

Politician watching: the measurement of pluralism in Italian television news

Chris Hanretty, European University Institute, Florence

Abstract

The Italian debate about the politics of the media has been interpreted in light of the concept of pluralism. Unlike certain neighbouring concepts (impartiality, objectivity, fairness), pluralism is suited to quantitative operationalisation. Here, I use data gathered by the Italian communications authority Agcom, to show how patterns of pluralism – in other words, the distribution of screen-time between political parties – differ across channels and across time. I demonstrate that although the conventional wisdom about the direction of each network’s bias is correct, government influence – secured through changes in Rai’s board – did not substantially alter these patterns. Measurement of political pluralism by Agcom has therefore failed to quell debate on the issue of the perceived lack of pluralism. I close by suggesting why this may be the case.

Keywords: pluralism, media bias, public service broadcasting, tempo di parola, Agcom, Rai

Introduction

Debate about media bias is common to most Western democracies. The salience of this debate for politics is usually low: the issue of the media does not feature on voters' lists of concerns at election periods, nor do members of the government spend much time talking about the media. Those few speeches which are made – for example, Spiro Agnew's 1969 Des Moines speech – are remarked upon in virtue of their rarity.

In Italy, by contrast, the issue of media bias is extremely salient. This is largely, though not entirely, due to the entrance into politics of Silvio Berlusconi, founder of the Mediaset group, which operates three of Italy's seven main television channels (Retequattro, Canale5, and Italia Uno). Berlusconi's role in the media means that he has faced significant conflicts of interest in opposition and as Prime Minister (May – December 1994; 2001 – 2006). The issue of Berlusconi's conflict of interests has multiple dimensions, but as far as the media are concerned, there are two complementary aspects. The more important during Berlusconi's time as Prime Minister was that he should not use his power as Prime Minister to benefit his media interests; but the alternate possibility – that Berlusconi might use his media interests to win or maintain office – is also normatively troubling, and has led to legislation limiting imbalances in broadcast news during election periods¹. This legislation, however, does not apply outside election periods, and criticism of the political orientation of the Mediaset channels continues.

Berlusconi's entry into politics interacts with another source of high political salience for the media. The Italian public service broadcaster *Radiotelevisione Italiana* (Rai) has

¹ Legge no. 28/2000, baptised the 'par condicio'.

historically been subject to strong political pressure which has determined the structure and outlook of the company (Monteleone, 1992). Initially this pressure came from the perennial party of government, *Democrazia Cristiana*, and was comparable to Gaullist control of *France Télévisions*. Unlike in France, however, the liberalisation of society which took place in the seventies did not lead to the liberation of Rai from political pressure. Instead the years of historic compromise between *Democrazia Cristiana* and the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (1976 – 1979) led to more subtle changes in the nature of political pressure. The practice of *lottizzazione* – of the sharing out of major posts in the broadcaster between nominees of the main parties of government and of opposition – developed. At its most encompassing, the system of *lottizzazione* divided the three Rai channels between all parties of the ‘*arco costituzionale*’, with RaiUno given over to the Christian Democrats; RaiDue to the secular parties of government (the Republicans, Liberals, and Socialists); and RaiTre to the PCI (D. Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Murialdi, 1997). This ‘iron-clad *lottizzazione*’ survived until 1993, and the collapse of the established party system. This collapse, and the introduction of a new method for appointing members of Rai’s board, have not, however, led to the end of *lottizzazione*, much less the end of political influence. Journalists with partisan affiliations have seen efforts to reform Rai’s journalism as ‘purges’ (Murialdi, 1994), and politicians have not been able to develop a culture of non-interference in Rai². Consequently, even without Berlusconi’s ‘*scesa in campo*’, debate about patterns of bias in Rai – and *a fortiori* about the media in general – would probably still exist.

² For a particularly egregious example, see “Capezzone: Sulle nomine Rai, a Montecitorio circola un foglietto...”, *La Stampa*, 5th September 2006.

This debate, conducted for the most part by politicians, is largely impressionistic, with the strongest accusations of political bias reserved for isolated incidents, such as the cancellation of certain shows (Travaglio & Gomez, 2004), or the omission from news bulletins of certain events judged newsworthy by some politicians (and not newsworthy by others).

Were this debate cast in the terms used in Anglo-Saxon debate, using concepts like objectivity and impartiality, the undecidability of claims about bias would be understandable. Such concepts are conceptually difficult to delineate, and impossible to operationalise.

Precisely because of these difficulties, Italian journalists have tended to reject objectivity and impartiality as governing values of good journalism. In a country where strong political cleavages meant violent symbolic clashes between the Catholic centre and the Communist left, the idea of a ‘view from nowhere’, to use Tom Nagel’s term, never took hold. The uniquely British fudge of due impartiality, which embodies less controversial metaphysical and epistemological premises than the American concept of objectivity, strangely never received much of a hearing.

Instead, the key concept in Italian media law and in political debates over the media has been the concept of pluralism. As in the UK, this concept has an economic aspect, meaning, in the words of one noted jurist (and later parliamentarian), “the existence of a telecommunications market with a number of competing subjects and limited barriers to entry” (Zaccaria 2004). Yet unlike the UK, and more like France, it also refers to the content produced by competing subjects in the market. Internal pluralism is the “obligation to give voice [*l’obbligo di dar voce*] to all or the largest possible number of opinions, tendencies or currents of political, social and cultural thought present in

society” (Zaccaria 2004, p. 97). Other principles – objectivity, fairness, and impartiality – have been subordinated to this principle.

Pluralism is much easier to operationalise than objectivity, principally because it deals in quantities. The genesis of the principle results from repeated complaints from the Italian Communist party during the fifties, sixties, and an early part of the seventies. The Party’s complaint was not that the Italian media – including the public broadcaster Rai and the non-partisan press – depicted the party unfairly (a qualitative claim), but rather that they did not depict the party at all (a quantitative claim). Repairing this imbalance came to mean, not that journalists should try harder in making syntheses that represent all sides equally, but that as many parties as reasonably possible should be shown when discussing a particular issue.

This quantitative interpretation of pluralism was sanctified by the *par condicio* law, which set limits on the ratio between time given over to competing coalitions. In order to effect this law, and to distance itself from the controversial application of anti-trust rules in the sector, the centre-left governments of the late 1990s created the communications regulator Agcom. Agcom has, since 2001, inside and outside of electoral periods, provided monthly data giving detailed information on the screen-time given over to political parties and their representatives collected by the Italian communications regulator Agcom, data which has so far only been used by scholars interested in the electoral effects of differences in coverage (Sani, 2001).

My question is this: what can this data tell us about the key claims made in the Italian media debate about pluralism? The puzzle which results is this: given that these data do yield interesting and counter-intuitive conclusions, why have they not calmed the debate on the presence or absence of pluralism in the Italian media?

Being precise about pluralism

Before turning to the data, how can we be sure that data on the screen-time given over to political parties adequately represents pluralism? Where the distribution of units of coverage between candidates A and B is of the ratio 80:20 for Channel X, and of the ratio 50:50 for Channel Y, we typically infer that (1) Channel X is less pluralistic, or more biased than Channel Y, and (2) that Channel X is biased *in favour of* candidate A³. These inferences depend on two assumptions: first, some assumption about candidates' entitlement to rough parity in the distribution of units of coverage, and second, an assumption that receiving more units of coverage is a good thing.

These assumptions are easily defeasible. The assumption of rough parity may be trumped when there are differences in newsworthiness. If candidate or party A's campaign is full of substantive policy announcements and/or attractive publicity stunts whilst candidate or party B's campaign possesses neither, uneven distribution of coverage between A and B may reflect genuine differences in newsworthiness rather than deviations from theoretical unbiased. (It would, however, be harder to defend such distributions if they were not found in other channels). Similarly, the assumption that, when it comes to coverage, 'more is better', does not hold when coverage is of a candidate or party's financial difficulties or internal contradictions.

There are, however, good reasons for adopting these assumptions in the Italian case. In particular, the weak position of Italian journalists vis-à-vis politicians, and the importance

³ When I say that a news outlet's coverage is biased 'in favour of' some candidate or party, I mean that the bias is such that it has beneficial effects for that candidate or party, not that the news outlet in question favours that candidate or party. The question of intentionality I omit.

of ‘giving voice’ to different strands of opinion, mean that the assumption that ‘more is better’ is a reliable one.

Italian journalism, criticism from without, and the ‘obbligo dar voce’

The assumption that more coverage of party or candidate x is good for x (hereafter, the assumption that ‘more is better’) holds only in certain cases, depending on the type of coverage in question. We can distinguish between four different types of coverage:

1. x , or members of x , talking about x
2. political candidate y , or members of political party y , talking about x
3. non-political actors z talking about x
4. journalists talking about x

Not all of these kinds of coverage are ‘good’ for party or candidate x . It seems most obvious that coverage of the first type is most likely to be ‘good’ for x ; but the three other types of coverage are not so obvious. If these cases make up a large percentage of total screen-time, it may undermine the assumption that more is better.

For coverage of the second type, it seems reasonable to assume that all such coverage can be judged *ipso facto* as unfavourable or at least neutral for party x . It may either be negative in the strong sense, in that other parties or candidates may be attacking party x ; or it may be negative in a weak sense, in that competition for screen-time is a zero-sum game, and any time given over to other parties is less time that can be given over to x . However, such screen-time is usually recorded as screen-time given to the competing political party, and does not count for x . Therefore, the assumption that ‘more is better’ continues to hold, given the way in which screen time is counted.

Coverage of the third type may be favourable, neutral, or unfavourable for x : there is no way to predict in advance the direction of this bias. Consequently, where coverage of the third type makes up a large proportion of total screen time, increases in a party's share of screen-time may not be better for that party if, at the same time, screen time is given over to non-party actors who are strongly critical of that party.

Finally, coverage of the fourth type may be favourable, unfavourable, or neutral with respect to a given party; but the unpredictability of this bias is less than for coverage of the third type. Journalists – and particularly journalists working for public service broadcasters – must be seen to be impartial and fair, and not to invent unfavourable criticism or questioning *ex nihilo*. We can therefore say that they select potential questions or criticism from a stock of criticisms already existing in the public domain. In voicing that criticism or detailing that question, however, they face a choice between expressing the criticism or question in their own words, and showing original footage of the individual or organisation making that criticism. Consequently, where coverage of the fourth type makes up a large proportion of total screen time, and where journalists typically structure their news items by re-expressing criticism rather than repeating it, increases in a party's share of screen-time may not be better for that party if, at the same time, screen time is given over to journalists who are re-expressing strong criticism of that party. (Of course, where journalists instead show footage of the original criticism, this becomes a case of coverage of the second or third types).

Therefore, the assumption that 'more is better' fails to obtain when non-party actors are often present on news bulletins, and where journalists frequently re-express or re-interpret public criticisms rather than re-broadcasting such criticism. These conditions are very rarely present in Italian broadcast journalism. Two features of Italian journalism explain this: the weak position of journalists vis-à-vis politicians; and the principle of

pluralism, which privileges the obligation to let different social actors speak for themselves.

The weak position of Italian journalists results, historically, from the limited size of the market for journalism (Daniel C. Hallin & Mancini, 2004). With low levels of literacy and newspaper readership, newspapers reported on a restricted elite, for a restricted elite. Links between journalists and the political elite were close, with deleterious consequences for journalistic independence (Forcella, 2004 [1959]).

Whilst the situation described by Forcella has perforce changed with the development of commercial and public television, the links between journalism and politics remain strong, with consequences for journalistic output. Because journalists are dominated by politicians, politicians, as a class, consequently dominate the news: one comparative study of the mid-eighties (D. C. Hallin & Mancini, 1984) found that Rai's news output is focused on parties, rather than government, public administration, or civil society groups. Writing more recently, Mancini (2000, p. 320) notes the tendency for "other kinds of topics and issues [to be] dealt with primarily by positioning them within the political or ideological context". Consequently, the likelihood of civil society actors criticising parties or candidates is low, and the assumption discussed above – that more coverage of party or candidate x is good for x – holds.

If the weak position of journalists vis-à-vis politicians explains the low likelihood of criticism from outside the party system, then the principle of pluralism explains why journalists do not re-express or re-interpret criticism, preferring instead to re-broadcast the original source. The tradition of pluralism and the emphasis on 'giving voice' – as well as the difficulties inherent in representing a fragmented multi-party system – means that Italian broadcast journalism is 'bitty', with each political story (and some non-

political stories) consisting of small slices of video of exponents of the several parties. Consequently, the percentage of time which is solely devoted to journalistic comment is low; the assumption that more coverage of party or candidate x is good for x therefore holds.

Conventional wisdom about the Italian media

If, given the centrality of parties and the principle of pluralism, significant between-channel differences in the distribution of coverage give us good reason to infer political bias, what good hypotheses have we about the direction of this bias? If popular media criticism in the United States has typically tended to view the media as a monolithic block capable of being described either as uniformly liberal or uniformly conservative, the high salience of the media issue in Italy has led to different expectations about each channel.

These expectations reflect the system of *lottizzazione* noted in the Introduction. Despite the collapse of the old party system, the three Rai channels (RaiUno, RaiDue, and RaiTre) and their associated news bulletins (TG1, TG2, and TG3) have inherited expectations generated during the nineteen-eighties. The association between these channels and particular patterns of bias has, in modified form, survived the collapse of the Italian party system and the introduction of bipolar competition between coalitions of left and right. RaiTre and TG3 are still occasionally referred to as ‘TeleKabul’, a pejorative epithet for the channel, given for its supposed anti-Western sympathies during the first Gulf War. RaiUno and TG1 continue to be viewed as the most ‘governmental’, as they were under ‘classic’ *lottizzazione*. Finally, in the same way as the secular parties of government during the eighties were rewarded with posts in RaiDue and TG2, posts within RaiDue and TG2 were, in the 2002 round of appointments, given to key

supporters of smaller government parties, the *Alleanza Nazionale* and the *Lega Nord*, junior partners in the Berlusconi governments of 2001 – 2006 (Vespa, 2002).

These beliefs generate the following hypotheses:

H1. where l is the screen time given over to parties of the left, and r is the screen time given over to parties of the right, l/r will be greater for RaiTre and TG3 than for RaiUno and TG1, and will be greater for RaiUno and TG1 than for RaiDue and TG2

H2. where g is the time given over to the Prime Minister, the Presidents of the two chambers, and the Government, $g / (l+r)$ will be greater for RaiUno than for RaiDue, and greater for RaiDue than for RaiTre

H3. where maj is the time given over to major parties of government, and min the time given over to minor parties of government, min will be greater for RaiDue and TG2 than for RaiUno, RaiTre, TG1, or TG3

At the same time, new beliefs about the role of government influence cross-cut traditional beliefs about the relative bias of each channel. Although the formal role of government in Rai's governance is limited to approval of certain commercial operations and decisions on the value of the licence fee, there is a widespread belief that the government enjoys extensive informal influence over the broadcaster through partisan ties with members of the governing board. Former President of Rai Lucia Annunziata claimed "to know for sure that Berlusconi picks up the phone and calls board members to suggest names and influence nomination decisions"⁴. Leaders of both coalitions have

⁴ "Annunziata denuncia: Berlusconi decide le nomine", *L'Unità*, 3rd February 2004.

claimed, when in opposition, that government parties turn Rai channels against them. Berlusconi, before, during, and after the 2001 election campaign, complained about the “militant occupation of Rai by the left”. Romano Prodi, prior to the 2006 election campaign, complained that “TV was not adopting an impartial role”, and that both Mediaset and Rai were unfairly treating Prodi’s centre-left coalition⁵.

The most commonly cited means of government influence is the through the appointments made by the Rai board. Until 2004, all five members of the Rai board were appointed by the Presidents of the two chambers of Parliament. The Presidents, typically members of the governing majority, selected boards with a majority of members who could be described as close to the centre-right majority. For two years, the majority was 3-2, with one centre-right nominee (Antonio Baldassare, a former Constitutional Court judge) holding the Presidency of the board. For one year, the Presidency was given to a nominee close to the left (Lucia Annunziata), with the remaining four nominees close to the right. Annunziata subsequently resigned in frustration with the other members of the Board, who she saw as too close to Berlusconi.

Given the limited tenure of board members (two years), the government is typically able – through the Presidents of the two Chambers – to work with a board with a similar majority. During periods of alternation in government, however, this is not the case. The Berlusconi government formed after the elections of 2001 had to wait until the end of the term of the left-appointed board, led by constitutional jurist Roberto Zaccaria, before they could nominate a board with a right-wing majority. We should therefore expect significant changes in coverage to follow the 2002 replacement of the Zaccaria CdA,

⁵ Corriere della Sera, 26th September 2005

nominated under a centre-left government, with the Baldassare CdA, nominated under a centre-right government; and we should expect these changes to benefit the parliamentary majority and the government.

H4. during the period of right-wing government, $(g + r)/l$ will be greater during the period of the Baldassare board than during the period of the Zaccaria board

Expectations regarding patterns of bias in the Mediaset channels are not so well grounded in popular knowledge or in politicians' statements. There is, however, a general belief that the Mediaset channels, in virtue of their ownership by Silvio Berlusconi, erstwhile prime minister and leader of the centre-right coalition, will be biased towards Silvio Berlusconi in particular and his centre-right coalition in general. Beliefs about individual Mediaset channels are not systematic, but depend often on the individual directors, such as TG4's Emilio Fede, who has made no secret of his friendship with Silvio Berlusconi, and who has been fined multiple times by Agcom. Therefore,

H5. the ratio $l:r$ will be smaller for any Mediaset channel than for any Rai channel

H6. the ratio $l:r$ will be smaller for all Mediaset channels considered together than for all Rai channels considered together

Data

The Italian communications regulatory, the *Autorità per il Garante nelle Comunicazioni* (Agcom), is required by law⁶ to monitor political broadcasting and ensure that broadcasters follow laws governing equality of access during election periods. Agcom has

⁶ Legge 31 luglio 1997, no. 249, Art. 1, §6(b)(9).

interpreted this requirement in expansive fashion. The authority publishes information on politicians' television appearances on a monthly basis, except during electoral periods, where information is released fortnightly. Each monthly summary covers the news bulletins (*telegiornali*) of all free-to-air channels, and, where relevant, current-affairs programmes which feature politicians. Information on the *telegiornali* is disaggregated according to the type of coverage: *tempo di parola*, or time in which a particular politician is speaking; *tempo di notizia*, or time in which a particular politician is covered by the bulletin; and *tempo di antenna*, which is the sum of *tempo di parola* and *tempo di notizia*. Each monthly summary lists each party's cumulative screen time. The screen time of certain office-holders – the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Presidents of the two houses of Parliament, government representatives, and European Union officials – is counted separately. This considerable body of data spans the periods January – October 2001 and May 2002 – 2006, and is published on Agcom's website, www.agcom.it.

These monthly summaries were processed and turned into a single data-set. Each entry in the file reports the screen time of members from fifty-three parties and five institutions, details of which are recorded in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Findings

Table 2 shows the monthly average shares of *tempo di antenna* across all Rai (TG1, TG2, and TG3) and Mediaset (TG4, TG5, and TgCom/Studio Aperto) news bulletins. The first column gives the average share for parties of the left, the second and third columns for parties of the right and governmental actors respectively. This information is represented graphically in Figure 1.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

I first consider patterns of bias between left and right. The data tend to support the hypothesis that TG3 is more biased to the left than TG1, and that TG1 is more biased to the left than TG2 (Hypothesis 1). On average, TG3 gave almost 9% more of its total screen-time to parties of the left than TG1, and approximately 9.5% more than TG2.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

ANOVA and post-hoc *t*-tests reported in Table 3 confirmed that the difference between TG3 and the other two Rai news bulletins was statistically significant at the 0.01 level, giving reason to believe that these differences are not artefactual. (Given that the data represent the entire population and not a sample thereof, statistical significance tests are used as an indicator of the reliability of the conclusion). Differences between TG1 and TG2, however, were not found to be statistically significant. Support for Hypothesis 1 comes entirely from variation in the left's share of screen-time. There was no statistically significant variation in the right's share of *tempo di antenna* across the three Rai news bulletins.

This finding is strengthened when we consider *tempo di parola*, or the time for which politicians are actually speaking. Table 4 shows the average share of *tempo di parola* across all channels. Whilst differences between TG1 and TG2 are not significant, TG3 gave significantly more time to the left; and this effect was stronger than when considering *tempo di notizia*. Interestingly, this finding did not extend to Rai current affairs programmes, which are produced by separate teams (data for which are not reported here).

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Continuing with bias between left and right, the simple hypothesis that all Mediaset channels would display a greater bias towards the right than any Rai channel (Hypothesis 5) is not supported. Considering *tempo di notizia*, Mediaset's TG5 favoured the left relative to the right slightly more than TG2. The same cannot be said for TGCom and TG4, which gave significantly less time to the left than the Rai news bulletins. This picture is essentially the same when we look at *tempo di parola* (Table 4). The more general hypothesis that the Mediaset channels taken together are more biased towards the right is confirmed.

When considering the 'governmentality' of the news bulletins, the hypothesis that the percentage of screen time given over to the government will be higher on TG1 than on TG2, and higher on TG2 than on TG3 (Hypothesis 2) is not confirmed for *tempo di notizia*. Differences between TG1 and TG2 were in the opposite direction to that expected, and whilst Table 2 does show that TG3 gave less time to governmental actors than either TG1 or TG2, this difference was not significant. (This is likely to be because *g_share* has a flatter distribution than the comparable variables for either left or right shares). However, there was significant difference in terms of *tempo di parola*, with TG1 giving more time over to the government than either TG2 or TG3. Differences between TG2 and TG3, although in the expected direction, were not statistically significant. These differences did not reappear when considering extra-tg screen time.

When we consider the distribution of screen-time between members of the right-wing coalition which governed between 2001 and 2006, – considered here *qua* partisan representatives, not *qua* representatives of government positions – we find from looking at Tables 2 and 4 that TG2 and TG3 appear to give more screen time to the junior partners within the government coalition, which would seem to confirm Hypothesis 3.

However, these differences were not found to be significant, with more significant differences obtained when comparing TG4 and TGCom with all other channels.

We turn finally to the issue of longitudinal changes in screen-time distribution: in particular, changes in distribution between the last administrative council selected by the left (that of Roberto Zaccaria), and the first administrative council selected by the right (led by Antonio Baldassare). This comparison is made more difficult by changes in the data during the period 2001 – 2002, when Agcom extended the range of governmental actors whose screen-time was recorded. Consequently, all channels – including Mediaset ones - seem to give less screen time to governmental actors during the early months of the Berlusconi government. Nevertheless, the percentage shares of all screen time under the Zaccaria and Baldassare Councils for the period June 2001 – March 2003 are reported in Table 5. This comparison enables us to compare coverage of the Berlusconi government under two different boards.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The ratio between the third and fourth columns – between the left's share and the right's – *is* greater for the period of the Zaccaria CdA, for all three Rai channels. However, this is less an effect of the appointment of the Baldassare CdA, and more an effect of comparing two different time periods: the same effect was observed in three of the four *non-Rai* channels.

In order to disaggregate the effects of changes in coverage from changes in management, a multiple regression analysis was carried out using three variables: a first dichotomous variable, *cda*, for the period under examination (either the period of the Zaccaria CdA or the period of the Baldassare CdA); a second dichotomous variable (*rai*) which is set to one for all Rai channels, and zero for all other channels; and a final interaction term,

which is equal to $cda * rai$. The effect of this interaction term will allow us to say whether the change in management, as opposed to the longitudinal changes in coverage, were responsible for the left's greater share of screen-time for the period of the Zaccaria CdA.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Table 6 reports the results of this regression analysis. The results show that the change from the period Jul 2001 to March 2002, to March 2002 – March 2003, was associated with a large drop in the ratio lr , but that the separate effect of new Rai management (represented by the interaction term) had no statistically significant effect.

Discussion

The first key node of the analysis concerns the differences between channels. Taking Rai news bulletins, some vestigial traces of *lottizzazione* remain. The same TG3 that was baptised 'TeleKabul' is still disproportionately likely to broadcast left-wing voices and remains unsurpassed in this respect. If the cession of RaiTre to the Italian Communist Party was compensation for losses elsewhere in Italian politics, it seems that the compensation remains even if the original losses – and indeed the rules under which they were incurred – have passed on.

It is harder to describe the patterns which distinguish TG1 and TG2, or RaiUno and RaiDue. Whilst it is true that RaiUno is more likely to feature government ministers on its current affairs programmes, and gives more screen-time to the largest government party, *Forza Italia*, this difference need not be explained by the effects of *lottizzazione*, but rather can be explained in a more parsimonious and less sinister fashion simply by noting that RaiUno has a much higher audience share than RaiDue, and that government ministers (and, to a lesser extent, those in *Forza Italia*), as valuable media commodities,

are more likely to (a) seek out and (b) obtain spots on networks with higher audience shares.

The Mediaset channels form a mirror image to those operated by Rai, with one outlier (ReteQuattro) flanking two channels closer to the global mean. This may result from idiosyncratic factors of ReteQuattro – Emilio Fede is a long-term acquaintance of Silvio Berlusconi – or from a different audience profile.

As for longitudinal differences, the data show that the percentage shares of screen time given by Rai to the left and right did not change significantly between the Zaccaria and Baldassare boards. This finding is not, in itself, surprising. The between-channel differences in the percentage distribution of screen time that I have demonstrated are the result of several years' of relative consensus on the political orientation of the three Rai channels. Consequently, whether by self-selection or through the influence of recruitment mechanisms, left-leaning journalists have gravitated towards TG3, and more centrist journalists to TG1 and TG2. Given the extensive autonomy enjoyed by journalists' editorial committees in each *telegiornale*, it would be surprising if the cumulative effect of several years' worth of recruitment decisions could be undone in the space of months by an incoming board.

Nevertheless, this finding seems to run contrary to the opinion, held by many, that Silvio Berlusconi enjoyed effective control over Rai throughout the period 2002 – 2006. It is, of course, possible, Silvio Berlusconi did enjoy effective control, and that this is not present in the data. This may occur through one of two routes. First, Rai journalists may, anticipating the appointment of a new board dominated by the centre-right, have altered their news coverage to favour the right, thereby hoping to gain favour from incoming right-wing board members. Consequently, although Rai, from the election of 2001 until

the new appointments of 2002, was headed by an appointee of the centre-left, it behaved as if it was already under the effective control of the centre-right. We should not therefore expect significant differences between the dog-days of the Zaccaria board and that which followed. Second, although Berlusconi did enjoy effective control, the resultant bias was not so crude as to be captured by bias-as-selectivity.

The first route is unlikely. Acrimony between the centre-right and Rai grew between the election of 2001 and the replacement of the Zaccaria CdA in 2002. Centre-right politicians accused 'biased' Rai employees of engaging in a 'kamikaze' attack against the centre-right government, seeding the schedules with programmes which attacked the centre-right under the mask of satire (Travaglio & Gomez, 2004). This suggests that, if the centre-right enjoyed effective control over Rai, it did not know or believe that it did.

The second route is always possible. As noted above, the concept of bias-as-selectivity is avowedly reductive, and can be criticised on this ground. Other scholars have argued that Berlusconi's peculiar genius for the politics of the media is not to place members of his party on screen more than members of any other party; but rather to cultivate a market-oriented, anti-political discourse, in the light of which Berlusconi's populist discourse seems appealing (Ginsborg, 2005). Yet those who maintain that this data is reductive face a quandary if, for example, they believe that RaiTre is biased to the right, or that ReteQuattro is biased to the left. They must maintain that bias-as-selectivity is sufficient when it comes to bias between channels, but not sufficient when it comes to bias between different boards.

Why didn't Agcom data cool the debate?

We are left with the puzzle of why readily available data did not lead to some reappraisal of conventional wisdom by politicians. In part this may be explained by the awkward

storage of these data, contained as they are in PDF files with inconsistent formatting. In part, however, it may reflect the following four factors: over-sensitivity to the media; attention to certain kinds of programmes not reflected in the data; the absence of credible signalling from Agcom; and an attention to marginal advantages.

First, as Bengt Johansson has shown with respect to the Swedish case (Johansson 2004), politicians are more likely than the general population to attribute political influence to the media. In part, this stems from simple exaggeration of media influences, something which in Italy exists thanks to an early wave of media effects scholarship which, in the extraordinary circumstances of the 1994 election, attributed to the media the remarkable faculty of inducing four million voters to switch their vote. Thus, politicians are likely to pay great attention to the media, and will debate its patterns of advantage *ad nauseum*, because, as a group, they are disproportionately interested in it. Italian politicians, because of the unusual position of having the owner of half the television market as a prime political player, are more likely to exaggerate the media effect than other politicians, and so are even more likely to debate the media.

Second, politicians sometimes pay attention to those programmes which are not treated in Agcom data. Some of the most clamorous cases of political ‘censorship’ in public broadcaster Rai have been cases where comics, not journalists have exceeded the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable. However life-like (or otherwise) certain comedians’ impressions of politicians are, they are not counted as screen time.

Third – and here we enter the realm of policy – Agcom data is not signalled credibly. That is, whilst it is published regularly, there are no consequences which flow from it. Unlike in France, where violations of the rule of three-thirds – one-third of political screen-time to the government, one-third to the majority parties, and one-third to the

opposition parties – bring sanctions for television channels, Agcom does not deliver rulings on whether certain channels have violated any norms of pluralism. Consequently, the release of data gets short shrift in the press and in the political debate. Not only does Agcom lack sanctioning mechanisms, it also lacks a monopoly on the collection of such data, with Rai commissioning its own data from the Pavia Media Observatory. Consequently, it is difficult to sustain the belief that the Agcom data are more than just a perspective.

Were Agcom endowed with sanctioning powers, this might – assuming that politicians had trust in the basic mechanism used to sanction providers – relieve politicians of the duty to cast a critical (partisan) eye over the totality of the news media. However, it would not totally exorcise the ghosts of lack of pluralism, for there remains a fourth factor in politicians’ interest in the media, and that is the attention to marginal advantage.

The point is best demonstrated by looking at the French case. Looking over press clippings related to the CSA, the most enduring polemics have been raised, not by violations of the rule of three-thirds, which are treated in a rather work-a-day fashion, but by items which seem to be utterly on the margins of the CSA’s work. Thus, it matters for French politicians whether one half of the (rather small) UDF party is counted as belonging to the opposition for the purposes of counting screen time⁷, just as it mattered whether Bernadette Chirac’s presence on screen would be counted for the government. This is attention to marginal advantage, both in the sense that the amount of time involved is marginal, but also in the sense that there is a risk present that one political group could eke out a slight advantage relative to the *status quo ante*.

⁷ Le Monde, “Le CSA partage l’UDF entre majorité et opposition à la télévision”, 15th June 2006

[INSERT APPENDIX HERE]

TABLE 1: Variables included in data-set

Variable	Possible values
Channel	RaiUno RaiDue RaiTre Retequattro Canale5 ItaliaUno La7 TG1 TG2 TG3 TG4 TG5 TGCom/Studio Aperto
Unit of measurement	Tempo di parola Tempo di notizia Tempo di antenna
Type of programme	Principal editions only All editions, news only All editions, current affairs coverage only
<i>L_share</i>	Percentage share of unit of measurement given over to parties of the left
<i>R_share</i>	Percentage share of the unit of measurement given over to parties of the right
<i>G_share</i>	Percentage share of the unit of measurement given over to governmental actors
<i>Maj_share</i>	Percentage share of unit of analysis given over to the major party of government from 2001 – 2006, Forza Italia
<i>Min_share</i>	Percentage share of unit of analysis given over to minor parties of government, the Lega Nord, Alleanza Nazionale, and the UDC and predecessors
<i>CdA</i> [Administrative Council]	Zaccaria CdA [1998 – 2002] Baldassare CdA [2002 – 2003] Annunziata CdA [2003 – 2004] Alberoni CdA [2004 – 2005] Petruccioli CdA [2005 -]
<i>Gdummy</i>	Amato government [1999 – 2001] Berlusconi government [2001 – 2006]

TABLE 2: *Tempo di antenna* for the seven main news bulletins, outside of election periods, January 2001 to March 2006

	<i>l_share</i>	<i>maj_share</i>	<i>r_share</i>	<i>min_share</i>	<i>g_share</i>
TG1	40.66%	7.96%	30.87%	8.90%	28.47%
TG2	39.96%	6.63%	31.13%	10.08%	28.91%
TG3	49.53%	6.53%	28.68%	10.49%	21.78%
TG4	19.08%	10.59%	28.09%	5.54%	52.83%
TG5	39.14%	6.32%	29.69%	9.39%	31.17%
TGCom, St. Aperto	19.79%	10.6%	32.71%	7.69%	47.50%
TG La7	42.24%	5.79%	28.15%	10.4%	29.61%
Total	34.37%		30.16%		35.47%

Note: figures exclude coverage during election periods. Figures for *maj_share* and *min_share* refer to period after May 2001

Source: www.agcom.it/

TABLE 3: Multiple comparisons between Rai channels using Bonferroni test

Dependent Variable	(I) channel	(J) channel	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
<i>l_share</i>	TG1	TG2	0.01	0.02	1.000
		TG3	-.08877(*)	0.02	0.001
	TG2	TG1	-0.01	0.02	1.000
		TG3	-.09574(*)	0.02	0.000
	TG3	TG1	.08877(*)	0.02	0.001
		TG2	.09574(*)	0.02	0.000
<i>r_share</i>	TG1	TG2	0	0.03	1.000
		TG3	0.02	0.03	1.000
	TG2	TG1	0	0.03	1.000
		TG3	0.02	0.03	1.000
	TG3	TG1	-0.02	0.03	1.000
		TG2	-0.02	0.03	1.000
<i>g_share</i>	TG1	TG2	0	0.03	1.000
		TG3	0.07	0.03	1.000
	TG2	TG1	0	0.03	1.000
		TG3	0.07	0.03	0.766
	TG3	TG1	-0.07	0.03	1.000
		TG2	-0.07	0.03	0.766

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Note: differences between other channels not reported here.

TABLE 4: *Tempo di parola* for the seven main news bulletins, outside of election periods, January 2001 to March 2006

	<i>l_share</i>	<i>maj_share</i>	<i>r_share</i>	<i>min_share</i>	<i>g_share</i>
TG1	44.07%	9.56%	32.44%	9.75%	23.48%
TG2	43.27%	7.91%	33.69%	10.99%	23.04%
TG3	57.84%	7.01%	26.52%	10.43%	15.63%
TG4	14.80%	14.37%	31.60%	5.78%	53.61%
TG5	45.16%	7.34%	27.06%	7.55%	27.78%
TGCom, St. Aperto	22.38%	14.22%	34.57%	6.96%	43.05%
TG La7	52.21%	7.02%	28.10%	10.12%	19.69%
Total	39.62%		30.64%		29.74%

Note: figures exclude coverage during election periods. Figures for *maj_share* and *min_share* refer to period after May 2001

Source: www.agcom.it/

TABLE 5: Comparison of *tempo di notizia* between Zaccaria and Baldassare CdA during the Berlusconi government.

Channel	Period	<i>lsbare</i>	<i>rsbare</i>	<i>gsbare</i>
TG1	Zaccaria CdA	51.78%	29.42%	18.80%
	Baldassare CdA	38.61%	23.92%	37.47%
TG2	Zaccaria CdA	58.62%	23.66%	17.72%
	Baldassare CdA	39.20%	23.50%	37.30%
TG3	Zaccaria CdA	68.37%	19.87%	11.75%
	Baldassare CdA	51.88%	20.96%	27.15%
TG4	(Zaccaria CdA)	27.05%	23.85%	49.10%
	(Baldassare CdA)	14.88%	16.09%	69.03%
TG5	(Zaccaria CdA)	58.96%	25.18%	15.86%
	(Baldassare CdA)	40.99%	18.69%	40.32%
TGCom, St. Aperto	(Zaccaria CdA)	38.81%	26.96%	34.23%
	(Baldassare CdA)	18.95%	30.79%	50.25%
TG La7	(Zaccaria CdA)	64.61%	24.83%	10.56%
	(Baldassare CdA)	41.69%	20.47%	37.84%
Total	Zaccaria	52.60%	24.82%	22.57%
	Baldassare	35.20%	22.05%	42.75%

Note:

TABLE 6: Regression analysis of *cda*, *rai* and *cda * rai* on the ratio *l:r*, all types of coverage

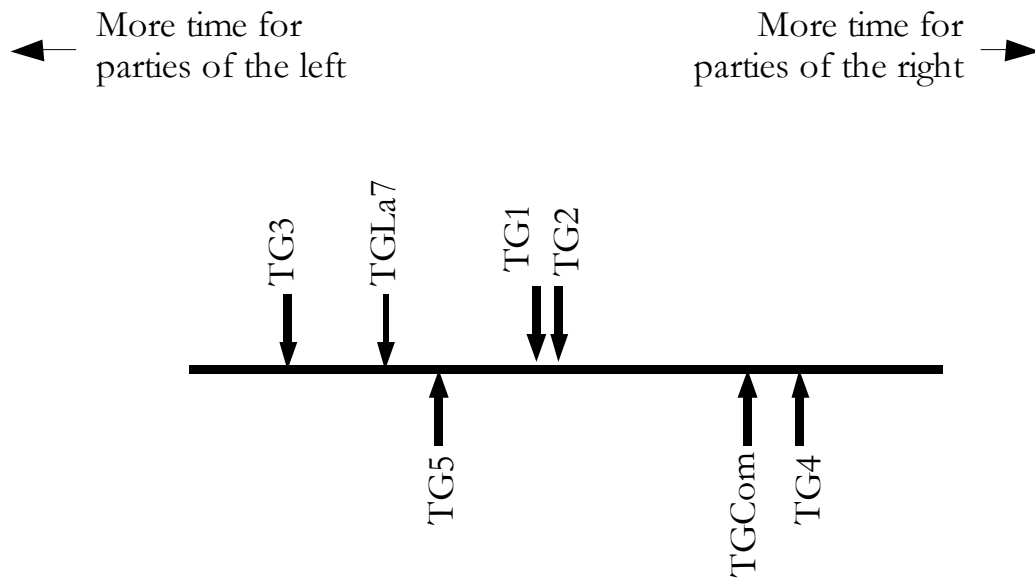
Model		df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	1 Regression	3	15.73	8.33	.000(a)
	Residual	522	1.89		
	Total	525			

a Predictors: (Constant), *intterm*, *cda*, *rai*
b Dependent Variable: *lrratio*

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.690	0.286		9.413	0.000
<i>cda</i>	-0.954	0.334	-0.354	-2.860	0.005
<i>Rai</i>	0.075	0.437	0.031	0.173	0.863
<i>cda * rai</i>	0.191	0.510	0.075	0.376	0.708

a Dependent Variable: Ratio between left and right

FIGURE 1:



Note: represents graphically the ratio between *tempo di antenna* given over to parties of the right and of the left.

Appendix 1:

The following table lists the parties or actors belonging to the left, the right, and to the government respectively. Parties active during the 2006 election and which signed a coalition agreement with other parties of the left or of the right were assigned to coalitions on that basis. Parties which ceased to exist prior to 2006 were assigned to the left (or right) on the basis of (non-) participation in, or (lack of) legislative support for, the left-wing governments of 1996 – 2001. Presidents of the Camera and Senate were counted as members of the government for the purposes of this analysis. Whilst these figures enjoy some independence from government by virtue of their post, they are implicated in the work of the government by their role in setting the parliamentary agenda.

Parties of the left	Parties of the right	Government actors
Democratici di Sinistra Democrazia Europea Girasole Grande Alleanza Democratica I democratici I socialisti i Verdi Italia dei Valori L'Unione La Rosa nel Pugno Lista Consumatori Lista Di Pietro – Occhetto Lista Pannella-Bonino Margherita Partito Pensionati Partito Popolare Italiano Partito Radicale Patto Segni PDCI Republicanri Europei Rifondazione Comunista Rinnovamento Italiano Social Democratici Italiani Sudtiroler Volkspartei Udeur Ulivo Union Valdotaïne Unione Democratici Uniti nell'Ulivo	Alleanza Nazionale Alternativa Sociale Azione Sociale Biancofiore Casa delle Libertà Centro Cristiano Democratico Cristiano Democratici Uniti Democrazia Cristiana Fiamma Tricolore Forza Italia Lega Nord Lega per autonomie/Alleanza Lombarda Movimento per l'Autonomia Raffaele Lombardo Movimento Sociale Italiano Nuovo Democrazia Cristiana Nuovo Partito Socialista Italiano Partito della Bellezza Partito Liberale Partito Socialista Italiano Polo PRI Riformatori Liberali UDC Unione per la Repubblica	Governo Presidente del Consiglio Presidente della Camera Presidente del Senato

REFERENCES

- Forcella, E. (2004 [1959]). Millecinquecento lettori - confessioni di un giornalista politico. In G. Crainz (Ed.), *Millecinquecento lettori - confessioni di un giornalista politico* (pp. 109): Donzelli.
- Ginsborg, P. (2005). *Hopes Unmet? Italian Society and Politics in a Decade of Decline*. Paper presented at the Conference Name | . Retrieved Access Date | . from URL | .
- Hallin, D., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political clientelism and the media: southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. *Media Culture Society*, 24(2), 175-195.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (1984). Speaking of the president. *Theory and Society*, 13(6), 829-850.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems : three models of media and politics*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Klein, M., & Maccoby, N. (1954). Newspaper objectivity in the 1952 campaign. *Journalism Quarterly*, 31, 285-296.
- Mancini, P. (2000). How to Combine Media Commercialization and Party Affiliation: The Italian Experience. *Political Communication*, 17(4), 319-324.
- Monteleone, F. (1992). *Storia della radio e della televisione in italia : società, politica, strategie, programmi, 1922-1992*. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Murialdi, P. (1994). *Maledetti Professori. Diario di un anno alla Rai*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Murialdi, P. (1997). Per una ricerca storica sulla lottizzazione. *Problemi dell'informazione*, 7-11.
- Sani, G. (Ed.). (2001). *Mass Media ed Elezioni*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Travaglio, M., & Gomez, P. (2004). *Regime*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Vespa, B. (2002). *Rai, la grande guerra. 1962-2002: quarant'anni di battaglie a viale Mazzini*. Roma: Rai-ERI.
- Williams, A. (1975). Unbiased study of television news bias. *Journal of Communication*, 25(4), 190 - 199.
- Zaccaria, R. (2004). *Diritto dell'informazione e della comunicazione*. Padova: CEDAM.

