

CULTURAL JOURNALISM IN ITALY

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Carbone, M. T. (2023). Cultural journalism in Italy. *Etkileşim*, 12, 543-546.
doi: 10.32739/etkilesim.2023.6.12.233

*This study complies with research and publication ethics.
Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.*

The newspaper *La Repubblica* first appeared on Italian newsstands on January 14, 1976. We are in the mid-1970s – the “years of lead” of the armed struggle, as they would later be remembered, but also the years in which the social transformation to which the country had embarked in the previous decade emerges in all its evidence. Between 1971 and 1978 divorce and pregnancy termination were legalized in Italy, and radio and television information – until then firmly subject to a public monopoly – began to articulate itself in a plurality of voices. And it was during that same period, in 1973, that employees obtained recognition of the right to study, in the concrete 150 hours per year of paid leave to be used for their own personal training. The new daily newspaper (“independent but not neutral”, Eugenio Scalfari, founder and editor-in-chief, wrote in the first issue) was born in this context, and already in the usual foliation: articles on cultural topics would come out of the enclosure of the “terza pagina” (page 3) as it had been since the early twentieth century alone – an elegant and well-behaved pause inserted between the domestic and foreign political news – but would occupy the double page at the center of the newspaper, would be its heart, “a sort of pivot around which everything revolves”, again Scalfari wrote.

Almost half a century later, the idea that a news organ – in Italy and around the world – would have culture as its pivot seems fanciful, if not absurd. As early as 1998, a collection of essays, *The Crisis of Criticism*, whose title is eloquent in itself, came out in the United States. The questions at the heart of the book – Do critics grant cultural permission or is their work merely descriptive? Is there such a thing as critical activism? How can critics bridge the gap between a sometimes hermetic art community and the public? – refer specifically to art

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criticism, but can be extended to all areas that we usually consider to belong to the territory of culture. After all, a few years earlier, in 1993, a famous Italian literary critic, Cesare Segre, had published a text, also significantly titled *Notizie dalla crisi* (subtitle: *Dove va la critica letteraria?*).

Today, in Italy as in other Western countries, newspapers publish cultural information (whether news or reviews) in weekly supplements separate from the body of the newspaper: "Robinson" for *La Repubblica*, "La Lettura" for *Il Corriere della Sera*, "Il Domenicale" for *Il Sole 24 ore*, and so on. On the other hand, the Web offers an overabundance of cultural titles, some of excellent quality but all (with one exception I will discuss later) free. Before reviewing them, I would like to focus briefly on one case, that of "Alfabeta2" (2010-2019), which I know from the inside, having been part of the editorial staff and then coordinated it in the four years before it closed.

When in 2010 the magazine's founder, Nanni Balestrini (writer, poet, tireless cultural agitator) decided to relaunch the masthead of what between 1979 and 1988 had been "the last magazine of the Italian twentieth century" (so literary critic Romano Luperini), he knew very well that in the last two-three decades the editorial landscape cultural and political has radically changed, and one cannot expect advertising revenues, combined with sales, to cover the costs of publication, some pay for the editors and perhaps a modest obolus for the contributors, as had happened precisely in the "Alfabeta" of the Eighties. Thus, in addition to changing the subtitle (no longer "monthly of cultural information", but "monthly of cultural intervention") and adding a #2 to the title, therefore marking a continuation and a discontinuity, Balestrini came up with a different formula: each issue would host a substantial focus on a contemporary artist, who would be invited to donate one of his or her works to the magazine, making him or her a patron in a sense. It would then be the marketing of these works, along with, of course, the sales of the magazine, that would ensure that *Alfabeta2* would escape the misery characterizing Italian cultural magazines.

In theory the plan was clever, but it did not take into account the ongoing crisis. Already a few months later it became clear that paying contributors was impossible, and even editors would at best be able to count on irregular and little more than symbolic "reimbursements". Affecting costs in particular was the distribution, which, unlike almost all Italian print magazines, targeted the newsstand network, and not only the now very rare bookstores in which a space for periodicals had been maintained. In 2014, *Alfabeta2* published its last paper issue, and 2019 was the year of its final closure. There were several reasons for this, but the main one was the bitter realization that a cultural magazine is nowadays unable to survive financially.

One would be inclined to say, taking the title of an old play by Nobel laureate Dario Fo, that in Italy culture "Non si paga, non si paga!". And free are some of the most popular cultural blog-magazines that have sprung up in the

last decade, which I mentioned earlier: I would like to dedicate a few words in particular to *Doppiozero*, a real in-depth cultural magazine, born in 2011 on the impetus of critic and writer Marco Belpoliti; *Antinomie*, founded in 2020 by Andrea Cortellessa, Federico Ferrari and Riccardo Venturi, with the intention of exploring the hybrid territory between images and writing; and *Le parole e le cose*, which since 2012 has been offering daily reviews, previews from upcoming books, reflections on the world of culture and beyond.

There are those who try to escape the condemnation of free circulation based on unpaid labor: this is done by what could now be called a “historic” magazine, *L'indice dei libri del mese*, founded in 1984 in Turin on the model of the *New York Review of Books*. *L'indice*, as it is known for short, charges – as is natural – for the printed monthly, but also armors behind a paywall many of its online articles. Whether this is then sufficient to guarantee pay for contributors remains to be seen, while a new online magazine, born in late 2022 – *Snaporaz*, started by critics Filippo D’Angelo and Gianluigi Simonetti – does so, and rightly takes pride in it. And Simonetti himself, in introducing the new journal, said,

We are convinced that we can engage first-rate contributors, pay them fairly, and offer in reasonable (hence not bulimic) doses thick cultural content: entertaining, insightful, energetic, and unsettling. But we are not at all sure that anyone, even among the most discerning readers, is willing to pay to read them – we created this magazine in part to verify that. In other words, we don’t really know who we are addressing: that is why *Snaporaz* (a formula that has no precedent in Italy) represents a gamble and a risk. And in some ways a folly.

Will *Snaporaz* (and another very recent magazine, *Lucy sulla cultura*, also – it seems – geared toward offering materials for a fee) succeed where in its time *Alfabeta2* failed? It is to be hoped, because it would be a sign that cultural work is accorded a value in Italy that is not just cosmetic, that it is finally clear how much effort and time it takes to write a review or prepare an interview. And yet, some doubts remain, not only about the economic sustainability of enterprises of this kind, but about the sense that a cultural review can have today in a country, Italy, where the publishing market in fact rests on a small minority (less than 10 percent) of so-called “lettori forti” (big readers), while more than half of the population has with respect to reading – we mean: reading books – an attitude of total detachment, and where the role of intellectuals, cracked a little everywhere in the world, is in total disarray.

In a very recent book by historian Giorgio Caravale, titled *Senza intellettuali* (Laterza, 2023), it is hypothesized that, the old figure of the “committed, authoritative, listened to, respected, almost sacralized” intellectual having precisely disappeared, “a horizontal model, less hierarchical and selective, of intellectual debate is emerging (...) also thanks to the flourishing of online journals”, and that this could be “the right recipe for reformulating the terms of a relationship between politics and culture that renounces the game of opposites”.

Before celebrating, however, it would be useful to know, beyond the ephemeral data of social *sharing*, how many people actually participate in the elaboration of these journals, in how many read them, what weight the published texts have to strengthen the critical dimension of collective discussion. This is what Paolo Di Stefano, cultural journalist for *Il Corriere della Sera*, says between the lines in an interview published in *Le parole e le cose*:

It is true that online journals often offer excellent materials for reflection and discussion. Essayistic interventions, reviews, wide-ranging debates. But cultural journalism would have a different purpose, that is, a more systematic informative look at news and current events, and on this basis, it should be able to seize the right opportunities to open discussions and comparisons. All these cultural journals cannot promise, partly because they are mostly born from individual personalities or intellectual groups who lack journalistic experience and sensibility, unless one thinks that journalism does not require specific expertise. Cultural journalism, as we have thought of it for at least a century now, should present multiple levels of intervention, is a whole in which everything, at least ideally and as far as possible, holds together: contributions of different size and tone, with different purposes and languages, reckoning with space and time (even in the sense of reasonable timeliness with respect to events). It is another thing from offering one or two or three essay papers every day, albeit very useful and excellent ones.

Conflict of interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.
Financial support: No funding was received for this study.

Çıkar çatışması: Çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.
Finansal destek: Finansal destek bulunmamaktadır.