

Italian Journalism: the Real Loser in the Italian Elections (guest blog)

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Beppe Grillo – the anti-media politician?

The Italian general elections held in February resulted in parliamentary [deadlock](#), and debates of who were the winners and losers still continue. Partito Democratico (PD), the centre-left coalition led by Pierluigi Bersani, and the Popolo della Libertà (PDL) party of Silvio Berlusconi nearly tied with just over 29% each. However, commentators tend to agree that [the real winner](#) was Beppe Grillo with his Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), which surpassed all predictions by obtaining 25.5% of all votes in just its first appearance in national elections. But according to Polis Intern [Jacopo Genovese](#) there is one clear loser that only a few pundits have mentioned: Italian journalism.

Italian journalists failed to predict the success of the M5S, proving themselves completely inadequate at understanding and representing the real political situation of the country at the time of

the vote. Most importantly, it is remarkable that this same political party that they ‘underestimated’ is notoriously [hostile to journalists](#) and traditional media outlets.

One of the reasons traditional Italian news media have declined in popularity is because of entrenched poor journalistic practice. In 2009, Time Magazine described Italian newspapers as “[untrusted sources](#)”: rather than reporting the news for the general public, journalists were described as referring to a small circle, providing no background to their stories as if none is needed, as every hint or allusion could be perfectly deciphered by members of that elite.

[Marco Alloni](#)’s critique of Italian journalism is slightly different, although he entertains the idea that Italian journalism has traditionally failed to engage with the electorate. His view is that journalists in Italy have reduced reality to its representation, and have transformed news into mere political gossip. [Michele Serra](#), instead, underlines how the practice of “ambush” journalism that characterises political reporting in Italy does not allow for longer reasoning or more elaborated analysis of complicated issues.

Clientelist journalism loses readers

Another problem with Italian newspapers is that media entrepreneurs [depend largely on politicians](#). Conflicts of interests exist beyond the well-known case of Mr Berlusconi. All of the most popular daily papers are in the hands of the main industrial groups in the country. This has led journalists to try to [influence politics](#), rather than just report it. Yet their political clout is waning as the public increasingly has alternatives to the mainstream industry-owned press.

Newspaper readership [has always been lower in Italy](#) than in most European countries, and has been [falling](#) significantly in the last few years. Readers have turned to alternative sources of information, especially on the web, more or less at the same time that M5S leader Beppe Grillo’s [blog](#) grew in popularity. This has not dissuaded journalists, however, from maintaining the same practices and the same business of promoting politically motivated narratives. While traditional media kept telling the same [self-reinforcing stories](#), a new political force – the M5S – was rising, a phenomenon that did not fit into the traditional “left-vs-right” categories of political reporting, and therefore was partly ignored or underestimated.

Traditional journalism buckling to political boycott

Underrepresentation of the M5S in the media was not only due to bad journalistic practices. M5S members have refused – and their party rules forbid – speaking to journalists or answering their questions. This media boycott started well before the electoral campaign, and has been going on after the elections, too. [The only ways](#) Mr Grillo communicated with his electorate were through his blog and in very successful political rallies. At the same time M5S has been campaigning for the [elimination of public subsidies](#) to newspapers, and for the [partial privatisation of RAI](#), the public service broadcaster.

Journalism's Defeat

The election of 2013, therefore, has been a debacle for Italy's traditional media. Indeed, not only have many journalists had to justify their mistakes to their audiences, but they have also been deprived of the possibility to talk and engage with the M5S, which supposedly represents the part of the Italian electorate that wants more radical change.

Moreover, this emerging party is on the warpath against traditional media. This defeat of Italian journalism raises serious questions about its future. If, in fact, traditional media have failed to adequately perform their duties, would cutting their funding better serve the public interest? Beppe Grillo claims that Italians do not need journalists; but could Italy survive as a democracy without them?

How much of this does Mr Grillo actually believe, and how much of this is a [political strategy](#), given that, on the one hand, he does [talk to foreign press](#), and on the other hand, that he also gained much of his popularity from being reported on in mainstream media? Is the Internet, in [the way Beppe Grillo sees](#) it, truly a solution to all the problems of unfair reporting in Italy – or simply a more accessible tool for [spreading political propaganda](#)?

Italian journalists have to change their practices if they want to survive and still make sense for their nation. They have been given signals in the past, but for the first time they are starting to be accountable for their mistakes. The latest elections show that existing journalistic practices are unsustainable, and demonstrate a need for reform.

Certainly, there are serious problems with political collusion and [media concentration in Italy](#), but those influences will not be mitigated by passing media policies under a minority government. The problem is ultimately a problem of trust, one that goes to the core of journalistic practice, and therefore any meaningful reform must be driven by journalists themselves, and not only by state policy.

This article by Polis Intern [Jacopo Genovese](#)

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