

Pre-Rinsing the News

Judith Harris (August 30, 2009)



Manipulation of the news creates its own truth, and this is a danger for democracy.

ROME - Premier Silvio Berlusconi has brought a one million euro law suit against the newspaper La Repubblica for defamation. For three months now the Italian daily has relentlessly published a daily list of ten questions for which the newspaper demands answers concerning the Premier's private affairs. These alleged affairs went onto the public record when the Premier's estranged wife, Veronica Lario, wrote an open letter accusing her husband of having inappropriate relations with



minors and of suffering from undefined physical problems. Last Friday Mr. Berlusconi's personal lawyer, Niccolò Ghedini, a member of Parliament for the Partito della Libertà, announced he will bring defamation suits against selected foreign publications if he can "verify if there is the possibility to bring civil actions against those who went beyond the normal right to report events."

The foreign newspapers will likely include the Spanish El País, the French Nouvel Observateur, and the British dailies the Times, Guardian, Independent, Financial Times and Daily Telegraph, all of which have not been reluctant to reveal piquant details.

By way of reply to the law suit against La Repubblica, the French leftist daily Liberation has begun publishing the same list in sympathy with the besieged Italian newspaper. "This is an intolerable attack on press freedom, and a disturbing signal for all of Europe," Laurent Joffrin, editor in chief of Liberation, explained.

The legal action and threats coincide with worsening of relations between the Italian Catholic Church and Mr. Berlusconi. Following a series of knuckle-wrapping editorial rebukes in the Catholic daily Avvenire, which is the official publication of the Italian bishops, the chief editor of Il Giornale newspaper (which belongs to Berlusconi's brother) Vittorio Feltri responded with signal brutality. The result: Berlusconi's much-vaunted dinner appointment in L'Aquila to meet with the Cardinal Secretary of State of the Vatican Tarcisio Bertone was cancelled by the Vatican.

Il Giornale then retorted Saturday that its "enemies" have been "unleashed." An editorial called the editor of Avvenire Dino Boffo the "chief moralist committed to launching anathemas against Silvio Berlusconi for his private affairs."

Meanwhile, last week the New York Times joined the fray in an op-ed comment by a professor of social psychology in Milan, [Chiara Volpato, "Italian Women Rise Up,"](#) [2] in which she discusses the role of the Italian press in maintaining popular support for the Premier.

Understanding how that role works under Mr. Berlusconi, who owns outright three national networks and appoints the directors of the other three, of a total of seven, may be the most important lesson to be drawn from this tawdry affair.

His air-tight control over TV means that the scandals were mentioned in passing or not at all on six of seven networks. The brainwashing mentioned by Professor Volpato was unnecessary, for the news was pre-rinsed for the precise audience which keeps him in power, an audience composed especially of the elderly living in the depressed South. The medium not only is the message, but determines who receives the message.

Nationwide, at most one-third of Italians over the age of 18 read newspapers (32% of those over 65). By contrast, 38% of those under 24 are TV viewers, but the figure rises to 57% of those over age 65, according to Eurispes, the research organization.

More importantly, when asked what is their most important source for the news, over 43% responded that it is TV and under 27%, the daily newspaper. Calculating further that Mr. Berlusconi also owns newspapers and magazines which published only the scantest information about the scandals, with invective and anger but no details, the figure of those who knew anything at all about them cannot be more than 10%.

Interestingly, Italians who defend Mr. Berlusconi say that his critics should pay less attention to "gossip" and more to the good things he has done for Italy, such as resolving the economic crisis--a claim he has made repeatedly on TV. He has not resolved the economic crisis, of course--no one has--but since he says he has, the claim becomes its own truth despite grim statistics to the contrary. One small example: 29% fewer jobs offered to the university graduates of 2009 over 2008.



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