

Towards a New Model of Journalistic Information

From the Absent Subject to Testimony

David Vidal Castell

Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences

Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona

1. The Crisis of the Information Model in the Western Press

Communication today is the dominant area of economic and cultural activity. An activity that has engulfed the world of information and the production of culture, and that essentially operates around industrial and commercial parameters.¹ The features of technologies applied to communication and information evolve and multiply every day - although, fortunately, not all of these are introduced to the field of journalism. Similarly, at this time of info-technological optimisation, we possess data and indicators that point towards a crisis in the written press, which seems to be somewhat more than a mere situation of a conjunctural drop in level. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves: in a media culture of shows and entertainment, in a hypertechnological society, in which journalism and the companies that develop it form part of the transnational economic power, what is the role of the written press, and of information in general? If there really is a crisis, what are the causes behind it? Towards what model of printed news service should we be heading?

In these plans we shall be attempting to answer these questions, and to propose a possible journalism for the near future, based to a certain degree on Gramsci's *integral journalism*, which defended the project of making information possible that does not only attend to public needs but that also knows how to create those that are necessary for a determined society. "We need journalism - wrote Gómez Mompert recently - that is able to explain a more complex world, a less apparent and confined reality,

¹ Ramonet, I. (1998) "To be informed you must take an active stance, you cannot be passive", interview in Riviére, M., *El segundo poder*. Madrid: El País -Aguilar, p. 48

complicated but resolvable problems.”² However, it is not always either cheap or easy to introduce new ways of operating the news industry, where only those cheap and easily introduced routines tend to succeed.³ The complex, emerging society of information - a name that not everybody agrees with - demands complex, high-quality journalism, in which the subject-journalist who sees, understands, explains and interprets is reinstated. Testimony, as we shall attempt to argue, is the main strategy for the recuperation of credibility, as well as being a key premise for the use of techniques of composition and style that could reinvigorate the press.

1.1 The Crisis of Sales and Advertising Income

The crisis of journalism is not only about increase and orientation, although those two elements of the crisis are currently the ones that news companies need to resolve most urgently - there are also concerns regarding sales and advertising income, which imply economic losses and a more difficult future. Indeed, the economic results of the publishing groups of the Spanish press have set several alarm bells ringing. Advertising income fell by about 7% in 2001⁴, and although sales in Spain have remained stable, in the Catalan market, which tends to be the port of entry of international trends into the journalistic market, there has been a fall of half a point. Although this may not seem like much, the fall in sales of the general press has been markedly higher (-2%) in Catalonia, and it is only when these figures are combined with the far healthier sales of the specialised press - mainly sports and economic newspapers - that the overall

² Gómez Mompert, J.Ll. (2001) Quality Journalism for a Global Society, in *Pasajes*, September-December 2001, page. 32..

³ José Saramago recently asked if, when we speak of the press, we need to definitively accept that it can be classed as an industry. If that is the case, we are faced by a change of orientation in the making of news, “given that an industry manufactures things (...) the information is no longer merely transmitting what exists but has also begun to produce facts.” [El País, 2-2-1999]. Indeed, the facts that promote the media industry are directly related to entertainment and shows, and have plenty to do with audiences and advertising revenue. Newspapers even give away a variety of things to their readers, and offer services, consultancies, television listings, and guides to leisure and cookery... As the Portuguese Nobel prizewinner asked, are we witnessing that the media is progressively moving away from its function of providing information? He replies that that would be inexact and apocalyptic. However, we can also admit that the task of purely providing news has lost ground to entertainment, services and other commercial operations that concentrate on the business concerns of communication industries.

⁴ “Investment in advertising in Spain is collapsing”, we could read in the specialised magazine IPMark, no. 569, of 16 to 31 October, 2001. As we shall see later, there is no single cause for this crisis, but rather, it is provoked by an articulation of both complex and simple, long and short term causes, such as, for example, the appearance of free newspapers, the phenomenon of the press and advertising on Internet, the international political crisis and the devaluation of the written support at this time of technological change in the media. (Cf., The Press, in *Informe de la Comunicació a Catalunya 2002*, Gómez Mompert, J.Ll. and Vidal Castell, D., *in print*)

percentage fall between 2001 and 2000 is softened.⁵ Indeed, after years of increases, a period of losses has begun, which affects the quantity of net business and, therefore, the possibilities of investment and mobility to avoid the crisis.

At the same time, we are not looking at a local or time specific phenomenon, but rather at an international trend that affects the newspaper model that has been developing in the West throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century.⁶ This crisis first showed its face in the USA months ago. The all-powerful *New York Times* announced in September 2001 that between 8 and 9% of its staff of 14,000 people would be made redundant that year as a result of a serious drop in advertising revenue⁷. In 2001, the publishing group behind the *Miami Herald* also cut its staff by 10%, the *San José Mercury News* in California, made 120 workers redundant, and even *USA Today* felt obliged to initiate its own policy of redundancies and early retirements for the first time since the newspaper was founded in 1982. The publisher of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News* has confirmed that it will make 200 workers redundant (6.4% of the staff) in 2002. Not even the *Wall Street Journal* has saved itself from this situation, and has recognised that it has suffered losses and has announced that it will be implementing a change of policy to deal with this lean period.⁸

The important press markets of Great Britain and Germany have also suffered major upheavals as a result of poor sales figures, and more importantly, falling advertising revenues. The German press is certainly going through its worst crisis since the end of the Second World War. One of the country's biggest newspapers, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, lost 27 million Euros in 2001. One out of every ten journalists working for the prestigious and until recently solid German daily soon lost their jobs as a result of the company's cutbacks. Its most direct competitor, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, has also announced that it foresees major losses for 2002, and spokespeople of its publisher has described the situation as the most difficult that the German press sector has ever confronted. And the story goes on: Springer, the publisher of *Die Welt* and *Bild*, recognised in 2001 that for the first time in its history it had lost almost 200 million Euros. The crisis has also hit the conventional press in France,

⁵ Data obtained from the minutes of the Oficina de Justificació de la Difusió and results of the Estudi General de Mitjans (EGM).

⁶ The model of informative press that we are speaking about here is wide enough to include the newspapers with the largest circulations in the whole of the western world, but does not include the sensationalist treatment of the gossip press or English tabloids.

⁷ *Capçalera*, no 105, September, 2001, p. 52..

⁸ *El País*, 19-5-2001.

where determination not to lose any more territory has led to bitter conflict with the free press.⁹

The appearance of free newspapers and, most of all, the growth in Internet newspapers - which until recently were always free - this is a trend that is now beginning to change with respect to certain major newspapers - and the way in which they are taking away advertisers, are some of the causes behind this crisis, according to the newspaper publishers themselves.¹⁰ So, is this merely a conjuncted crisis, of distribution and income, which can be solved through short-term policies with a more economic edge, such as redundancies and cost reductions - the use of less correspondents and colour images, for example? Or does the *product* need to find a new place in the market, with a far more long-term redefinition policy? Time will surely tell, and it is clearly difficult to know anything for sure right now, or to know what the best way forward should be. Here, we defend the latter option, understanding that the causes behind this crisis - the increasingly greater availability of free information, the appearance of new advertising supports, and the devaluation of written news in favour of more oral media - are not at all conjunctural, but rather are approached as constants that characterise the news market of the forthcoming years. There are indeed several publishers and managers of newspapers that share this opinion. In this respect, we should take note of the forecasts of three managers as are Antonio Franco, Pedro J. Ramírez and José Antich (*El Periódico*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*), that believe that this new context is leading traditional newspapers to develop themselves towards a more interpretative, contextualised and explanatory nature, as opposed to the more agile, superficial and fragmentised model of free newspapers¹¹ and audiovisual media.¹²

⁹ The serious conflict between the newspapers to be paid for and those that are free, which the metropolitan region of Paris suffered in February and March 2002, even caused injuries and a strong division between the unions responsible for the distribution of standard newspapers and free ones, who defended the rights of the new employees of free newspapers. .

¹⁰ Cf. IPMark 572, I15, December, 2001, where we can read a note from the Spanish Association of Newspaper Publishers (AEDE) saying that "the appearance of this type of newspaper has led to a transformation in the status of the present day market". We shall be looking at these repercussions in a little more detail later on.

¹¹ Nobody doubts that the free daily press has indeed got off to a healthy start; in the Barcelona area an overall total of some 274,000 copies are distributed daily - and there are clear signs that this figure is set to increase. In a context in which investment of advertising in the press, as we have said, is falling in the Spanish market, which has had a knock-on effect in Catalonia, the appearance of these publications has deeply concerned the publishers of pay-newspapers. The most optimistic observers have commented that free newspapers are the inspiration for readers to move on to buying newspapers. We need to follow the development of these newspapers over a few years and compare their sales to those of newspapers that are paid for before we can be sure of that belief. The forms of presenting the news in free newspapers are

1.2 Credibility Crisis of the New Model of Televised News

So, the distribution crisis is marked, as agreed by all the major experts, by a more general crisis faced by the written press - of the written letter and word as communicative tools - interpolated by new technological supports, hypertext and emotional-visual and info-entertainment communication. Giovanni Sartori's essay *Homo videns*, which caused such controversy a few years ago, is particularly indicative of this change¹³. According to Sartori, man is a symbolic animal that, presently, receives his *imprint*, his educational stamp, in images of a world that is centred around the act of seeing. The image supercedes the word, which is no longer what it was at first, as stated in John's gospel. This new culture of visibility is built around the television as being an anthropogenetic instrument, i.e. one that generates a new type of *anthropos*. Sartori's thesis is based, as a premise, "on the pure, simple fact that our children watch television for hours and hours, before they learn to write".¹⁴ Something that means that when these children reach adulthood, they are adults that are "deaf for life to the stimuli of reading and knowledge transmitted by written culture. When they are adults they almost only respond to audiovisual stimuli."¹⁵ The word, therefore, no longer seems able to take

clearly different to those of conventional newspapers. The news is covered more briefly, with less background and in a less contextualised manner. Fragmentation and spacing, even visually - due to a layout that includes the maximum possible advertising, and therefore much shorter texts - are the characteristic features of this product. Even the data that a reader can obtain from a free newspaper seems, both in terms of quantity and quality, more like that which somebody would get from hearing a news bulletin on the radio or television than those that the reader of a standard paid-for newspaper would obtain. The information in the free press is more ephemeral, a disposable product that is left lying on a seat in the underground once the reader has checked three or four issues related to current affairs and the television listings. This orientation, which seems inevitable by the very nature of the product, seems to clearly suggest what market niche is left for pay-newspapers: quality information that is contextualised, interpretative, explanatory and comes with a background. At least that is what seemed to happen at the time of the international crisis that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when sales of newspapers increased considerably as people felt the need to be properly informed about what was happening at such a delicate moment.

¹² Ramírez, P.J., and Antich, J., interviewed in *Anuncios, Especial diarios*, no. 937, 24-30, September, 2001. Both agree that there is a need to create a model of interpretative newspaper that provides a greater quantity and quality of information than free communication supports. Meanwhile, Antonio Franco, in reply to questions by Enric Rimbaud in *la Revista de les revistes*, published by APPEC in December 2001, page. 15 states: "We are not in a crisis of information but in one of the printed word. The image has taken over. It is a complicated moment and despite the efforts of professionals and businesses, the tendency is spiralling downwards. (...) After the terrorist attacks on September 11, people in the USA that usually consumed free newspapers realised that such newspapers did not give them the volume of information and knowledge that the occasion demanded. In fact, sales of newspapers were much higher throughout those days."

¹³ Cf. Sartori, G. (1998) *Homo videns*. Madrid: Taurus. Cf. also Gubern, R. (2001) *From Face to Portrait*, in *Anàlisi*, no. 27, page. 37-38, Departament de Periodisme i Ciències de la Comunicació de la UAB, and earlier, (1993) *Espejo de fantasmas*. Barcelona: Espasa.

¹⁴ Sartori, G. (1998), p. 19-21.

¹⁵ Sartori, G. (1998), p. 23.

account of the new reality, and has lost a good part of its symbolic features to images and new visuals.

Apart from this crisis of textual rationality, which erodes the newspaper and the magazine as an informative support in favour of the emotiveness of the new media, there is surely also a crisis of informative credibility¹⁶ faced by the media in general, and most particularly by the written press. This crisis has been described by several analysts over the last decade, such as Ramonet, Bordieu, the aforementioned Sartori and Chomsky. Journalists themselves have realised that they are increasingly less credible, and have attributed this to the impact on audiences of the circus of media consortiums that are sold, purchased and merged, and which, therefore, interpret the world in accordance with their own role in the market.¹⁷ Never as much as in these last ten years have we heard so much questioning of essential and fundamental concepts of newspapers such as objectiveness.¹⁸ At the Santiago de Compostela Conference on changes in journalism, sponsored by Unesco in November 2000, journalists recognised that they are continually feeling less credible, partly due to the press model that they have opted for: unidealised, sensationalist and closer to the audiovisual than the written model. Perhaps the most convincing and persistent self-critic has been Ignacio Ramonet, director of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, who in *La tiranía de la comunicación* (*The tyranny of communication*) described the decline in journalistic quality, based on

¹⁶ Our culture's credibility crisis reaches beyond the confines of journalism, although that is the only area that concerns us here. It is clearly related to a general confidence crisis suffered by society-culture in the so-called post-modern period. The new cultures of the early twenty first century are suffering a profound crisis of the word, which had already begun to appear in the twentieth century and is also a crisis of the virtues and potential of the word. The word, as Steiner has repeatedly warned us, no longer seems capacitated to take account of reality. In part, this credibility crisis of languages has derived from a confidence crisis that is weakening the messages of politicians and religious leaders, as well as any institutions and norms. The different crises suffered by western democracies almost certainly originate from these pathologies of meaning. Cf. Duch, Ll. (1996) *Mite i cultura*. Barcelona: Publ. De l'Abadia de Montserrat

¹⁷ In Spain, we lived through an episode that is a particularly good example of this explanation. During much of the late nineteen nineties there were two digital television platforms, one right of centre and the other socialist, each with newspapers, conventional television stations and radio channels side by side. Particularly heavy were the confrontations between the newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo* and the Ser and Cope radio channels - which came into violent conflict with editorials, news, accusations of professional discredit, etc. Although the evolution of the conflagration softened the confrontation (to the almost Vaudevillesque point that, only a few months ago, the purchase of Via Digital was announced by the more successful Canal Satélite Digital, whose greater success had come, in part, thanks to the commercialisation of its Canal+ product), the effects on the credibility of the journalistic profession in Spain were evident, as different investigations and studies have demonstrated in recent years. Paradoxically, now that there is no censorship, journalists took upon themselves the task of demonstrating that, more than ever, they are the voices of their leaders. And that these leaders are the companies and business cultures that are created around them, and in which journalists are socialised.

¹⁸ Cf. Vidal Castell, D. (2002) The Transformation of the Theory of Journalism: a Paradigm Crisis? in *Anàlisi*, 28, p. 21-54. Departament de Periodisme i Ciències de la Comunicació at the UAB.

episodes of what has come to be known as *new global journalism* such as the graves of Timisoara and the infamous cormorant in the Persian Gulf.¹⁹ Ramonet clearly understands the disappointment the public feels towards the media. “In the United States - he writes - 55 per cent of the people feel that the written media publish 'frequently imprecise' news (...) In Europe, where 87.9 per cent of the population get their main news from television bulletins, this lack of confidence is still high.”²⁰ Faced by this credibility crisis - which threatens to make the distribution and economic crises even more serious - in 1997, the American Society of Newspaper Publishers, implemented a three-year programme costing 1.2 million dollars, to find out why journalists have lost credibility, and most of all, what can be done to get it back. One of the conclusions of the global programme, which implied different research into journalistic work in different support areas, was that quality increased the audience, but that quality is becoming more and more difficult to find.²¹ Lance Bennet and Theodore Glasser speak of a new journalism that has very little to do with that of Tom Wolfe. This new form of going about journalism is directly related to the cult of triviality and entertainment. It is a journalism that avoids profound questions and concentrates more on everyday sentimentality, gossip and the lives of the rich and famous, and which all too often is redressed as the service press. Bennet offers data: thirty years ago, in the United States, international news took up 45% of televised news, which has now fallen to 15%, and in the nineties broadcasts of news and reports of murders multiplied by seven even though actual murder figures dropped by a half over that same period.²²

The response to this credibility crisis is therefore a higher quality of service, which is hence associated to a determined press model. The newspaper reader demands quality, and wants to know why he should pay the difference between one Euro or even more for one of the more renowned newspapers, and nothing at all for one of the free newspapers. So, newspapers need to go back to exploiting their inherent possibilities for providing written culture and communication. In other words, they must improve the

¹⁹ Cf. Ramonet, I. (1998) *The tyranny of communication*. Barcelona: Debate. Gómez Mompert does not define new global journalism as the information of internationally relevant events that tended and tend to occupy the main pages of elite newspapers, but "journalism that conforms to a thematic agenda induced by cultural globalisation in a global political-economic strategy". Gómez Mompert, J.LL (2001) Quality Journalism for a Global Society, in *Pasajes*, no. 7, September-December, 2001, page. 28. New global journalism, as explained by Ramonet, was forged on events such as the Gulf War, the assault on the Russian parliament, the fall of Ceausescu and the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which showed what this new form of journalism could achieve and using what methods.

²⁰ Ramonet, I. (1998), Op. Cit., p.219.

²¹ Oliva, Ll. (2000), Concern in the USA, in *Capçalera*, no. 101, November, 2000.

²² El País, 19-11-2000

quality of their stories, making full use of the rich experience of the facts, but providing deeper analysis and explanations of the keys behind the more complex elements, all of which are basic factors in the rational-textual matrix of newspapers as opposed to the emotive-iconic paradigm of the audiovisual media.

That is what has been understood, for example, by *USA Today*, the first 'non-textual' newspaper, which first appeared in 1982, and that for almost two decades has done nothing but grow (to the point that with 1.85 million copies a day it has become the biggest-selling newspaper in the USA), making it an international reference point for the new popular press of the techno-informative age. After changing the design in April 2000, when Karen Jurgensen took over, the newspaper that had always wanted to imitate television decided to recuperate text as the basis for its newspapers because - according to the editor - it nowadays makes no sense to compete visually with the television and news web sites.²³

At the other extreme we find another of the world's most important dailies, *Le Monde*, a textual-analytical newspaper that so much has influenced the many newspapers that have imitated its style, even though the most recent changes in January 2002 brought about the inclusion of colour and the use of photographs (other than those that are purely illustrative), has reinforced its reflexive style and the quality of its data and sources, as well as offering more information about the economy, and modern and futuristic concepts such as communication, science and technology.

These two emblematic models will most probably create new trends and lead to imitations, because in their own ways and according to their own strategies, they have confronted the challenges from which newspapers in the twenty first century cannot escape, as brought about by the more competitive elements of television and internet: free, instantaneous, simplified, spectacular, hypertextualised and useful.

Ramonet explains how this new global journalism has accepted that television has gained control with its live transmissions, under the false idea that everything, even the complexities of international relations and wars, can be seen, and therefore *understood, live*, as if they were a football match or a victory parade. Ultimately, information in real time is the least real, i.e. the least profound and explanatory; it tends

²³ A fairly similar case is what happened throughout the year 2000 with *El Periódico de Catalunya*, which had to modify a very aggressive design of its lead stories and sections - which used a hypertextual and broken down style, with plenty of colour, practically imitating web pages and Internet navigation, which coincided with (as we cannot say for sure that this was the cause) a considerable fall in the sales of that newspaper.

to be superficial, visual and spectacular, and as stated by Ramonet, the journalist tends to disappear, and all that is left is the technological connection.²⁴ The live camera has taken the place of the informer, spectators are left unhappy because there really is nobody that is able to cheat them, and they can see everything with their own eyes. It is one step further towards the (fictitious) disappearance of the subject in the news process that advocated and advocates the positivist paradigm, defined by C.P. Scott's famous sentence that, *facts are sacred, comments are free*. Objectivity and objectuality expressed to a maximum.

Visuality clearly transforms information; from the start, being live and being visual brings an emotiveness to an approach to the contents. "Around 1990, television definitively took over from newspapers (...), it became dominant and the obligatory reference point for the other forms of media (...). Television became the medium that defines the style of what news is."²⁵ This journalism had an impact on the agendas of the western media around the world, making the content more spectacular, leading to a persistent tendency to lean towards superficiality and repetition, elements more of emotive-audiovisual than rational-textual paradigms, which had traditionally formed the basis of the written press. Frankly, Ramonet has come to speak of the death of journalism.

1.3 The Overabundance of Information: the Excess of Noise, the Absence of a Listening Attitude, the Inflation of Meanings

Along with this loss of credibility that brought about a transformation in the professional habits of information, the impact of new technologies applied to communication had a second devastating effect: the multiplication *ad infinitum* of the content. The new supports - fibre optics, satellites, and technological convergence - have led over recent years to an exponential increase in the quantity of messages that we can potentially receive in the course of one day. All is repeated or repeatable, because audiovisual news stories are no longer limited to certain times - those of news bulletins - but have now adopted the *non-stop* model. Newspapers have struck back by increasing the quantity of information (and papers) to levels of paroxysm. A copy of the *New York Times* on a Sunday contains more information than a person living in the seventeenth

²⁴ Ramonet, I. (1998), *passim*.

²⁵ Gómez Mompert, J.Ll. (2001), Op. Cit., p. 28.

century would have been able to access in their life. “To give one example - writes Ramonet-, every day, around 20 million words of technical information are printed on different supports (...). A reader that is capable of reading 1,000 words a minute, eight hours a day, would need a month and a half to read the production of just one day, but by the end of this period would have accumulated a delay of about five and a half year’s worth of reading material.”²⁶ Information, for so long so difficult and expensive, has become 'prolific and abundant', in the words of Ramonet. Along with air and water, it would be the most abundant element on the planet, according to the director of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. So where does the problem reside? Precisely in its very over-abundant nature, which drowns us and dissuades us from trying to penetrate the mass of jungle that it has become. Censorship now operates as a result of an excess of information, not as a result of defects. Moreover, poor information now mainly functions through fraudulent comparisons: all has the same vale, there are no explanatory criteria to categorise it, to create hierarchy. The news of a war next to, or below, football's World Cup final. The man in the street, who has never had so much democratic power in his hands, has never had so much information in his hands. However, the hardest part has yet to come: turning that information into knowledge. It must be contextualised, explained, ordered, discerned, discriminated. Informing also involves all those factors, even though the old positivist paradigm insisted upon the objective nature of the role of the informer. More than ever, we need honest, committed information, a response to the scopic drive of live, *techno-light*, news, low in reasoning and explanations, in memory and in backgrounds. This loss of the word, this *a-logic* information -without *logos*- eludes the memory and blends identities such that everyone seems the same: politicians are all corrupt; immigrants are all a threat; teenagers are all frivolous... The abundance of information is making us all hostages of the immediate present and victims of stereotypes. What has happened to our backgrounds? “I don't know what it is that makes man more conservative, that he only knows the past or that he doesn't know about anything that isn't the present”, wrote John Maynard Keynes. We surely have to agree with him.

The current problem with news is not the receiving of information but, firstly, *wanting to receive it* - being motivated and interested - and secondly, organising and structuring it such that it creates a meaningful environment - a past, a present and a future - against which we can place ourselves and act accordingly. In the present form,

²⁶ Ramonet, I. (1998), Op. Cit., p. 218.

reality often comes to us in such a schematic way and with such a lack of context that we find it practically unintelligible. There are today, according to Manuel Castells, three new types of citizens, "the uninformed that only have images, the over-informed, which is most of the planet, those that live in a whirlpool, and the informed, who select, order and can pay for their information".²⁷ Many of the citizen paralyzes in the sphere of public activity seem to come down to this incapacity to understand and decode the tonnes of raw information that fall upon us every day, as well as the informational apathy that we show as an audience, something that can only be avoided by a systematic hiding of information, something more in line with the ways of the dictatorial regimes of old. Ramonet insists upon this point saying: "We said that we are in a society of information (...) [but] the problem is the overdose of communication. There is an excess that makes it difficult to orientate oneself. We have gone from a world of scarce information to one in which we are swimming in an ocean of it, and that has changed everything."²⁸ Among the things that change, we find the media itself, and journalists, that now play a role that Ramonet considers "abusive" with respect to the circulation of information, something which is only generating even more chaos. Paradoxically, at the very time of this avalanche of information, we have to pay more for quality information, that which is not offered free thanks to advertisers and promotions. "We will have to abandon for good the idea of informing ourselves well, freely and without making an effort. To be well informed we will need to adopt an active posture, it cannot be passive. Everything is going to be very expensive."²⁹

The overabundance of information and the need to keep a wide range of supports open 24 hours a day automatically means that everything must be repeated or repeatable and that, therefore, the attitude of attentive, reflexive and silent listening has now become an impossible *desideratum*. Surely, only the single, meaningful word can make this attitude of listening, of opening up to the otherness that manifests and emphasises itself before us, an unrepeatable spoken act. So, it seems that live broadcasts are seeking to make up for this deficit. But this strategy loses its value because in this new form the word is treated like dirty dishwater. The chatter of presenters, journalists, compères and a variety of freaks, increasingly more alike and interchangeable, creates an *inflation of meanings* without meanings or at best very little meaning. Due to this lack of value,

²⁷ Castells, M. (1998), "Today there are three new classes: the uninformed, the overinformed and the informed", interviewed in Rivière, M., *El segundo poder*. Madrid: El País -Aguilar.

²⁸ Ramonet, I. (1998b), Op. Cit., p. 49.

²⁹ Ramonet, I. (1998b), Op. Cit., p. 49.

words are used compulsively, like banknotes in the Weimar Republic, and the listeners are left without any space for either silence or understanding. We have more broadcasters of words circulating than ever before, but very few that actually mean anything. Like the child that rejects the mother's breast when only water comes out, the audience shows a clear rejection of the words of the media. Paradoxically, we need its background noise, the offensive roar of the television that has become the technological mantra of the new century, but without really being listened to. And by *listened to* we mean to say heard in silence - an interior silence - and acquired by the listener. This inflation of words and this lack of a listening attitude is not being experienced by western culture for the first time, not by any means³⁰. But we need to recognise that today we are living this with more profundity and clarity than ever as a result of the power and diversity of the media we have.

We have already stated that one of the solutions to fight the inflation of words is repetition. That is surely a particularly ineffective solution: it is like printing more banknotes at a time of an inflation crisis. As pointed out years ago by several poets, including Octavio Paz, the problem can be solved by giving words back their value. Present day western culture is refractory towards poetry, which is an inevitable human activity for the *animal loquens*, and is not, as is often believed, unmaintainable luxury. Underestimating poetry, and not enjoying it, implies a loss in the value of words and their meanings, and leads to that inflationary crisis. We must remember that Nietzsche defined words as old, used-up metaphors, coins that had been used so often that their faces had been worn away. Creating new words or giving new meanings to old ones: that is the role of the poet. Poetry, like literature, is more than an art or a pleasure, a form of knowledge (and construction) of, and experimentation with, reality. It is the workshop where language is perfected. And he who renounces that culture will pay the consequences. Steiner laments this when in *Real Presences* he describes our western societies as societies of the secondary word, i.e. of words that speak over other words³¹. People read more reviews of books and summaries of essays than actual books and essays. Our culture is a culture of the secondary word, and that is what is predominantly circulating around the media. Firstly because that is the easiest way to do

³⁰ Both Georg Steiner and W.H. Urban could illustrate this statement in their different works. Also well known and documented is the crisis of the word that was illustrated so well by Hoffmannsthal in his *Letter from Lord Chandos*, who opted for silence rather than having to use a language that had been corrupted by depraved use.

it, cheap and easy to produce. Secondly, says Steiner, because it seems like we have lost part of our ease and capacity for experiencing the presence that words can create when used correctly. We could add, and Steiger actually suggests this implicitly, that our journalism is also a journalism of the secondary word. We can turn to other sources that tell us or confirm to us what we should consider news - agencies, other media, CNN - because as journalists we are incapable of directly verifying the facts. This has been one of the causes behind the credibility crisis that we spoke of earlier, which began with incidents and doubts about the veracity of the news stories covering the Gulf War and the Balkan Conflicts. We can even find that an enormous percentage of the most intimate news stories we hear, those covering local news or national politics, for instance, are based on quotes and not actual facts. New headlines that include expressions of statement - *announces, threatens, replies, responds...* - show us to what extent our journalism that needs to fill spaces and minutes is a journalism of declarations and counter-declarations. Meanwhile, research journalism, or testimonial reporting, that goes to places and explains what it sees, with a solid documental base with a wide range of compensated, quality resources, is hard to find at all. It is expensive and laborious, as stated by Bastenier, vice-manager of *El País*³². It is a quality approach, which would certainly reap benefits, as the journalist would be seen, in such a case, not as an intermediary that manipulates or deforms, but as an authorised, testimonial voice, who is distinguished from the rest of the journalistic babble by the honesty of his position. And by the use of a vigorous word, and not the secondary word.

So, given the lack of a listening attitude and the credibility crisis, we therefore have the unrecommendable solution of repetition, and also the option of testimony.³³ This is also the option of the word, and a chance to recuperate the linguistic and literary activity that has always figured as a hidden element of journalistic structure and writing. This attitude supposes, firstly, the recuperation of genres such as the feature and the

³¹ Cf. Steiner, G. (1991) *Presencias reales*. Barcelona: Gedisa. Mainly the first chapter, dedicated to this diagnosis of the word in present day western culture.

³² And, on the other hand, underlines how the most important newspapers such as *Le Monde* and the *New York Times* continue to defend this model. Cf. Bastenier, M.A. (2001) *Curso de periodismo*. Madrid: El País-Aguilar.

³³ In the doctorate thesis *Otherness and Presence*, we explained that another possible solution to the crisis of credibility and words was the option of irony, which is so common in audiovisual products. The ironic word has, towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, occupied a statute of general enunciation. This is due to it being so easy for any subject, in full crisis of ideological discourse, to distance oneself in the very act of enunciation from one's own discourse. The attitude of the speaker with respect to their own words can often be erroneous. Several literary critics have pointed out a large increase in the use of irony in the texts of paradigmatic authors around the turn of the century. Cf. Ballart, P. (1994) *Euroneia*. Barcelona: Critique.

report. Definitively, the subject once again takes his place in journalistic enunciation, after years of being hidden behind a positivism and a realism that have surely been, up until now, a fertile business, but that maybe are not any longer.

2. The Model of the Subject Absent from the Positivist Paradigm

The theory of written journalism, or the theory of the press, was based throughout the twentieth century on C.P. Scott's statement that, *facts are sacred, comments are free*. The genealogy of this sentence is undeniably positivist and realist and, despite everything, in having been formulated as an opinion, it is, in itself, debatable, in accordance to its own doctrine. Epistemologically, its roots are, indeed, positivist: only the facts are of interest, and not the way in which we relate to them. We also said that it was realist because it is built on a conviction that facts and news exist and live outside of the journalist and that this person merely has to catch them in his objective net of words, without modifying them or modulating them. For many years, the journalist-subject has therefore been a type of labile figure, practically inexistent in the theory of the process of producing information, which, despite inevitably appearing in the text, is concerned with covering up their tracks, writing everything in an objectifying and objectified style that makes every effort to convey as much impersonality as possible. The idea was that the text should seem like it had written itself. That was what was called the informative style - as if there could be only one, the informative style - and it was considered precise, transparent and concise, according to the many classic books on journalistic writing styles. In a business sense, this is a highly profitable theory for the press, as it establishes the possibility of the objective reception of reality in the words of the journalist. The journalist as a subject disappears, and is replaced by the notion of an objectivity that, stylistically, represents the concealing of the subject and the author.

But a news text is always intentional, even if the opposite is so often insisted upon and the journalist is defined as a non-intentional communicator. The poorly named informative style, which is presented to us as a guarantee of impartiality, is little more than a fabricated impersonal mask that conceals the indispensable activity of a subject beneath the immaculate surface of a text. A transparent, truthful form of guaranteeing professionalism is therefore produced. But this style is not a guarantee of what it

supposes. As Núñez Ladevéze wrote, “an informative style is independent of whether language is used to inform or not. One can, therefore, inform in a non-informative style, and not inform, or only partially inform, in an informative style”³⁴ The truth is that, as this author said himself, the qualification of an informative style is unfortunate, because style is one matter and information is another, but “it all seems to indicate that the informer either unwittingly confuses or makes deliberate use of this confusion”³⁵.

To avoid this confusion, Núñez has already proposed, with very little success, a distinction between informative language and the descriptive style - it should be pointed out here that there could be a wide variety of registers within the informative style. But this distinction at least allows us to contemplate different styles as possibilities for informative language, and to respond better to the plurality of expressive resources used in writing news information. It also presents writers with the possibility of using, without committing any credibility-related crime, a wide variety of compositional and stylistic resources in their news stories, which not only give us the amount of information we need, but also tempt the possibility of offering the quality of experience, an aspect that the all too popular informative style often leaves to one side³⁶. Bias and impartiality - i.e. what is usually confusedly named objectiveness - are not properties that are exclusive to a hypothetical informative style, as they are not conditions of language, but forms in which the subject opts to behave. One can be impartial and honest using a style that goes beyond mere objectivist and descriptive composition.

In fact, this objectifying stylistic appearance is achieved using perfectly describable options: preference for standardisation - long nominal syntagmas with adverbial and prepositional complements - little use of verbs - as a direct consequence of the previous characteristic - adoption of a lineal sentence order, which avoids subordinates and shows a preference for copulative coordinates, and the presence of periphrasis, Anglicisms and specialised and technical terminology that, as part of the aforementioned nominal logic, emphasise the writing and give it a tone of pomposity. The nominal pomp almost always acts as a resource for clichéd, ritualised, disfigured and often lexicalised expressions. This immediately gives it an impersonal style, but one that is solidly assertive and that contrasts with the concealing of the subjectivity of the

³⁴ Casasús, J.M. and Núñez Ladevéze, L. (1991) *Estilo y géneros periodísticos*. Barcelona: Ariel, p. 106.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ The concept of the *quality of the experience* was proposed and developed by Albert Chillón (1999) *Literatura y periodismo*. Bellaterra-Castellon-Valencia: UAB, UJI, UV.

enunciator.³⁷ This ritualised style, full of the trickery of expressions such as "sources close to the investigation" or "generally well informed", is one of the maximum expressions of the inflation of words that we described earlier, as it uses *clichéd* expressions that *mean* very little. Words, as we are reminded by the philosophy of language, often serve more to conceal than to reveal.

The second half of the twentieth century saw the return of the subject in many humanistic and social disciplines, and we believe that it is undoubtedly also time for the return of the subject to journalistic theory. Written newspapers have to overcome the hiatus between literature and journalism that has impoverished the expressive possibilities of the press and has stagnated the so-called literary canons, so impermeable to new forms of linguistic expression. The press has to go back to exploiting its inherent possibilities in written culture and communication, in other words, it has to improve the quality of its stories, making full use of the richness of the experience of new facts and going deeper into the analysis and explanation of the keys behind complex issues, all the basic elements of the rational-textual matrix of newspapers, as opposed to the emotive-iconic matrix of audiovisuals³⁸. The world is no longer obvious and understandable to simple eyesight. Too many paradoxes, too much information, too much uniformity - in thinking, in culture, in tastes - and at the same time, too much diversity of sources, due to the frightening array of stimuli that technologies bring to our increasingly varied and smaller terminals - televisions, computers, mobile phones, watches... - that are turning the world into MacLuhan's tiny place. Discussing this excess of information, Umberto Eco predicted a few years ago that, in the same way that "the hole in the ozone layer would change the shape of the continent and the landscape (...), this information overload is changing our heads. We are, like mutants, undergoing a change".³⁹

3. Conclusion

The question of the effectiveness of texts is certainly linked, along with the whole theory of journalism, to rhetoric - the art of finding in everything what is most apt for

³⁷ Cfr. Casasús, J.M. i Núñez Ladevéze, L. (1991), Op. Cit., p. 107-108.

³⁸ Cfr. Gómez Mompert, J.Ll. (2001), Op. Cit., p. 27.

³⁹ Eco, U. (1998), "The information overload changes our head", interview in Rivière, M. *El segundo poder*. Madrid: El País -Aguilar.

persuasion, according to Aristotle. We have to ask ourselves, therefore, which form of narration and putting into words is the most useful and efficient at this particular cultural and social time, characterised by the conditioners that we have commented in earlier sections. And, therefore, which composition strategy and which stylistic techniques are capable of generating better listening attitudes - and also of causing the greatest impact. The increase that has been experienced by the journalistic interview, so clearly emblematic of journalism without mediations, head to head closeness, in which a subject directly addresses the listener, viewer or reader, is an indicator of the importance that the voice, the presence, the subject and the testimony recover in this play of confused mirrors that has become *new global journalism*⁴⁰, and that has weakened journalistic credibility.

We have recently been reminded of the usefulness of Bertolt Brecht's considerations of the epic form of theatre, in comparison to his own dramatic form, which we can apply to a different field of linguistic production as is journalism.⁴¹ Brecht rejected the identification of the spectator as a hero, he promoted a critical attitude, and strove to maintain an attitude that *shows* the facts. Gómez Mompert has applied these Brechtian precepts to the two main styles of presenting the news that we described earlier: objectivism and a more elaborated and testimonial style. The former is called, if we follow Brecht's categorisations, the dramatic form of news, as opposed to the epic form. So, while the epic form of giving news narrates the events by stimulating interest, concern and attitudes, the dramatic form is eminently emotive. The epic form makes it possible to encounter and discover the human being, and therefore avoids stereotyping.⁴² This form of journalism, which seems mostly possible in the so-called interpretative genres, such as the interview, the feature and the report, has plenty of elements in common with what should be the responsible work of György Lukács' *publizistik*. The German Marxist philosopher wrote in 1932 in *Sociology of Literature*:

⁴⁰ Cf. Arfuch, L. (1995) *La entrevista una invención dialógica*. Barcelona: Paidós, p. 13-14. The *cold* world of technologies and networks seems to need the existential warmth of media conversation, which fakes an approximation to a subject who is shown to be live, in front of our eyes - a presence for emotive consumption.

⁴¹ As stated by Gómez Mompert (2001), Op. Cit., p. 33. "As for narrative fact, the report of the actual facts should overcome the schematics of the medieval report (of heroes) or the historiography of events (of gestures and protagonists) that is so frequent in journalistic style, and to do this it will need to recuperate the models of the so-called novelised report and socio-economic historiographical streams and mentalities."

⁴² Cfr. Gómez Mompert, J.LI (2001), Op. cit., p. 33.

"The report is an absolutely justifiable and indispensable form of publicism. In its true height, it creates a genuine union (...) between what is general and what is special, between what is necessary and what is fortuitous. Because the true report is not content to simply represent the facts; its narrations have always created a whole, discover causes, provoke deductions."⁴³

We shall therefore end with this desideratum: it is necessary to find the form of creating new listening attitudes, new prolocutory effects - which communications persuade, and move towards comprehension and action - because the old support of the informative press is full of new words. We must remember that the context, as we have explained, is demanding: the media competition from *light infoentertainment* is very strong, as it is cheaper, sometimes even free; we have found ourselves faced by a crisis of language, with a large inflation of words and an overabundance of information; we have found ourselves faced by a crisis in the model and sales of the informative press.

The rich diversity of procedures for composition and style that journalistic writing has been seen to use for decades could now remodel simple and complex genres, making them more dynamic and more appropriate for effective communication. According to the model of authors and journalists such as Theodor Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, Oriana Fallaci, Ryszard Kapuscinsky, Rex Reed, Truman Capote, Josep Pla, Gunter Wallraff or Gabriel García Márquez, the journalism of complexity and of overabundance could take on a different perspective. Thus, we expect that the next few years will surely see a revival of *interpretative reporting* and quality journalistic writing - always subordinated to the model of informative press that the economic crisis makes viable: we have already said that first hand material will be expensive, on the contrary to present appearances. Thus, journalistic faculties must stop only teaching what the press *does* and begin teaching, as already occurs in some places, what it *could* do.

⁴³ Lukács, G. (1973) Report or Configuration?, in *Sociología de la literatura*. Barcelona: Península, p. 123.