

Bruxelles, 3 and 4 May 2012

Journalism and the challenge of intolerance

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I'm here on behalf of the Italian union of journalists, the Fnsi, to expose you our latest experiences, what we have done and are doing to face the risks of racism and xenophobia in media; to talk about the serious responsibilities of our category in spreading seeds of intolerance. But it's not an alibi to remember, first of all, how heavy have been and are also some politicians' responsibilities, who have consciously used the hostility against immigrants, dropouts, outsiders to increase their votes. They have been effectively defined "political entrepreneurs of fear". Above all members of centre-right parties, but not only: their ideas have influenced, affected, also part of the centre-left, which has been for years very faint, very weak, in opposing to these dangerous campaigns. It's not a malicious assumption of ours, this bad role played by a bad politics. A few weeks ago, one of the most important leaders of the Northern League, a party very aggressive against immigrants (and even against the presence in northern regions of Italian people coming from South Italy), loyal ally of Berlusconi in his government, Roberto Maroni, has publicly acknowledged: "When we understood that this issue gave us a political profit, we took advantage of it, we abused of it". Much more relevant, this admission, if you consider that this man has been for years Minister of the Interior, responsible for the refoulement policy, for the boats full of immigrants driven back to Libya. One word can be sufficient for a politician to create an atmosphere of anxiety and concern about the newcomers: as happened when Berlusconi, during the so-called "Arab spring", defined as "human Tsunami" the refugees who were leaving to Italy. A few thousand people (much less than those headed in other countries) depicted as a dangerous wave which was going to devastate the Italian coasts. In such a situation, it's not easy for journalism to contain the widespread hostility, to counter an atmosphere of social alarm.

Nevertheless, we can't escape our responsibilities: if some political campaigns have been so successful, great part of the reason is in the support they have found in our media. In many cases without awareness: but unconsciousness can't be pleaded by a journalism which wants to be considered reliable by the public opinion.

The turning point, for us, was at the end of 2006. In a small town near Milan, Erba, four persons were killed: an Italian woman, her little son, her mother and a neighbour. For the following 24 hours, all Italian media were unanimously sure that the murderer had to be the woman's husband, a North African immigrant. In a few days, the police investigation discovered that the

killers were a couple of Italian neighbours. But the compact racism that our media had shown was an enormous problem. Someone criticized us harshly: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees asked the Italian journalism to apologize. And this call met the embarrassment felt by a growing number of journalists. So, we together (Unhcr, our Union and the National Association: in Italy we have also an Order of Journalists, you know) decided to give ourselves a new, more detailed system of rules: the so-called Charter of Rome, that is a “code of conduct regarding asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking and migrants”.

We had to overcome some distrust: above all the perplexity of a lot of colleagues towards the risk to write a new text, full of noble principles but bound to stay unused. So the aim has been to do something that journalists can be stimulated to use in the everyday work. Starting from the first materials we employ: the words. That’s the reason why you can find, as annex to the Charter, a small glossary. Admitting our ignorance, we have underlined the differences, not obvious, among asylum seeker, refugee, irregular migrant. Ten years ago, the most common word in Italy to define the immigrants was “vucumprà”, which reproduced in a scornful way the words used by the immigrant hawkers (“vucumprà” means “do you want to buy?”). Then we have learnt that this word was too derogatory, and have replaced it with the word “clandestine”: but used in a too widespread way, without understanding the negative “aftertaste” of the word (clandestine is someone who lives in the shadow, potentially dangerous), and defining “clandestine” also people who are asylum seekers, or refugees.

To discuss on the use of words was the first step in the commitment to training colleagues that we put at the basis of the Charter of Rome. To avoid that the fight against intolerance in media remains empty, rhetorical statement, we have therefore chosen to force us to study on it. The new generations of journalists must study: since two years the Charter of Rome is part of the texts that you have to know to overcome the examination, which in Italy you have to pass if you want to become professional journalist. But also (perhaps especially) we older journalists must study, because we have arrived at the profession in years in which the ethical sensitivity of this issue was not yet well developed. For this reason we have arranged workshops in different Italian regions (some of them in cooperation with the Unar, the Italian institutional regulatory body of intervention against racism), and we are organizing training sessions in the largest television companies (starting from Rai, the Italian public service broadcasting).

To be interested in training activities does not mean to leave out harder and more direct interventions, necessary when some journalists write articles with a racist tone. In fact during the last years, the Order (the national Association which has, on the basis of the sharing out of responsibilities, the role of the ethical surveillance) has begun to punish those who, for example, write about "Romanian scum", inspired by news reports in cases in which were involved

immigrants from Romania; or those colleagues who arrange bad campaigns against Roma camps in the suburbs. But we are convinced that – together with the right punishment – the training sessions are indispensable, because it's necessary to change the way of thinking and talking of each of us, stopping to reflect on cultural prejudices in the use of the words that journalists have, even those of us who think to be open-minded. “Ethical journalism is thinking journalism. But, to be ethical, journalists need time to think”: these are the first words of the study “Getting the facts right”, that now we are going to know. Precisely: to stop and to think. Sentences, ethical convictions are important, but they are not enough.

Along with the training activity, the warranties of concreteness that we wanted for our Charter was the monitoring activity. We joined with the Italian university faculties, which study the relationship between media and immigration, to establish with all of them an Observatory that makes a periodical survey on the trends of our information. Since now, we have had three public events, three presentations of these reports, that provide scientific basis to the clear perception that we had yet as journalists: our media talk about immigrants almost exclusively for crime news and trials (or for landings on the Italian coasts). On the contrary, our media pay no attention to the positive experiences of integration (which exist, nevertheless, in the Italian society). If ten immigrants are held in a police station, for a fight with a use of a knife, just outside a disco, this is news. But if three immigrants take a degree in a university, this is not news.

If journalism work this way, it is obvious that people are convinced that immigrants are only a great danger. Yet the Charter of Rome does not ask to our colleagues be "kind" with immigrants, it doesn't ask to have a favour treatment to them. What is required to journalists is to be journalists: to respect the truth of the facts, of data, of statistics. The Charter of Rome asks them to give the same emphasis for a crime, regardless of the nationality of the person who committed it. And if an horrible crime, such as a rape, deserves the front page - when the man who does the crime is an immigrant - the same journalistic emphasis must also have a rape committed by an Italian citizen. But this equality of treatment there is not. I wish to quote only one number, provided by a recent university research: in Italy, the rapes committed by Italian citizens are 61%; on the contrary, in the media, articles and reports dedicated to rapes committed by immigrants are three times more than the ones dedicated to the rapes committed by Italians. It is an awful and shameful fact. Perhaps the author of the individual article is not aware, and he is not racist. But we are doing racist information, because we feed a hostility in the public opinion that is not justified by actual data. On these data we have to stop to think about in our training sessions, so that directors and editors take the data into account to modify their criteria for choosing articles.

There is another guarantee of effectiveness, we wanted to give to our Charter: we are journalists, but we think that these issues should be discussed not only among journalists. Our work involves the whole society, and therefore we thought it was right to open ourselves to comparison, criticism, cooperation with those organizations that are active on immigration issues in Italy, and who pay the consequences of political and media campaigns. Therefore, to go on both training of journalists and monitoring activity, we have created an association, whose members are 15, at the moment (but we are sure that the number will grow up): organizations of volunteers, associations of migrants, movements, Ngo's: we wish to have their opinions, their proposals, their experts in our meetings. We think it's the only way to avoid the risks of a corporative system, that is the closure of a category in itself .

The work done with the Charter of Rome has also been useful to get in touch with colleagues who were born abroad but who worked in Italy for such long years, and who are obviously very sensitive to these issues. Thus, on the basis of the Charter, within our union was born a new group of specialization, the National Association of Intercultural Press. It deals with, among other things, making easier the recognition of a career for foreign journalists who work in Italian newspapers. Because we are convinced that it's here - looking at the future - one of the solutions to the problem of intolerant information: it is important to have their reports about immigration, because those journalists can tell us from a perspective less full of prejudice.

Finally, the movement that was created around the Charter of Rome has had a further good result few months ago: Fnsi and Order, together with some associations, had launched a campaign, a year ago, against the ban on access for journalists to the Identification and Expulsion Centres for immigrants. To enforce this ban was the same Minister of the Interior, about whom I spoke earlier, arguing that journalists would have been a hindrance, an obstacle to the operations of assistance to immigrants. A brutal attack to our right and duty to inform, and to the right of immigrants of being treated in a human, civil way within detention structures that many say are worse than prisons. We have insisted for months, and when the Berlusconi government has been replaced by the Monti government, the new Minister of the Interior has removed the circular of her predecessor (although in different cities the police is still doing resistance to the access of journalists, and is creating bureaucratic excuses to prevent us from doing our reports).

So, this is part of our work, that I have had the opportunity to share with you. We think that it has something to do with the fight against populism, against the risks that Europe is facing. Protecting a good, more responsible journalism is not so far from protecting our democracies.