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The Revolution Will Be Televised: The Italian Communist Party, Public Television Broadcasting and the ‘Free Television’ Experiment

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It is a little-known fact that the Italian Communist Party invested vast financial resources in the establishment of a network of local television stations. By 1980, there were as many as twenty of these stations. This article examines how the PCI’s ‘free television’ experiment developed within the context of private broadcasting in Italy, and why it was eventually abandoned. A discussion of some of the programmes produced by communist television stations, complemented by interviews with some of the experiment’s protagonists, will frame the experience of communist broadcasting within the PCI’s history and television policy.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) managed around twenty local television stations, either directly or through its local branches. If a political party’s ownership of a television station can be considered an anomaly, then a Western Communist Party that controls twenty such stations represents a rare historical occurrence. At the time, the PCI was an important player in the Italian political arena. It was the second-largest party in the peninsula and had won over 34 per cent of the vote in the 1976 elections. Moreover, from July 1976 to March 1979, Christian Democrat (DC) politician Giulio Andreotti was in government thanks to the ‘external support’ of the PCI, rendering the latter a de facto member of the government majority, although no communist ministers were appointed. Finally, the PCI held an authoritative voice within the international communist movement.

Political influence alone, however, cannot account for the unusual involvement of a political party in the field of television broadcasting. Rather, this situation can be ascribed to the anomalous situation of Italy’s private broadcasting sector, which had no parallel in any other European country. According to official government figures, as many as 679 private television stations (and no less than 3,353 radio stations) were broadcasting in Italy by the end of 1979.¹ For several years, private broadcasting developed without legislative regulation, leading to a striking proliferation of private television stations. Among those who took great advantage of this situation, in particular the absence of any restrictions on the sale of advertising space, was Silvio Berlusconi.² It is in this context that the soon to be media tycoon and future prime minister of Italy launched his media empire, which was eventually able to compete on equal terms with the Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI), the Italian public broadcasting service.³

¹ P. Ballini, ‘Le regole del gioco: dai banchetti elettorali alle campagne disciplinate’, 30; P. Ballini and Maurizio Ridolfi (eds.) *Storia delle campagne elettorali in Italia* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002), 1–57.

² On the exponential growth of television advertising revenues in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, see G. Gozzini, *La mutazione individualista. Gli italiani e la televisione 1954–2011* (Bari: Laterza, 2014, digital edition), 127–8.

³ Franco Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia. Società, politica, strategia, programmi 1922–1992* (Venice: Marsilio, 1992), 443.

The first communist television stations were born on the initiative of the party's local branches. The reason for this development is that communists at local level felt pressure to compete with the governing parties for the latest propaganda methods. From the mid-1970s, most of the other parties, and particularly the PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano) and the DC, had in fact started their own televisions, with the aim to boost political consensus locally. The communists followed suit, although with some delay. Many of the PCI-sponsored television stations quickly went bankrupt due to insufficient financial resources. Some managed, nevertheless, to overcome the initial difficulties and gained local notoriety (e.g. Videouno, Teleradio Milano 2 and Telereggio). The very existence of these stations made the PCI's national directorate willing to support the development of a communist television network. In practice, that meant investment for new technical equipment for the local PCI-affiliated stations, and the creation of the syndication NET (Nuova Emittenza Televisiva; New Television Transmitter). NET was entrusted with the production of television shows to be distributed among the various television stations politically linked to the party.

Existing studies on private broadcasting in Italy have focused either on independent television of the late 1970s or on the big networks that were formed in the early 1980s, above all Silvio Berlusconi's TV channels but also the Rusconi, Rizzoli and Mondadori groups.⁴ The Italian political parties' direct involvement in private broadcasting, however, has received marginal scholarly attention. In particular, almost nothing has been written on the Italian Communist Party's attempts to become one of the protagonists of the Italian broadcasting sector.⁵ This article thus contributes to media history by unearthing a little-known and unparalleled episode of television broadcasting. It also challenges existing scholarship and common perceptions of the Italian Communist Party as exclusively pro-public television and prejudiced against and hostile to private broadcasting by showcasing its attempt to enter this sector.⁶ Undoubtedly, the strenuous defence of public broadcasting was always at the core of the PCI's policy on television. However, it is possible to identify some timid expressions of sympathy for early experiments in private broadcasting in the communist press, especially when these were too small to pose any serious threat to the RAI's hegemonic role. Ultimately, the communists' assessment largely depended on the political orientation of the television channel in question.⁷

The first section shows how the PCI's policy on television evolved over the years. Initially, the Italian Communist Party championed a state monopoly on wireless broadcasting, but by the mid-1970s it had come to accept the principle of private broadcasting, although it maintained that this should be limited to the local or, at most, the regional level. Above all, the PCI believed that the Italian regions had an important role to play in the development of both public and private broadcasting, and that the creation of a new regional channel, namely RAI 3, would solve the problem of the uncontrolled proliferation of private televisions by offering local stakeholders an opportunity to satisfy both their cultural and commercial needs in a 'controlled environment'. Section two offers fresh information on how the first communist television stations came into being. Section three discusses how the PCI tried to avoid the formation of a television oligopoly. However, it failed in its endeavour:

⁴ On Rizzoli and Mondadori see, for example, Irene Piazzoni, *Storia delle televisioni in Italia. Dagli esordi alle Web tv* (Rome: Carocci, 2020), 141–4. The bibliography on Berlusconi is too vast to be listed here; for a general overview see Paul Ginsborg, *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony* (London: Verso, 2004) and James Newell, *Silvio Berlusconi: A Study in Failure* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

⁵ A few authors do mention the PCI's commitment to private broadcasting, but only en passant; see, for example, Piazzoni, *Storia delle televisioni in Italia*, 135–6; Giandomenico Crapis, *Il frigorifero del cervello. Il PCI e la televisione da 'Lascia o raddoppia?' alla battaglia contro gli spot* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2002), 130; Michele De Lucia, *Il Baratto. Il PCI e le televisioni: Le intese e gli scambi tra il comunista Veltroni e l'affarista Berlusconi negli anni ottanta* (Rome: Kaos, 2008), 66.

⁶ Crapis, *Il frigorifero del cervello*; Ortoleva, 'La televisione italiana', 145; F. Debenedetti, and Antonio Pilati, *La guerra dei trent'anni. Politica e televisione in Italia 1975–2008* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), 18–23.

⁷ See, for example, the rather sympathetic article covering the birth of the Florentine 'Firenze libera' (Free Florence), whose first broadcast – a documentary celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the city's liberation from Nazi occupation – had a clear left-wing tone: 'Stazione Televisiva in funzione a Firenze', *l'Unità*, 20 Sept. 1974, 6. Firenze Libera was to become TeleLibera Firenze. In 1982, it was absorbed by the network Retequattro, owned by Mondadori first, and from 1984 by Fininvest (Berlusconi).

Italy ended up with something worse than an oligopoly, namely the Berlusconi–RAI duopoly, but the blame for this outcome does not rest solely on the PCI, as some authors have maintained.⁸ The history of the communists' commitment to private broadcasting ultimately offers interesting insights into the propaganda activities, decision-making processes and culture of the Italian Communist Party, at both national and local level, in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The article principally draws on two kinds of sources. First, archival documents stored in the Archivio del Partito Comunista Italiano (APCI) at the Istituto Gramsci (IG) in Rome; the Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico (AAMOD) in Rome; and the Telereggio (AT) archive in Reggio Emilia (northern Italy). The latter was one of the most important television stations within the communist network, and to my knowledge the only one that still preserves a rich archive. Second, I conducted a number of interviews with former communist activists and professionals who either worked at NET or in the PCI-sponsored television stations.

Television and Politics in Italy

Regular television service began on 3 January 1954. Due, in part, to the fact that its onset coincided with the initial phases of the economic miracle, television soon became a central factor in the nation's cultural life. A large part of modern Italian mass culture was, indeed, made up of television and/or conveyed through television.⁹ The PCI had accomplished much in both political and cultural terms in post-war years, most notably the successful establishment of an alliance with Italian intellectuals, resolutely pursued by the PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti. This was 'a well-directed strategy aimed at achieving a hegemonic position within national thought and culture'.¹⁰ However, the PCI was almost completely cut off from the RAI's television,¹¹ which partially explains the PCI's early hostility towards this medium.¹² As the influence of television on cultural identity formation and public sentiments grew, the PCI became increasingly concerned with its inability to take advantage of this new medium. For example, its visibility in the so-called *tribune politiche* or *tribune elettorali* – dedicated TV shows that featured politicians, often during the run-up to elections – was very limited, especially in comparison to the governing parties (primarily the Christian Democrats), whose political ideals and *weltanschauung* dominated the small screen, in particular during news bulletins.

The communists therefore constantly campaigned for the RAI's 'democratisation', demanding greater political access to the medium of television. They found an unexpected ally in the newborn *regioni*, the Italian regions, established as administrative bodies in 1970. The communist-controlled Emilia Romagna region, for example, vociferously asked for the *diritto di accesso* (the right to access the public broadcasting service). The first president of Emilia Romagna, Guido Fanti, argued that the RAI must grant the regions slots, so that the exceptionally diversified Italian society, with its dense network of – political and charitable – grassroots associations would finally be given a voice.¹³ Not just red regions (i.e. those regions controlled by the left) were asking for access to the RAI, however.

⁸ For a trenchant statement of this view see Michele De Lucia's *Il baratto*. De Lucia's conclusions are discussed below.

⁹ John Foot, 'Inside the Magic Rectangle: Recent Research on the History of Television', *Contemporary European History*, 11, 3 (2002), 467–75.

¹⁰ Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943–1991* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 12.

¹¹ Monteleone, *Storia della radio*, 211–15; Peppino Ortoleva, 'La televisione italiana 1974–2002: dall' "anarchie italiane" al duopolio imperfetto', in V. Castronovo and N. Tranfaglia, eds., *La Stampa italiana nell'età della Tv. Dagli anni settanta ad oggi* (Bari: Laterza, 2008), 101–2.

¹² In the words of a Press and Propaganda Section bulletin, the RAI was 'the great enemy' that communist militants had to fight in every possible way; see IG, APCI, MF 468, pp. 1475–82, *Stampa e Propaganda. Alle Segreterie delle federazioni*, 1 June 1960. Some scholars have argued that the communists' approach to television showed that they had fundamentally miscalculated its cultural potential. The purely political lens that the PCI adopted in its assessment of the content of television programmes prevented it from appreciating that, despite its rather conservative tone, television represented a powerful vehicle for cultural and social emancipation. See, for example, Crapis, *Il frigorifero del cervello*, 40.

¹³ Guido Fanti, *Radiotelevisione, informazione e democrazia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1973).

For example, Lombardy, ruled by the DC, was at the forefront of this struggle.¹⁴ There couldn't have been a better time to ask for the RAI to open up to society: the exclusive right to wireless broadcasting was granted to the RAI (controlled by the state-owned holding company IRI) by a convention with the Italian state, which was due to expire at the end of 1972. It was, therefore, an unprecedented opportunity to redraft the laws governing television – a development that would give the political opposition and the regions a role in the management of Italian public broadcasting service. A heated debate concerning the reform of the RAI thus emerged in parliament and in the press.¹⁵

The state–RAI convention was, however, prolonged multiple times, while the ruling parties laboriously tried to find an agreement on the new law on television.¹⁶ Only in 1975 did the reform of the RAI eventually come through. Some scholars have argued that, instead of 'democratising' RAI, the reform actually paved the way for the so-called *lottizzazione*: the practice of dividing public broadcasting departments and contracts among the various political parties.¹⁷ Historian Giovanni Gozzini has observed that, in those years, *lottizzazione*, though morally reprehensible, was a political necessity, and should therefore not be demonised. Because the PCI, being a communist party, could never be allowed to be in government in a Western country, *lottizzazione* granted its voters and supporters an equitable share of power and offices, which they were somehow entitled to, because of the PCI's considerable electoral weight.¹⁸ The practical result of the RAI's *lottizzazione* was thus that the PCI received its share of power and departments. On the other side, the regions were left with nothing, except with the right to nominate three members of the RAI's editorial board and the promise that a new regional channel, RAI 3, would be established in a near future.¹⁹ The reform of the RAI, however, did not put an end to the ongoing row over the control of television.

In 1976, the Italian Constitutional Court – which passes judgements on the constitutionality of laws – cancelled some articles of the 1975 law; for the first time in Italian TV history, non-state television broadcasting became legal, albeit exclusively at a local level.²⁰ The court also recommended the prompt promulgation of a law that would regulate the private broadcasting sector, which, however, the ruling parties were to put on the back burner.²¹ Up to that time, a growing number of small and semi-clandestine television stations had dared to defy the state monopoly on wireless broadcasting.²² In many cases, authorities had not intervened, allowing a sort of unofficial liberalisation of the airwaves.²³ After the constitutional court's deliberation, though, television stations began to appear everywhere, and in exceptionally high numbers.

Since there was no law regulating private broadcasting, anyone transmitting a signal could claim a de facto ownership of one or more of the terrestrial television frequencies, which are limited in number. The stronger the signal, the wider the catchment area, the higher the prospective earnings. It was a gold rush. It did not matter how rudimentary the broadcasting equipment was; even less important was the quality of the shows these new television stations were broadcasting, which was in fact low most of the time.²⁴ Yet, it was a cultural revolution. For too long the cultured, politically conformist

¹⁴ Franco Chiarenza, *Il Cavallo Morente. Storia della RAI* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2002), 175–6.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Richeri and Gabriele Balbi, 'The Final Days of the RAI Hegemony: On the Sociocultural Reasons behind the Fall of the Public Hegemony', *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, 3, 1–2 (2015), 63–9, 69.

¹⁶ Chiarenza, *Il Cavallo Morente*, 176–7.

¹⁷ Monteleone, *Storia della radio*, 389; Ortoleva, 'La televisione italiana', 132–4; Francesca Anania, *Breve storia della radio e delle televisione italiana* (Rome: Carocci, 2004), 87.

¹⁸ Gozzini, *La mutazione individualista*, 109–10.

¹⁹ Chiarenza, *Il Cavallo Morente*, 195.

²⁰ Anania, *Breve storia della radio*, 93.

²¹ The court would reiterate such a request in 1981 and 1986. Yet, no law was to be promulgated until 1990 (Law 223 of 6 Aug. 1990, the so-called Mammi Law). Anania, *Breve storia della radio*, 109–10.

²² Giancarlo Dotto and Sandro Piccinini, *Il mucchio selvaggio: la strabiliante, epica, inverosimile ma vera storia della televisione locale in Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), 29.

²³ Chiarenza, *Il Cavallo Morente*, 200.

²⁴ For a brief history of early private broadcasting in Italy see Andrea Sangiovanni 'Dalle libere alle private. Sulla nascita della televisione commerciale in Italia', *Comunicazioni sociali*, 1 (2013), 68–78.

and rather stiff public television broadcasters had misrepresented or utterly ignored Italian local communities. These were now given a voice, and they started to talk, loudly and proudly. The *radio libere* (independent radios) of the mid-1970s had already offered an important platform to those who felt misrepresented by the public broadcasting service, but the impact of television was incommensurably stronger because of the power and directness of moving images. Moreover, when private televisions began to broadcast, it was as if another Italy was taking the floor, an Italy not even independent radios had been able to represent. The independent radios were often launched by grassroots political groups belonging to the radical left, and many of them – although by no means all of them – served to promote counterculture and independent information. By contrast, the private television channels of the late 1970s, which were much more expensive than radios to set up, were mostly financed by local entrepreneurs, and often expressed far more conservative views. As pointed out by Irene Piazzoni, television entrepreneurs feared that an overtly strong political characterisation would alienate potential viewers. This concern was often shared by left-wing entrepreneurs too. This resulted in programmes and bulletins having a rather ‘mainstream’ or even apolitical tone.²⁵

The PCI’s national directorate looked at the proliferation of ‘free televisions’, as they were labelled in the communist press, with a mix of perplexity and benevolence. While the party showed awareness of the danger that an oligopoly could take shape at some point, it also recognised the potentials of a ‘*spinta democratica*’ (push towards democratisation) that this unprecedented phenomenon offered. The solution to the conundrum – the party argued – could only come from the RAI’s *decentramento produttivo*, that is, the production of RAI TV programmes partially being entrusted to the regions, and from the aforementioned *diritto di accesso*.²⁶ At this stage, the political centre made no attempts to enter the television business. The various components of local left-wing subcultures, however, showed a precocious interest in the medium, especially in the communist-controlled red regions. For example, in December 1976, the communist-socialist *Lega delle Cooperative* (a federation of cooperative enterprises) of Reggio Emilia acquired 30 per cent of the shares of Telereggio, the third TV channel ever established in Italy.²⁷ Only a few months before, Silvio Berlusconi had launched his first terrestrial television (after an early experiment with cable television), called Telemilano, which blatantly supported local DC and PSI politicians in view of the elections of June 1976.²⁸

1977 was a difficult year for the PCI as well as for the country. Political violence was rife, and an anti-establishment youth rebellion, known as ‘movimento del 1977’ (1977 student movement), broke out. While having an unmistakable left-wing character, and making explicit reference to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, this new movement included traditional left-wing parties, and particularly the PCI, as targets in its uncompromising criticism of Italian society in its entirety. This threatened to cut the political roots the communists had established in the universities and among youngsters since the late 1960s.²⁹ The issue of private broadcasting thus virtually disappeared from the communist press in 1977, as more pressing matters demanded the undivided attention of both militants and leaders.

In February 1978, however, communist senator Pietro Valenza took stock of the latest developments in the broadcasting sector, in an interview published in the PCI’s official newspaper, *l’Unità*.³⁰ In the three years that had elapsed since the reform of the RAI, according to Valenza, public broadcasting had become more inclusive politically, and more open to new ideas. This was principally because the government had been stripped of the power to exert direct political control on the RAI, as

²⁵ Piazzoni, *Storia delle televisioni in Italia*, 135.

²⁶ Carlo Galluzzi, ‘Perché la proliferazione’, *Rinascita*, 11, 12 Mar. 1976, 32.

²⁷ Istoreco, FED GEN – fascicolo 38/A, Telereggio. Federazione provinciale delle Cooperative di Reggio Emilia, Comunicazione alle cooperative, 27 Dec. 1976.

²⁸ Michele De Lucia, *Il Baratto*, 29.

²⁹ On the Movimento del ‘77, which vigorously opposed the PCI’s policies, see among others Robert Lumley, *Dal ‘68 agli anni di piombo. Studenti e operai nella crisi italiana* (Florence: Giunti, 1998), 273–90 and Luca Falciola, *Il Movimento del 1977 in Italia* (Rome: Carocci, 2015).

³⁰ ‘La battaglia delle antenne’, *l’Unità*, 26 Feb. 1978, 4.

had been the case prior to the reform. The RAI now answered exclusively to the parliament. Valenza himself was a member of a supervising body composed of MPs, with the task of monitoring the public broadcasting service. However, since they could no longer have unrestrained political control over public broadcasting, the ruling parties had grown progressively disaffected with the RAI and had blatantly started favouring private broadcasting. The PCI found itself in a rather strange position: although it had become the strongest supporter of public television, it still exerted the least political influence over the service. To make things worse, RAI 3 still existed only on paper, and the RAI's overall *decentramento* had progressed very little. Valenza could have completed the picture by adding that the various political parties were covertly entering the television sector, sponsoring the establishment or development of politically-aligned TV stations. Even a relatively small party like the Partito Radicale (Radical Party) could count on a television station in the area of Rome: TeleRoma 56.³¹ It was time for the PCI to act.

The First Communist Television Stations

In June 1976, for the first time ever, the Communist Party had won the administrative elections in Rome. A tool was needed to advertise the achievements of the new communist mayor and help secure his re-election. The party thus decided to invest in the establishment of a local television station, called Videouno. In January 1978, the PCI purchased a pre-existing transmission system installed on Monte Cavo, a mountain in the outskirts of Rome.³² The studios were initially set up in a basement in the suburban Trionfale neighbourhood. Legally, Videouno was constituted as a subsidiary of the PCI-controlled newspaper *Paese Sera*. The first two directors of Videouno, Aniello Coppola and Giuseppe Fiori, came from *Paese Sera*, as did the journalists who set up the news bulletin. The collaboration with Videouno provided valuable working experience for many young Roman journalists and party activists; for several of them, it represented the early stages of a successful career in the Italian television industry.³³ The first images broadcasted on Videouno concerned the kidnapping of DC President Aldo Moro, on 16 March 1978. Two journalists of Videouno were the first to get to the Roman location where the kidnapping had taken place. They were thus able to film some of the shocking footage of the corpses of Moro's bodyguards, after they had been ambushed and mercilessly mowed down, by a commando formed by members of the Red Brigades terrorist organisation.³⁴

The PCI-PSI relationship deteriorated considerably during Moro's kidnapping. By arguing in favour of a negotiation with the terrorists for the release of the DC's president, PSI leader Bettino Craxi not only broke with the 'front of firmness', as the DC-PCI stance of not bargaining with the Red Brigades was then called; he also showed himself to be a leader capable of acting independently from the PCI. This greatly irritated the communist leadership.³⁵ Television was another subject of disagreement between the PCI and the PSI. By the end of 1978, the PSI had moved beyond the rigid defence of the public service. In particular, the PSI leadership judged that the request of large private companies to obtain direct access to national broadcasting could no longer be ignored. The

³¹ Lorenza Ponzone, *Il Partito radicale nella politica italiana, 1962-1989* (Fasano: Schena, 1992), 166.

³² Interview with former Videouno journalist Fiorenzo Pompei, 3 July 2019.

³³ The Italian readers will be familiar with the names of Federica Sciarelli, Maurizio Mannoni, Gianni Cerqueti and Enrico Lucci, many of whom subsequently worked for RAI 3, once this was 'given' to the PCI at the end of the 1980s (see further).

³⁴ A troupe of the RAI led by journalist Paolo Frajese arrived shortly after and shot a long, single sequence (of almost three minutes), showing graphic details of the massacres. The footage is regarded as a defining moment in the history of Italian television. For the first time, a (very dramatic) piece of news was given to the public principally through unedited images and with very little mediation by the journalist. This type of coverage, which was unusual at the time but would become more frequent in the years to follow, was made possible by new technologies, particularly tape-based camcorders, which required no printing of the footage. Camcorders were also a key factor in the development of private television stations. For an analysis of Frajese's coverage of the Moro kidnapping see Fausto Colombo, *Il paese leggero. Gli italiani e i media tra contestazione e riflusso* (Bari: Laterza, 2012), 133-5.

³⁵ Marco Gervasoni, *La Guerra delle sinistre. Socialisti e comunisti dal '68 a Tangentopoli* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013), 41.

authoritative Italian employers' federation (Confindustria), for example, had been asking for a 'virtually complete liberalization of broadcasting' ever since 1972.³⁶

In November 1978, the PSI thus proposed the creation of a fourth public television channel to be entrusted to a select number of private companies – something similar to the British ITV network. The planned (but not yet created) third public channel was, instead, to be left to the regions and to small local entrepreneurs.³⁷ The PCI leaders and intellectuals, however, saw the socialist proposal as a threat to the prominence of the public broadcasting service, which was the core of the PCI's television policy, and strongly rejected it. They did so not just for the sake of the RAI, but also in the name of 'the small local televisions that have flourished in recent years'. These, according to the PCI, were 'the expression of a will to participate, of a genuine demand of cultural growth, and an articulation of real needs'.³⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, for the communists the interests of large companies deserved no protection; only small entrepreneurs and, of course, grassroots cultural and political associations were to be supported.

Perhaps the socialist proposal arrived too late to reverse the trend towards the uncontrolled privatisation of the airwaves.³⁹ However, the PCI's unavailability to even discuss it had serious and long-lasting consequences. The PSI ultimately turned to private television, and later on PSI leader Bettino Craxi saw in Silvio Berlusconi the entrepreneur who could balance out a public broadcasting service seen as culturally dominated by the Catholics, and in a smaller measure by the communists. Additionally, Berlusconi's television company was based in Milan, that is, the PSI's political stronghold. Although the creation of an important television centre in the Lombard capital had been a socialist project for quite some time, it had never come to fruition.⁴⁰ Part of the DC also decided to favour the development of a mixed system by purposely leaving the matter unregulated, either because they thought they could gain from it in terms of electoral support or because they considered a similar development to be inevitable.⁴¹ As far as the PCI directorate is concerned, precious time was lost waiting for a law that would finally secure the RAI's national predominance while granting local stakeholders fair and regulated access to television, whereas very little was done to gain a competitive advantage on the television market.

The PCI's local sections, however, were taking autonomous initiatives in the broadcasting sector. Towards the end of 1978, its Milanese branch bought a television station, which was renamed TeleradioMilano2 (TRM2). It was a matter of political survival; businessmen who were politically near the DC had already invested in Tv66, while others were turning Telelombardia into a station politically aligned with the PSI. However, TRM2 was not intended to serve just the area of Milano, but the entire region. The local branch of *l'Unità* sent two experienced journalists, while other personnel were recruited among militants. Fourteen people in total were working at the station when it was launched at the beginning of 1979. Thanks to the strong investments made in TV repeaters, TRM2's signal managed, in time, to cover a vast area, including the whole of Lombardy, Piedmont and the northern part of Emilia Romagna, and eastwards as far as Verona, in the Veneto region.⁴²

In the meantime, other communist television stations were appearing all over, especially in the north of the country. Sometimes, these were established on the initiative of entrepreneurs who

³⁶ Giulia Guazzaloca, *Una e divisibile. La RAI e i partiti negli anni del monopolio pubblico (1954–1975)* (Milan: le Monnier, 2011), 200.

³⁷ See Enrico Menduni, *Televisione e società italiana 1975–2000* (Milan: Bompiani, 2002), 72; Crapis, *Il frigorifero del cervello*, 12.

³⁸ 'TV: il PSI conferma le sue proposte a sostegno dei grandi gruppi privati', *l'Unità*, 17 Nov. 1978, 2.

³⁹ Piazzone, *Storia delle televisioni*, 155–6. The socialist proposal was opposed not just by the communists, but also by sectors of the DC.

⁴⁰ Piazzone, *Storia delle televisioni*, 154–5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴² Angelo Ferranti, one of the earliest directors, remembers how, in the early years, he had to battle with the owners of competing television stations, including Berlusconi, who routinely tried to use TRM2's frequencies and ended up covering its signal. Interview with former director of TRM2 Angelo Ferranti, 18 July 2019.

happened to be militants of the Communist Party. One such television was TeleMarsica, in the Abruzzo Region, whose editor was Mario Spallone. He had been for many years PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti's trusted physician. One issue, however, was troubling communist officers: the much-feared oligopoly was finally taking shape. In an amusing article published in *l'Unità* in May 1980, journalist and satirist Michele Serra described the depressing scenario of the national convention of private television entrepreneurs, which had just ended in Saint Vincent, a popular holiday resort in northern Italy.⁴³ A handful of big groups, among which Fininvest (Berlusconi's holding company), and the publishing houses Rizzoli, Rusconi and Mondadori, were taking the lion's share of the advertising market, throwing but crumbs to the remaining hundreds of small television owners.⁴⁴ These were left begging to be affiliated with a network. Many would eventually be forced to sell their television stations and surrender the frequencies they had so tenaciously fought for to the market's big players. Those who had invested – in the 1970s – in the establishment of a television station, motivated by noble purposes, such as breaking what they regarded as the unjust monopoly of the RAI, had completely been defeated. The PCI came to the same conclusion in its internal documents: the era of the '*mille libere antenne*' (one thousand free televisions) was over.⁴⁵

The Party Steps In

The party thus became convinced that the initiative in the broadcasting sector could no longer be left to the local branches. A new comprehensive plan was needed: one that would bring local initiatives into harmony with the PCI's national policy, particularly concerning its commitment to safeguarding the public service. There were also pressing political reasons behind this intervention. At the elections of June 1979, the PCI lost almost 1.5 million votes. In the months preceding the elections, Craxi had strongly undermined the PCI's ideological foundations, for example by criticising the totalitarian nature of many communist regimes and their repression of libertarian ideals, represented instead by the PSI's non-Leninist brand of socialism.⁴⁶ Berlinguer blamed Craxi for the communist setback, even if the PSI had not directly benefitted from it in electoral terms.⁴⁷ The ensuing conflict worsened the political relations between the PCI and the PSI, at the time the largest parties within the Italian left.⁴⁸ The PCI, in particular, suffered from the fact that it lost a highly valuable actor in the 'historic compromise' project. This was the backbone of communist political strategy since 1973. The 'historic compromise' policy appealed for an alliance of the '*forze democratiche e popolari*' (democratic and popular forces), reaching out to both the PSI and the DC. The aim of this alliance was to avoid the potential destabilisation of the democratic regime, as had happened in Chile in September 1973, and to create a broad front supporting political and social reform.⁴⁹ However, by the end of the decade it became clear that the 'historic compromise' policy had failed to achieve its ultimate scope: to get the PCI into the government. This proved impossible due to the fierce opposition not only of right-

⁴³ 'Anche l'etere è una torta da spartire', *l'Unità*, 7 May 1980, 8.

⁴⁴ Data show that, by 1984, the networks held over 60 per cent of the television advertising revenues, while independent local television could count on a meagre 8.8 per cent (as opposed to 18.5 per cent in 1979). Francesco De Vescovi, *Economia dell'informazione televisiva* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1986), 89.

⁴⁵ IG, APCI, MF 488, Dipartimento Stampa propaganda e Informazione. Informazioni e proposte sulla nostra Rete televisiva, 1980, 1348.

⁴⁶ L. Musella, *Craxi* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2007), 155–66.

⁴⁷ 'Dichiarazione di Berlinguer', *l'Unità*, 5 June 1979, front page. For an analysis of the 1979 electoral results see Simona Colarizi, *Un paese in movimento. L'Italia degli anni Sessanta e Settanta* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2019), 194. The PCI mostly lost middle-class votes, the majority of which went to the Partito Radicale.

⁴⁸ For a general overview of the PCI–PSI quarrel in the 1980s, see S. Colarizi, 'I duellanti. La rottura tra il PCI di Berlinguer e il PSI di Craxi alla svolta degli anni ottanta', in F. Barbagallo and A. Vittoria, eds., *Enrico Berlinguer, la politica Italia e la crisi mondiale* (Rome: Carocci, 2007), 105–18.

⁴⁹ See P. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 356–7.

wingers within the Christian Democracy but also, and perhaps more importantly, of both the United States and the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ Moreover, Berlinguer's strategy had angered many communist militants and alienated many youngsters involved in the counterculture movement of the late 1970s.⁵¹ Between 1980 and 1981, the leader of the PCI abandoned the historic compromise policy and instead proposed the formation of a government without the DC, founded on the pursuit of the *questione morale* (moral question), as it was called: the fight against widespread corruption and bad governance that was plaguing the country.⁵² This political turn, however, did not reduce the political isolation of the PCI. Quite the contrary: it contributed to deepening it.

There was, however, a wider range of cultural and political reasons for the PCI's electoral defeat and subsequent political crisis, including the tendency towards political disengagement, which came to be known as the *riflusso* (reaction).⁵³ The wrongdoings of communist regimes also alienated the moderate public opinion from the PCI. The relationship between the Soviet Union and the PCI had actually never before been so strained as it was at the time, mostly as a direct consequence of Berlinguer's public endorsement of Western-style democracy.⁵⁴ However, because the PCI leadership refused to actually break with the Eastern Bloc, and because it tried to minimise coverage of the political differences between the Italian communists and their Russian comrades, it continued to take the blame for the misdeeds of communist parties in power.⁵⁵ The worsening of the party's public standing made it even more urgent to strengthen its propaganda apparatus, so that the communist subculture at grass-roots level could be safeguarded against insidious ideological and political aggressions.

From autumn 1979, a policy took shape that comprised three major developments. Firstly, the party would offer financial support to existing television stations and establish new ones in the regions where they were lacking, with the aim of achieving national transmission coverage; secondly, the party would take on the task of coordinating the activity of these television stations in order to form a network; thirdly, the centre was to create a syndication for the distribution of television programmes.⁵⁶ The PCI spared neither time nor effort in implementing the first part of the strategy: at the end of 1980, over twenty 'communist' stations were broadcasting, and more were ready to be launched.⁵⁷ According to the cadres of the Propaganda Section of the PCI, the operation could be considered a success.

However, internal documents also revealed that the communist television network was beset by several problems from the very outset.⁵⁸ First of all, the PCI could not achieve national coverage, as six regions out of twenty lacked communist televisions.⁵⁹ Moreover, the operation proved very

⁵⁰ On US hostility to communist involvement in government, see the compelling analysis by Lucrezia Comellini, *L'Italia sotto tutela. Stati Uniti, Europa, e crisi italiana degli anni Settanta* (Città di Castello: Le Monnier, 2014). For an analysis of the USSR leadership's perspective on this issue, see Francesco Barbagallo, *Enrico Berlinguer* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), 233–40. For a general overview of Berlinguer's policy during this period, see Silvio Pons, 'Berlinguer e la politica internazionale', in F. Barbagallo and A. Vittoria, eds., *Enrico Berlinguer, la politica italiana e la crisi mondiale* (Rome: Carocci, 2007), 119–33.

⁵¹ On the doubts communist militants nurtured about Berlinguer's policy, see the study by Marzio Barbagli and Piergiorgio Corbetta, 'Una tattica e due strategie. Inchiesta sulla base del PCI', in M. Barbagli, P. Corbetta and S. Salvatore, *Dentro Il Pci* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1979), 9–60.

⁵² Francesco Barbagallo, 'Enrico Berlinguer, il compromesso storico e l'alternativa democratica', *Studi Storici*, 4, 45 (2004), 939–49.

⁵³ On the social and political reasons of the *riflusso* see N. Ajello, *Il lungo addio. Intellettuali e PCI dal 1958 al 1991* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 1997), 213–19.

⁵⁴ S. Pons, 'L'Italia e il PCI nella politica estera dell'URSS di Breznev', in Agostino Giovagnoli and Silvio Pons, eds., *L'Italia Repubblicana nella crisi degli anni settanta. Tra guerra fredda e distensione* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2003), 63–88.

⁵⁵ Alessandro Brogi, *Confronting America: The Cold War between the United States and the Communists in France and Italy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 325.

⁵⁶ IG, APCI, MF 427, Sez. di lavoro, Stampa e propaganda, 15 Oct. 1979, 574–93.

⁵⁷ IG, APCI, MF 488, Dipartimento Stampa propaganda e Informazione. Informazioni e proposte sulla nostra Rete televisiva, 1980, 1353–4.

⁵⁸ IG, APCI, MF 440, Informazione sull'emittente televisiva locale – Riservato alla segreteria, 28 Feb. 1980, 120.

⁵⁹ IG, APCI, MF 504, 22 May 1981, 619.

expensive. While comrades in the north could pay for the establishment of their television stations, the party was forced to invest large sums to create them in the centre and south: in 1980 alone, the PCI invested 840 million liras (roughly equivalent to 2 million of today's euros) merely in television equipment.⁶⁰ The party's *Stampa e Propaganda* (Press and Propaganda section) had little to show for such an extraordinary effort; audience measurement revealed that communist television stations were not doing very well when it came to attracting spectators.⁶¹ The Milanese TRM2 had less than 15,000 daily viewers, while the Roman Videouno had an average of 25,000. These were not satisfactory figures, especially for regional channels. Most of the non-communist local stations in the same areas were, by contrast, performing much better. For example, in the spring of 1981, the Berlusconi-controlled Canale 5 (the former Telemilano) had around 633,000 daily viewers, while another Milanese television station, Rusconi's Antenna Nord, outperformed all of the above with its 760,000 daily viewers.⁶² In Rome, GBR television, which was politically near to the PSI, had over 300,000 daily viewers. Among the television stations of the communist network, the only positive exception was Televenezia; in the summer of 1981, it had a daily average of 269,000 viewers.

Ironically, it was the PCI's policy itself that was contributing to the disappointing results of the communist television stations. Absurd limitations had been placed on the activity of the television stations participating in the communist network. The latter, for example, were not supposed to exceed regional coverage, as this would have gone against the provisions of the law the PCI had proposed in order to regulate the private broadcasting sector.⁶³ For the same reason, each television station within the communist network had to produce in house 50 per cent of its programmes, which was very expensive. Competitors, by contrast, would fill up the schedule with American sitcoms, Brazilian soap operas and Japanese cartoons, which were often old and therefore bought at bargain prices.⁶⁴ Finally, no company or entrepreneur could own more than one channel. Each communist station was therefore the property of a different company, specifically created for that purpose, or owned by a cooperative. Competitors, however, had no such limitations; in fact, they had no limitations at all, since the government had not yet approved any law on private broadcasting. The PCI was inadvertently putting its own television stations at a disadvantage.

The implementation of the other parts of the 1979 plan – namely the creation of the network and of a syndication – was entrusted to a newly created company: NET (*Nuova Emittenza Televisiva*; New Television Transmitter). The investment was considerable: 1 billion liras (roughly 2.5 million of today's euros), half of which came from Publiherz, an advertising company controlled by car manufacturer company FIAT, as an advance payment for the future broadcasting of commercials within the communist network.⁶⁵ Walter Veltroni, who was later to become mayor of Rome and the first leader of the post-communist Democratic Party, was appointed CEO. NET was, however, a failure. It began to distribute programmes in March 1980, but one year later it ceased its operations with a huge commercial loss.⁶⁶ The party's internal documents are laconic when it comes to describing the reasons NET failed; they speak of '*errori, ingenuità, illusioni*' (mistakes, naivety, delusions).⁶⁷ Former NET employee Luciano Vanni blamed the network's television stations for the premature and inglorious ending of the communist syndication.⁶⁸ In order to honour the contract with Publiherz, NET programmes (which

⁶⁰ The equivalent sum in today's euros was calculated using <https://inflationhistory.com/> (accessed on 25 May 2020).

⁶¹ IG, APCI, MF 505, Rai-tv e problemi dell'informazione, 2 July 1981, 708.

⁶² See *Prontuario delle emittenti italiane. Dati Radio TV*, Gruppo STP-RV, n. 3, May 1981, p. 37. This can be found at: <http://www.planetmedia.it/Radio%20Tv%20Dati%20Prontuario%20Delle%20Emittenti%20Italiane.pdf>

⁶³ IG, APCI, MF 440, Informazione sull'emittente televisiva locale – Riservato alla segreteria, 28 Feb. 1980, 117.

⁶⁴ In 1980, Italian television stations imported 3,500 to 4,000 hours of films and 10,000 to 20,000 hours of TV shows, 60 per cent of which were made in the United States. Italy was the second foreign market for American TV products, after Canada. Mariagrazia Bruzzone, *Piccolo grande schermo: dalla televisione alla telematica* (Bari: Dedalo, 1984), 158.

⁶⁵ IG, APCI, MF 440, Informazione sull'emittente televisiva locale – Riservato alla segreteria, 28 Feb. 1980, 121. The equivalent sum in today's euros was calculated using <https://inflationhistory.com/> (accessed on 25 May 2020).

⁶⁶ IG, APCI, MF 504, 22 May 1981, 620.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 627.

⁶⁸ Interview with former NET employee Luciano Vanni, 15 July 2010.

took up twenty-six hours per week) were supposed to be aired in primetime.⁶⁹ Yet, local broadcasters refused to comply. They did not appreciate any interference from the party centre in the programming of television stations that they regarded, first and foremost, as their own. There were also problems with the TV shows NET was producing. Although these were generally of good quality, they were too expensive to produce.⁷⁰ Many of the network's stations could not pay for them, and those that could were not willing to, which soon made NET's financial situation untenable. Reportedly, the shows were considered too 'Roman', that is, unmistakably shot in Rome and with a focus on the capital's cultural, social and political environment. They were therefore deemed unsuitable for the audience of other parts of Italy.⁷¹

It is very difficult to assess the truthfulness of the latter claim, as very few of the TV shows produced by NET still exist. Magnetic tapes were highly expensive at the time and were thus reused several times. As a consequence, not only NET's TV shows, but also most of what local television stations produced and broadcast in those years has been irremediably lost. The AAMOD archive preserves one episode of *Puzzle*, a 30-minute public affairs show produced by NET in 1980.⁷² It does not seem to be exclusively focused on Rome. Although it features an interview with Roman actor Gigi Proietti and a report on Rome's suburbs, it also includes an interview with the communist mayor of Turin and coverage of the performance by the American Bread and Puppet Theatre in San Giorgio a Cremano, in the outskirts of Naples. We could therefore argue that it was not so much the 'Roman' outlook of NET's TV shows that the directors of the communist television stations disliked but their national, non-local character.

Similar to the producers working for the RAI, the professionals at NET were producing shows for a generic 'Italian' audience, with little consideration being given to local specificities. As a matter of fact, NET's TV shows were blatant imitations of the programmes produced by the RAI. *Puzzle* was, for example, clearly inspired by TV7, the first modern Italian TV magazine, which first aired in 1963.⁷³ When watching local television stations, however, people were not interested in learning about the politics and cultures of other regions and cities. The RAI was perfectly able to inform the public about issues of national interest, and through TV programmes of a much better quality than NET or any local television station could produce at the time. From local television stations, however, people expected local news; they wanted to see their own city and hear about local initiatives. This is the service that local television stations, including communist stations, were offering. For example, TRM2 used to broadcast the daily *Di Milano in Milano* (From Milan to Milan), a TV bulletin exclusively dedicated to the cultural and political life of the city of Milan. Local football was discussed in *Sinistro al volo* (Left-footed volley kick).⁷⁴ The Roman Videouno honourably fulfilled the role of catalyst of local communist subculture by airing *Telefonate al Sindaco* (phone calls to the mayor), a weekly show in which the communist mayor of Rome took calls from the public.⁷⁵ The same can be said for TRM2, which broadcast the congresses of the Milanese PCI and musical concerts with *cantautori* (singers and songwriters) performing at the local Feste dell'Unità.⁷⁶ These were the festivals organised

⁶⁹ 'TV locali? Sì, ma intelligenti, Presentati ieri i nuovi programme NET', *l'Unità*, 23 May 1980, 8.

⁷⁰ Interview with former Videouno journalist Fiorenzo Pompei, 3 July 2019.

⁷¹ Interview with former director of TRM2 Angelo Ferranti, 18 July 2019.

⁷² Walter Veltroni presented the TV show to the press in July 1980. 'Provate a sciogliere il "Puzzle" della NET', *l'Unità*, 11 July 1980, 8. Veltroni claimed that *Puzzle* was an attempt to deliver modern and entertaining information.

⁷³ Monteleone, *Storia della radio*, 354.

⁷⁴ Interview with former director of TRM2 Angelo Ferranti, 18 July 2019.

⁷⁵ Interview with former Videouno journalist Fiorenzo Pompei, 3 July 2019.

⁷⁶ The encounter between the PCI and the *cantautori* was in part the result of political affinity. Songwriters advocated pacifism, social justice and, just like the PCI, they were generally critical of the Italian economic development and its deleterious social effects. P. Carusi, *Viva L'Italia. Narrazioni e rappresentazioni della storia repubblicana nei versi dei cantautori 'impegnati'* (Milan: Le Monnier, 2018), 25–30. A collection of tapes of *cantautori* concerts recorded and broadcast by TRM2 is stored at Fondazione ISEC, in Sesto San Giovanni.

by the local branches of the PCI in order to raise funds for the party press.⁷⁷ Because of their distinctive quality, NET's TV shows – including those offering pure entertainment – did not quite meet the needs of local broadcasters, and never really fit in the weekly schedules of communist television stations.

After the failure of NET, the PCI's commitment to private broadcasting lost momentum. Plans to relaunch the NET project were never implemented.⁷⁸ Several of the newly established communist television stations shut down in the months following the end of NET, while others were forced to bend to the dictates of the major players.⁷⁹ A few entered a new syndication, politically sponsored by the PCI: Teleconsorzio. This did not produce any TV shows; it syndicated the signal of TV Koper – Capodistria (also known as Telecapodistria), a television station broadcasting in Italian language from Slovenia, which was then part of communist Yugoslavia.⁸⁰ Teleconsorzio lasted until 1986.⁸¹ In the meantime, the oligopoly was turning into a duopoly. Between 1982 and 1984, Silvio Berlusconi bought out all his major competitors – the networks Italia 1 and Rete 4 – from Rusconi and Mondadori respectively.⁸² His company Fininvest was now able to compete with RAI on equal terms, and it was precisely towards the RAI, and more specifically towards RAI 3, that the PCI turned its attention once again.

RAI 3, the third channel of public television, had finally started airing in December 1979. However, it initially remained on the margins of the public broadcasting service; it was purposely underfunded, and its signal managed to reach a mere 45 per cent of the population. Nobody really wanted this new national television channel, apart from the regions and the PCI, which were still pursuing the *decentramento* and the *diritto di accesso*.⁸³ The PCI proposed that the local RAI's production facilities, which were currently underutilised (in 1981, RAI 3 broadcast only three and a half hours of regional programmes a day), should be leased under favourable conditions to local television stations, in order for them to produce TV shows. In this way, the PCI argued, local broadcasters could finally gain their independence from the international market.⁸⁴ What troubled the communist officers were the thousands of hours of films and *television film* (drama shows), which were purchased annually from the United States. Communists believed that a cultural colonisation was underway.⁸⁵ The PCI's proposal was bold, indeed almost visionary, but also utterly naïve. Just like the rest of the communists' policy on private broadcasting, it was based on a false premise: that the ultimate purpose of private television was to produce high-quality TV shows. What Berlusconi and other businessmen knew all too well is that private television must, above all, produce an audience that will watch the commercials advertisers had paid for. The American TV shows fulfilled this purpose just fine, and they were also less expensive than most in-house productions.

⁷⁷ The first Festa dell'Unità had taken place in Sept. 1945 and was based on the model of the Feste de L'Humanité of the French Communist Party. It soon spread to many cities and towns and very quickly became one of the most awaited annual events for communist militants and sympathisers. For a history of the Feste dell'Unità, see C. Bernieri, *L'albero in piazza – Storia, cronache e leggende delle Feste dell'Unità* (Milan: Gabriele Mazzotta Editore, 1977).

⁷⁸ IG, APCI, MF 504, 22 May 1981, 627–8.

⁷⁹ Videouno, for example, began to broadcast tapes sent in by the major networks during primetime. The tapes were pre-edited, with added commercials. 'C'era una volta "libera antenna", che ne è rimasto? Tv locali in crisi', *l'Unità*, 11 Dec. 1981, 12.

⁸⁰ Even before Teleconsorzio syndicated its signal, Telecapodistria could be seen in large parts of the centre and north of Italy. When it was launched in May 1971, it was the only television station broadcasting in colour on Italian airwaves. A brief history of Telecapodistria can be found at https://www.rtvsl.si/tvcapodistria/chi_siamo/2 (accessed on 25 May 2020).

⁸¹ Interview with former NET employee Luciano Vanni, 15 July 2010.

⁸² De Lucia, *Il Baratto*, 65, 80.

⁸³ Monteleone, *Storia della radio*, 401.

⁸⁴ IG, APCI, MF 488, Per un dibattito sulla 3a Rete RAI, 26 Feb. 1981, 1368.

⁸⁵ The head of the party's Stampa e Propaganda (Press and Propaganda section), Adalberto Minucci, stigmatised this situation in his report to the party's central committee meeting, held in July 1982. Seventy-five per cent of what was broadcast in Italy – he claimed – was made in the United States. 'La relazione di Minucci', *l'Unità*, 15 July 1982, 6–7.

According to Michele De Lucia, between the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985, the PCI and the ruling parties reached an agreement, entailing the PCI's surreptitious support for the RAI-Fininvest duopoly in exchange for political control over RAI 3.⁸⁶ This resulted in the appointment of Angelo Guglielmi and Sandro Curzi as the directors of, respectively, RAI 3 and the RAI 3 news bulletin.⁸⁷ It is difficult to establish whether any negotiations really took place, and what the exact terms of this alleged agreement were. De Lucia even talks about a '*trattativa riservata*' (secret negotiations) between Berlusconi and the PCI,⁸⁸ though he has no evidence to show for it. Perhaps the PCI's manifest inability to counter Berlusconi's ever-increasing economic power in the second half of the 1980s was simply due to political weakness. We should not forget, in this respect, that the Italian Communist Party suffered an electoral decline in the second half of the 1980s, as well as a progressive cultural marginalisation.⁸⁹ The mass gathering of nearly two million people at Berlinguer's funeral (June 1984) – an event that was broadcast live by the RAI – and the PCI's subsequent victory at the European elections gave many communist militants the illusion that their party was still very strong and a true protagonist of Italian politics.⁹⁰ In reality, however, by that time the PCI had become quite isolated politically. Political overtures to Berlusconi may therefore have been no more than an attempt to resemble a 'modern' and business-friendly party, rather than proof of a secret agreement, as De Lucia claims.⁹¹ Perhaps, for once, the PCI showed some political realism: having realised that the duopoly was going to happen, whether it liked it or not, it decided it could get something out of it.

This new situation where the PCI became more influential in the public broadcasting service had a direct impact on what was left of the communist network. At the end of 1986, both Videouno and TRM2 were sold to private entrepreneurs without any political connection to the Communist Party.⁹² However, not all the television stations that were politically linked to the PCI ceased to function. Those more directly dependent on the party's local branches, or which belonged to associations and groups of the left-wing archipelago, survived much longer. Telereggio, for example, continues to broadcast, and it is still linked to the *Lega delle cooperative* of Emilia Romagna.⁹³

Conclusion

The history of the communists' commitment to private broadcasting sheds a light on the Italian Communist Party's approach to mass media and on the changes in the relationship between the PCI's national directorate and its local branches in the 1970s. The PCI had no particular prejudices against television itself. From the late 1950s onwards, communist cadres and intellectuals started showing awareness of the positive cultural changes produced by the new medium, for example with regard to the power of television to demystify the liturgy of the Church.⁹⁴ It was, rather, the exclusion from the management of the RAI that caused the PCI's profound hostility towards the Italian public

⁸⁶ De Lucia, *Il Baratto*, 95.

⁸⁷ Anania, *Breve storia della radio*, 107.

⁸⁸ De Lucia, *Il Baratto*, 95–6.

⁸⁹ M. Di Giacomo and N. Di Nunzio, *Trent'anni dopo. Il PCI degli anni ottanta* (Boca: Oltre Edizioni, 2016), 90–1.

⁹⁰ As argued by Valentine Lomellini, the PCI's impressive results obtained at the 1984 European elections were more the result of the emotional impact of Berlinguer's tragic death than any appreciation for the communist Europeanist policy among Italian voters. In fact, the PCI lost all subsequent elections. See 'The PCI and the European Integration from Eurocommunism to Berlinguer's death', in Luca Bonfreschi, Giovanni Orsina and Antonio Varsori, eds., *European Parties and the European Integration Process, 1945–1992* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), 172.

⁹¹ De Lucia, *Il Baratto*, 104–9.

⁹² Interviews with former Videouno journalist Fiorenzo Pompei and former director of TRM2 Angelo Ferranti, respectively, on 3 and 18 July 2019.

⁹³ For a history of Telereggio see P. Bonacini, *Una voce nell'etere. Trent'anni di Telereggio e altro* (Reggio Emilia: Consulta Libri e Progetti, 2018).

⁹⁴ Sandro Bellassai, *La morale comunista. Pubblico e privato nella rappresentazione del P.C.I. (1947–1956)* (Rome: Carocci, 2000), 130.

broadcasting service. It is true that, in the 1970s, the Communist Party opposed – together with other political forces – the introduction of colour TV. However, this was due to an anti-consumerist prejudice rather than to a hostile attitude towards television.⁹⁵

Communist analyses of television were, nonetheless, deficient. Because they were obsessively focused on getting access, in one way or another, to this medium, the communists failed to appreciate how the *neotelevisione* ('neotelevision') of the late 1970s and early 1980s was irreversibly changing not just propaganda, but politics itself.⁹⁶ The fact that politics became entertainment accounts for the proliferation of talk shows in the early 1980s.⁹⁷ These, in turn, produced sensationalist reporting of political life, personalisation of politics, and the relentless erosion of long-established political allegiances, with voters turning into a generic audience that the politician had to win over within the television arena.⁹⁸ Although there was not much the PCI could have done to stop this development, it seems that party officers were scarcely aware of the very existence of this problem, and of its reverberations at grassroots level.⁹⁹ Indeed, the more television hours were offered, the more people – including communist militants – were encouraged to stay at home; this had a dire effect on the sense of communality on which a large part of the PCI's appeal and political strength was based. What was, then, the rationale for creating twenty new local television stations? Whether it was the right move or not, it is striking that hardly any reflection on this issue can be found in the communist press, or in the party documents of the period.

No political force – not even the PCI – really tried to avert the progressive spectacularisation of politics, which seemed to be inextricably linked with *neotelevisione*. Since the 1970s, it had become clear that the personality of PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer, especially his humanity and modest manners, worked perfectly in television debates. The PCI was not afraid to capitalise on Berlinguer's popularity, and it was more than willing to indulge the audience, even at the cost of compromising the image of seriousness and respectability that the party had built up over the years. A proof of this is a famous photograph taken on 16 June 1983 on the Terrazza del Pincio, in Rome; it captured the moment Tuscan actor and comedian Roberto Benigni took Berlinguer in his arms and lifted him up.¹⁰⁰ On the one hand, Benigni's stunt was a declaration of love towards the PCI's leader; on the other, however, it was a defining moment in a process of spectacularisation of Italian political life: a process that progressively diminished the prestige and authoritativeness of Italian politicians, ultimately preparing the ground for Berlusconi's advent, perhaps the least dignified of Italian prime ministers.

⁹⁵ Crapis, *Il figurifero del cervello*, 88–91 and Ortoleva, *Un Ventennio a colori*, 67. The long debate on colour TV – which lasted almost fifteen years – is summarised in Gloria Gabrielli, 'L'introduzione della televisione a colori in Italia: 1962–1977', in Piero Melograni (ed.) *La paura della modernità. Opposizioni e resistenze allo sviluppo industriale* (Rome: Cedis, 1987), 67–90. The RAI finally started to broadcast in colour on 1 Feb. 1977.

⁹⁶ Umberto Eco coined the term *neotelevisione* in 1981, to describe the unbroken and chaotic stream of TV shows being broadcast by private television. These were building a new relationship with the viewer and ultimately shaping a new kind of citizen. Umberto Eco, 'A Guide to the Neo-television of the 1980s', in Z. G. Barański and R. Lumley, eds., *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy. Essays on Mass and Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 245–55. On *neotelevisione* see also M. W. Bruno, *Neotelevisione. Dalle comunicazioni di massa alla massa di comunicazioni* (Rubbettino: Soveria Mannelli, 1999).

⁹⁷ Anania, *Breve storia della radio*, 97.

⁹⁸ For an analysis of this phenomenon see E. Novelli, *La turbopolitica. Sessant'anni di comunicazione politica e di scena pubblica in Italia 1945–2005* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), 175–6.

⁹⁹ There were exceptions. For example, in 1983, the then director of *l'Unità* Alfredo Reichlin warned his comrades that television was not a loudspeaker, which simply amplifies one's voice. The effective use of television required an analysis of its specificities, especially in terms of modes and models of communication. Such an analysis, Reichlin argued, was still lacking within the party. Alfredo Reichlin, 'Società dell'informazione e sinistra: per una nuova cultura politica del cambiamento', in Giorgio Grossi, ed., *Comunicare Politica* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1983), 153.

¹⁰⁰ See the episode reported with great evidence by *l'Unità*, 17 June 1983, 17. Roberto Benigni had also starred in the film comedy *Berlinguer ti voglio bene* (Berlinguer, I Love You), produced in 1977 and directed by Giuseppe Bertolucci, where he played the character of a construction worker who strongly believes in the myth of the communist leader.

It is safe to say that the PCI's media strategy was not informed by a correct reading of the developments that were occurring in Italian society. With Anglo-American neoliberalism emerging, new ideas such as individualism and self-reliance made their way into the hearts and minds of the Italians, changing their perception of the role of political parties vis-à-vis people's desires.¹⁰¹ Many would withdraw into the private sphere in order to satisfy their personal needs, in the safe environment of their individual living space, where a (colour) TV and many channels offered plenty of entertainment. Yet, for many years to come the PCI's television policy remained anchored in the belief that the medium's main purpose was to educate the public and to promote participation and political commitment. The Italian Socialist Party (or, rather, the right-wing side of the PSI) undoubtedly saw more clearly what was coming, which explains why at some point the socialists decided to abandon the rigid defence of the public monopoly over broadcasting.

Contrasting readings of the historical moment Italy was going through ultimately fuelled the notorious political and personal rivalry that opposed PSI leader Craxi to PCI leader Berlinguer. Berlinguer considered the economic crisis that was affecting the country in the 1970s as irrefutable proof of the final crisis of Italian capitalism. Craxi, instead, foresaw the opportunities offered by the incipient post-industrial society to which the current economic crisis was just a prelude. In the words of Donald Sassoon, Berlinguer was a man whose integrity could be 'doubted only by those who had none'.¹⁰² Yet, he was perhaps also a man 'stuck to black and white television', as Craxi put it: namely, a man who lived in the past.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, Berlinguer was willing to acknowledge the errors the PCI had committed with respect to its overall approach to the issue of private broadcasting. In a meeting held shortly after the disappointing election of 1979, the PCI leader made the following claim: 'The most severe self-criticism that we must make concerns our policy on the RAI, and the long time it took us to grasp the importance private radio and television broadcasters were acquiring. We have indeed been very slow in this respect. Our own initiatives in this field, including the attempts to collaborate with non-communist broadcasters, were insufficient; nor have we been sufficiently resolute when campaigning for a regulation of the sector'.¹⁰⁴

The story of the PCI's television adventure reveals how profoundly the party had changed following the creation of the *regioni*. Local branches disregarding the orders from Rome would have been unthinkable in the previous decades, when the party's reins were firmly in the hands of Palmiro Togliatti, a leader formed in the political and cultural climate of the Third International. By the late 1970s, though, traditional party hierarchies had started to crumble, as local branches gained ever more independence from the national directorate. Consequently, they no longer accepted any interference with their programming choices. By contrast, at the local level the party seemed to have understood – far better than the national directorate did – how a local television station was supposed to work, and what its function was. The project of the communist network's regionalisation, in particular, was not only unbearably expensive but also the result of a wrong assessment of people's needs and preferences. As mentioned above, the public was interested either in national or local matters; the regional dimension made no sense from the audience's point of view. This is ultimately why the regional RAI 3 never truly fulfilled the role of local Italy's voice that the 1975 reform had foreseen.¹⁰⁵

While the party's local branches showed a genuine appreciation for the potential of local television, a certain snobbishness with regard to private TV characterised the leadership. Many PCI politicians

¹⁰¹ Simona Colarizi, *Storia politica della Repubblica. Partiti, movimenti e istituzioni* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2016), 321–2.

¹⁰² Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), 590.

¹⁰³ Luciano Cafagna 'Il duello a sinistra negli anni Ottanta', in Gennaro Acquaviva and Marco Gervasoni, eds., *Socialisti e comunisti negli anni di Craxi* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), 120.

¹⁰⁴ See 'I lavori del Cc e della CCC' in *l'Unità*, 4 July 1979, 8.

¹⁰⁵ Enrico Menduni, 'L'altro video. Videodocumentazione e TV via cavo', in Lino Micciché, ed., *Il cinema del riflusso* (Venice: Marsilio, 1997), 58–66, 62–3.

and intellectuals believed that private televisions were negatively contributing to the development of Italian popular culture and to the Italians' education. To them, the daily schedule of private televisions was nothing more than 'a blob of quizzes, astrology, amateurish psychoanalysis, sparse news, and a bunch of music', to quote the words used during a conference on the problems of television the PCI organised in October 1979.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, private television stations were regarded as being responsible for the crisis of Italian cinema, given that they broadcast hundreds of hours of films on a weekly basis, thus stealing potential film-goers away from Italian cinemas, ultimately undermining the national cinema industry.¹⁰⁷

The party's local branches used television to protect the communist subculture as much as possible from the blows of the 1980s' conservative ideological offensive. With regard to the national directorate, its decision to launch a television network testifies to the PCI's desire to keep up with the pace of developments, and that the party was not yet culturally and politically dead. Yet, it did not succeed in radically changing its modes of communication. Clearly, it lacked the business-like mindset that would have allowed the party to navigate through a rapidly changing world.

¹⁰⁶ Carlo Raspollini, 'Radio e Tv locali: elemento centrale della questione in Italia', in Giuseppe Vacca, ed., *Comunicazioni di massa e democrazia* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1980), 104.

¹⁰⁷ Francesco Pinto, 'Cinema e Tv: una integrazione auspicabile', in *ibid.*, 96.