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PERIOD OF GRACE FOR ASIAN NEWSPAPERS

THE INTERNET REVOLUTION HAS YET TO COME TO THE CONTINENT

Torben Stephan

The newspaper market in China, India and Indonesia is booming. These three emerging economies alone ensure that newspaper circulation is increasing in Asia as a whole. In their euphoria, many media representatives, however, overlook the fact that the Internet revolution has yet to come to this part of the world. To date, only a third of the Asian population has access to the Internet, while two thirds rely on other sources. In places where people have good access to the Internet, such as Japan and Singapore, Asian newspapers are also battling falling circulation figures. Publishers should make a start now to adjust to the new era.

ASIAN BOOM IN THE NEWSPAPER MARKET

2011 was an excellent year for the newspaper sector in India. Circulation increased by five per cent, advertising revenues even by 15 per cent. It is no wonder that the president of the trade association walked up to the microphones to deliver his annual report with his head held high. Jacob Mathew, President of the World Association of Newspapers (WAN-IFRA, India), shouted defiantly to the heads of publishing houses assembled in Chennai that the newspaper industry had resilience of over 400 years in its genes. "There is no crisis in newspaper industry."¹

1 | "No crisis in newspaper industry", *The New Indian Express*, 7 Sep 2011, <http://newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/article359224.ece> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

Strong words in Asia, while newspaper publishers in Europe and the USA were licking their wounds, inflicted by the advance of the Internet. They were still commiserating about falling circulation figures and advertising revenues. Asia, on the other hand, appeared to have remained totally unscathed by the so-called newspaper crisis. Two years later, there was renewed rejoicing at the World Newspaper Congress 2013 in Bangkok, the annual international meeting of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers. Newspaper circulation figures had risen by close to ten per cent over the previous five years in Asia, reported WAN-IFRA. Advertising revenues had increased by just over six per cent over the same period.² While Asians paraded through the Bangkok Convention Centre on a wave of success, Europeans and Americans showed a rather more despondent demeanour.

The success story from Bangkok spread quickly. The economic news of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, for instance, carried the following headline on 4 June 2013: "Asia's newspapers continue on growth path." And it almost sounded as if there was a hint of hope in this headline of the traditional Swiss newspaper that maybe everything would soon go back to normal in Europe as well. Maybe the Asians had found a way for print newspapers to stand up to the digital threat from the Internet.

In short: they have not. In spite of all prophecies, Asia is no land of plenty for newspapers either; even if former WAN-IFRA President Christoph Riess called Asia "the powerhouse of the world's newspaper industry". It always did sound more like wishful thinking than reality. When one looks more closely, one soon realises that newspaper publishers in the highly developed Asian countries are fighting exactly the same battle with falling circulation figures as their European and North American counterparts.

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Most notably Japan. This high-tech country has a unique newspaper tradition. The daily paper with the biggest circulation in the world based in Tokyo, *Yomiuri Shimbun*,

2 | WAN-IFRA, "World Press Trends 2012", 3 Sep 2012, <http://wan-ifra.org/articles/2012/09/03/world-press-trends-2012> (accessed 21 Mar 2014).

currently sells just under ten million copies – every single day. *Asahi Shimbun* from Osaka follows in second place with just under eight million.³ In view of the circulation figures common in Germany and Europe, these numbers are more than impressive. However, one should not ignore the fact that circulation in Japan is also on a strong downward trend. According to WAN-IFRA, *Yomiuri* was still selling 14 million copies back in 2005, and *Asahi* twelve million. The situation is similar in Singapore, which boasts fast, stable and, above all, uncensored Internet access. Since 2008, the sales of daily newspapers in the city-state have decreased by eleven per cent – even though the Singapore Press Holding has no competitors. In South Korea, which today is Japan's equal in terms of high tech, circulation dropped by 7.5 per cent between 2010 and 2012.⁴



Just under ten million copies sold every day: *Yomiuri Shimbun* from Tokyo, here the edition of 12 March 2011 with the Fukushima nuclear disaster as lead story, is the daily paper with the largest circulation in the world. | Source: Pinboke Planet, flickr ©.

The fact that as a region Asia has experienced an increase in circulation despite this, as well as an increase in revenues from advertising is due mainly to the two large emerging economies of India and China. While sales are decreasing in highly developed countries, new Asian competitors are moving up in the world ranking. The Chinese newspaper *Sichuan Daily* apparently already sells over eight million copies. If this figure is correct, the paper

3 | International Federation of Audit Bureaux of Circulations (IFABC), "National Newspapers Total Circulation", 30 Dec 2013, http://ifabc.org/site/assets/media/National-Newspapers_total-circulation_30-12-13.xls (accessed 21 Mar 2014).

4 | Ibid.

has already caught up with the Japanese *Asahi Shimbun*. *Cankao Xiaoxi* from Beijing and *The Times of India* published in New Delhi both exceeded the three million mark some time ago.

Quoting the current figures provided by WAN-IFRA, *The Economist* reported in mid-2013 that China had overtaken India as the largest newspaper market with a total daily circulation of 114.5 million copies.⁵ According to the latest figures, newspaper sales have reached 118 million copies per day in China.⁶ Only in 2011, *The Economist* had painted precisely the opposite picture.⁷ At that time, India had overtaken China and headed the field with some 110 million copies. This duel illustrates the strong growth of the newspaper industry in these two emerging economies. Indonesia too, a country with a population close to 250 million, was able to increase its total circulation by a sensational 29 per cent between 2008 and 2012.⁸

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Asia, therefore, has mainly the emerging economies of India, China and Indonesia to thank for the large increases in circulation. At the same time, the highly developed countries in Asia are battling with the same problems as the West. The fact that circulation figures overall are still on the increase is purely down to the joint population of the three best-performing countries being almost twice that of the remaining Asian countries.

ECONOMIC UPTURN AND LACK OF INTERNET CONNECTIVITY IN THE GROWTH COUNTRIES

It is precisely the above-described situation that gives rise to the assumption that there is a connection between the economic development of emerging countries and the

5 | "Fold the front page", *The Economist*, 4 Jun 2013, <http://economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2013/06/daily-chart-1> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

6 | Bundesverband Deutscher Zeitungsverleger (BDZV), "Zeitungen und ihre Leser in Stichworten", No. 14, Nov 2013, <http://www.bdzv.de/markttrends-und-daten/wirtschaftliche-lage/wissenswertes> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

7 | "Bulletins from the future", *The Economist*, 7 Jul 2011, <http://economist.com/node/18904136> (accessed 21 Mar 2014).

8 | N. 2.

A reason for the newspaper market booming in emerging economies may be that rising prosperity goes hand in hand with a rise in literacy.

good performance of print newspapers. This assumption is also supported by the fact that circulation figures are also steadily rising in Latin America.⁹ There are numerous emerging economies on the South American continent. Depending on which definition one uses,¹⁰ they number twice as many as those in Asia. But what is the reason for the newspaper market booming specifically in these emerging economies? Experts believe that this may be due to the fact that rising prosperity in the emerging economies goes hand in hand with a rise in literacy. They think that in conjunction with the desire for better education, economic prosperity and political participation this makes for a good environment for the newspaper industry.

According to the Human Development Index (HDI), prosperity has increased by an average 1.5 per cent over the last twelve years in India, by 1.42 per cent in China and by 1.28 per cent in Indonesia. The average increase in the Western countries has been between 0.3 and 0.4 per cent. At 0.32 per cent, Japan is in a comparable position, Singapore and South Korea in a slightly better position at 0.67 per cent. This index illustrates the dynamic development enjoyed by the three emerging economies.

One crucial – yet mundane – determining factor is that the majority of the population in these emerging economies is not yet connected to the Internet. It is the case that user numbers in Asia are huge: Almost half of all Internet users worldwide are Asians.¹¹ However, the market is by no means fully developed. Less than a third of Asians had access to the Internet at all by the middle of 2013

9 | Ibid.

10 | There is no generally accepted list of emerging economies. The World Bank, OECD, IMF and EU use different classification criteria and have therefore published different lists, defining between ten and 30 countries as emerging economies. The World Bank lists six Asian and twelve South-American countries under the heading "Upper-middle-income economies". For this document, however, it is particularly the so-called BRIICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China and South Africa) that are of relevance.

11 | International Telecommunication Union (ITU), ICT Indicators database, "Key ICT indicators for developed and developing countries and the world (totals and penetration rates)", 2013, http://itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2013/ITU_Key_2005-2013 ICT_data.xls (accessed 27 Mar 2014).

(28.8 per cent).¹² There are still large swathes of Asia that the Internet has not yet reached. There, time flows more slowly, and newspapers are not experiencing the “digital threat” to any large degree. In Myanmar, for instance, a mere one per cent of the population uses the Internet, in Cambodia five, in Afghanistan and Bangladesh six, in Pakistan and Laos ten per cent.



Internet cafe in Turpan, China: In mid 2013 not even one third of Asians had access to the Internet. | Source: Tom Thai, flickr ©📷.

At 42 per cent, even China is still nowhere near having comprehensive Internet coverage. In India (13 per cent) and Indonesia (15 per cent), Internet accessibility is, in fact, very patchy. In the highly developed countries of Singapore (74 per cent Internet access), Japan (79) and South Korea (84), on the other hand, virtually all citizens have access to the Internet and newspaper circulation is experiencing a downturn.¹³ There is therefore a clear correlation between the availability of Internet access and losses in print newspaper circulation.

ASIA'S NEWSPAPERS FACING DIGITAL CHALLENGES

In 2012, approximately 2.4 billion people had their own Internet connection. This means that over a third of people globally were travelling through the World Wide Web via

12 | Ibid.

13 | ITU, “Individuals Internet 2000-2012”, 2012, http://itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2013/Individuals_Internet_2000-2012.xls (accessed 21 Mar 2014).

their computer or smartphone. In Asia, at slightly more than one billion, it was only 27 per cent.¹⁴ These figures do not include people who may have no connection of their own, but are able to go online via Internet cafés or university computers, for instance. At 1.7 billion, considerably more than half of the Internet community is active in social networks such as Twitter or Facebook, the so-called Web 2.0.

This fast and furious development has brought about major changes in the media sector in the industrialised countries. New online offerings are competing with the newspapers in areas such as job exchanges, car markets and classified advertisements. The Internet is also putting strong pressure on newspapers in the area of product advertising. As people freely divulge their entire life stories online, advertisers on Google and Facebook can select their target groups by age, gender, origin and even interests. Compared to classic newspaper advertisements, there is considerably less wastage. Added to this is the fact that some serious mistakes were made in strategic decision-making. Many newspapers and magazines are still offering their journalistic output for free online. After having suffered losses in the area of advertising, they are thereby giving away their core product: journalistic reporting.

It took quite some time for newspaper publishers in the West to begin using the possibilities offered by the Internet. Editor-in-chief of the Welt newspaper group, Jan-Eric Peters, put a positive slant on it: "We have developed our operation in line with readers' interests from 'print only' to 'online first' to 'online to print'."¹⁵ These days, many leading daily and weekly papers and magazines are engaging with the Internet with much greater ease. Both publishers and readers have not considered newspapers exclusively a print medium for some time now. The Hamburg weekly paper *Die Zeit* has even set up a team looking specifically after the paper's own online readership.

14 | Mathias Brandt, "Nur jeder 3. weltweit online", Statista, 17 Apr 2013, <http://de.statista.com/infografik/1049/weltbevoelkerung-mit-mit-internetzugang> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

15 | Lena Bulczak and Michael Gneuss, "Herausforderung in Echtzeit", *Die Welt*, <http://welt.de/article123776792/Herausforderung-in-Echtzeit.html> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

Large sections of Asia still have this development to come. The number of citizens excluded from Internet access is decreasing rapidly. Growth rates are huge, particularly where mobile Internet use is concerned. Between July 2012 and July 2013, the number of page views via mobile devices in Asia rose from 18.8 to 26.6 per cent. Compared with this, surfing via smartphone in Europe was still relatively insignificant at 9.7 per cent.¹⁶

While the development of Internet activities was implemented predominantly via the dilapidated telephone lines in industrialised countries, Asia jumped directly onto the bandwagon of mobile Internet use that was just taking off. Particularly in countries with poorly developed infrastructure, such as Myanmar, or island states that are difficult to develop by traditional means, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, mobile Internet definitely has the edge. Mobile transmission technology is easier and cheaper to realise in these countries. In addition, the new 4G standard (also called LTE) can in some instances offer faster transmission rates than conventional cable connections.

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With rising accessibility rates and increasing Internet usage, the digital challenge to classic media will take a similar form as it does in Europe, North America and Australia. The task then will be to find new ways of selling the journalistic product, namely high-quality, reliable and fast information, at a profit. In some countries, this will generate considerable problems. But many are already able to respond to the new times in a flexible manner. The important thing will be to avoid the mistakes that were made in the West.

PERCEIVING THE INTERNET AS AN OPPORTUNITY

While sound and video features were previously restricted to radio and television, the Internet opens up opportunities for the newspapers to offer multimedia content. Most

16 | Mathias Brandt, "17 Prozent des Web-Traffics sind mobil", Statista, 22 Aug 2013, <http://de.statista.com/infografik/1092/anteil-mobiler-geraete-am-internet-traffic> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

newspapers did not realise this opportunity until very recently – they did not have the necessary expertise, after all. In 2010, Apple CEO Steven Jobs introduced the first iPad – a revolution for the newspaper industry. The first tablet computer enabled newspapers to offer customers their publications in familiar design, complemented by multimedia or even interactive elements. Moving pictures in a daily paper – that had previously only existed in the magic world of the Harry Potter films.

The digital versions could be “shipped” virtually for free. It only required a few seconds and took the paper simultaneously to places all around the globe. Today, readers of digital newspapers (whether viewed via the iPad or the website) can generally access the current issue shortly after the copy deadline on the evening before publication day. Subscribers to the paper version, on the other hand, still have to wait until the following morning. The latest information, such as sports results, can easily be included late in the night, which means that the newspaper contents are always up to date.

The cost saving aspect in particular should provide an incentive for advertising digital versions to readers and advertising clients.

It seems strange that most newspaper publishers do not engage more aggressively in advertising the digital versions to readers and advertising clients. The cost saving aspect in particular should provide an incentive. The digital version entails neither print nor shipping costs (labour, rent, energy, ink, paper, wear and tear, etc.). It is the customer accessing their newspaper online who bears the latter. This is an optimum business model, for India for example. Since newspapers began to expand beyond the limits of the cities where they were based in the 1980s, a fierce price war began on the subcontinent. Newspaper prices have not gone up for over ten years. Today, the cover price of many newspapers does not cover the cost of production. The resulting loss must be compensated through corresponding advertising revenues. This frequently results in newspapers even being willing to sell their journalistic output to advertisers. This has repeatedly drawn harsh criticism, particularly during election time, because newspapers had allegedly or demonstrably sold political reporting to the highest bidder as well.

Especially for the Indian newspapers caught in a price war, the option of moving to the considerably cheaper alternative of digital publication offers a great opportunity to escape from the downward spiral. However, this will need India to first surpass the critical mass of 50 per cent Internet access rate.

LEARNING HOW TO ENGAGE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media, most notably Twitter and Facebook, are also very popular in Asia. China is the undisputed leader where use of such platforms is concerned. According to statistics from the independent market research company eMarketer for April 2013, China has twice as many users of social networks as the USA. In Asia, the individual networks have different regional strongholds. Twitter is very popular in the Philippines, for instance, while Facebook dominates in Indonesia and Thailand.

As users spend a great deal of their time on Facebook, etc., that is where newspapers must go to alert their readers to their own offerings. A simple newspaper will therefore publish across the media, publishing both the print version as well as the so-called e-paper version. At the same time, the multi-media contents must be prepared for the website and the digital versions (e.g. for the iPad). In addition, the editorial office will also output information via the social media. The work involved, and particularly the expenditure for basic and further employee training, has increased greatly. Today, journalists must be able to write an article, take photographs and operate a video camera. They will frequently combine the contents digitally for the different channels themselves. Learning the skills required to operate the equipment alone represents an enormous training requirement.

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In Asia, many newspapers have found the transition to Web 2.0 quite an easy undertaking. Many view Twitter as a type of news agency, which can be supplied by the individual newspapers themselves. Suthichai Yoon for example, Chairman of the Board of the Bangkok daily The Nation, is a keen Twitter user. Each of his 140-character messages reaches over half a million people.

For many people, social media now represent some of the most important channels providing information about current affairs. In 2011, the BITKOM trade association stated with respect to Germany that “nearly every third community member” obtains news via the social media networks. Among the younger target group of 14 to 19-year-olds, it was even a little over a third.¹⁷ A 2013 study by the U.S. Pew Research Center found very similar results for the USA. 30 per cent of adult Facebook users obtain news updates from the platform.¹⁸ One can assume that Asia will at least equal these figures. That is because the social networks in many Asian countries are still the most reliable source of news, given the prevailing state regulation of the press.

The Bangkok newspaper *The Nation* imposes a commitment on its employees to send tweets to further the company’s interests, thereby increasing the reach of the paper through their network.

The Bangkok newspaper *The Nation* has responded to this development in a remarkable manner. It imposes a commitment on its employees to send tweets and posts to further the company’s interests – using individual accounts.

Each employee thereby becomes an ambassador for the company, increasing the reach of the paper through their network. The digital network of *The Nation* has since attracted over two million followers on Twitter and Facebook. Once again, this course of action requires a great deal of training. Older employees in particular first have to learn how to engage with the new media. Younger employees, who are already familiar with the technology, must be trained in its appropriate use, because Twitter and Facebook messages must also be subjected to an editorial quality check. To this end, each employee is handed the “Code of Conduct” when they join, which has included an entire chapter on proper conduct when engaging with social media for some time now. This is important because social media specifically entail considerable risk. The speed with which messages proliferate across Twitter and Facebook is enormous. Once a message is out there, it can very rarely be erased. One wrong tweet can have devastating consequences for the person concerned – and therefore also for the company.

17 | BITKOM, “Soziale Netzwerk werden zum Informationskanal”, 28 Nov 2011, http://bitkom.org/de/markt_statistik/64018_70419.aspx (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

18 | Amy Mitchell, Jocelyn Kiley, Jeffrey Gottfried and Emily Guskin, “The Role of News on Facebook. Common yet Incidental”, Journalism.org, 24 Oct 2013, <http://journalism.org/2013/10/24/the-role-of-news-on-facebook> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

Anton Casey is a case in point. There was an occasion when the British asset manager resident in Singapore had used public transport in the city-state, as his Porsche was in the workshop. He took a picture of his son, posted it on Facebook and added the caption: "Daddy, where is your car and who are all these poor people?" He subsequently added a further photo of his son – now sitting in the repaired Porsche – with the caption: "Normal service can resume, once I have washed the stench of public transport off me." These two posts unleashed what is commonly referred to as a so-called shitstorm of outraged messages of abuse. Even the Minister of Justice of the harmony-seeking country became involved in the end to voice his indignation.¹⁹

Casey lost friends, his job and ultimately, the country he called home, where he had lived for twelve years. According to media reports, he emigrated to Australia with his family.²⁰

No doubt Casey is an extreme example. But he is by no means the only one. Amy Cheong, an employee at the Singapore national trades union NTUC, lost her job when she complained about cheap Malay weddings, posting discriminatory remarks on Facebook.²¹ At the end of 2013, New York PR manager Justine Sacco sent a racist tweet before taking off on a flight to South Africa – probably meant as a joke. By the time her flight landed, she no longer had a job either.²²

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UTILISING SPEED AND INTERACTIVITY

Until recently, there had not really been any change in the daily routine of the editorial offices since the first daily newspaper was published. There was a copy deadline that all editors worked towards. Texts, pictures and graphics

19 | "'Poor people' comments by Anton Casey 'deeply offensive': Shanmugam", Channel NewsAsia, 23 Jan 2014, <http://channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/poor-people-comments-by/964856.html> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

20 | "Anton Casey loses job, friends", AsiaOne Singapore, 28.01.2014, <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/anton-casey-loses-job-friends> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

21 | Jeanette Tan, "NTUC fires Assistant Director for racist comments", Yahoo News, 8 Oct 2012, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/ntuc-assistant-director-says-sorry-for-racist-post.html> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

22 | Syd Neumann, "Dieser Afrika-Tweet kostete eine PR-Agentin den Job", *Die Welt*, 22 Dec 2013, <http://welt.de/vermischtes/article123207732.html> (accessed 7 Mar 2014).

were then combined to produce the newspaper. The final product was ready in the evening. The editorial offices were very slow to move away from this working method. That is all the more surprising as the Internet enabled journalists for the first time to compensate for their disadvantage compared to radio and television

Today, it is common to have news published promptly on the internet before printed. Even developing stories are no longer an exclusive format reserved to TV news channels.

where speed was concerned. Reporting on events on the same day or even live used to be reserved to the colleagues from broadcasting. Today, it is common all around the world to have news published promptly online before it makes it into the papers. Newspapers even offer a news ticker service for sports events online nowadays. Even so-called developing stories, which are being reported on as they evolve throughout the day, are no longer an exclusive format reserved to TV news channels.

Philippine news portal Rappler.com realised this development early on. The Social News Network (a description the news portal successfully coined for itself) was founded by former CNN journalist Maria Ressa. Rappler offers its readers live blogging. This is an advance on the news ticker service. The difference is that live blogging provides regular updates not just in text form but also through images with commentary and short videos of, for instance, sports events, beauty queen competitions or important trade fairs such as the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. It provides users with a virtual presence at these events.

Using an app, Rappler readers themselves can additionally become active by sending photos or video clips directly to Rappler. After having been checked in the editorial office, these are then also published in a live blog, the so-called #RStream. This type of citizens' journalism works very well in the Philippines, which regularly experiences typhoons and flooding. As the so-called citizen journalist volunteers of the craggy island state live where these disasters occur, Rappler is able to obtain up-to-date images and reports far faster than the reporters of major daily newspapers, let alone foreign correspondents.



Did Kim Jong-Un (r.) really have his uncle Jang Song-Thaek thrown to be devoured by a pack of hungry dogs? Media all around the world spread the story of a Chinese satirist blog. | Source: © picture alliance, Kyodo.

MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER: CHECKING THE FACTS

Somewhat inappropriately on Christmas Eve, the Singaporean daily *The Straits Times* had a gruesome story to report. According to that information, the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un had his uncle Jang Song Thaek executed not by machine-gun salvos as usual, but by having him thrown to be devoured by a pack of 120 hungry dogs. The Straits Times had based its article on a report in the Chinese newspaper *Wen Wei Po*. Carried by the news agency Thompson Reuters, the gruesome message went out into the world from Singapore. The British newspaper *The Independent* adopted the story without question as did *USA TODAY* and the German *Focus* magazine. Particularly the tabloids in Europe and the USA included the message in their reporting, as it fitted so well with their preconceptions. The original piece of news has since disappeared from the website of the Straits Times. The reason: the Chinese *Wen Wie Po* had fallen prey to a nasty joke played by a satirist blog in the Chinese Tencent Weibo network, and with it the Straits Times and large parts of the Western media world.

Today, news is disseminated through news agencies and social media at breath-taking speed, making the need for journalists to verify the facts all the more important. This cornerstone of journalistic practice represents the difference between professional journalism and the ever-increasing masses of amateur bloggers.

Every day, readers are faced with the question of whether they are still willing to pay good money for professional journalism given the large amount of free information available on the Internet. They will soon answer in the negative if the supposed professionals are no longer doing their job properly. Verifying the truth behind information still represents one of the greatest challenges for journalism. And that is the competitive advantage of the classic newspaper that needs to be defended.