented.

In spite of these difficulties, in the following lines a list of the most discussed areas (and the most important books in the area) in relation to what can be called journalism culture is stressed:

a) historical area: there are many books reconstructing the history of Italian journalism (Murialdi 1986; Castronovo 1976, Castronovo & Tranfaglia, 1976 and 1979; Farinelli / Paccagnini & Santambrogio 1997);

b) political area: as stated, this is the most 'frequented' field. Journalism is seen essentially as an occasion of political debate and struggle. The discussion over the concept of objectivity, and its limits, is part of this tendency. As a matter of fact, as journalism cannot be objective its bias becomes an issue of political debate (Pansa 1977; Brancoli 1994; Murialdi 1986; Roidi 2001; Sorrentino 2002)

c) economic: few works deal with the issue of the monopolistic or the oligopolistic dimension of Italian journalism. As a matter of fact, the situation of the media industry in Italy is said to be monopolistic, if one looks at the television system (eg. private television is almost completely in the hand of just one major owner) and oligopolistic if one looks at the situation of the print press where few major corporations own the majority of print press (Gambaro & Silva 1992; Mosconi, 1998);

d) professional models: different studies can be referred to this area:

- *Self-perception*: the only studies that exist are those of Patterson & Donsbach in their comparative analysis of journalists in five countries (USA, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Sweden). These studies demonstrate the high level of partisanship of Italian journalists and their tendency towards commentary and pedagogy (Patterson & Donsbach 1993 and 1996 a and b;).

- Hallin and Mancini have recently analysed different professional models in Europe and USA. The Italian professional model is part of what they call the 'Mediterranean or polarised – pluralist model' (Hallin – Mancini, 2004). Its is characterised by a weak level of journalistic professionalisation and autonomy while a long tradition of media instrumentalisation goes together with their high level of advocacy. Parties, political and economic groups use the media to support their ideas and their economical interests, as the media themselves are not able to reach a sufficient economic autonomy. These features are strictly linked with a political system that appears to be polarised, invading different social spheres.

- *Socio-demographics of professional journalism*: (Mancini & Pellegrini 1994; Mancini 1999). Research demonstrate that the number of journalists has dramatically increased after the commercialisation of the '80s: more women have entered the profession while the need for a specific professional training has become one of the main problem for journalists' organisations.

3. European public sphere

In the Italian literature on the various topics regarding the European Public Sphere it is not easy to find a precise definition of the EPS itself. This depends mainly on the fact that all the scholars admit, in an implicit or explicit way, the actual non-existence of such a sphere, and concentrate their attention on the conditions and processes that would make it possible in the future.

If one wants to find a definition of EPS it can be said that there is a general agreement with Habermas' point of view, according to which the EPS should consist of the transnational and networking dimension of all the typical actors of a public sphere: news media, parties, social movements, corporations, interests organisations, and so on. The obstacles are represented by the multilingual and multicultural situation of Europe.

If we maintain that such a sphere might develop only in the future as a process, we may move our attention to the conditions that will result in the different stages of the process itself. The debate may be considered as divided into two fields: one deals with the relationship between the Constitution-building process (or, anyway, the Constitution) and public opinion; another one studies the forms of the public debate about Europe, essentially the role of the news media in the representation and construction of a public sphere whose borders are gradually extending to the European dimension.

The first field is made up of politics and law scholars: they debate the foundation of concepts and entities, which in many ways overlap, such as sovereignty, people (or nation), Union as a super-State (according to the so called Unionist or federalist point of view), and they pay most of their attention to the legitimacy basis of institutional and political integration. The focus of this discussion is the Constitution as the starting point, the 'lever' for activating the process of building up a European public opinion as a first entity that may develop into a European people (Paciotti 2003 & 2004; Cantaro 2003).

The second is closer to the mass media field. Here we find the definition of the EPS as a sum, or at the best a network, of the national public spheres of the Member-States. These national arenas (or national media systems) exercise a sort of substitution action: in this sense it becomes relevant to study how the coverage patterns of the national media systems influence the representations of Europe and the integration process. It is not only a matter of the prevalence of a national point of view; it is also a matter of the way in which institutionalised forms of representation of the political life tend to select and to shape the European issues themselves (Grossi, 1996; Marini 2001 & 2003).

Within this field a clearer idea of EPS might therefore be found: it is the inter-connection among the various national arenas, which, together are going to build a European dimension of the political life itself.

4: Conclusion

The field of mass communication studies in Italy appears very rich and alive, but strongly affected by its public relevance. Being a much-debated issue in the Italian public arena, and being an issue of political struggle, discussion and research on journalism are affected by this relevance that frequently prevails over the academic and research dimension.

Two other previously mentioned characteristics have to be stressed: because of its historical evolution only recently has the Italian mass media system entered into a market driven logic and therefore, only recently, have many topics linked to a situation of competition among sources and media organisations and among media organisations themselves, become important (this is the case of media management and information/news management, etc.). As the field of information/news management is our specific topic, it is to be asserted that so far, very few relevant studies have been conducted.

Secondly, the recent, very fast and 'dramatic' development of communication courses, faculties of communication, schools of journalism has produced a very rich literature that is affected by this sort of 'emergency'. This 'over production' of books has produced a situation where there is no clear distinction between textbooks, research books and, political criticism.

References:

Agostini, Angelo / Fenati, Barbara & Krol, Stanley (1987): *Annali della Riforma*. Torino: ERI VQPT.

Bechelloni, Giovanni (1995): *Giornalismo o postgiornalismo?* Napoli: Liguori.

Bechelloni, Giovanni (1982): *Il Mestiere del Giornalista: Sguardo Sociologico sulla Pratica e sulla Ideologia Giornalistica.* Napoli: Liguori Ed.

Brancoli, Rodolfo (1994): *Il risveglio del guardiano*. Milano: Garzanti.

Cantaro, Antonio (2003): *Europa sovrana: La costituzione dell'Unione tra guerra e diritti.* Bari: Dedalo.

Castronovo, Valerio & Tranfaglia, Nicola (1979): *La stampa italiana del Risorgimento*. Bari: Laterza.

Castronovo, Valerio (1976): *La stampa italiana dall`unità al fascismo*. Bari: Laterza.

Cattaneo, Alberto & Zanetto, Paolo (2003): *(E)lezioni di successo*. Milano: Etas.

Farinelli, Giuseppe / Paccagnini, Ermanno & Santambrogio, Gianni (1997): *Storia del giornalismo italiano*. Torino: UTET.

Forcella, Enzo (1959): Millecinquecento lettori. *Tempo Presente*, 6, 65 –81.

Gambaro, Marco & Silva, Franco (1992): *Economia della televisione*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Grossi, Giorgio (1996): *L'Europa degli italiani: L'Italia degli europei*. Roma: Rai – Eri.

Grossi, Giorgio (1985): Professionalità giornalistica e costruzione sociale della realtà. *Problemi dell'informazione*, 10, 375-388.

Hallin, Daniel & Mancini, Paolo (2004): *Comparing Media Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Invernizzi, Emanuele (2001): *Relazioni pubbliche*. Milano: McGraw-Hil.

Mancini, Paolo (2002): *Il sistema fragile*. Roma: Carrocci.

Mancini, Paolo (1999): Giornalisti in Italia: Indagine socio-demografica sui professionisti dell'informazione. *Problemi dell'informazione*, XXIV (1), 92-109.

Mancini, Paolo (1994): *Sussurri e grida dalle Camere*. Milano: Angeli.

Mancini, Paolo (1993): Between trust and suspicion: how the political journalists solve the dilemma. *European Journal of Communication*, 8 (1), 33 – 53.

Mancini, Paolo & Pellegrini, Cristiana (1994): Il popolo dei giornalisti italiani. *Problemi dell'informazione*, 19, 199 – 216.

Marini, Rolando (2003): *Comunicare l'Europa*. Perugia: Morlacchi editore.

Marini, Rolando (ed.) (2001): *L'Europa dell'Euro e della guerra*. Roma: Rai – Eri.

Marletti, Carlo (1985): *Prima e dopo*. Torino: Eri.

Mazzoleni, Giampietro (1998): *La comunicazione politica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Mosconi, Franco (1998): *Economia dei quotidiani*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Murialdi, Paolo (1986): *Storia del giornalismo italiano*. Torino: Gutemberg.

Muzi Falconi, Toni (2002): *Governare le relazioni*. Milano: Il Sole 24 ore Libri.

Paciotti, Elena (ed.) (2004): *La Costituzione europea: Luci e ombre.* Roma: Meltemi.

Paciotti, Elena (ed.) (2003): *Sfera pubblica e Costituzione europea*. Carocci: Roma.

Pansa, Gianpaolo (1977): *Comprati e venduti*. Milano: Garzanti.

Patterson, Thomas & Donsbach, Wolfang (1996a): Decisions: Journalists as Partisan Actors. *Political Communication*, 13, 455 – 468.

Patterson, Thomas & Donsbach, Wolfang (1993): *Press – Party Parallelism: A Cross National Comparison*. Unublished paper.

Pecchenino Michele (2004): *Le relazioni pubbliche*. Roma: Carocci.

Roggero, Giuseppe & Setaro, Marco (1994): *Teoria e tecnica delle relazioni pubbliche*. Milano: Arcipelago Editore.

Roidi, Vittorio (2001): *La fabbrica delle notizie*. Roma: Laterza.

Rositi, Franco (1978): *L`informazione dei radiotelegiornali nei programmi della Rai Tv*. Roma:Vpt.

Rositi, Franco & Grossi, Giorgio (1984): Prefazione. In: Grossi, Giorgio (ed.): *La Rai sotto Analisi* (pp. 13-26). Torino: ERI.

Sorrentino, Carlo (2002): *Il giornalismo: Cos'è e come funziona*. Roma: Carrocci.