

## **‘Berlusconi’s Italy’: the media between structure and agency**

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In this article, I explore the conditions of the media in Italy by taking into consideration a variety of elements: the context of media legislation and media concentration that have favoured the interests of Silvio Berlusconi, and the role of progressive agency (media professionals, citizens’ groups) as they worked within those constraints to keep alive the flames of democracy during the ‘Berlusconi era’. This perspective is intended to provide an alternative interpretation to what has become the prevailing view of contemporary Italy: an ‘abnormal’ country; the ‘Sick Man of Europe’; worse yet: a country of ‘servants’. The framework of analysis includes the influence of the media-magnate-turned-politician on media legislation and the television sector, but also evaluates the important roles that media professionals and citizens have played to improve pluralism. The article argues that despite extreme levels of media concentration and an unprecedented conflict of interests, a commitment to engage in political discourse has continued to characterise Italy’s political culture. This commitment has been expressed by a multiplicity of actors, from journalists and media professionals to citizens’ organisations and media activists.

**Keywords:** Berlusconi and media; media policy; public service broadcasting; media professionals; media activism; Italian media

### **Introduction**

In this article, I argue that in order fully to evaluate the complexity of the impact and legacy of Silvio Berlusconi on the Italian media, we need to move beyond a focus on media concentration to include a discussion of journalists’ and citizens’ media activism. This approach is intended to provide an alternative framework to what has become the prevailing interpretation of ‘Berlusconi’s Italy’.

Much of the existing literature on this topic has focused on the problems of media concentration and Berlusconi’s control of the media, which have often been seen as yet one more sign of the country’s ‘abnormality’ (Andrews 2005). For Chris Hanretty (2010, 86), the media’s ‘lack of autonomy from politics [...] makes Italy the sick man of Europe’. According to Maurizio Viroli, Italians under Silvio Berlusconi have lived in an existential condition of servitude, deprived of the education and the willpower to achieve ‘the liberty of citizens’ (2012, 1–13). In a fascinating cultural analysis of ‘pre-Berlusconi’ Italy, Alessia Ricciardi (2012) argues that scarcity of critical thinking has characterised the country’s public sphere since the 1980s. A sort of aristocratic disdain for ‘mass’ culture by leftist intellectuals impoverished the

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quality of public discourse, opening the way to an era of commercialisation, the advent of mass consumerism and, ultimately, the rise of Berlusconi (Ricciardi 2012).

For Paolo Mancini (2011), Berlusconi has embodied the dreams and the expectations of Italians, passive audiences waiting to be entertained and led by the media magnate. The Italian case has been exemplary: in the field of media studies, a specific term, 'Italianisation', has been coined to warn scholars and media policy-makers of the perilous trend of media moguls turning politicians in some of the post-communist democracies of Eastern Europe (Splichal 1994; Stetka 2010).

Indeed, Berlusconi's conflict of interests and the levels of media concentration in the television sector have been unprecedented and of substantial concern. Yet the conclusion according to which Berlusconi might have irreversibly damaged Italian society through the exercise of some sort of cultural hegemony thanks to his control of the media does not do justice to the resistance and activism that Italian citizens have manifested during his years in power.

In fact, the focus on the structural dimensions of Italian media has overlooked the agency of media professionals and citizens, who have maintained their vigilant engagement in the political and civic life of the country. This aspect of the media and democracy in Italy during the 'Berlusconi era' (a period covering the years from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s, which coincided with his presence at the pinnacle of the country's political power) needs to be woven in to offer a more complete picture. I argue that when the many instances of resistance are brought into the picture, the state of Italian democracy appears much less negative than it might otherwise. Therefore, in this article, I propose to shift the attention from a focus on structural concerns to the role of agency, and more precisely, to the interplay between those structural constraints and the possibilities for social change.

In the next section, I introduce and define the concepts of structure and agency as they apply to the study of the Italian media. I then briefly review media concentration in Italy and Berlusconi's conflict of interests in order to provide the background for the study.

### **The interplay between structure and agency**

Structures can be defined as patterns of social practices that constrain human action, whereas agency refers to the possibility for such action. However, structure and agency should not be considered as separate entities, completely independent one from the other. Although structures constrain, they also allow human action, and without human action, there would be no structure. Anthony Giddens defined this interplay as the 'duality of structure', one of the foundational concepts of his 'structuration theory' (1984). An approach that looks at the interplay between these two constitutive elements of social relations can be fruitful also in the field of media studies. Indeed, various scholars have pointed out the importance of exploring the tensions between structure and agency in order to understand better the complex roles of the media in society, and move beyond the emphasis on either structural forces (the focus of media political economy) or audience interpretation (Mosco 2009, 185–210; see also Couldry 2004).

Agency refers to purposeful action that is necessary to reproduce existing structures, or to create social change. In the history of the Italian media we can find a variety of examples of this kind of agency. There is no doubt, for example, that Berlusconi himself has exercised much agency, as his actions have been influential in shaping the media system in ways that have benefitted his own media empire. In contrast, there has been a different kind of agency, one that either collectively or individually has operated to ignite debate, to offer a counterbalance to

Berlusconi's power, to represent and give voice to alternative perspectives, challenging the conditions of a concentrated media sector.

Media structures represent the conditions under which media operate and the legislative framework that regulates a country's media. In Italy, two main structural conditions have characterised the media system since the mid-1980s: a very high level of concentration in the television sector and the absence of regulation preventing Berlusconi's conflict of interests.

Although the television sector has exhibited tendencies towards the concentration of ownership in many industrially advanced countries and mature democracies, including the USA (Noam 2010), the levels of concentration, especially in the area of broadcast television, have been unprecedented in Italy. Indeed, since the mid-1980s, RAI (the public service broadcaster) and Fininvest/Mediaset (Berlusconi's media empire and TV channels) have controlled the advertising market and commanded the vast majority of national audiences in what has since been defined a duopoly. By the late 2000s, the sector was still highly concentrated with an index of 4639 points on the Herfindahl-Hirschman scale (Colapinto 2010, 62). In 2010, Mediaset commanded 56.8% of all television advertising revenue and RAI 22.1% (AGCOM 2012, 113, 115).

In addition to such a highly concentrated television sector, the lack of proper regulation with regard to conflicts of interests had made it possible for Silvio Berlusconi to become Prime Minister on multiple occasions (1994; 2001–06; 2008–11) without renouncing his media ownership, thus allowing him to exercise, directly or indirectly, control over broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> This was the “original sin” ... at the heart of all anomalies in the Italian communications system’ (Cepernich 2009, 34). In fact, the absence of regulation that could prevent such conflicts of interests brought an already close relationship between the media and politics to an extreme and actualised what Jürgen Habermas (2006, 420) had defined as an ‘incomplete differentiation’ between the media and the political sphere.

### Media policy and legislation

A country's media regulatory framework constitutes one crucial structural condition that defines the relationship between media institutions and the state. The regulatory framework, however, also vividly illustrates the interplay between structure and agency. In Italy, this relationship has been characterised by Berlusconi's heavy-handed interventions and has been influenced by his own agency.

In this section, I focus on media legislation in the television sector because of the social and political relevance of this medium. Indeed, television has historically been at the centre of the media diet of the Italian people, and this tendency has persisted well into the early 2010s. According to CENSIS, the Italian Institute for Socioeconomic Research, in 2013 television audiences (including the growing number of satellite television subscribers) still ‘basically coincide[d] with the entire population’ (CENSIS 2013, 89). Indeed, television has continued to play a fundamental role as a source of information for millions of people: news bulletins on generalist television channels remained the main source of information for more than 86% of the population well into the first decade of the twenty-first century (CENSIS 2013, 90).

Television has also been the media sector most coveted by advertisers and has drained resources from other media (most notably print). Indeed, since the establishment of the duopoly, a less than adequate share of advertising revenues has plagued the print media. In the mid-1970s, they shared more than 64% of advertising revenues; by the early 1980s, that percentage had

dropped to 47% (Padovani 2005, 106). By 2010, newspapers and magazines could only count on 28% of advertising revenues, whereas television controlled 42% (AGCOM 2012, 166).<sup>2</sup>

The origins of ownership concentration in the television sector in Italy can be traced back to the early 1980s, when the absence of antitrust regulation, and Berlusconi's influence and networking within the political establishment – in particular, with the right wing of the Democrazia Cristiana (DC – Christian Democratic Party), the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI – the Italian Socialist Party) and the Partito Repubblicano Italiano (PRI – the Italian Republican Party) – made it possible for Fininvest to establish full control over the national television market as early as 1984. How was it possible that one entrepreneur could amass all that media power? How come the broadcasting sector did not open up to more players and instead became locked in a duopoly? An analysis of three of the most influential laws in the history of Italian broadcasting (Law no. 223 1990; Law no. 249 1997; and Law no. 112 2004) reveals the political machinations that allowed the duopoly to continue. Each one of them illustrates the extent of the interplay between the media and the political establishment and the power of Berlusconi's agency in shaping the history of the Italian media.

### *The establishment of the duopoly*

By the late 1980s, RAI and Mediaset already controlled 95% of advertising revenues and more than 85% of the national audience share (Padovani 2005, 42). In 1989, Ciriaco De Mita (at that time Prime Minister, and a leader of the left wing of the DC), proposed to reform the television sector in order to set limits on advertising revenues for the commercial broadcaster and to make possible 'the indispensable playing field for free competition among multiple players' (Rocca 1990). However, after almost one year of parliamentary discussions, the bill ended up legitimising the very duopoly that it should have broken down. Indeed, not everyone agreed on the kind of regulatory intervention to be adopted. The DC, especially the left wing of the party, together with the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI – Italian Communist Party), favoured a strong public service sector and argued that in order for RAI to compete in an increasingly commercialised and global media environment, no advertising ceilings should be imposed on its programmes. The PSI (with its leader Bettino Craxi, a personal friend of Berlusconi), together with the more conservative, powerful right-wing faction of the DC (and other smaller parties), opposed the introduction of strict antitrust legislation to regulate the activities of Fininvest on the pretext that doing so would have weakened Italian media corporations and made them unable to weather international competition. In reality, it could be argued that the only corporation that they wanted to protect was Fininvest.

As discussed elsewhere (Padovani 2009), this final text of the law was a compromise between those who wanted a robust public broadcaster and those who supported a strong commercial broadcaster. Rather than establishing antitrust limits on the basis of advertising market share and audience reach, the law set them on the basis of the number of national channels potentially available, stating that no broadcaster could control more than '25 percent of all national TV channels, or three channels' (Law no. 223, Art. 15, section 4). That was precisely the number of channels that the public and the commercial broadcasters respectively operated.<sup>3</sup>

### *New antitrust measures*

Another missed opportunity to change the situation was Law no. 249 of 31 July 1997, passed by the centre-left government of the time. The law established stricter antitrust measures (neither

RAI nor Mediaset could exceed 20% of available national channels), and established that any channel in excess would have to migrate to satellite. The law also established the *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* (AGCOM), a Communications Authority that was given the task of monitoring and enforcing legislation and antitrust measures. However, while bold in rhetoric, the law failed to set a deadline for the migration of channels to the satellite platform, thus leaving the duopoly unchanged in actual fact. A more drastic solution would have been to order the immediate divestiture of both RAI's and Mediaset's channels in excess of the 20% limit (for instance, RAI3 and Rete4), but this would have been a very unpopular move that no political force was seriously willing to consider. In fact, at that time satellite television was still in its infancy in Italy. Therefore, forcing channels out of the analogue spectrum and onto the satellite would have met with resistance from voters (who watched their favourite RAI and Mediaset channels on analogue television) as well as from the two broadcasters, who would have lost large sums in advertising revenues. In the end, the duopoly was left untouched: the paradox was that, although a channel like Rete4 (Mediaset's third channel) was in violation of antitrust limits, it continued to broadcast using the same frequencies, since there was no deadline for the transition.

### ***Expanding the 'relevant market'***

The third piece of legislation to consider is Law no. 112 2004 (known as the 'Gasparri law', after the communications minister at the time), passed by the second Berlusconi government (2001–06). This, too, paid lip service to principles of pluralism and competition, and set stricter antitrust limits, whereby no single entity could control more than 20% of all resources. However, the law expanded the definition of the 'relevant market' on the basis of which that 20% would be calculated, to incorporate revenues from the entire *Sistema Integrato delle Comunicazioni* (SIC – Integrated System of Communications). The integrated system included revenues from other media, such as the printing press, radio, cinema, advertising and the Internet. The result was that, in a much larger market, the dominant position of Mediaset was diluted, allowing Berlusconi's television empire to keep its lucrative over-the-air channels until the switch-off of analogue broadcasting in 2012. As Christopher Cepernich points out, this law was 'one of the most evident cases of *ad personam* legislation' (2009, 36), clearly designed to protect the Prime Minister's private interests.

The idea of an 'Integrated System of Communications' had been developed by Antonio Pilati, a highly regarded media analyst close to Berlusconi's party *Forza Italia* (FI), who was considered by many to be the true inspiration behind the 'Gasparri law'. An intellectual who had worked for Fininvest in the early 1980s, Pilati had become an influential member of the Communications Authority in 1998. In the 1990s he had also been a prominent member of the Institute of Media Economics (IEM), a well-respected think tank created under the auspices of the Rosselli Foundation, whose work had been sponsored by various media and telecommunications operators, including Fininvest. As Pilati explained in his introduction to the IEM third report on the economic conditions of the media sector in Italy, an 'integrated macro-sector of communication' would soon become the 'central engine of the economy' (Pilati 1996, 3); and he warned that an integrated system of production and distribution of knowledge was the key to making gains in the global economy. In order to compete, it was necessary to 'strengthen the dynamism of the sector' (4) by reducing the 'bulimic normative debate' (5) in the country, and its many laws, which penalised the nation's firms. His argument was that at a time when the trend towards consolidation in the media industry was at its height internationally,

Italy's only commercial broadcaster should not be weakened. Indeed, the Gasparri law protected the interests of Mediaset under the pretext that a strong corporation was necessary to improve Italy's visibility in the new information society. In international trade publications, the law was characterised as a measure to 'deregulate the country's airwaves [while] bolster[ing] the dominant position of [...] Mediaset' (Vivarelli 2004).

Yet, AGCOM retained powers under European Union competition laws to restrict RAI's and Mediaset's dominant positions and launched various investigations into the matter. In 2005 the authority fined the two operators for breaching the 30% advertising limit imposed by Law no. 249 of 31 July 1997.<sup>4</sup> Again, in 2006, Mediaset was fined for breaking advertising rules with regard to the frequency with which advertisements were shown during films.

### **Berlusconi's agency**

As Cepernich points out (2009), during the early phase of the development of Italian commercial television, Berlusconi played an important role in forcing the television sector to open up to innovation and privatisation. He exploited the initial regulatory vacuum of the 1970s and 1980s, his connections with the political party establishment, the growing popularity of his television channels and, from the 1990s, his position as an elected politician, to modify and shape media policies in his interests. At first, he was a key actor causing the structure of Italian television to change from the state monopoly over national television to a duopoly between the public service broadcaster and the commercial broadcaster. Later on, he was decisive in maintaining the status quo.

Therefore, Berlusconi can be said to have been a powerful agent, acting against existing laws (as when he circumvented regulations against national commercial broadcasting in the early 1980s), but also in concert with sympathetic politicians, media experts and consultants, to provide a patina of legitimacy to the duopoly, by passing legislation that sanctioned, and then prevented, its break up.

### ***Changes on the air?***

Notwithstanding Berlusconi's many interventions to maintain the status quo, things began to change in the television sector towards the end of the 2000s. Technological developments, including Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) and satellite, contributed to making these changes possible. Overall, the impact of these on the duopoly was significant and the average daily audience share for RAI and Mediaset channels decreased from 89.6% in 2002 to 73.6% in 2012 (RAI 2002, 27; RAI 2012, 30).

In the over-the-air television sector, La7, the channel owned by Telecom Italia, gradually rose to prominence during the decade as the 'third pole' of Italian television. For many years, the channel had attracted considerably smaller audiences than those of RAI or Mediaset – the audience share of La7's prime-time news bulletin reached an average of almost five percentage points in 2010, while the average audience share for Mediaset prime-time news bulletins was 39.5%, and that of RAI 50.9% (AGCOM 2012, 118). However, the prestige of La7 in the panoply of Italian news media continued to improve thanks to the line-up of high-profile journalists, innovative formats for news and public affairs programmes, and its reputation as the 'only national channel independent of [...] Silvio Berlusconi' (Zecchinelli 2002). The channel affirmed itself at the beginning of the 2010s as a channel for in-depth coverage 'with a clear anti-Berlusconi slant' (Freccero, personal interview).<sup>5</sup> This was the main strength of La7. Indeed, by

the end of 2011, the average audience share for its evening news programme had grown to 9.6%, nearly double that of one year earlier (AGCOM 2012, 118).

Major changes were also occurring in the area of pay-per-view television. Since its launch in 2003, News Corporation's Sky Italia had become the dominant player in the sector of satellite television. This meant that the centrality of Mediaset was being threatened on two fronts: in the over-the-air television sector (with the rising influence of La7) but also, and perhaps most importantly, via satellite TV (Gerbaudo 2012). By 2012, Sky Italia controlled 32% of total revenues for the Italian television market (including advertising and pay-per-view subscriptions), ahead of both Mediaset (30.2%) and RAI (28.5%). In fact, by the early 2010s, the Italian television sector (free and pay) had slowly developed into a 'triopoly', with these three players accounting for more than 90% of all television revenues in the country (AGCOM 2013, 138).

### **The relationship between media institutions and media professionals: the case of public service broadcasting**

The public service broadcaster in Italy has historically represented a privileged vantage point from which to observe the interplay between practices of political interference and the agency of media professionals and journalists. In the 1970s, a specific term, *lottizzazione*, was coined to define this relationship as the 'parcelling out' of positions of power inside RAI among the various political parties (Padovani 2005, 2). In this section, I first illustrate some of those interferences as they developed during the Berlusconi years and then focus on the agency of journalists who, in various ways, countered that influence by empowering the public with alternative and critical programmes.

The first example of Berlusconi's influence over the public broadcaster was the so-called 'Bulgarian Edict' of spring 2002, which signalled the beginning of 'unprecedented interventions of the executive in the internal affairs of RAI' (Freccero, personal interview). During an interview from Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, Berlusconi, then Prime Minister for the second time, accused three popular TV personalities of having made 'criminal use of television' for their open stance against his coalition in their talk shows, public affairs and satirical programmes. Sure enough, their contracts for the following autumn season of 2002 were not renewed, and they had to find jobs elsewhere (although two journalists later went back to work, for some time, for the public broadcaster).<sup>6</sup>

The second example of Berlusconi's interference refers to a series of phenomena indicated in the popular press as 'mediasettizzazione' of the public broadcaster (this is a neologism inspired by 'Mediaset', the name of Berlusconi's TV company). The term indicated the process of 'colonisation' of the public broadcaster RAI on the part of the commercial broadcaster Mediaset, illustrated by a series of appointments in key positions of people coming from the entourage of the Prime Minister, or from Mediaset. They included: Antonio Baldassarre, a former Italian Constitutional Court president and member of a party allied to Berlusconi, who was made president of RAI's Board of Directors in 2002; and Agostino Saccà, a member of FI, who was appointed Director General of the corporation in the same year (and later became director of RAI Fiction). Directors of news programmes were also replaced by people close to the media mogul. One of the most controversial was the appointment, in 2009, of Augusto Minzolini, a man close to Berlusconi's party, to the helm of Tg1, the most influential news bulletin in Italy.

Another instance of direct involvement in the internal affairs of the public broadcaster was Berlusconi's 'personal lobbying', documented by a series of wiretapped telephone conversations

between him and high-level RAI officials. These conversations were brought to the attention of the public on various occasions. In 2007, for instance, the weekly *L'Espresso* revealed telephone exchanges between the media mogul and Agostino Saccà, when Berlusconi was heard recommending a young woman for an acting position, telling his interlocutor how much he liked a certain show and that he wanted that particular show to be aired (*L'Espresso* 2010). More phone conversations were intercepted between the Prime Minister and Minzolini – when the two were heard discussing the content of the evening news on Tg1 (*Corriere della Sera* 2010) – and between Berlusconi and Giancarlo Innocenzi, member of AGCOM, in which the Prime Minister expressed his frustration with the public affairs talk show *AnnoZero*, broadcast on RAI2, and fronted by his archenemy, the journalist Michele Santoro (Foschini 2010). More conversations were also recorded over the years between RAI news editors and their Mediaset counterparts. Some of these were leaked by the Rome-based newspaper *La Repubblica* in the autumn of 2007, revealing that editorial decisions for some of the most important news programmes produced by the public broadcaster were being made after consultations with the commercial competitor (Randacio and Galbiati 2007). In other words, Mediaset news editors and, at times, Berlusconi himself, were exercising a role as ‘gatekeepers’ to indicate the tone, perspective and content of the daily news agenda, even for the public service broadcaster.

From overt threats against TV personalities, to strategic appointments of the Prime Minister’s men to key positions, to private conversations and personal lobbying, Berlusconi’s tentacles of power were all around the public broadcaster. This was the framework within which some journalists tried to assert their agency in order to offer counter-information and pluralism inside RAI.

### **Agency for democratic communication**

So far, I have described the various elements that have defined the recurrent pattern of undue interference in RAI. In fact, the relationship between the public broadcaster and the political establishment in Italy has long represented a form of constraint over content, hiring of personnel and appointments in the echelons of the organisation. In this regard, RAI has been defined as the ‘least independent’ from the political establishment among a group of prominent public broadcasters (Soroka et al. 2012, 18). This lack of independence has been correlated with a poor offering of ‘hard news’, and research has shown that watching public television in Italy has had ‘a net negative impact on knowledge’ of hard news (Soroka et al. 2012, 18).

It is beyond the scope of this article to comment on the results of these findings. However, I propose here that perhaps this entrenched history of political interference might also have ignited the proliferation of ‘antibodies’ against these forms of pressure. Indeed, in order to assess the impact of the ‘Berlusconi era’ over the public broadcaster, it is important also to pay attention to the instances of quality television that RAI has continued to offer (especially on its RAI3 channel) and the many examples of opposition to and criticism of Berlusconi that media professionals have demonstrated in their work. I now turn to define the kind of agency exercised by media professionals in RAI.

### ***The agency of public service journalists***

Journalists have exercised their agency collectively on various occasions to protest against the undue influence of Silvio Berlusconi. For example, shortly after Minzolini’s appointment as news director, the *comitati di redazione* (newsrooms) of TG1, TG2 and TG3 were up in arms,



joining together to protest against the Director's decision not to include the news surrounding Patrizia D'Addario's account of her romantic affair with the Prime Minister in their bulletins (Vitale 2009).<sup>7</sup> The powerful union of RAI journalists (USIGRAI) backed the journalists who questioned the Director's decision not to cover the matter.

Often journalists exercised their agency individually, as some of them decided to do when they left their prestigious positions to denounce the undue pressures from 'above' inside Tg1, and its news agenda that often failed to represent the reality of what was happening in the country. One example of this kind of individual agency was Maria Luisa Busi's decision to resign as anchor of Tg1's prime-time evening edition, in protest against the leadership of Director Minzolini and the 'unbearable climate' that, she said, had been created inside Tg1. Busi denounced the fact that under Minzolini, the 'dialectics among different sensibilities inside the newsroom' were now in jeopardy (Busi in Palestini 2010). She received the endorsement of the *Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana* (Italian Press Federation); two members of the Board of Directors of RAI also expressed solidarity with her. Busi's decision made national headlines when she released an interview for the daily *La Repubblica* on 1 April 2010, explaining her position and the reason for her actions (Palestini 2010). Her interview rekindled the debate on the role of public service journalism in Italy, which should have been to report a variety of viewpoints and perspectives in support of pluralism of information.

Other journalists publicly expressed their disagreement with Minzolini's leadership in a similar fashion. One of them was Elisa Anzaldo, who also stepped down in May 2011 from her anchor position in protest against Tg1's biased reporting in favour of Berlusconi and his government coalition (D'Argenio 2011).

### **Political talk shows**

Journalists also exercised their agency by using the existing structures of the public service broadcaster RAI to promote a kind of programming and an entire genre that flourished during the 2000s as a source of counter-information. This genre was political talk shows.

Talk shows – in which leaders of the Opposition and the coalition in power, as well as journalists, intellectuals and audience members, animatedly discuss the issues of the day – have been engaging and entertaining and have kept political issues in the forefront of public opinion, providing a platform for the expression of dissent on mainstream television. In fact, they have become the 'television core of counter-information' (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009, 136). The format provides the opportunity for direct interaction between the audience in the studio and politicians: citizens can ask questions during the shows (as in *Leader*, hosted by Lucia Annunziata on RAI3 during the 2013 winter season), and the public sits visibly in front of the camera (a good example of this is the show *Piazza Pulita*, hosted by Corrado Formigli, on La7 since 2011). A giant screen for live feeds offers a connection with the *piazza* (as in most of Santoro's shows), where correspondents interview union members during a strike, protesters during a march, citizens' organisations and so on.

Many talk shows have been critical of right-wing governments, and Berlusconi as Prime Minister. *AnnoZero* (broadcast on RAI2 between 2006 and 2011 and fronted by Santoro), has been a leading example of this kind of counter-information provided on mainstream television, covering many issues of social, political and cultural relevance (from immigration to criminality, from labour to moral issues). In fact, shows such as *AnnoZero* have represented an important forum for groups and organisations whose voices might not otherwise have been heard on the national media. This can be one way to empower the public, providing agency and a venue for

representation to those issues and social actors who would otherwise find no space on mainstream television.

During the 2000s, this genre became a central ingredient of Italians' television diet. On generalist TV, the offer has increased from 212 hours in 2011 to more than 340 hours in 2013 (Siliato 2013, 1). Although viewers have been showing signs of 'audience fatigue' and migrating to satellite television, the average audience share of some of the most popular talk shows has remained consistently higher than the audience share of their respective channels. For example, at the beginning of the 2013/14 TV season, the average audience share for *Ballarò* (hosted by Giovanni Floris and on the air since 2002) was nearly double the share of the channel which hosted it, RAI 3; the share for Santoro's *Servizio Pubblico* (2011–) was three times that of the channel which hosted it, La7 (Siliato 2013, 3).

### **Public service on RAI3**

Whereas political talk shows have become popular on all generalist television channels, the genre was championed by RAI3, the third channel of the public service broadcaster. Indeed, over the years, RAI3 has continued to represent a bastion of counter-culture, and an example of that interplay between progressive agency for social change and the structural constraints of mainstream television.

During the 2000s, programming on the third channel was heavily focused on 'News, Information and Analysis' (a category that includes political talk shows), which has grown from 23.2% in 2006 to 40.2% in 2012 (RAI 2006, 29; 2012, 31). This has turned out to be a successful formula. Even though the overall audience for this channel has always been relatively small, it is important to note that during the first decade of the twenty-first century, while the duopoly was already losing viewers, RAI3 fared better than any other generalist channel on RAI or Mediaset: from 2002 to 2012, the average daily share of RAI3 dropped only two percentage points (from 9.7 to 7.7), while the share for RAI1 went from 23.8 to 18.3% and that of Canale5 decreased from 22.6 to 15.2% (RAI 2002, 27; RAI 2012, 30).

### **The relationship between citizens and mainstream media**

So far, I have discussed the agency of media professionals and journalists who have expressed their opposition to Berlusconi's influence by stepping down from their positions, or by developing a TV genre providing counter-information that has proved wildly popular. There is yet one more site to explore in order to shift the focus from the negative impact of media concentration and Berlusconi's power, towards a discussion of progressive agency. Therefore, I now turn to study citizens' media activism during the Berlusconi era.

During the first decade of the 2000s, a time characterised by several successive right-wing governments, Italians have demonstrated a growing level of commitment to various forms of political activism. In fact, the level of citizens' participation 'from below' has considerably increased. According to DEMOS & PI Research (2014), the 'participation index' (that is, the percentage of individuals who have been involved in three or more activities of political or civic value) grew for all age groups over the period from 2006 to 2012. This has been particularly noticeable for those aged 25–34, whose involvement in civic committees and local organisations, and participation in public manifestations of protest, has increased from 28.3 to 41.7%. Indeed, according to CENSIS (2013, 52), since the 1990s, political activism has taken on new forms, characterised by an engagement in "organized demonstrations, protests and

occupations". This level of grassroots engagement has been expressed also in heightened awareness of, and interest in, media activism. In the section below, I will discuss some experiences of alternative media during the 2000s that illustrate well the level of citizens' commitment and agency.

### *Alternative media and representation*

There have been many examples of media activism in Italy against the Berlusconi government (Mattoni 2012; Padovani 2010; Treré 2012). Here, I will mention two cases of creative uses of communication for political protest that illustrate the range of activists' media awareness. The first example is Indymedia Italia (the Italian chapter of the global online alternative newsgathering network Independent Media Center, or Indymedia). The Indymedia network was launched in 1999 in Seattle in protest against the World Trade Organisation's meeting in that city. It soon developed as an international network of activists who published their autonomously produced media reports online. The Italian section of Indymedia shared a similar criticism of global capitalism, but was also very vigorous in its opposition to mainstream media and Berlusconi-led governments, especially during the 2001 Group of Eight (G8) summit in Genoa, when the network became a main source of alternative information about the events surrounding the meeting. Media activists played a crucial role in circulating self-produced audiovisuals reporting on the activities of the 'No G8 movement' and the examples of police brutality against the protesters, culminating in the killing of the demonstrator Carlo Giuliani by a *carabiniere* on 20 July 2001. The case of the Italian Indymedia network illustrates the power of participative platforms of communication in opposition to the centralised political and media power that the Berlusconi's government had at its disposal at the time. Indeed, the information that Indymedia Italia produced and distributed during the G8 of Genoa offered a perspective from the protesters' point of view and countered the often one-sided reports of the official mainstream media (Juris 2005a and 2005b).

The second example is a form of activism rooted in a network of citizens who are engaged in addressing problems related to their local community and territory: this is the case of media activism on the part of citizens' organisations in L'Aquila, a town in central Italy. Residents' organisations, loosely associated within the so-called 'L'Aquila social movement', sprang up soon after a powerful earthquake destroyed the city in April 2009, displacing more than 80,000 people. Their work gained wide resonance especially during the G8 meeting, which was held in L'Aquila in July of that year. In this case, citizens' organisations promoted an alternative, participatory model of reconstruction and media representation 'from below'. Some of the groups, in particular *3e32* (3:32 am being the time when the earthquake hit the city on 6 April) and *Cittadini per i cittadini* ('citizens for citizens'), utilised a variety of media and communication platforms to convey their perspectives and share information about the post-emergency phase and the reconstruction process. Their intent was to offer a first hand representation of their own living conditions after the catastrophe and to counter the Berlusconi government's top-down reconstruction plans for the area, as well as the prevailing mainstream media representation of the situation on the ground, which falsely portrayed L'Aquila as a new 'Italian miracle' of post-earthquake recovery, where citizens were well taken care of by an efficient and magnanimous administration. The media campaigns organised by these groups were all-encompassing and aimed at reaching vast audiences (Padovani 2010, 2013). In order to provide a more realistic representation of the residents' living conditions, activists adopted a variety of strategies: for instance, they created their own media, interacted with local newspapers

and television channels and even found sympathetic ears in various mainstream media outlets at the national level, including news programmes on RAI3. These groups' approach was different from that of Indymedia in that they engaged with mainstream media, often finding ways to collaborate with them, thereby providing an important example of the possibilities for interaction between established structures (such as mainstream media institutions) and progressive agency.

Moreover, political talk shows such as *AnnoZero* and *Ballarò* provided some space for the citizens' committees to voice their views. Citizens' representatives were invited into TV studios on several occasions, or were interviewed on live feeds from L'Aquila. On one of those occasions, on 18 November 2010, a representative of the citizens' committees announced the launch of a *legge di iniziativa popolare* (people's law initiative), a bill that would regulate the post-emergency phase and the reconstruction period in L'Aquila by giving citizens and local authorities, rather than the central government, direct control over the decision-making process. This event gave enormous visibility to a movement that might otherwise not have had opportunities to reach national audiences.

These are examples of interaction between established media outlets and citizens who have utilised existing resources (newspapers, television programmes, etc.) to make their voices heard. They illustrate agency, and its relationship with structure, at its best: purposeful actions to provide alternative viewpoints to those carried by most mainstream media and to promote social change.

### *Citizen activism and media policy*

Considerable work has been done by citizens with regard to carving out spaces for media representation. There are also a few examples of grassroots organisations that have spoken out against Berlusconi's conflict of interests and media concentration, and taken action to denounce cases of censorship and abuses against journalists. One of these organisations is *Articolo21*, founded in 2002 by media professionals, public intellectuals, lawmakers and concerned citizens. *Articolo21* has provided a forum to share information and a commitment to free and independent media in accordance with the Article 21 of the Italian Constitution.

The group hosts a website that contains commentaries, opinion pieces and research in the field of freedom of speech and media independence, and has intervened in the national debate on media concentration, the collusion of media and political power and the lack of media pluralism under Berlusconi. It has advocated the writing of effective legislation regulating Berlusconi's conflict of interests and has promoted the public's participation in media policy debates, from the discussion regarding spectrum allocation after the transition to DTT, to the role that the public service broadcaster should play in reinvigorating Italian democracy.<sup>8</sup>

Of interest also is the European Initiative for Media Pluralism (<http://www.mediainitiative.eu/it/>). This organisation was established in 2012 to promote the European Citizens' Initiative, meant to intervene in the legislative process at the level of the European Union to improve pluralism of information and media democratisation in all member states. Although the European Initiative for Media Pluralism includes representatives from various member states, young Italian activists were among the founding members, working at its forefront and occupying various leadership positions. This organisation has recognised that the concentration of media, and media owners' influence over political processes, are not isolated phenomena but a widespread problem of capitalist democracies, where the interests of corporations, rather than those of citizens, have taken priority in many areas, including in the field of media policy. The

group has called for more effective rules on media concentration and conflicts of interests, taking the case of Italy as an example of what needs to be avoided and changed in order to achieve more democratic media.

These are just some examples of how citizens have engaged with the media, at a local, national and international level, in the policy-making process and maintained critical thinking and creativity in their use of communication technologies, while retaining an acute awareness of the limitation of mainstream media representation under the Berlusconi governments. They are an illustration of progressive agency for social change and an expression of the enduring spirit of 'resistance and independence' (Downing et al. 2001, 294) in the country.

## Conclusions

The focus on the interplay between structure and agency has provided an opportunity to move beyond the gloomy assessments that have characterised much of the literature on the impact and legacy of Berlusconi on the Italian media, and more generally, on democratic life in the country. The purpose of this analysis has not been to paint a rosy picture, but to open a discussion by bringing to the forefront some of the vital elements of progressive agency that have characterised the history of this era.

It is evident that an area where the impact of Silvio Berlusconi has been most apparent is in the field of media legislation. Indeed, since the first reform law was passed after the end of the local and state monopoly over broadcasting (Law no. 223 1990), legislation has been consistently slanted in favour of the interests of Fininvest/Mediaset. The legacy of Berlusconi's influence on the media sector has been multifaceted and includes the duopoly and the consequent centrality of generalist, free-to-air and advertising-driven television. The importance of television and the grip of the duopoly over the advertising market have put an additional burden on print media, a sector that has seen its share of advertising revenues decline consistently since the early 1980s. However, both the duopoly of RAI/Mediaset and the centrality of generalist television have been challenged by technological developments and the arrival of global media enterprises in Italy. In the free-to-air television sector, the La7 channel has risen to become an important alternative for news, information and public affairs; in the sector of satellite television, Rupert Murdoch's Sky Italia has established a solid presence.

Undoubtedly, Berlusconi's pressures inside RAI have gone beyond previous practices of political party interference (Busi, cited in Palestini 2010). At the same time, Berlusconi's heavy-handed approach has heightened the commitment of some well-known journalists to take a stance against his interventions and express alternative viewpoints through the production of a vast array of political talk shows. The role of RAI3, the third channel of the public broadcaster, has been pivotal in this regard, by offering a platform for most of these shows to reach millions of people. This has paid off: although RAI3 has always had a small audience, during the 2000s the channel has done better than any of the other generalist channels on RAI or Mediaset. Its performance has been a sign of its social and political relevance.

When all these elements (i.e. structural constraints, as well as agency for progressive change) are taken into consideration, the history of the media during the 'Berlusconi era' shows that even at a time marked by media concentration and an unprecedented conflict of interests, some journalists, as well as some sectors of the Italian public, have exercised their agency by challenging mainstream media representation. In fact, structural conditions have not only constrained agency, they have also provided the very *medium*, and perhaps the stimulus, for progressive agency to step up and express itself.

As Paul Ginsborg has written, 'There is much in modern Italian society which favours the growth of a democratic culture' (2003, 322). Among these various elements, he has listed the 'growth of a plural and crucial civil society' (322) and 'the energy of its citizens' (324). The history of the 'Berlusconi era' needs also to include the work of the many citizens and media professionals who have remained politically engaged throughout the years. Also thanks to them, dissent, the 'casting out nines' of democracy, has continued to be alive and well in Italy.

## Notes

1. The head of government is referred to in Italy as the *Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri* (President of the Council of Ministers), whose powers do not fully correspond to those of the British prime minister. In recent years, however, the academic literature available in English on Italian politics has made good use of the term 'Prime Minister', also to avoid confusion with the role of the head of state, the *Presidente della Repubblica* (president of the Republic).
2. Indeed, newspaper readership has been historically low compared to most western European countries. In 2009, for instance, the circulation of daily newspapers was 168.8 per 1000 people, which put Italy at the bottom of the list compared to other European Union member states. In the United Kingdom the number was 332.4, in Germany 287.7 and in France 193.6 (IEM 2012, 102).
3. The law was very controversial, and rumour has it that the adviser to the communications minister at that time, Davide Giacalone, a man close to the leadership of the PRI and to Berlusconi himself, was its real author. As part of the *Mani Pulite* investigations into political corruption of the early 1990s, Giacalone was indicted for having accepted bribes from Berlusconi in exchange for the ministry's favourable position in the allocation of spectrum frequencies to Fininvest. Once Giacalone stepped down from his government post in 1991, he was hired as a highly paid consultant by Fininvest.
4. The sentence was overturned by the regional Court of Lazio in July 2005.
5. Carlo Freccero is an author, intellectual and media professional in Italy. In 1986, Silvio Berlusconi appointed him as director of La Cinq (France's first commercial broadcaster, owned by the media tycoon); in 1991, Freccero was called to lead Italia1. From 1996 to 2002, he was director of RAI2. In 2008, he became director of RAI4, one of the digital television channels of RAI. This interview was conducted at the RAI4 headquarters in Rome, on 24 July 2012.
6. The events following the 'Bulgarian edict' against journalists Michele Santoro and Enzo Biagi, have been the subject of scrutiny in the popular press as well as in trade and academic publications. Most notably, Nina Rothenberg (2009) has analysed the significance of this form of censorship for the Italian public sphere within the context of the country's highly concentrated media market and Berlusconi's conflict of interests.
7. In June 2009, Patrizia D'Addario, an escort from Bari, revealed that she had been paid to sleep with Silvio Berlusconi the year before.
8. In some regards, *Articolo21* can be compared to the British organization Hacked Off, founded in 2011 to campaign for the rights of victims of press abuse. Both organisations serve to signal problems in the mainstream media and campaign for a fairer media landscape and better regulations.

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