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"A Public Service Through a Private TV": Tracing Multidimensional Approaches to Researching Italian Local Television Through the History of TeleRoma56

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Abstract

The (scarce) historiography on the history of Italy's local televisions has largely outlined an adventurous story, often based on anecdotes and hearsay, and predominantly underscoring their evolution from being "free" TV stations to becoming private broadcasters. Whereas both RAI and Mediaset have actively engaged in efforts to systematize their archival collections, the possibility of undertaking an in-depth reconstruction of the history of Italy's hundreds of local TVs is cut short by the lack of reliable sources and limited access to archival resources. The present article moves from these considerations with a dual intention: to complicate common understandings on the commercial evolution of Italy's private television in the course of the 1980s; to propose a multidimensional approach to researching Italy's local TV, combining a variegated ensemble of oral sources, audiovisual material, specialized TV magazines and national newspapers, public and private documents, as well as commercial and political archives. To these ends, the article focuses on the case-study provided by TeleRoma56, that is Rome's first over-the-air TV station. During the 1980s, TeleRoma56 was owned by the Radical Party, consequently operating as a sort of "hybrid" local TV, combining its commercial exigencies with enduring instances of bottom-up political engagement. As a result, its story challenges any linear or easy interpretation of the progressive commercialization of Italian local TV, encouraging to look for unexplored historical trajectories and archival research pathways.

Keywords: Broadcasting privatization; Italian Radical Party; Italian TV; Roman local TVs; Television archives.

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It's the year 1976, new broadcast frequencies are quivering everywhere over the Italian airwaves. A mushrooming of independent radio and TV stations calling for "freedom of information" marked the previous years, pressuring legislators to act on the matter. During the Summer, the Italian Constitutional Court officially sanctions the liberalization of radio and television broadcasting, albeit with a provision of a territorial limit.[1] Tuning to the Milanese "Radio popolare," there is a jingle by famous singer Eugenio Finardi playing. It goes:

> *E se una radio è libera, ma libera veramente,*
> *mi piace anche di più perché libera la mente.*
> *Con la radio si può scrivere, leggere o cucinare:*
> *Non c'è da stare immobili seduti lì a guardare.*
> *E forse è proprio questo che me la fa preferire:*
> *è che con la radio non si smette di pensare...*[2]

> And if a radio is free but really free,
> I like it even better because it frees the mind.
> With the radio on you can write, read, or cook:
> There is no sitting still and watching.
> And maybe that's why I like it better:
> Because with the radio you don't stop thinking...[3]

The lyrics are a celebration of the radio as a bottom-up media instrument of free thinking and political engagement, as opposed to the "sitting still" viewership imposed by the television. The history of Italy's private television is yet to be written. Nonetheless, there is already the feeling that local TVs are going in a different direction compared to free radios.

We fast-forward to 1990. During the Summer, the Italian Parliament passes a law (n. 223/90) sponsored by the Minister of Postal Services and Telecommunications, Oscar Mammì, effectively sanctioning the RAI-Fininvest duopoly over national television broadcasting. In the previous decade, a countless number of private TVs invaded Italians' public imagination, shaping new entertainment languages and communication paradigms. Tuning to the radio, a few months after the Mammì Law, one can hear a new song, jointly performed by Enzo Jannacci and Giorgio Gaber, signaling that the times have changed. It is a parody of that new "strange" Italian family that has gathered around television screens. The refrain goes:

> *Come ti chiami? Da dove chiami?*
> *Ci son per tutti tanti premi*
> *Pronto, pronto, pronto*
> *Tanti gettoni, tanti milioni.*
> *Pronto, pronto, pronto*
> *Con Berlusconi o con la Rai.*[4]

> What's your name? Where do you call from?
> There are many prizes for everyone.
> Hello, hello, hello
> So many tokens, so many millions.
> Hello, hello, hello
> Either with Berlusconi or with Rai.

The two songs, which respectively open and close what can be considered the golden age of Italian local television, provide an effective synthesis of the latter's historical trajectory. As such, they also testify to that process of—borrowing from Stuart Hall—"selective 'canonization' " that the social and public memory around Italy's local television went through (1999: 6). The history of Italian private broadcasting has mostly been

1. Two years earlier, in 1974, the Constitutional Court had already ruled in favor of the liberalization of cable broadcasting, provided that it would be limited to local frequency areas.

2. Eugenio Finardi, *La Radio*. Cramps, 1976.

3. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian to English are mine.

4. Enzo Jannacci and Giorgio Gaber, *La strana famiglia*. DDD, 1991.

envisioned as an adventurous story, largely based on anecdotes, clichés, hearsay, epic and rambling memories (Dotto and Piccinini, 2006). This kind of narrative is consistent with the "Far West" rhetoric that characterized the public representation of the hundreds of local TV stations that emerged all across the peninsula in the course of the 1970s.

Either because of a lack of reliable sources or due to limited access to archival documents, the historiography on Italian television has mainly focused on, alternatively, RAI's public service or, although to a lesser extent, Berlusconi's commercial networks, namely the Fininvest-Mediaset group. The possibility of undertaking an in-depth documented reconstruction of the variegated historical trajectory of Italy's hundreds of local TVs is cut short by the "archival vacuum" (Blasi 2023: 13) faced by television scholars. Only RAI and Mediaset (recently and to a limited degree) have actively engaged in making their historical audiovisual collections available to the public. Public-private efforts to preserve and classify Italian television's archival heritage have thus largely reiterated the long-standing television duopoly or, at best, they have been conditional to proprietary logic. It follows the *de facto* absence of conventional archives referring to the history of minor private TV networks and local TV stations. When it comes to Italian local television, all we are left with are traces.

To compensate for this lack of sources, a joint group of scholars and public officials from Apulia[5] has recently made a public outreach calling for "freedom of archives" (Gervasi and Pellegrino 2023). They have solicited a greater public commitment to mapping, recovering, and safeguarding regional/local television archives, acknowledging the value of informal collections (e.g. those compiled by amateurs) and proposing to leverage local televisions' historical relation with the local press and radio. It goes in this direction the research conducted within the project "ATLas of Local Televisions," which represents the first relevant attempt at tracing the activity and addressing the impact of Italian private/local televisions on the national media environment.[6] Two significant data emerge from these different academic endeavors: the need to rethink the research *of* the archives where to look for sources even before researching sources within the archives; the difficulty of mapping all the hundreds, locally dispersed, television experiences that crossed the country following the rulings of the Constitutional Court in 1974–76. This fragmentation prompts to identify illustrative case studies, pursuing unexplored pathways into the history of Italian local broadcasting from the early 1970s to the early 1990s.

The present article moves from these considerations to cast light on archival routes that trace historical trajectories alternative to the dominant narrative on Italian commercial broadcasting. The goal is dual: to complicate common understandings of how the evolution of Italy's private television intertwined with larger socio-economic, cultural, and political developments affecting Italian society in the course of the 1980s; to propose a multidimensional approach to researching Italy's local TV, combining a variegated ensemble of oral sources, public and private documents, as well as commercial and political archives. I will do so by concentrating on the case study provided by TeleRoma56. This was Rome's first over-the-air TV station, which began its broadcasting in the Summer of 1976, was owned by the Radical Party throughout the 1980s, and is still operative to this day.[7] As a local TV station owned by a political party, TeleRoma56 was, from 1979 to 1995, a sort of "hybrid" local TV, operating in between notions of television broadcasting as a form of public service and the idea that TV programming should meet the public demand for entertainment. Its simultaneously strong relation and distance with Radio Radicale (i.e. the free radio founded and owned by the Radical Party) is a useful litmus test of the divergent trajectories undertaken by free radios and private TVs in the course of the 1980s, while also complicating any dichotomous understanding of such diverging experiences.

5. Apulia stands out in the history of Italian local television as the region that hosted one of the largest and most famous local TV stations in Italy, Telenorba. It was also in Apulia that RAI set up an experimental (short-lived) regional production center as part of the regionalization of its public broadcasting following the creation of its third channel, Raitre, in 1979.

6. The project was funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research. It involved four research units from different universities: The University of Bologna, Sapienza University of Rome, the University of Turin, and the University of Cagliari. See the project's website: https://site.unibo.it/atlas/en/the-project/about (Last accessed: June 2025).

7. TeleRoma56 is today owned by the publishing group headed by the Caltagirone family.

1 Or So the Story Goes

The (scarce) historiography on the history of Italy's local television has largely outlined a linear evolution from being "free" TV stations to becoming private broadcasters, emphasizing their shift—in the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s—from invoking "freedom of antenna" (Scalfari 1972) to heralding the liberalization of the broadcasting market in the name of the audience's right to greater entertainment. According to this perspective, the early emergence of hundreds of local broadcasters, in the first half of the 1970s, can be inscribed within the counter-information push that had characterized the political movements of the previous decade (Sangiovanni 2013). The Italian government's inability, however, to follow up on the 1976 Constitutional rulings with legislation regulating private broadcastings disclosed the underlying contradictions of the liberalization of Italy's mediascape. As early as 1977–78, several TV magazines pointed out the inherent tension between the thrust for a more liberal media system and the need to be competitive within an unregulated television market. As it was noted in the magazine *Millecanali*, in 1977, "such a system inevitably leads toward an oligopolistic setting [...] Under these circumstances, can broadcasters pursuing purely commercial targets still be considered 'local'?" ("Anatomia delle private" 1977: 926). A year later, the TV magazine *TV Sorrisi e Canzoni* similarly pointed out that local televisions could be "either private, or free: whichever, and yet it's not at all the same thing" ("E per tetto un cielo d'antenne" 1978).[8]

It followed the public and historiographic tendency to oppose the enduring public service vocation expressed by the free radios of the late 1970s to the increasingly entrepreneurial spirit and profit-oriented logic embraced by many local televisions (Sangiovanni 2015; Grasso 2006). In their attempt to territorially and economically expand their activity, local TVs became more and more dependent on advertising contracts (Passi 1979) and thus more inclined to join the national TV networks set up by major publishing and financial groups like Mondadori, Rizzoli, Rusconi, SIT, and—of course—Berlusconi's Fininvest (Piazzoni 2022; Medi 1990).[9] The result was the establishment, by the early 1980s, of what the public press defined as a "a new Italian 'mixed' television system" ("Non c'è tele senza network" 1982; "Network all'italiana: via etere e via cassetta" 1980; Fleischner 1980). This comprised, on the one side, a handful of private TV networks in control—through a complex web of syndication agreements[10]—of a majority of local TVs; and, on the other side, RAI's public broadcasting. Within a few years, however, Fininvest's acquisition of its biggest competitors ("Italia 1" from Rusconi in 1982, and "Rete 4" from Mondadori in 1984) made Berlusconi's media group the undisputed leader of Italy's private television market. The passing, in 1984–85, of the so-called "Berlusconi's Decrees" granted the possibility, for Fininvest, to broadcast nationally, as long as the broadcasts were not aired live. Although officially intended as temporary regulations, the decrees sanctioned the beginning of the RAI-Fininvest duopoly over Italian television.

This commercial evolution of Italy's local TVs has commonly been read as participating in broader economic and cultural developments that marked the country's transition from the 1970s to the 1980s. These include the reorganization of the Italian industrial system around large financial groups, as well as the consumerist turn and "individualist mutation" (Gozzini 2011) of Italian society, on the wave of a growing invasion of advertising content into public and private spaces (Scaglioni 2013; Gervasoni 2010). It followed a new kind of TV programming largely centered on variety shows and entertainment, so as to attract an audience large enough to secure profitable advertising contracts.[11] As commented by Aldo Grasso, the private network system marked the end of "the revolutionary dream of an alternative communication paradigm" (2006: 15).

8. In his thorough historical reconstruction of radio and television broadcasting in Italy, Franco Monteleone is keen to underscore how a constant dialectic between revolutionary ferments and instances of capitalist restructuring characterized the history of Italian private TV since its early stages (Monteleone 1992: 387).

9. To be fair, the first networks originated thanks to advertising agencies like GPE, GRT, Manzoni, and Radiovideo. As early as 1978, these took the initiative to nationally connect local broadcasters within national distribution circuits, simultaneously operating as marketing consultants and syndicators.

10. It should be noted that, in Italy, the term *syndication* has a different meaning than in the US: whereas in the Italian context *syndication* refers to a consortium of local/national broadcasters, in the US the concept applies to the lease or sale of broadcast rights to multiple TV stations without having to go through a TV network.

11. Advertising investments in the television industry significantly grew in the 1980s, outnumbering those in other media and entertainment sectors (Fasce 2016: 133–34).

Peppino Ortoleva has similarly linked the privatization of Italian broadcasting to a broader de-politicization of Italian public life. According to him, private broadcasters proposed a new model of "dream television" (1995), that is a kind of television programming uncoupled from public affairs, constituting a depoliticized public space of action and a source of distraction from the recurrent political crises, as opposed to an "allotted" RAI at the mercy of the main political parties. This point of view is consistent with the more general interpretation of the 1980s as a decade of public disengagement and retreat into the private sector (*"riflusso"* in Italian)[12], in contrast with the heated political environment and social tensions of the 1970s (Crainz 2013; Gervasoni 2010). In the words of Fausto Colombo, during the 1980s, Italian television acted upon "Italian public imagination deeply, turning it into a site of entertainment and disengagement" (2014: 255).

This common narrative on the history of Italian local televisions effectively synthesizes their undeniably commercial evolution. However, it also runs the risk of retrospectively projecting the eventual predominance of a profit-oriented reorganization of Italy's television landscape, thus failing to account for the varied, at times even contradictory, trajectories undertaken by those TV stations that do not fit into this dominant narrative and whose history has hitherto remained largely unexplored. Looking into the experience of local TV stations that stubbornly endeavored to combine commercial exigencies with enduring instances of bottom-up political engagement requires pursuing new archival research approaches, thus improving our comprehension of the history of Italian television. To this end, TeleRoma56 provides a simultaneously paradigmatic and exceptional case study. As the following paragraphs will show, its story challenges any linear or monolithic interpretation of the progressive commercialization of Italian local broadcasters during the 1980s, prompting us to look for unexplored historical references and narratives.

2 Where to Look? The Business, the Party, the People

TeleRoma56 was originally founded by the internationally famous Italian architect Bruno Zevi, alongside Professor and psychiatrist Guglielmo Arcieri. It was later bought and managed by the Radical Party, which remained in control of it until the mid-1990s. This much about it is commonly known. Some creativity and an extensive investigation were, instead, required to uncover how the broadcaster commercially operated, why the Radicals acquired it, who were the people in charge of its programming, and what were its main purposes. In the absence of any official archive collecting the documentation (let alone the audiovisual material) referring to TeleRoma's origin and subsequent activity, a usual refrain might apply: to begin, follow the money. This led to two sites: The Roman Chamber of Commerce, which, by law, holds records of the incorporation deeds, the financial statements, and the minutes of the shareholders' assembly of all Rome-based firms; TeleRoma56's first legal residence and recording studios, Bruno Zevi's villa, which currently hosts the "Zevi Foundation."

Based on the official records held by the Chamber of Commerce, TeleRoma56 was legally registered on July 9, 1976: a couple of weeks after the actual beginning of its broadcasting but before the Constitutional Court granted it legal sanctioning.[13] Amid the liberalizing buzz of that Summer, TeleRoma56 immediately stood out as both popular and atypical. As early as mid-August, a short piece published by *Il Corriere della Sera* welcomed it as "the first free TV in the city," further reporting Zevi and Arcieri's aspiration to turn TeleRoma into a "bridge between the university and the city" ("L'antenna di TeleRoma punta sulla cultura" 1976), a sort of televised university, providing a platform to discuss politics and culture.[14] In Zevi's view, private TVs should address the problem of a predominantly "elite university," believing that "a university for the masses requires mass media" ("Interview with Bruno Zevi" 1979). To this end, TeleRoma's early schedule included the involvement of many Roman intellectuals (from Elsa De Giorgi to Aurelio Roncaglia), the experimental implementation of live university lectures, political talk shows featuring leaders from all parties, and the *Tavolo redazionale*, a pioneering news program. During the night, the TV station aired *In diretta per voi*: a music TV program targeting younger audiences and hosted by Francesco Arcieri (Guglielmo's son and third founding partner).

12. The "riflusso" paradigm has long framed public and historic interpretations of Italy's 1980s. Even though it offers a useful conceptual category to explain some of the economic and sociocultural trends that characterized the decade, it is a problematic notion that has been repeatedly questioned (Asquer et al. 2012; Capuzzo 2010; Colarizi et al. 2004).

13. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl – Fascicolo n. 3033, *Atto Costitutivo*, July 9, 1976.

14. A copy of the press review referring to the launch of TeleRoma56 and its early activity is held by the Zevi Foundation.

The other side of this popular attitude soon became the significant space given to sportscasting, especially following the collaboration with local sports journalist Michele Plastino. In 1979, Plastino inaugurated on TeleRoma his iconic *Goal di Notte*, a sports program that still figures among the longest-running shows aired in Italy.[15]

Within a few years, TeleRoma56 became one of the most prominent local TVs in Rome. As evidenced in the report issued by its Board of Directors in 1978, the TV channel was especially appreciated for its "socio-cultural characterization" and pluralist attitude.[16] Nonetheless, the same report also underlined the financial difficulties posed by growing commercial competition and the increasing dependence upon advertising revenue. A few months earlier, the shareholders' meeting had similarly stressed the need to increase the advertising budget *vis a vis* "the difficult moment" caused by the dissolution of the contract with Giuliano Re's advertising agency.[17] And yet, rather than meeting its financial restraints with a commercial twist, TeleRoma56 opted to get political. In a 1978 report to the shareholders, Zevi advanced "the hypothesis of possible financial and political coverage by a political party" signaling the ongoing negotiations with "a few political groups," including the Socialist and the Radical parties.[18] In the summer of the following year, the newspaper *Il Tempo* tellingly remarked how "Zevi's television" was dedicating increasingly "large space to the propaganda of the Radical Party" (Castelli 1979). By the Fall, the political acquisition went through. In the shareholder meeting held at the end of October 1979, Sergio Stanzani (i.e. one of the leaders of the Radical Party) figured as CEO.[19]

To understand why the Radicals decided to acquire a local TV, it is useful to integrate business history and public sources with the collection of oral interviews, thus intertwining different historiographic approaches. According to the testimony provided by Paolo Vigevano (who managed the party's finances at the time of the acquisition), the largest support to taking over TeleRoma56 came from Massimo Teodori.[20] The determinant factor proved however the electoral exploit achieved by the Radical Party in the elections of June 1979. On that occasion, the Radicals elected twenty representatives to the Italian Parliament thanks to the pressing propaganda campaign jointly conducted via Radio Radicale and TeleRoma56 (still owned by Zevi and Arcieri, but already open to political content). As Vigevano explains, this result definitively persuaded the leaders of the party of the benefit that could originate from owning a Rome-based local TV station. Outbidding the offer made by the Socialist Party, the Radicals integrated the TV station into their political communication strategy, alongside and in coordination with the radio.

As with Radio Radicale, the Radical Party financially supported TeleRoma56 via public subsidies destined for political parties (the *"finanziamento pubblico ai partiti"*). In doing so, the Radicals publicly represented the radio and the TV as a sort of "reimbursement to the citizens" in the form of an "unmediated information," as opposed to the government-controlled communication provided by RAI (Spadaccia 2021: 453; Gusso 1982: 113). Conversely to TeleRoma56, however, Radio Radicale did not have any advertising. As both Vigevano and Carlo Romeo have underscored in interviews with them, this substantial difference evidences the opposite trajectories undertaken by the two media in the course of the 1980s.[21] At the same time, though, the fact that Radio Radicale and TeleRoma56 shared some programming signals a possible inroad into getting to watch what was aired on the latter. The political purpose bestowed upon the TV station by the Radicals implied a commitment to preserve its audiovisual record as part of preserving the political heritage of the party. While, then, Radio Radicale followed a different pathway compared to its television counterpart, through the radio one can trace the archival route to TeleRoma's audiovisual records. The "Archivio di Radio Radicale" holds a

15. Michele Plastino's *Goal di Notte* provided a training setting for some of Italy's most famous sportscasters, including Fabio Caressa, Massimo Marianella, and Sandro Piccinini.

16. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl – Fascicolo n. 3033, *Verbale di Assemblea*, July 13, 1978.

17. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl, Registro ditte 408535, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, February 1, 1978.

18. *Ibid*.

19. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl – Fascicolo n. 3033, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, October 31, 1979.

20. The interview with Paolo Vigevano was realized on October 23, 2024. Excerpts of all the interviews used to write this article are available on the ATLas Web Database: https://historica.unibo.it/handle/20.500.14008/81141 (Last accessed: June 2025).

21. Carlo Romeo was TeleRoma56's news director. The interview with Romeo was realized on November 22, 2023.

significant number of historical videotapes, mostly recording TeleRoma's political programs.[22] Among them, there is a video, dated 1983, showing one of the many *"fili diretti"* (i.e. "direct lines," namely live phone calls through which average local viewers had the chance to speak and interact with local and national politicians) realized by Marco Pannella (i.e. the leader of the Radical Party). Replying to a question on the party's employment of public subsidies, Pannella clarified the Radicals' commitment to directing public funding toward "independent entities" like the radio and the television, thus confirming the party's conception of these media as a public service.[23]

Whereas Sergio Stanzani was formally the owner of TeleRoma56, the party appointed Angelo Samperi as the directing manager and Carlo Romeo as the news director. In the early years of the Radicals' management of TeleRoma56, the TV channel largely focused its programming on politics and information. In 1980, during the campaign to gather the signatures for the referendums proposed by the Radicals, TeleRoma once again played its part. Another videotape shows Pannella dressed up as a clown, loudly inviting the audience to take action and join the Radical *"baraccone"* ("circus"). According to Paolo Vigevano, the call made by Pannella on live TV proved determinant to gather the minimum number of signatures required to propose a referendum in Italy, further demonstrating the possibility of a fruitful political use of local televisions. In contrast to the common idea that local TVs progressively turned to entertainment in the 1980s, TeleRoma's programming was neither de-politicized nor centered on entertainment.[24] The broadcaster's political vocation finds additional confirmation in a series of broadcasting decisions made, which gained national resonance in the early 1980s. These include the airing of *Last Tango in Paris*, a film that was censored in Italy ("Ultimo Tango a Parigi, dal rogo alla tv" 1981), as well as the anonymous delivery, to TeleRoma's studios, of a videotape containing the interrogation of Ciro Cirillo by the Italian terrorist group *Brigate Rosse*.[25] Moreover, to convey the idea of a bottom-up employment of the TV medium, TeleRoma filled its schedule of numerous *fili diretti* and programs like *Per la strada* ("On the road"). According to Carlo Romeo, this latter was proposed by Pannella; it consisted in placing an open microphone around the streets of Rome to provide a free speaking platform for the citizens.

It must be noted that TeleRoma56's strong political characterization was not unique. As early as 1981, the Communist newspaper *L'Unità*, in its survey of the local televisions of Rome, underscored their political characterization, linking it to their proximity to the centers of political power (Riccobono 1981). Throughout the 1980s and up until the early 1990s, all major Rome-based local TV stations were either owned by a political party or outspokenly political in their programming: Videouno was part of the publishing group *Paese Sera*, owned by the Communist Party; the Socialist Party bought GBR[26] in 1985; while TeleRomaEuropa (TRE) belonged to Gaetano and Filippo Rebecchini and was hence close to the Democratic Christian Party.[27] In this regard, we could even say that TeleRoma56 somehow led the way, providing the first and best example of a simultaneously political-commercial management of a local broadcaster. This political coverage did not however secure enough financial sustainability to be competitive beyond the Lazio region. The 1980 report made by TeleRoma's Board of Directors, while restating the "adequate character of the technical, political and cultural activity" realized by the TV station, also signaled its recurrent financial losses, underscoring that the broadcaster struggled to secure stable advertising contracts.[28]

22. To be more precise, the audiovisual collection is held by a private firm connected to the Archive of Radio Radicale and located in Naples.

23. All the audiovisual clips henceforth referred to were digitalized and made available on ATLas Web Database: https://historica.unibo.it/handle/20.500.14008/81141 (Last accessed: June 2025).

24. Even though TeleRoma56 does not hold any recording of its programming schedules, I was able to access several of its daily schedules through a variety of local magazines and national newspapers, including the Roman *Scelta TV*, the nationally famous magazine *TV Sorrisi e Canzoni*, and the communist newspaper *L'Unità*.

25. As explained by Carlo Romeo and Giandomenico Caiazza in an episode of *Prima Pagina* (one of TeleRoma's information programs), the channel decided not to broadcast the videotape, handing it to the police and only showing it to a selection of journalists. The episode of *Prima Pagina* is available on ATLas Web Database.

26. GBR was a Roman TV station made famous by its unique recording of the discovery of Aldo Moro's dead body in Rome in 1978.

27. Gaetano and Filippo Rebecchini were the sons of Salvatore Rebecchini, a famous postwar member of the Democratic Christian Party and the first mayor of Rome under the Italian Republic.

28. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl – Fascicolo n. 3033, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, May 30, 1980.

It is again by turning to the people who made TeleRoma's history that we get some insight on how the broadcaster faced these financial challenges in a moment, the early 1980s, which saw several local TVs either giving up or giving in to the national networks. In an interview with famous sportscaster Sandro Piccinini—who began his training in the local TVs of Rome—, he explains that it was Fabio Galimberti (i.e. TeleRoma's broadcast director) who convinced the Radicals to convert TeleRoma56 into a generalist channel, thus downscaling its political focus.[29] This meant three kinds of innovations. First, the party created an additional TV channel, Canale 66, entirely dedicated to its political programming. At the same time, the studios were moved from Zevi's villa to a building in the Balduina neighborhood, thus marking a professional parting from TeleRoma's early stages. More importantly, TeleRoma's programming schedule was reorganized and enriched to include greater space for *telenovelas*, movies, TV series and, above all, sports. It was as a consequence of this restructuring—Piccinini argues—that TeleRoma56 started to be really competitive, even posing itself as a local alternative to RAI. Despite, then, continuing to give significant space to the newscast and information programs run by Carlo Romeo, TeleRoma56's financial hold became increasingly dependent upon its sports programming, whose large audience guaranteed a steady flow of advertising revenue. In 1982, an article dedicated to TeleRoma56 by the TV magazine *Buongiorno TV* emphasized how "in terms of programming, there is a lot of sport and a lot of politics, plus some movies: basically, it's all sport and politics, politics and sport" ("Bassi, grassi" 1982). It was at this stage that figures like Mauro Mazza (the now famous news anchor) and Lamberto Giorgi (a locally famous VJ and sportscaster) joined the TV staff. TeleRoma's sports show, *In campo con Roma e Lazio*, soon became the most popular TV program in Rome. In 1984, the shareholders positively valued TeleRoma's performance, signaling a substantial increase in the local audience, making it the local TV with the highest rankings in Rome, right after the national networks.[30]

Overall, in terms of show production, TeleRoma56 prioritized information and political content over entertainment. As it lacked both the resources and the intention to propose variety shows and quiz games, the channel equated its entertaining offer largely to sports, and thus to a kind of entertainment that—as we will see—could be framed in political terms. During the rest of the decade, its programming remained centered—to quote Carlo Romeo—on "Pannella"—from the name of the leader of the Radical Party—and "Pallone," namely football, while also expanding its reach and focuses of interest.

3 A Glocal Broadcaster

By the time the Italian Parliament approved the Berlusconi Decrees, TeleRoma56 had become a locally popular TV station, proposing an effective mix of political vocation and commercial evolution. Defying any possible understanding of Italian private television as a monolithic bloc, local broadcasters and private national networks opposed the decrees, conversely calling for legislation to safeguard pluralism of information. As the Italian TV landscape became increasingly marked by the RAI-Fininvest duopoly, all private TVs were compelled, in order to stay competitive, to simultaneously enlarge their economies of scale and strengthen their territorial entrenchment. TeleRoma56 did so by embracing a fully multidimensional television gaze and scope of action. On the one hand, the Roman broadcaster enlarged its operation taking the initiative to nationally connect with other local broadcasters, thus extending its reach and proposing a regulatory agenda alternative to the duopoly. On the other hand, TeleRoma strengthened its relationship with the surrounding territory, impacting on Rome's political life and publicly presenting local TVs as a stronghold of free information. Once again, the many facets of this evolution are only detectable through a combination of oral history sources, grey archives, an overview of the public press, and audiovisual material. In other words, just as much as TeleRoma56, the archival research to uncover its history must be multidimensional, moving across a variety of methodologies, documentary typologies, and contexts of investigation.

In the Fall of 1984, in a clear response to the emerging duopoly, TeleRoma made a deal with the national network headed by the Marcucci brothers, the "Gruppo Elefante." The agreement involved its "inclusion in an important broadcast syndication," with the network that was supposed to take over the local TV channel,

29. The interview with Sandro Piccinini was realized on June 19, 2025.

30. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl – Fascicolo n. 3033, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, May 21, 1984.

provided the commitment to uphold the distinctive (political and sports) characteristics of its programming.[31] Even though the contract with the "Gruppo Elefante" did not go through, it marked a first attempt at expanding TeleRoma56's reach beyond its local area. The following year, the TV's Board actively took the initiative of launching its own national syndication network, Tivuitalia. This was officially established on September 13, 1985, with the purpose of "coordinating the activities of different radio and TV stations within a single network," thus securing a growing number of national advertising contracts.[32] At the same time, TeleRoma56, together with other politically-involved Roman televisions like Videouno and TRE, launched a series of public initiatives asking for clear norms to regulate private broadcasting in the country.[33] In doing so, they reclaimed the public value held by local "TV antennas standing for the cultural heritage of local territories." ("In pericolo la sopravvivenza di molte tv private" 1984; "Come si organizzano le piccole tv?" 1985).

On the other hand, the continuous local range of TeleRoma56's frequencies went together with a stronger dedication to covering local news about Rome's political and cultural life. In the words of Fabio Galimberti, *vis a vis* Fininvest's growing dominance over Italian private broadcasting, TeleRoma worked to "emphasize the local character of our TV station" (Conti 1984). In an interview aired on TeleRoma56, in July 1985, Sergio Stanzani emphatically argued that any government's attempt at limiting advertising slots on private TVs, while allegedly targeting Berlusconi's networks, ran in fact the risk of "blowing up" local broadcasters. He hence framed the latter as "the only real alternative to the RAI-Fininvest duopoly," given that local private TVs were "the only subjects that had given a meaningful value to moving from the State's broadcasting monopoly to a mixed public-private networks system."[34]

The call for the public's right to information remained, therefore, a constant in the political debate surrounding private TV stations, in contrast to the idea of its being set aside in favor of reclaiming the right to entertainment. Throughout the second half of the 1980s, TeleRoma56 continued engaging in the production of political programs and was outspokenly committed to guaranteeing a kind of bottom-up pluralist information. To this end, the TV station brought to full fruition some of the decisions made during the first part of the decade, from the generalist re-orientation of its programming to its localist turn and the centrality bestowed on its sportscasting. On the one hand, the broadcaster kept playing a role in the electoral campaigns conducted by the party, including those of 1987. This famously led to the election to the Italian Parliament of former porno star and Radical candidate Ilona Staller. On the other hand, the relation with the Radical Party was publicly downplayed. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the *filo diretto* hosted by Carlo Romeo with Francesco Rutelli (a member of the Radical Party and future mayor of Rome in the 1990s) after the 1987 political elections.[35] While off-air, Romeo clarified the need to avoid appearing "outspokenly Radical" given that TeleRoma56 was, formally, a commercial broadcaster.

At the same time, the continuous need to differentiate itself from both private national networks and RAI compelled TeleRoma56 to more extensively localize its focus, acting as a locally relevant political agent. This meant increasingly greater space given to local newscasts and, more importantly, active participation in the city's political life, by conducting political investigations, hosting municipal council meetings, or collecting requests and complaints from the audience. Among the most famous examples of such political engagement is the journalistic inquiry into Rome's housing problem realized in 1989. As recalled by both Carlo Romeo and Manuela Moreno (one of TeleRoma's first anchorwomen), during a newscast attended by the Roman municipal councilor responsible for the city's real estate property, the two anchors (Romeo and Moreno) publicly exposed the municipal government's mismanagement of Rome's public housing.[36] The episode even made it to the national press (Sofi 1989; Arletti 1991), as it did the hearing—aired on TeleRoma56 in 1989—questioning

31. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl – Fascicolo n. 3033, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, May 9, 1985.

32. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Tivuitalia srl – REA 559269, *Atto costitutivo*, September 13, 1985.

33. Their legislative counter-proposal included a series of anti-trust norms prohibiting national networks to control/own more than one national TV channel and three regional TV stations.

34. The interview with Stanzani was realized by Carlo Romeo within the program *Prima Pagina*. It aired on July 23, 1985. The related videoclip is available on ATLas Web Database.

35. The "filo diretto" with Francesco Rutelli was hosted by Carlo Romeo within the program *Dossier*. It aired on June 23, 1987. The related videoclip is available on ATLas Web Database.

36. The interview with Manuela Moreno was realized on May 30, 2024.

the management of Rome's public canteens by Salvatore Malerba, the city's former councilor for commerce (Melati 1989). Likewise, TeleRoma56's studios hosted the public gathering of several members of the municipal council following Pietro Giubilo's discharge as mayor of Rome, in the Spring of 1989. TeleRoma56 was also directly involved in the Radical Party's campaign during municipal elections. In 1989, for instance, the program *Campidoglio 89* became a public platform to present local candidates supported by the Radicals, including famous actor and nobleman Urbano Barberini. The latter's interview with Carlo Romeo is included in the audiovisual collection held by Radio Radicale's archive.[37] In the words of Carlo Romeo, TeleRoma's strength relied on and grew thanks to its ability to "intervene on the city's metropolitan and local life" by creating "a direct line between the city and its citizens that could not be found on national networks" (Traveri 1993).

This political approach to covering local news was mirrored by the rhetoric that TeleRoma56 employed in defense of its right to broadcast football matches of the local/national teams *A.S. Roma* and *S.S. Lazio* (i.e. the most popular teams in Rome and Lazio). As Sandro Piccinini recalls, during the 1980s and up until the early 1990s, local TV stations engaged in a long-lasting battle against RAI regarding sports broadcasting rights. In 1987, an agreement between RAI and the Italian Football League effectively banned all broadcasting of football matches by any private, local, or commercial broadcaster. On that occasion, TeleRoma56 led a campaign (soon joined by other local TVs), claiming their "right to report" and arguing that private televisions provided a public service to football fans and local citizens. Significantly, the campaign foregrounded the representation of sportscasting as news rather than as entertainment. This was because football broadcasting provided a form of entertainment that, in light of the strong relationship between local teams and their respective territories (in the case of TeleRoma56 a territory restricted to the Roman area, but potentially also national), could be presented in political terms. This point of view was also embraced by the public press. In an article published in July 1987, the newspaper *Italia Oggi* publicly depicted the RAI-Lega Calcio agreement as "a killer action against private TVs [...] a violation of the public right to information" and, above all, "a severe blow to the fans," given RAI's inability to guarantee "those news-reporting services that local broadcasters can nowadays provide" (Mancini 1987).

By the end of the decade, TeleRoma56 had both nationally expanded its commercial reach and localized its television gaze. And yet, its local focus implied an inevitably national—if not transnational—dimension, further characterizing it as a multidimensional TV station. In this regard, the majority of the interviews collected with some of the key figures of TeleRoma's history (including Carlo Romeo, Manuela Moreno, Paolo Vigevano, and Valentino Tocco[38]) all underscored the fact that "in Rome even talking about the local meant talking about the national" (Romeo) and that, because of this, "it is difficult to consider a local TV station based in Rome as purely local, given that the content is national" (Moreno). At the same time, they highlighted the dispersive nature of a large city like Rome, where local news could either interest a single neighborhood or have a national—at times even transnational—impact. It is consequently no surprise that, throughout the decade, TeleRoma56's newscast and political talk shows dedicated significant space to both national and international events, from coverage of the trial against Enzo Tortora to Romeo's reportages from Mauritania and Burkina Faso or to the broadcasting of a videotape with a public message from Gheddafi (Caprara 1986; "Su Teleroma il messaggio di Gheddafi" 1986). In an interview to Carlo Romeo published by *La Repubblica* in 1994, the anchorman emphasized that "During the Gulf War, while all other TV crews stood idle, TeleRoma56 was the only TV station broadcasting live under the bombing of Tel Aviv" (Ceccarossi 1994). These declarations, while clearly biased, highlight TeleRoma56's commitment to providing timely information, beyond the local scope of its frequencies.

Through its promotion of Tivuitalia's national syndication, its active participation in Rome's local life, and its coverage of news from all over the world, TeleRoma56 intertwined multiple dimensions in its broadcasting. This multidimensional television range made it—I argue—an exceptionally glocal broadcaster: deeply rooted in the many localities of Rome's municipal districts, in direct contact with the city's citizens and their

37. The episode featuring the interview with Urbano Barberini was aired on October 21, 1989. The related videoclip is available on ATLas Web Database.

38. Valentino Tocco was TeleRoma56's cameraman in the 1980s. He later worked as a cameraman for Maurizio Costanzo at Mediaset. The interview with Valentino Tocco was realized on January 19, 2024.

daily troubles, but also outward-looking and engaging with national and transnational content. As such, it also provided an exceptional laboratory for television professionals that would eventually become nationally renowned, from famous sportscaster Fabio Caressa to RAI's news director Mauro Mazza.

4 TeleRoma56's Swan Song

The various structural and programming reorganizations undertaken by TeleRoma56 from the mid-1980s seemed to pay off. The minutes of the shareholders' assembly of 1987 pointed out the net profit achieved the previous year thanks to the efforts made to "improve the production capacity" and "the growing demand for advertising slots."[39] Likewise, the Tivuitalia network enlarged its reach, coming to comprise 15 local TV stations in 1987, and up to 23 in 1989.[40] Even in terms of public perception, TeleRoma56's intertwining of a strong political vocation and an essentially commercial nature repeatedly received positive recognition. In a letter sent by a reader to the communist newspaper *L'Unità*, in 1987, TeleRoma56 was envisioned as the touchstone of "an alternative kind of television," evidencing that "it is possible to keep up a TV station with high ratings by broadcasting parliamentary debates and political talk shows" (Scalfati 1987). As the decade came to an end, TeleRoma56 appeared as "a particular TV station, perhaps the only non-commercial TV left [...] a still ideological broadcaster at a time when no one is anymore" (Sannucci 1989).

Nonetheless, its management was increasingly compelled to come to terms with the commercialization and oligopolistic trends of the overall Italian mediascape. As a result, Tivuitalia partially gave in to the duopoly, entering an advertising-delivery contract with Fininvest in 1989.[41] The subsequent year, the approval of the Mammì Law further aggravated the financial strain encountered by local TVs. The law gave definitive sanctioning to the duopoly, prohibiting national networks from supplying programs and advertising content to local TV stations, and forcing the latter to reserve 20% of their programming to local newscasting (Eusepi 1995). In a last attempt at keeping up with these commercial and legislative developments, in 1990, TeleRoma56 joined the national network Odeon TV. It also moved its studios to Fiano Romano (a small town in the outskirts of Rome), in buildings with enough space to have larger recording and production facilities.[42] According to Carlo Romeo and Sandro Piccinini, the decision originated from the will to extend TeleRoma's range of activities, turning it into a production center where to realize TV shows for all major networks and other local TV stations. Like in the previous decade, this commercial and technical restructuring went together with TeleRoma56's public engagement in a battle against the duopoly, once again juxtaposing the pluralist information provided by local TVs to the top-down communication approach of RAI and Fininvest's networks (Vinci 1990).

In the early 1990s, TeleRoma56 was still the most popular local television in Rome (Pirari 1993), despite (or perhaps in light of) the marginal space given to entertainment in its schedule. This continued to largely revolve around newscasts and political content on the one hand, and sports and football on the other. According to Romeo and Piccinini, though, the relocation to Fiano marked the beginning of the broadcaster's eventual decline, mainly due to the high maintenance cost of the new studios, together with the lack of a clear managerial vision on the future of the TV channel. In 1994, TeleRoma56 was awarded the "Premio Cronista" (Reporter Award) by the "Unione Nazionale Cronisti Italiani" (National Union of Italian Reporters) in light of its

> meticulous TV exposés and the public service carried out amid the unfolding malaises and the many contradictions characterizing the Roman megalopolis [...] despite its scarce technological means [...] TeleRoma56 has distinguished itself for the continuous commitment to covering local news [...] a task rarely valued by big communication media, and yet a guarantee of pluralist information despite the excessive power of the RAI-Fininvest duopoly.[43]

39. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma. Teleroma 56 srl – Fascicolo n. 3033, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, April 30, 1987.

40. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma, Tribunale di Commercio. Tivuitalia srl – Fascicolo 8842/85, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, April 30, 1987; *Verbale d'Assemblea*, May 2, 1989.

41. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma, Tribunale di Commercio. Tivuitalia srl – Fascicolo 8842/85, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, May 2, 1989.

42. Archivio della Camera di Commercio di Roma, IRTA srl, *Verbale d'Assemblea*, November 15, 1990.

43. The access to the document reporting all details on the award and its motivations was provided by Carlo Romeo.

Notwithstanding this important public recognition of its contribution to creating a more pluralist media environment, by the time of the award, TeleRoma56 was already being negatively impacted by a series of broader changes in Italy's political and social life, first and foremost the outbreak of the so-called "Tangentopoli" scandal. This marked the end of Italy's "First Republic," with the collapse of all major political parties of the postwar era and the political rise of Berlusconi. In his campaign for the 1994 political elections, Berlusconi did not fail to leverage the enormous communication power originating from his—by then—highly influential television empire (Gallucci 1993; Barbacetto 1994). In this regard, Carlo Romeo significantly highlighted how, by 1995, it was clear that a political, cultural, and economic era had come to an end with important consequences also for Italy's mediascape. In this context, the general crisis experienced by all local broadcasters intertwined with the management crisis caused, within TeleRoma56, by the "lack of confidence in the possibility to become a sort of La7 with a ten years advance."[44] Struggling to comply with the prescriptions imposed by the Mammì Law, TeleRoma56 went bankrupt and was sold to the real estate and publishing group headed by the Caltagirone family.

Conclusion

In many ways, TeleRoma56's history both confirms and defies conventional narratives on Italian commercial broadcasting, helping us to understand the eventual predominance of Berlsuconi's television, but also complicating any easy or linear understanding of such an outcome. In 1993, the magazine *Radiocorriere* significantly titled a piece dedicated to TeleRoma56 "A Public Service Through a Private TV" (Marengo 1993), challenging common interpretations that linked the privatization of Italian TV to a conceptual shift from envisioning TV broadcasting as a public service to considering television as a media at the service of the public. Outlining the experience of TeleRoma56 was not simply intended to cast light on a relevant case study in Italian television history; it more importantly aimed at expanding and bringing new insight into the historiography on Italian local TVs, uncovering unknown historical trajectories by tracing multidimensional archival pathways. Neither the trend toward commercialization nor that toward entertainment should be understood as preordained outcomes. While not exempt from a commercial evolution, TeleRoma56 points to the existence of alternative routes undertaken by Italian private broadcasters in the course of the 1980s. These did not simply diverge from the commercial paradigm provided by Berlusconi's networks but also imagined innovative ways of intertwining their financial exigencies with conceptions of television as a bottom-up counter-informative political medium. Moreover, TeleRoma56's Roman localization facilitated its evolution into a glocal broadcaster, adopting a multidimensional television gaze that was simultaneously local, national, and international.

Both its multidimensional activity and its dual political-commercial characterization are mirrored in the archival research conducted to investigate and learn about TeleRoma56's past. In this regard, I believe that a multidimensional approach to researching the history of Italy's local televisions—moving in between local and national, private and public, commercial and political sources of information—can help to avoid reproducing the RAI-Fininvest duopoly in the historical investigation. The absence of institutional archives holding the memorial heritage of Italian local TVs, alongside the lack of substantial public efforts to recover such a heritage, prescribes the reliance on a patchwork of different archival resources. It follows the need for a creative attitude in the search for possible archives, preceding the research within the archives. This means bringing together typologies of sources as different as oral interviews, audiovisual material, financial budgets and commercial documentation, specialized TV magazines, and local and national newspapers. In the case of TeleRoma56, it also meant leveraging its political affiliation with the Radical Party and with Radio Radicale. The scattered and multifold nature of this wide array of primary sources demands a multidimensional analysis, combining elements of business history and media history with notions and methodologies typical of oral history, political history, as well as cultural history.

44. The quote is from the interview with Carlo Romeo. La7 was the new name given, in 2001, to Telemontecarlo. This was an Italian-language broadcaster founded in 1974 and based in Monaco. While Telemontecarlo struggled to keep up with the competition posed by Fininvest throughout the 1980s–1990s, La7 eventually became the first private TV broadcaster to gain national relevance in defiance of the RAI-Fininvest duopoly.

Meeting the call for greater public sensitiveness toward recovering the many histories hidden behind the screens of Italy's hundreds of local TV stations, it would ultimately seem that inquiring into a local TV station like TeleRoma56 can indeed show the way to offering a public service through a private television.

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