

The Italian Oxygen Method to discover new forms of censorship

By Alberto Spampinato – Director of the observatory “Ossigeno per l’Informazione”

Among the six founding countries of the European Union, Italy is the only nation where the press is classified as not free but “partly free” by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders annual Reports. The last Freedom House Report puts Italy in 68th place out of 197 countries. Why has Italy had such a poor ranking since 2009?

It is due essentially to three reasons: a concentration of media ownership, an insufficient separation between media, politics and government, and a high number of journalists threatened with physical and legal harassment. This last problem is a hidden one. Italy has this serious problem but nobody would admit it. Politicians and the public began to take notice only after the shocking data published by the observatory Ossigeno per l’Informazione, which developed an original approach and conducted a special inquiry over the last five years using a specific research method that we named the “Oxygen Method”.

We think that Italy's unsolved problems, especially the wide presence of intimidatory acts against journalists, deserve special attention also from abroad, because they reveal that a new kind of censorship, insidious and undeclared, can emerge and spread in modern democracies, acting like an unknown disease, which damages one of the fundamental human rights and frustrates all efforts made to banish classical censorship.

It's important to monitor this new kind of censorship beyond Italy, to discover if it is present in other countries, in what form and to what extent. The “Oxygen Method” can be applied to do this. We make it available to everyone and hope that OSCE and other international institutions will support its implementation.

The main problem is not only to see if the new disease afflicting the press is present, but to demonstrate it to a skeptical audience. We show the effects of the disease: intimidation, threats, and victims. Our method classifies 29 different kinds of intimidation against media workers. In this grid in the last six years we have documented the names of more than 1400 victims of intimidation and have published each of their stories. This work helps people to overcome entrenched beliefs and stereotypes and brings hidden intimidation to the public stage. It's a big job but a worthy one. In Italy our work is entering the political agenda. In 2012 an investigation commissioned by the Parliament confirmed our data and analysis and inspired recommendations to government and MPs for legislative reform to limit intimidation. There is still a lot of work to do, but we are on the right path.