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Josep Lluís Gómez Mompert

From quality journalism to speculative journalism

Between January 2007 and May 2008, due to old age or sickness, among other reasons, quite a few journalists representative of what in the last century was considered quality journalism died: journalism that has not only honoured a profession necessary for the development and consolidation of democracy and freedoms, but which has also contributed, as the brilliant journalist Jean Daniel believes it should, to exposing everything that the authorities virtually always try to hide or, at least, divert attention from. Probably for this reason, this profession is “the best in the world”, in the words of Gabriel García Márquez, or “the most interesting”, after literature, according to Mario Vargas Llosa.

I would like to remember half a dozen journalists, in some ways paradigmatic, of all those who passed away in those eighteen months. I shall begin with Ryszard Kapuscinski, the Polish reporter who died in Warsaw on January 23rd 2007, aged 75, an exemplary

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communicator who has bequeathed an entire *philosophy of being* to a group at times rather sceptical and at others cynical: “in order to be a journalist you have to be a good person” or “cynics are no use at this profession”, he would say repeatedly. Perhaps for this reason, the new mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who was a despicable journalist (a cheat)¹ was able to become a smart politician, just like Berlusconi, who has persecuted the good Italian journalists

that have dared to denounce his continual corruption and prevarication.

Kapuscinski was fascinated by journalism and by its possibilities of learning about the world, particularly that of the dispossessed. He, who had begun working in the National News Agency of a Poland with the iron censorship of a totalitarian regime, was able to sidestep it like other good professionals who have to work with self-censorship and/or the heavy pressure of democratic states. After a first period in India and China in the early nineteen fifties, in 1959 he moved to Africa as the agency’s correspondent, where he stayed until 1981, travelling continually to Asia and Latin America. Up to his death he devoted himself to writing important articles and extraordinary works of journalism in book format, like *The Emperor, Imperium* or *The shadow of the sun*.

On February 4th 2007, one of the most troublesome journalists for Austrian politicians died of a heart attack in Vienna, aged 61: Alfred Worm. In a country governed by spurious alliances, Worm investigated the scandals of corruption and hypocrisy, like for example the exposure in 1980 of the major financial fraud in the construction of the principal AKH hospital in Vienna. His struggle against financial and political corruption was rewarded by recognition as the best journalist of 2006.

New Zealander Kate Webb, a pioneering Vietnam war correspondent, died of cancer on May 14th 2007 in Sydney, at the age of 64. She was very brave as a war reporter and had a special gift for words, as the journalist Peter Arnett, a Pulitzer Prize winner for his reports on Vietnam, remembered. In 1967 she travelled under her own steam to Saigon and after a few months she was hired by the UPI agency as a permanent correspondent for the quality of her work, such as the stories revealing the involvement of South Vietnamese officers in the black market.

Kate Webb was kidnapped and held for 23 days in Cambodia by North Vietnamese troops and was initially given up for dead. Despite thirst, hunger, infections and the terrible interrogations, when freed she declared that she had been treated courteously; she got

■ ¹ Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson (1964). Despite his refined education at Eton and Oxford, in 1987 he was sacked by *The Times* for faking some quotes by his godfather when he was a trainee editor. He then went to the right-wing newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, where he ended up as a columnist, and in 1999 he left that paper and went off to edit the centre-right magazine *The Spectator*, which he left in 2005 to devote himself to politics, and to appear on humorous television programmes thanks to his razor-sharp tongue.

malaria and risked her life on many occasions. In 2001 she retired as associate manager of AFP in Jakarta, a post she had held since 1985, because she considered herself “too old to report from the front line” —the only kind of reporting she liked doing. She did not see herself at all as a tough person, but rather vulnerable, and contrary to what people think, she said, being weak had been the key to survival in such difficult circumstances.

The founder of the alternative magazine *Actuel* and the free radio station Radio Nova, Jean-François Bizot, born in Paris into an upper middle-class family, died on October 8th 2007, aged 63, from cancer. In 1970, after working on the weekly *L'Express*, along with friends —among them the noted French politician Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde— he founded the monthly underground magazine *Actuel*, producing long, excellent reports. This magazine, a countercultural icon in France, which at one point was selling 400,000 copies, was intended, in Bizot's words, “to surprise, to comprehend, and above all not to preach” in relation to the new social movements and the alternative groups (of gender, sexual orientation, music...), the ways of life in the communes, black culture in the USA or ecology.

One of the most outstanding critical voices in Italian journalism, Enzo Biagi, who in 2002 when he was dismissed from the RAI became the symbol of Berlusconi's repression in the media, died on November 6th 2007 in Milan, aged 87. His professionally honest approach brought him problems with several media organizations. After being a member of the Partisan Resistance in the Second World War he began working on the Bologna newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* and lost his job in 1951 for signing a manifesto against the atomic bomb. In 1960 he was fired from the weekly *Epoca* for severely criticising the government of the ultra right-winger Tambroni, and three years later Saragat, the future president of the Italian Republic, dismissed him as director of the RAI's television news, accusing him of being a “communist”, although he always defined himself as “a socialist without a party”. He then worked on the newspapers *La Stampa*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera* and the weekly *Panorama*, but it was during the nineties that some memorable RAI programmes, such as *Il Fatto*, made him very popular with viewers.

Finally, on April 2nd 2008, at the age of 92, Sir Geoffrey Cox died, a renowned journalist —he was a reporter on the Spanish Civil War for the liberal anti-Francoist newspaper *News Chronicle*— who shook up television news with News at Ten on the British channel ITV. Cox, who had been a correspondent in different European countries, became one of the pioneers of television news when, in 1967, he introduced the first half-hour news programme for a mass audience, at ten o'clock at night, a programme that was virtually a national institution for 32 years. By giving pride of place to images live from the scene of the events, instead of the anodyne news bulletins that had been produced up to then, this journalist, born in New Zealand and educated at Oxford, was the forerunner of modern television.

THE END OF THE DOYENS AND THE SUPREMACY OF THE SHARKS

Is the death of all these great journalists, and those of many others perhaps less well known, a symptom of the end of an era of the most brilliant and socially most useful journalism? Can quality journalism, which has given democracy and progress so many good things, reproduce itself if the (good) professional masters are dying off?

Even though the new generations of journalists are usually better trained and more prepared (because not only have they studied the subject specifically at university, they have often done an M. A. and speak a couple of foreign languages), they are finding fewer and fewer veterans in newspaper offices of the kind that, besides training them in good journalistic practice, can guide them in critical, rigorous and important journalism, showing themselves to be a model of conduct, with high professional standards and independent, not servile, attitudes towards the public and private powers.

Without doubt, the lack of living doyens close to young journalists is worrying, in a profession increasingly mimetic, less interested in history —often not even their own— and more “immediatist” and spectacular due to the influence of stories closer to infotainment or tabloidism (journalism, sensationalist or not, that invents stories and lies unscrupulously). Even more so, when the oligo-politicisation of the media and a continual replacement of traditional press bosses by managers and executives of huge multi-media groups prevails: the ownership of journalistic companies belongs less and less to families or entrepreneurs in love with the news business, but has passed into the hands of above all speculative capitalist companies, coming from industries far removed from information. They need to control this information in order to pursue their global business interests, whether weapons, energy, property, transgenic crops or laundering dirty money.

A couple of examples, on either side of the Atlantic, exemplify the repercussions of this new media ecosystem.

In November 2007 the staff of the prestigious German weekly *Der Spiegel* forced Stefan Aust, its editor for thirteen years, to leave. Even though under his editorship the magazine had maintained good results, reinforced its prestige even more and its presence on television and Internet had been consolidated, the journalists of *Der Spiegel*, owners of 50.5% of the shares, dismissed him alleging that they wanted to win back younger readers, through good fresh ideas that they thought Aust was unable to come up with.

Der Spiegel, founded on January 4th 1947 and which at times has sold over a million copies, has been a landmark of quality and investigative journalism in Germany, with the exposure of political corruption and various scandals, like the case of the illegal financing of parties known as the “Flick affair”.

Then there is Marcus Brauchli, editor of the important financial newspaper *The Wall Street Journal*, who was forced to resign in April 2008, four months after the paper was bought by magnate Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch’s media giant News Corporation (175 press mastheads) took control of Dow Jones —the company that publishes the financial newspaper—

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for 5.2 billion dollars. The resignation of Brauchli, a man very influential in the American press, given that *The Wall Street Journal* is the second biggest-selling paper in the USA after *USA Today*, came when he had not yet been in the job for a year, having taken over from previous editor Paul Steiger. Both had kept up the journalistic quality and independence, but Rupert Murdoch had already made it known that he wanted to turn *The Wall Street Journal* into a lighter paper with more political information to compete with *The New York Times*, among others. A few months before, the powerful Tribune group—publishing among many other newspapers *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times*—had been sold to property magnate Sam Zell.

The personalities of some of this century's new press *sharks* recall those of a century ago, like the architect of tabloid journalism William Randolph Hearst, outstandingly portrayed in Orson Welles' superb film *Citizen Kane* (1941). That legend could now compare with the case of Conrad Black, the Canadian magnate who in the nineteen eighties and nineties was admired for controlling, through the Hollinger group, 500 newspaper mastheads from Toronto to Jerusalem. Lord Black, who idolised the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, was charged and found guilty in July 2007 of three serious counts of fraud, sentenced to 35 years in jail and fined one million dollars, when it was found that he had created a financial scam to illegally get his hands on shareholders' money when newspapers in the group were wound up.

INFORMATION, SPECULATIVE MERCHANDISE

These, like so many other transactions in the media, suggest that for some magnates—who no longer have anything of the honourable term “press barons” about them, as they were described in 19th century England—information, in this information society, is simply raw material for the wholesale business of speculation. If information has become speculative material for many of the media emperors, this would explain the course that much



of journalism has taken, even emblematic names. If this hypothesis, quite plausible, is confirmed, one could talk of *speculative journalism*, just as at other times in the history of journalism expressions have been coined like “interpretative journalism”, “sensationalist journalism”, “quality journalism” or “tabloid journalism”.

Here, “speculative journalism” would be the superior, prophetic phase of the “tabloid journalism” new on the scene, but linked to quite prestigious media bodies, paradoxically not populist but relatively elitist, whose nature is above all that of an economic-cum-financial template based on speculation; namely, moving *assets* (news) around without paying too much attention to the significant core of the meaning of the news, understanding it as an intangible asset with exchange value once its useful value has been cancelled out.

It is difficult to think that any of these media *sharks* might care about information in the profound sense that legitimates the job of the journalist. On the contrary, what seems to emerge from their operating methods and their buying and selling strategies —and consequently, from the repercussions that this maelstrom has for journalism and journalists— is that the intangible asset which makes exchange possible is the symbolic prestige or the name of the masthead. The gradual denaturalisation of the type of journalism is the way of voiding of meaning and content the reporting that up to then had been done, often justified by new readers, new fashions and new topics. In a word, nearly always lighter, more striking, more fun, more surprising, more colourful, more agile... in short, more trivial.

After years of a degree of success —though with several crises— of the radical left-leaning French newspaper *Libération*, launched in 1973 and founded, among others, by Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault, in 2006 the historic editor Serge July handed over to a former reporter on the same paper, Laurent Joffrin. Recapitalisation, with 15 million euro designed to get it out of the latest financial crisis, paradoxically meant opening the door —in the newspaper born of the events in Paris in May 1968— to magnate Edmond de Rothschild. Although this multi-millionaire declared that he would not change the editorial line, he demanded the following: the resignation of the editor, who had been the soul of the paper, responsible for enormous growth during the Mitterand years, and a change of design, full colour and more dynamic. The new design —which was aimed at making *Libération* “more seductive, clearer, more optimistic, more open and more humble”— includes novelties like the so-called “Contre-journal”, which gathers bloggers’ opinions, or a “making of” section explaining the secrets of the day’s edition, and also the imposition of shorter articles and more pictures.

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER SECTARIANISM PREVAILS

The other strategy that prevails as a marketing formula comes from the logic of the television audiences: give the *public* what a certain majority wants, not very demanding and critical, which seems to want to amuse itself to death (in the words of Neil Postman) or which manifests consumeristic mass hedonism (as Pier Paolo Passolini put it) and which, at times, will read one paper or another, free or paid for, as long as it is not too boring, too complex, too political or too cultural. This transferral of audiovisual fashions to the written press (paper or digital) is based on the fallacy that information has to be

guided according to what the readers want to read, adapting the social reality to a media one that does not clash with the beliefs (strong or stereotyped) of readers of a certain ideology or sensibility. The model of the American Fox TV channel, with its sectarian journalism, would be the best example on the other side of the Atlantic, just as a well-known radio station or a Madrid newspaper would be quite representative in Spain.

In line with this tendency, a couple of monotheistic religions strive and devote lots of money to own or strengthen media organs of an orthodox spiritual observance. This is so with the new Mohamed VI television channel of the Holy Qu'ran, created in June 2006 in Morocco with the aim of training imams in the mosques, as Koranic radio had done previously. As it is with the project to create a worldwide network of Catholic television stations, resulting from the First Catholic Television Stations Conference held in Madrid in October 2006. Six months later it was

made known that the Catholic Church was preparing a sort of papal CNN, multi-channel (TV, Internet, mobile telephones) in six languages and aimed at a potential audience of twenty million. It was named H₂O to symbolise “purification, salvation and vitality” and presented as being independent of the Vatican, but with “the demands of Catholics about the information the Church gives to the world”.

A hundred years after the reactionary campaigns of the “good” Catholic press that, besides persecuting the plural and democratic European press by all means possible (assemblies, conferences, brief treatises, preaching, demonstrations, instructions in the confession boxes, threats of excommunication, etc.), created a powerful media network to counteract it, the Catholic hierarchy is now not only infiltrated in and possesses many media outlets around the world (similar to the Jewish lobbies), it also wants to have its mega-TV channel *urbi et orbe* like the ones some of the evangelical Churches have.

Obviously, in the Muslim world, the possibilities for good journalism are extremely limited, especially in the audiovisual media. And the great hope of a change in the media scene since the end of 1996, when the Al-Jazeera channel went on air, has received all kinds of pressure, from East to West, precisely for presenting the news rigorously². Its independent, plural nature (the channel's motto is “Opinion and Counter Opinion”, and its Arab

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■ ² EL-NAWAWY, Mohammed and Adel ISKANDER, *Al-Jazeera, The Story of the Network that is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism*, Cambridge, MA, Westview Press, 2003.

F R E E A N D E Q U A L

journalists share fifteen different nationalities and orientations) has been acknowledged by fifty million viewers in the Arab countries and, since November 15th 2006, by a billion viewers around the world thanks to its English-speaking international channel (AJI).

From time to time Al-Jazeera has been attacked in order to prevent it reporting. Pressure on the Emir of Qatar from the USA and the Arab regimes; the bombing of its studios in Kabul and Iraq, censorship in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, or the expulsion of its correspondents from different Arab capital cities. Channels have also been created to compete with it, like the BBC's Arab channel, the American Al-Hurra or the Saudi Al-Arabiyya³. Since the early months of 2008, Al-Jazeera has been toning down its language and cutting some reports, besides the two habitual news taboos (Qatar and Saudi Arabia), probably as a result of the agreement between the twenty-two Information Ministers of the Arab League which, at a meeting in Cairo in February 2008, took a firm stand against "certain satellite channels that have strayed from the right path".

In this state of affairs it seems that power now lies not so much in information as in misinformation, as José Vidal-Beneyto explained very well a few years ago:

Communication has become advertising; and political communication, propaganda. To make this conversion, it was necessary for information to become misinformation, i.e., that the knowledge and transmission of real events would not be possible, because the facts available referred to another reality, produced through falsification. Misinforming is not just informing wrongly or manipulating information; it is imposing certain information, making it impossible for any other to exist offering content different to one's own. It is a process of gradual falsification that results in a radical falsehood⁴.

In the public sphere where the media operates and in its repercussions on public opinion it has often been accepted that power lay in information, but, as I have just pointed out, this has not been the case for quite some time. Therefore, the function of journalism is badly damaged, given that, as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, two renowned American journalists and current events analysts, explain, “the main purpose of journalism is to give the people the information they need to be free and capable of governing themselves”⁵. Lately this information malady has got worse, because increasingly “journalism without information”⁶ is the norm, as is demonstrated by an excellent study directed by sociologist Félix Ortega. Although the investigation refers to Spain, there can be no doubt that many of the ideas and the conclusions reached by these media analysts are habitual in world journalism: journalism from which the information—the description and explanation of facts and events—virtually disappears, to be replaced by all kinds of rumour, speculation, distortion, invention and concealment at the service of the self-reproduction of the media in order always to trap the receivers and, on occasions, with unspeakable aims.

Moreover, the loss of quality of the press is generalised, even in much of what has been considered as “quality press”. This was borne out by Alan Rusbridger, editor of the noted British newspaper *The Guardian*: “The serious newspapers are dumbing down. Today the trend is to produce a sort of journalism that trivialises reality”⁷. Two days before, the same journalist was talking about how front pages were now designed to attract the readers, and he gave two examples from the serious British press: the front page of *The Times* that—in the edition of September 27th 2007—gave two thirds of the space to the football manager José Mourinho and he assured that this would have been unthinkable twenty years before, and the front page of the prestigious *The Independent* that sought to attract attention with a story on the front page that had nothing to do with that day's news⁸.

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■ ³ LAMLOUM, Olfa, *Al-Jazira, espejo rebelde y ambiguo del mundo árabe*, Hacer, Barcelona, 2006.

⁴ VIDAL-BENEYTO, José, “Las armas de falsedad masiva (I)”, *El País*, 03/04/2004, p. 4.

⁵ KOVACH, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel, *Los elementos del periodismo*, Santillana, Madrid, 2003, p. 24.

⁶ ORTEGA, Félix (coord.), *Periodismo sin información*, Tecnos, Madrid, 2006.

⁷ Statements collected in *El País*, in a report by M. R. S. from Segovia.

“Los periódicos miran hacia Internet”, 30/09/2007, p. 43.

⁸ RUSBRIDGER, Alan, editor of *The Guardian* interviewed by Walter Oppenheimer, *El País* London correspondent: “Nunca querremos ser triviales”, 28/09/2007, p. 50.

All this is the consequence—in the words of Vargas Llosa— of the process of *tabloidism* and sensationalism of the press today, “the cancer of the press, mostly in open societies”⁹. Previously, the Peruvian writer had remarked that one of the threats facing journalism is that it is becoming entertainment, and he added: “A lot of the media has lightened and dumbed down its content, as the only way of winning over or keeping readers. I think this is very dangerous. If journalism becomes mere entertainment, it abdicates”¹⁰. This deterioration, nevertheless, also derives from the conditions journalists have to work under, as Ignacio Sotelo points out: “the increasingly small editorial offices and the low salaries are reflected in the quality of the press, which, by losing credibility and interest, loses readers”¹¹.

THE COLLATERAL DAMAGE OF DEVALUED JOURNALISM

Beyond technological changes, the result of the spread of the digital press via Internet and the proliferation of well-made free newspapers, the depreciation of the financial investment in journalism has for years been bringing about a severe re-structuring of the sector. And the newspaper owners, as if inspired by Robert E. Park’s “Natural History of the Newspaper” (1923), according to which the newspaper, rather than an institution is a living organism fighting to exist, to adapt, which seeks to raise sales figures by attracting attention: doing whatever is necessary in order to survive. In this doing and undoing, however, they forget that the press, information, is not simple merchandise: it is not just a social institution but a public asset necessary for social progress and for democracy. As a result, the bad use of information corrodes civic attitudes and degenerates social life.

In June 2007, the News Corporation group, owned by the Australian magnate Rupert Murdoch, announced the sacking of 90 journalists from his four British newspapers in order to reduce costs. This affected 6.5% of the staff of *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The News of the World* and *The Sun*, which together employ almost 1,400 journalists. In February 2008 *The New York Times*, which employs 750 journalists, decided to cut its staff by a hundred, although the publishing company that owns the paper—which also owns the *Boston Globe* and the *International Herald Tribune*— made after-tax profits of 143 million euro, despite a 4.7% drop in sales of its papers. And in April 2008, the *Le Monde* group announced that 85 out of 320 journalists would be leaving the editorial department of this French paper, which had already made staff cuts three years previously. To fight against this re-structuring, the workers at *Le Monde* went on strike for a few days, which prevented the paper from coming out.

Perhaps the first notable professional opposition to these staff cutbacks on major newspapers in this century, without sufficient justification and hiding behind the crisis, was by Dean Baquet, editor of *The Los Angeles Times*. This respected intelligent journalist,

■ ⁹ VARGAS LLOSA, Mario, “El cuarto poder”, *El País*, 04/05/2008, p. 33.

¹⁰ Highlighted in *El País*, with the sub-heading “Los retos de Vargas Llosa”, in the report by Lali Cambra, from Cape Town, “La difusión de periódicos en el mundo creció un 2,3% en 2006”, published in the edition of 05/06/2007.

¹¹ SOTELO, Ignacio, “El desplome del cuarto poder”, *El País*, 02/11/2007, p. 10.

¹² Report by Carlos Rajo, from Los Angeles, in *El País*:

“El director de *Los Angeles Times*, despedido por oponerse a un recorte de la plantilla”, 09/11/2006, p. 40.

¹³ Umberto Eco interviewed by Juan Cruz in *El País Semanal*, no. 1644, photograph by Jordi Socías: “El que se sienta totalmente feliz es un cretino”, 30/03/08, pp. 46 and 47.

the winner of a Pulitzer Prize in his early days as a reporter, was fired in November 2006 as editor of the California paper for standing up to the cutting of a hundred full-time jobs and, moreover, going public with it. The managing director, who supported Baquet, was also fired some days later. Baquet expressed his outspoken views until the very last moment:

standing on his desk, he bade farewell to his colleagues with these words: “You have the creativity, the intelligence, the courage and the will to take risks to continue to make the newspaper even better than it is now”¹².

The risks of the drop in informative quality, for some of the principal reasons mentioned, besides information that at times is not information, but misinformation or triviality, implies serious problems that have also made the Italian linguist, literary critic, novelist and essayist Umberto Eco reflect on today’s “information and knowledge” society:

The abundance of information about the present does not allow one to reflect on the past. [...] The abundance of information about the present is a loss not a gain. [...] One of today’s problems is the abundance of irrelevant information and the difficulty of selecting it [...] The newspapers have lots of pages, not much information. On the same topic there are four articles possibly saying the same... There exists the abundance of information, but also the abundance of the same information. [...] We turn to Internet to read the most important news. The information in the newspapers will be increasingly irrelevant, amusement rather than information.¹³

In open progressive societies, informative-communicative wellbeing is essential for social development and the advance of deliberative democracy. Just as in the new society —of globalized economy and worldwide culture— it is absolutely necessary to go for innovation, in the sphere of journalism innovation *has* to mean the quality of the information. In order for this to be qualitatively interesting from a social point of view it has to be useful, relevant (not to be confused with boring), i.e., it has to help to explain our complex world. Moreover, the kind of journalism that seems to be gaining ground is not sufficiently inclined —notable exceptions aside— to the quality of the information (the selection of a few crucial issues treated *glocally* [globally and locally at the same time] with revealing pleasantness), but to a saturation of *glamorous* or coarse trivia, kindly inviting us to participate in almost puerile fashion: “comment on the news”, “send an SMS”, “vote for an issue”, “tell us your story”... All in all it seems that we enjoy playing more, participating to little effect, than demanding useful information that favours individual and collective knowledge, without realising too much that the quality of the information is by now a new public right

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