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IMAGES OF THE PUBLIC

*The construction of Italian TV audience (1953-1955)**



During the first year of regular scheduling, 1954, RAI¹ launched an advertisement campaign aimed at increasing the purchase of TV licences. RAI aired a short clip which clearly outlined some of the main issues involved in the construction of a specific audience in the early stage of Italian television. Claiming that “RAI has sent us here to convince you of the happy moments you will spend in the company of television”, Mario Riva encouraged a typical bourgeois family to purchase a TV set. It is interesting to note that the two TV characters performing the sketch were already well-known to the Italian public: Mario Riva, former *revue* actor and radio performer, and Alberto Rabagliati, one of the first Italian radio stars and popular music idols. Through their presence in the advertisement, RAI tried to attract a wider audience, referring to a shared, previous medial memory. Moreover, through this campaign the representation of television audience that the Public Service Broadcasting tried to construct and diffuse clearly emerged: a family-oriented, domestic, middle-class image of the public.

It can be argued that, near the beginning of the regular scheduling, the issue of audience strongly emerged in the TV institution, mostly due to the sudden and sharp increase of the diffusion of the medium. This is revealed by the data collected in some reports of that period: as the span of regular programming rose from 923 hours in 1953 to 1,497 in 1954 (peaking to 1,828 in 1955), by 1954, 88,675 people owned a TV licence. This number more than doubled the next year, soaring to 182,416 people². In 1955, a survey on the television viewers claimed that almost 6-7 millions adults, not possessing their own TV set, watched the programmes at friends' places or in public contexts such as bars and taverns. Over

¹ * The essay has been conceived and developed altogether by the three authors. Massimo Scaglioni has written the introduction and paragraph 4, Cecilia Penati paragraph 1 and 3, Luca Barra paragraph 2 and 5. The paper has been presented at the INA Conference “Television. The Experimental Moment” (Paris, May 28th 2009).

The Italian television public service, which had a monopoly in broadcasting until 1975.

² *Annuario RAI 1954 - 1955 - 1956*. 1957. Torino - Roma: Rai.

one million young people used to watch TV outdoor too³. However, from an overview of sources and documents such as television programmes, management's speeches collected in house-organs and articles published on weekly and daily press, both popular and highbrow, it is evident that in the early years of Italian television (from 1953 until at least the second half of 1955) a fixed and stable image of a specific television audience was lacking.

The aim of the paper will therefore be to describe the gradual development of an unchanging and defined idea of television's public from the invention to the institutionalization of this medium in Italy. The specific process of definition of *an audience* will be considered as a significant point of view to comprehend the process of institutionalization of early Italian television. Through a "trial and error" path, which characterized this primitive stage, Italian television settled a stable image of its public, which would become long-lasting during the scarcity era of the public broadcasting monopoly, from 1955 to 1975, also known, in the words of Umberto Eco, as "paleotelevisione"⁴. However, just before that "passive", mainly domestic and middle-class image of TV audience took form, a multiplicity of different images emerged.

Our specific focus will be on this "primitive blossoming" of different models of television audiences between 1953 and 1955. Television tried to define a unified and stable image of its public re-mediating a cinematographic and a theatre model of audience as well as encouraging the growth of a family audience through the installation of TV sets into domestic spaces⁵ discouraging otherwise the practices of collective viewing. This, in a short period, kept alive different ways of addressing its spectator, mainly based on the dynamic of interplay. Significant evidence of a strategy of interaction between the television institution and the audience of the very first years will be provided, challenging the long-held view, generally accepted within the field of TV studies, of a passive form of early television spectatorship. With this challenge, we intend to rekindle the debate on the primitive Italian television public.

This paper is grounded in a wider research project on cultural history of Italian television, considering that the history of broadcasting can never be separated from its broader national, social and cultural historical context. Consequently, this research has dealt with different sorts of documents and sources, all rigorously investigated: early TV programmes still conserved in the RAI archives, para-texts (as well as house-organs and survey's reports) as well as articles from popular and highbrow press⁶. As the research developed, the

³ *Indagine Doxa sull'ascolto della radio e della televisione. Risultati definitivi di un'inchiesta eseguita nel febbraio-marzo 1955*. Roma: typescript.

⁴ The term gained visibility in opposition to the following neo-television phase, as described by Eco, U. 1983. *Tv. La trasparenza perduta*. In: 1983. *Sette anni di desiderio*. Milano: Bompiani and Casetti, F. & Odin, R. 1990. *De la paleo à la neotélévision*. *Communications*, 51.

⁵ Spiegel, L., 1992. *Make Room for TV*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶ The project was developed thanks to the research resources of RAI archives in Rome and Turin: "Biblioteca centrale Paolo Giuntella", "Biblioteca Comunicazioni di massa di Via Teulada", the RAI film and video warehouse in via Salaria (Rome) and "Bibliomediateca e Centro documentazione Dino Villani" (Turin).

most difficult challenge was the scarcity of the audiovisual material conserved within the RAI archives: in fact, a considerable amount of early programmes has not been preserved and it is not currently on display.

Two main points will be discussed in the paper. Firstly, how the paternalistic policy implemented by the management of the Public Service Broadcasting contributed to shape the first, stable image of TV “theatre-like” audience after a first stage of “trial and error”. Secondly, we will discuss where it is possible to find evidence in the primitive years of different ways of audience-addressing, based on a more active-interactive model of the public. Finally, we will reconstruct the case history of the TV show *Duecento al secondo* demonstrating how, in late 1955, the interactive model was symbolically put aside in favour of a mainstream, long-lasting image of the domestic/familiar/theatre-like and bourgeois television spectator.

1. Shaping the first television audience: between paternalism and *re-mediation*

There is a consensus among Italian scholars on some of the processes which have conditioned the development of a small-screen-specific spectatorship. The first and most important assumption, explored extensively within the field of Italian television history⁷, is that the image of Italian television in its early years has been deeply shaped by the moralistic and paternalistic ideology of Catholic inspiration by one of the first management of RAI, led from 1954 by managing director Filiberto Guala. Guala was appointed by Amintore Fanfani, a leading politician and head of the Christian Democratic Party (*Democrazia Cristiana*). Notwithstanding the opposition raised from the majority of the former management of RAI, settled in Turin and expression of a liberal and merely “industrial” view on the television system, the Catholic administration could set the agenda of scheduling practices and implement a policy of broadcast focused on the concepts of education, entertainment and information.

From 1954, when Guala diffused his *Code of behaviour for Italian Television*, deeply influenced by high hierarchies of the Vatican⁸, the moralistic character of the public service sharply increased, consequently causing a change in the image of the public that the new medium was supposed to address. The main point of the *Guala Code*, overall reflecting and confirming the common Catholic moral, was to recommend to the producers and authors of television programmes a specific concern about “audience sensitivity”, asking firmly to avoid the representation of violence and the use of offensive behaviour and language, both in genres such as teledrama and telefilms, and in shows peculiar to the new medium (such as quiz and variety shows, directly inspired by music hall and revue), which involved a direct interplay with contestants selected from the audience. Through these statements, the television institution took an authoritative position, dealing with the audience with a paternalistic attitude and taking for granted the idea of addressing the people to educate them.

⁷ Grasso, A., 2004. *Storia della televisione italiana*. 3rd edition. Milano: Garzanti; F. Monteleone, 1995. *Storia della radio e della televisione italiana*, Venezia: Marsilio.

⁸ Monteleone, F., 1995. *Storia della radio e della televisione italiana*. Venezia: Marsilio.

Besides, the first president of RAI in the age of television, Cristiano Ridomi, expressed clearly the pedagogic intent of the first small-screen programmes while pronouncing the inaugural speech of the 19th National Exhibition of Radio and Television (September 1953). This marked a sharp rise in the educational aim of the new medium from the radio era and theorised that the construction of a proper television audience had to be driven by a well-rounded schedule, grounded in cultural programmes. Ridomi's speech closely evokes the theory of "social responsibility" of public broadcasting, postulated by Lord John Reith, BBC's director-general from 1927 to 1938⁹.

In the very first years of Italian television a particular rhetoric of spectatorship took form, grounded both in domestic consumption and collective viewing in public spaces such as bars, taverns and inns. Press reports clearly depict two different images of audience, distinct by different qualities: «the public of taverns, hostels and bars of suburban districts» and «the urban public of huge cities»¹⁰, which were described as opposite audiences. Consequently, the television viewing in its early years was clearly divided into two patterns of spectatorship, both site- and class-specific: according to *Corriere d'informazione*, a popular daily newspaper, the first was peculiar of «bars, rooted in collective consumption» and the second of «wealthy, urban people»¹¹. These two models of spectatorship clearly denote that in this phase of transition of the media scenery, widely known as "age of scarcity"¹², television had to deal with two different aims: while pursuing the goal of providing a popular, lowbrow entertainment, programmes also had to be addressed to a more cultured and middle-class target. Therefore, it can be said that the period between 1953 and 1955 represents an experimental stage, in which different patterns of addressing an audience were performed at the same time.

The transition from a collective practice of television viewing – perceived in the public opinion as dangerous and morally bothering – to a form of domestic and familiar viewing was convincingly encouraged by popular and specialised press, through the slogans "A television in every family" and "Television, heart of our times"¹³. This process was in fact a replication of what occurred with radio domestication in the early stage of the century, when the rhetoric of promotion was ideally addressed to wives. Buying a radio was represented as a way to keep men and husbands away from taverns and saloons, now enjoying the domestic pleasure of the family gathered around the new, impressing technology¹⁴.

⁹ Briggs, A. & Burke, P., 2005. *A Social History of the Media. From Gutenberg to the Internet*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁰ Difetti e coraggio dei pionieri della televisione. *Corriere d'informazione*, 23 November 1955.

¹¹ Ecco in poche parole il 1955 alla televisione, *Corriere d'informazione*, 12/13 January 1955. The same process has been studied and pointed out by McCarthy, A., 2001. *Ambient Television. Visual Culture and Public Space*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 29-62.

¹² Ellis, J., 2000. *Seeing Things*, London: Tauris.

¹³ Advertisement in *La televisione illustrata*, May 1954, year 1, n. 2, p. 1, and October 1954, year 1, n. 7, p. 1.

¹⁴ Briggs, A. & Burke, P., 2005.

Some of the content found in *La televisione illustrata*, one of the first Italian popular magazines dedicated to this new medium, clearly expresses this process of ideal construction of a domestic and family audience. A good illustration of this case is a short novel about how the television crossed the threshold of a typical middle class family with two children, during the first year of regular scheduling in Italy, 1954. The brief tale is aimed at promoting the purchase of a television set as an instrument to contrast the children's presence beneath the windows of public spaces where television had been placed. These were considered dangerous and inappropriate locations, mostly due to the social background of their attenders, who were prevalently male and belonged to the working-class. The short sketch represents a typical middle class family discussing the purchase of a TV set, yearned by the two children and their mother. The father, who embodies the family authority figure, appears hostile to the new medium, but his hostility is directed even more at public spaces of viewing¹⁵. It is clear that the main parental concern is about the moral integrity of the youngest members of the family, which could well have been compromised in the event of their participation to public rituals of television viewing inside public places. The second issue raised within the family by the debate on television dealt with the aspiration of social upgrading involved by the very first ambition of owning a TV set. In this short sketch, such an ambition emerges as peculiar to the mother, who explicitly tends to characterise the owners of the new technology as rich and belonging to upper-classes¹⁶.

Consequently, it is possible to argue that both the television institution (through its most representative managers, Guala and Ridomi) and para-texts about television (press reports, "exemplary novels", claims and advertising campaigns) carried a paternalistic image of the audience and, despite being well-aware of the collective form of spectatorship diffused all over the nation, encouraged the gradual development of a family-rooted audience.

In so far as the first television audience was shaped on the model of previous media's spectatorship, it can be said that a sort of *audience re-mediation* occurred close to the beginning of Italian television. The fact that television directly stems from some previous communication technologies and spectacular forms is an issue largely debated by scholars. According to Raymond Williams¹⁷, it is possible to describe the TV medium as the result of a rearrangement of previous spectacular and technological devices: mainly radio, theatre and cinema. However, other spectacular forms influenced the medium as well: for instance, the music hall and the variety revue have to be considered the direct source of inspiration for television shows

¹⁵ «I don't want you to hang around in the streets and stop to watch television in public spaces», he replies to the pressing enquiries of the two children. The youngest child uses this position to attain his intention: «You could buy us a TV set, and we could watch it all together in the living room». In *La televisione illustrata*, April 1954, year 1, n. 1, p. 10.

¹⁶ «Since Mrs. Amelia received the television as a gift from her husband, she's no more feeling lonely, all the neighbours visiting her to see teledramas and women's television". – The imagine of wealthier, upper-sider neighbours having made her said those words with a bit of regret - "Darling, let Mrs. Amelia slide... It is clear that her husband is well-off".

¹⁷ Williams, R., 1974. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Collins. The term "re-mediation" has been used firstly by Bolter, D., & Grusin, J., 1999. *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: MIT Press.

such as quizzes and minstrel shows. It might be argued that a process of *re-mediation* occurred not only on the side of the production of TV content, but also in a similar way on the side of the medium reception. A convincing argument to support this idea might be the advertisement put by RAI in the *Corriere della sera*, the main Italian broadsheet, in early January 1954. As the images and the claims of the insertions significantly pointed out, the aim of the first programmes of the regular scheduling was clearly to imitate theatre (“Television presents: home theatre”), sport events (“Television is in service of sport”) and overall to “assimilate and go beyond” the miracle of the radio”. It is therefore clear that the addressee of the new medium was supposed to be the same audience entertained earlier by spectacular events such as theatre, sport, radiodramas, which became accessible, comfortable and direct for each household, due to television’s inherent quality: domesticity. Quoting Williams, we might say that previous spectacular forms had to adapt to newly devised technologies and to develop different relations with the audience.

Moreover, it is crucial to consider the role played by the newly born television critique in shaping the identity of the first television audience: Giovanni Cenzato’s reports on *Corriere della sera* are *a case in point*. Cenzato, a former theatre reviewer, shifted his interest to television in 1954. His reports clearly depict an image of a “medium without content”: in his opinion, television was conceived merely as a form of technology aimed to air a live collection of dramatic masterpieces and events with social relevance (for instance the election of the President of the Republic, or the Pope’s speeches). In one of his first reviews on the new medium, Cenzato stated that «Television should absorb previous artistic patterns and adjust them so as to accomplish the necessities of our times». Furthermore, he assumed that «Television could find its sense as a medium just in opera and dramatic theatre, neglecting all the other genres of programmes». The acknowledgment of a television *re-mediation* results in a definition of television viewers’ expectations, which provides interesting further implications on the topic of *audience re-mediation*: «It must be considered that there are two main pleasures that the audience expects from television: theatre and film»¹⁸.

2. Interaction: a struggle for the new medium

Together with the main assumptions in defining the TV audience pointed out above – the moralistic and paternalistic ideology towards both popular and bourgeois publics; the audience re-mediation of previous media – another approach takes into account the various ways the TV institution interacted with its emerging public. In a first experimental phase, preceding the establishment and institutionalisation of a “passive” paleo-television audience, the *primitive* Italian TV tried to involve its viewers at different levels. During this “trial and error process” emerged some peculiar forms of interaction that were soon abandoned, to regain visibility only in recent years.

¹⁸ Cenzato, G., 1954. Radio e televisione, *Corriere d'informazione*, 13/14 January.

A first type of interaction involved people attending TV programmes directly in the studio (more often, the theatre) where they were filmed. The peculiar pattern of this model of communication stemmed directly from the conventions of “classic” theatrical spectatorship: for instance, in “filmed theatre” – the TV reprise of *pièces* act on real stages – shots of the real audience, shown before the opening and at the end of the play, contributed to frame the show as a traditional piece of theatre aired by television.

Similarly, in *Scala reale* (*Royal Flush*, 1954), a collection of songs and sketches unified by the host Adriana Serra, the public sat in a large stall and stressed the most entertaining moments with applause and laughs: Miss Serra intervened only to invite the audience to calm down, pretending to wave it down. However, the spectators often remained off-screen, a rarely visualized presence strongly connected with the TV audience at home (or in bars, or even in other theatres).

The most interesting experiments of interaction with the public on-site, though, occurred in the shows directly derived from music hall and revues (the so-called “avanspettacolo”). Once again the audience sat (and laughed) in stalls, and once again the host tried to address it in representation of the wider public spread all over the nation. As an unexpected result, the national broadcasting of these on-site jokes gave them a complete new meaning, both expanding and frustrating their potential for a new involvement of the audience.

For instance, in the musical variety *Un, due, tre* (*One, Two, Three*, 1954), the presenter Corrado involved the on-site audience in a gag: he announced a prize-winning competition, inviting everyone in the theatre to check the number under their seat; when they discovered there was no number, and the host explained the joke, the camera evidenced the amused looks of some people in the theatre. A second trick (and surprised looks) followed together with the exchange of some lines with an off-screen spectator. Then Corrado terminated the joke with a sentence which was the prelude to the following exhibition: “Don’t believe to what the host says. You must never believe. But this time you have to”¹⁹.

The broadcasting on TV of such a gag as the one described above, typical of stand-up comedy, necessarily took into consideration the reaction of a wider audience, who could see it as a supplementary element of the show (as the *Radiocorriere* recommends, «the presence of the public becomes, for the TV viewers, integral part of the show itself»²⁰), or on the contrary could feel excluded by the joke exactly as it was by the location where it took place. These forms of involvement were common in early Italian TV comedy shows, such as *Ottovolante* (*Merry-go-round*, 1954), and came to a peak (and to an end) with *Duecento al secondo* (*Two Thousands a Second*, 1955), a game show whose contestants were randomly selected between the spectators present in the theatre.

The possibility to reach a wider audience, overcoming the space of a single, specific theatre, led early television shows to establish a dialogue with another type of public, situated in the middle range of

¹⁹ It happens during the last episode of the first season, aired on Tuesday, 20th October 1955.

²⁰ Musica e buonumore, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 32, 8-14 August 1954, p. 17.

the on-site spectatorship and the dispersed audience in front of a TV set: in other words, the urban population who lived in the city where the show took place, and who could – more or less easily – reach the location and get in touch with the programme, or the television institution.

Once again in *Duecento al secondo*, for instance, some so-called “outside events” were included in the plot of the game show, inspired by US format *Dollar a Second*: during an episode, presenter Mario Riva invited the viewers who lived in Milan to check if they possessed a 100-lire banknote beginning with a specified serial number, put in circulation the day before by a local bank; whoever owned a banknote that fulfilled the request, had to reach the Manzoni theatre in Milan, in order to participate to the live show.

In Rome, the local audience was similarly challenged by another show, *Ottovolante*, which once invited all the Roman citizens to bring their domestic pets to the theatre. As the *Radiocorriere* pointed out, «the sensational stir of this peculiar game with the spectators has been extraordinarily diffused, to confirm the vitality of television shows and their correspondence to the growing new audience»²¹. The “dualism” of the cities where the two main RAI production centres were, Milan and Rome, was mirrored by two twin shows – *Un, due, tre* and then *Duecento al secondo* in Milan, *Ottovolante* in Rome – that offered similar opportunities to the cities’ inhabitants to be involved in the programmes of the newly-born medium. Once again, a huge part of the TV audience was excluded and could participate at this *primitive* form of interplay only from a distance; once again, these patterns of interaction would have been dismissed almost immediately, as soon as the medium fully encompassed both its potential and its limits.

In addition to on-site and metropolitan audiences, *primitive* Italian television also tried to interact with the “real” TV audience, the wider public that watched the new medium all around Italy, «in big cities as well as in minor towns», «not only in bars and cafés – besides, naturally, in private homes – but also in the streets in front of shops and even in cinemas and theatres where companies put a TV set»²². The simpler form of involvement was the continuous appeal to a distant public (“ladies and gentlemen”), present in almost all the non-fiction shows, albeit with some light differences: in *Album personale* (*Personal Album*, 1953), a production of the experimental period where each episode was dedicated to a theatre *vedette* (as Wanda Osiris and Erminio Macario), there was often an off-screen voice interacting with the star, asking questions and leaving comments on the public’s behalf; while in *Lascia o raddoppia* (*Leave it or Double it*, 1955), the first great success of Italian TV, presenter Mike Bongiorno used to greet specific segments of the audience, such as groups locally supporting a contestant (“Carpi’s inhabitants”) or definite professional categories.

The paternalistic ideology of the early Italian television resulted in some of the first examples of “tool TV”: teacher/student interaction was mimed, purposing to transform television in a wider version of a classroom: this approach is evident in the so-called *Tv dei ragazzini* (*Children’s TV*, 1953), or in *Passaporto*

²¹ Ottovolante numero due, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 15, 11-17 April 1954, p. 14.

²² Come in tribuna ai campionati di calcio, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 27, 4-10 July 1954, p. 15.

(*Passport*, 1954), an English course run by teacher Jole Giannini, where the lessons in front of the camera were only interrupted by the interventions of some English native-speaker children.

Besides these elementary forms of “linguistic” interaction, however, some experiments of a more complete, two-way communication between the institution and its audience were also performed. A first example may well be *Una risposta per voi* (*An Answer for You*, 1954-56), a weekly programme where Alessandro Cutolo, bibliography professor at the Milan University, answered to questions regarding general knowledge and humanistic studies: mails received from the public – «in geometric progression», as Cutolo himself pointed out²³ – were read during the programme (similarly to the letters’ corner in newspapers and magazines), allowing the audience to take part in the transmission and, even if only incidentally, to comment on it or on the TV anchor itself.

If this first way of interacting with television recalls the means used by the national and regional press, a second form, the involvement of the audience in prize-winning competitions and games, is taken directly by radio programming. In all those cases, together with the tasks of a regular contact with a volatile audience and a prolongation in time of the ephemeral experience of vision²⁴, *Radiocorriere* – a weekly magazine on radio and TV programmes published by RAI – worked as a sort of house-organ of RAI, providing practical support to TV shows and their first, timid, extensions outside the small screen. The first example of competition occurred even before the beginning of regular scheduling: *Attenti al fiasco* (*Mind the Fiasco*, 1953), presented by Dino Falconi, proposed every week a riddle to the “far-off public” of the show; the viewers could send the solution to a dedicated mailbox, participating – if the solution was correct – to the “draw of stunning prizes”. The names of the winners were published in a dedicate section of *Radiocorriere*²⁵. These kinds of competition continued in the first years of regular transmissions: another example was the show *Ottovolante*, which offered the chance to win three TV sets to those who gave the right solution to a quiz, then published (with the names and the addresses of the winners) on *Radiocorriere*²⁶. As telephones were still absent from TV programmes, it was the regular mail – with the support of the house-organ – to provide the viewers with the possibility to participate in TV games and win prizes.

Other ways to interact with television were some acting and beauty contests, which can be placed between the TV competitions described above and “real” job advertisements. A few weeks before the beginning of regular programming, *Radiocorriere* launched a first search for television announcers, presenters and newsreaders²⁷. However, the most significant contest was connected to a TV serial, *Il dottor Antonio* (*Doctor Antonio*, 1954). Radio and TV subscribers were invited to listen attentively to the radio reduction of

²³ Cutolo, A., 1954. Ogni settimana una risposta per voi, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 11, 14-20 March, p. 14.

²⁴ Ortoleva, P., 1999. Fermare la voce. Usi e funzioni di un organo di stampa alle origini della comunicazione via etere. In: L. Parola ed. 1999. *E poi venne la radio. Radio Orario 1925-1929*. Roma: Rai Eri; and Grasso, A., & Scaglioni, M., 2002. *Schermi d'autore. Intellettuali e televisione 1954-1974*. Roma: Rai Eri.

²⁵ For an example, *Radiocorriere*, XXX n. 41, 3-10 October 1953, p. 14.

²⁶ For an example, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 51, 19-25 December 1954, p. 33.

²⁷ La Televisione ha bisogno di nuovi volti e nuove voci, *Radiocorriere*, XXX n. 49, 6-12 December 1953, p. 4.

the novel, to choose their favourite character and to send in their photos and curricula to the broadcaster. Some viewers were selected on the basis of the material sent to RAI and, after a casting, signed a three-month contract as actors for the television version of the drama²⁸. Such effort to select actors and actresses through a nationwide casting was an attempt to visualize, for the first time, the audience of the new medium, in a contest significantly called “New Faces for Television”: some weeks after the casting launch, *Radiocorriere* started to publish the photographs sent to RAI, with a brief indication of name, age and location. «The public that by definition had not a face, now begins to have one»²⁹, stated the *Radiocorriere*, while Miss Lucy, a protagonist of the novel, became a «mirror in which girls try to watch themselves»³⁰. The broadcaster gave voice to a diffused “anxiety” to engage with the new medium, not only by participating as a spectator or as a contestant, but also as an actor, a presenter, a protagonist. At the same time, the great response of the public allowed the broadcaster to map – at least partially – and visually represent the disperse and diversified audience of the new medium.

Finally, another interesting way the broadcaster connected to its wide audience was children’s programming: the involvement of the probably more active part of the TV public went far beyond the English lessons of *Passaporto*, and included some specifically intended competitions and other forms of constructive interaction with the new medium. One useful example is *Ragazzini in gamba* (*Kids on the Ball*, 1954), a programme which frequently invited the viewers aged from 5 to 12 years to send in their drawings and illustrations: for instance, in the competition “La cartolina di Natale” (“The Christmas Card”) the 30 best images were presented during the programme, and their authors rewarded with a children’s book³¹. As far as constructive interaction is concerned, the *Tv dei ragazzini* involved its young public in several activities: for instance, it explained how to make a small-scale model of a little plane, with the *Radiocorriere* publishing the instructions and a 1:2 scale drawing of the pieces³². The experiments to engage the children with – and fidelize them to – the new medium were here declined in a practical (and to some extent pedagogical) form.

3. The press as a mediated space of interaction between television and its audience

A further argument to support the theory of a strong pursue of interactivity laying under the pattern of early TV spectatorship is provided by the analysis of the modalities in which the Italian press took into account television in the period between 1953 and 1955. A case in point may well be represented by the column *Postaradio*, a regular section of the *Radiocorriere* dedicated to the readers’ letters. Due to the hybrid nature of the *Radiocorriere*, which was at the same time a popular magazine and a house-organ, this column

²⁸ Nuovi volti per la tv, *Radiocorriere*, XXX n. 51, 20-26 December 1953, p. 17; Chi sarà di voi il dottor Antonio?, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 1, 3-9 January 1954, p. 15.

²⁹ Nuovi volti per la tv, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 9, 28 February-6 March 1954, p. 14.

³⁰ Nuovi volti per la tv, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 11, 14-20 March 1954, p. 15.

³¹ La cartolina di Natale, *Radiocorriere*, XXXI n. 46, 14-20 November 1954, p. 15.

³² Ragazzi, la tv vi insegna a costruire un modello volante, *Radiocorriere*, XXXII n. 29, 17-23 July 1955, p. 16-17.

can be considered as another example of the demand of participation emerged from the television audience and taken into consideration by RAI. From 1953, newly owners of TV sets – or people interested in purchasing one – mailed the *Radiocorriere* to ask for information on the new technological product. As they relied on the “experts” from the magazine to install correctly the new medium into their living room and to familiarise with it (*domesticate* it), it can be said that the column played the crucial role of *media literacy*. Likewise, the column “Parliamo tra noi” (“Let’s talk confidentially”), held weekly on *La televisione illustrata* starting from January 1954, often fulfilled the same purpose. Enquiries were about technical matters, for example on the adequate lighting the room should receive when the TV was on, or about explanations of the “miracle” of live broadcasting of sound and images. A handful of readers wrote to be reassured about the further costs implied by the possession of a TV set after the first payment. These few readers’ enquiries put forward new arguments backing the theory of an *audience re-mediation* that occurred in this experimental phase: in fact the readers asked the magazines to account for the minutes of break scheduled in the live broadcasting of dramatic theatre, between the divisions of the Acts.

Besides, these pages were considered by the first television viewers as a space where they could put forward their ambitions and give public relevance to their aspirations of taking part in TV programmes and being involved in the process of production of television content. A considerable amount of the published letters came from young female readers, who wrote to promote themselves enthusiastically as announcers, hyping their skills (as a perfect diction) and qualities (mainly beauty and nice appearance).

It is interesting to consider that broadsheets newspaper also tended to include in their pages the audience’s point of view in the public discourse on television developed. Giovanni Cenzato’s reviews frequently dealt with letters sent by common viewers, very often complaining about TV shows considered excessively lowbrow or morally inappropriate.

In 1956 Italy had to face the astonishing case of Professor Lando Degoli, a contestant eliminated from *Lascia o raddoppia* due to an ambiguous question about classical music: the episode, hyped and over-reported by the press, resulted in the largest public debate on television until then. The *Corriere d’informazione* reserved a whole page to the letters from the audience, all written in response to the question raised by the newspaper (“Have your say on Degoli’s case”): a sort of primitive *forum*, completely dedicated to the topic, took form on the tabloid³³.

In other words, it is possible to claim that – in those first, experimental years – the press represented a *tribune* aimed at mediating between television institution and its audience. Letters to magazines and newspapers from the audience represented an instrument to interact with TV, and at the same time a way for the novelty spectators to get acquainted with the new medium and all the different practices it had imposed upon the society.

³³ Il pubblico interviene nel caso Degoli in attesa del verdetto della commissione, *Corriere d’informazione*, 21/22 December 1955.

4. *Duecento al secondo* and the overcoming of the experimental phase

As we have suggested in the first part of this paper, the institutionalisation of television audience took form through a “trial and error process” which eventually led to the overcoming of an experimental phase and to the dismissal of the most evident and popular forms of interplay with the public.

A good example of this overcoming may be the case of quiz show *Duecento al secondo*. The show, created and written by Garinei and Giovannini, former theatre and radio authors and already well-known to the public for their peculiar sense of humour, almost near the knuckle, was presented to the press as a show «performed right in front of the public, to which the public itself must participate»³⁴. *Duecento al secondo*, hosted by comedian Mario Riva, ran on Italian television from 1955 and immediately turned into a huge popular success, documented by press shots of people queuing to receive the invitation ticket to the show³⁵. The scheme of *Duecento al secondo* was simple: one pair of contestants was selected to perform a task and they earned 200 *lire* for every second they could remain on stage. If they made a mistake, they had to pay a penalty, usually embarrassing and involving performances of slapstick comedy (for instance, the contestant had to slide down towards a small swimming pool placed in the middle of the stage).

If *Duecento al secondo* collected the appreciation of a vast popular public, on the other hand the show was sharply criticised by the majority of the highbrow critics and reviewers, who pointed out the lack of good taste in the show, which explicitly teased the contestants, playfully provoking and making fun of them. The players were negatively judged too because, in order to gain money, they resorted to perform “silly childish games”³⁶, considered inappropriate for a prime-time TV show.

Due to the vast public discussion raised and to the negative reaction of the press, the show was cancelled on the schedule and replaced in late 1955 with *Lascia o raddoppia*, a quiz show modelled on the American *The \$64,000 Question*, whose contestants were required to display their general knowledge³⁷. The television institution thus confirmed its paternalistic attitude, preferring to please a middle-class and bourgeois audience through the dismissal of many stylistic features directly imported from previous popular entertainment shows (such as funfairs and amusement parks). This process clearly expresses the attempt of the apparatus to “normalise” its programmes and to implement a form of passive spectatorship which became typical of the *paleo-television* age from the beginning of 1956.

5. Conclusions

The replacement of *Duecento al secondo* with *Lascia o raddoppia* – with the reduction of the quiz show to a handful of “morally secure” patterns and mechanisms – is an important signal of the substantial changes

³⁴ I quiz show anche in Italia. 100 al secondo, la più originale rubrica di varietà della tv, *La televisione illustrata*, June 1955, year 2, n. 6, pp. 38-39.

³⁵ Press shot collected in *La televisione illustrata*, September 1955, year 2, n. 9, p. 31.

³⁶ Gramigna, G., 1955. Troppe torte in faccia per duecento lire al secondo, *Corriere d'informazione*, 22-23 September.

³⁷ Difetti e coraggio dei pionieri della televisione, *Corriere d'informazione*, 23 November 1955.

into the interaction of the TV institution with its public that started to occur since the last months of 1955. This process clearly expresses the attempt of the apparatus to “normalise” its schedule and to implement a form of passive spectatorship which became typical of the paleo-television age.

Many other signs testify the end of a period of experimentation in which “trial and error” policies of interaction were implemented, and the subsequent top-down stabilization in a clearly defined image of audience mainly composed by families in their private homes. A first confirmation can be read in the long-lasting conflict between liberal executives with an “industrial” view and the catholic management for the control of the broadcaster, a conflict which ended in 1955 with the strengthening of the latter group. The catholic managers soon brought the RAI to level all its programmes to the strict moral norms of the “Guala code”. Besides, new forms of scientific measurement of the TV viewers changed, at least partially, the broadcaster’s vision of its “implied audience”: in October 1955, the results of a first quantitative survey on television spectators were published, calculated by research institute Doxa and referring to the months of February and March³⁸. The questions focused on the way people interacted with the new medium, more than with its programmes. Within the research queries, there were: the duration and frequency of TV viewing on a daily basis, both in house and outdoor; the new habits and their impact on the lifestyle and consumption of cultural goods; the sources used by viewers to find information about TV scheduling.

The reduction of challenging forms of viewers involvement into TV programmes coincided with the increase of pedagogic effort and more precise quantification of the audience and its habits: the role of the press and its attitude towards the new medium changed too. In the last months of 1955, the television column of the main Italian newspaper moved from the evening tabloid-style edition (*Corriere d'informazione*) to the morning broadsheet journal (*Corriere della sera*): an upgrade that effectively symbolizes the growing role of the television in media system, and the recognition of its audience as an increasingly important group that had to be taken into account even by social and cultural élites. Furthermore, the *Radiocorriere* itself was revolutionized: from the end of October 1955, it reduced the space exclusively dedicated to radio and TV programming and changed into a weekly mainstream magazine. This «radio and TV journal, will not mirror, although with high fidelity, only a part of the vast and complex activity of Italian radio-television, but will represent it as a whole; it will be more an echo of a general informative attitude than a voice recalling the flat chronicle of its single programmes»³⁹, it claimed on the same issue whose cover story recalled the main results of the Doxa survey quoted above⁴⁰.

Since the last months of 1955, the institutionalization of the medium therefore corresponded to a similar institutionalization of its audience. The growing mass of TV viewers obtained a new recognition as a central force in the development of the medium, and progressively became a research object, widely in-

³⁸ *Indagine Doxa sull'ascolto della radio e della televisione. Risultati definitivi di un'inchiesta eseguita nel febbraio-marzo 1955*, typescript, Roma, ottobre 1955.

³⁹ Ai nostri lettori, *Radiocorriere*, XXXII n. 43, 23-29 October 1955, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Le abitudini di ascolto, *Radiocorriere*, XXXII n. 43, 23-29 October 1955, p. 3; 16-17.

vestigated with both qualitative and quantitative methods. As the TV audience started to be institutionally defined, its connection with the spectatorships of the previous media gradually weakened: TV became dominant – and stand-alone – in the media system. The various “experiments” inside and outside the small screen aimed at enhancing the involvement of the potential public with the new medium, that had been peculiar to TV experimental years, almost disappeared.

In conclusion, the “trial and error” process of the novelty years, which conducted to a sort of “predation age”⁴¹ where previous media habits and new experiments made possible by the new technology collided into the progressive discovery and definition of various types of public, vanished into the paleo-television paradigm, where those new forms of interplay were substantially repressed by a normalizing idea of a familiar TV audience which needed to be morally and culturally guided.

This essay tries to demonstrate the relevance of the very first phase of Italian television, using the relationship between the TV institution and its audience as a *fil rouge* to discover innovative attempts and crossroads, later suppressed by the prevalence of a unique interpretation of the audience. It is only a first step towards further research projects, which we hope would fulfill the difficult task to map extensively the mechanisms of TV institutionalization in Italy and, finally, to contribute to a broader cultural history of the medium.

⁴¹ The expression is used, with some changes in meaning, in Bettetini, G., ed. 1980. *American Way of Television. Le origini della tv in Italia*. Firenze: Sansoni.