

The Death of a Magazine

Before I left his apartment, the editor of the dying magazine gave me a brief tour of his bookshelves and pulled out several old editions that he handed to me, one by one. – This one is great! Oh, and this one. A classic! Is there anything you are especially interested in? I peeked at the titles. There were hundreds of them. I pointed at one that read ‘From Emigrants to Racists’. – What about this one, I asked. – That’s a good one!

He smiled. We looked at a few pages together before I added it to my pile. He seemed glad to give them away, as if he were handing over a responsibility and not just magazines. - If you give me your address, I’ll send you some more from the office in Milan, he offered.

I walked out of his flat with all the journalistic history I could carry in my hands, an unborn story kicking in my midst and his last words ringing in my ears. – Everything dies in the end, apart from passion. Passion never dies.

It was born in 1945, in the hybrid of the last century’s ideological folly. It rose from the ruins of a country devastated by invasions, counter offensives and civil war. It invested ingenuity, creativity and knowledge into a product that would be renowned globally for its quality in less than ten years. It was the Made in Italy of magazines. It was *L’Europeo*.

Now it is no more. The August issue is the last to be published before the emblem of Italian postwar journalism closes for good. It has been haltering for a while, though. Already in the late seventies and eighties, falling sales replaced the steep success of the 50s and 60s. *L’Europeo* lingered on until it finally closed as a weekly in 1995. In 2001, it reappeared as a quarterly. Since then the magazine has had a devoted, though limited, audience.

In a strangely well-timed reminder of how all things go, also in the publishing world, the mummy of another mega-magazine is on display in Rome: Photos from LIFE magazine. Perhaps the greatest photojournalism ever known, these shots of everything from D-Day to Greta Garbo are now revered only as museum artefacts, melancholic memories of a bygone era, the very opposite of what journalism intends.

But what causes the rise and more precisely, the fall, of publications like *L’Europeo*, or *LIFE* for that matter? We are, after all, talking about a magazine that had a weekly distribution of over 200,000 copies in the 1960s. How can something once so popular have become so obsolete? And more importantly, does it matter if it goes?

I contacted Daniele Protti, the editor-in-chief of the ailing magazine, to see if I could find out.

We met in his apartment in Rome. Piles of journalistic history covered the floors, and photos that had made history when they were first published seemed to jump at me from the front pages. Protti later told me that *L’Europeo* had benefitted greatly from the way the photographers were integrated into the editorial team. They were, as Robert Capa always insisted, journalists, not photographers. “People read the photos and look at the articles”, the founder Arrigo Benedetti once exclaimed.

Benedetti's statement doesn't do justice to the writers. *L'Europeo* always took great pride in its list of signatures. One of the magazine's most famous reporters died only a few years back. Discredited by many because of her rage against fundamentalist Islam, Oriana Fallaci nevertheless remained a journalistic legend. *L'Europeo* was her workplace for more than two decades.

– Ah, Oriana! She was aggressive, she had an ego! And her hate of war... But she was some journalist. Daniele Protti smiles at the memory of the interview Oriana Fallaci once did with the late Giulio Andreotti, several times Italian Prime Minister. Mr. Andreotti wouldn't let her smoke, and if there was something Oriana did a lot, it was to smoke. The interview lasted five hours.

He's passionate about these stories, Mr. Protti. He's passionate about the magazine in general. But mostly he is passionate about journalism. 'Go, see, listen, ask, return and report' was the magazine's journalistic mantra and its reporters obeyed orders, their articles would often count thirty pages or more. Protti's wrinkles splinter in frustration when he compares that tradition with the contemporary world of web publishing, where anyone can say what they want and claim to be believed without having to abide by any sort of code of conduct, while they claim to act in defense of liberty of expression.

– It's total anarchy! he bursts out

A story he keeps coming back to is a recent Italian tragedy – a young girl committed suicide after her classmates had harassed her on Facebook. And when he starts to talk about Twitter, frustration becomes anger.

– Italians are in love with everything new! Regardless if it is good or not. Via tweets, people intervene in discussion about topics they have no clue of!

Since its re-launch in 2001, *L'Europeo* has countered this tendency in its own, very particular way. In monothematic monthly issues, Protti and team have been reprinting reportages on a selected topic from the archives of the weekly magazine, supplementing them with new articles and comments.

- You need to know about yesterday to understand today, he sighs. – That's what we tried to do. Use old news reports as history lessons to shed light on critical issues. And then the quality! You know, already in 1956, at a publishing fair in Berlin, *L'Europeo* was praised for its quality. It was a prestigious magazine.

International acclaim has not always been taken for granted in Italy. In 1945, the country was a ruin. It was poor, and living conditions especially in the south, were extremely difficult. Yet by the mid-60s, Italy had become one of the world's most powerful economies, the annual growth rate between 1955 and '65 was six percent, one of the highest in the world. Within Europe and the world, Italy became known, not for fascism, poverty and bloodshed, but for martinis, Ferraris and Sophia Loren. And in the media world, for *L'Europeo* – a magazine that managed the seemingly impossible task of combining prestige with popularity and that captured the essence of its day.

- So why is it closing then? I asked, suddenly reminded of why I was there. Protti claims his figures are not red.

- The closure is not justified by negative sales figures. There is a market, limited yes, but it's there. I even wanted to lower the price to five euros (now it's 7,90 euros), that would have boosted the sales, but they wouldn't let me. They've fallen in love with the web. But who makes money on web publishing? The technology industry. Only them. Elsewhere, paper is on its way back. And there are good paywall solutions out there that ought to have been tested. We're very behind in that respect in Italy. It is very short sighted, this new strategy, he sighs.

- Who made the decision?

- Oh, RCS, the owners.

Later, at my desk, I tried to find out more about RCS and their strategic approach. RCS is a large editorial group that owns several publications both in Italy and abroad. A neatly summarized strategy is available in five bullet points on their webpage. RCS wants to focus on editorial innovation and the qualitative strengthening of power brands with editorial contents of digital origin, develop and broaden digital products to improve the editorial experience of the reader, and dismiss activities considered 'non vital'.

I wanted to understand these choices a bit better and asked the corporate media relations manager at RCS, Verdiana Tardi, why *L'Europeo* falls outside of their vital interests. Ms. Tardi started out stressing how sorry she was that 'the best magazine in the world' had to close, but told me that RCS has been through a difficult period and was at one point facing bankruptcy. The dire situation had forced them to take certain measures. A three-year managerial plan was drafted and certain criteria set up to facilitate the difficult choices. *L'Europeo* fell outside of the core brands; those that the group felt had potential for growth, digitally as well as internationally.

- The only option, she said at the end, would be to sell the magazine to a publisher who could see *L'Europeo* fit within their portfolio. Ms. Tardi told me that some attempts had been made in that respect, but without concrete results. She expected to have more information the following week and promised to send me an update in case of new developments. I never heard back.

Everybody seems to love *L'Europeo*, but nobody wants to invest in it. Owners, a large business conglomeration that has multiple factors to take into consideration, cannot risk losing money on what has become a niche product.

Fair enough and so what? Really, the magazine is, after all, a niche product published in a mid-sized European country. The loss of *L'Europeo* might mean a lot to a few, but it has little significance for the great many. Apart from a certain nostalgia, what value does a publication like *L'Europeo* add? Does it matter if *L'Europeo* dies, and if so, why?

The answer came, ironically, in a magazine. *Colors* was founded by a star photographer, Oliviero Toscani, who once worked for *L'Europeo*. Their spring edition was devoted to *Fare notizie* 'Making news'. According to *Colors*, since 2000, the American newspaper industry has shrunk by 43 percent. In particular, the number of foreign correspondents is declining. Newspapers no longer send reporters abroad. Instead, they trust other sources to do the job for them. Sixty percent of articles in UK newspapers are mere copies of press releases or wire reports and they are often not fact-checked before they are printed. Pictures are manipulated before they are sent to large news corporations and hit the front pages as they are.

And then there is social media. Fake social media messages that went straight from tweets to headlines, completely unfounded - and unquestioned. False tweets even caused falls in stock markets.

If this is true, Protti's is not only a concern of an old-school editor. Something *is* happening to journalism. A mantra, that of going, seeing, asking, returning and reporting, is abandoned and, at least partly, substituted by social media, an anarchic structure that can be both used and misused. The people that were supposed to do the safeguarding are being laid off by owners that are struggling to survive in a competitive market and have other priorities than controlling the trustworthiness of tweets. After all, the more shocking these tweets and photos are, the more likely they are to sell.

L'Europeo perhaps couldn't fight all this on its own. But it served as a reminder of what journalism is, or at least used to be about. That is why the loss of *L'Europeo* matters – to all of us.

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A few days after the interview with Mr. Protti, a box arrived at my door. The mailman warned me, - It is heavy, he said as he handed it over. He was right. I opened the box and picked up copy after copy, hundreds of pages talking about everything from organized crime via movie divas to the unknown history of Italy's public debt, hundreds of pages of passion – and of journalistic as much as Italian history.

I placed the magazines on the bookshelf by my desk so that they can remind me that the formats might change, newspapers might get sold and magazines might die. But the passion for journalism lives on. It shouldn't be strangled.

The last issue of L'Europeo was published in August 2013.