

## PREFACE

On 25-26 November 2016, within the framework of the celebrations for its ninety years of activity, ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) held a conference in Rome entitled “Italian Society and the Great Economic Crises 1929-2016”. For the occasion, some experts in the human sciences (from sociology to statistics, economics and social psychology) were asked to organize panels with the most accredited scholars. In particular, the two authors of this preface were asked to organize a panel titled “Media and Italian Society. Technological Revolution and Communicative Innovations”. While making up the panel and wording the invitations, we set ourselves the objective of addressing the development of the media system in relation to both the major crises and the role played by innovation in making the media – with respect to the crisis itself – assume a cyclical or anticyclical role.

We therefore asked some well-known scholars, with different outlooks and approaches, to present their observations on the issue with the utmost freedom. The debate that emerged strikes us as fascinating, in which historical views of the past and traditional media crises (1929, the 70s) are seen in relation to more recent ones (in particular the role of the digital media during the last major global and national crisis which began in about 2008).

After the panel, we proposed to our colleagues that the outcome of that debate should be published in a special issue of *Comunicazioni sociali*, and we considered it appropriate to extend the invitation to another colleague, who in a parallel panel had examined the creative industry of fashion with a similar attention.

The contributions that appear here are therefore the fruit of both the discussion in the course of the panel and a careful review that the authors have made in the light of the debate in Rome. In our view, this offers an important cross-section, both in a historical and a theoretical sense, of the significance that the media (both in what we may call their institutional configuration and in the practices they enable) embody in societies traversed by major economic, political and social crises.

It was, we have said, an impassioned discussion that took us through the twentieth century to the present, starting with the Great Depression and the role played in it by the media and the entertainment industry, as analysed in the essay by Enrico Menduni. Cinema, radio, photography and more generally the entertainment industry – in its more or less legal forms – are interpreted in that historical context as a ground of reaction to the crisis both on a purely economic level and their capacity to represent in an alternative way a present in which, even amid many difficulties, it was possible to regain confidence. It was Roosevelt’s America and the ability to mobilize the media and the imaginary played, argues Menduni, a significant part in the New Deal. The discourse when

it comes to a less distant, and indeed Italian crisis, is different: the delicate transition of the Seventies. In those years of economic crisis and great social tension for the country, the media system certainly played a central role in intercepting the desire for participation with the emergence of the democratic media. Then, on the eve of the 1980s, it was capable of creating a dialogue with the socio-economic structure and with daily life, which were changing profoundly with the redefinition of, for instance, the chain of distribution and family buying habits: a fundamental process and in harmony with the new advertising market destined to become the driving force of private television, first, and then the duopoly. This was a very delicate step from a social and economic point of view. However, as Giuseppe Richeri says, it happened in the almost total absence of the institutions, which failed in every way to guide a transformation destined to establish the Italian media system's structure for many years to come (at least until the stage following the transition to digital terrestrial television).

The centrality that the media and the social media have, above all in periods of crisis, as the terrain of the articulation of the social ties is at the centre of the reflection of Giovanni Boccia Artieri. This essay examines how the spread of the media and the social media has exerted an anti-cyclical role in Italy with respect to the economic crisis, relying on the adoption of new media (and in practices of connection and consumption) which opposed the pressure of contraction due to the economic crisis. Then – through the social history of media – the essay analyses whether and how the social media are constituting a public space for collective actions and representations, capable, among other things, of entering into synergy with public and private life in the last ten long years of crisis. A hypothesis, that advanced in the essay by Boccia Artieri, which is extended in the essay by Carla Lunghi. Moving from the terrain strictly of the media to that of the creative businesses in the fashion industry, the essay analyses how the social media have triggered innovative socio-economic processes. In particular, the essay addresses some experiences of appropriation of social media platforms by fashion companies, which find in them a space for developing a different and sustainable cultural proposal in both ethical and economic terms, hence responding precisely to the difficulties that even fashion and designers have had to cope with in these years of crisis. Alberto Marinelli's essay also presents research in the field, addressing the universe of Italian YouTubers and their transition from amateur to professional production. This is a step in which the new professionalisms emerge on the one hand as a biographical response to the economic crisis and on the other hand as a systemic response of the media to the ongoing processes of innovation. In both cases, these are certainly promising answers, but they are not devoid of great ambivalence and criticality. Marinelli sheds light in particular on the function of disintermediation and its correlation with prosumer capitalism, with all its opacity concerning themes such as (among others) the exploitation of immaterial work. The essay also highlights the difficulty that institutions and citizens have to deal with in interfacing with the processes of innovation conducted at a supranational level by the major players in the platform economy. Finally, our own essay offers a general overview in a diachronic perspective, seeking to delineate, within the history of the Italian media system, the complex theme of the relations between the media and crisis, highlighting the dynamism of the relations that the media – in their cultural, technological, economic and political components – have had with Italian society since the post-boom phase, and seeking to use this perspective as the basis for a new periodization of the national media system which moves beyond the monomedial approaches adopted to date. The picture that emerges illustrates how the Italian media, following the boom, have basically been confronted for the last forty years with a period of uninterrupted crisis that

has seen a gradual decline of the country until the phase of the last decade. During this long span of time, the crisis has sometimes functioned as a depressive element on the media system and sometimes as a promoter of systemic innovations, favouring the rise of new content and forms of consumer offerings (for instance with the explosion of private broadcasting, or the advent of the social media, and the birth of connective media, as recalled in the foregoing contributions). Certainly many facets of this subject remain to be explored, and many phases need to be interpreted in greater detail. This does not detract from the fact that the discussion has been fascinating and in our opinion fruitful, as well as the invitation to pursue it together.

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