

Lecture V – Mass Communications and Political Communication in Italy

“All people have the right to express their thoughts freely in speech, writing, or any other means of communication.”

Italian Constitution, article 21

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

US Constitution, First Amendment

→ Television as the main changing factor in the “communication revolution in Italy”: TV was introduced in Italy in 1954, at a time in which post-war recovery was underway and the seeds of the coming “economic boom” were being planted. At the same time, TV was introduced at a time of profound political and social change, and it can be said to have both accompanied and stimulated such change.

→ TV was introduced as a **public service medium**, as in all European countries. The introduction of TV was a complex political issue all over the world. The key issue was scarcity of frequencies, which implied that a limited number of signals could be broadcast at the same time. Therefore, the amount of programming that was accessible to the whole audience at a given time was limited, with a potential threat to the diversity of the contents and the points of view available and hosted.

Two solutions:

- In the U.S., the problem of pluralism was resolved through competition among private businesses in a pure market system, regulated under anti-trust law (Sherman Act, 1890, Italian anti-trust law, 1990) and later special communication rules limiting ownership concentration and multimedia convergence (such rules are currently being questioned and possibly relaxed).
 - Problem: can the market itself provide for that public goods?
- In Europe, the problem of pluralism was resolved through the creation of public monopolies who were to provide within themselves and their programming the degree of pluralism, balance, and participation that was not achievable through market solutions.
 - Problem: can a public monopoly provide for that public goods?
- The two solutions actually merged: a (financially limited) public service broadcasting (PBS) was later established in the US, while many European countries saw their markets opening to private enterprises.

→ Introduction of TV in Italy

- The ruling Christian Democratic Party (DC) introduced TV as an instrument for holding power by controlling public opinion. Programs had to be in line with the cultural policy and ideology of the government.
- Though often despised by intellectual elites, the quality of programming was usually pretty high, thanks to the monopoly condition which made programmers much less host of the public’s most vulgar taste (no other programming was available when Opera or ballet were on).
 - Television’s role in the cultural advancement of a poorly schooled, often illiterate population.
 - School by television.

- Creation of a popular culture which bridged high and low culture.
- This scheme, hegemonized by the dominant culture, was put into question by two (somewhat opposite) demands:
 - After the social unrest in 1968 and 1969, the Communist Party and the social movements demanded for a democratization of public service broadcasting, which resulted in PCI obtaining control over one of the then three RAI channels in 1978.
 - Increasing pressure from private enterprises who wanted to enter the TV business claiming violation of Italian Constitution guaranteed right to free speech.
 - Such a request would be reasonable if:
 - The condition of frequency scarcity no longer applied
 - Proper regulation of the private system were provided, so that to put the system in balance.
- The Italian Constitutional Court sentenced that private broadcasting was admitted on a local scale, thus opening a loophole which allowed many private enterprises to broadcast programs nationally through connection of local networks.
- Consequence: what has been called “The TV Far West”: “The passage from hyper-regulation to capitalist free-for-all was so abrupt that it did not allow for the crucial stage – experienced by other Western countries – of negotiation between television and state on how best to regulate the medium, and between television and its audiences over what service should entail.”
 - The new private sector filled in a gap in RAI’s programming: quiz shows, talk shows, television movies, serials, and cartoons purchased in the international market (mostly US).
 - RAI did not respond by strengthening its institutional public-service role, but rather following the same tide of commercialization and spectacularization.

→ Commercial television in Italy

- The lack of regulation made Italian commercial TV more focused on the distribution end (i.e., selling viewers’ eyeballs to the advertisers) than on the production end.
 - Programs are not the final product, rather they are an intermediate product to get to the audience, which is not the customer but rather the final product delivered to the real customer, the companies who sponsor the programs and buy advertising time.
 - Success in the advertising market was the key to success in the TV market.
 - This was the key to Silvio Berlusconi’s success: his company was vertically integrated from broadcasting to advertising and much more efficient than the competitors on the advertising side.
- Lack of regulation also implied no restrictions on the amounts of programs that could be bought out of the national market (even though RAI had to respect such limits).
 - Because Italy lacked a common popular culture (due to late and elitist formation of a national state, poor participation to this process on the part of the people, great geographical and cultural differences) it was much easier to “import” a common culture from a flashy and fascinating country (the US) rather than “inventing” it based on some weak common ground which RAI was still trying to create.
 - “Once we’ve made Italy, we have to make Italians” (Massimo D’Azeglio, Italy nation founder, 1861).
 - “The low level of national integration has meant that in place of formal institutions and official traditions, sports and entertainment have often been the principal sources of a shared set of national cultural symbols; thus stars and within fields such as popular music, film, cycling, and soccer have been called upon to perform a function in terms of national mobilization.”

- Importing content from abroad is also cheaper for the entrepreneur, due to economies of scale in programming, therefore it is a safer investment.
- Lack of regulation also meant lack of rules on ownership concentration.
 - Due to his brilliant success mostly based on advertising efficiency and aggressive programming choice, Berlusconi was able to displace the competitors (who notably came from the publishing business, while Berlusconi did not) and construct a three-network “pole” which equaled the three-network public “pole”.
- Key problems in Italia television:
 - Dominance of television on the other media in the mass communication system: mostly due to its unregulated growth and Italians’ citizens poor habits of consumption, television takes the lion’s share of revenues in the system.
 - Fifty seven per cent of all Italian advertising budgets is spent on television (compared with 23 per cent in Germany, and 33.5 per cent in the UK).
 - Oligopoly: two giant three-network poles plus a small and largely irrelevant “third pole” and a wide array of flourishing local networks (perhaps the biggest opportunity for change in the system).
 - Poor quality of programming content, due to lack of competition and of regulation, bad viewing habits, loss of specific public-service functions, limited domestic production despite alleged excellence of Italian film-making, generous display of sex and reinforcement of sexist stereotypes (despite the Catholic Church).

→ The press in Italy

- Italian newspapers have always had a relatively small readership. It peaked to 6.5 million newspapers sold per day at the beginning of the 1990s (mostly due to commercial promotions that did not really expand the market) and is not stalled at about 5 million copies a day.
- This is due to both supply and demand dynamics:
 - Supply
 - There are no “tabloid” and “popular newspapers”. The average Italian newspaper can be regarded as a “quality” newspaper that tailors to the same relatively well-educated and high-income readers as most competitors do.
 - Other than mostly elitist in their outlook and writing style, Italian newspapers have historically been closer to the power holders than to their customers.
 - “All the newspapers are much more wordy than their equivalents in the Anglo-Saxon press. They are also more serious and probably go into the news in greater depth than their British or American counterparts.”
 - On the other hand, there are three national sports papers (which is unique in the whole world) and many very successful weekly gossip and public affairs magazines that have historically been very strong and established.
 - Demand
 - The Italian public of readers was not really enlarged beside elite readership until the post-war recovery, which is when radio and television appeared and deprived newspapers of their monopoly of information and entertainment.
 - Italy became a nation of potential readers when many other more exciting and easier alternatives to reading were available, therefore reading newspapers was not established as a long-standing habit (which is the only way it can be established solidly and consistently).
 - Not casually, the successful sports papers and weekly magazines highly relied on the radio and TV entertainment-based culture that was becoming dominant.
- Newspapers and political power

- Party newspapers used to be very important and successful in the times of large mass political parties in Italy (*l'Unità* and its “voluntary door-to-door agents”).
- The press is mostly controlled by so-called “impure publishers”, meaning that they are owned by large groups that operate in other businesses not related to mass communications, and that acquire newspapers in order to exert influence on the governing elites rather than to make money through sales and advertising.
 - Most newspapers in Italy are still unprofitable and actually lose money.
 - Newspapers as “passive items in otherwise positive balance sheets”.
 - Newspapers often become tools that members of the ruling elites use to talk to each other “over the heads” of the readers.
- Freedom of the press: Reporters Sans Frontiers’ second world press freedom ranking:
 - Finland, Iceland, Netherlands and Norway 1st, Germany 8th, United States 31st, Italy 53rd (due to Berlusconi’s conflict of interests and draft law on communications), China 161st, Cuba 165th, North Korea 166th (last).
- Whereas the press and the journalistic institutions were born as oppositional voices to the power structures in most Western countries, the press, the journalistic elites and their economic operations have historically been very close to the power centers.
 - “Little tradition of the kind of fearless investigative reporting common in Britain and America. Papers are stronger on polemic and on mere news digest than on fully researched factual exposés when controversy is in the air.”
 - “The higher Italian journalism tries to combine two ingredients that often do not mix well: the brio of ideas and the substance of events, commentary and reporting evaluation of themes and statement of facts.” The separation of news and commentary has been absent in most journalistic enterprises.

→ Topics for discussion

- Does this picture resonate with what you are experiencing in Italy?
- On many respects, could Italy be said to have anticipated trends that are rippling through most Western democracies? (Commercialization, popular culture based on sports and entertainment, erosion of the public sphere...)
- In some respects, is Italian television as described (especially by Tobias Jones) quite similar to US television?