

# Italian Journalism and the Credibility Issue: A Comparative Analysis

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## SUMMARY

*This paper focuses attention on the credibility issue within Italian journalism. In the first part it attempts to define what credibility is; then it investigates possible "affinities" between journalistic models and credibility models; and lastly it endeavours to make out why a journalistic system such as the Italian one is not perceived as credible. The considerations to emerge in this first part will constitute the second part of the paper, which focuses on a research conducted through interviews with privileged observers of the Italian information system. These interviews helped us to a better understanding of the dynamics and issues in the world of Italian journalism, and to observe the awareness and possible counter-measures to the credibility crisis that the Italian information system is facing.*

Key words: journalists, credibility, trust, news media, pluralistic-polarized model, Italy

## Introduction\*\*\*

For many years now and increasingly of late, the state of health of Italian journalism is being debated in newspapers and on television, in public discussions and in

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political circles, in specialised reviews and in the academic world, particularly with regard to its potential to carry out the role of the “fourth estate” in the dissemination of information – the role characterised in the liberal tradition of the eighteenth century as the essential instrument for creating an informed public opinion and, when necessary, for criticising the powers that be, whether political or economic, social or cultural in nature.

Many, however, are doubtful about Italian journalism’s effective ability to perform this role, so fundamental for correct interaction among the various systems and therefore for the smooth running of democracy itself (Bergamini, 2006; Mancini, 2005; Morcellini, 2001; Sorrentino, 2002). Concern has been expressed by sociologists, political scientists, economists, jurists, philosophers and historians whose different approaches explore the phenomenon from different angles (Baldini, 2009; Bergamini, 2006; Hallin, Mancini, 2004; Mancini, 2005, 2009; Morcellini, 2001; Murialdi, 2006; Partipilo, 2010; Roidi, 2008; Sartori, 1999; Scandaletti, 2003; Sorrentino, 2002, 2006). Yet all share a common critical view towards the entire information system (in the sense of the whole set-up of editors and publishers) – the news as the product of journalism, and the actors *par excellence* of information: the journalists themselves. Each one of these scholarly categories has naturally offered its own prescription to improve the situation, thus further highlighting the difficulty in finding answers to suit the whole complicated, multi-faceted information galaxy: a continually-expanding galaxy where traditional information today tends to be increasingly out-flanked by that wide sector, anything but mainstream, which arose from and spread by means of the web.

The extreme disparity of the reasons that, in the opinion of all, contributed to the start and development of the present crisis is counterbalanced by a substantial uniformity when the same scholars are asked to define this state of crisis: it is commonly held to be a *problem of credibility*.

This paper focuses attention on the credibility issue within Italian journalism: firstly it attempts to define what credibility is; then it investigates possible “affinities” between journalistic models and credibility models; and lastly it endeavours to make out why a journalistic system such as the Italian one is not perceived as credible. The considerations to emerge in this first part will constitute the second part of the paper, which focuses on a research conducted through interviews with privileged observers of the Italian information system. These interviews helped us to a better understanding of the dynamics and issues in the world of Italian journalism, and to observe the awareness and possible counter-measures to *the credibility crisis* that the Italian information system is facing.

## Credibility, trust and journalism: the theoretical framework

Sociological studies define “credibility” as the “probability of being believed” (Gili, 2005: 3). In sociology each individual, each system is credible when the interlocutor deems it worthy of trust – that is, when the interlocutor, having focalised his own expectations and evaluated various factors (be they cognitive, affective or relating to value) chooses whether or not to take the risk of granting his trust (Bostrom, 1983; Gambetta, 1988; Goffman, 1967; Luhmann, 2000; O’Neill, 2002). It seems clear that from this viewpoint credibility is no longer that personal characteristic of which Aristotle spoke in *Rhetoric*, but a relationship, and as such it takes form, evolves, ceases, moves elsewhere.

It is for the very reason of its relational nature that credibility can be perceived, and therefore trust granted, for reasons that vary and diverge greatly one from the other. These reasons were investigated several times during the twentieth century and their identification was the subject of numerous in-depth works of research (Hovland, Weiss, 1951; Hovland, Janis, Kelley, 1953; Deutsch, Gerard, 1955; Kelman, 1961; Berlo, Lemmert, Mertz, 1972; Bostrom, 1983). In a good attempt at synthesis, Gili (2005) holds that these reasons may spring from three different but possible anchorages of credibility and confidence, which in turn correspond to three different authority models (Weber, 1922). We hasten to state that such models are not alternative one to the other, nor does one in any way exclude the others: therefore, their co-existence is recognised and, as we shall soon see, this element is of the greatest importance when we focus on the microcosm of journalism.

A person may therefore be deemed credible when considered competent (i.e., for cognitive reasons), and because certain values are shared by the transmitter and the receiver (i.e., for *evaluation-normative* reasons), and lastly because the communicator is considered “likeable” (therefore for *affective-expressive* reasons). Cognitive credibility is linked to a form of *rational-legal* authority (therefore a credibility based on recognition of the power of rules and of the competence of the person exercising a certain role); in the case of the *evaluation-normative* anchorage, on the other hand, the reference is to an authority model of the *traditional* type, i.e., an authority based on a belief in the sacred character of traditions and on the consequent legitimacy of those who hold power in virtue of such traditions; lastly, we have an *affective* credibility when reference is to a typically *charismatic* authority, through which confidence is conceded by reason of a relation of affection, love and identification with the leader (i.e., he who expresses his own charisma). These differing forms of credibility and authority have counterparts in similar models of trust (Table 1): rational trust (i.e., trust that calculates the cost/benefit ratio) corresponds

to cognitive credibility, while more immediate, non-reflective trust springing from feelings and familiarity relates to affective credibility. Placed somewhere between the two, and a mirror-image of credibility based on an evaluation-normative root, we find trust based on esteem, deference and respect (Gili, 2005).

Table 1 – Credibility, trust and authority

<i>Roots of credibility</i>	<i>Forms of trust</i>	<i>Forms of authority</i>
Cognitive root	Rational trust – interest	Rational-legal
Normative root	Esteem – deference – respect	Traditional
Affectivity root	Affection – love – identification	Charismatic

This theoretical framework about credibility and trust needs now to be applied to journalism. In order to do so, it will be helpful to compare Hallin and Mancini's theory (2004) on journalistic models with the theory proposed by Gili (2005) on the anchorages of credibility.

If we restrict the scope of analysis to democratic contexts – those in which journalism arises and develops and where the contexts themselves would not have developed without these same journalistic phenomena (Bettetini, 1997) – Hallin and Mancini (2004) observe that three models are fundamentally possible: the *liberal* model (typical of the Anglo-Saxon countries), the *democratic-corporative* model (featured in the countries of central and northern Europe), and the *pluralist-polarised* model (found in the Mediterranean countries, therefore in Italy as well).

These three models differ one from the other in a number of factors touching respectively on the *political system* (i.e. political history and the resulting levels of conflict and consensus, the government system, pluralism, the role of the state and rational-legal authority) and the *media system* (the structure of the press, political parallelism, the level of professional training, the role played by the state).

With regard to the former factors, the pluralist-polarised model features a strong role of the state and the political parties, due to the substantial weight of patronage and the weak development of the rational-legal authority (i.e., the presence of an efficient bureaucracy made up of personnel recruited on merit, able to ensure an administrative practice immune from external interference). On the other hand, in the liberal-model countries it is the market that plays a strong role; pluralism is modest, with a tendency towards a first-past-the-post political system; the political parties

tend to be less important; lastly, the rational-legal authority is highly developed. As regards the democratic-corporative model, in the main it presents many points of contact with the liberal model, although there are some important differences: the countries in question tend to have social groups that are strongly organised and integrated in the political process; pluralism is modest, and there is a widespread consensus towards the political institutions; lastly, the role of the social state is strong, as is the rational-legal authority which appears well consolidated.

Moving on to the subject of the media, in the pluralist-polarised model we find the presence of a substantially elitist press with a relatively low circulation due among other things to the absolute domination of the electronic media. Added to this, freedom of the press tended to spread more slowly, as did commercial development: thus newspapers are economically marginal, and in fact themselves need economic subsidies. In countries belonging to the liberal model, on the other hand, the development of press freedom and the mass press was achieved fairly early on. The same holds good for the democratic-corporative model countries where, however, the spread of party papers or those linked to organised social groups has been equally fast.

A further feature of the pluralist-polarised model is the high level of political parallelism (i.e. the strong connection between the information system and the other systems through which social life goes forward, especially the political and economic systems), and this means that the press is intensely interested in politics and that journalism is notoriously biased and oriented towards commentary; professional training for journalism is low-profile and journalists are in fact politically active. In the liberal model, by contrast, political parallelism is low and pluralism normally prevails; journalism is highly professional (although generally free of “formal organisation”) and in the main independent (albeit partially limited by commercial pressure and, in part, politically exploited); lastly, the role of the State appears contained. With regard to the democratic-corporative model, political parallelism here has always been high and a moderate level of pluralism persists; this shapes a journalism oriented towards commentary, even though a growing emphasis is observed in favour of neutral journalism. The high level of professional training of journalists corresponds to an equally well-structured formal organisation.

With this description of the three models, it would at first seem difficult to identify a general rule that might indicate which roots are likely to offer anchorage to information credibility: it will however prove more helpful to view the single models and to see in each case whether a particular anchorage is more likely, or at least if any one anchorage must necessarily be taken into account.

In our opinion, this “symmetry” does exist between journalistic models and credibility/trust models, in that each journalistic model tends to link its own credibility to the anchorage that best suits and/or best reflects its history, organisation and social role. If we look at all the factors typical of the liberal model according to Hallin and Mancini (2004), we have the impression of a greater affinity between this model and a cognitive-type anchorage, since within liberal journalistic contexts credibility does in fact appear to come from the public’s perception of the competence of the journalist, of the paper, and of the system used, first to seek out and then to tell the truth; and this is also due to an established awareness of journalism’s social function (Lippmann, 1922; Schudson, 1978). In the pluralist-polarised model, however, the high level of contamination between the political system and the information system, and a low perception of journalism’s social role, point to a greater affinity with anchorages of the value-normative and/or affective-expressive type: information credibility is not apparently linked to competence in first seeking out and then telling the truth (at least not initially); it is rather linked to the journalist’s ability to be perceived as holding the same values and/or as being “likeable”. Lastly, in the case of the democratic-corporative model, the very nature of this model (containing factors that could by no means co-exist in other models) makes it quite impossible to identify the dominance of one anchorage over the others: clearly this model features that possible convergence of the different roots of credibility described by Gili (2005).

### **Italian journalism and its credibility crisis**

If this symmetry between journalistic models and credibility/trust models were to prove correct, it would be clear that even journalism such as the Italian type should have all the qualifications necessary to be perceived as credible. However, looking at the many in-depth investigations over the last few years that have attempted to quantify public satisfaction in our journalism, and the resulting degree of confidence the public is willing to concede (i.e. Astra, 2008), the equation “different journalistic models = different credibility anchorages” seems to creak ominously. The Italian public in fact declares that it trusts neither its journalists nor the overall information system, and that it hopes for a different kind of journalism: more oriented towards independence, impartiality and the search for truth; a journalism capable of explaining complex everyday phenomena; a journalism whose only “principal” (Goffman, 1981) is the reader. Information is *credible* not because the journalist and the public hold shared values, nor because of the “likeableness” the

journalist succeeds in conveying, but because of the journalist's ability to fulfil his or her social role; in other words, because of personal competence (Astra, 2008, De Bortoli, 2008).

This last consideration leads us to believe that an evident problem occurs when we shift from a general definition of "credibility" to the more specific "credibility of journalism". In speaking of journalism we believe it is no longer sufficient to say that credibility consists in a generic "probability of being believed", but that something further should be added: the anchorage of such credibility should be specified. But that is not all. In identifying this anchorage we cannot stop at the most natural choice, or the one most innate to the journalistic model dominating in the single model; we should look to the anchorage that characterises the model closest to the very idea of journalism. From this point of view, there can be no doubt that of the three models proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), that closest to the idea of journalism and its mythology is the liberal model (Agostini, 2004; Bechelloni, 1982; Brancoli, 1994; Ottone, 1987; Sartori, 1999). This tends to make us think that the credibility of journalism cannot discount competence, i.e. its ability to embody that social role that Pulitzer (1904) summarises in his famous metaphor of the journalist as the "lookout on the bridge of the ship of State", whose task is to note "the passing sail, the little things of interest that dot the horizon in fine weather", to report "the drifting castaway whom the ship can save", as he "peers through fog and storm to give warning of dangers ahead": a journalist who "is not thinking of his wages or of the profits of his owners" and who remains at his post "to watch over the safety and the welfare of the people who trust him".

Our hypothesis is that Italian journalism is perceived as lacking credibility, not because the public fails to recognise its high ability to share values or because it lacks "likeability" or, occasionally, competence, but because the journalist is not perceived as an expert, but as the accomplice, the supporter, the intermediary (and not the mediator) between public and power (whether political or economical, social or cultural, etc.).

We believe that this hypothesis is strongly supported in the literature (Agostini, 2004; Baldini, 2009; Mancini, 2009; Scandaletti, 2003; Sorrentino, 2006), which on a number of occasions has queried the causes triggering the crisis besetting Italian journalism:

- causes that vary widely one from the other but with a common denominator, the crisis in credibility mentioned in the introduction to this paper;
- causes which on the one hand reflect the materialisation of a state of crisis ("they used to think I was credible, now they don't"), yet on the other they

highlight an innate fault (“they don’t think I’m credible today, but then they never did”);

- causes that are explicitly and unequivocally linked to credibility that is first of all cognitive.

Therefore, given that the literature shows a significant degree of agreement in its definition of the state of Italian journalism (credibility crisis), this agreement fails to pinpoint the causes: widely differing reasons are attributed to the concept of “credibility crisis”. We believe that such causes should be systematised. In the classification below, we therefore attempt the operation, linking elements from the literature to those which we shall define as the “seven ‘deadly’ sins” of Italian journalism:

- I. journalism’s potential to perform its own *social role*: only in rare cases has Italian journalism actually been perceived as an essential factor for democratic life; society and democracy in Italy have therefore evolved without the fundamental contribution of journalistic phenomena in a climate of opinion that, if not actually apolitical, is at least indifferent towards information (Bettetini, 1997; Brancoli, 1994; Mazzanti, 1991; Morcellini, 2001; Ottone, 1978; Sorrentino, 2002);
- II. the *editorial organisations*: the issue of an “impure” publishing industry, the medley of information and publicity, unhealthy relations with politics and the economy are all factors that undermine the system’s credibility since they cast doubts on its independence and hence its impartiality: a system can hardly safeguard its own autonomy when it depends economically on the very powers over which it should be keeping watch (Bergamini, 2006; Murialdi, 2006; Mancini, 2009; Scandaletti, 2003);
- III. the *operators*: forced to work within a system that has done little to safeguard their professionalism, Italian journalists have not done enough to change the image they have made of themselves internationally as being dependent, at times totally subservient; in their tendency to self-referral, they show themselves to be scarcely accustomed to or interested in the search for objectivity, and seem above all to be proud of their own bias (Antiseri, 2008; Baldini, 2009; Brancoli, 1994; De Bortoli, 2008; Montanelli, 2002; Roidi, 2008);
- IV. the *message*: in a system flawed by an unhealthy contamination between the information system and those systems (the political one above all) over which journalism should be the watchdog, it is the normal news-making processes that are warped, with the result that what becomes news is not what interests the public but what is dictated by the political agenda (Papuzzi, 2003; Sartori, 1999; Sorrentino, 2002; Wolf, 1985);



- V. *research*: at a time when the web provides access to endless sources (not always controlled and/or controllable, but in any case numerous), journalism in general, and Italian journalism in particular, is distinguished by its almost pathological dependence on primary sources, a fact confirmed on the national scene by the very marginal status of its investigative journalism; this dependence is even more serious when the sources themselves are tainted (and the duty to verify these sources appears at low ebb) (Pratellesi, 2008; Scandaletti, 2003, 2005);
- VI. the *form*: Italian journalists share a bad habit with many of their foreign colleagues: carelessness. This comes out in spelling and grammar mistakes, inaccuracy and the retouching of photos, etc.; the problem is that in a kind of journalism where content tends to be weak, “mistakes” in form become even more evident (Baldini, 2004; Capovilla, 2003; Roidi, 2009);
- VII. *rules and values*: from the point of view of regulations, the structure of Italian journalism is absolutely rigid and poses an obstacle to access in the form of a state examination and registration with the Ordine dei giornalisti – the association of Italian journalists which is considered to be a press council (Zatlev, 2008) – as a pre-condition to the exercise of the profession; this impenetrable mechanism is not, however, founded on an equally solid and well-rooted ethical conscience. All this reflects clearly on professional ethics (or *deontology*), which appears no more than a mere instrument to impart orderliness rather than a “place” where those values that *give meaning* to a profession become norms (De Bortoli, 2008; Fabris, 2006; Partipilo, 2010; Roidi, 2008; Spalletta, 2010; Stella, 2008).

### **The crisis seen from the inside: research on the journalists in Italy**

As we have seen, therefore, an in-depth investigation into the state of health of credibility in Italian journalism involves advancing across very rough ground.

Furthermore, we are apparently facing a credibility crisis inseparably connected to Italy’s recent history since the early 1990s. Over the last twenty years, issues on the political front regarding the political parallelism have become overwhelmingly significant since Silvio Berlusconi (who is one of the most important information publishers, founder and main shareholder of three national television networks) entered the political arena with his repeated presence as Head of the Government. It is transparently obvious that his political career has turned the spotlight onto the problem of the impartiality, equity and correctness of journalistic information, re-kindling debate on the subject and, above all, taking it well beyond the spheres of scholars and the professionals involved, out into the full glare of public opinion.

Even in this predicament, however, Italy seems to be experiencing a *sui generis* evolution: if it is true, as Hallin and Mancini state (2004), that the perception of the liberal model as the “correct” one means that the diverse journalistic situations of the countries under examination “tend” towards the North Atlantic model, then it is also true that Italy is one of the cases in which this does not in fact occur. Italy, therefore, is apparently in a paradoxical situation in which an almost universally criticised tendency is strengthened. In the light of this, the question arises of whether the credibility problem is scarcely perceived as such, or whether it is in part misrepresented.

This belief of ours has been further confirmed by the particular circumstances of the last two years in Italy. As of April 2009, when a scandal involving the Prime Minister Berlusconi broke out (the so-called “Noemi-gate”), the role of the press in Italy and the conditions and interests involved in the information system have produced an on-going background noise to the political debate. On the one hand certain publications (notably “la Repubblica”) were accused of launching a carefully-constructed attack based on gossip and rumours during the campaign for the European Elections in an attempt to overturn Berlusconi’s following. On the other hand, other publications (notably “Il Giornale”) were accused of minimising the backlash of the scandal involving the Prime Minister.

This on-going heated conflict between the two sides continuously rekindles discussion about the credibility of the Italian press from all points of view. The debate has now overrun the mere political dimension to invade everyday news, especially in criticising the attitude of the Italian news media regarding a number of crime cases.

With these premises, our research inevitably focused on the real level of perception held by the main figures in the Italian journalistic system regarding the credibility problem, its present critical state, its causes and its possible solutions.

## **Research methodology**

Our research, therefore, is based on three considerations concerning Italian journalism:

1. Hallin and Mancini (2004) placed Italian journalism within the “pluralist polarised” model; among the various motivations for this choice on the part of the authors, one of the most forceful is unquestionably the high level of political parallelism in Italy linking the world of journalism to the worlds of politics and economy (the impure editorial industry, conflicts of interest). The credibility

- issue must therefore be seen within a journalistic model where the anchorage of credibility is not necessarily founded on cognitive factors (Gili, 2005);
2. in recent years, research on the degree of trust conceded by the public to journalism has in fact identified the main cause for lack of trust in the high level of political parallelism (Astra, 2008). The result of this research is in effect perfectly in line with the outcome of public debate over the last fifteen years;
  3. according to the indications of Italian literature on the subject of journalism (among others Agostini, 2004; Baldini, 2009; Bechelloni, 1995; Bergamini, 2006; Brancoli, 1994; De Bortoli, 2008, Lepri, 2005; Mancini, 2009; Morcellini, 2001; Murialdi, 2006; Ottone, 1978, 1996; Pansa, 1986, 2011; Papuzzi, 2003; Roidi, 2008; Scandaletti, 2003; Sorrentino, 2002, 2006), the causes of low credibility in Italian journalism are certainly to be found in the political parallelism mentioned by Hallin and Mancini (2004), but also in a further series of factors: the inability to discharge journalism's social role, journalists' low level of professionalism and independence, source contamination, bias in selecting and reporting news, carelessness and/or excessive sensationalism, low ethical and deontological standards. From this same literature, however, it appears that Italian journalists do not always seem to be aware of this crisis, its significance and its causes.

These considerations are the point of departure of our research. Our aim is in particular to attempt to understand what perception Italian journalists have of their own credibility. To do this, we will highlight three issues: firstly, Italian journalists' awareness of the low level of credibility of their profession; secondly, to what causes they think this crisis can be attributed; thirdly, what possible solutions they envisage in the short and/or long term.

We chose the qualitative type of approach; the technique selected was to interview competent observers, those "authorities and experts on the phenomenon who have a direct, profound vision of it given their particular observation post" (Corbetta, 2003b: 89). In certain cases, continues Corbetta (2003b: 90), "the privileged observer is part of the population under study, but has a special position: an opinion leader or a community leader [...]. Or else [someone who] has a particularly detailed knowledge of the subject being studied".

In the light of this, we decided to approach observers from two different categories. In the first, those interviewed were chosen on the basis of two main features: first of all, they were to be in a position of responsibility, with the authority to intervene personally in the editorial approach of the masthead; they were also chosen as being ideal "representatives" of the media to which they belonged: print, radio, television, press agencies, web.

The second category is that of journalists from foreign papers who have been working in Italy for a number of years: we considered their contribution of high value thanks to the greater detachment of these observers from the major issues (if not all the issues) of the Italian press system. The three journalists were intentionally chosen from journalistic systems which belong, or show affinities, with the pluralist-polarised model proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004).

In line with the above criteria, ten observers were chosen: for newspapers, the executive editor of the “Corriere della Sera”, Ferruccio de Bortoli; as a radio journalist, the executive editor of Radio24, Gianfranco Fabi; for the web, the editor in charge of the online edition of the “Corriere della Sera”, Marco Pratellesi; for the agencies, the executive editor of the Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (AGI), Giuliano De Risi. As regards television journalism, those interviewed were Fabio Zavat-taro, the RAI TG1 journalist who is also responsible for information regarding the Holy See; Milena Gabanelli, anchorwoman in charge of the weekly journalistic programme *Report*; Emilio Carelli, executive editor of Sky TG24. As we go to print, Pratellesi and Carelli are no longer in the positions they held at the time of the interviews.

For the foreign press we interviewed: Valentina Alazraki, who has been the Vatican correspondent for Televisa for several years; Marcelle Padovani, the “Le Nouvel Observateur” correspondent in Italy; and lastly Antonio Pelayo, the Antena 3 correspondent in Italy.

The interviews followed a similar approach, with questions regarding three main lines of investigation:

- initially the observers were asked to define the concept of the credibility of journalism and to express an opinion on the state of health of Italian journalism;
- a second group of questions aimed at investigating the issue of the cause of the crisis;
- lastly, the third group of questions concerned possible strategies to emerge from the crisis.

## **Research results**

As was to be expected, the picture emerging from the analysis of the interviews proved somewhat varied. In this paper we will attempt to underline the most relevant aspects that may serve as a starting point for a reflection on the evolution that the news media must inevitably undergo over the next few years.

It is first of all only right, and to be honest it is also somewhat comforting, to announce that every one of the privileged observers chosen judged credibility an essential element of the information system. As regards the causes of the credibility crisis, of the “seven ‘deadly’ sins” listed in the first part of the paper, the first six were immediately put forward, and among these the first three (the social role, the editorial organisations and the operators) clearly and evidently appeared as those most involved in the crisis in Italian journalism.

Upon probing further into the substance of the answers, with regard to problems concerning the editorial organisations (the aspect most closely linked to the issue of political parallelism as described by Hallin and Mancini), it is only fair to say that they were mentioned by nearly all the observers, both from the point of view of the *impure publishing industry* (Pelayo says that “It is an almost universal fact that Italian newspapers are connected to large industrial and financial groups. Which is obviously not the best possible situation to ensure any degree of independence of the information”) and from that of *conflicts of interest* (“The state of health of information in Italy would not be so disastrous – states Pratellesi – if in the specific field of information publishing there were not a series of conflicts of interest, intercrossing and persistent, of which the most evident, but not the only, is that concerning the Prime Minister”); furthermore, such aspects are intrinsically bound to the problem of the *operators* mentioned above (“When you arrive as a correspondent – says Alazraki – you have to read the various papers to get an idea and above all you have to know who the owner of the single paper is to understand why that paper writes as it does, what the political and economic group behind it is”). The journalists interviewed, therefore, agree on political parallelism as being the cause of the low credibility of Italian journalism.

With regard to the other possible factors in the crisis, in this case too we found a convergence of opinion between what is found in the literature and the journalists’ perception. The interviewees refer to:

1. the progressive loss of awareness of *journalism’s social role*: De Bortoli states that “good information develops an open governing class which expects to be challenged and does not make decisions merely on the grounds of opinion polls, but envisages the future”;
2. the tendency toward *self-referral* and a certain degree of *short-sightedness* on the part of the professional category: De Bortoli maintains that a credible journalist must not “dispute the facts. Many journalists read the facts and interpret them, yet sometimes refuse to accept them if they go against their own opinions” while De Risi laments the fact that Italian journalism “in-

dulges in certain commonplaces, without even looking to see what is really happening”;

3. *bias in the newsmaking process*: “I am convinced – says Padovani – that the Italian press is probably the only press in the world that does not supply information: it supplies either propaganda, or politics, or comment, or controversy: but not information”;
4. the *insufficient checking of sources*: “When the Pope was on holiday in the Valley of Aosta – Fabi recalls, referring to an episode of July 2009 – all the newspapers and televisions announced that three nuns, travelling at 180km/h along the motorway, were stopped by the road police and fined. Their excuse was that they were worried about the Pope’s health because he had broken his wrist, and they were on the way to Aosta to see for themselves how he was. This news was given out by all the media, yet no-one took the trouble to check with the Motorway authorities or the road police. The news was, quite simply, false”;
5. the tendency towards *sensationalism*: “Something else that makes for a loss of credibility – says Alazraki – is the irritating habit of ‘splashing the monster across the front page’. It is as if a newspaper decided on a story line and became the judge instead of the journalist”. Pelayo adds: “a minor, almost domestic, incident becomes a drama, a tragedy”;
6. *carelessness of form*: “A good deal of information – observes Fabi – is constructed step by step through conjecture, hence the journalist writes without being in possession of all the elements he should have, partly because he’s in a rush, but partly through a degree of slovenliness”. “In selecting my journalists – adds Carelli – I have always put training first. This work cannot be done without a cultural background, without university training”.

However, while the issue of political parallelism is stressed in all the interviews, these other elements, as in the literature, emerge only by fits and starts, and are not always mentioned with the same emphasis.

Lastly, as to the possible ways out of the quagmire of this credibility crisis, the answers are once again forceful and convergent: they call for an urgent return to the values on which the journalist’s profession is founded. Among the numerous answers of this sort we quote the one that is perhaps the clearest, from De Bortoli: “I would point to the two English words that I think best describe the journalist’s credibility: accuracy and fairness. After which I would recall Lambeth’s five principles: truth, justice, freedom, humanity, responsibility. That would be enough” (De Bortoli is referring to Lambeth, 1986).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

As we said, six of the “seven ‘deadly’ sins” described under point 2 are mentioned by our observers. The seventh one, the profile relating to ethics and deontology, did not appear distinctly in the interviews. However, in our opinion, at the end of our research this is the very point of interest and discussion: what is, or what could be, the main role of the rules and the values of the journalistic profession in the construction of its credibility?

### **Credibility: Rules, Values and Professional Ethics**

In speaking of rules and values, we are in fact dealing with a “cross-factor” to be found, partly or totally, in all the differing aspects investigated during the interviews. This factor can also be broken down into three different features: rules, values, and, therefore, their synthesis, i.e. professional ethics or *deontology*. Intentionally, we did not include questions pointedly concerning these three aspects, leaving the observers absolutely free to evaluate the way in which these elements may be connected to credibility. And they surfaced in very different ways.

Apart from one single exception, none of the observers thought it necessary to dwell on issues involving the Italian press council (*Ordine dei giornalisti*), or the rules that are applied to the world of information through the press council, or to those regulating access to the profession (a fact we mentioned, not exactly in tones of praise, in referring to the various editorial organisations), or to any sanctions applicable to journalists, or to the problems concerning the recognition of other professional qualifications in the world of information. And it is doubly meaningful to note that the only observer who mentioned it, Gianfranco Fabi, pronounced himself unreservedly in favour of the abolition of the *Ordine* (a question under discussion for years but as yet little more than a mere suggestion). As if – and this is our perhaps slightly malicious deduction – the rules laid down by the Italian press council were perceived as secondary or hardly binding on the profession.

However, from this point of view it is therefore significant that the observers considered fundamental those values historically connected to their profession. The fact of associating information credibility to a series of values such as professionalism, correctness, objectivity, respect, as our observers did, enables us to deduce that professional journalism is still to a certain extent aware of its own social role and of the function of journalism in a full democracy.

Considering the present moment in Italian history, it is very tempting to believe that the founding values of the journalist's profession have disappeared without trace or, worse still, are obsolete. Certain journalistic forms waver along (indeed often overstep) the thin line that divides journalism from sensationalism and the use of the press for ends quite at odds with those historically appointed; the success of such forms must give pause for thought.

Once more the analogy proposed by Massimo Baldini (2009) between the journalist and the doctor comes to our assistance, and was meaningfully used by our observers (for example De Bortoli: "if a doctor or a banker says 'I do a certain thing', I would never think that doctor or that banker is in the pay of my rival. I would sometimes think that even if a journalist writes an inconvenient article he is probably only doing his job"). Given the important social role each performs, should we consider credible only the doctor seeing that he is believed, perhaps because he is pleasant or good-looking or even because he is related to the patient?

### **The Possible Way Out**

At this point, however, one question necessarily arises: since there is an awareness of these basic aspects, how is it possible that our country has run aground on a credibility crisis in which it apparently prefers to flounder rather than to get afloat and away? To be more down to earth: since our observers have given us the impression that Italian journalists, particularly those in positions of responsibility, are aware of this crisis, why is it that they are not doing their utmost to steer towards greater credibility?

We believe the answer to be inevitably complex and it certainly cannot disregard those component parts of journalism that are bound less closely to the universe of information. To recall the obvious: for journalists, journalism is also the source of their pay-packet, so it is perhaps too much to expect them to react against the pressures imposed by the employer, at least at the individual level.

Yet these factors clearly create a vicious circle, in which a journalism that has developed through means supposedly alien to the profession becomes entangled in certain mechanisms from which it is then difficult to extricate it. This is why we were interested in the difficulty observed in many of the journalists interviewed, a difficulty underlined by the three foreign press journalists: the problem of becoming effectively conscious of this state of crisis and of the general public's perception of it. Specifically, we feel that while on the one hand a single journalist may be fully aware of the situation, it is equally unlikely that this awareness be made apparent at the more comprehensive and complex level of the world of information



– which also includes other figures, the most relevant of which are of course the editors and the end-users.

Since there is a relation in Italy between the media system and the political system with the characteristics described and analysed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), a fracture may therefore emerge between what all individuals are aware of and the way in which the whole system continues to go forward, almost by inertia. The journalists cling to their own positions, the editors look after their own interests, the general public loses its trust in information and meanwhile loses interest in the issue itself, all of which can only push journalists and editors to a further enhancement of the interests of their own category. The low extent of awareness, or rather the “partial” awareness, shown in these professionals’ perception of their crisis and the public’s attitude towards it, is in all probability a symptom of an ever decreasing level of communication among the various sectors, sectors which will inevitably continue to diverge, each in its own way, or rather each according to its own interests.

Once more we are inescapably faced with the problem which is the context of the whole research: the interests at stake. The key point is probably to concentrate the attention of all the parties involved (journalists, editors, end-users) on the vital *social function* of information, which is (in Luigi Einaudi’s words) to supply the instruments needed to deliberate, actively seeking the truth in the interests of the general public. This issue is mainly cultural, since it can only come about through the combined good intentions of all those involved. As a number of our observers noted (and as is happening more and more often in our country), journalists are associating in co-operative editorial groups, or else they are experimenting (successfully) with new initiatives, widely divers one from the other, which place editorial decision-making in the hands of the journalists themselves, thus unquestionably demonstrating their own aptitude for responsibility. These are steps in the right direction which encourage a certain degree of optimism, yet they must be followed up if we are not to remain bogged down in our present situation.

### **Professional Ethics**

As mentioned above, the crisis thus emerges of the third element which, after the rules and the values, comprises the final “sin” of Italian journalism: professional ethics. Since we consider professional ethics as a synthesis of values and rules, we can identify the nature of the fracture between theory and practice, and it is purely deontological. Journalists appear to have forgotten that rules and values keep step with each other and come together in professional ethics, which increasingly seem a sort of provisional directive, a musical background of which one is aware but which

structurally gains little attention. The journalists we interviewed mentioned professional ethics only occasionally without devoting much time to the subject, in spite of the fact that they are profoundly aware of the basic values of their profession.

It is not by chance that the issue of the interests involved, or as Goffman (1981) said, of the “principal” behind the information, is so evidently present and rooted in a system that apparently has trouble with professional ethics, or in this case of awareness of what the journalist’s profession actually is. The feeling is that the world of journalism and the social system are losing their perception of the difficulty and the importance of the role appointed to journalism, and the gap between intentions and actions appears to run parallel with the gap between rules and values: a rift arising from the crisis of what brings together rules and values, i.e., professional ethics or deontology. The task of professional ethics, as we have seen, is to transform *ethical thought* into *ethical action* (Spalletta, 2010; Stella, 2008); and whereas our interviews fortunately show that *ethical thought* is intact, its translation into *ethical action* seems to encounter more than one obstacle.

### **Credibility and Responsibility**

In conclusion, we can say that Italian journalists increasingly lack “credibility”; it is just as well that they cannot be considered “credulous”, indeed quite the contrary. But certain elements lead us to believe that they are not fully aware of the inevitable requests that will face information in forthcoming decades, towards which they seem rather “incredulous”. Incredulous towards a situation into which Italian information has plummeted, incredulous towards the very fact that it has plummeted to such a depth. Incredulous towards the huge gap that separates Italian information from the model that is universally considered the best one (or perhaps the only one), towards which all information systems naturally tend, yet from which the Italian system naturally shies away. Incredulous, apparently, towards the duties inherent in the profession they have chosen, and perhaps incredulous towards the sheer dimension of the challenge issued to the world of information by the evolution in Italian society, politics, economy and culture: the challenge of a radical change of course to avoid transforming a crisis of credibility into an utter loss of credibility. An utter discredit from which it is extremely difficult to return.

We believe however that the same parts of society that pose this challenge to journalism can in no way consider themselves immune from the challenge itself. The utter discredit of journalism must necessarily have strong repercussions on those very same parts of society, politics, economy and culture which would be the first to benefit from credible journalism. Nor can academic reflection on journalism

consider itself exempt. It is therefore greatly to be hoped that in the next few years research will focus attention on the ethical aspect, with that prospect of shared responsibility of which Roger Silverstone spoke (2007).

We think that the solution of the credibility crisis besetting Italian journalism is not and cannot be the exclusive interest of the professional category; it calls for the contribution on the part of the Institutions and of culture and society as a whole.

In our opinion, this is the major implication that surfaces from our research, in reference to the existent Italian literature about journalism: this literature covers marginally (and often merely anecdotally) not only the credibility issue, but also the issue of professional ethics, which is too often considered as a prerogative of juridical studies. On the contrary, our research shows that the credibility issue is closely connected to the question of professional ethics, and it also affirms that both require a study approach that is not solely juridical but is as interdisciplinary as possible. We believe that this is the main contribution that should come from the literature in forthcoming years.

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