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INTRODUCTION

The RAI, Radiotelevisione Italiana, turned sixty in 2014, having officially started broadcasting on 3 January 1954. That day, TV arrived in Italy. Sixty years of history is a great deal, especially considering technological time scales. In just under a decade, digital media and the Internet have changed TV radically. The transition from traditional analogue to digital broadcasting, for instance, has generated new viewing dynamics and prompted new repertoires of imagery hovering, as ever, between the euphoria of the “magical” discovery and the terror of its possible negative effects. But for over fifty years, TV was the twentieth century’s dominant medium, fulfilling a precise social role and fuelling an experience as widespread as it was shared, encapsulated in the simple phrase “watching TV”. For a long time, therefore, watching TV was like a window onto a new world, a priceless discovery. The current scenario of technological convergence and transformation also entails a change in viewers’ identity, engaging them physically. The image of the “multi-television” viewer still seems elusive, however, because the “new” tries to make itself more palatable by borrowing the clothes of the “old”, which, in turn, react to the competition by carving out survival niches¹.

To attempt to understand the significance of sixty years of TV, when tackling the medium’s history, we must stop looking through a filter that long coloured the historiographical debate about the small screen: nostalgia. The era of the RAI monopoly was long interpreted as a kind of golden age with just a few dominant products and genres in its “historical canon”: drama series, educational and cultural programmes, and the great studio variety shows². TV archaeology’s task, however, is simply to help us understand the essential characteristics of the medium’s history in Italy, without ever letting nostalgia colour our view.

In its early days, TV had two fundamental roles. On one hand, it made the Italians “visible”, continuing the traditional function of representation and self-representation previously fulfilled by cinema (e.g. with Neorealism). And on the other, TV synchronised the rhythms of a community and thus made it more self-aware, able to recognise itself and imagine itself collectively, as an “us” facing a common destiny (of the completed post-war reconstruction, the economic boom, and the advent of the consumer society, suitably mediated by the reassuring theatricality of *Carosello*).

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¹ A. Grasso, M. Scaglioni, eds., *Televisione convergente: la tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Milano: Link Ricerca – RTI, 2010.

² J. Ellis, “Per un canone storico dei programmi televisivi”, in A. Grasso, ed., *Storie e culture della televisione italiana*, Milano: Mondadori, 2013, 211-222.

No historian can write the last sixty years of Italian history without the help of TV, its symbolic heritage, and the rituals rooted in an “imagined community”³: from *Lascia o raddoppia?* to the Sanremo Festival, from sports to all the big media events⁴. Hence, indeed, we can split the first six decades of the RAI, and of mainstream TV as a whole, into three main periods, considering the relationship between television programming and the audience: the time when the RAI’s cultural offering was more advanced than its viewers’ level of education (one Italian in two was illiterate); the period when television programmes were in step with audience knowledge; and the present day, when mainstream TV is aimed largely at an audience that is still vast but now “residual” (by age, education and economic background), given how the country has changed. As with all attempts to periodise history, there is a risk of oversimplifying here, too. More than that, the media’s nature is cyclical, and their relations are determined by the phases that they are in. Now, for example, the hegemonic baton is passing to that huge convergent media system of which the PC is the most representative outlet.

When TV arrived in Italy, the medium was controlled by elites of first liberal then Catholic bent. It reflected the spirit of its upper-middle-class target audience, the only social group able to afford the costly television set, although *Lascia o raddoppia?* would soon prove a stunning success in public spaces, bars, cinemas and parish youth clubs, showing how TV was the main tool of popular culture. Meanwhile, the medium’s allure heralded a new era in which television could stimulate new repertoires of imagery.

Three examples illuminate this thesis. In 1957, Mario Soldati produced a remarkable documentary, *Viaggio nella valle del Po alla ricerca dei cibi genuini*. Curiously, Soldati chose to explore Italy’s food and wine culture at a time when many Italians still associated the idea of food with mere survival, with the hungry days endured during and straight after World War 2. Even more interesting was the 1959 investigation by Giovanni Salvi and Ugo Zatterin, *La donna che lavora*, a study of the changes in women’s work in Italy. It seemed revolutionary at the time, despite being perfectly in line with ministerial directives. Guido Sacerdote and Antonello Falqui launched *Studio Uno*, a show of rare artistic elegance in 1961, when the variety genre was virtually unknown to nearly all viewers. Other examples include the TV adaptations of novels (the attempt to bring great literature into Italian homes) and *Il processo alla tappa* (a round-up of the Giro d’Italia cycle race). They simply reinforce the point that TV was culturally more advanced than its audience. The managers of the time are often remembered as emanating an aura of great professionalism and moral fibre. A more careful historical analysis reveals some cracks in that image (the newscasts then knew little of impartiality, for example), although the leading exponents were lucky enough to find themselves in the right place at the right time.

The second period may be considered to begin, symbolically, with the 1967 screening of *I promessi sposi*, as the RAI, by then fully aware of its central role in the national cultural and entertainment arena, celebrated the spirit of its educational mission with Manzoni. This period ended with *Blob*, a montage of clips from other programmes, a critical expedient for analysing TV, the triumph of self-referentiality. In between were programmes that everyone watched, everyone talked about, and everyone was influenced by, including the other media: *90° minuto*, *Canzonissima*, *Bontà loro*,

³ B. Anderson, *Comunità immaginate. Origini e diffusione dei nazionalismi*, Roma: Manifestolibri, 1996.

⁴ A. Grasso, ed., *Fare storia con la televisione. L’immagine come fonte, evento, memoria*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2006.

Portobello, *Quelli della notte*, *Quark*, *Domenica in*, *Mixer*, *Samarconda* and *La Piovra* (although commercial TV also contributed, as with one of Fininvest's first big popular hits, *Drivein*⁵). We could mention many other programmes, and all would underline how the RAI both reflected and shaped the times of a nation. Television relied on some major advantages: its ability to articulate the public in the private; its accessibility and popularity, of course; its complementary, supplementary nature (in contrast to the compartmentalisation of printed-word culture); and finally its specific nature as a "mainstream flow-based medium" that tended to synchronise the habits of a community.

The third period is the present, starting from the early 2000s with the major watershed that was *Grande Fratello* (produced and aired by commercial television). The public-service broadcaster has reacted to the challenges of digital technology as well as it could, frequently hamstrung by politics. The RAI's potential audience reach covers the entire population, because, simply enough, each family has a television set (often more than one), although TV is the sole interface with the wider world for only a minority. They are, in essence, segments of the population with a dual disadvantage: their (medium-low) educational level and advanced age (Italy has the largest elderly population in Europe); and, above all, their standard of cultural consumption, which does not go beyond mainstream TV.

The RAI is trying to adjust to the new world. It has come out of its shell, offering several more channels on digital terrestrial television, and is reinventing itself, although its core business and main mission remain the Public Service (and ad-funded) model.

The following articles discuss Italian television's sixty-year history from a cultural-history perspective, illuminating several questions that have become crucially important in directing the rapid process of institutionalizing the small screen in Italy and then some of its main subsequent changes. The contributions take account of the various interwoven levels that define the medium in each of its historical phases (such as programming, the economic system, the management's visions and ideals, and the relationship with the viewing public).

Massimo Scaglioni's article probes how cultural and managerial initiatives to control the remarkable innovation of television were developed over the decades by the "historical national cultures", especially those of the Catholics and the political left. They had immediately grasped its central importance within the cultural industries and its potential appeal to a much broader popular audience.

Cecilia Penati reflects on the historical process of institutionalizing the medium and on the journey that, in little over five years from 1954, transformed television from a communication medium consumed in public places through collective and participatory viewing styles into an object firmly integrated into the domestic space. Along with other players (including the television set manufacturers), the RAI played a fundamental role in guiding television's development as a domestic medium, through programming and via communication and promotional initiatives.

Luca Barra's essay traces the history of US-sitcom distribution in the Italian networks' schedules. Its path lights the trials and the errors, the hits and the flops, and the various phases in which sitcoms were scarce or plentiful in the schedules and more or less popular with the viewers. This television genre's evolution – lateral, maybe mar-

⁵ Cf. L. Barra, M. Scaglioni, eds., "Moving at Different Speeds. The Commercialization of Television Systems in Europe and its Consequences", *Comunicazioni sociali*, 35, 1 (2013).

ginal, often parallel – on Italian screens interwove with the progressive development of the national media system, from monopoly to multichannel, helping to open up Italian television to the influence of global content, formats and production models.

And the article by Paola Abiezzi analyses the symbolic and identity-forging meanings conveyed by television in its representation of two important factors in the national cultural tradition: food and diet. The essay constructs a history of television's treatment of food, interweaving it with the representation of Italian culture and society, and identifying which formats, genres and texts have characterised food's presence on the small screen from TV's origins to the present day.