BERLUSCONI’S TELEVISION, BEFORE AND AFTER
The 1980s, innovation and conservation

Do we really want to usher in the era of deregulation in Italy by introducing anachronistic restrictions that could be no less than a death sentence for a sector that, precisely because of the freedom that it has enjoyed, has developed over the last five years more than any other, creating thousands of new jobs and, above all, enabling others to create even more?
(Silvio Berlusconi, Corriere della Sera, November 9th, 1984)

1. CONSERVATIVE INNOVATION: BERLUSCONI’S TELEVISION

Since entering the Italian political arena in 1994 and being elected prime minister as many as three times in twenty years, Silvio Berlusconi has become a particularly interesting subject of study, both nationally and internationally, for everyone interested in the relationship between media strength and political power. Both academic investigation and the wider public debate have probed issues such as conflict of interest, examining the “short circuit” that has arisen between (direct or indirect) control of communications media, especially television, and the development of consensus.

Over a shorter-term horizon, and especially in the last few years, the relationship between media power and the ability to influence the Italian electorate’s political choices has sometimes been grossly oversimplified, i.e. to a direct causal link between propaganda and the construction of the Berlusconi hegemony. Nevertheless, a theoretical framework that is broader, less deterministic and more sensitive to cultural and media dynamics has informed attempts to interpret the Berlusconi phenomenon in light of the profound changes in Italian society in the 1970s and 1980s, characterised in particular by the birth of commercial television and its repertoire of “colour” imagery.

According to Peppino Ortoleva, the arrival and consolidation of commercial television in Italy symbolically represent the changes in the country’s cultural universe in the 1980s. The commercial networks – which Berlusconi firmly controlled from 1984 with his holding company, Fininvest – have catalysed a series of value clashes that transcend TV itself and mirror divisions in the wider society. For example: being for or against

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* This essay has been conceived and developed jointly by the authors. Massimo Scaglioni has written the first two sections; Luca Barra, the last two.

1 See, for example, Stille A., Citizen Berlusconi. Vita e imprese, Milan: Garzanti, 2006; Valentini G., La sindrome di Arcore, Milan: Longanesi, 2009.

2 The advent of private commercial television in Italy coincides symbolically with the launch of colour broadcasting and with the progressive replacement of the old black-and-white television sets with colour models. See Ortoleva P., Un ventennio a colori. Televisione privata e società in Italia (1975-95), Florence: Giunti, 1995.
advertising, which was largely introduced by the commercial networks; being for or against “quality” cinema (and, similarly, for or against “Americanised” television); being for or against the “commercialisation of culture” associated with the increasing prominence of a type of TV with no public-service aims (educating or informing) whatsoever but merely an unbridled focus on entertainment; being for the “carnival” or for “Lent”, “intellectual” or “popular”, “new” (an intrinsically “neo-conservative” new) or “old”, Right or Left.

This essay is informed by these considerations and starts from the idea that the 1980s were an important watershed in Italy’s media and cultural history. To understand that decade and its impact on later ones, it is necessary to give the period a historical framework, in cultural and media terms. The advent of Berlusconi’s commercial TV and its rapid, extraordinary success must be understood in the precise historical context of the time. It is important not to give it a kind of “finalistic” reading, in light of what happened only in the years that followed (with Berlusconi’s political success in the 1990s and 2000s). In this sense, Berlusconi’s TV profoundly transformed Italy’s media world and cultural milieu. Above all, it was notable, especially in its formative years, for its explosive vigour and innovative thrust in several ways. Only later did this explosive, innovative momentum seem to gradually dissipate, as the empire sought to stabilise itself in the position that meanwhile it had “bulldozed” its way into.

This article examines, in particular, three aspects that are crucial for contextualising this initial drive for innovation followed by a phase of increasingly conservative consolidation aimed at gradually “locking down” the marketplace, which by the 1990s had settled into an “imperfect duopoly” between the public and private players.

The first significant aspect concerns the genres featuring in Berlusconi’s TV output in the 1980s and early 1990s, and in particular the pivotal “information question”. One of the more common readings of commercial TV’s arrival in Italy is that it represents, and gives concrete form to, the Italians’ demand for pure entertainment. Italy was then emerging from the 1970s, a period of major social conflict, terrorism, and austerity politics after the oil crisis. Commercial television would therefore symbolically mark the end of the dire so-called anni di piombo (“years of lead”), offering escapism, pure and heedless entertainment, a light from reality into “phantasmagoria”. Significantly in this sense, the Fininvest networks showed no informative programmes throughout these years. A more meticulous historical analysis reveals, however, that this characterised

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3 From the 1980s, the Italian Left, led by the PCI (Italian Communist party) and later by the PDS (the post-communist Left-wing party), waged a cultural battle against the abuse of advertising on the commercial networks, especially during film screenings. It called for specific legislation to set stricter limits for advertising time. The campaign culminated in a popular referendum in 1995, at which the Left’s position was rejected.

4 The cultural battle fought by the Italian Left against the use of commercial breaks in film screenings was supported by large sections of the country’s film industry and, very significantly, by internationally renowned directors, such as Federico Fellini, whose works include the 1985 film Ginger e Fred, which lambasted the new commercial television and its values.

5 Cf. Ortoleva, Un ventennio a colori.

6 The television market in the 1980s was largely unregulated. The decade is usually remembered as the era of the “Far West of the airwaves”: because of various conflicting political interests, Italy’s leaders effectively refused to manage deregulation and the migration from a public monopoly in an orderly fashion; they confined themselves, at the start of the 1990s, to legislating (with the Mammì Law) to “rubber-stamp” the Rai-Fininvest duopoly that had arisen from the battle between opposing economic interests, from which Silvio Berlusconi emerged victorious.

7 For a definition of “imperfect duopoly”, see Balassone S., La tv nel mercato globale, Rome: Meltemi, 2000.

8 Cf. Ortoleva, Un ventennio a colori.
Berlusconi’s commercial television only up to a point. From the mid 1980s, indeed, Berlusconi’s TV showed an interest in extending its genre range to include current affairs and news. This can be seen both from a series of experiments that emerged before the networks became able to broadcast live (from the 1990s)\(^9\) and, above all, from the founder’s own various public statements of intent.

A second major aspect is the programming – more specifically, the scheduling strategies that Berlusconi’s TV introduced in Italy. This is perhaps the aspect that reveals the explosive vigour of the new commercial television most clearly: not only did the “neo-television”\(^10\) transform TV output from a series of “discrete sequences” of gaps and content (in the schedule) into a continual flow of programmes, commercial breaks and promos\(^11\), it also revolutionised the very concept of the schedule. No more a way of merely piecing together existing products, it became a marketing tool aimed at informing production decisions.

While the schedule turned into the preferred tool for controlling TV content from a commercial and marketing-oriented standpoint, the third aspect of innovation, closely linked to the previous one and a fundamental driver for the networks’ economic progress, was the new approach to advertising revenues and investors. In this field, too, Fininvest – with its advertising sales agency Publitalia – aggressively and determinedly conquered the market in the first half of the 1980s before becoming a “conservative stabilising” factor that ended up effectively blocking the entry of new players for the next twenty years.

These three aspects – the genres characterising Berlusconi’s commercial networks and the “information question”; programming and the politics of scheduling; advertising and the overall market scenario – are far from confined to the technical/professional or the political/economic dimensions of the television medium. On the contrary, they had a major social and cultural impact in 1980s Italy. They can be interpreted in light of a framework of “innovation within limits” or “conservative innovation”: the networks rapidly oriented Italian viewers towards an idea of pluralism in television that liberated them from the “one-service-fits-all” RAI model, even – albeit partially – for current affairs, as would be the case more decisively from the 1990s, when the live commercial newscast was introduced; they familiarised Italian viewers with new ways of consuming television centred on flow-based programming; and they introduced them to a richer and more complex world of consumer and service brands, which went hand in hand with the progressive spread of large-scale distribution. In essence, Berlusconi’s commercial television both contributed to and reflected a series of changes that profoundly typified the media and cultural landscape of 1980s Italy. These indisputable innovations must, however, be seen in the context of a decidedly fragmented historical dynamic, characterised rather by breaks with the past and subsequent reconsolidations, in which commercial TV gradually lost its explosive power and established itself as the “norm”. This “two-phase”, contrasting historical dynamic provides the most effective basis for interpreting the Berlusconi phenomenon in the round, even beyond this article’s limited

\(^9\) Law no. 223 of August 5th 1990 (known as the “Mammi Law”, after the then minister for postal and telecommunication services) granted private TV channels the right to broadcast live throughout Italy, forcing each network to transmit its own TV news.

\(^10\) “Neo-television” is Umberto Eco’s famous definition of the new commercial networks, which saw the curtain fall once and for all on the “paleo-TV” that had fossilised around the public monopoly. See Eco U., *Sette anni di desiderio*, Milan: Bompiani, 1983.

temporal and thematic scope. Indeed, it was in the pivotal 1980s that Berlusconi the media and television entrepreneur – before he became a politician – made his name through his growing public visibility and popularity as an agent of change, albeit with all the limits that it entailed.

2. THE “INFORMATION QUESTION”: LIBERALISM AND CONTROL

The subject of television information – its freedom and pluralism – began to colour Italian public debate increasingly strongly after 1968, especially in the 1970s, a decade marked by acute social conflict and many varied social changes. In those years, a law reforming the public service, known as the “RAI Reform”\textsuperscript{12}, translated those changes into a mechanism for representing the various political movements present in parliament. This ended up, however, by completing a gradual process of “dividing up the spoils” of public TV at the hands of the political parties (\textit{lottizzazione}, spoil system). Meanwhile, the needs for access, involvement and alternative information emerged across the country in the many initiatives that characterised the birth of independent private local TV and radio stations\textsuperscript{13}.

During the 1980s, the subject of freedom of information on television lost none of its importance, even as the cultural and media scene continued to change. An immediate effect of the RAI Reform was to make the Tg2 newscast independent, under the influence of the Italian Socialist party, and then to launch a Tg3 under the political and cultural auspices of the Italian Communist party (while the Tg1 newscast remained firmly Christian Democratic). Yet the independent television channels had to continue providing news within the “local” and territorial context in which the legislative framework had confined them. Between the two extremes – current-affairs broadcasting increasingly conditioned by the role of the parliamentary political parties, and hence often partisan and biased, and the experience of the private channels that had cornered the local-information market – a new intermediate area emerged, that of the early commercial networks.

In reconstructing the cultural climate of the 1980s, what we see clearly is the interest in the current-affairs genre, and newscasts in particular, from the big national publishing groups engaged in the wholly new adventure of building television networks to overcome the stultifying limits of the “local range”. As early as December 1980, Rizzoli group, owners of the leading national newspaper \textit{Corriere della Sera}, experimented with \textit{Contatto}, a “private” newscast on its own Primarete Indipendente channel, anchored by Maurizio Costanzo and involving several professionals originally from the RAI, such as Enza Sampò and Ruggero Orlando\textsuperscript{14}. This was the first attempt by an Italian commercial network to compete with the RAI on current affairs, albeit a short-lived one – it ended a year and a half later, foundering on the ban on live broadcasting beyond the local area.

From 1984, the commercial-television editorial scene was shaped by Silvio Berlusconi’s victory in the battle for the airwaves, and his now pre-eminent role after the withdrawal, for various reasons, of his competitors Rizzoli, Rusconi and Mondadori. His empire of networks, wholly controlled by Fininvest and mirroring the three RAI networks, would characterise the national television arena for twenty years to come.

\textsuperscript{12} Law no. 103 of April 14th 1975: it took public TV out of the hands of the government and brought it under parliament’s control; a parliamentary commission was established to monitor radio and TV services.

\textsuperscript{13} On this point, see Giuseppe Richeri’s essay in this journal.

The “information question” regarding Berlusconi’s networks in the 1980s can be approached from two slightly different perspectives. First, we can reconstruct – especially through the public debate in the daily press – Berlusconi’s attitude about potentially adding current affairs to his networks, to complement an offering initially made of bought ready-made series and films and locally produced entertainment programmes. Second, it is useful to examine the network schedules to establish to what extent the stated intentions were translated into actual information products.

From the first perspective, the Berlusconi channels’ intent to broadcast live current-affairs programmes was already crystal clear from mid decade. The government headed by the Socialist party leader, Bettino Craxi – Berlusconi’s great political sponsor – introduced a decree-law, albeit without an overarching framework law, effectively resolving the anomaly of commercial networks broadcasting nationwide without the legal right to “interconnect”. Within months, Berlusconi’s channels had already established a “Sport and News” facility, inspired equally by the American approach and by the French La Cinq experience. Berlusconi’s intentions were clear and clearly articulated. For example, at a conference in Milan organised by the Associazione per il progresso economico in May 1986, he said: “With the international supply [of news from international agencies, \textit{Ed.}] assured, the next task will be to organise the Italian news bulletin, which must not be a partisan political bulletin. We shall listen to politics when its representatives have something to say that relates closely – very closely – to people’s lives. When politics becomes relevant, we shall give it space; until then, we shall leave it to the RAI to report the politicians’ tedious outpourings”\textsuperscript{15}. Clearly, from as early as the mid 1980s, over six years before Tg5, Fininvest’s founder already had a very specific idea of current-affairs information that was quite different from the RAI’s. It was inspired by the idea of an American-style news bulletin, with stories focused on the various aspects of news, sport, and the availability of spectacular images from the big international agencies. This template of Berlusconi’s was almost totally novel in Italy’s television news scene, which was strongly influenced by the central focus on domestic politics, especially when the parliamentary parties had greater influence on the RAI news outlets.

In devising a newscast based around the role of the “anchorman, the presenter who, like Walter Cronkite in the United States, will have to win over the Italian viewers, to gain their trust, to be accepted as part of the family every evening and become their confidant with his objective information”\textsuperscript{16}, Berlusconi expected that the Fininvest newscast would be up and running quickly – in “three to six months” – depending only on when a framework law would be passed to enable the networks to interconnect nationally and to broadcast live. Instead, a long political battle ensued over whether the Berlusconi networks should have the right to broadcast live news in exchange for selling off one of the group’s three channels, in line with clear anti-trust principles\textsuperscript{17}: four years later, thanks to his lobbying skills, Berlusconi would achieve the former (through the Mammì Law) without conceding the latter.

From the second perspective, i.e. the production of actual information products by the Berlusconi networks in the 1980s, parliament’s failure to pass legislation to regulate the sector stalled the introduction of an actual newscast – despite Berlusconi’s wishes. Nonetheless, by the middle of the decade, Fininvest had developed quite a significant


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Cedrazzi G., “Via libera al TG privato”, \textit{Corriere della Sera}, October 9, 1986.
news department, comprising thirty journalists and sixty-odd staff\textsuperscript{18}. The current-affairs and in-depth journalistic analysis output developed in two directions. On one hand, Berlusconi pushed for an experimental pre-recorded “quasi-newscast”: the current-affairs programme \textit{Dentro la notizia}, aired daily from 1988 on Retequattro, was a step in this direction. On the other hand, the Fininvest founder invested heavily in current-affairs programmes with a strong opinion content, bringing in heavyweight Italian journalists from the group’s various titles (such as the newspaper \textit{Il Giornale}, edited by Indro Montanelli). Following this line, throughout the second half of the 1980s, the private networks produced and transmitted a variety of programmes covering the information genre, in its broadest sense: \textit{Prima pagina}, \textit{Protagonisti}, 2000 e dintorni, \textit{Il cittadino e il potere} by Giorgio Bocca; \textit{Monitor}, \textit{XX Secolo}, \textit{Dovere di cronaca} edited by Guglielmo Zucconi; \textit{Punto sette} and \textit{Tivù Tivù} under Arrigo Levi.

Quite clearly, then, both in their intentions to establish an “American-style” newscast and in their no-less-important work of producing current-affairs and magazine programmes, Berlusconi’s networks’ journalistic approach was a key feature of the 1980s, especially the second half of the decade. Yet it remained to be established how this approach fitted in not only with the founder’s strategies but also with the cultural climate of the time. Once again, Berlusconi’s comments seem crystal clear, when interpreted correctly: “I believe that all the output of our networks demonstrates our neutrality. On a personal level, I have friendly and even close relationships with some politicians, such as the prime minister [Bettino Craxi, \textit{Ed.}], but I have cordial relations with other political leaders too. As a publisher, I consider myself independent, and I aim and plan to remain so, especially when the newscast comes on stream. [For this,] I need a journalist with the qualities of Biagi, Bocca and Montanelli rolled into one: but as there is nobody like that around, we shall have to invent one”\textsuperscript{19}.

From this perspective, too, Berlusconi represents an important innovation on the Italian scene. For he was an entrepreneur who presented himself as “purely” a publisher and TV owner, inspired by liberal principles, interested, at least on the surface, only by the economic dimension of “news as a product” viewed in a purely commercial sense, “American-style”. At the same time, he was a shrewd and sophisticated builder of relationships with the political powerbrokers. He was convinced of the need to lobby but equally aware that a new model of television and information (less bombastic, less bound up with arcane party-political trivia, “closer to the people” and their interests) would soon change the power relationships between politics and the television medium.

\section*{3. PROGRAMMING: FROM AMERICA TO THE NATIONAL-POPULAR}

During the 1980s, a continual dynamic first of breaking the mould and then of (rapidly) rebuilding it characterised not only the relationship between Silvio Berlusconi and television news but also – more generally – almost all the “pillars” on which he established his commercial networks. These range from broadcasting techniques (first through the master tapes – the so-called \textit{pizzone} – that could be copied and aired at the same time on channels that were then still local, thus giving the impression of a nation-
The transition from Telemilano to Canale 5, in 1980, brought some major innovations to national television programming. They gave the new commercial network a clear brand identity, partly by breaking radically with both the public monopoly offering and the many local networks that had flourished in previous years (and from which Canale 5 itself emerged). Some constraints, like the lack of live broadcasting, became strengths, as the network built its identity on its abundant exclusive licence rights (to films, TV series, animated cartoons etc.) and its image of openness to international trends.

First with the arrival of a heavyweight recruit from the RAI, scheduler Carlo Fuscagni, and soon after with the appointment of Carlo Freccero to look after the programming, Canale 5 sought to position itself as “American”. Indeed, the schedule was deliberately rigid, with regular programmes recurring day after day at fixed intervals (half-hour, one-hour or 90-minute programmes) to encourage habitual viewing. A technical requirement – simulating live broadcasting with highly recognisable standard programme times – merged with the effort to fix a series of “horizontal” landmarks every day (and not just during the daytime, as would become the norm, but also in prime time) in order to turn its growing audience into loyal, “compulsive” viewers. The blocks of the American schedules were imported somewhat naively in autumn 1980 as the network’s “easy-to-remember fixed timetable” in order to turn its growing audience into loyal, “compulsive” viewers. 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changed radically as early as 1984. The imported American flavour was no longer enough. Indeed, it risked alienating a "broader" and more general audience capable of attracting advertising from major investors. Radical change resulted; the Italian identity came firmly to the fore, even at the cost of a weaker differentiation from the RAI offering. Thus, if "the American model adopted by Canale 5 at its outset had served to break into the market vigorously and visibly," then the broadcaster "wasted no time in blending the glittering but 'fake' image imported from the States with some specific elements of authentic Italian pop culture, taken from the worlds of cinema, variety and public television"\(^{23}\). Once again, it was the constraints that defined editorial policy – after the bloody "war" fought and won with the other networks – through cost-cutting and resource-optimisation. The schedules made up entirely of films and TV series (whose prices had risen beyond recognition in the meantime) thus made room for original productions, which cost less at least during the daytime, while there were more hours of programming (and, therefore, repeats). The three networks began to develop different identities, tones and target audiences. After years of warring behind the scenes "involving ambushes, coups de main, surprises, traps and pitfalls"\(^{24}\), as Berlusconi put it, "when broadcasting is concentrated in a private group, viewers gain a major benefit: [...] the audience is not forced to choose between The Thorn Birds and The Winds of War, for clashes become a thing of the past"\(^{25}\).

In this progressive rationalisation and, in certain senses, "normalisation", Freccero’s position as chief scheduler for the three networks was held by first Roberto Giovalli and then Giorgio Gori. With the flagship channel’s shift towards a more national-popular audience, the American patina faded; it was retained on the “youth” network, Italia 1, but replaced on Canale 5 by early-afternoon game shows, family programmes and variety shows. The schedules adjusted, for example by rediscovering the original Thursday-evening slot for Mike Bongiorno’s popular quiz. While the exclusive on Bongiorno, wrested from the RAI in 1982, was the moment that marked “the private networks’ coming of age”\(^{26}\), the Canale 5 editorial line became specifically Italian national-popular over the ensuing years. It even finished up by effectively "pillaging the memory of the RAI"\(^{27}\), not only through the programmes and genres but also, and above all, through a campaign to headhunt the presenters. The Fininvest channels attracted stars looking for something new (and higher pay): besides Mike, there were Corrado, Sandra Mondaini and Raimondo Vianello, and many lesser presenters. Yet in April 1987, when Pippo Baudo and Raffaella Carrà changed horses together, with equally dismal results, the point of no return had come. The strategy’s heyday was over, and it was clear once and for all that Canale 5 had abandoned any attempt at innovation or maintaining an international image, as the channel was now embroiled in direct competition – that was set to last – as an equal with Raiuno.

After a few years, therefore, Canale 5, and the Fininvest networks in particular, lost the groundbreaking and strongly distinctive features of their output that had marked their beginnings. They settled for a general and national-popular mainstream television language and audience. The scheduling approach changed from handcrafted to more

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\(^{23}\) Rizza N., “Il palinsesto come fattore di produzione”, ibid.: 536.


\(^{25}\) Quoted in Corriere della Sera, August 28, 1984.

\(^{26}\) Martini P., Tv, sorrisi e milioni, Milan: GDI, 1985, 15.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 123.
properly industrial, according to a “model of imitation and reconfiguration”\textsuperscript{28} that may have been less creative and innovative but was much more effective economically.

4. ADVERTISING: FROM AGGRESSIVE NEWCOMER TO A NEW STATUS QUO

Advertising income, too, the \textit{core business} and primary driver of commercial television\textsuperscript{29}, was one of the test beds in which Silvio Berlusconi successfully rewrote the rules of the game in the 1980s. He first aggressively penetrated the market – reinventing it to a certain extent – and then established a lasting position of power, which he defended by systematising and standardising.

Publitalia, Fininvest group’s advertising sales agency, was set up in 1979. From the outset, it enacted a series of extremely aggressive commercial policies aimed at imposing itself on Sipra, its RAI counterpart, and at ensuring a large and constant income to finance the networks’ programming. Sipra carefully vetted its \textit{sponsors}, even after Carosello had ended, ensuring that they were worthy of television exposure. It exploited its dominant position by setting conditions and censoring the commercials for broadcast, by imposing long waits on advertisers and forcing them to buy advertising packages on print media as well. From the outset, however, Berlusconi’s sales approach was as inclusive as possible. He aimed to attract not only \textit{big spenders} disenchanted with Sipra, but also all the companies that had thus far been excluded from TV advertising.

This “breaking the mould” in the early years can be seen clearly in the means used to persuade investors to include the developing commercial television in their \textit{media mix}. These innovative, and in some ways unscrupulous, promotional and sales methods were aimed at creating an initial relationship with the client, at finding \textit{ad hoc} and over-the-counter solutions, and at cutting out the middlemen (sometimes by taking the place of media centres and advertising agencies). The inventions attributed to Berlusconi include the “cash-register test”, for existing RAI advertisers. This was an invitation to choose three different products and invest a billion lire on advertising each one on a single medium only (commercial TV, public TV, or newspapers), to see which would be the most profitable (putting the earnings from each medium in a different “cash register”). Advertising on the private networks was thus shown to be highly effective. For businesses debating whether to invest in TV, he offered the “window test”: the advertising sales agency guaranteed particular sales levels for a product advertised on Canale 5, at its own risk – if the results disappointed, the client would get a full refund. These formulas were not Berlusconi’s only tactics for creating (and growing) a market by establishing profitable relations with the business sector. A vital task for any advertising sales agency is to sell all the available space to best effect, given that big discounts are preferable to unsold slots: “We are like fishermen: if we can’t sell the fish by the end of the day, then we have to get rid of it at a knock-down price. Otherwise it goes off. If you can’t sell the space, you need to give it away”\textsuperscript{30}. This explains the complex promotional system that Fininvest set up: the “buy one, get one free” formula for TV spots; clauses ensuring minimum \textit{audience} numbers; free runs and those paid with percentages of the


\textsuperscript{30} Silvio Berlusconi, quoted in D’Anna S.E., Moncalvo G., \textit{Berlusconi in Concert}, London: Otzium, 1994, 224.
sales of the advertised products; goods bartering, with payment “in kind”; cumulative offers and low prices at certain times of year\textsuperscript{31}.

In the first half of the 1980s, both through these aggressive slot-selling policies and through assiduous work all across the country, the “legend” of Publitalia was born. It was carefully constructed through slogans, from “vendiamo vendite” (we sell sales) to “la tv commerciale fa vendere, la RAI fa spendere” (commercial TV sells, public TV costs)\textsuperscript{32}. Furthermore, the company philosophy was based on specific rules: a fanatical attention to formal detail – from keeping your jacket on at all times to always being clean-shaven, from guarding against sweaty palms to being friendly with the clients (Berlusconi’s “sole in tasca”, literally “sunshine in your pocket” or ready warmth) – combined with standard interaction procedures (“state, demonstrate, summarise, repeat”) and skillful mastery of the schedules and viewing figures, not just for the programmes but (more importantly) for the commercial breaks, too. The Publitalia salespeople, and especially Berlusconi himself on his annual tours of Italy’s main cities to meet old and new clients in person, plugged commercial television’s specific features: a different, more “mobile” audience of people who actually buy the products promoted and trendsetters; the greater effectiveness of spots in the middle of programmes (unlike the RAI, which ran them only before and after); the importance of insistently repeating and articulating the message at several times of the day; integrating the messages into the schedules around programmes carefully selected to meet commercial requirements. The Publitalia machine made a point of getting involved in the different creative stages of packaging the adverts, supporting the clients at every stage and helping them to get the right ideas across effectively.

Once significant market share had been achieved – as early as 1985, Publitalia held 60% of television advertising revenues\textsuperscript{33} – the pioneering, belligerent phase ended, and Silvio Berlusconi’s approach to the market changed radically. From determined newcomer, the Fininvest agency became a seasoned campaigner seeking to stabilise the market and ward off new pretenders. Once numerous investors had been won over to TV as an advertising medium, the discounts and “trial offers” were gradually rationalised within the context of a more stable standard price list. This fostered continuity of advertising sales (and revenues) and made it easier to monitor and measure the campaigns’ success. As Berlusconi himself explained, “I market my networks using the most direct and straightforward sales techniques, encouraging investment in television by offering specific and widely sought-after target markets at any time of day and in prime time”\textsuperscript{34}. Once again, improvisation had become science.

Italian commercial television, which gelled in the 1980s around Silvio Berlusconi’s media empire and networks, can therefore be seen, in the case studies examined here, to have developed less linearly than has often been claimed \textit{ex post}. What has been described as a “conservative modernism” that “lends a sheen of modernity to reassuring images, formulas and values”\textsuperscript{35} is revealed in its historical dynamic as a movement of two, only partially overlapping, stages. Indeed, the first stage – of innovation, breaking the


\textsuperscript{32} D’Anna, Moncalvo, \textit{Berlusconi in Concert}, 46.


\textsuperscript{34} Speech at the round table “Il futuro dei media in Italia”, 1987.

\textsuperscript{35} Ortoleva, \textit{Un ventennio a colori}, 84.
mould and challenging the established wisdom – was replaced over varying timeframes, depending on the circumstances, by a subsequent period of settling down, returning to the mainstream, rebuilding, and even copying the old mould that it once broke. The announcement (and, partially, the implementation) of an alternative and radically new model for television information soon became the perfect “bridgehead” from which to compete directly with the public broadcaster and to penetrate, as an equal, a world of political power that was much more multi-faceted and open to compromise. The decision (and the demand) to bring Italian households the best American programmes, in schedules that copied their clarity and simplicity, left room, once the novelty had worn off, for a smoother (and certainly more profitable) policy of exploitation, through original entertainment productions and presenters bought dearly from the competition. The more original persuasive strategies, aimed at convincing investors that would never have considered television and at creating a new advertising market with different rules, were then shelved as soon as the need emerged to stabilise the system and to keep potential new competitors at bay. The Fininvest method of the 1980s may seem contradictory, a volte-face, disowning what it had done before; but it was actually a carefully calculated dual approach, one that built it a strong identity as an innovator, while enabling it to enjoy the benefits of stability. This constant duality – an oxymoron, to a certain extent – can illuminate different sides of its central figure, Berlusconi, and an entire approach to the media (and more besides). And not just in the world of television.

SUMMARY

During the Eighties, commercial television has been a driver of deep innovation into the Italian media system, mainly thanks to the complex figure of media entrepreneur (and then tycoon) Silvio Berlusconi. However, a closer analysis show how, after a short “rupture phase” necessary to enter a new market and conquer the TV audience, with originality and a strong conflict with PSB, often the new Fininvest commercial channels started to more easily adapt to their competition’s common routines, thus becoming a conservative force using its new power to reinforce the system’s stability. The essay shows, following the case histories of commercial TV news, scheduling and financing, how this dynamics of innovation and conservation have been carefully implemented and defended since the beginning of Silvio Berlusconi’s media activity.

RIASSUNTO

Negli anni Ottanta, la tv commerciale è stata un elemento di profonda innovazione nel sistema dei media italiano, principalmente grazie alla complessa figura dell’imprenditore (e poi media tycoon) Silvio Berlusconi. Una più attenta analisi, però, mostra come, dopo una breve fase “di rottura” necessaria a entrare in un nuovo mercato e a conquistare l’audience televisiva, con elementi di originalità e un forte conflitto con il servizio pubblico, spesso i nuovi canali commerciali Fininvest cominciarono ad adattarsi in modo più piano alle routine più comuni dei loro competitor, diventando una forza conservatrice che usa il suo nuovo potere per rafforzare la stabilità del sistema. Il saggio mostra, seguendo i casi di studio dell’informazione televisiva commerciale, della programmazione e delle forme di finanziamento, come questa dinamica di innovazione e conservazione è stata attentamente perseguita e difesa fin dalle prime battute delle attività di Silvio Berlusconi.