

From opinion press to brand-name product : when newspapers become a mass product

Autor(en): **Mensch, Christian**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **25 (1998)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **13.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907515>

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From opinion press to brand-name product

When newspapers become

Internationally seen, Switzerland is a newspaper Eldorado. Not only do the trees in the press forest stand more densely than anywhere else. In contrast to the real dying of forests mainly the big and mighty trees remain healthy.

If we look beyond the national frontiers the changes which are taking place in the Swiss press landscape look different: never before have more newspapers disappeared than in 1997 – a total of 16 titles. Since April 1998

*Christian Mensch**

only 82 newspapers appear several times a week. Ten years ago the number was 127. The much conjured up forest of protection of democracy has become susceptible itself to avalanches. A number of pessimistic estimates suggest that in the near future in German-speaking Switzerland there will be only five or six big regional dailies.

No longer a newspaper per valley

It seems a paradox that one of the most important reasons for the radical clearing out of the publicity undergrowth is the explosive inflation of the media which has now, after several years of catching up with our foreign neighbours, finally overtaken Switzerland. It suffocates the traditional and many-sided newspaper forest, where every little town and every valley had its own paper. The reverse is a new variety of regionally and locally anchored publications. This was created within the press by the new foundation of supra-regional weekly titles such as “SonntagsZeitung”, “Cash” and “Facts”.

* Christian Mensch is a media editor at “Weltwoche” in Zurich.



The fight for readership: newspapers on sale in German-speaking Switzerland. (Photo: Keystone)

But there were also the electronic media, which gradually pushed the daily press away from its position as a leading political medium.

More room for advertising

The advertising agencies profited more from this media boom than the media consumer citizen. They, who financed a large number of newspapers with their advertisements, are today no longer dependent on small and medium-sized regional papers for their advertisements. They can choose and in case of better offers can move into the supra-

a mass product

regional press. They also have the freedom to change their advertising spots into radio and television.

The publishers at first reacted helplessly to these changes. Would the readers be ready to pay more for their daily newspapers to compensate for the loss of advertisements? Edipress, the West Swiss quasi-monopolist, made an attempt but scarcely were the higher prices in effect when the circulation dropped significantly. The head of Edipress, Pierre Lamunière broke off the experiment quickly.

Media as brand-name products

Now is starting in Switzerland what, for example, happened in the United States about ten years ago. The publishing branch is moving away ever more from its political responsibility and is beginning to come to market as the newspaper which will be mass produced as the image of a brand-name product. The news magazine "Facts" of TA-Media ("Tages Anzeiger", "SonntagsZeitung") was the first publication in Switzerland to be catapulted onto the market according to the new rules of the game. Not a publicistic vision stood behind the magazine but a marketing idea which has been successfully implemented elsewhere. What happened with "Profil" in Austria and "Focus" in Germany must also be possible in German-speaking Switzerland. Developments seem to be proving the publishing house right: after three years and an investment of 42 million francs, "Facts" is already in black figures and has reached the circulation target of 100,000 copies.

Face lifting for many media

If the foundations of publishing in Switzerland have been revolutionised in this way, this has consequences for the editors. In a first step practically all Swiss newspapers have adopted a new layout in the last few months. Now consistent introduction of editorial marketing is the order of the day. This requires from all journalists, from the simple editor right up to the editor-in-chief, a new

professional understanding. Editors-in-chief are less and less able to limit themselves to writing leading articles. They are becoming involved with commercial responsibilities. Younger media people now direct themselves hardly to superior values of journalistic ethos, they interpret their role now rather more as neutral information providers and – particularly in the electronic media – as entertainers.

Thomas Bernhard, secretary of the journalist's trade union SJU is however not pessimistic: "Particularly in the bigger newspapers in Switzerland there still exists a remarkable potential in edi-

tors with a high journalistic ethos". The German media researcher Siegfried Weischenberg cannot speak too highly of Swiss journalists. Journalism here is still understood as a "good piece of enlightenment".

So in spite of critical considerations of today's changes in the Swiss press landscape, it should not be forgotten that internationally seen the Swiss press still offers above-average quality. Switzerland continues to be a newspaper Eldorado even if the gold veins are not quite as frequently found as previously. ■

The changed media landscape: Interview with Heinz Bonfadelli

Well entertained but badly informed

The launching of local radios and private television programmes in the 1980s has greatly changed the landscape and use of the Swiss media, says media researcher Heinz Bonfadelli.

Professor Bonfadelli, how do you perceive the situation of the Swiss media?

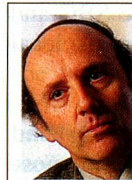
From the point of view of the media consumer the Swiss media market is more or less saturated. Only just 5% of all inhabitants today do without a television set. The level of cabling amounts to more than 80%, and there is a video recording set in about 60% of households. Since 1980, radio as well as television channels have multiplied and the programmes have expanded in terms of time.

And how has the press changed?

As far as the range of newspapers is concerned the total circulation of the press has continually grown. In consequence a good three-quarters of the adult population are reached today by the three information media, radio, television and newspaper. It is true that at the same time the number of titles has greatly fallen as a result of press concentration.

How long is the media read, listened to and watched daily?

Radio is a typical background medium:



Professor doctor Heinz Bonfadelli (born in 1949) has been since 1994 Professor extraordinary at the Institute for Journalistic Sciences and Media Research at the University of Zürich.