Foreword

The complex but nonetheless virtuous relationships between information, liberal democracy and the market economy have been a crucial focus of the political and economic literature of the last three centuries. Today, the radical technological changes of the digital world and the internet, as well as those seen in the geopolitical sphere (the end of the bipolar balance of power between the USA and the USSR after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet empire, the rapid pace of globalisation, and the sudden emergence of new international players), have subjected the media world to continual, overwhelming stress testing. The world of information has been shattered by these changes. However, we still have a real need for high-quality journalism, to reconfirm and reintroduce the values of political and economic democracy that we have no intention of discarding.

The challenge, then, is to try to hold together these values, which remain anchored in civic consciousness, above all in the countries of the West, with economic and social transformations prompted by high-tech innovation – and so to hold together democratic tradition and digital innovation in order to ensure a future for high-quality information.

It is against this contextual backdrop that Virginia Stagni's work is so valuable. It reconstructs the history and context of the development of information, partly through the effective use of an educated knowledge of literature and philosophy (references to Plato and the "Allegory of the cave" at the beginning are particularly relevant). It prompts critical reflection on the productive and cultural processes of journalism. And it offers an in-depth analysis of the choices we need to make to tackle the questions posed by "creative destruction" and "disruptive" innovation, in terms of both the news context and media business models, with new synergies between journalists, marketing and technology. The

author's direct experience with the *Financial Times*, one of the world's most authoritative newspaper groups, provides significant support for her advanced strategic ideas, which suggest a new balance between moral values and corporate production dynamics.

This brings us to the first important point to consider. To express it in the words of a maxim well known in the offices of the *Financial Times*: "Our newsroom needs to be data-informed and not data-led". The information available to readers – or, more accurately, users – of the news, and the extraordinary processing power offered by artificial intelligence algorithms, allow journalists and their editors to understand their audience ever more deeply, and this can shape the choices they make in their news products. But allowing yourself to be guided exclusively by social media likes, or thinking that reach is the only measure of success, is to court trouble. Stagni cites the pertinent warning of Nobel laureate Herbert A. Simon: "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention". The background noise generated by everything circulating on the web hinders a real, in-depth understanding of essential news. The "perceptual deception" of Plato's cave has an up-to-date parallel in our own confused and contentious times.

Good journalism, if it is to combat this "perceptual deception", must therefore maintain a dialectical relationship with its public to an even greater extent than in the past. It is responsible for continuing to follow its own principles: providing thorough and reliable information; refining the tools that allow readers to understand events; and developing up-to-date interpretative keys to political, economic and social changes.

Staying with the classic paradigms of high-quality information in the English-speaking world, we should recall and be guided by the slogan of the *New York Times*, "All the news that's fit to print", and that of the *Washington Post*, "Democracy dies in darkness". Aside from their communicative power in American rhetoric (Hollywood's depiction of journalism has contributed to the myth-making too), these are professional and ethical prescriptions relevant to Europe's media world.

What of Italian journalism? In its recent history, it has produced exemplary work in reporting, investigation and comment. Even today, at a time when the fundamentals of liberal democracy and the market economy are in crisis, and in the face of extraordinarily strong competition from powerful authoritarians, the construction of an Italian "public discourse" – in the sense of the principles laid out by a theorist such as

Jürgen Habermas – urgently calls for a relaunch through relationships between high-quality news and the values of citizenship and democratic participation.

And here is the second central point to consider and reconstruct, in terms of both the news and business models. "Values over volume should be the common mantra", Stagni rightly claims, criticising the obsession with Twitter and Facebook likes (beloved of populist and nationalist politicians) and insisting on the value of engagement, not the number of hits, as the guiding criterion for journalism. Volume-led editorial models are likely to remain profitable in the near term, but they will eventually mean abandoning the capacity for critical thought and depending wholly on volatile followers. This state of affairs, moreover, is one widely affected by the growing dissemination of fake news, which is strongly political in character (here again appears the shadow of the anti-democratic manoeuvrings of autocratic and totalitarian powers).

The response to this invests responsibility in the world of journalism (an unrelenting campaign to educate readers in the importance of fact checking is needed), but also in the work of democratic political organisations, social actors and leading cultural figures. Crucial, also, is a general increase in levels of education, as well as a widespread awareness of the risks of disinformation, in order to tackle fake news on the broad topics of the environment, health and science. In this sense, our dramatic times of pandemic and recession offer valuable food for thought. As we know, given the goals of sustainable development, defined by the UN, supported by Pope Francis and documented in leading economic and international social literature, we have a critical need for high-quality information.

The third point to consider in Stagni's book concerns the renewal of business models for journalism; a different approach must be taken if they are to continue to be "trustworthy entities". "A new entrepreneurial mindset" is needed. Better still, news companies need "intrapreneurs" – alert, curious, irreverent innovators who accelerate the diffusion of innovation into established company procedures. These are intrapreneurs understood as "corporate entrepreneurs". The book contains much fascinating material on how to navigate traditional hierarchies and ideas for creative disruption. More generally, it is worth bringing to mind our need for figures capable of synergising and synthesising different values and spheres of knowledge – philosophical engineers or (why not?) poet-

ic engineers: individuals capable of constructing a "polytechnic culture" in which the humanities and scientific knowledge are hybridised into a new and original mindset incorporating different worlds, from business to training, from research to politics itself. Italy, with its "culture of polytechnic enterprise", is a master of this – from Pirelli to the public companies of the 1950s, via "Machine Civilisation" and Olivetti. The country can continue to offer fascinating inspiration.

"Collaboration is the key to innovation", Stagni claims, and with good reason. As she says, "What matters is to be a driven human. People who drive change, drive others, drive the future".

The renewal of the journalism sector should be guided by the human factor. Women have a special role in this – their presence in the sector is growing, even if, unfortunately, not with all the recognition, in terms of roles and value, that they deserve. This is another goal to reinforce and complete – though with the awareness that innovation is a continual process: it is non-linear and imperfect, but essential to implement. It is worth recalling Karl Popper's teaching on science: this is a process that progresses via trial and error, discovery and fresh starts.

What is on the horizon, then? The answer is a new Enlightenment of empathy, in which the intellect engages positively our emotional intelligence. And a new digital humanism. This involves working for a better, more knowledgeable future and the "knowledge economy". The reassuring conclusion is that this is the future, despite conflict and controversy, which we are already walking towards.

Antonio Calabrò

Introduction

Born into a wealthy and noble family, Plato was studying for a career in politics when the trial of Socrates took place. It was 399 BC. Inspired by the philosopher, Plato abandoned plans for a political career and turned to philosophy, following his mentor, Socrates. He then opened a school (known as the Academy) in Athens, dedicated to the Socratic search for wisdom.

The myths narrated by Plato in Book VII of his best-known work, *The Republic* (gr. Πολιτεία; lat. Res publica), certainly has a tangible value for the education of any man and woman who considers themselves to be human.

The Allegory of the Cave is expressed as a conversation between Socrates and Glaucon. The philosopher describes a scenario where a group of people live in a cave-like dwelling. They are chained to the wall so that all they can see is the wall in front of them. The objects that apparently move in front of them are just shadows: they have been projected onto the wall thanks to the lighting of a fire burning from a side of the cave not visible to the chained slaves. So, they are not real objects but are simulacra of statuettes, puppets. The noises the slaves hear belong to the shadows as well. The truth is that the noises, the puppets and the fire are made by artists who lead the entire dwelling, so that the slaves live in a complete illusion. Plato says that only a philosopher can discover the truth and free his mind from this fantasy. The rest of the prisoners are destined to live at the bottom of the cave forever.

However, if a slave were able to free himself and could gradually explore the cave and then leave it and observe the external reality, if he once returned to the cave and told what he knew and saw, he would not be believed by others, but indeed attacked and killed. Similarly, the philosopher who rises from the level of opinion and belief (from the sim-

ulacra of things) to a vision of reality at its highest intelligible level (in mythological terms, looking at the light of the Sun) and then divulges his knowledge, such a philosopher would not be believed by those who are still enslaved by their passions and opinions. Indeed, the philosopher would be considered insane and killed (as happened to Socrates).

What you have read is one of the most successful metaphors in the history of universal thought.[1]

A dark cave becomes the representation of our universe, while the external world represents the place of ideas (Hyperuranium), of reality, of truth, where the sun of knowledge shines. The captive slaves, on the other hand, are men. The chains, ignorance. The images on the bottom, the perceptions of the senses. A state of unconscious submission, of which the path to liberation is only one: philosophy and its liberating actions such as thinking, logos (=word), critical perspective and dialogue.

And this is what we will humbly try to represent dynamically within this book. We will try to understand the steps to get out of the dark cave we might find ourselves immersed in when approaching the 'news' realm. Thus begins a minimal (the topic is too vast!) but hopefully engaging journey that attempts to walk the path of better understanding the chaotic and cacophonic news ecosystem, how to approach a variety of stimuli, how to turn into a critical thinker and how to build a career in one of the most exciting and challenging industries – the media.

If, with the advent of modern man, there is an awareness of the relativity of knowledge and the values that guide our society, increasingly hyperbolically magnified by that crisis loudly shouted in every media, we are increasingly inclined to live in a state of rarefied indifference, the realm of the impossibility of making a decision. And the web is a perfect

---

[1] This allegory has been used by many other artists and authors to represent the fictional reality men are constrained to view and live in. Two examples to stimulate your curiosity. Kubrick, in the film *Clockwork Orange*, gives the protagonist the "Ludovico cure": he is forced to watch projections for hours on end. As if chained in the cave, he can only look at the images in front of him, with his eyes wide open and his body in a straitjacket. In the Wachowskis' Matrix trilogy, the 20th-century human race believes that it lives freely in the world but, rather, it is controlled by machines that keep humans imprisoned. The movies suggest that not all humans will be willing to abandon their 'cave' when discovering the truth: they would favour the peace and safety of their illusory life. The parallelism with Plato's story is even more explicit in the film's last scene: the protagonist looks directly at the sun, as does the captive freed from the cave.

sea in which to get lost and forget about this difficult circumstance in which we constantly wander.

But this lack of control comes from a fallacious if not non-existent management and enhancement of knowledge: we increasingly believe it is a synonym of power and control rather than a path of freedom and speech.

If the approach to communication methods has become increasingly global, disassembled and disintermediate, a metamorphosis of productive and cultural processes within the news has been formed. Therefore, a rethinking of the founding values of journalism as a social entity and democracy's bastion is urgently needed, in which the primary objective is still shared living and living well.