

Italy: The Politics Of Information

by John Hopkins

The editor of 'Journal of the Centre for Advanced TV Studies' relates the instinctive tale of how TeleBiella, a local Italian Cable TV group, brought down the government and, what it means for us.

In Italian politics for the last year, a debate on the status of public information has been raging. It's a debate that brought down Andreotti's centre-right government, and one that is inextricably bound up with TV on all levels. It involves the state monopoly TV network RAI, the development of cable-TV, the push for centralisation of both control and content, and the use of portable video which now has adherents all over the country.

There is only one TV Network in Italy, RAI, set up under the Christian Democrat (DC for short) Government in 1952 with a 20-year mandate to provide (in black and white only) the nation's TV. Last December, a further year's extension was granted. Although ostensibly a public service, RAI has in fact been in the control of the DC party and its secretary Fanfani for most of the last two decades.

In Italy, where the political left is voluble, articulate and has massive student, worker and union support, the opposition to continued DC control is very strong. The debate was brought to a head early this year on the issue of cable-TV: which is curious if you consider that there is actually none, anywhere in the country.

Last November in the small northern town of Biella, Beppo Sacchi set up his operation. Starting with two Akai portables and a few monitors placed around the town's main square at weekends, Sacchi with his wife and a couple of friends began TeleBiella—a type of TV reportage and playback reminiscent of local-paper journalism. Reconstructed crimes, lurid sensational reporting, advertising made up most of the content.

In the best tradition of the independent entrepreneur, Sacchi engineered an impressive blaze of publicity for his shoe-string stunt, and within a few weeks he had hit not only the national press but also the purses of the rich liberals.

So well did Sacchi play his game that a score of other groups started all over the country—names like TeleMilano, TeleTorino—and held a nationwide congress at Udine. Of course there was the predictable backlash. RAI, in an operation curiously reminiscent of the BBC's attitude towards the use of portable video in their own studios sent detector vans into the town. Their job was to 'prove' that TeleBiella was causing interference with the reception of RAI.

Eventually the Minister of Posts



Bridging the communications barrier, people's participation in organising their own information service.

and Communications, one Mr Gioia (English translation 'joy') issued a decree banning cable-TV. One spring morning the local judge padlocked TeleBiella's shopfront. And the government fell. Banning, however, has not prevented a sharp rise in the sales of Akai portables this year . . .

Portable video, it turns out, is being used in many places in Italy, and not all as media-hyped as Tele-Biella. At the recent Pesaro Festival of New Film, where I had the dubious distinction of being the only foreign video delegate, five days of discussion debate and tape viewing showed that there is a deep and serious interest in the use of video for information purposes. Current work ranges from use in psychiatry, to providing genuine decentralised information networks for the public at large: and it's here, that the real significance of the emerging school of Italian video-workers lies.

I visited Bologna, where a mixed Italian-American action-research team has been quietly preparing

long-term plans for a decentralised public information network for the local regional administration. For a generation, the Emilia-Romagna region, of which Bologna is the capital, has been Communist controlled.

'To govern with a high degree of political participation', says Giuseppe Ricchiere, one of the team, 'we need a very good information system because without information, without communication, we cannot have participation. This means a large decentralisation: in the schools, the factories, the neighbourhoods with their *Casa del Popolo* (peoples meeting houses), the small local administrations, in fact in every organised situation of this kind, the people must have the possibility of organising their own information'.

He went on to explain their phased plan for the creation of such a system, based on the use of portable video and cable-TV. Starting with the 13 largest towns in the region, bases with production hardware will be set up accessible to all the different groups. They will be supported with mobile video vans. Later, there will

be a further step of decentralisation to the smaller towns and the surrounding countryside.

Backing this up and providing the means of intercommunication will be two-way cable-TV, with some of the channels completely controlled by local groups. What makes this set up a structural revolution, is that cable-TV will at first *not* be used to link up private houses. Instead, centres of gathering and organisation will be linked. This marks a decisive step in the political use of the media, and perhaps one that is possible only because of the prevailing politics and the way of life here, so different from that in England.

Or is it? You can read off the political development of our green and pleasant land by simply looking at the media structure: one-way monoculture with carefully controlled access to the means of production and distribution. It is evident that without sufficient access to information of what alternatives are possible, the real choices in England are safely limited to the menu of the ruling classes. And *they* aren't going to give up without a hell of a struggle.