[IT] Italian Communication Authority releases report on the consumption of information

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On 19 February 2018, the Department of Economics and Statistics of the Italian Communications Authority (AGCOM) released a report on the consumption of information (the "Report"). The drafting of the Report comes into being as result of AGCOM competence to monitor the information system and ensure the protection of pluralism of information, both on the supply and demand side of the news media market. Also, AGCOM has stressed that the monitoring of the news system is part of a global scenario where some negative phenomena are growing, including the spread of fake news and misinformation.

The study relies on two main assumptions - i.e. that (a) information can reach individuals only if they make a decision to access media and a further decision to access news content, and (b) news consumption does not necessarily takes place in an effective manner. The findings of the research show that almost all of the Italian population accesses the media in order to be informed, and that over 80% of citizens access information on a regular basis (i.e. every day); and also that the "informational diet" of Italians is characterised by a marked phenomenon of "cross-media" (i.e. using three or four means to obtain information), which affects now more than three quarters of the population; only a small proportion of Italians (around 5%) is not informed at all.

As to the use of media for news, the study reports that television is the medium with the greatest informational value, followed by the Internet, radio and newspapers. AGCOM has stressed that more and more people rely on the Internet to search and access news, and over a quarter of the population deems it the most important to get information, although some concerns may arise in respect of the reliability of online information sources, which is perceived to be lower than that of traditional media.

Part of the research has been focused on the minor's consumption of information. In this respect, a dual social system has emerged: on the one hand, some minors do not become informed at all or are informed through a single medium only; on the other hand, there are groups of minors with regular access to a plurality of media and sources of information.

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Special attention is also paid to the dynamics concerning the consumption of online news. In this regard, online information is accessed mainly through algorithmic sources (e.g. social networks and search engines), while there is a more limited use of editorial sources. For 19.4% of the population algorithmic sources are the most important ones. Thus, search engines and social networks are ranked, respectively, third and fourth among the various sources of information.

However, algorithmic sources may also raise some reliability issues, since less than 24% of the consulted population deems these sources to be actually trustworthy. The Report also highlights the role of digital platforms, which are increasingly considered to be gatekeepers for access to information, for both publishers and consumers. These actors are said to act as intermediaries for access to online information by individuals. Furthermore, they are significantly affected by ideological polarisation, which results in the spread of radicalised positions and the creation of ideological bubbles.

Lastly, the Report focuses on access to and consumption of political or electoral-related information. It observes that when it comes to electoral news, citizens have a less broad and articulated consumption of information - that is to say less cross-media and hybrid compared to their consumption of general information. Generally speaking, a relationship is shown between citizens and sources of information: the more these sources are chosen to access general and current news, the more likely to be used by citizens to form their political opinion. However, the so-called “echo-chambers” are quite recurrent, since individuals tend to discuss only within a very selective and ideologically close circle. The Report, in this respect, stresses that the polarisation is generally operating at the level of the choice of the medium; this then becomes viral as a consequence of the actions carried out on social networks by users, coupled with the use of algorithms.

Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni, Rapporto sul consumo di informazione, 19 febbraio 2018

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