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# The Swiss Observer

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## Comment

### HARD TIMES FOR NEWSPAPERS

No industry has been more remarkable than the Press in managing to survive in the face of persistent difficulties. This is true, as we know, of Great Britain, where the National Press is a past-master in brinkmanship. But it is now particularly true of the Swiss Press.

The Swiss Press is as remarkable as the federal political and demographic structure which underlies it. Every Canton has its own political parties represented at its own parliament, and most important cities have their local main party branches. Likewise, most Cantons have their own papers. There are no national papers to speak of, with the exception of the two or three with the largest circulation (*Blick*, *Tages Anzeiger*, *La Suisse*) which have a vast regional base. According to a brochure by Josef Jaeger entitled "Das Bild der Schweizer Presse", there were no fewer than 334 papers in Switzerland in 1967. These papers appeared either daily, twice, thrice or once-weekly, and their total circulation was 2.62 million copies a day. This meant that a newspaper was published every day for 2.27 inhabitants and that there was one newspaper title for 17,800 inhabitants on average. But this figure varied from 44,000 in Solothurn to only 6,000 in Schwytz.

The situation at one time made Switzerland a journalist's paradise. Any young man who had failed his exams and didn't know what to do could find a niche in a newspaper editing room. Canton Zurich had 34 papers, Geneva eight and Basle-Town six. There were no fewer than 31 papers in Aargau, and 30 in St. Gallen.

Alas, times have become harder for budding journalists. The first blow came about four years ago when journalists, who were gradually organising themselves and setting standards for their profession, obtained considerable rises. Outside contributors had to be sacrificed in the process and it became increasingly difficult for non-established freelancers to sell stories to newspapers and magazines.

But more serious difficulties have piled up over the past year. The cost of paper has shot up and this commodity is actually getting scarce. The economy is no longer expanding as it did, and this has produced a very noticeable effect on job advertisements. The two developments together have led to a drastic reduction in the number of pages of newspapers. The *Tribune de Geneve*, Geneva's evening daily and its main advertiser, had an average of 80 pages a year ago and now only has about 50.

The *Neue Zurcher Zeitung* has gradually reduced its daily editions from three to one. Rising postal costs have caused further difficulties since the majority of newspaper sales come from subscribers who expect their paper to come with the morning mail, and do not rely on newsagents as they do in Britain. The reduction of postal deliveries to one a day in the big cities has compelled newspapers to complete production at night at the cost of rising expenses. Others are looking to private distribution agencies. Finally, rising wages due to labour shortages have called for heavy investments in modern and automatic machinery. Many papers were not in a position to face such costs and have had to close down. Others nearly went under because of the size of their investments.

All this has led to a reduction in the number of newspapers to somewhere over two hundred, still a large number by any national standards. But this has worried all those who consider the Press essential for the maintenance of a healthy federal life. Mr. Fred Luchsinger, Chief Editor of the *Neue Zurcher Zeitung*, regretted, in a recent interview with *La Vie Protestante* that French-speaking Switzerland and the Zurich area no longer had their socialist papers.

His explanation was that the traditional public for socialist publications, the workers, nowadays lived no differently than the "bourgeois" and were quite content with reading the liberal or non-political newspapers of their neighbours. Indeed, the great mistake of these failed socialist papers was to be too "red" and to try to motivate a public which was quite satisfied with its lot.

Many calls for public aid have been made to help the Press out of its difficulties. But aid must be given with care in a free economy, and it is difficult to establish rules to determine which papers should be aided. So far, the State's support has been given in the way of postal reductions. Moves may be undertaken to ban the free advertisers which have been of great concern to the newspaper publishers.

There is a subtle difference between the British and the Swiss local Press. In Britain, people are informed of world and home events by the national Press and rely on a surprisingly prosperous local Press for information on their community, on bargain sales, work opportunities, bedsitters, etc. Switzerland hasn't got a national Press to speak of, so that world and local news are found in the "local" Press, which is in fact communal or cantonal. A paper with a circulation of 10,000, only read within a radius of 15 miles, would subscribe to the Swiss Telegraphic Agency's World Service and have news about Nixon, the Middle-East and East-West detente. In some cases, it might even share a correspondent in London or in Bonn.

There are approximately 26 journalists of Swiss Papers in London and this, to our knowledge, is at least as large a Press corps as the one representing French papers. There is not the specialisation found in other countries so that the same small paper might supply both local and international news. The "economic" solution would involve a national Press, but then its levelling effect on information would hurt the ideals of federalism.

It must be said, however, that there is almost a national Press in German-speaking Switzerland since educated people of all cantons wishing in-depth information would read the *N.Z.Z.* in addition to their "local" paper. With the *N.Z.Z.*, the *Tages Anzeiger* possibly enjoys a wider readership than the thirty remaining cantonal papers put together.

One development to save the smaller papers has been to share pages and correspondents. Thus the *Journal de Geneve* and the *Gazette de Lausanne* have an intelligent agreement. They both keep their own local pages, but the *Gazette* prepares the international pages, while the *Journal* does the same for the economics pages. The relevant flongs are exchanged overnight by a motor cyclist racing up the Geneva-Lausanne motorway.

A similar arrangement holds between the *Courier* of Geneva and Fribourg's *La Liberté*, two Catholic publications. Much will depend on the future economic situation. Switzerland depends more on exports than nearly any other country in the world and if the slump in world trade which the pundits predict materialises, a great many small Swiss papers will find it impossible to continue.

P.M.B.