

## Media concentration: the Italian case-study

By Raffaele Mastrodonardo,  
Created 2002-03-14 00:00

On 22 February, after many arduous days of negotiation, the board of directors of Rai (*Radiotelevisione Italiana*), Italy's state-run terrestrial television system, was finally appointed. That day the sixth largest economy of the planet, became an interesting case-study for media scholars and social scientists from all over the world. Italy, in fact, will give them the unique opportunity to investigate 'in the field' the effects on a capitalist democracy of a prime minister with control of the six biggest terrestrial television channels in the country (totaling more than 90% of the national daily audience).

### Berlusconi's handshake

It is widely known that Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's prime minister, is the main shareholder in Mediaset, which operates three out of the country's four private terrestrial television channels. In 2001, they attracted 43.17% of Italian television viewers. Equally widely known is the political use that Berlusconi has made of his channels.

During the 2001 election campaign, for example, Berlusconi was on the screen of Mediaset channels for 1427 minutes, compared to the 887 minutes of Francesco Rutelli, his centre-left opponent (data quoted in G. Pasquino ed., *Dall'Ulivo al governo Berlusconi*, il Mulino, 2002).

The complaisant attitude displayed by Mediaset toward its boss is revealed in another statistic: from 1997 to 1999, Berlusconi appeared on Italian terrestrial television for 6645 minutes, against 2338 minutes for his closest rival (data quoted in G. Sani ed., *Mass media ed elezioni*, il Mulino, 2001). More than 4500 of these minutes were accumulated on Mediaset channels.

The Italian case-study could become even more stimulating for scholars if they take into account that 82% of Italians depend only on television for news, the highest percentage in Europe (data quoted in Pippa Norris, *A virtuous circle*, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

With almost half of the country's television system firmly in his hands, Berlusconi now has the chance to get a solid grip on the rest (which still had 47.25% of the audience in 2001). In Rai's case, though, Berlusconi's 'control' will be more nuanced and multifaceted. This fact is shown by Berlusconi's failure to secure the Rai chairman of his dreams, Carlo Rossella, editor in chief of *Panorama* (a magazine produced by Mondadori, Italy's largest publishing house, owned by – need you ask?).

Instead, the prime minister had to accept Antonio Baldassarre, sponsored by Alleanza Nazionale (the second largest party of the governmental coalition), and that the two Rai directors assigned by the government were from smaller parties of the coalition and not Berlusconi's beloved Forza Italia. This is an example of the constraints to which Berlusconi's control of Rai will be subjected: the allies will use their bargaining power to get the largest possible amount of power in Rai.

## **An end to media pluralism?**

However, the harsh negotiations leading to the agreement on Rai's board, and Berlusconi's disappointment for not having obtained all he wanted, should not mislead us. The new board and its chairman still express the government – of which Berlusconi is the leader, and his party, Forza Italia, is by far the major force. The internal dialectic among the governmental parties may make Berlusconi's ability to use Rai for his own interest less unconstrained; but it by no means erases it.

Moreover, his allies have so far been very loyal to their larger partner each time his interests were at stake. This was seen most vividly last autumn when they all aligned with the leader in voting through a law that will make irrelevant the two criminal trials in which Berlusconi is defendant (on charges of false accounting).

When three out of four major terrestrial television channels belong to Berlusconi, and the other three are full of friends, former employees and men eager not to displease him, there is no need to be cynical in guessing what kind of coverage of the prime minister's judicial problems will be offered to Italians.

But Rai's control game is not confined only to the board of directors. Other aspects of Rai, like its reliance on public money and advertising, are crucial for its major competitor, Berlusconi's Mediaset. Silvio Berlusconi is in a position not only to use Italian state-run television for his political goals, but also to use Rai for the benefit of his own group. As Piero Sansonetti has written, "it is probable that the opposition will be granted some space of information to guarantee in this field a minimum level of pluralism", but it is certain that in Rai "there will be not even a millimeter of economic pluralism" ("TV, il premier punta a tutto", *l'Unità*, 13 February 2002).

### **The left opened the door**

Thus the question of 'who controls Rai?' sheds a brighter light on the relation between Berlusconi's vast business interests and his position as prime minister. Berlusconi kept his promise to solve this 'problem' during the first 100 days of government. The problem is the substance of the solution he came up with.

On 28 February, the lower house of the Italian parliament voted through a 'conflict of interest' bill which passed – after the centre-left opposition walked out of the chamber, so as not to give 'legitimacy to a deceitful law', as its leader Francesco Rutelli said.

The new law makes it impossible for an individual to hold a public office if at the same time he or she is *running* a company or holding some honorary position in it. Crucially, however, the simple *ownership* of a company or of its shares is not enough to make that individual unfit to hold a public office. Therefore, according to the bill, the only thing Berlusconi will have to relinquish is his honorary chairmanship of AC Milan soccer club which he owns. That means he will be able to keep his controlling stake in Mediaset, Mondadori and Mediolanum (the largest financial services group in Italy). This law, as the *Financial Times* said, is 'a fig leaf' ("In Italy's interests", 4 March 2002)

The scholars interested in the Italian case-study will probably have many years at their disposal to investigate the matter and draw their conclusions. And the current state of the Italian institutional left does not leave much hope for a rapid improvement of the situation.

It is true that some signs of awakening have arisen in Italian society, from the anti-neoliberalism movement that was hit so hard by the government's repression last July, to the rallies against

Berlusconi's conflict of interest of recent days. These initiatives and movements have forced an impaired institutional left to find some cohesion and to adopt a more aggressive stance toward Berlusconi.

But the real problem is that in the past few years this parliamentary left has surrendered the terrain of language and ideas to Silvio Berlusconi and his allies. Now, the left has no credible alternative vision of society to oppose to his, and no effective media to articulate one. Our scholars, therefore, can pursue their researches without any need to hurry.

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-globalmediaownership/article\\_54.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-globalmediaownership/article_54.jsp)



Copyright © Raffaele Mastrodonardo, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.