THE HEART OF OUR TIMES: RAI AND THE DOMESTICATION OF ITALIAN TELEVISION IN THE 1950S

Abstract

When the Italian television started its regular programming, in January 1954, only a few of its spectators could appreciate the brand new experience of viewing in the cosiness of their homes. In the early stage of the medium, different cultures of television viewing coexisted in Italy for a relatively long period, and the model of collective consumption rooted in public spaces (such as bars, movie theatres, Catholic associations, and political circles) was largely dominant, due to economic issues (the high-price of the technical device), and cultural bias over the new medium, often considered dangerous and dodgy for the stability of the family and the privacy of the domestic life.

This paper is aimed to outline the role assumed by the Italian Public Service Broadcasting (RAI) in contrasting the affirmation of a public culture of viewing, stimulating instead the construction of the television as a domestic medium in the stage of its institutionalisation, which lasted approximately until the beginning of the Sixties.

Considering a wide array of historical sources (first RAI’s advertising and public campaigns, house organs and leaflets, public speeches of RAI’s first managers), the paper will show how the RAI was deeply interested in promoting a wide diffusion of the TV sets in the private domestic context, in order to maximise the economic profit coming from the license associated to the possession of the set and thus providing economic resources for programming and broadcasting. RAI’s major effort was intended to reassure the Italian citizens, presenting the television set as a harmless device that could enhance the comforts of the modern home in the social context of the Post-War economic boom.

Keywords

Italian television history; domestication; TV set; RAI.

1. INTRODUCTION

After an intense period of testing and experimentation Italian television began regular broadcasting in 1954. However, few of its early viewers could appreciate the spectacle of the new “media miracle” in the privacy of their homes. The high cost of buying a TV set coupled with the licence fee imposed by RAI, the public-service broadcaster, put the new medium out of many Italians’ reach. With Italy emerging from the economic hardships in the aftermath of the Second World War, owning a private home television at the

* Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione e dello Spettacolo, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano – cecilia.penati@unicatt.it.

dawn of the new public communication medium was therefore the preserve of a narrow audience of pioneers. Aside from a few technophiles, most of these pioneers came from the middle class and from mostly urban areas, as it took time to extend television signal coverage from the major cities to the whole country. When the new medium was in its infancy, for the vast majority of Italian viewers, watching TV was largely a collective experience, lived outside the home and with a high degree of participation, mostly in public spaces like bars, associations, clubs, and cinemas converted for the occasion into ‘television theatres’, rather than in private dwellings, as also Anna McCarthy has pointed out studying the beginnings of US television. In Italy, the historical process by which television firmly established itself in its niche par excellence – the family home – was tortuous and by no means inevitable. For quite some time, at least until the early Sixties, various overlapping models of viewing the new medium co-existed, with a strong prevalence of a collective form of viewing taking place in public spaces. It was only as television technology improved, while becoming also less costly, and as the quantity of RAI programmes gradually increased that the domestic (family and individual) consumption model established itself as the principal way of watching the medium.

This essay aims to trace the RAI’s historical role in shaping television as a domestic and individual medium. What strategic initiatives did the early RAI managers plan and enact to promote the adoption of licences and the mass acquisition of domestic televisions in Italy? What communication campaigns were run? And what policies supported the initiatives undertaken by RAI’s management? The paper will demonstrate the major role played by RAI in acting and campaigning in favour of the domestication of television, while retracts the historical process by which television found its way into the living space of the home, thus becoming part of the everyday life of the household members both as a technology and a cultural form.

A wide array of sources will help to outline this historical process, reading representations of advertising in magazines and newspapers as evidence of the incorporation of television in the house. The paper will rely on fragments of early television programmes, in-house and industrial documents preserved in the RAI archive in Rome, articles from the popular press, and advertisements by the RAI and by the Italian and international firms that made the TV sets and commercialised them in Italy (such as Phonola, RadioMarelli, CGE, Philco). Popular magazines put TV on the public agenda through columns, editorials, cartoons, stories and interviews with experts who explained

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how it worked and discussed the new “social rituals” surrounding the new communication medium in the home. As Lynn Spigel has pointed out in her study over the first years of American television and its gradual incorporation in the domestic space⁹, also in Italy the popular media system helped to create a collective image of the new medium, giving the audience instruction on how to approach and use it properly.

Through an analysis of these historical sources, the paper will reflect on how the RAI’s efforts to promote the purchase of home TV sets in the first five years of its public life faced two main issues. The first was the need to tackle the collective concern, evident from numerous comments in the contemporary press, that television was a dangerous medium, both materially (that it might damage your eyesight and slow your cognitive reflexes) and culturally (that it might invade domestic privacy, hinder communication within the family, and bring disquieting and provocative images into the sanctity of the home). Therefore, the RAI’s main effort was intended to promote the sale of television subscriptions and TV sets, by reassuring Italian citizens that the TV set was a harmless device that could add to the comforts of a truly modern home in the social context of the post-war economic boom¹⁰, just like other technical conveniences (from refrigerators to washing machines). In this respect, the consumer-electronics brands and vendors were strong allies: in order to maximize revenue from television sales, they strongly promoted domestic viewing on as individual a level as possible. Moreover, the Public Service aimed to present television as a modern domestic ‘hearth’ around which the family could gather to watch entertaining yet educational content.

The second problem was the need to provide practical instructions and advice on how to integrate the TV set into the home environment, from both a cultural and a technical standpoint (fitting the necessary electrical hardware, fixing the aerial, and learning to tune the set). The RAI responded by establishing partnerships, primarily through communication campaigns, with the consumer-electronics manufacturers who made the television sets (Phonola, CGE, RadioMarelli, Philco, Brionvega, etc.).

The objectives of the broadcaster were pursued through a multi-layered strategy involving four main policies, which this article will discuss in its sections. The first was speech-making by RAI managers at public occasions like technology fairs and exhibitions; the second involved advertising campaigns; the third consisted in the public service’s important role in “domesticating” the medium as a new technology, giving practical advice and tips through regular columns in its own publication (Radiocorriere, a weekly “house organ” magazine published by the RAI) and special books distributed to RAI subscribers; and the fourth strategy involved including advice about using the medium at home in some of the early television programmes. All four strategies combined to strengthen the connection between television and the domestic space.

2. ACCESS TO TELEVISION

The high access cost (of buying the equipment needed to watch television at home) was a crucial hurdle for the RAI in its efforts to bring television sets – and, therefore, its pro-

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grammes – into all the Italian homes. This issue emerges clearly, for example, in some of the RAI managers’ contributions to the public debate about the price of TV sets. Opportunities to demonstrate the new technology to the public, such as fairs and exhibitions, were an important way for the television establishment to tackle the open questions and critical issues concerning the spread of the medium in its early days. Strategic alliances with the technology manufacturers were often forged.

For instance, during the inaugural speech at the annual radio and television exhibition at the Palazzo dell’Arte in Milan, RAI chairman Antonio Carrelli, appointed in the seminal year of 1954, mooted the need for a strategic alliance between the broadcaster and the consumer-electronics brands, to produce a new low-cost television set within the economic reach of even the most impecunious strata of society. Thus, the critical mass needed to consider the medium fully institutionalized could be achieved. His words also reflect the concept of television as a means of entertainment and education for popular audiences, as a pillar of the widely held European ideal of public-service broadcasting. Antonio Carrelli maintained, “We need a new range of sets with a distinctive combination of affordability and good reception quality. These sets will open up access to television for vast sections of the populace that would not otherwise have the chance to use this new medium of entertainment and spiritual ennoblement”.

The Minister for postal and telecommunication services, Gennaro Cassiani, also spoke at the event. He drew an important parallel between the annual radio and television exhibition and its domestic-electrical-appliances counterpart, both considered a direct reflection of the developments and progress that the country was experiencing. For, he said, domestic mechanization through the new household conveniences (like the fridge, the washing machine and the television set) brought, on one hand, a material comfort and relief from domestic drudgery and, on the other, a spiritual comfort through the programmes on the broadcast media, television in particular. Cassiani believed that “technical progress brings families not only spiritual but also material comfort, through the huge range of tools that help to make the home a more welcoming place and to reduce, and thus dignify, the more menial tasks”. The national political institutions, too, had an interest in the wide uptake of domestic television as an instrument of social order: as entertainment moved into the home, certain ‘dangerous’ practices (like drinking and mass gatherings) would diminish.

The difficulty of introducing the small screen into Italian homes immediately en masse, given the high cost of the licence fee and of obtaining the equipment, was a central theme that long exercised the managers of the early public-broadcasting service. In presenting the annual report on the fourth year of regular television broadcasting, RAI MD Marcello Rodinò dwelt on the proposal to cut the television licence fee significantly, from 18,000 to 16,000 lire. He told shareholders: “We are confident that this further reduction will serve to spread the use of radio and television ever wider among less affluent groups, which are those that stand to benefit most from your company’s broadcasting services”.

Interestingly, Rodinò was another who identified the question of broadening domestic and private access to television among the less well-off with public-service

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11 The Radiocorriere (RAI’s printed house-organ) reported on the event with the article “Aperta la XX Mostra Nazionale Radio e Tv”, in September 1954, also providing transcriptions of Mr. Antonio Carrelli’s and Minister Gennaro Cassiani speeches.

broadcasting’s educational and pedagogical mission, which promised again to bring the best of the previous cultural and entertainment tradition to those with limited economic means.

The question of spreading domestic television was addressed by not only the television managers but also the representatives of the institutions. For in officially launching the experimental broadcasts from Milan in 1952, the then Minister for postal and telecommunication services, Giuseppe Spataro, had laid down the guidelines for gradually rolling out the technology to those he termed the “popular masses”, inviting manufacturers and vendors to lower TV-set prices to help break down the economic access barriers to the new medium. Spataro said: “The spread of television depends now on the industrialists and businessmen, who must make their fair profits not from high prices but rather from selling more sets”.

And during the 1954 national radio and television exhibition, held at the Milan Triennale building along with the national electrical-appliances exhibition (refrigerators, washing machines, ovens, American kitchens), the new medium was presented as a domestic object that would relieve families (and mostly women) from the heavy travails of running the home, just like the other electrical appliances, in a “product range from the radio to the vacuum cleaner and the television set to the espresso machine”. Whereas the revolution in the domestic environment prompted by the gradual spread of electrical appliances promised to resolve the practical problems of household management, the small screen offered up a highly valuable source of home entertainment: “The public is, therefore, inclined and openly in favour of anything that simplifies or reduces work and offers opportunities for home entertainment, as the radio does and television now must”.

3. COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

One clear sign of RAI’s attempts to construct television as a medium for consumption in the family home is the frequent direct and indirect appeals to the new medium’s early audiences. These efforts took the form of publicity campaigns and advertisements in the popular press, such as daily and weekly publications and illustrated current-affairs magazines.

A good example of these appeals is the RAI-inspired advertisements that appeared throughout 1954 in the specialist periodical La televisione illustrata. The magazine, published in Milan, was devoted to discussions about issues raised by television’s move into the home such as its incorporation in the domestic design and the new social rituals born around the medium. The “La televisione in ogni famiglia” (TV in every family) campaign aimed to bring “the visible world to every home at any time”. The press promotions particularly emphasized the needs for a boom in the quantity and artistic quality of television programmes; a reduction in the licence fee; continual advances in television-set technology but at lower cost; and tax breaks for TV-set manufacturers and vendors, to help reduce retail prices.

Continually emphasizing the traditional rhetoric of the small screen as a ‘window on the world’, they revisited some of the open questions that had already emerged in the early RAI managers’ public comments. First was the concept that spread of private

13 His presentation was covered by the technical journal Elettronica e televisione italiana, in the May-June 1952 issue.
televisions should necessarily go hand in hand with an extension of viewing choice and an improvement in programme quality. Second was the economic access barrier (i.e. buying the technology and paying the RAI licence fee), which at this early stage of television’s public life confined TV-ownership to the more affluent classes only. Last was a technology issue, namely the conviction that the high cost of access to television sets should be offset by improvements in their technical specifications, to keep driving up the quality of the domestic viewing and consumption experience. Also emerging decisively was the promise that television could be a new frontier of modernity, an instrument of revolutionizing lifestyles and the means of communication. According to the public-service broadcasting ideals, television was a landmark in civilization for Italian society, one that could be achieved only through a collective effort involving all the citizenry and the various social strata.

To promote the uptake of TV licences, in 1954, the RAI launched an audio-visual advertising campaign entitled *La tv in casa* (TV at home), featuring Mario Riva and Alberto Rabagliati. The two small-screen stars appeared as themselves, joining a lower-middle-class family at home to help with the domestic chores (looking after the children, cleaning and tidying the house, and so on) and to encourage them to take out a broadcasting licence: “The RAI has sent us to convince you of the happy times that you can enjoy in the company of television”, they explained. Through its use of comic and parodic tones, the narrative reveals the broadcasters’ main rhetorical devices for constructing television as a domestic medium. Stylistically it was a comedy of manners: a bored middle-class couple complains about the difficulties of routine family life – looking after the younger children, especially. The family environment is dominated by chaos and disorder. Then Riva and Rabagliati arrive at the door, sent by RAI to restore calm and family harmony. By overseeing the domestic chores and supervising and settling the children, they raise the domestic staff’s spirits and end up persuading the father to buy a radio and television licence without hesitation. The underlying metaphor was quite explicit: TV in its traditional guise as ‘the electronic hearth and entertainer’, gathering the family together and taking over some of the household tasks (looking after the children and keeping the adults company).

It is interesting to note that the two TV characters in the sketch were already well known to Italian audiences: Mario Riva was a former variety actor and radio performer, and Alberto Rabagliati was one of the first Italian radio pop stars and theatre actor in the company of Italian famous producers Garinei and Giovannini (afterwards producers of many successful TV shows as well). By involving them in the advertisement, the RAI tried to attract a wider audience, appealing to an earlier shared media memory and presenting television as part of a continuum with other forms of popular entertainment (radio, comedy and theatre). Moreover, this campaign clearly reveals the type of television audience that the public-service broadcaster was trying to shape: a family-oriented, domestic, middle-class image of the public. Also very clear is the RAI’s attempt to foster a model of consumption based on the private space of the home, instead of the public spaces of collective viewing.

Mario Riva, who was also one of the first Italian television hosts and entertainers, often dealt with the issue of domesticating the new medium when he presented his most popular show, *Il Musichiere* (*Name That Tune*, 1956). In his monologues, he spoke to the families gathered at home, suggesting how to position the screen in order to watch the show to best effect at mealtimes, exhorting children to behave properly when using the set, and poking fun at the fathers who pretended not to be interested in the new ‘technological miracle’ when they were actually very fond of it.
This video advertising was not the only promotional initiative that the RAI implemented in the early years of regular programming. Many other advertising campaigns were released on mainstream and specialized media, all using two main images to present the new medium.

The first was the television as a new “electronic fireplace” for the family to gather around that could provide all the comforts needed in a proper modern home and safely reunite the family in the household after the difficult period of the Second World War. The Italian case thus confirms an international pattern already pointed out by American studies of the historical process of television domestication\textsuperscript{14}. One of the most interesting campaigns presents a peculiar image: the TV set is not explicitly pictured but is suggested by the RAI’s logo in one corner and by the slogan “Television, hearth of our times”. In the centre of the picture are a domestic cat, a comfortable armchair and a pair of slippers: all symbolic references to an earlier system of middle-class values connected to the intimacy and privacy of the modern home, which TV was supposed to preserve however also update and modernize. Their aim was twofold. On one hand, they sought to reassure the audience of the brand new media that the TV set was safe, that it could be easily introduced among the other comforts of the household without jeopardizing its moral integrity or the safety of the family members. On the other hand, the television set is presented as fitting in perfectly with the interior décor of a typical bourgeois home, not as a medium but as merely a material object of design, a piece of furniture to be included among the furnishings, according to one of the phases of media domestication noted by Roger Silverstone, namely incorporation\textsuperscript{15}.

Interestingly, similar ideas were expressed by the ads from the main TV set manufacturers, which shared the public service’s interest in boosting sales, to make their economic model sustainable through profits.

The transition from collective television viewing – often perceived by the public press as dangerous and morally worrying because of the nature of the spaces where it took place – to a form of domestic family viewing was convincingly promoted by the popular and specialized press, through slogans that suggested a strong link between television, the home and the family. Television was presented as the new frontier of modernity, and the RAI strongly encouraged a collective rush to reach it. This process was in fact a replication of what had happened with radio domestication in the early years of the century, when the promotional rhetoric was targeted at housewives to reach their husbands. Buying a radio was described as a way to keep your men folk away from bars and pubs and thus to revel in the domestic bliss of the family gathered around the impressive new technology.

The second image used by the public service to promote television subscriptions was the classic vision of the medium as a ‘window on the world’, capable of bringing the best entertainment and the latest news into the protected space of the home, thus fulfilling Raymond Williams’ ideal of mobile privatization\textsuperscript{16}. An advertising campaign in leading newspaper Corriere della Sera in 1954 by the public service with the National Association of Electronic Industries invited readers to buy a TV set, claiming that “The TV set completes the comforts of a modern home. Equip your home with a TV set, and


\textsuperscript{15} Silverstone, Television and Everyday Life.

\textsuperscript{16} Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form.
give yourself an open window on the world. The TV set will bring all this into your
home, to entertain you and your family”.

The strategy is clear: countering public concerns and the debate, kindled in the
popular and highbrow press, about television as a disturbing technology that threatened
to intrude on domestic life and jeopardize the integrity of the family, bringing seductive
worldly things into the home. The campaign aimed to present the TV set as an inter-
mediary between the desire to participate in social and public life and the intimacy and
privacy of the home.

4. “DOMESTICATING” THE MEDIUM

The public service played another important role in promoting television as a fully
domestic medium through its in-house publications (journals, leaflets and brochures).
These offered technical and practical suggestions for the first TV subscribers on how to
accommodate the TV set in the domestic space.

Note that, in these early days, television was not an especially user-friendly tech-
nology: incorporating the medium into the domestic context required certain technical
skills that most people lacked, and the viewing experience needed to be mediated by
various technical procedures (such as regulating the test card and setting frequencies,
sound and brightness). With the brochure Invitation to TV, published and diffused in
1960, the RAI therefore acted as a technological intermediary, with a set of tips for con-
structing the electrical system needed for installing the set and setting it up properly. The
brochure took a strictly scientific approach and was aimed mainly at technophiles and
those already initiated to the new medium (mainly men).

If we read the technical hints from the public-service engineers, provided to the
first television audience, it becomes clear how the act of watching television was still
not conceived as a fully naturalized event, nor as an act completely integrated into the
domestic routines. All the tips imply the need to arrange a proper viewing area, some-
how separated from the rest of the house, suggesting a sort of re-mediation of previous
experiences of viewing (cinema and theatre). As this image from the Invitation to televi-
sion brochure shows, keeping the recommended distance from the screen was the main
issue, in order to avoid possible damages to the eyes or the ears of the spectators.

This brochure was not the only source of information. From 1953, new owners of
TV sets – or people interested in purchasing one – could write to the Radiocorriere for
information on the new technology product. As they relied on the ‘experts’ from the
magazine to install the new medium correctly in their living room and to familiarize
them with it (i.e. to domesticate it), the column can be said to have played a crucial role
in fostering media literacy. Readers asked about technical matters, for example how
to light the room suitably when the TV was on, or how the ‘miracle’ of the live broad-
casting of sound and images worked. A handful of readers wrote to be reassured about
whether they would have to pay any additional costs after buying a TV set.

It is interesting to note how, in this technical domestication of the TV set, the public
services always addressed the male members of the family, while the housewife was
always excluded from the process, particularly in the very early days of the new medi-
um (1953-55). To quote from the RAI’s technical brochure, Invito alla TV, “The TV set
is a fragile and delicate object and must be handled with care. In particular, it must be
cleaned by a competent man, not by the inexpert hands of a good housekeeper. Better to
leave a little dust than to break an expensive piece of equipment”. It is only afterwards,
by the end of the Fifties, that women began to be addressed directly by the public service, and by TV-set producers as well, thus confirming an important gender shift in the way of conceiving of and representing the medium.

The advertising produced and disseminated directly by the broadcaster, the RAI, is one of the few examples of initiatives aimed at properly guiding TV’s entry into the domestic environment that does not focus solely on the television set’s appearance and technical specifications. Rather, understandably, it also considers the symbolic dimension of the TV content, the range of programmes and how they were scheduled. A related and significant development was the leaflet that the RAI’s Propaganda service circulated in 1965 to encourage families to take out a TV licence: *365 buone ragioni. Invito alla radio e alla televisione* (*365 Good Reasons. An Invitation to Radio and Television*). The leaflet is a significant source for various reasons. First, because it constructs an ideal public image modelled entirely on women: “A modern woman needs to know that, for the low price of a licence fee (33 lire a day for the television set and 8 for the radio), the RAI provides her with news, entertainment and useful information of all kinds, that will gladden every hour of her day”. The leaflet’s promotional tone aimed to encourage television-watching as a potential means to solve many of the problems that blighted the modern woman’s lifestyle, in urban centres as in the countryside, while signalling the medium’s gradual penetration even in rural areas: “today, the modern woman has many problems to face, whether she lives in the big city or in the country”. The appeal, then, was addressed no longer to the head of household as the man who would decide whether to buy a TV, but rather to the lady of the house as an active protagonist in the family’s cultural-consumption choices.

This RAI leaflet’s promotional rhetoric appeals to the image of television as hearth and entertainer, presented as a form of home entertainment that gave increased social control, especially over the children, who, when watching TV “can learn, have fun and relax out of harm’s way. And Mum can relax, too”. The metaphor of the medium as a ‘hearth’ is complemented again by a second image: television as an open window (“You can keep up to date on everything without leaving your home”) on what is happening in the world outside the domestic confines.

### 5. Conclusions

For most Italians, viewing television in the first years of its existence actually meant *going to television*, as with previous forms of popular entertainment. The process of superseding the collective and public culture of viewing, accomplished by the early Sixties, involved myriad negotiations between different players with important roles and various stakeholders at different levels.

The public-service broadcaster, alongside the electronics industries, deployed some top-down initiatives to counteract the natural bottom-up development of television as a medium consumed in public and collective spaces. This phase of instability in the medium’s primary characteristics\(^\text{17}\) ended as television progressively stabilized as a fully domestic medium. The ideal of the home changed, as well, as technical commodities entered its space: television was at once considered one of those, and efforts to naturalize

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it in the home first had to overcome fears that the family’s privacy might be invaded by a mechanical eye, suspected of spying on the most intimate aspect of domestic life. The arrival and establishment of the new medium in the intimacy of the family home was facilitated by a dense and varied network of mediators, namely the TV-set vendors, aerial fitters and maintenance technicians, the specialist publications from the RAI and the technology manufacturers, and the displays at fairs, shows and public exhibitions. The idea is that, especially in the earliest stage of television’s public existence, to naturalize the technological and symbolic innovation that the small screen represented, a whole range of different people needed to get involved to explain this media novelty not only to the narrow, tiny community of initiates but also to the larger group of lay people. Television’s development as a communication medium firmly integrated into the home as its place of consumption was achieved, therefore, through a process sparked by the confluence of various currents: the broadcaster’s and the consumer-electronics technology manufacturers’ needs for television to achieve widespread distribution in Italian homes, to facilitate a sustainable economic model for both; the national institutions’ interest in a kind of domestic family entertainment that was socially less potentially inflammatory than the collective forms of cultural consumption outside the home; and consumer demand for a natural evolution of radio, a medium to meet the widespread need for an additional component in the domestic media scene, one that could bring the whole family together in consuming new entertaining and informative content. Ultimately, these drivers had the better of the resistance that arose primarily from comments by opinion leaders in the press, who believed that the new domestic medium would trivialize family life and weaken relationships, and from cinema and theatre owners’ concerns over falling ticket sales.

In the few short years from 1954 to the early sixties, Italian television became fully institutionalized. A (technological, programming and consumption) model was established that was to remain for several decades, at least until the public-service broadcasting monopoly collapsed with the advent of commercial TV in the mid-Seventies.

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