

## TV GOES SOCIAL

### ITALIAN BROADCASTING STRATEGIES AND THE CHALLENGES OF CONVERGENCE

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the Italian television scenario has become fully convergent, and social TV is an activity – and a hip buzzword – indicating both a rich set of possibilities for the audience to engage with TV shows, and an important asset developed by the television industry to provide such engagement, with promotional and economic goals. Mainly adopting the perspective of the production cultures of Italian broadcasters, the essay will explore the “Italian way to social television”, highlighting the strategies adopted by networks and production companies to encourage online television discourse and to exploit it as a content, a marketing device or a source of supplementary income.

**Keywords:** convergence, social TV, second screen, social media, television industry, Italian television

#### 1 Introduction. Extension, Access, Brand: Three Keywords of Convergent TV

The first decade of the 2000s can be considered an ‘explosive period’ for media and television<sup>2</sup>, in Italy as in many other European countries. The completion of the switch-off process in 2012, leading to the establishment of digital terrestrial

<sup>1</sup> This essay was conceived jointly by the two authors. As for the actual writing, Luca Barra is responsible for sections 2, 5 and 6; Massimo Scaglioni, for sections 1, 3 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> Massimo Scaglioni, *La tv dopo la tv. Il decennio che ha cambiato la televisione*, Vita e Pensiero, 2011. See also Peppino Ortoleva, *Il secolo dei media. Riti, abitudini, mitologie*, il Saggiatore, 2009.

television as the universal distribution platform for broadcasting (and, consequently, a multichannel environment), the enrichment of the pay-television and on-demand, non-linear offering, plus the many other challenges imposed by digitization on other media, have brought about a fully convergent ecosystem. In line with the historical periodization proposed by John Ellis, television has definitely entered its 'age of plenty.'<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, as Henry Jenkins has clearly shown,<sup>4</sup> the process of media convergence cannot be regarded as a merely technological mutation but rather as a complex phenomenon encompassing major changes in consumption practices, in textual features and in the industrial strategies of broadcasters and production companies aimed at finding new ways to adapt to and exploit this very different scenario. To fully conceptualize 'convergent television,' therefore requires a complex approach: an analytic framework to connect television's different interrelated dimensions and illuminate how they are changing. In particular, it demands a point of view able to deal with TV's current features and their constraints, with the diversity and complexity of viewing and production practices, and not only with the changing but also the traditional practices of the TV industry and TV consumption.

In the renewed convergent television system, three important concepts emerge that help in developing a framework of analysis.<sup>5</sup> The first keyword is 'extension.' The proliferation of screens and texts is deeply connected to the multiplicity and variety of consumption practices and to the need for 'touchpoints' capable of connecting TV content and viewers.<sup>6</sup> As a result, contemporary television texts are no longer 'just texts' with clear borders; instead, they become a complex network of textualities, produced partly by broadcasters and production companies, partly by the audience itself, as grassroots remixed material. TV shows become transmedia narratives,<sup>7</sup> with a variety of ancillary text including diegetic extensions, narrative addenda such as webisodes, and merchandising goods, as well as websites, apps and social-media outlets devoted to developing and sustaining several opportunities for interaction. An extended ecosystem like this is fuelled not only by top-down and bottom-up forces, as Jenkins outlines, but also by the different players operating in a burgeoning globalized media scenario.

A second, essential concept for understanding convergent television is 'access.' As digital platforms proliferate, audiences gain a greater variety of more complex ways to select and watch TV shows. Not only is there a strong distinction between legal and illegal routes (e.g. streaming and downloading) but new synchronicities also arise: access to television content is less managed directly by broadcasters and more affected by technological and socio-economic factors, such as: devices, platforms (including on-demand services) and knowledge of them, or the social groups that the audience belongs to (family, friends, pairs, colleagues, etc.).

The third keyword of the convergent television environment is 'branding.' Since audiences are becoming increasingly fragmented and consumers' habits and practices more and more diverse, broadcasters tend to build identifiable and effective brands<sup>8</sup> for both TV products and networks. Their aim is to restore order in a confused scenario, to establish themselves against the competition, to catch the viewers' (fleeting) attention, and to make their programmes and channels part of habitual viewing. Through brand-building, broadcasters can activate discourses and generate communities while promoting their products and channels and even making additional profits with branded extensions.

3 John Ellis, *Seeing Things. Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, I.B. Tauris, 1999.

4 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, NYU Press, 2006; Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media. Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, NYU Press, 2013.

5 Luca Barra, Cecilia Penati and Massimo Scaglioni, 'Estensione, accesso, brand. Le tre dimensioni della televisione convergente', in Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca/RTI, 2010, pp. 21–31.

6 Ivan D. Askwith, *Television 2.0. Reconceptualizing TV as an Engagement Medium*, MS thesis, MIT, 2007. See also Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising. Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, NYU Press, 2013; Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately. Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, NYU Press, 2010.

7 On transmedia storytelling, see also M.J. Clarke, *Transmedia Television. New Trends in Network Serial Production*, Bloomsbury, 2013; Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television. Audiences, New Media, and Daily Life*, Routledge, 2011; Indrek Ibrus, Carlos A. Scolari, eds., *Crossmedia Innovations. Texts, Markets, Institutions*, Peter Lang, 2012.

8 Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television*, Routledge, 2012. On the Italian context, see also Alberto Mattiacci and Alessandro Miliati, *Tv Brand. La rivoluzione del marketing televisivo*, Lupetti, 2011.

Through the particular perspective of these three keywords, it is easy to see how television broadcasters have become multimedia players devoted to expanding their content well beyond the medium's traditional limits and how they are following consumers' practices while anticipating or actively stimulating them. Yet clearly, so-called 'social TV'<sup>9</sup> is just one of the activities – and one of the hip contemporary buzzwords – that fall under the convergent-television umbrella. It indicates both a rich set of possibilities for viewers to engage with their favourite shows and an important asset that the television and media industry is increasingly developing and sustaining to provide such engagement, for promotional and economic ends. Social TV expands the textual narrative through ancillary texts, both industry-controlled and grassroots; it allows for the reduction of the multiplicity of access, establishing the 'correct' time to see the programme; finally, it helps in reinforcing the editorial and promotional identities of both programmes and networks.

This essay, then, analyses the strategies that Italian television broadcasters and production companies have developed in recent years in their approach to social television and the second screen, always keeping in mind that these choices are deeply grounded in the wider scenario of convergent television practices. Adopting the special perspective of industry professionals' production and distribution cultures,<sup>10</sup> and focusing on a swift analysis of some specific case histories, it is possible to find several shared goals and strategies emerging as the main paths travelled by the Italian networks, engaging in different ways with extensions, access and brands. Although full of mistakes, ingenuousness and naiveté, their trial-and-error approach was eventually able to establish best practices, professional routines and, in general, the importance of social TV as a fundamental part of production and consumption practices for most programmes, across different genres. Building on the results of a six-year study on the broadcasting strategies and audience practices of Italian convergent television (that included a range of different methodologies such as desk analysis, virtual ethnography, in-depth group and single interviews, focus groups and expert panels),<sup>11</sup> and then scrutinizing these specific aspects through textual and contextual analysis, systemic data, and some informal interviews with industry professionals, some initial results on the 'Italian way to social television' will be established, along with some of the challenges that still remain for broadcasting and production companies.

## 2 Building the Television Event

After an initial experimental phase, with the networks taking sceptical and often contradictory views of fandom activities and online grassroots commentary in forums and blogs, Italian broadcasters are now increasingly amenable. They are adopting and developing complex 'social-television strategies' to engage properly with their audience, to complete the programme (and the channel) experience with social-networking sites and technological devices used as 'second screens,' and to better fit into a novel convergent environment. No longer afraid of the internet or willing to participate desultorily in these new parts of the television experience, broadcasters have honed their tools, strategies and tactics, forming specialized teams and carefully connecting the television and social experiences – not without some mistakes along the way. In particular, a set of four clear goals and objectives has emerged, allowing the TV and media industry to adopt social TV as a new tool within a wider set of practices, routines and traditions.

The primary aim of Italian broadcasters approaching social television is to construct and build, over time, a programme that viewers can consider an event,<sup>12</sup> a date not to be missed. In a television arena crowded with channels, brands and non-linear services, it is as important for mainstream networks as it is for thematic channels to grab viewers' attention and to make an individual piece of content stand out from the blurred background of all the other programmes, whether

9 Mike Proulx and Stacey Shepatin, *Social TV*, Wiley, 2012. On the Italian context, see also Alberto Marinelli and Giandomenico Celata, eds., *Connecting Television. La televisione al tempo di internet*, Guerini, 2012; Gianpaolo Colletti and Andrea Materia, *Social TV. Guida alla nuova tv nell'era di Facebook e Twitter*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 2012; Marta Perego, *Social TV*, 40k, 2014.

10 John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture. Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Duke, 2008. See also Mark Deuze, *Media Work*, Polity, 2007; David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, Sage, 2007.

11 Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca/RTI, 2010; Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, 'Risalite e discese. Le trasformazioni dei percorsi degli spettatori nell'ecosistema mediale', in Claudio Bioni and Veronica Innocenti, eds., *Media Mutations. Gli ecosistemi narrativi nello scenario mediale contemporaneo. Spazi, modelli, usi sociali*, Mucchi, 2013, pp. 165–174.

12 The definition of "media event" is taken (and expanded) from Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's classic *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History*, Harvard University Press, 1992.

for one-shot events or serial programming. In addition, creating hype and buzz around a TV programme can transform it into a ritual for a community of viewers<sup>13</sup> watching (and commenting on) the same text at the same time and can thus (hopefully) boost the ratings.

Two examples from the 2013–14 Italian television season illustrate the various ways that different networks adopt to achieve this goal. *In questa notte fantastica*. #lorenzoneglistadi was a special show broadcast by Italy's main PSB channel, Raiuno, at the beginning of the television year (2 September 2013). It was a pop-rock documentary following the live concerts of Jovanotti (Lorenzo Cherubini, one of Italy's most famous singers) across the country, featuring performances centred on his popular songs, backstage and rehearsal footage, and various guests. In an attempt by the network to involve younger demographics, the show was heavily promoted on social media, with a campaign mimicking grassroots forms yet involving many music and television stars. First of all, the actual programme was first announced on Twitter, with a message by Jovanotti on his much-followed official account a month before the airing, with immediate confirmation from Raiuno channel manager Giancarlo Leone (together with comments by Raitre channel manager Andrea Vianello) on the same medium. Secondly, the programme title included its own hashtag, officially establishing the 'right way' to engage with the show as well as trying to appeal to a modern younger audience. Even after the airing of the show and its not-so-brilliant results in the ratings – with only 2,946,000 viewers, and a 13.98% share, a far cry from the network's biggest successes – Jovanotti gave feedback to his fans and followers online, this time using Facebook for a longer thank-you note.



Fig. 1 The programme promo of *In questa notte fantastica*, including the official hashtag.

This online promotion's main thrust, intended to create attention and buzz across the internet and on more traditional media, such as press, radio and TV itself, comprised a series of videos. Jokingly called 'unauthorized promos,' they were made by the stars involved and were spread on YouTube. Jovanotti himself started the trend. He filmed some 'amateur-like' clips with his mobile phone in various formats (backstage footage, scenes from the stadiums and the editing room, improvised poetry about the programme, spoofs and parodies of other promos), in an effort to push the event in a sort of viral campaign. The template was clearly Fiorello, an Italian showman/comedian who has started to experiment with online broadcasting, through original clips and *L'edicola* ('The news stand'), an occasional online morning show commenting on and mildly satirizing the newspapers and the news. After a few days, Fiorello jumped in and helped his friend Jovanotti with another 'unauthorized promo,' recorded from a beach and with his daughter's voice off screen, aired on Fiorello's YouTube channel.

That was just the beginning. Fiorello involved other Italian celebrities like comedian Luciana Littizzetto, or pop group Ricchi e Poveri in making other promos for the programme.

<sup>13</sup> An "imagined community", according to the classic definition in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1982.





Video 1. Click [here](#) to watch it.  
Fiorello's 'unauthorized promo' for Jovanotti

In a process of direct imitation and in a bandwagon effect, other mainstream television stars began to record their own 'unauthorized' videos, this time published on official Rai accounts and with a more 'institutional' approach. Hosts and



Video 2. Click [here](#) to watch it.  
Luciana Littizzetto's promo for Jovanotti

other mainstays of Raiuno programming, such as Terence Hill, Fabio Fazio, Carlo Conti, Flavio Insinna, Paola Perego and Milly Carlucci were involved, in what soon became a 'who's who' of mainstream television and a way to reinforce the corporate image of Rai and the Raiuno channel brand with a 'team' of celebrities. On one hand then, the campaign featured a recurrent 'grassroots flavour' from the amateur nature of the videos, with holiday locations, slip-ups and a general YouTube aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> On the other, it established itself from the outset as a celebrity-driven (and broadcasting-driven) form of viral promotion, exploiting bottom-up practices by opinion leaders and industry officials.

Another example is Real Time, a digital channel by Discovery Networks available on both free-to-air and pay television, which developed social strategies directly through its marketing departments for its baking talent show *Bake Off Italia*. *Dolci in forno*, the Italian version of the UK format *The Great Bake Off*. To launch the first episode (broadcast on 29 November 2013), they developed an integrated communication campaign involving the media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television), special partnerships, outdoor advertising (including special bus shelters with old factory billboards emanating the aroma of cookies), and a special focus on social-television outlets and user practices. The first tool was a second-screen app with special recipes and a photo competition (nicknamed 'Bakestagram').



Fig. 2 The *Bake Off Italia* official app.

A second strand entailed carefully planned activities on social-networking sites, including the development of official Facebook and Twitter accounts and buying sponsored spaces. To engage viewers, to boost their digital involvement, and to create buzz around the new show, however, the most powerful gimmick involved placing a series of 'hashtag machines' in the central train stations in Milan and Rome on the day of the first episode. Users who locate themselves near these machines and posted a message on Facebook or Twitter with the correct hashtag #bakeoffitalia would automatically receive a branded cookie. Here, the social-TV practices are engineered and stimulated by top-down dynamics, directly controlled (and heavily funded) by the broadcaster to underline the programme's originality as well as the innovativeness of its communications. This kind of experiential marketing, bridging digital outlets and real-life events, in some ways forces the viewer into a quasi-Pavlovian reaction. But it also helps to firmly establish the official

<sup>14</sup> Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Polity, 2009; Peppino Ortoleva, 'YouTube e l'iconosfera online', in Roberto Diodato and Antonio Somaini, eds., *Estetica dei media*, Il Mulino, 2011, pp. 295–312.

hashtag and, above all, to 'break the ice' in an 'ongoing conversation' on social networks and through the app, which can (and indeed will) continue during the subsequent episodes and weeks.

### 3 Building 'Coolness'

A second strategy, and a second goal for the broadcasters that clearly emerges from research on Italy's social-television experiment relates less to the timing of TV events and to the creation of an unmissable occasion and more to the public's perception of TV content. While the first strategy creates the hype, this one maintains it through the episodes and the seasons. Network television is traditionally perceived as 'low culture,' an everyday, light pastime devoid of value or 'aura.' Yet the birth of 'quality television,'<sup>15</sup> the proliferation of channels and the advance of pay-television services have afforded a new 'premium' value to selected TV programmes, spreading the idea that certain particularly valuable products and genres (live sports, original TV series and productions, etc.) are worth watching and even justify paying the subscription on their own. In this new context, social-TV practices are a particularly effective way to build the 'coolness' for specific TV programmes, to make their brand 'shine.'<sup>16</sup>

*X Factor* is an internationally known UK television format, sold and adapted in more than forty countries worldwide. The Italian adaptation is a particularly interesting case. Created in 2008 for Raidue, the PSB's second channel<sup>17</sup>, it moved to pay TV on Sky Italia from season five (in 2011), becoming one of flagship channel Sky Uno's most expensive entertainment productions. While the transition from free-to-air to pay television has not significantly altered the product's main features, one aspect had to change: the programme, and its brand, had to be re-imagined and relaunched to give the product new life. Promotion and marketing are fundamental tools for Sky Italia to keep its subscribers while attracting



Fig. 3 The *X Factor Italia* official app.

15 The concept, also applicable to non-fiction programming, is analyzed by Kim Akass and Janet McCabe in *Quality TV. Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, I.B. Tauris, 2007.

16 Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, 'Produzione convergente. Dieci regole per il broadcaster', in Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca/RTI, 2010, pp. 45–47.

17 Luca Barra, 'X Factor', in Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca/RTI, 2010, pp. 135–145.

potential customers ('prospects'), and *X Factor* has become a byword for good-quality entertainment. It exemplifies an effective synergy between the television and music businesses, a talent show in contrast to the same old 'useless' reality shows (like *Big Brother*). In this context, the adoption of a complex, fully developed strategy for social-media use during *X Factor* airings on Sky has helped to attract, involve and retain a young, well-educated audience and, more generally, to radically change the common perception of the show, transforming it into a 'cool' programme worth spending time on and talking about. During four seasons (2011–14), a whole range of ancillary extensions and spin-off products for *X Factor* have sprung up, giving viewers and fans a wealth of second-screen extras.

A free official app, especially designed for the programme, was launched on the most important online stores. It encapsulates many functions and provides the audience with an 'essential' second screen for an outstanding experience, with news on the show, original backstage photo sets, and videos taken from the live show and the rehearsals. Furthermore, the application allows users to vote for their favourite performers during each session, free of charge, substituting more traditional forms of tele-voting, such as phone calls and SMS. The app has even given a new life to one of the most classic tools of television audience involvement – the *applausometro* (clap-o-meter), with a feature to capture data (measured second by second) on the acts that the viewers like or dislike.



Fig. 4 The applausometro.

Another staple used to carefully build the programme's 'coolness' was Twitter. An official account with a social-media team providing content and stimulating discussion constantly reinforced the already strong grassroots buzz about the show. One important feature was the ability to involve numerous opinion leaders – celebrities, journalists, radio and television hosts, even webstars – who follow the programme, tweet about it and thus help to spread the idea that *X Factor* is essential viewing if you want to be up with the latest trends and fads. This two-pronged model – with the carefully designed official app and the live discussion, mainly triggered (and controlled) on Twitter – has proved so successful that it has been adopted, with minor changes, for another Sky Italia original production, the Italian version of *Masterchef* (2012–14), first aired on its free-to-air channel Cielo and then, again, on Sky Uno. Both examples show how social media and second screen can become crucial tools for expanding a programme's touchpoints according to the product and network brands' needs. Careful, constant cultivation of these online strategies can help to construct (or reconstruct) a show's image, with contextual elements that must be coherent with the text's inner quality, and also to maintain it over time as the show develops and builds to its finale and while it is on hiatus as well.



## 4 Passionate Involvement and Fandom

The third strategy and goal, from the broadcaster's viewpoint, is strictly tied to the opportunity to build – or exploit, where already present – passionate involvement, and sometimes even fandom,<sup>18</sup> among the audience. Here, the networks can reach established interest groups and fan communities, involve them in the programme, follow their passions, and persuade them to participate and to contribute (directly or indirectly) to the show. Viewer engagement can be weak or deep,<sup>19</sup> depending on the genre of the show and the rewards provided by the programme. Two important genres where such practices have been particularly well developed in the Italian scenario are political talk shows – with their strange 'fandom' dynamics – and musical events.

With the former, social television becomes a way to attract and visually represent a highly polarized audience. Politics, or 'pop politics' as it has been dubbed,<sup>20</sup> has been one of the most successful genres on Italian television in recent decades. Thus, the involvement of ordinary citizens as talk show spectators, instituting a sort of popular discussion about political issues on the small screen, has been seen as an important opportunity to increase the shows' appeal and to distinguish them from one another. Almost all the main programmes aired both on public-service and on commercial channels (in particular on the independent, non Berlusconi-owned channel La7) have begun to select the most relevant tweets coming from the audience and show them on air: examples include prime-time talk show *Piazzapulita* (La7, 2011–14) and access-prime-time interview programme *Ottoemezzo* (La7, 2001–14). In some cases, like La7's summer programme *In Onda* (2010–14), the hosts bring and show a tablet, directly 'quoting' a selection of tweets in the live broadcast and using them as questions and conversation material. Since Twitter is widely used, some shows have been experimenting with other forms of engagement. To give just one example, *AnnoUno* (La7, 2014), a talk show involving young people, has been designed as a social-TV programme. The studio debate involves ordinary people introduced with their names and a specific hashtag (e.g. "#stoconCecilia", "#stoconCesare"), and the audience can virtually support the different points of view in the discussion by using the hashtags online; at the end of the show, the audience's favourite emerges as the winner.



Fig. 5 Selected tweet at the bottom of the screen in *Piazzapulita*.

18 Massimo Scaglioni, *Tv di culto. La serialità televisiva americana e il suo fandom*, Vita e Pensiero, 2006.

19 Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, 'Consumo convergente. Pratiche, orientamenti e discorsi', in Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca/RTI, 2010, pp. 57–78.

20 Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Anna Sfarini, *Politica pop. Da «Porta a porta» a «L'isola dei famosi»*, Il Mulino, 2009.

Another kind of passionate involvement that the broadcasters try to sustain, develop and channel towards their programmes is the relationship between music stars and their fandom communities. A good example is the long-running MTV Italia channel, and especially the experience of *MTV Awards Italy*, which in 2013 and 2014 have replaced the 'traditional' *TRL Awards*. In both years, this annual ceremony with prizes and showcases has been set in Florence, first in Piazzale Michelangelo and then in Parco delle Cascine, before a large live audience. This direct engagement of the 'real' audience in the show has been mirrored in digital social interactions, as the event has been a fixture among the trending topics and online discussions (in 2013, 34,000 different users wrote 630,000 tweets just during the live show). To achieve this goal, the programme itself is built around several 'digital moments.' There are prize categories directly involving fandom communities (and self-reflexively rewarding the fan bases and their stars) and other awards assigned on the simple basis of Twitter voting – for instance, the 'best performance' prize counts the occurrences of special hashtags (constructed to the template #voto[artist's name]MTV) tweeted in the five minutes after each performance happening live on stage.

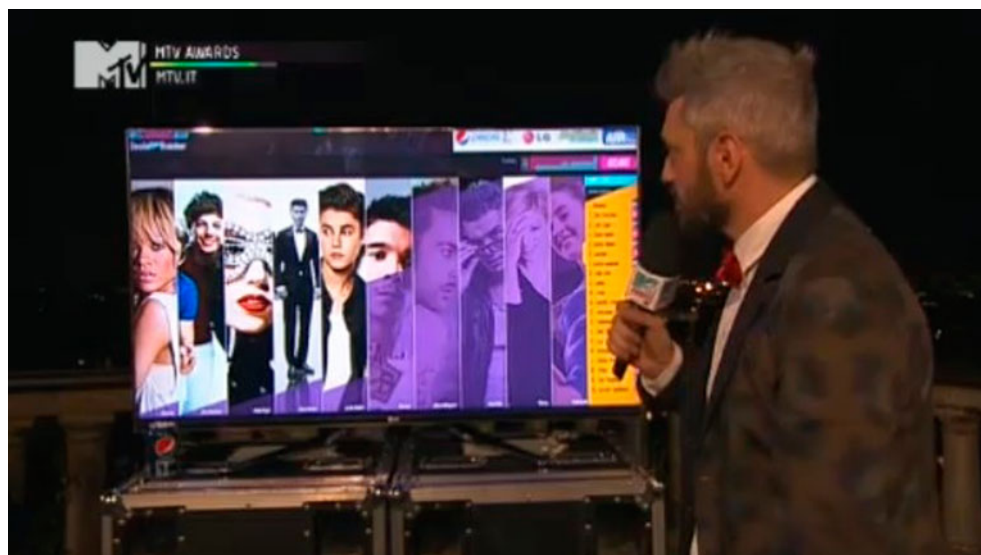


Fig. 6 The Social Tracker commented live at *MTV Awards Italia* 2013.

Another tool used by the broadcaster is the 'Social Tracker.' This is a means of recording all the hashtags used on Twitter during the show and associating them to a singer or band, thus enabling the viewers to see directly what is trending online at any time during the show, by devoting their second screen to the dedicated website (socialtracker.mtv.it). The first and second screens sometimes came together, unusually, as the Social Tracker appeared live during the show, with the host, beside the main stage, commenting on the results and inviting the viewers to participate further by commenting and tweeting 'to help' their favourite artists. In this case, the channel's strategy works in two (apparently opposite) ways. On one hand, it attempts to parasitize an existing online activity by viewers and fans, thus exploiting the long-lasting relationship between stars and their fandom for the sake of a single television event. On the other, however, it also provides rewards (the prizes) and self-reflexive tools (the tracker) that have a direct, often playful, effect on the show's dynamics and are visible on screen, thus empowering the active viewers and stimulating further conversations.

## 5 Irony, Fun and Sarcasm

A fourth strategy adopted by Italian broadcasters trying to find 'their own way' in social television involves humour, irony, sarcasm, and more generally a detached approach towards what is shown on television. In grassroots online communities, a playful, ironic approach to TV texts, characters and narratives is widespread, often in ways running counter to the 'seriousness' of the institutional medium, and broadcasters' online activities have started to use this light

tone, too. 'Lightness' is often the key to achieving a 'different' engagement with an audience that is willing to distance itself from the stereotyped couch potatoes of mainstream television watching. Networks, channels and production professionals must therefore inject online textual extensions with at least some parody, humour or irony, if not also harsh satire.<sup>21</sup> The detached perspective on the programmes brings out different aspects of them and creates a different kind of affection, or at least a specific viewing ritual.

A perfect example of this 'double reading' in the combination of television and second screen, of simple viewing and live participation (or at least lurking) in a broad online conversation, is provided by the Italian edition of *Peking Express*, called *Pechino Express*, broadcast in prime time by the second PSB channel, Raidue. The second season, *Pechino Express. Obiettivo Bangkok*, aired for ten weeks from 8 September 2013, is especially typical. This pre-recorded travel adventure takes couples of famous and non-famous contestants to exotic places to overcome various challenges and to compete against each other for the final prize. It was already widely popular online during its first season, because of its official Facebook and Twitter pages, its official Twitter hashtag clearly shown on screen, and the pivotal efforts of a team of social-media editors in actively stimulating the conversation and engaging viewers.



Fig. 7 The invitation to comment on Twitter during an episode of *Pechino Express*.

However, the second season provided a useful addition to an already complex social television strategy, directly controlled by the programme production team. The new host, Costantino della Gherardesca, a former contestant in series one, played a major role. As the programme was pre-recorded, with all the episodes actually produced months before their airing, della Gherardesca was able to participate actively in the online discussion developing around each episode. For example, he reminded his followers when the programme would start, provided a running commentary on the scenes appearing on air or on the show's characters, and hinted (to a limited extent) at how the plot would develop as it unfolded on screen. Thus, the host can 'watch the show' with their online audience, adopting a completely different tone from the official one conveyed (with few exceptions) in the programme or used on the official Twitter page. Indeed, della Gherardesca chose a sarcastic tenor for his tweets that was perfectly coherent with his public persona, thus engaging directly with the programme with self-reflexive ironies, mocking comments about the contestants, suggestions, and liberal use of fun backstage photos, screenshots, viral images modelled on internet tropes and animated gifs, prepared by the social-media team and ready to be spread online.

The host's active participation in the online discussion is then reinforced by a wide use of retweets, putting individual viewers in the spotlight, and continually 'bouncing' content and comments between the programme's official profile and the host's account. With this strategy, it is the broadcaster that provides the viewers with both a serious and an ironic perspective on *Pechino Express*, a playful show that easily allows both interpretations: the traditional tone shown on air; and a denser, more "complex"<sup>22</sup> reading in a satirical and humorous vein, with the direct participation of stars and

21 Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, 'Produzione convergente. Dieci regole per il broadcaster', in Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca/RTI, 2010, pp. 43–45.

22 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, MediaCommons, 2013. <http://mcpress.media-commons.org/complextelevision/>





Fig. 8 A selection of images posted by Costantino della Gherardesca on Twitter.



producers, not as a substitute for the programme but to accompany and reinforce it. The third season of the show, started 7 September 2014, followed the same strategic guidelines.

Thanks to social-television tools, political programmes and talk shows also allow a more caustic, ironic or (at least) a lighter point of view on the serious topics of the political agenda, government and parliamentary debate, offering a different reading that can engage some if not all viewers. Although the showcase on screen of live tweets often constitutes a mere counterpoint to the programme and its dynamics,<sup>23</sup> in other cases the 'digital pop politics' becomes a vehicle for satire and discussion on television. The best example here is *Gazebo* (2013–14), a late-night politics show from a left-wing perspective, hosted by a brigade of journalists, cartoonists and musicians led by Zoro (Diego Bianchi), a videomaker who started his career publishing powerful online videos about Italian *Big Brother* and the perpetual crisis of the Italian left-wing party. Together with an original reportage on the news of the day, the show's regular slots include playful commentary on the best (and the worst) tweets, Facebook posts, replies, etc. The 'social top 5' segment becomes the perfect place to spotlight the ineptitude of politicians, journalists and other public figures on the social networks, as well as a space for the viewers to appear on air with their recommendations or amusing responses.

Another staple of the programme is a running joke, where 'fake hashtags' are shown at the bottom of the screen. They are not intended to be used (because they are too long, complex or simply wrong); rather, they work as a funny commentary underlining what is happening on screen. Therefore, the programme's relationship with its active viewers becomes complex, with different levels of intensity and the shared assumption that, like politics, social media and their dynamics must also not be taken too seriously.



Video 3. Click [here](#) to watch it.  
The 'social top 5' segment in an episode of *Gazebo*.

23 See Sara Bentivegna, ed., *La politica in 140 caratteri. Twitter e spazio pubblico*, Franco Angeli, 2014; Augusto Valeriani, *Twitter Factor. Come i nuovi media cambiano la politica internazionale*, Laterza, 2011.

## 6 Conclusion. A second Phase and Its New Challenges

The analysis of the four main goals (and subsequent strategies) that Italian broadcasters have followed in recent years to connect with a convergent digital audience and to respond properly to the challenges of social television and second screen, taken together with the individual examples briefly presented, clearly shows how the professional practices of national broadcasters and production companies have improved hugely since an initial phase of hesitant experiments, unmotivated fears and many mistakes. The television and media industry has correctly acknowledged how social and digital media can improve their viewers' experience while strengthening their assets in terms of content, narratives, characters, etc. Those media can expand their textual features (with the modular elements of transmedia storytelling), provide multiple forms of access (with different strings attached) and reinforce their brands (with products becoming franchises and networks increasing their value and guiding role).

Nevertheless, this advanced phase in the development of digital strategies is still largely based on trial and error, which cannot guarantee stable results for television professionals and institutions. Every example provided has great strengths but also various weaknesses.

It is still largely difficult to correctly quantify and to monetize the activity on social media and second screens. Whereas the first rule for a commercial broadcaster is to make money, or at least to recover their outgoings, many professionals admit that social-media strategies still seem to have no clear underlying business model and are unable to provide a proper return on investment. During an economic crisis, this inability to provide clear (and commercially usable) metrics, and/or even a tenuous connection to ratings, could make the difference when deciding whether or not to develop a digital strategy. At present, most of these activities are considered just as a promotional tool, and therefore included in the marketing budget, or as a narrative expansion, directly or indirectly connected to the programmes' editorial and writing staff.

On the other hand, a question of coordination arises from these experiences. Underlying every such venture is the issue of control, both economic and editorial. Some programmes (like *Pechino Express*, *Piazzapulita* or *Gazebo*) develop their digital strategies as part of programme production. Some others (such as *Bake Off Italia* or the *MTV Awards*) strictly connect the programme's image to that of the channel involved. Still others (e.g. *X Factor* or *Masterchef*) have a centralized model where the programme's every decision has to be evaluated by the company, according to their goals. Often, the boundaries are blurred, and there are no clear responsibilities for the content, the actions and the results that follow the social-TV and second-screen strategies. Some actions may be extremely good for the programme but can damage its channel's identity and brand, or vice versa. Indeed, while the definition of a larger 'social TV space' can weaken the tie connecting the shows and their channels, at the same time this relationship (and the awareness of the network) can be reinforced with a proper and coordinated use of extensions and discourses.

In conclusion, the challenges that broadcasters are facing with social television practices are still manifold, on both a commercial and a more creative level. After mimicking grassroots practices and then developing original industrial strategies and tactics, then, some naivety and errors still need to be corrected, or at least mitigated, to better engage and involve the audience. The aim must be not only to exploit these practices and inject them into programmes but also to offer multiple occasions for encounters, playfulness and 'double reading' involving the television texts and characters. Clearly, television's central importance endures online, too, stimulating discussions and setting shared viewing timelines for a partially different audience: as one of the judges jokingly remarked during a press conference for the Italian *X Factor*, "without *X Factor*, that internet everyone is talking about would be empty." Now the next step for broadcasters is to take advantage of this centrality and to manage the 'online space of television' better, to make profits and to improve the quality of programmes and TV viewing.

## Biography

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