



PRESS RELEASE

Trento, 2 June 2008

Financial Times columnist introduced by Dario Laruffa

JOHN LLOYD: THE MARKET IS INDISPENSABLE FOR INFORMATION BUT INFORMATION IS INDISPENSABLE FOR DEMOCRACY

Allowing readers to decide may mean giving priority to recipes

Internet cannot replace good journalism

The market is indispensable for information, also because information starts with the market. However, there are problems, which concern journalists and also citizens in general, in the era of internet, pay TV, the free press, or more simply audience: consider the “informal” producers of information, who put their videos online, or the readers and viewers whose daily choices essentially decide the space that newspapers dedicate to Hezbollah and earthquakes or else to cooking and gossip.

These are some of the topics discussed this morning during the meeting with John Lloyd, journalist and leader writer for the Financial Times, for many years Moscow correspondent, introduced by a RAI journalist known to the Festival of Economics, Dario Laruffa.

It was indeed Laruffa, opening the meeting, who provided up-to-date statistics on the information market in Italy. First of all: despite the internet and specialist TV channels, ordinary television is “holding on”, with a vengeance. It is watched by 85% of Italians for at least 4 hours a day. Radio is not doing badly either: it is listened to daily by 38 million Italians. At least 42% of the population has access to the internet and according to very recent data this percentage has by now exceeded 50%; we are however below the European average. The newspapers are doing less well, although with some exceptions: 5.5 million people a day buy a newspaper, with a fall of 10% in the last 7 years (and a disastrous situation above all in the south). However, at the same time 79% of Italians over the age of 14 say that they read a newspaper, paid for or on the internet: it is clear that newspapers pass from one person to another and that for every copy sold there are several readers. It is above all young people – there is a fall of 4% in the 18-24 age band – and women, 20% fewer readers as compared to men, who are less likely to read newspapers; however women readers compensate with periodicals.

Ultimately, according to Laruffa, today it is possible to be well-informed: it is simply that many are not interested.

John Lloyd – of Australian origin – began his speech by stating that he was happy to be in Italy on the day of the Republic: “We don’t have this holiday” – he added – “because we are not a Republic (*ed. note*: Australia is a federal constitutional monarchy, headed by the Queen of the United Kingdom)”.

Coming to the theme of the day, Lloyd stated that not only that when journalism is free does the country also tend to be free, but also that the market and competition, according to the fathers of free thinking, such as Stuart Mills, are good for the truth, because when there are two opposing theories, one true and the other false, in the end the first prevails. Thomas Jefferson even said that he would have preferred to be governed by the newspapers than by a government: this was the era in which the United States were trying to shake off the yoke of British colonial rule and the organs of information, of whatever kind, were seen as an indispensable source of freedom and democracy.

Historically, added Lloyd, it would appear that journalism began in Venice at the end of the 16th century and in this era Venice was the ultimate “world market”. So how can we doubt the importance of the market in this field?

In actual fact there are problems today. First of all the role of the public, the readers, because it is clear that a form of journalism based on the market cannot disregard user satisfaction (and hence sales). So what does the more recent experience of freely distributed newspapers, in their turn strongly based on this factor, at times with periodic surveys of reader satisfaction as regards the different types of news published, show us? That in actual fact the readers want above all recipes and property ads, not news on the conflict in the Middle East or catastrophes happening in remote areas of the planet. Consequently even the most prestigious newspapers today are seeing a crisis, closing their foreign offices and in short are losing ground; alternatively they turn towards other sectors – such as commercial ads – which have little to do with information as Thomas Jefferson understood it.

There are nevertheless various ways of not succumbing to the law of the market and the force of numbers. Sometimes the solution is represented by the ownership: which perhaps obtains profits in sectors very distant from the media, but nevertheless decides to continue to publish a newspaper because it offers prestige, unless they perhaps decide to change its nature, as Murdoch did with the Times in London, transforming it from the newspaper of the establishment into an anti-establishment paper.

There are also other routes: in Sweden, where the market would on its own be too restricted to allow the survival of quality newspapers, there is a foundation which occupies itself with this. In the USA on the other hand there are foundations supporting the universities that train future journalists.

Coming to television in particular, the state usually tries to regulate the market. The logic is that there are few broadcasting channels, as compared to newspapers for example. But today there is also TV on the internet and we often find the same films shown on the television included with the papers. So is there any sense in public control? And if so, in what context? What is more: with the internet, readers themselves have become the providers of information. This was seen recently following the catastrophe in Burma:

photos and information on the cyclone and its victims escaped the censorship of the regime and were diffused throughout the world. According to Lloyd, one problem comes from the fact that the public's interest is increasingly being transferred from pure information to comment. So who vouches for the enormous amount of information and opinions "surfing" freely on the media ocean, if further up there is no genuine company – be it a newspaper or TV station – evaluating and deciding? How can one transfer the ethics of public service to the internet?

So many questions remain open. However, ultimately it is important to continue to believe that journalism is an essential part of democracy.