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"Switzerland is becoming more ignorant of world affairs"

The Zurich-based media scientist Kurt Imhof has been carrying out research into the Swiss media landscape for years and is the co-editor of the yearbook "Qualität der Medien" (Quality of the Media). He is seeing an alarming fall in the quality of information journalism and is calling for free products to be eliminated. Interview by Manuel Gnos

"SWISS REVIEW": Mr Imhof, we live in an information age. So, this begs the question: What state is the Swiss media in?

PROFESSOR KURT IMHOF: It is much worse than even 20 years ago. There has been a tremendous increase in the share of soft news, of human interest and sport stories. There is also less structure to our journalism. Reporting has become more episodic, and current affairs are broken down into individual events that are no longer connected to one another. The cause and effect process is neglected, and the formation of public opinion is restricted. Politicians with provocative messages today have far greater opportunity for inclusion in editorial content than before. And, last but not least, there is also an ongoing decline in the coverage of foreign issues. Switzerland is becoming less outward-looking and more ignorant of world affairs.

What reasons has your research identified for this trend?

Until the 1970s it was party newspapers that conveyed political messages. Party newspapers are about political opinion; they do not focus primarily on sales. This was followed by the heyday of the "forum newspapers", which took over from party newspapers in communicating with the public. The public were regarded as citizens first and foremost and not media consumers. This changed radically in the 1980s.

In what way?

A media system emerged that focused on media consumers and attempted to win them through sensational stories. Journalism became morally and emotionally charged, which saw private and personal issues become relevant at the expense of matters of public concern. Today, populist politicians from all parties have a greater presence in the media than

those who seek to conduct politics through argumentation. The gentle force of a better argument is being ousted by the cultivation of outrage. Because they have lost their own newspapers, the parties must work with the most sensational and provocative messages possible.

What are the political consequences of this for Switzerland?

Wherever there has been a sharp rise in free products, political populism has also enjoyed paralleled success. The consequences of this are more serious in Switzerland than in countries with a system of government and opposition. The Swiss system of concordance fares badly with a form of public communication where brute force rules over the presentation of superior argument. Democracy suffers when dramatic bloodletting in the press becomes the most important means of political communication.

This is the old chicken and egg conundrum – what changed first, the media approach or public interest?

No, this is not a chicken and egg situation. It is more a matter of civilisation and culture versus barbarism. People have always been able to sell trash, that's nothing new. In the days of the Ancien Régime, tens of thousands of people went to public executions to satisfy their thirst for scandal, gossip, bloodshed and violence. For democracy, an elite project, the general level of education had to be raised to enable citizens to participate in democratic public life using arguments. We are not simply at the mercy of a current trend. We are talking about a conscious decision.

How did you see the role of the media in the recent election campaign?



Kurt Imhof, born in 1956, studied history, sociology and philosophy and is now a Professor of Journalism and Sociology. He has been head of the "Research Institute for the Public Sphere and Society" at the University of Zurich since 1997. He has published numerous books. "Die Krise der Öffentlichkeit – Kommunikation und Medien als Faktoren des sozialen Wandels" (Campus, 2011) and the second "Qualität der Medien" yearbook (Schwabe, 2011) came out recently. The yearbook can also be found online at www.qualitaet-der-medien.ch. It is financed by the "Stiftung Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft" (Foundation for the Public Sphere and Society). www.oeffentlichkeit.ch

This was an extraordinary election campaign. Since the 1990s, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) has generally been able to assert itself through its campaigns, particularly in 2007 when it focussed on criminality among foreign youths. This resulted in youth criminality, in particular that caused by foreigners, taking first place in the GfS worry barometer prior to the elections, together with the issue of immigration. This then led to the success that the SVP enjoyed at the ballot box.

Were things different this year?

Yes, the parties' campaigns were disrupted by major events, such as Fukushima, the strong Swiss franc, the economic crisis and, more recently, the latest UBS scandal. All of this diverted from the SVP's

campaigning on mass immigration. The real world still has an impact on the political and media systems, which is reassuring at least.

It is precisely these processes that you are researching at the "Research Institute for the Public Sphere and Society" at the University of Zurich. The second "Qualität der Medien"

There is even more soft news and less structure in reporting. This is explained by editorial redundancies and the fact that journalists are leaving the media. Reporting is therefore becoming even more episodic. And finally there has also been restructuring – the number of foreign correspondents has been reduced, with resources re-deployed to cover stories like Kachelmann and Hirschmann.

In a special chapter, you examined the business coverage of companies. You developed a piece of plagiarism software for this purpose.

Yes. This enabled us to demonstrate that an alarmingly high proportion of business reporting is simply PR. Newspapers take corporate press releases and sell these specific interest stories as general interest. We found this in all print products but to varying degrees. The highest proportion was found in the free newspapers.

Another chapter looks at how foreigners are presented as a problem. Why is this so effective in Switzerland?

Switzerland has a strong tradition in this respect dating back to the 1960s. Using the expulsion and minaret initiatives, we were able to illustrate how a campaign has to be managed to produce as much editorial coverage as possible. Money and a provocative message are required. The SVP spent 3.3 million Swiss francs on the expulsion initiative in paid-for media, such as posters. By comparison, the FDP only spent 180,000 Swiss francs, the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP) 45,000 and the Social Democratic Party (SP) 5,000. No other country has the kind of wealthy, populist, right-wing group found in Switzerland. Thanks to its provocative message, the SVP achieved the greatest response and its presentation of foreigners as a problem was upheld by a majority. These factors go a long way towards explaining the success of the initiatives.

What has to change if the quality of public communications is to be improved?

We need to focus on three areas: firstly, the public and, above all, teenagers and

young adults. For example, it no longer matters in terms of social conventions whether someone reads a quality newspaper or a free product. We need to target schools and develop greater media awareness. Secondly, we should introduce a rating system to indicate media quality. This would allow us to show on an annual basis which media products are performing well in terms of diversity, professionalism, topicality and relevance. And thirdly, the government needs to create conditions that enable quality journalism to remain financially viable. For this to work, there needs to be fewer free products because the public has almost zero cost awareness.

How would you achieve this?

We must eliminate free products at all costs. The relationship between advertising revenues and editorial content, which has long sustained journalism, is breaking down. Support measures are therefore needed, which may include public funding. Media companies that have free products in their portfolio and therefore distort the market ought to be excluded. This would of course have to be done outside government control via a foundation awarding funding based on clear quality criteria. Citizens would have to dig deeper into their pockets as there would be no other solution. It is important here to recognise that journalism is democracy's most important public service, even more important than public transport. If public communication is left exclusively to the market, we will lose the cultural values that enlightenment brought us and we will move towards barbarism.

Is that politically feasible?

There is no viable alternative. If, for example, one of the major media companies is sold abroad, Switzerland will lose its publishing infrastructure and the opportunity to maintain and develop democracy. And it appears highly likely that a major crisis is on the horizon. While crises are terrible, they do always present the opportunity to emphasise to people how important the quality of public debate is.

(Quality of the Media) yearbook was published in Switzerland in October. How do the results differ from those of the previous year?

The use of all forms of information media has decreased compared to 2010. This has been the case for a while now with subscription newspapers. There has also been a particularly dramatic decline in radio and television information channels over the past 10 years. However, the fall in the use of online news sites from 2009 to 2010 is a new development. By contrast, there has been an increase in the use of other service portals, such as Bluewin and GMX.

These are quantitative changes, but are there also qualitative differences?