

Television audience enjoyment and the *Lascia o raddoppia?* phenomenon

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From the end of 1955 to the middle of 1959, the quiz programme *Lascia o raddoppia?* transformed the way that Italians watched television, attracting a mass audience and appealing to viewers of different class backgrounds and levels of education. The quiz, watched by 15 million Italians at its peak, was more than Italy's first successful television show: *Lascia o raddoppia?* also reflected the social and cultural transformations of Italy's economic 'miracle', and confirmed the growing importance of mass culture and education in modern Italy. Yet, the role and response of the viewer in this television phenomenon has been largely overlooked. Viewers, if discussed at all, are often represented as an 'Everyman', mediocre, or the victims of Americanisation. This article examines the audience responses to the quiz by connecting the Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) broadcaster's audience enjoyment ratings to the programme transcripts, specific contestants and media coverage. The audience data, when linked to individual programmes and contestants, reflects important changes in society and education and challenges the myth of the passive viewer, demonstrating even that 1950s television audiences were not as malleable or as conservative as contemporary commentators and many histories suggest.

Keywords: Italian television; audiences; mass culture; Italy 1950s history; *Lascia o raddoppia?*

It was Thursday, the evening of *Lascia o raddoppia*. Faces were intent, mouths closed, foreheads were furrowed in the effort of thought, and then smoothed, happy with the answer, and lips parted in knowing smiles. These people *knew everything* and answered along with the contestants on the stage the strange questions on unknown topics; participating, you identified with them, acquiring a good greater than strength and beauty: the divine, free, total, absolute omniscience.

Everywhere, in the evening now sacred to Minerva, Italians interrupt their business, entertainments, passions, work, and even law making, and gather to improve themselves, to acquire the gift of knowledge.

Carlo Levi, 'La Sapienza', *La Stampa*, 15 July 1956.

Introduction

Lascia o raddoppia? was more than a successful television show; it was a cultural and social phenomenon. As Carlo Levi observed at the time, Italians enjoyed *Lascia o raddoppia?*, and watching the show was a shared and often exciting experience. For Levi, viewers participated in the quiz programme like fans at a football match – emotionally, communally, and almost religiously (Levi, *La Stampa* 1956, 5). In mid-1956, Thursday nights in Italy were indeed sacred to

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Minerva the goddess of wisdom, as over ten million adult viewers watched the 9pm quiz (RAI 1957, 39). Levi's description of a shared cultural experience, written during the height of the programme's success, depicts viewers as actively engaged and relating to the contestants. However, many commentators and later historians perceived television audiences as passive receptors, dazzled by American influences, or seeking banal and escapist distraction, rather than being selective or participating viewers (Alberoni 1968a, 147–148; Lanaro 1992, 215–217; Arvidsson 2003, 32). In a letter to the magazine *Epoca* in 1956, one reader and quiz viewer asked a well-known psychiatrist about the value of *Lascia o raddoppia?* to help students learn. The psychiatrist replied that audience engagement and learning were limited, and that viewers were not even able to remember the questions or answers in the programme half an hour after it had ended, adding that they identified only with the 'miraculous' hope of winning the prize money (*Epoca*, 27 maggio 1956, 9). Writing two years after the programme finished, Umberto Eco defined its host Mike Bongiorno as the ultimate mediocre Everyman, attributing his success to the viewers who saw their own intellectual and cultural deficiencies reflected and celebrated through his mediocrity (Eco 1994). Eco's picture of the mediocre 'Everyman' quiz audience is frequently referenced and reiterated in historical accounts of the programme and shapes our ideas about Italian television viewers of the late 1950s.

Lascia o raddoppia? holds an important place not only in the history of Italian television, but also as a powerful symbol of Italy's economic transformation, the significant impact of mass culture and increased popular education. Like the media coverage at the time, Italian histories of the economic 'miracle' recount the quirks and celebrity of the programme's contestants and the popularity of the host Bongiorno and his blonde co-host Edy Campagnoli, detailing the negative reactions of intellectuals, parliament and the Catholic Church. The audience, if mentioned at all, is portrayed as a passive recipient of Americanisation, or a vehicle of the conservative views of the Catholic Church and Italy's traditional social values. For historian Silvio Lanaro, the television programmes of the late 1950s offered a self-tranquillising modernity for 'Everyman' viewers, where *Lascia o raddoppia?* provided a memorised and shallow version of culture with 'moderately bizarre' contestants (Lanaro 1992, 215–217). Other histories refer to the emblematic image of peasants carrying their chairs down from the mountains to momentarily connect with modern Italy through the quiz show, perhaps peering behind the television set to see if there were people behind it (Ginsborg 1990, 241; Monteleone 1995, 297). While these accounts reflect some of the early television-viewing experiences, our understanding of the way that audiences responded to the programme is at best incomplete and, at worst, a caricature that tells us more about the Americanisation fears of Italy's elites than about the actual viewers (Foot 2001, 33–34; Gundle 2000, 93). This article seeks to deepen our understanding of the reactions of the quiz audiences by looking at their reactions to specific contestants and programmes. Through an analysis of RAI's audience survey data and media coverage, I contend that the *Lascia o raddoppia?* audiences were engaged and selective in their response to the quiz and in the ways they identified with its contestants. My article challenges the representation of the early Italian television viewers of the 1950s, by contemporary commentators and later historians, as passive, mediocre and conservative. I argue that viewers varied in their responses, based on whether they liked, or related to, contestants and the entertainment value of the suspense of approaching the 5,120,000 lire prize money. A particularly significant aspect of the programme is that it drew its contestants from the general public, from its own viewers. This provides a unique perspective on the audience as the programme's successful and unsuccessful applicants reveal regional, educational and gender trends in engaging with the quiz.

When Italian television broadcasting began on 3 January 1954, the single state-run channel offered a programme schedule of 30 hours a week. Italian television upheld Catholic values formulated in the 1954 *Codice di autodisciplina televisiva – norme interne* (Code of Television

Conduct – internal rules), an internal document of guidelines defining acceptable and prohibited content. The code articulated the RAI's sense of having a 'grave responsibility' for their charges – the television audience. This paternalistic and protective approach to the audience included the statement that 'television must not cause offence to the principles of general morality and the morality of customs, but, on the contrary, it must disseminate and enhance their value with all the most opportune means' (RAI: Teche, 2004, 65). The Catholic Church sought to influence television content through the appointment of administrators like Filiberto Guala, who had strong ties to both the Church and the Christian Democrat party (Caroli 2003, 30). In this way television could do more than inform, educate and entertain: for the RAI it would also assist the viewer's moral development, mediate access to television content and promote Catholic values.

Before the quiz show *Lascia o raddoppia?* debuted in late 1955, television audience numbers remained small: the most popular of the evening programmes attracted between two and three million viewers and on occasion, up to four million (RAI 1958b, xxiii). Televisions in the home were uncommon and people generally watched television in public places such as bars, cinemas, and clubs or at other people's houses. Just over a year after the introduction of television, 400,000 people regularly watched it at home; another 800,000 watched in the houses of friends or family; and about three million people watched television in public places such as cinemas and local café bars (RAI 1958a, 549). As the *Lascia o raddoppia?* programme gained in popularity, public television viewing increased. By the end of 1956, around one-sixth of the 366,000 televisions in Italy were in public places – 3,000 in cinemas, 42,000 in café bars, and 10,000 in local recreation organisations (RAI 1968, 468). Most people watched television outside the home as the cost of owning a set (around 200,000 lire) and the annual home licence (15,000 lire) lay beyond the reach of most Italian families, at a time when the average annual income was approximately 250,000 lire (Anania 1997, 23; *Epoca* 16 gennaio 1954, 22; *Epoca* 12 gennaio 1954, 22; RAI 1958b, 139; Alberoni 1968, 25). Italian television developed as a shared activity across private and public spaces, although the place where viewers watched television continued existing social practices. Social factors, such as gender, or the size of the town that viewers lived in, influenced the viewer experience. For example, only one-in-six younger women who lived in large cities would watch television in public (Alberoni 1968, 25). This would change as gender and generational barriers shifted, and women and children joined communal television viewing in public places (Foot, 1999, 380).

For Italian audiences throughout the peninsula, although they watched or experienced the programme in different ways, *Lascia o raddoppia?* became the first nationally shared television experience: for many, it was the only television programme they watched (RAI 1957, 39–40). The programme proved so popular that newspapers printed transcripts for those who had missed the show, or who lived in areas yet to receive television. This meant that people did not need to watch the programme in order to participate in the phenomenon. During a private papal audience held by Pius XII with the show's hosts and *Lascia o raddoppia?* contestants in late 1956, the pope observed that he would very much like to join the 15 million Italians who watched the show, except that his commitments meant that he only had time to read the transcripts in the newspapers or magazines (*L'Unità* 7 ottobre 1956, 2).

Americanisation, hosts and prizes

Lascia o raddoppia? reflected the growing American influence on Italian culture. The host Mike Bongiorno was the perfect cultural hybrid. Born in America and raised in Italy, Bongiorno was a clear communicator with a pleasant manner, an Americanised first name, and American-style suits. He was good television. His approach was conspicuously different from the formal style of early television presenters with theatre backgrounds or the RAI professors with their didactic

educational mission. This home-grown adaptation of an American quiz show highlights the powerful appeal of American culture, particularly, as Victoria De Grazia has observed, the classlessness of American mass culture and the use in Italy of both high and low culture within commercial contexts (De Grazia 1989, 54; 2005, 459; Ferrari 2012, 135). The success of the programme was in the new ways it engaged with viewers, particularly in the way it reflected and even enabled changing aspirations and opportunities for Italians.

Understanding the audience

The huge popularity of the quiz with television viewers surprised everyone, perhaps the RAI management most of all. The programme, its hosts and its contestants, were newsworthy, and print journalists came to the live broadcasts to capture the evening's victories and defeats (Photograph 1). By late 1956, media estimates of viewer numbers reached around 15 million, although the exact figure is difficult to calculate, as so many viewers watched television in public places (*L'Unità* 7 ottobre 1956, 2). Newspaper and weekly magazine columns analysed possible reasons for the success of the quiz, fascinated by the popularity of its host Mike Bongiorno. The media commonly cited the quiz as evidence of the cultural apocalypse and saw it as the focal point of the intellectual debate on the invasion of mass and American culture. For writer Alberto Moravia, *Lascia o raddoppia?* was just a game of chance based on memory, observing that for viewers, 'from the point of view of culture, both in America and in Italy, it is an incitement to stupidity' (*Epoca*, 1 gennaio 1956, 20). The main problem, expressed by intellectuals writing in the newspapers of the day, was that the prize money represented the commodification of knowledge. Another consistent complaint made against *Lascia o raddoppia?* was the lack of cultural achievement in rote learning: critics argued that contestants were merely 'memorising football champions or soup ingredients' (De Castro *La Stampa* 1956, 3).



Photograph 1. Media at a live broadcast of *Lascia o Raddoppia?* October 1956. Photo: RAI Teche.

Of all the attacks against the programme, Umberto Eco's 1961 critique of *Lascia o raddoppia?* and its 'mediocre-Everyman' host Mike Bongiorno, originally published in the *Il Verri* journal, stands above them all. The title of the essay, 'The phenomenology of Mike Bongiorno', was a play on words and mass culture reference to the way the media, in both enthusiastic and damning terms, described the popularity of the quiz show as a 'phenomenon' (Eco 1994, 156–164). Eco's 'phenomenological' description of Bongiorno started unforgivingly: 'Mike Bongiorno is not particularly good-looking, not athletic, courageous or intelligent'. This was followed by the assessment of Bongiorno's intellectual powers, which Eco believed were not strong – 'Mike Bongiorno is not ashamed of being ignorant and feels no need to educate himself', adding, 'he drives clichés to their extreme'. Eco assessed Bongiorno's communication skills as rudimentary: 'Mike Bongiorno speaks a *basic* Italian ... No effort is required in order to understand him' (Eco 1994, 159). For Eco, Bongiorno is the Everyman, the triumph of an average and unexceptional person celebrated by ignorant viewers for legitimating their own limits and mediocrity, where 'what he is cannot create in a spectator, even the most ignorant, any sense of inferiority. Indeed, the spectator sees his own limitations glorified and supported by national authority' (Eco 1994, 158).

Eco's piece aims to analyse the reasons for Bongiorno's popularity with viewers. Instead, it reveals more about the attitudes of intellectuals to the viewers, and the role of television in the 1950s. Eco mocks viewers for their admiration of Bongiorno, like misguided and backward children indulging in something that was clearly bad for them. For Eco, the mass viewer revels in the success of other mediocre people, finding their own mediocrity not only excused, but also celebrated. The modern television audience was for Eco, without discernment, culture or aspirations. Even worse, viewers were thoroughly reassured by, even complicit in, the triumph of mediocrity.

Mike Bongiorno therefore convinces the public by his living and triumphant example, of the value of mediocrity. He provokes no inferiority complexes, though presents himself as an idol; and the public repays him, gratefully, with its love. He is an ideal that nobody has to strive for, because everyone is already at its level. No religion has ever been so indulgent to its faithful. In him the tension between what is and what should be is annulled. He says to his worshippers, 'You are God, stay exactly as you are.' The appeal of Bongiorno's banality and mediocrity is that it gives the banal and mediocre viewer permission to feel happy with their lack of knowledge or culture. (Eco 1994, 158)

Here, the television viewer is the true culprit. For Eco, Bongiorno presents a role model of cultural ignorance, who will not make people feel the need to educate themselves and rather reinforce their own lack of discernment or knowledge. Eco's assessment and other contemporary views of the audience's response to the programme emphasise the stupidity of the entertainment, the 'banal and mediocre' audience and a popular celebration of ignorance.

Audience enjoyment and *Lascia o raddoppia?*

RAI closely monitored the impact of television on the Italian population with television audience surveys that examined an extensive range of demographic factors. Between 1956 and 1959, RAI completed approximately 90,000 surveys on audience opinion of specific television programmes and their general viewing behaviour (RAI 1959, 13). The results and data provide valuable historical source materials and form the foundation of my audience analysis below.

One of the most valuable aspects of the RAI research into Italy's early television audiences is that, in addition to measuring the viewer numbers and their various social and economic characteristics, it attempted to measure the response of the individual, whether or not audience members said they enjoyed the programme. The data allows a drill down into viewer segments and smaller groups rather than considering 'Italian television audiences' as a homogeneous group.

RAI used a straightforward evaluation system throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Viewers rated their enjoyment of genres, programmes or episodes: *per niente* = 0 (did not enjoy it at all); *poco* = 25 (enjoyed it very little); *discretamente* = 50 (enjoyed it a fair amount); *molto* = 75 (enjoyed it a lot); *moltissimo* = 100 (enjoyed it very much) (RAI 1957, 3). Over the three-and-a-half years that the quiz was broadcast, the audience enjoyment levels varied greatly – from high levels of viewer enjoyment in the 90s to low levels of enjoyment in the 40s (RAI 1958a, 289–290; RAI 1959, 71).

The RAI audience research shows that people across sex, age, education and class categories enjoyed the quiz (RAI 1957, 38–40). Women, however, recorded a greater level of enjoyment and older people a lower level. The research found that viewers of the highest economic status clearly enjoyed the programme, while lower-class viewers loved it even more. This broad appeal across class categories was not common in other television programmes and, as television historian Franco Monteleone suggests, the lack of class distinction in the show's content was key to the programme's success (Monteleone 1995, 323). There was something in the programme for everyone. In a similar way, the programme appealed to people with different levels of education. Primary, middle school and high school educated viewers all reported a high level of enjoyment of the show. The only viewers to show levels of enjoyment lower than the other groups were those with a university degree. Nevertheless, in 1956 more than half of the university-educated viewers reported that they too enjoyed the programme. While the quiz was the most popular with young women with less education, and the least popular with older university-educated men, people of all educational levels enjoyed and watched the quiz (RAI 1957, 38–40). The appeal of the programme was not universal, yet it came close.

In addition, viewer responses to individual *Lascia o raddoppia?* programmes challenge the portrayal of an undiscerning audience: instead, enjoyment varied, depending on the nature of the contestants and questions. Even when the show's popularity was at its highest, audiences expressed different responses to different programmes and enjoyed some more than others, or did not enjoy them at all. In the first year of the show, the enjoyment ratings (published from April 1956) were very high. Audience satisfaction for the months April to November 1956 averaged 84 and ranged between 75 and 95, meaning that most viewers enjoyed the programme *molto* (a lot), and many enjoyed it *moltissimo* (very much) (RAI 1957, 41; Santoro, RAI 1958a 288–295). The audience enjoyment of the programme increased with the appearance of contestants whom viewers found appealing, particularly the contestants that viewers could empathise with or imagine as friends. This connection between viewer and contestant is significant because it forms a different type of audience identification process from the admiration of famous television hosts, actors or cinema stars. The contestants were other Italians, television viewers who had applied to be part of this television quiz, people just like them, or like other people they knew, whose lives were transformed as they attained a celebrity status and won the prize money.

The audience's engagement with *Lascia o raddoppia?* included aspiring to become part of the show, to be a contestant, and even a quiz champion. RAI noted the importance of the thousands of viewers writing in to be contestants as an indication of the popularity of the programme, comparing the process to the way cinemagoers would write to Hollywood to ask to become actors, directors and writers (RAI 1958a, 268–271). By mid-1958, after two-and-a-half years of *Lascia o raddoppia?*, 400,000 people had applied to be a contestant, approximately one in every 90 adult Italians (Brambilla, *La Stampa* 1958, 3). Would-be contestants from all over Italy sent their applications to the programme. Over the first two years, Umbria had the highest per capita number of applications – 9,009 applications for a region with a population of 814,000 – although the number of applications that met the quiz subject requirements or that had been completed correctly

was only 744. This suggests that a region with low incomes (160,000 lire a year) and an illiteracy rate of 14 per cent identified with the programme and could imagine participating in it. The centre regions of Italy, including Tuscany (25,111 applications), Umbria, Marche (8,960 applications) and Lazio (28,993 applications), had the highest per capita number of applications – eight applications for every 1,000 inhabitants. Over 46,000 residents of Lombardy, where the programme was filmed in the capital Milan, applied, and residents of Piedmont sent 36,736 applications. In the south and islands, the proportion of applications was lower, yet regions like Campania, with 23 per cent illiteracy and average annual income of 115,443 lire, showed strong interest with 29,002 applications (RAI 1958a, 269–271).

Fewer than eight per cent of all applications were correctly completed, and this proportion varied greatly across Italy. Smaller towns, particularly in regions with illiteracy levels between 20 and 30 per cent, had the highest number of incorrectly completed applications. Almost all the rejected applications from larger cities came from women, ‘presumably waitresses’ (RAI 1958a, 262–271). The volume of applications from across Italy, even though many came from people who lacked the expertise to be a contestant or lacked the experience or literacy to complete forms, still reflected a strong identification and engagement with the show and a desire to become part of it. Other reasons to be excluded were that the applicant had professional expertise in the subject or specialised in controversial subjects, such as the death of Hitler. Of these hundreds of thousands of applicants, only 11,000 would-be contestants attended the exam (Brambilla, *La Stampa* 1958, 3). The host Mike Bongiorno worked with programme management to select contestants who ‘could become celebrities’ and appeal to viewers (Bongiorno 2007, 143). Contestants needed knowledge and an ability to answer questions, but their life story and personality also formed an important part of the selection criteria.

The modern girls of *Lascia o raddoppia?*

Of the many transformations within Italian society in the 1950s, changes in the everyday lives of women were the most marked, particularly as a result of rising education levels and decreasing female illiteracy rates. At the start of the decade 3.3 million female Italians over the age of six were illiterate, and a further 10.5 million were literate, but lacked a primary school qualification. Together, these 13.8 million women with low-literacy levels or illiteracy and no school qualification comprised almost two-thirds of the female population of 21.8 million. By 1961, this had dropped to 10.9 million, or 47 per cent of the female population, and the number of women completing primary school had grown from 6.2 million to 9.6 million women, or 41 per cent of the female population (De Mauro, 1995, 24). Added to the number of women who had completed middle school, this increase meant that for the first time in Italy’s history, more women had a school qualification than not. *Lascia o raddoppia?* showcased this transformation and the emerging opportunities for women.

Overall, the number of female contestants was far lower than the number of male contestants: in the first two years of the programme, half as many women as men appeared on the show (RAI 1958a, 549–552). However, this was a relatively high proportion given the low number of women who successfully applied to be contestants. Of the 307,906 applications to appear on the quiz between 1955 and 1957, 13 per cent or 41,124 applications were accepted: of these 8,130, or 2.6 per cent, were from women (RAI 1958a, 268–271).

In March 1956, Paola Bolognani – a young blonde from Pordenone in Friuli Venezia Giulia – tried her luck as a contestant on the programme: she would go on to become the first female quiz champion and the first female celebrity contestant. Bolognani was in her final year of

high school. She was competing to earn money for her family; her father had died in the war and her mother's income as a teacher was very low. She had good looks and a sad story. She provided an example of the high price Italians had paid in the past, as well as the new opportunities opening up to young women in education and employment. More importantly, she had selected one of the topics of more than passing interest to many millions of Italian men – football. Bolognani could successfully name players from the 1932–1933 Juventus team that had won three consecutive championships before she was born. What wasn't there to love? And love there was. Bolognani received letters, gifts, marriage proposals from besotted male viewers and required a police escort for public appearances (RAI 1958a, 122). Two thousand letters arrived from viewers to Bolognani in the five days after her first appearance on the show and this grew to 20,000 letters a week by her last show, her popularity and success becoming international news (RAI 1958a, 42; *Chicago Daily Tribune* 29 March 1956, 1). Bolognani demonstrated an astute handling of the media and boosted her popularity by claiming to be single, saying she was not engaged and introducing her fiancé as a family friend or relative (Gundle 2006, 74). The media praised her good looks and she was dubbed 'the beauty' or 'the lioness' of Pordenone. Her 'vivacious' nature and 'exuberance' were appealing characteristics, as was her capacity for self-discipline and hard work at school. In one of many magazine interviews, Paola said she looked forward to becoming a wife because 'a woman is only truly complete in marriage' (*Oggi* 15 marzo 1956, 8; 64). So, the prototype of the ideal female contestant was formed – young, single, educated, attractive and seeking to win money to help her family. The tens of thousands of marriage proposals made to Bolognani suggest that male viewers found her to be a feminine ideal and model wife.

RAI almost flew too close to the sun with their selection of the 27-year-old tobacconist Maria Luisa Garoppo from Casale, competing on the subject of Ancient Greek theatre (Photograph 2).



Photograph 2. Host Mike Bongiorno with contestant Maria Luisa Garoppo, August 1956. Photo: RAI Teche.

Garoppo's first appearance had been much anticipated and the print media published full-length photographs that highlighted her figure: press reports of her bust measurements varied between 103 and 108 centimetres. The media ransacked science, film and high culture for the right metaphors, calling her the 'atomic of television', 'Lollobrigida of Casale' and 'Carmen from Casale'. Garoppo caused a scandal with her tight-fitting clothing and her '*floridezza*' or voluptuous figure. In the scores of magazines and newspapers reports, her name was almost always preceded by evocative adjectives, as Garoppo's body became public property and the subject of debate. Garoppo, like Italian cinema's *maggiorate fisiche* Gina Lollobrigida and Sophia Loren, symbolised the new prosperity of modern Italy: dark-haired, full-mouthed, large bosomed women with cinched waists. These prosperous dimensions signalled pleasure, sex and fecundity, and offered an image of an ideal woman that was simultaneously traditional and modern and, as Stephen Gundle suggests, provided an 'assertive and physically striking appearance' that merged Italian and American feminine ideals (Forgacs and Gundle, 2007, 80). Like the *maggiorate fisiche* of the cinema, the *Lascia o raddoppia?* modern women were from humble backgrounds and displayed a confidence in their ability to find opportunities for themselves.

The second, and I suggest more significant reason for the strong reaction from the Catholic Church, was the reply Garoppo gave to Bongiorno's question about her personal life. Commencing with light pleasantries, Bongiorno had commented on the high level of media interest in Garoppo and asked about her job as a tobacconist. Finally, he asked about her relationship status. Garoppo responded, 'I do not have a fiancé. I believe that you can quickly go from being a Miss to a Mrs but from Mrs you cannot become a Miss again.' Bongiorno asked, 'Do you prefer being single?' to which she responded, 'Yes, I am an independent type' (*Stampa Sera* 17–18 agosto 1956, 4). Garoppo appeared to the Italian television public as far more than an 'independent type': she was a self-employed, single and sexually confident woman who was articulate, educated and culturally informed, and in no rush to be a wife and mother.

After complaints from a Catholic newspaper in Milan and allegedly also the Vatican, the RAI management met with Garoppo, insisting that she wear more modest clothes (Costanzo and Vaime 2010, 81). Displaying a good degree of media savvy, Garoppo went to the press, gave interviews and held her own. She suggested that she might leave the quiz show, and publicly expressed her low opinion of both the RAI management and the media coverage, asking, 'Is it my fault I am not a telegraph pole?' (*La Nuova Stampa*, 21 agosto 1956). The drama heightened as Garoppo fell ill immediately before the next programme: when she did not appear on the show, the enjoyment ratings dropped from 87 to 80. While 80 still reflected a high level of enjoyment, it was the lowest recorded level of the programme to date (RAI 1959, 71).

The following week, the television public came together to see just what would happen next for the 'new star'. RAI's book on the popular quiz observed, 'maybe this evening there was not a television switched off in the whole of Italy, and at every television there was the greatest possible number of people watching' (RAI 1958a, 70). For her return to the show, Garoppo wore clothes that *La Stampa* newspaper described as 'chaste' (*La Nuova Stampa* 31 agosto 1956, 5) and the RAI described as 'a triumph of good sense' (RAI 1958a, 70). For Garoppo her dress was 'dignified but a little tight', lamenting that her '108 centimetres are reduced to only 92' (*La Nuova Stampa* 29 agosto 1956, 8). RAI observed that Marissa Boroni, a less buxom contestant, had comfortably worn the same dress, implying there had been some disingenuous padding for Garoppo's previous appearances (RAI 1958a, 70).

Welcoming her back to the show, Bongiorno asked Garoppo if she had received any marriage proposals: she answered that she had received 35 and a half, the half proposal being from someone who had written and asked her to marry him, and then wrote again to say that he had changed his mind

(*La Stampa*, 1 settembre 1956, 4). The enjoyment rating for the programme was a high 86 (RAI 1959, 71). Over the next weeks Garoppo went on to win the prize money and received the gift of a trip to Greece from the Greek ambassador to Italy (RAI 1958a, 150). While Garoppo was a little too modern for some of the more traditional parts of society, her time on the programme received high enjoyment ratings from a clear majority of the viewing public, ranging between 85 and 88 in the satisfaction ratings (RAI 1958a, 289). As journalist and writer Vincenzo Rovi reported, she was the most popular of all the quiz show's contestants to date: 'the surveys of the public's opinion of television put [Garoppo] in first place, ahead of all who have appeared on *Lascia o raddoppia?*' (Rovi 1956, 3).

Despite this strong popularity and appeal with viewers, historians cite Maria Luisa Garoppo's appearance on *Lascia o raddoppia?* as evidence of the conservative and controlled nature of the early years of television, proof of traditional values held by television audiences (Monteleone 1995, 347). Certainly RAI was conservative, promoting Catholic values through programming and with censorship. Still, RAI had selected Garoppo to appear on the show, not only knowing what she looked like, but also promoting her to the print media in advance. The problems arose not solely from Garoppo's figure, but her dismissal of the traditional female role of wife and the reference to divorce. The very high levels of enjoyment of the weekly episodes featuring Garoppo, and the millions of viewers who gathered to watch her progress, suggest instead that it was those who complained to RAI, as well as the RAI managers who deferred to them, who were out of step with the values of the public. Stephen Gundle argues that Catholic disapproval of Garoppo was a continuation of the Church's strong reaction against the 'carnality' of the *maggiorate* film stars Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida, and that the Church was 'annoyed to find the same model of female physicality being proposed in a medium over which they had greater control' (Gundle 2006, 73). As with Lollobrigida and Loren, audiences liked Garoppo for her appearance, strong personality and, in this case, the comic nature of the enforced reduction of her chest size. Magazines recounted with amusement that some religious institutes had switched off their televisions when Garoppo appeared on the quiz (Poggi 1956, 37–38). A clear majority of the show's millions of viewers had found Garoppo, and the collision of traditional and modern values, to be engaging and very entertaining. Garoppo's views on marriage illustrated the risk of live television with unpredictable responses from contestants, rather than staff who were required to follow internal guidelines.

Lascia o raddoppia?, the host Bongiorno and the general media coverage of the programme celebrated the modern characteristics of the young female contestants, even though, as the Garoppo case demonstrated, RAI tried to constrain some excesses. The media often described the female contestants as 'modern girls' and they were admired for their capability and intellect, although ambition needed to be tempered with other interests, beauty and femininity. Marriageability was still a woman's greatest asset and represented traditional values of selflessness and family in a modern context. However, the female contestants with secondary school education and university aspirations had reached a higher level of schooling than most Italians. They offered a visible sign of the generational change in female education that had started in the post-war period. Fortuitously, these first public appearances of educated female citizens on Italian television turned out to be quite lovely. The focus of the audience and media was squarely on smiles, dimples, curls and curves as well as cultural expertise or schooling. Typically in their late teens or early twenties, the contestants' youth made them appealing and, importantly, unintimidating.

Humble origins and hard work

The viewer enjoyment of the programme was based on the appeal of the contestants and a sense of participating in their attempt – viewers were moved by the victory of people they had grown

attached to, and this engagement and identification transcended a passive spectatorship. Contestants were themselves viewers who had crossed over to become part of the programme; viewers could identify with them and admire their self-education or quirky fixations on topics ranging from cinema to Dante. Contestants of limited means who had not finished primary school, yet possessed a great passion for culture, were particularly popular with viewers. The celebration of the self-taught and self-starters formed an important aspect of the quiz, an aspect disseminated and magnified by the media. Self-educated contestants were held up as examples of what could be possible in modern Italy with hard work, and the love of Italian culture by men with little or no education was celebrated. During the 1950s, 90 per cent of Italians had a primary school level education or lower, so self-education was an important way to learn. Italy's illiteracy rates were decreasing during the 1950s, down from 13 per cent in 1951 to 8.3 per cent by 1961: although illiteracy in the south and islands remained higher, it decreased from 25 per cent to 16 per cent as more people gained the opportunity to attend school (Ginsborg, 1990, 440).

Manual labourer Egidio Cristini became a popular favourite, answering questions on the poems of Homer. Cristini was a semi-literate bricklayer from a small seaside village in Lazio. As a result of his lack of education and low literacy, reading the poems of Homer was even more difficult and time consuming for him than for most people. Cristini recounted that it took him more than a day to slowly read a *canto*, which the media represented as an even greater accomplishment (RAI 1958a, 152). Audiences enjoyed watching his progress and reported enjoyment ratings of over 80 (RAI 1957, 71). To the final question, 'In the fifteenth canto of the *Iliad*, who broke the bow string of Teucro when he was about to shoot Ettore?', Cristini correctly answered, '*Giove, Giove, Giove!*', winning the 5,120,000 lire prize. When asked what he would do with the money, he said that he would finish building his house, give his daughter some money to get married and 'then I will rest ... I have always worked in my life; I want to see what it is like to take a holiday' (Ghirotti, *La Nuova Stampa* 1956, 7). Cristini's achievement, not only to learn to read, but to tackle Homeric poetry, was both entertaining and inspirational to viewers.

In a similar way, the 86-year-old contestant Attilio Zuliani, answering questions on the works of Alexandre Dumas, reinforced the idea that everyone could enjoy culture regardless of their start in life. Viewers reported an enjoyment level of 75, one of the last few times the audience's enjoyment level would reach *molto* over the next two years (RAI 1958a, 289–290). The media reported that Zuliani had been illiterate up until the age of 30 and applauded the achievements of this self-taught literature fan (Brambilla, *Stampa Sera* 20–21 settembre 1957, 4). Both Cristini and Zuliani represented Italians who had very little and yet sought culture and knowledge within their limited means and education. However, despite the popularity of the contestants with lower levels of education, they proved an exception not the norm. In the first two years of the programme, only 43 out of the 261 contestants had a primary-school level of education (RAI 1958a, 284–285).

Felice Mannarelli became a *Lascia o raddoppia?* champion in 1958, competing on the subject of world history. The young man aimed to win enough money to be able to afford to go to university, daring to set himself the goal to go from a small village and become one of the 1.3 per cent of Italians who gained university qualifications (De Mauro, 1995, 24). His appearance on the programme attracted enjoyment levels ranging from 73 to 83. The shows that rated in the 80s provided a return to high levels of audience enjoyment rarely seen since the first year of the programme (RAI 1958a, 289–290).

Giovani Oggi, a 1960 RAI television documentary, captured the significance of this serious young man for Italian television audiences. Their examination of the lives of young people in Italy contrasted the apathy of a group of truant students in Rome against the self-discipline and ambition of Felice Mannarelli (RAI Mediateca 1960). The documentary juxtaposed images from

Mannarelli's small rural village, the 'old ways' of the shepherd and his animals contrasted to the 'new ways' of passing cars, an aeroplane overhead and a fade to modern apartments and the future. The narrator observes that many millions of Italians ceased their education at primary school, and praises the young man's determination in a modern world, adding that 'society helps those who can, or want to help it advance' and with 'technological, scientific and modern progress, not having an education is like not having an arm' (RAI Mediateca 1960).

Most audience members who successfully crossed the divide between viewer and television to become contestants were far more educated than the Italian national average, and also the average television viewer. More than one-quarter of the contestants had graduated from university; almost 30 per cent had completed high school; 28 per cent middle school; and 13 per cent had a primary-school level education (RAI 1958a, 284–285). The education level of the overall television audience was also higher than the national average: seven per cent had university degrees; 14 per cent had completed secondary school; 21 per cent completed middle school and 58 per cent had an elementary school education (RAI 1958a, 284–285). In contrast, the education levels of the general population was lower: in 1951 one per cent of the population had a university degree; three per cent had completed secondary school; almost six per cent had completed middle school; and 77 per cent had completed elementary school or were literate without qualifications. Almost 13 per cent of the population was illiterate (Ginsborg 1990, 440).

The show increased the visibility of educated citizens and presented knowledge and education as admirable traits. Television historians Martina Corgnati and Giuliana Caterina Galvagno suggest that 'in the eyes of the viewers, education became something that could bear fruit not only in an academic environment, but also in the everyday images that everyone saw, ensuring money and fame for the best' (Corgnati and Galvagno 2014, 29). This weekly reinforcement of the idea that education could bring reward and fame was a powerful message to audiences. The show's contestants personified the opportunities that modern Italy offered to those who invested the time in their own education and cultural development. While this was a message carefully crafted by RAI and amplified by a press eager to generate popular news stories, the enjoyment statistics reflect that these aspirations and contestants resonated with viewers.

The end of the phenomenon

Between May and November 1957, the quiz experienced volatile ratings. Following the high enjoyment levels of Felice Mannarelli's win, the programme had a two-month slide in enjoyment ratings down to 62 – an average level of enjoyment not quite good, yet more than fair. Television viewers preferred other programmes as the quiz regularly failed to attain even the average enjoyment level for all television programmes, which was 73 (RAI 1958a, 290). Enjoyment ratings returned back to the 70s for the one-hundredth episode of the show, which included the appearance of two celebrities: the popular Italian actress Pina Renzi, as a contestant on the history of Milan; and the glamorous American starlet Jayne Mansfield, as a guest star (RAI 1959, 70). It is interesting to note, in an important indication of the nature of the audience, that the appearance of these film stars, and indeed Pina Renzi's later victory, did not excite enjoyment ratings as high as the hard-working, 'poor, young Everyman' Felice Mannarelli and other contestants that viewers related to.

At the beginning of 1958, the quiz programme maintained good viewer enjoyment ratings around the 75 mark. Yet by the second half of the year, viewers were enjoying the programme less and less, with ratings in the 60s and even down to 52 (RAI 1959, 72). It was clear that most viewers had lost their enthusiasm for the quiz. In 1956, 79 out of 88 cinemas in Turin had shown *Lascia o raddoppia?*. By 1958, only 16 out of 103 cinemas continued to do so (*La Nuova Stampa*,

6 giugno 1958, 2). In 1959, enjoyment ratings for the quiz fell far below the enjoyment levels of most television programmes, generally in the 50s, and on occasion, dropped to an average viewer response in the 40s, meaning that most viewers were not enjoying the programme (RAI 1959, 73). The format had lost its appeal, perhaps because some contestants appeared contrived as they became savvier and aimed to play the celebrity game, or perhaps because audiences had heard all they needed to hear about the life of Dante, or the victories of Italian cyclists. Like all media phenomena, the precise reason that the audience moved on is difficult to pin down, yet it was clear that the magical connection between viewers and contestants happened less frequently, and there were other programmes to debate in the bar.

The lowest audience enjoyment ratings for the quiz came during the appearance of the avant-garde American composer John Cage, who joined the quiz show as both a celebrity guest and contestant. He answered questions on biology, specifically on the subject of mushrooms. The programme's enjoyment ratings had already been very low at the beginning of 1959 and the television audience did not appreciate the introduction of a famous American composer of experimental music. In January, audience enjoyment levels were very low, in the mid-to-low 50s, and by Cage's third performance of experimental music on 19 February (Photograph 3), the show had recorded its lowest enjoyment rating yet – 49, as Cage performed his recent composition *Water Walk*, playing household items including blenders, a bath and radios (RAI 1959, 73). The other celebrity appearance on the show that evening was actress Jean Seberg, and Mike Bongiorno's conversation with her, and presentation of a pretend Oscar for best actor to the cat from *Bonjour Tristesse*, certainly may have contributed to the low enjoyment of the programme (*La Stampa*, 20 febbraio 1959, 4). Cage was admired for his international status and success in winning the quiz's top prize: however, host Mike Bongiorno delivered one of his famous 'gaffes'



Photograph 3. John Cage performs *Water Walk*, February 1959. Photo: RAI Teche.

when he bade farewell to Cage by wishing wistfully that Cage was staying in Italy and his music returning to America, rather than the other way around (Brambilla, *Stampa Sera* 1959, 4). The low enjoyment ratings suggest that viewers were unable to identify with a foreign composer of esoteric music and did not enjoy his victory or his atonal experiments.

Conclusion

Lascia o raddoppia? was a cultural and social phenomenon, and was recognised as such in its day by the public, the RAI and in the print media. The quiz show played a vital role in attracting large audiences to television, and this examination of the individual programmes and contestants that audiences enjoyed the most, provides us with a valuable insight into social attitudes, as well as the changes underway in a modernising Italy. *Lascia o raddoppia?* was important because of the way that audiences selectively engaged with the show and related to the contestants, their attempts, victories and defeats. As such, this evidence of viewer responses to the show offers a valuable and missing part of the *Lascia o raddoppia?* story. Significantly, the reception of the quiz and its contestants highlighted the generational changes underway for young women and also for working-class men.

Far from being passive and indiscriminate, audiences varied in their responses to different programmes, based on their interest in, and empathy for, the contestants. The attempts by self-taught Italians, modern young women, older semi-literate labourers overcoming disadvantages, or an ambitious young man from a small village, resonated most with viewers. Significantly, audiences responded to contestants in unexpected ways, as the great popularity of the very unconventional Maria Luisa Garoppo demonstrated. Her case also reinforces the importance of giving the responses of the *Lascia o raddoppia?* audience a place in the history of the programme. Far from judging and condemning Garoppo, many millions of Italian television viewers across Italy found her appearance on the show, her challenge to conservative values, and her exuberant personality all very appealing and immensely entertaining. The strong audience response to Garoppo, contrasted with the Church's condemnation of her physical appearance and ideas, embodies the differing social influences in modern Italy. Whether by providence or design, the voluptuous and independent Garoppo was away on her complimentary trip to Greece when Pope Pius XXI held his private audience with the other *Lascia o raddoppia?* champions in the month after her victory.

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Italian summary

Tra la fine del 1955 e la metà del 1959 *Lascia o raddoppia?* trasformò il modo in cui gli italiani guardavano la televisione, attirando un pubblico di massa e spettatori di diversi ceti e livelli di istruzione, e al suo apice fu seguito da quindici milioni di italiani. Il suo significato tuttavia va oltre l'essere stata la prima trasmissione di grande successo in Italia: in *Lascia o raddoppia?* è infatti possibile leggere le trasformazioni sociali e culturali del 'miracolo' economico italiano, e la crescente importanza della cultura di massa e dell'istruzione nell'Italia. Tuttavia il ruolo e la risposta degli spettatori in questo fenomeno televisivo è stato trascurato nella letteratura sulla storia dei mass media in Italia. Gli spettatori, quando discussi, vengono spesso rappresentati in termini di 'everyman', cioè pubblico mediocre o come vittime di un processo culturale di americanizzazione. Questo articolo esamina le risposte del pubblico al quiz collegando gli indici di ascolto della Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) alle trascrizioni dei programmi, a concorrenti specifici e alla copertura mediatica del programma. Le statistiche di gradimento, quando collegati al contenuto e a concorrenti specifici, riflettono importanti cambiamenti a livello di società e istruzione e sfidano il mito dello spettatore passivo, dimostrando che il pubblico televisivo degli anni Cinquanta non era così malleabile o conservatore come alcuni commentatori contemporanei e molti resoconti suggeriscono.