

## **EUROPE AND ITALY: ONE CONTEXT, DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

*By Philip Willan*

Western Europe is lucky to have a long tradition of free expression in the press, and that is true of Italy too, the country that is hosting this conference. I have worked here as a freelance journalist for almost 30 years and intend to speak mainly about the Italian experience.

It is appropriate that we are discussing this topic in Venice, the city that gave us the word *gazette*, from a monthly paper published by the government in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century.

There are certainly problems about the way the press has evolved here, and I think that makes Italy a country particularly worthy of study. Reporters Without Borders placed Italy at number 35 in its Press Freedom Index for 2007 (Russia came in at 144).

Like many other countries in Western Europe, Italy's post-war media were created on an Anglo-American cultural model and nurtured in the early stages by the western allies. The result has been a lively, diverse and plural media, corresponding to the multiplicity of political parties competing for power, or at least for visibility.

But as I mentioned, there have been problems. When I first began working here I noticed the high esteem that journalists enjoyed within Italian society. British journalists don't generally enjoy that high regard.

When people think of a journalist in Britain they probably think of a tabloid journalist: ruthlessly efficient and aggressive, who is liable to steal a photograph from your mantelpiece if you let him in the house and who won't remove his foot from the door when you don't.

In Italy he was a much more genteel figure, respected because he was connected to and a conduit to political power. And that was the problem.

Journalists working for the state broadcaster RAI often seemed subservient to the politicians they were interviewing. There was little sign of the pitbull journalism associated with certain BBC reporters. The aggressive questioning of someone like Jeremy Paxman was unthinkable here.

Journalists were not there to call political leaders to account, to put hard questions to them on behalf of the public, and to insist on an answer when they tried to wriggle out of giving one. They were often there to hold an open microphone and let the politician say whatever he wanted.

That was no surprise, because the political journalists owed their jobs to the political parties. The three main state networks were divided up under a spoils system known as *lottizzazione*: RAI One was controlled by the Christian Democrat Party, RAI Two owed its allegiance to the Socialists, and RAI Three was the fiefdom of the Italian Communist Party. And there were various slivers of media influence for the other minor parties.

Until quite recently, I understand, a new director of the RAI One news programme couldn't be appointed without tacit approval from the Vatican.

Control over television is particularly important in Italy, as it is almost everywhere, because television is the principal source of news for the majority of the population. That news is provided by RAI, and since the 1980s, by Silvio Berlusconi's

Mediaset company. Like RAI, it has three national networks – and that's another of the problems on the Italian media scene.

The written press is also lively and diverse, but Italians are not great newspaper readers. About 6 million copies are sold every day, so fewer than one in 10 Italians is buying a newspaper – given that those who do buy often get more than one paper.

One of the weaknesses of the print sector though, is its dependence on public subsidies. These were initially justified after the war as a way of encouraging democratic pluralism as the country emerged from a fascist dictatorship. But over the years it has become a source of abuse, limiting the independence of the press and showering politicians and their friends with easy money.

A recent study showed that the state was subsidising newspapers to the tune of €700 million a year, much of it going to cover the cost of newsprint and postage. Some of it goes to tiny political publications which almost nobody reads, and some of it, unnecessarily, to some of the biggest and most commercially successful national newspapers.

The Berlusconi government has announced a drastic reduction of the subsidies and there is now a debate as to the fairest way to implement the cuts.

It is interesting to note that Spain, with a somewhat similar history, has moved in a diametrically opposite direction. Under the dictatorship of General Franco there was an extensive network of state-funded media. These were all sold in the 1970s and 80s and today there are no party newspapers and there is no direct state funding of the media.

That is not to say, of course, that the parties don't exert direct political influence over the two state television channels and an indirect influence on the media through institutional advertising, especially at a regional level.

Though it is some years since a journalist was killed in Italy because of his work, those covering the activities of organised crime in southern Italy still face a high level of risk. Among the best known examples are Roberto Saviano, the author of a best selling book about the Naples area Camorra and Lirio Abbate, a crime reporter for the national news agency ANSA in Palermo. Both men have received threats and require police protection.

Again there is a parallel with Spain. Reporters working in the Basque region who are not sympathetic to the separatist cause of ETA have been threatened and killed. In recent years a reporter and newspaper administrator have been killed, another reporter was injured by a parcel bomb and numerous others have been forced to leave the region because of concerns for their safety.

What makes Italy a particularly interesting international anomaly today is the control exercised over the media by Silvio Berlusconi, the current prime minister.

The country's richest man, he owns a communications empire encompassing three national television networks, a major book and magazine publishing company, while both his wife and brother own newspapers that generally support his policies.

Through control of parliament, he is able to influence the personnel and policies of the state broadcaster RAI as well. During his second term in office he issued a statement during a visit to Bulgaria condemning three individuals – two journalists and a

comedian – for making what he called a “criminal use” of television. All three of these critics rapidly disappeared from the screen.

The French academic Pierre Musso has just published a book examining the relationship with the media of Berlusconi and his French counterpart President Nicholas Sarkozy.

The book is entitled “Sarkoberlusconismo” and observes that the two leaders have a similar approach to the media and a similar success in harnessing it as a vehicle for the promotion of their personal popularity.

While Berlusconi is able to exert direct influence through ownership, Sarkozy enjoys similarly favourable coverage through his personal friendships with the owners of print and electronic media.

Musso acknowledges that Italy is the only developed country in the world where the prime minister continues to exercise control over a media empire. But he is not convinced that ownership of the media necessarily implies control over their content, or that the media have a direct, mechanistic influence on electoral outcomes.

He points out that Berlusconi has lost two elections while still being in possession of his TV networks.

How much Berlusconi is able to influence content and how that content influences elections is a very complex question. The prime minister himself often complains that his media group is full of employees who support his political opponents.

And Professor Musso’s downplaying of Mediaset’s political influence may itself be shaped by the fact that he appears to be an admirer of both Sarkozy and Berlusconi. Ministers from both the French and Italian governments participated at the presentation of his book in Rome last week.

A documentary about the Camorra was broadcast recently on Berlusconi’s flagship Channel Five. It was a highly professional account of the criminal group’s latest bloodthirsty activities and how the government was reacting. It mentioned the Camorra’s involvement in the refuse crisis in the Naples area, but neglected to mention its ties, in that context, to local politicians.

That might have involved admitting that an undersecretary in the government had been accused by former Camorristi of having links to the criminal organisation – an allegation that has been reported in the daily and weekly press.

Perhaps that wasn’t the real thrust of the story, but one can imagine numerous cases of self-censorship by broadcasters whose professional activity comes under the direct or indirect control of the prime minister. The cumulative effect on public opinion of these missing items of information is impossible to quantify.

More easy to imagine is the influence of the Network Four news programme, run by a journalist called Emilio Fede, who is a personal friend and ardent admirer of the prime minister. Almost the only item of news that is not cast as political propaganda is the report on the weather.

Freedom of the press in Britain, another country I am familiar with, is solidly entrenched. Reporters Without Borders ranks the country at 24 in its Freedom Index.

There could be concerns though about the concentration of ownership in the hands of a few tycoons: Rupert Murdoch’s global media empire comes to mind. In Italy

however, his relatively new satellite news channel is helping to open up the market to competition.

A further player in the Italian television news market is La Sette, but the company is short of cash and has been laying off reporters. Furthermore, it is owned by Telecom Italia, a company dependent on the government for operating licenses and telecommunications tariffs.

Perhaps the most significant threat to press freedom in the UK comes from the country's stringent libel laws. The high awards granted by judges and the costs of employing a good London libel lawyer can have an intimidating effect on newspaper and book publishers. The very fact of being sued, even if the plaintiff's case is unfounded, can have the effect of wiping out a book publisher's profit in one fell swoop.

A curious island of press freedom is represented by satirical magazines. Britain's Private Eye is still going strong, offering a forum for sensitive stories which the mainstream press is sometimes afraid to touch. But even Private Eye has become somewhat more cautious than it once was as a result of expensive libel suits.

In France Le Canard Enchaîné appears to be going from strength to strength. Last year it made a profit of more than €6 million and saw its circulation rise by 24 percent. And all this without an inch of advertising and without making use of internet, but trading instead on a reputation for investigative scoops and reliability fostered over its 92-year history.

In Italy a similar role is played by a satirical and investigative TV programme called Striscia la Notizia, which one might translate loosely as "The News Strip". The programme, which often denounces government waste and abuses of power, is produced by Berlusconi's Mediaset company.

Perhaps the most interesting of these maverick publications was a weekly magazine published in Italy in the 1970s called Osservatore Politico (Political Observer). Its editor, Mino Pecorelli, published countless scoops on political corruption and terrorism – both serious afflictions at the time.

His analysis of the Red Brigades' kidnap and murder of Aldo Moro, the chairman of the Christian Democrat Party, was particularly illuminating and highlighted the interest of both cold war superpowers in removing the Communist Party from the area of power. Moro had been pursuing a power-sharing project when he was seized and that project came to an end with his life.

Pecorelli was shot dead in 1979 and no one has yet been convicted for his murder.

I may have given the impression that freedom of the press is in a healthier state in Britain than it is in Italy. I don't deny that that is my overall view.

I believe that the main media organisations in Britain offer a more level playing field for the competing parties than they do in Italy, where there has been a long tradition of party political interference in areas that elsewhere would be none of their business.

It is no accident that the public image of Italy's politicians is severely tarnished and that books denouncing their abuses – notably "The Caste" written by two Corriere della Sera journalists – have been runaway best sellers.

But it is worth reflecting that the global financial crisis of recent days represents a catastrophic failure of the Anglo-American cultural model.

It also represents a serious failure on the part of Anglo-Saxon journalism. The press, just like the regulatory authorities, doesn't seem to have exercised an effective control over this sector of the economy. If voices of warning were raised in advance, they certainly didn't get through to me or to the newspaper-reading public as a whole.

So there is little cause for complacency.