

The Swiss agricultural press is changing

1. The agricultural press: still the main source of information

Although various agricultural portals, platforms and specialised websites have been set up in Switzerland over the past few years and are being visited by a growing number of users, information continues to come primarily from the agricultural press. Still only a fraction of Swiss farms can be reached via the internet. On the basis of the number of users of agricultural portals it appears that only between 5 and 10% of all Swiss farmers regularly visit the net to obtain information.

During the internet hype at the turn of the century Swiss farmers and Swiss agricultural publishers entertained high hopes and drew up new projects. All of these came to nothing. The internet is not likely to supersede the agricultural press but at the most find a niche as an incontrovertible additional medium from the point of view of up-to-dateness and cost, for example for market information and as a platform for trading second-hand farm machinery and a contact point. Agricultural portals include *schweizerbauer.ch*, *agrigate.ch* and *agrarmedien.ch*, while *agropool.ch* and *agri24.ch* are two popular platforms.

Agrigate.ch has been taken over by the Swiss Farmers' Union. The portal is due to be completely revised with new contents and should be relaunched within a few months. The internet indeed offers agricultural organisations totally new possibilities for interactive communication with their members. It still remains to be seen whether and when these possibilities will start to be used, however.

2. Switzerland: a land of newspapers and magazines

With 196 different publications, Switzerland easily has the most newspapers and magazines per head of the population. The German-speaking part of the country has 126 publications, the French-speaking part 52 and the Italian-speaking area 16; even the Romansch-speakers have a choice of 2 different publications. For some time now this structure, which has come about through historical developments and the geographical, cultural and political diversity of the country, has been under pressure owing to economic considerations as well as changing habits among the readership. The process of concentration, which has already led to the disappearance of many publications, will most likely continue.

2.1. Switzerland: a country of agricultural publications

The choice of Swiss agricultural magazines is as diverse as that of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines. As far as agriculture is concerned, there are five newspapers representing different language areas: the *BauernZeitung* and the *Schweizer Bauer* are on sale in the German-speaking part of the country, *Agri* and *Terre & Nature* are available for the French-speakers and the Italian-speaking Tessin has the *Agricoltore Ticinese*. The latter is in fact a cantonal newspaper. There are five cantonal publications in the German-speaking part which are all published in eastern Switzerland, with the exception of the *Bauernblatt Obwalden, Nidwalden + Uri*, namely the *Bündner Bauer*, the *St. Galler Bauer*, the *Thurgauer Bauer* and the *Zürcher Bauer*. The one cantonal publication in western Switzerland, the *Terre Valaisanne*, is due to close at the end of this year. The choice of Swiss agricultural publications also includes four specialised magazines and a range of magazines published by producers' organisations and special interest groups. One that deserves special mention is *Tierwelt*, which is in fact published by the Swiss Association of Small Animal Breeders. It is also popular among farmers in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, however. It is not bought and read for the information it contains from the Association but because it includes by far the largest and most diverse small ads section. In *Tierwelt* readers can find almost everything, every possible and impossible kind of article is offered for sale or being sought. *Tierwelt* is in fact one of the most profitable publications in Switzerland.

2.1.1. Cantonal and linguistic-region newspapers

Unlike the publications that target one linguistic area, the main feature of the cantonal newspapers is reports on agriculture in the area in question. The publications are edited by the cantonal farmers' unions. With the exception of the *St. Galler Bauer* the editorial board is headed by the secretary general of the local cantonal farmers' union. The journalistic quality also varies.

The newspapers destined for a certain linguistic area are professionally edited by editorial boards and their columns cover all aspects of agriculture. The Swiss agricultural press took on a professional image at the beginning of the 1990s when the *Schweizer Bauer* was taken over by a large publishing house, namely what has today become the Espace Media Group (publishers of the *BernerZeitung*, the *Bund*, etc.). The agricultural newspaper for the canton of Berne became a modern, up-to-date publication for the German-speaking cantons that is independent of any agricultural organisation. At the same time publication was reduced to two issues a week instead of three.

As a reaction to this development, the Swiss Farmers' Union together with the Central Association of Swiss Dairy Farmers launched the *BauernZeitung* at the beginning of 1994. The different linguistic areas are covered by two regional supplements, one for north-west Switzerland, Berne and Fribourg and the other for central Switzerland and Aargau. The *Zentralblatt* – the dairy farmers' newspaper, and the cantonal agricultural publications for Solothurn, Lucerne and central Switzerland were incorporated into the *BauernZeitung*. Two years later the *BauernZeitung* changed from being a members' publication to a subscription publication and it was taken over by an independent company, namely Schweizer Agrarmedien GmbH. Although the company's share capital is held by the main Swiss farmers' organisations and one regional organisation, the firm is financial and legally independent.

With an attested circulation of 37,526 copies, the *BauernZeitung* is the largest subscribed agricultural publication in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Despite major changes in agriculture, the number of subscribers has remained surprisingly stable, like that of the *Schweizer Bauer*. The free magazine for members' of the agricultural cooperatives, the *UFA Revue*, has the highest circulation.

2.1.2. Completion of the concentration process in western Switzerland

While there are still cantonal newspapers in the German-speaking part of the country, the concentration process of agricultural publications in the French-speaking area will be completed with the disappearance of the *Terre Valaisanne* at the end of this year. From January 2006 on there will be only one agricultural publication in western Switzerland, namely *Agri*. Although *Terre & Nature* can be found in almost every farmhouse it finally became a newspaper for rural areas this spring. The agricultural press market now reflects recent developments in agriculture. In western Switzerland this structural change is far more advanced than in other parts of the country. As far as usable land is concerned, farms in the French-speaking areas are on average twice as large as those in German-speaking Switzerland.

2.1.3. Concentration in the publishing sector

In the German-speaking part of Switzerland there have been no more mergers among publications over the past ten years, although various publishing houses have merged. There are now two major publishers, namely the Espace Media Group and Schweizer Agrarmedien GmbH, who are fighting a fierce battle for the falling readership and stagnating advertising market. The Espace Media Group publishes not only the *Schweizer Bauer* but also the *Landfreund*, a magazine which is also sold in Germany under contract in combination with *topagrar* and/or *profi*. At the same time the Group operates the most successful agricultural portal on the internet, namely *schweizerbauer.ch*, and is responsible for advertising and subscriptions for the *Schweizer Landtechnik* and *Der Gemüsebau – Le Maraîcher*.

In western Switzerland the Espace Media Group collaborates with the major publishing house Edipresse to produce *Terre & Nature*. Along with the *BauernZeitung* with its two regional supplements, Schweizer Agrarmedien GmbH has been producing the more conservative *die grüne* since 2000. It also brought out *Frauenland* in 2003 in collaboration with the Swiss Association of Farmers' Wives. Furthermore, it operates by far the largest internet trading platform for agricultural machinery, *agropool.ch*. In western Switzerland Schweizer Agrarmedien GmbH collaborates on the production of *Agri*.

2.2. Peculiarities of the Swiss agricultural press

Swiss people like an exception to the rule, although the diversity of the agricultural press in this country is not particular to Switzerland; in Austria and Germany there is a similar number of publications. And the contents of these products, such as reports on agricultural methods, species testing, farm management, product markets, etc., do not distinguish them from others; such topics are the core of the agricultural press all over the world. So what makes the Swiss agricultural press different?

Its peculiarities are closely linked to the historical development of agriculture's role in politics and society, as well as the fact that Switzerland is a multilingual country, and in particular the system of direct democracy that prevails here.

In a country where agriculture is protected and subsidised to the extent it is in Switzerland, it comes as no surprise that politics enjoys a central position in the agricultural press. Foreign readers are astonished by the extent to which political issues are covered in the Swiss agricultural press and are explained in detail. And it is by no means only agricultural policy that is addressed, debated and commented on in the agricultural press. Foreign policy, namely Switzerland's relations with the EU, foreign trade policy (the World Trade Organisation and trading agreements), economic policy, finance, environmental protection, spatial development, energy policy, etc. – there is hardly a single area of national politics that does not affect agriculture and is not covered in the Swiss agricultural press.

The system of direct democracy means that almost every issue is debated in great detail. Within the Swiss agricultural sector there is rarely a unanimous opinion, even on agricultural issues, more often than not only majority and minority opinions. Like the daily press, the Swiss agricultural press has taken it upon itself to facilitate this democratic debate. The voice of the Swiss Farmers' Union is only one among many ... and this ensures a really lively debate in Swiss agricultural publications.

3. Prospects: Continuation of the concentration process

It is always said that one should be cautious with forecasts, especially since they concern the future. The agricultural press is closely linked to developments in the agricultural sector. Since agricultural markets will continue to be opened up and state subsidies will definitely not be increased, the following scenario can be assumed.

- The structural change will not slow down but on the contrary it will pick up speed.
- Over the next few years Swiss prices will be increasingly adapted to the European environment.
- Switzerland will not join the EU within the next ten years because such a step is still far from being what the majority of the population want.
- In 2015 there will only be around 30,000 farms in the German-speaking part of the country and about 10,000 in western Switzerland.

It is not difficult to see what these changes will mean for the Swiss agricultural press. Falling readership figures and an at best stagnant advertising market will result in a drop in income while the cost of producing newspapers and magazines will rise. It can therefore be assumed that in the future

- the number of different publications will fall and that out of all the cantonal agricultural newspapers only the *St. Galler Bauer* has any real chance of survival;
- only one single publication will survive in each linguistic region;
- at the most one Swiss agricultural magazine will continue to be published;
- foreign agricultural publications will not (yet) constitute any real competition because production conditions will continue to be extremely different.

It remains to be seen how fast this concentration process will take place in the German-speaking agricultural press. The same and similar forecasts were voiced ten years ago. In 2005 the reality is different.