

INTRODUCTION

In many ways, the history of television is a peaceful “flow” – of texts, programming techniques, viewing habits – disrupted from time to time by changes of various magnitudes. Commercialization – the entry into the media market of privately owned and advertising-funded TV stations, as opposed to monopolistic state-controlled Public Service Broadcasters – has been one such major transformation.

On one hand, TV commercialization had a wide-ranging impact on the broader media and cultural scene, at a social and cultural level and from a political and economical viewpoint. On the other, this phenomenon was able to revitalize the medium itself, directly or indirectly, profoundly modifying the rationales and criteria of broadcasting, the production and distribution practices, the art of scheduling, the process of developing programmes and genres, as well as the forms of consumption.

The commercialization of television has been studied extensively in terms of the different national media systems. But unfortunately, there is still no transnational European point of view that can work on the cusp of national and international boundaries, even if some work has been done to scrutinize the historical evolutions of the different national TV systems in the light of broader, supranational trends¹. Nevertheless, developments in European TV can be profitably understood through a comparative approach focusing on commercialization: the entry of private and ad-based players into the national TV markets is a major phenomenon that has affected broadcasting in different European countries at different times and speeds, with complex consequences. Starting from the strong tradition of public-service broadcasting – in many cases, a monopoly – European television has experienced the birth of commercial TV at different points in its history, from the first experiments in the UK during the Fifties, until the elaborate and often contradictory process of deregulation and “liberalization” in many continental countries from the Seventies, and even – in Eastern Europe – into the Nineties. This issue of *Comunicazioni sociali* thus analyzes the gradual spread of various models of commercial TV throughout the decades in different nations across Europe. A process that “moves at different speeds” in the different countries and nonetheless has similar powerful outcomes, enlarging the TV market and opening it up to both local and global influences, ranging from programming to acquisition, from scheduling to the means of advertising, and from freedom of speech and representation to a possible impoverishment of public debate as a consequence of this larger “mediatization”.

¹ See BIGNELL J. - FICKERS A. (eds.), *A European Television History*, New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008; and BOURDON J., *Du service public à la télé-réalité. Une histoire culturelle des télévisions européennes 1950-2010*, Paris: INA, 2011.

The following pages, through both single case histories devoted to individual nations (or regions) and larger comparative studies, provide a rich, structured and powerful outline of the implications of commercialization at the social, cultural, institutional, political, textual and technological levels. The picture that vividly emerges is fairly fragmented yet deeply connected.

To better reconstruct the “different speeds” of television commercialization in Europe, the essays are presented here in a mixed order, both thematic and chronological.

A first group of studies, with unprecedented research and a rigorous historical reconstruction, tracks the early experiments with commercial television in Northern Europe through the Fifties, which often led to failure but in many ways set the scene for the subsequent experiences. Andreas Fickers’s essay *Tele-Saar. Europe’s first commercial TV station as transnational experiment* recalls the valuable experience of a complex TV experiment that took place between 1953 and 1958, broadcasting across the French-German border, in the politically and economically crucial Saar region. The second paper, *Negotiating television’s cultural potential as commercial asset. Early experimental commercial television in the Netherlands*, written by Sonja de Leeuw, gives a broad account of the first long experimental phase of commercial TV broadcasting in the Netherlands, in the Forties and the Fifties, which resulted in a long-lasting and somewhat controversial national public debate between all stakeholders, including the state and the national technical industry. The essay by Elinor Groom, *Mapping the region. The scope of Southern Television’s identity during the emergence of ITV*, centres instead on the UK, where the successful (albeit atypical) commercial TV Independent Television started in 1955 as a group of regional affiliates. The paper focuses on the experience of Southern Television, analyzing the process that led to representing a very multifaceted geographical area that had still to be built. The fourth article, *Semi-commercial or semi-public service? Legitimacy and regulation of commercial television in Finland* by Heidi Keinonen and Heikki Hellman, compares the experiences of three different Finnish commercial stations that have developed their own idea of broadcasting at different times (from the late Fifties to the Eighties) according to different business, social and cultural models.

The central part of the publication moves forward to the late Seventies and the Eighties, and concentrates in particular on the birth of the Italian commercial TV, provided here as an example of the broader trends exhibited at the time across continental Western Europe (France, Spain and Germany). *La via italiana alla televisione commerciale*, by Giuseppe Richeri, is a careful analysis of all the phenomena that slowly led to the development of a private TV in the Italian market: social turmoil, institutional changes, technological advancements and the birth of a large-scale retail market. These factors combined to bring about and develop a commercial communication arena. Andrea Sangiovanni’s *Da libere a private. Sulla nascita della televisione commerciale in Italia* explains, drawing primarily on sources such as newspapers and magazines, the radical upheaval in the Seventies that transformed the idea of a “free” and politically independent television into the classic commercial model of “private” television. *Berlusconi’s TV, before and after. The 1980s, innovation and conservation*, by Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, seeks to shed fresh light on the ascent, during the Eighties, of media mogul (and future politician) Silvio Berlusconi, using several case histories (TV news, schedules and advertising) to explain how the “strong innovation” factor that became legendary was confined to an initial phase of his commercial TV, later giving way to more conservative methods, sometimes identical to the very mould that it had sought to break in the first place. Another essay, *Dallas, Italia. Cronaca di un successo (non troppo) annunciato* by Davide Bassi, concentrates on a close and detailed analysis of

the Italian scheduling of the US TV series *Dallas*, both on the PSB Rai and on the commercial station Canale 5, and shows how a deeper understanding of US programming strategies (and national viewing habits) turned a huge failure into a defining success, a real landmark in Italian television history.

The final section includes studies focusing on the last two decades, tracing the development of commercial television in countries often out of the spotlight, i.e. emerging or minor media markets. The essay by Paolo Carelli, *Media systems in Central Eastern Europe after 1989. A national way to post-communism?*, explains the systemic traits of the emergence of the private TV sector in post-communist countries after 1989, contrasting the cases of Poland and Albania, which followed totally different paths of opening up to private-sector investment. *The commercialization process of Romanian post-communist television. The movement for an independent television and its consequences*, by Mihaela Teodor, adds another tile to this continuously evolving mosaic, explaining what happened in another post-communist nation, with the opposing forces of civic initiatives and commercial needs. Last but not least, Benedetta Prario and Marta Cola's article, *The commercialization of television in Switzerland. A matter of neighbours*, tackles the idea of commercial TV, to understand how a national media system like the Swiss one, fragmented and pervaded by foreign flows, has but little room for commercial television.

The essays in the present issue of "Comunicazioni sociali", therefore, are heterogeneous: different in their times and spaces of analysis, in their background disciplines and points of view, in their methodological approaches to the topic of TV commercialization. However, this prismatic mosaic can be very effective in bringing out the complexity and richness of such a huge process, the many trials and errors, the different paths taken by broadcasters and national institutions, the overlapping and interconnections that crossed national borders on many occasions. And hopefully, this first collection of works will lead to further developments in comparative research on TV history.

Massimo Scaglioni - Luca Barra