



Italians abroad. Second-class Readers, Second-class Citizens

Letizia Airos (March 24, 2010)



Funding to publishers is cut in half – but it only applies to Italian newspapers abroad. History repeats itself. Neglect and upheaval, Italian-style? Those newspapers affected include America Oggi in the U.S., La Voce d'Italia in Venezuela, Gente d'Italia in Uruguay, Il Corriere Canadese in Canada, Il Globo in Melbourne, and La Fiamma in Sidney, Australia. All are in danger of folding.



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Let's look at the big picture and set aside the details, which are too technical and complicated to cover at this juncture. This is about Italian politics, which is always difficult to explain to the uninitiated, especially to those who don't deal with it on a daily basis.

As has occurred for far too long in the 'Bel Paese', it began with the passing of a measure intended to institute something completely different. The initial idea was to develop a plan to streamline and reorganize state aid to newspapers, which in Italy amounts to a lot of money. Above all, it was meant to redistribute funds away from those entities that were not entitled to them. (It must be said that there are many anomalies with regard to the funding situation of Italian newspapers, and the system does require better regulation, including perhaps some aid for online publishing, which is completely ignored. But we are not going to discuss these issues now.)

So what happened instead? Basically, the Council of Ministers has gone after the newspapers serving Italian readers abroad. They have taken away fifty percent of their aid, while all other newspapers in Italy continue to receive regular funding. And what's worse, they have taken away fifty percent of last year's aid. That's right - the measure is also retroactive!

So newspapers like America Oggi in the U.S., La Voce d'Italia in Venezuela, Gente d'Italia in Uruguay, Il Corriere Canadese in Canada, Il Globo in Melbourne, and La Fiamma in Sidney, Australia are all in danger of folding, mostly due to the debilitating effect of these retroactive measures.

If this seems an oversimplification, let us attempt to discuss some of the details. Take heart and read on. It's a long and complicated story, another Italian-style mess, but let's begin at the end.

The Council of Ministers approved the Decree known as "Incentives" or "Stimulus" (in Italy these days major legislation is passed as decrees, thus bypassing parliamentary discussion). This measure, intended to stimulate the economy, contained among other provisions an appropriation of ten million Euros (about 14 million dollars) to "fix" the budget shortfall caused by another recent Decree known as "Milleproroghe". But newspapers serving Italian readers abroad were excluded from receiving this special funding.

What is the "Milleproroghe Decree"? Originally intended as an exceptional and urgent measure, it is now regularly invoked in Italy and used far too often—extending to matters of marginal significance such as funds for the flower market in Sanremo.

In our case, while the "Milleproroghe" had cut state aid to all newspapers, the subsequent last-minute amendment inserted in the "Incentives" Decree now protects funds earmarked for newspapers published by political parties and by cooperatives. But (surprise?) newspapers abroad have been left out in the cold, along with local TV and radio stations and publications by consumer protection organizations. State aid to these media is now expected to be cut by fifty percent.

So, we dare say, history repeats itself. Thanks to an Italian-style mess, Italians residing abroad bear the brunt of the cuts. They are not like other residents in Italy, and nobody seems to have



considered the fact that these newspapers can also be a driving force allowing younger generations to become familiar with their mother country, especially with the Italian language.

Let us quote Andrea Mantineo, America Oggi's Editor in Chief, on the matter: "The fifty percent funding cut places America Oggi and other Italian language newspapers published abroad at risk of folding. It cannot be said that this is a decision dictated by economic conditions. The limited amount saved (5 million Euros in all) is certainly not enough to redress the state's budget deficit. This does, however, leave Italians residing in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Venezuela without a means of getting information in their own language. And what does the President of the Republic think of this? Repeating the question from our initial editorial: Is this right?"

So, indeed, What does the President of the Republic think? And what do Italians in America think? What do their children think?

After Italians abroad won the right to vote (and we do wonder at this point whether this right can be taken for granted), it seemed that the two worlds—those in Italy and those abroad—could finally begin to know each other, speak to each other calmly, and raise their own children in a "glocal" world.

But a similar measure turns back the clock and negates the possibility of understanding and being understood. The parity that would equalize the rights and responsibilities of citizens no longer exists.

Let's take a few words from an article by Stefano Vaccara, journalist for America Oggi and director of its weekly magazine Oggi7: "Is someone trying to kill America Oggi? Perhaps a few 'refined' minds in Rome would like to kill off the Italian language newspaper in the U.S., along with the other major Italian newspaper in North America, Il Corriere Canadese of Toronto, and the other brave Italian newspapers in Venezuela and Australia." Vaccara goes on to write at the end of his article: "We hope they are right, that their PDL only wanted to make a 'refined' decision to help publicize and transmit language, culture, and information to Italians living abroad, namely, the independent information that is never enslaved to anyone. But certainly, no refined mind would ever have thought that the Italian press abroad could possibly be a nuisance simply because of its unassailable independence, and who could possibly want to silence it forever...."

Is there some truth in what he suspects? Let's hope not.

Let us conclude with another suspicion, this time from Gian Antonio Stella. The journalist for the Corriere della Sera writes in his wonderful article: "Doubt remains. Deceit. Would the cuts have been made if a general election rather than regional elections [where Italians abroad do not vote] were on the agenda?"

The answer may be contained in the very subtitle of the famous book on Italian emigration that Stella wrote a few years ago, *The Horde*: Yes, perhaps Italians abroad are still considered to be "the Albanians."

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