

# IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



## Italy

16-07-1999

Italy is a country characterized by a well-established democracy, but it shares with the other G7 countries a concentration of press, television and publishing firms not efficiently controlled by the existing antitrust rules.

<b>Population:</b>	57,226,000 (1996)
<b>GNP per capita:</b>	\$ 19,880 (1996)
<b>Government / Constitution:</b>	Republic
<b>Main languages:</b>	Italian
<b>Main religions:</b>	Roman Catholicism
<b>Literacy:</b>	98% (1995)
<b>Online:</b>	19,09 (June 2000)

For a long time we have been waiting for reforms and simplification in legislation regarding the press, but no changes are expected in the near future. Actually, active government censorship is almost totally absent. Minority groups have extreme difficulty in accessing mass media (television networks and periodicals) in order to give their contribution to political and cultural debates.

Relative entrepreneurial freedom and voluntary work in any case allow small organizations to produce their own serials or collections. But market mechanisms make these products marginal: the investments indispensable for their diffusion cannot be made.

For this reason we see a rise in small-scale specialised publishing, which targets very small but lively and diversified groups. Anyway, its impact does not manage to contrast the effect that the cultural industry system has at mass level. Such an effect determines identical messages and stimulation in publishing media, which even have political and cultural trends very different from each other.

In some regions the number of bookshops and of news-stands is not sufficient and the school attendance is low. These issues are to be added to the structural handicaps. In the same areas even libraries are inefficient and in some cases absent. The result is a real censorship caused by market mechanisms rather than by institutional intervention.

There is no evidence of any form of censorship or persecution of opinions. But this apparent freedom of expression reduces awareness of the difficulties which minority groups meet in expressing their opinions when not aligned to traditional positions.

Indeed episodes of censorship or limitation of free information in libraries are rarely pointed out by specialised journals and newspapers, and when it occurs, they are not always confirmed (vg: proposals of book acquisition rejected by local authorities because of ideological reasons, obstacles to the free consultation of materials considered immoral).

Therefore, in the absence of a survey on this matter, we cannot evaluate self-censorship practices and the effective accessibility of controversial material for the library users. Censorship and free access to information are being more often discussed in newspapers and journals in relation to the Internet and to minors.

The manifold problems connected with public access to the Internet in libraries have found wide space in professional reviews and conferences: rules, possibility to distinguish between the services specifically offered by the library and those which are not (i.e. electronic mail, chat, etc.), authorisation for minors, control systems and user privacy, use of filters and other monitoring and security programs, free services and fees.

Nevertheless, items of noteworthy importance as freedom of expression and access to information find a special forum in AIB-CUR, the discussion list of more than 1500 Italian librarians: <http://www.aib.it/aib/aibcur/aibcur.htm3>. Here it is possible to get information and comments on copyright, limitations to loan and document delivery, free services and fees in libraries, free access to legislative texts and in general to public information, access to independent information sources or to those ones representing a specific position on such events as the Kosovo war.

On a legislative level, the Law N. 241 has given citizens the right of access to administrative acts since 1990. Much has been done to make this right easy for everyone, but a bureaucratic approach continues to limit access only to interested parties and ruling classes.

The use of the Internet, the creation of information sites by public authorities, both central and local, help facilitating access. In this context the diffusion of civic networks is critical too. Even if all that improves access conditions for those

who are able to use public or private workstations, as a matter of fact a vast majority remains excluded from active participation in community life.

### **The role of libraries**

Libraries, in particular public libraries, provide uneven service levels in terms of quality and satisfaction of demand.

In Northern regions and in some Central ones the quality of service is comparable to the average European standard and sometimes it fully exceeds it. Indeed such cities as Bologna, Milan, Turin, Brescia, Mantua made or are making big investments both in buildings and services. On the contrary, service is inadequate in some Southern and metropolitan regions.

AIB supported the Action Plan "MEDIATECA 2000", promoted by the Ministry for cultural heritage, to stimulate the realization of new multimedia library services and to exploit and boost the existent ones. This process is part of a wide convergence of public and private services, enterprises, cultural industries, school and training systems towards the development of the Information Society. Owing to the insufficient resources invested, the Plan has been slowly carried out, with many contradictions and without achieving the expected results.

In Italy, as in every part of the world, all such issues as the lack of libraries, the organization problems, the insufficient resources devoted to the acquisition of new publications help reducing intellectual freedom and access to information.

### **AIB action**

AIB is strongly affirming the rights of intellectual freedom and access to information through the following actions:

- Lobbying action on the Italian Government and Parliament to create awareness on these problems with particular attention to:
  - National and local legislation: we presented a draft of framework law on libraries and access services to knowledge, thought, culture and information. The Italian text is at the URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/editoria/n10/98-04ipot.htm>
  - We are defending, with the support of other associations, the right to reproduction of printed and digital materials for private and non-commercial purposes in libraries, which could be restricted by new laws. <http://www.aib.it/aib/cen/copyright1.htm>  
<http://www.aib.it/aib/cen/cs971024.htm>
  - We are proposing a simplification of administrative procedures based on the Law n° 103/95 and DM n° 420/95, which restrict the use of the INTERNET workstations in libraries.
- With the help of other organizations we intend to build a task force to systematically observe violations of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression.
- The AIB General Assembly held at the AIB Convention in Genoa, 29 April 1998, set up the Italian Professional Register of Librarians, kept by AIB and based on the British Library Association model. Important requirements for registration are professional behaviour and respect of the Librarian Code of ethics (<http://www.aib.it/aib/cen/deocod.htm>)
- Through our publications and Website we diffused the IFLA/FAIFE statements a few weeks after their publications (<http://www.aib.it/aib/editoria/n11/99-05dichia.htm>)

### **Conclusion**

Awareness of problems connected with human rights in the area of access to knowledge and freedom of expression is rather modest in Italy. Only minority groups and national bodies represented in international organizations continues to keep it alive.

Public opinion tolerates that in certain regions 40% of young people escapes school obligation condemning themselves to exclusion or, in any case, to reduction of chances and freedom. This happens in the same regions where libraries lack or are inefficient.