

Paolo Carelli; Anna Sfardini

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EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION GOES DIGITAL

CHILDREN'S TELEVISION AND ITALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Paolo Carelli

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
paolo.carelli@unicatt.it

Anna Sfardini

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore¹
anna.sfardini@unicatt.it

Abstract: Since its origins in the Fifties, Rai has always paid attention to pedagogical aspects of its offer, consistent with its Catholic inspiration, combining different genres and divulgation approaches. In the first years of its history, Italian public television represented a “second school” for different targets, producing iconic titles in learning and training. A particular branch of educational approach to television content has often been represented by the direct involvement of school groups within the programs, in the logic of game and soft competition oriented to the transmission of knowledge. During the Covid-19 pandemic, with the closure of schools and the deployment of distance teaching, Rai recovered its pivotal role in learning practices through TV programs; in a period marked by an increase of television and audiovisual consumption, Italian public service broadcasting played a distinctive role in diversifying learning opportunities of Italian students and adults.

Keywords: Children Television, educational television, Public Service Broadcasting, Italian Television, TV History

1 The Concept of Education in Television Studies

In the field of television studies, the concept of ‘education’ has been widely and variously treated. Since the origins of the medium, this relationship has been investigated and analysed, revealing the urgency, especially on the part of the scholastic and educational communities, to address the emerging language of television.² This is a necessity of a pedagogical nature, a perspective that primarily considers television to be an educational tool and learning resource for use alongside other more traditional agencies of socialization.³ In fact, as observed by Raymond Williams, “television has not attempted to exhaust the teaching process, but has been offered as an aid, in planned relation to other kinds of material.”⁴

In agreement with Moeller,⁵ several reasons for this interest can be identified, ranging from the presence of programmes intended for both children and adult learning to the nature of television as a medium “accessible both in terms of content and technology”⁶ and the development of new technologies that make an interactive and needs-based viewing experience possible. All these elements contribute to outlining a clear picture of the role that television systems as a whole can play in this regard.

As effectively summarised by Rivoltella,⁷ at least two main lines of investigation into the relationship between television and education can be identified: one considers television as a resource for educational interventions, while the other focuses on the idea of television as a tool for teaching and promoting education. The first perspective underlines the fact that television could be taught and explained as if it were a school subject among many other more traditional subjects; the second perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of television as a medium and language able to promote values and to act as a medium that problematizes the questions of life and their pedagogical effects.

In the European context, the birth and development of television have been structured around the notion of ‘public service’ in the wake of a mission that is both political and educational⁸ and which, however, conceals what Williams has always called the “paternalistic model,”⁹ a hierarchical, asymmetrical approach that is “by definition pedagogical, strongly oriented towards its mission.”¹⁰

This article examines the initiatives of the Italian public television service (Rai) during the pandemic emergency in terms of developing an educational project capable of supplementing the traditional educational offering: both during the first lockdown (February-May 2020) and the second period of distance learning, which has characterised, albeit with differences between school levels, a good part of the 2020/21 school year, Rai was able to resume its original mission by building up a range of content aimed at learning across different disciplines, exploiting both linear channels and the on-demand platform RaiPlay. In this sense, Rai has simply added a new chapter to a long history that has been intertwined with school education on more than one occasion.

2 Italian PSB and the Educational Mission from its Origins to Present

The Italian public service broadcasting (PSB) is traditionally linked to the concept of education. From the very beginning Rai’s history was steeped in this pedagogical mission, which has manifested itself both through the production of dedicated programmes and through specific political and management models. The so-called “*Tv delle origini*” (“TV of the origins”, henceforth “early Rai”, 1954–1961) was established based on a prevalently formative and pedagogical intent that did not only manifest in educational programmes, but also more subtly through entertainment content such as quiz shows, dramas (the so-called ‘*sceneggiati*’) and variety shows. Early Rai was controlled by the Christian Democracy party, which had the relative majority. In particular, it was the prime minister Amintore Fanfani, who sensed the importance of television as a “key instrument in a vast plan to educate the masses.”¹¹ It was television that operated under a monopoly regime and that, therefore, saw itself serving as a “second school for everyone, adults or children, without making a distinction,”¹² as well as an agent of linguistic unification in a country characterised by fragmentation and massive use of dialects.¹³ In its children’s programming, early Rai adopted the objective, among others, of “educating while having fun,”¹⁴ conscious of its pedagogical mission in a country still characterised by widespread limited literacy. Under the direction of Ettore Bernabei (1961–1974), an important figure in the consolidation of the public service during the monopoly period, the role of education became even more significant and structured. Starting in 1968, in fact, Bernabei divided the old ‘programme direction’ into two areas¹⁵: one dedicated to entertainment (the so-called *varietà* or variety shows) and one dedicated to education. The latter took on the name of *Direzione centrale programmi culturali e scolastici* (“Central Directorate for Cultural and Scholastic Programmes”) and was in turn subdivided into three areas under the guidance of Fabiano Fabiani: cultural and special programmes, programmes for young people, children, and educational and scholastic programmes.¹⁶ This system

remained in place until the Rai reform of 1975,¹⁷ when content organisation was unified under the Dipartimento Scuola Educazione (DSE), renamed Videosapere in 1995. Two years later, in 1997, Rai Educational was born, a project for promoting culture and knowledge linked to the figure of Renato Parascandolo, who would be its director until 2002. From the beginning, Rai Educational's content was characterised by two main pillars, educational content and history, with two dedicated channels broadcast via satellite: Rai Edu 1 and Rai Edu 2. In 2009, they changed their names to Rai Scuola and Rai Storia respectively, and from 2014 the whole structure took on the current name of Rai Cultura.¹⁸

3 Rai and School: Essential Programmes

While the phases described above illustrate the evolution of the educational and cultural mission of the Italian public service, certain programmes stand out amid Rai's back catalogue, suggesting the potential of this medium to offer itself as a surrogate for the concrete experiences of daily life, in this case school. From the very beginning, in the so-called age of the medium's scarcity,¹⁹ the public service's pedagogical project took concrete form in *Telescuola* ("Tele-school"), an experimental programme (aired from 1958 to 1966) organised with the support of the Ministry of Education: fully fledged vocational training sessions designed for pupils living in areas of Italy with no secondary schools.²⁰ The project was a great success, thanks also to its promotion as "the first training course for television in Europe, the attendance of which allowed students to obtain a valid vocational school diploma."²¹ In 1960 another programme launched that would leave its mark on the history and memory of this early era of television: *Non è mai troppo tardi* ("It's never too late," on air from 1960 to 1968). Presented by the "maestro" Alberto Manzi, it was aimed at illiterate adult Italians and created in the wake of the success of *Telescuola* in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in order to support the process of mass schooling by helping people achieve their elementary school leaving certificate. The programme was adapted to the daily work schedules of its adult audience by airing at 6 pm, and in order to compensate for the lack of television sets in Italian homes at that time, Rai set up 2,000 listening points, which were attended by 57,000 students during the first cycle, and providing learners with a supporting textbook published by Eri, Rai's publishing house.²² Programmes that combine entertainment and education were aimed at younger age groups: an example of this is *Chissà chi lo sa?* (on air from 1961 to 1972), a successful programme that has become an icon of Italian children's television, created by Cino Tortorella²³ in which two teams of seven young people from different Italian provinces compete in quizzes and riddles.



Figure 1. *Chissà chi lo sa?* (Rai, 1961–1972).

During the phase led by Bernabei, television strengthened its mission with *Sapere* (“Knowledge,” on air from 1967 to 1976): under this title, a series of educational programmes were brought together, aimed at providing the adult audience with a permanent educational service (such as the themed episodes dedicated to the planet, energy, health, and great inventions: respectively, *Pianeta Terra*, *Energia*, *Salute*, *Le grandi invenzioni*) and foreign language courses. During the 1970s, thanks also to the second public channel, in 1961, the profile of the programs diversified, sending the educational mission of the public service into new directions. In this context of change on the level of society, culture and the media, the association between television and school dissolved in favour of promoting the medium as the main hub for socialising for Italian families. In the crisis of values that began with the student movements of 1968 and, more generally, among the younger groups of society, it was precisely school and educational models that were being challenged and contested. Attentive also to choices made by competing commercial TV stations, Rai chose to focus on programmes suitable for everyone, disinvesting in its educational role.²⁴ From the mid-seventies, the second channel increased its focus on children and young people as the target audience of programmes geared more towards entertainment, in order to compete with the private and commercial channels that, from the end of the seventies, were proposing attractive imported programmes, primarily Japanese cartoons and American television movies. The long-running programme *Tandem* (Rai 2, on air from 1982 to 1987) is an excellent example of Rai’s desire to adapt to the needs of its young audience of secondary-school students, with two hours of live broadcasting comprising a sequence of games, cartoons, scientific interventions from the Boston MIT and electronic quizzes. The connection with the world of school is represented by the studio audience and the contestants, who were made up of students from the various schools around Italy. From the nineties onwards, television for children and young people was divided between different genres, including the rise of the ‘Teens’ series, both imported and Italian, which featured school more as the theatre in which stories are told than anything else. The educational function in a more markedly scholastic guise survived in those programmes that continued the tradition of hosting competitions between school students, such as *Per un pugno di libri* (“For fistful of books,” Raitre, on air from 2001 to 2020), a variety show with an educational slant aimed at an adolescent audience: in every episode, two teams of students from different geographical areas of Italy would challenge each other in quizzes and games based on knowledge of a classical literary text or contemporary novels. By this point, ‘tele-school’ seemed a thing of the distant past, surpassed by the advent of the internet and, above all, by the fact that the younger generations no longer engage with television, being increasingly attracted by the world of social media.

4 The Pandemic Emergency and the Challenge Faced by Italian PSB

The year 2020 marks a watershed between history ‘before’ and ‘after’ the advent of the pandemic: from science to economics, from the world of production to that of consumption, every field at a global level has experienced a disruptive negative impact, to which we are only beginning to respond two years later. Even the media system, in every country, has seen changes in both production routines and content organisation, and in the role and use of individual media in everyday life. In Italy in particular, during the lockdown of 2020, television, the internet and social networks became indispensable tools for maintaining relationships, both personal and professional, gathering information and sourcing entertainment. The use of the media as a set of necessary tools has driven both the consumption of audiovisual content and the updating and acquisition of media skills among a large segment of the population, moving the clock forward in terms of the structure that our contemporary media system is developing. The prediction of television’s imminent demise has been disproved by the essential role that this ‘old’ mass medium has in fact taken on during the health emergency: television has represented an ‘institutional’ point of reference for audiences, relaying news and speeches by political decision-makers, opinions from the scientific world, and live monitoring of the worsening of the pandemic and restrictive measures. Television has been rekindled in the eyes of media consumers, meeting the need for certain fundamental functions inherent to the medium: ‘accurate’ and certified information versus the world of opinions on the internet; ritualised moments

capable of creating a palpable sense of belonging to an imagined community (“we Italians”), thanks to a widely shared programming schedule (versus the individualised use of the internet)²⁵; and the development and sharing of the story of the pandemic through images and testimonies. The consumption of television, especially news programmes, increased to such a considerable degree that television became a sort of ‘seismograph’ of the pandemic crisis²⁶: in particular, its consumption very closely reflected the progress and development of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, climbing significantly during the most difficult periods, such as March-May 2020 and the autumn of 2020, which were also marked by lockdown measures. The emergency acted as a driving force for television consumption and restored the central role of television in the media system, rekindling old functions that had seemed so long forgotten.

5 Three Examples of Rai’s “Television School” during the Pandemic

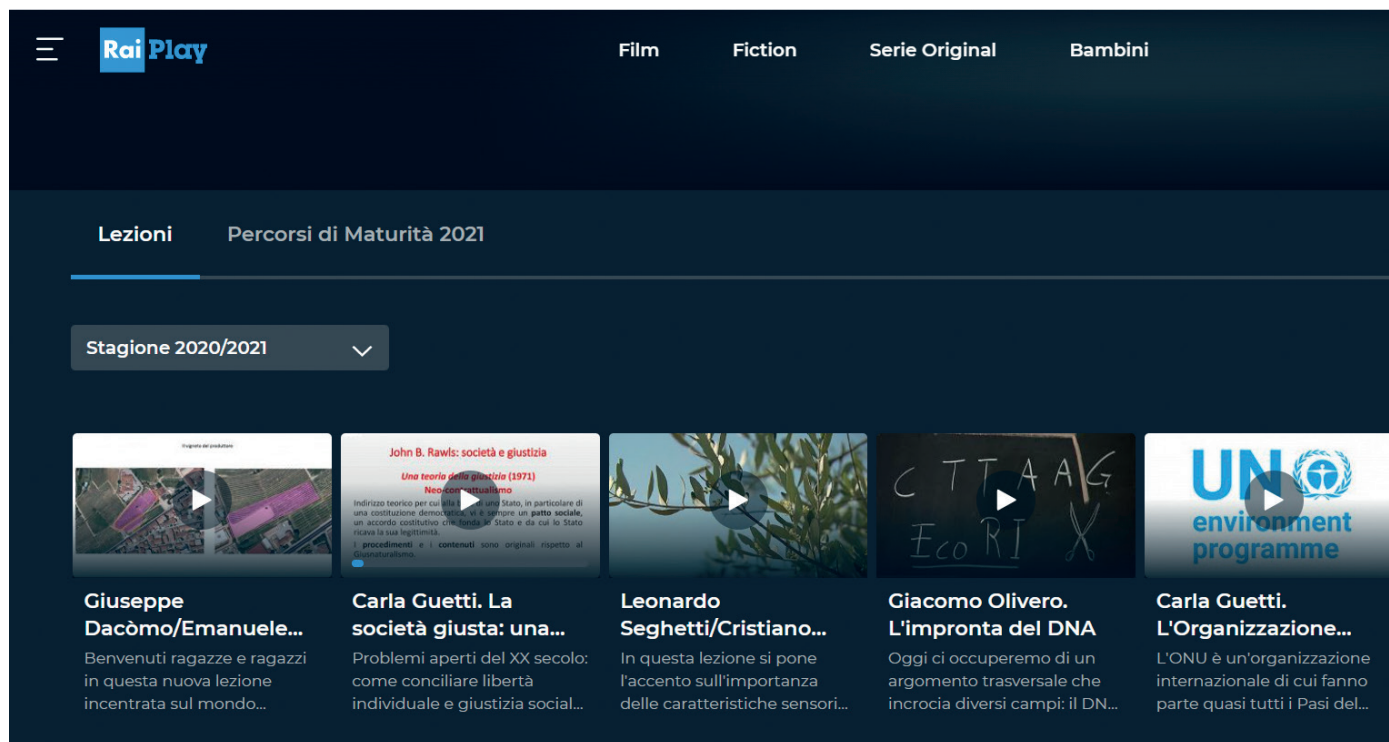
At the beginning of the pandemic emergency in February 2020, with the suspension of teaching activities in Italian schools, Rai entered into an agreement with MIUR (the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research) “with the aim of supporting students in completing the school year and [...] compensating for the lack of in-person attendance.”²⁷ Precisely in the most acute moment of the pandemic, the public service wanted to rekindle its role as a “large school,”²⁸ so frequently adopted throughout its history.

Thanks especially to the on-demand platform RaiPlay, the Italian public service focused the attention of students from various school levels by organising contents under the specific “Learning” section; this served as a depository of materials already available in the broadcaster’s archives, which were supplemented with specific and special original productions that were broadcast on linear channels dedicated to young audiences (Rai YoYo and Rai Gulp) and then added to the available on-demand material. In this sense, RaiPlay has fulfilled the function of television distributed through the internet, as widely theorised by Lotz.²⁹

The content in the “Learning” section was structured around macro-themes such as “History,” “Literature,” “Science,” “Geography,” “English,” “Music and Performing Arts” that directly reflect school subjects and disciplines, as well as other more transversal ones such as “Cyberbullying,” “The mysteries of the universe” and a section dedicated to Dante Alighieri on the 700th anniversary of his death.

In terms of specific educational content, there are various products, each one aimed at different potential targets and each one conveying a specific approach to knowledge and school preparation.³⁰

La scuola in tivù (“School on TV”) is a series of 30-minute lessons, each preceded by a brief introduction by the presenter Anna Pancaldi to help identify the relevant school area and place in the curriculum. The respective teachers are directly recommended by the Ministry of Education. Individual lessons are composed of three units (three approaches or integrated paths) with the support of slides along with other materials and interpretative keys. In April, *La scuola in tivù* was joined by a spin-off, *Percorsi di maturità* (“Secondary-school diploma courses”) designed for students in the final year of secondary school who are taking their final exams,³¹ which, due to the limitations imposed by the measures to contain the pandemic, were being held in a different way from usual. *Percorsi di maturità* does not offer lessons on educational topics, but rather bite-sized “*pillole*” (“pills”) of 15 minutes’ duration that show students how to take the tests within the various educational profiles.

Figure 2. *La scuola in tivù* (RaiPlay).

La banda dei fuoriclasse (literally “The outstanding gang”) is a series that began in April 2020 and covered up to June of the first period of distance learning, before resuming in September when the new school year began. It had a traditional schedule, airing five days a week on linear channels, featuring content designed for two macro-targets: primary-school children (6–11 years) and secondary-school children (11–14 years). Once again, the key figure, the connection, is represented by the presenter Mario Acampa, who introduces the lessons and acts as a ‘mediator’ between content and audience, “facilitating a simpler identification process for younger viewers”³²; the presenter, in fact, often intervenes by engaging the teacher, connected via Skype, with questions and his own curiosity, making the lesson less scholastic in feel and more like standard television programming, whilst also transforming the role of the teacher into what Denicolai calls the “teacher-YouTuber.”³³ Alongside Acampa is an illustrator, Gabriele Pino, who draws conceptual maps relating to the subject matter of the episode; a nod to the aesthetic and semantic universe of the historical Rai programme *Non è mai troppo tardi* and Maestro Alberto Manzi (1960–1968). *La banda dei fuoriclasse* comprises 108 90-minute episodes, available on RaiPlay; as well as these, spin-offs have been created specifically for digital circulation, short *pillole* of about 10 minutes delivering special “Lessons,” and the series *Prepara l’esame con la banda* (“Prepare for your exam with the gang”) dedicated to preparation for the secondary-school exam, as well as a series of lessons in Italian Sign Language for students with hearing disabilities.

A third example of the educational content delivered by the Italian public service broadcasting in the age of the pandemic and distance learning is *Diario di casa* (“Home planner,” on air from April 17, 2020, on Rai YoYo, Rai’s “kids” channel targeting the pre-school audience), which aired daily and was designed “to inform children and families about the coronavirus emergency (...) trying to answer the most frequent questions”³⁴ on the subject. *Diario di casa* was produced with the collaboration of the SPI (Italian Society of Pediatrics) in order to illustrate some daily practices for handling periods of lockdown and trying to fight the spread of the virus. Presented by Armando Traverso with Carolina Benvenga, *Diario di casa* consisted of 136 ten-minute episodes in total (61 in the first phase and another 75 from November 2020), airing until March 12, 2021. The programme ran throughout the various phases of the pandemic, before organising its content for digital platforms in dedicated spaces such as *#unpassofuori* (“A step outside”),

which collates the episodes from the spring of 2020 that were preparing children and families for the summer and the possibility of going out of the house again, and #*andràtuttobene* (“Everything will be alright”), bringing together the first episodes from March 2020.³⁵

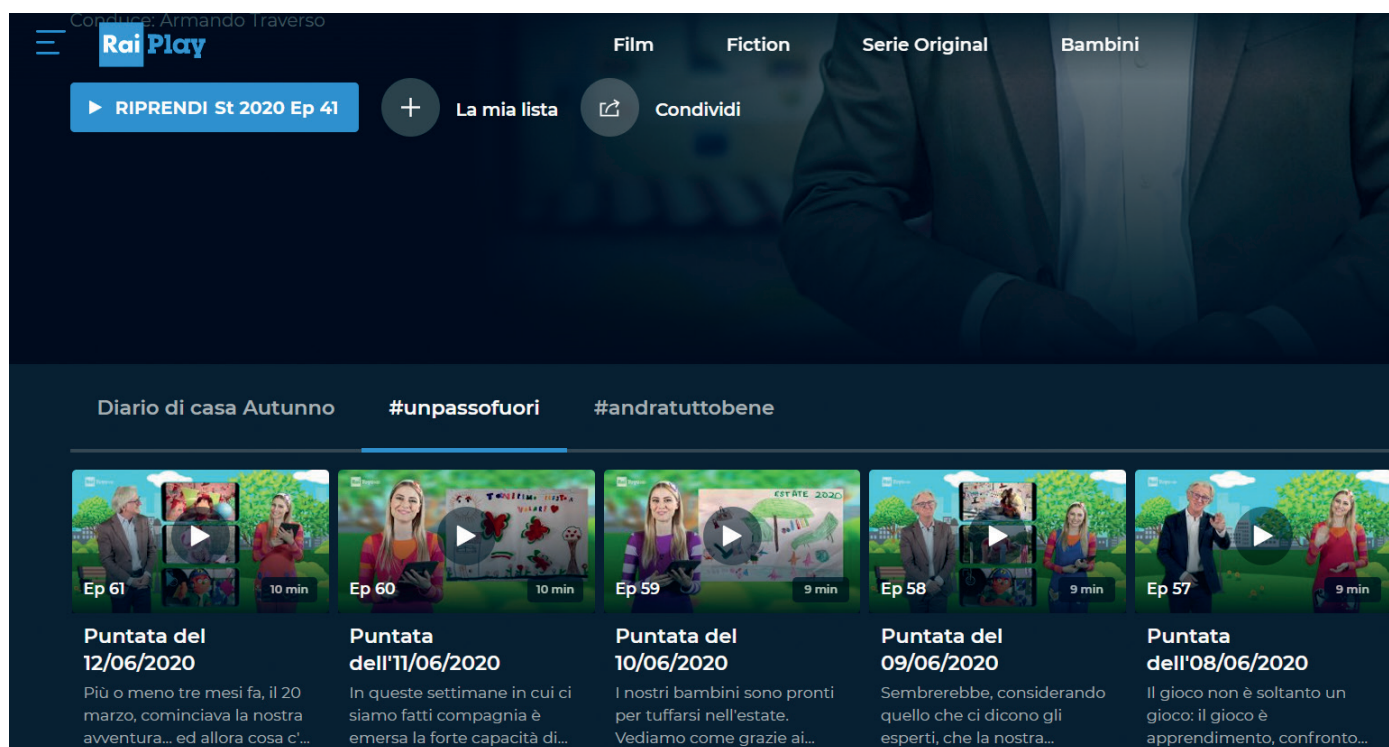


Figure 3. *Diario di casa* (RaiPlay).

6 Conclusions. One-off or “New Deal” for the Public Service Aimed at Children?

The history of Italian television ascribes a specific role to Rai – to educate and entertain its audience, and expose them to culture, which is part of the more general history of the European public broadcasting service.³⁶ The evolution of the media system and the gradual multiplication of platforms, publishers and contents has inevitably modified the function of Rai’s channels over time, limiting their impact on the populace, partly as a result of the gradual “commercialisation” of the principles that govern programming schedule choices, increasingly more restricted by competition with the world of national and international broadcasters. The advent of OTT media services has further personalised consumption choices, increasing the range of content on offer for increasingly fragmented targets in the form of niche audiences. While children’s television has now been dispersed into a variety of platforms, genres and audiovisual products, within which television has a decreasingly central role, ousted by the world of social media and grassroots productions by young, if not very young, users.

However, the extreme situation generated by the pandemic has demonstrated the irreducible role written within the DNA of this medium, which guarantees its survival, if not its continuous transformation to adapt to a society subject to inevitable change. In particular, the emergency has highlighted how television still represents the central medium in the complex ecosystem of contemporary communication, capable of exercising a widespread informative function. Specifically, public service broadcasting, both its generalist content and the new forms made possible by digital

platforms, serves as a compass for the national community, aligning its models for transmitting knowledge and learning with the political-cultural objectives and new consumer behaviours of younger audiences.

Notes

1. The two authors devised and discussed the essay together. Sections 1, 2 and 5 were written by Paolo Carelli, while sections 3, 4 and 6 were written by Anna Sfardini.
2. From this perspective, it is worth mentioning in particular James D. Finn, "Television and Education: A Review of Research," *Audiovisual Communication Review* 1 (1953): 106–126; Robert L. Hilliard, "Television and Education," *The Journal of Higher Education* 29, no. 8 (1958): 431–470.
3. On the concept of television as a learning resource and agent of socialization, see Jack Lyle, "Learning from Television," in *Television and Social Behavior: Television in Day-to-Day Life*, eds. John P. Murray, Eli Abraham Rubinstein, George A. Comstock (Rockville: National Institute of Mental Health, 1972); and the classic Dennis McQuail, *Audience Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997).
4. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 1990/original edition 1974).
5. Babette Moeller, "Learning from Television: A Research Review," *Center for Children Technology Reports* 11, no. 3 (1996).
6. *Ibid.*, 1.
7. Pier Cesare Rivoltella, "I media come ambiente educativo" [The media as educational environment], in *L'esigenza di educare* [The need to educate], ed. Giuseppe Vico (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 2011), 73–83.
8. For a complete and exhaustive survey of the concept of "public service" and its functions in the European context, see Jérôme Bourdon, *Du service public à la télé-réalité. Une histoire des télévisions européennes. 1950–2010* [From Public Service Broadcasting to reality TV. A History of European television. 1950–2010] (Bry-sur-Marne: INA Éditions, 2010).
9. Raymond Williams speaks of a "paternalistic model" with respect to the British public service of the first decades, defining it as "an authoritarian system with a conscience." See Raymond Williams, *Communications and Community* (London: Bredford, 1961), 24.
10. Massimo Scaglioni, *Il servizio pubblico. Morte o rinascita della Rai?* [Public Service Broadcasting. Death or rebirth of Rai?] (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 2016), 35.
11. Bourdon, *Du service public à la télé-réalité*, 30.
12. Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, *Che cos'è la televisione. Il piccolo schermo fra cultura e società: i generi, l'industria, il pubblico* [What is Television] (Milan: Garzanti, 2003), 208.
13. On the role of television in the linguistic and cultural unification of the Italian population, see, among others, Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia repubblicana dal 1946 ai nostri giorni* [Linguistic History of Republican Italy from 1946 to the present day] (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2014).
14. Grasso and Scaglioni, *Che cos'è la televisione*, 207.
15. In addition, the Direzione centrale servizi giornalistici [Central Directorate for News Services] was established, dedicated to providing information and news.
16. On the structure and organisation of the content directorates under Bernabei's leadership, see Enzo Scotto Lavina, *Il cantiere televisivo italiano* [Italian Television Worksite] (Milan: Lampi di stampa, 2015).
17. Law 103/75 reforming the Italian public service reaffirmed Rai's monopoly and shifted control of the public service from the government to parliament.
18. In addition to Rai Scuola and Rai Storia, Rai Cultura also includes Rai 5, a channel dedicated to art, music, theatre and documentaries.
19. John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996).
20. Teleschool became a real unified middle school course proving to be a valuable tool for teacher training as well. See Aldo Grasso, *Storia critica della televisione italiana* [Critical History of Italian Television] (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2019), 164.
21. Anonymous, "Il 1959 della tv" [TV in 1959], in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4 January 1959.
22. Grasso, *Storia critica della televisione italiana*, 202.
23. The image of Cino Tortorella, an Italian author and television presenter, is linked to the *Zecchino d'Oro* ("Gold Coin"), a singing event for children that he conducted for 50 years, from 1959 to 2008, in the role of the Mago Zurli. See Marina D'Amato, *La Tv dei ragazzi. Storia, miti, eroi* [Kids TV. History, myths, heroes] (Rai VQPT n. 187, Rai Eri: Rome 2002).
24. *Ibid.*, 33.
25. Massimo Scaglioni and Anna Sfardini, "Political Publics: La TV ai tempi del Covid-19. Cosa è cambiato?" [Political Publics: TV in the age of Covid-19. What has changed?], *ComPol Comunicazione Politica* 21, no. 2 (2020): 317–320.
26. Massimo Scaglioni, "Il virus sullo schermo. Il 'sismografo' televisivo e la mediazione della crisi" [Virus on the screen. Television 'seismograph' and the mediation of the crisis], in *L'altro virus. Comunicazione e disinformazione al tempo del*

- Covid-19* [The other virus. Communication and disinformation in the age of Covid-19], eds. Marianna Sala and Massimo Scaglioni (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2020), 17–29.
27. Lorenzo Denicolai, “Learning by Watching with Televised School: How the Italian Broadcaster Rai has supported students during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Comunicazioni Sociali*, no. 2 (2021): 244.
 28. Luciano Di Mele – Erica Della Valle, “La Tv educativa al tempo del COVID-19. Analisi del programma RAI ‘Diario di casa’” [Educational TV in the age of Covid-19. Analysis of Rai’s “Diario di casa”], *Media Education* 11, no. 2 (2020): 137–148.
 29. On the concept of network-distributed television, we refer, in particular, to Amanda Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).
 30. Besides the cases we mention in this article, we couldn’t forget the program *Maestri* (“Teachers”), another product rose from the synergy between PSB and Ministry, but not conceived for specific school groups; it is a program, aired on generalist channel Raitre, with single popular lessons on various arguments.
 31. The term “*maturità*” in Italy refers to the final exam of secondary school that prepares students either for work or university education.
 32. Denicolai, “Learning by Watching with Televised School,” 245.
 33. Ibid, 247.
 34. Di Mele & Della Valle, “La Tv educativa ai tempi del Covid-19,” 140.
 35. Besides their digital packaging and offer, the three programs here analyzed are interesting also for their linear audiences. *Diario di casa* reached 1,10% share, with a specific 4,95% share on 4–14 target in season 2020/21, in line with average ratings of the channel Rai YoYo; *La banda dei fuoriclasse* performed well in the first phase of pandemic and lockdown, with 2,60% share in April 2020 and 1,83% in May 2020, in line with average ratings of the channel Rai Gulp in that period. No ratings are available for *La scuola in tivù*.
 36. Bourdon, *Du service public à la télé-réalité*.

Biographies

Paolo Carelli (PhD) is Assistant Professor at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan and Brescia, where he teaches Media Theory and Broadcasting History and Languages. He is Senior Researcher at Ce.R.T.A. (Research Centre on Television and Audiovisual Products) and didactic coordinator of Master “Fare TV. Gestione, Sviluppo, Comunicazione.” He has published several articles on international journals and the books *Confini mobili. I sistemi mediatici nazionali tra globalizzazione e digitalizzazione* (2013) and *Il passaggio al 5G e gli effetti sul sistema radio-televisivo locale* Rubbettino, 2020, with A. Sfondini).

Anna Sfondini (PhD) is Assistant Professor at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan) where she teaches “Intercultural Communication” and “Research Methods on Media Production and Consumption.” She is Senior Researcher at Ce.R.T.A. (Research Centre on Television and Audiovisual Products) and didactic director of the Master “Fare Tv. Gestione, Sviluppo Comunicazione.” Her principal field is media and television studies with a focus on media convergence, audiences, Tv genres, mediatization of politics, tv for women and for kids. She is the author of several papers and books including *Reality Tv* (Unicopli, Milano 2009), *La tv delle donne. Brand, programmi e pubblici*, Milano, Unicopli 2015, with C. Penati), *La politica pop* (Il Mulino, Bologna 2009 with G. Mazzoleni), *La televisione. Modelli teorici e percorsi di analisi* (Carocci, Roma, 2017, with M. Scaglioni).