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## One man and his blog

**Thursday, December 20, 2007**

Dennis REDMONT

The international media person of the year has been announced in a poll taken by Iwantmedia.com, the key site for media maniacs.

The honor goes to [Writers](#) on Strike: the 12,000 members of Writers Guild of America who staged a strike early this year.

Among other nominees were disgraced CEO and newspaper mogul Conrad Black (sentenced to six years in jail), media tycoon Rupert Murdoch (who bought Dow Jones and the Wall Street Journal), and the publisher of the New York Times.

Italy has taken no such [survey](#) – had it deigned to it surely would have unanimously elected Beppe Grillo. Beppe who?

I second the motion!

The 59-year-old Genovese started life as an actor, until an improvised monologue for an audition led him to comedy.

But the corpulent, [mop](#)-haired Grillo has used his humor for far more than punch lines.

His current punch line has everyone saying "Vaff...", meaning "go to hell".

A self-styled representative of both the disenfranchised and Italians weary of political

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corruption, Grillo simultaneously challenges the Italian government and tries to mobilize public action.

Unlike Black and Murdoch, he has no business empire, but the satirist has gained prevailing support from the Italian and international public – and stifling opposition from the government.

In a country like [Italy](#), where a reported 68 percent view their government negatively, Beppe Grillo is an uplifting presence.

The actor-turned-[comedian](#) was in effect banished from publicly owned television (Rai) in 1987 satirical attack on the then prime minister, Bettino Craxi.

In the years of exile since, Grillo has toured auditoriums in and out of Italy to deliver his sharp of [political humor](#) and, more interestingly, entered a new terrain on which to fight his battle – his daily blog, [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it).

In a 2005 Freedom House review, Italy ranked 77th for press freedom – all six of the public television channels were owned by or accountable to the prime minister (at that time Silvio Berlusconi).

When Berlusconi was in power, Grillo said Italy had been downgraded to the level of Turkey “from free to semi free”.

Grillo showed the nation's desire for change and unrestricted social commentary when his blog became the most visited in Italy within its first year.

Now, [technorati.com](http://technorati.com) ranks it in the top ten most visited blogs in the world.

Grillo himself claims the site gets more than 50,000 hits a day. When one sees the responses to his pieces, sometimes running into the thousands, his claim is perfectly believable.

His campaigns, posted daily on the site, vary – Operation “Clean Parliament” is a popular crusade proposing 10 year term limits, and the proposal that no politician ever should be allowed to hold office if he has a [criminal record](#), or is under investigation (radical for Italy, where at least 23 members of parliament have been convicted of something).

Elsewhere, his [Web site](#) explores other matters; Grillo explains, “Go to my blog and you will understand what is happening. For hours, people are there talking about transport, energy, all the differences between Italy and other countries...And all of them are joined by the idea that they want proper politics and proper politicians.”

Using funding made from public donations to the Web site, Grillo has taken out advertisements in newspapers such as the International Herald Tribune to further promote his campaigns. From this came “V-Day”, standing for Vaffanculo Day. Translated literally (and perhaps somewhat cleaned up) expresses what many Italians are starting to feel about their politicians – “Stuff it”.

On September 8, 2007 events were scheduled in 280 Italian towns and cities to sign a bill objecting to politicians with criminal records staying in office.

- » [Don't let the headscarf cover our eyes from Kirkuk \(Cengiz ÇANDAR \)](#)
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Despite, or indeed because of, widespread public support, much of the Italian press criticized Grillo for his assault - Grillo's campaigns are termed in the media as "Anti-Politica", implying, of course apoliticism.

Supporters such as Former Prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro (now a member of Parliament himself) ridiculed the term, explaining that his crusades are anything but.

Mauro Mazza, director of public television channel RAI2 says "Nowadays, fortunately, we don't have good or bad masters. We have evidently acquired a sorcerer's apprentice, though."

### **Grillo's defence?**

That, "anyone who incites the crowd, who is outside the institutional riverbed is condemned. The language of V-Day is criticized to avoid talking about its contents and the causes that brought it about".

Recent criticisms include premier Romano Prodi's center-left government for "not having the courage to receive the Dalai Lama (who met Grillo himself, instead) and for "ignoring the slaughter" of workers who die on the job because of Italy's lax safety laws.

Grillo is the people's media person because he has realized the democratic power of the web, and using the [blog](#) form to engage in social commentary and a form of political debate which is otherwise unheard of in Italy.

He has gained the support of many segments of Italian society - to the intellectuals, such as Nobel literature prizewinner Dario Fo and world-renowned architect Renzo Piano, and to the 330,000 Italians who signed the V-Day petition in just one day.

American political activist and linguistics professor [Noam Chomsky](#) welcomes the V-Day phenomenon "It is extremely impressive that it could be done - I think it must reflect the substantial, overwhelming feeling on the part of the population that something dramatic has to be done about this persistent problem of Italian politics".

"The serious charges coming from elite opinion stem from the belief that the population should be removed from public affairs, that they should be spectators and not participants. From that point of view, it's a threat to try and engage [public opinion](#) in public affairs."

But perhaps we can take measure of his influence not by praise, but hostility - the Italian government has recently proposed a law that requires anybody who keeps a blog or Web site to register with the Communications Authority. This also means paying tax, providing documentary proof of identity and submitting a letter of intent of financial purposes.

Grillo, who lauds sites like wikipedia.org for their independent and unrestricted distribution of information, argues that this law means the end of the Internet in Italy.

He may have a point - this law is a regressive response to bloggers like Grillo, who have proven the Internet to be a powerful and creative medium for political debate.

It also shows Grillo's great influence, and the fear surrounding it from politicians who do not recognize the power and opportunity that lies in the Internet.

As Grillo himself has warned, "These politicians don't know the power of the Internet. They don't know how to use the Internet. For sure, these politicians don't know where we are headed."

\* Dennis Redmont, an executive at the Council for U.S. and Italy, is an American journalist and consultant, who divides his time between Rome and Istanbul. He teaches International journalism at the RAI School of Journalism, University of Perugia (SGRTV). He can be contacted at [mediadennis@libero.it](mailto:mediadennis@libero.it).

Liz Rusbridger contributed to this article.

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