

All Passionately On Stage: Antenna 3's Creative Journey between Entertainment and Advertising*

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Submitted: September 29, 2025 – Accepted: October 8, 2025 – Published: December 22, 2025

Abstract

The article examines, in the broader frame of the ATLAS research project, the role of Antenna 3 as a pioneer in the late 1970s, during the formative phase of Italian private television. It reconstructs the channel's origins, tracing its evolution from the earlier local station TeleAltoMilanese, and follows its trajectory over more than a decade of activity, during which Antenna 3 progressively developed into a fully structured, profit-oriented media enterprise. Drawing on original in-depth interviews with former professionals and other witnesses, as well as on the analysis of original corporate documents and periodical press coverage, the contribution highlights the broadcaster's operational practices and industrial organisation, placing special emphasis on Antenna 3's in-house entertainment productions, which illustrate both its creative ambitions and engagement with local culture, and its increasing alignment with logics of media professionalism and commercialisation. Antenna 3 is a key example to illuminate the shift from grassroots television initiatives to structured private companies with industrialised workflows and business models. A close analysis of selected shows—particularly through the role of presenters, fostering a strong sense of identification among viewers—reveals a dynamic relationship between entertainment formats and in-house advertising strategies. This interplay underscores Antenna 3's dual identity as both a creative force and a commercially driven actor inside a rapidly transforming media landscape.

Keywords: Advertisement; Entertainment; Production; Television; Territory.

Acknowledgements

This contribution is one of the results of a wider research on Antenna 3 conducted by the Università di Bologna team in the ATLAS research project (PRIN 2020; Prot.: 2020NB4PWK); together with the authors, relevant parts of the work have been done by Matteo Marinello and Darcy Isabel Continanza. The authors express their gratitude to Wally Giambelli, Alessandro Di Milia, Sandro Parenzo, Fabio Ravezzani and the Mediapason Group for granting access to valuable archival materials and for their generous permission to reproduce images; and to Marta Cagnola for setting a precious first contact. The partially quoted in-depth interviews to Wally Giambelli, Ettore Andenna, and Angelo Costanza, as well as the others to Marella Cayre, Susanna Messaggio, Davide Rampello, and Davide Tortorella, provided interesting and useful insights, and the authors thank all the informants for their kind availability.

* The article has been researched, structured and discussed by both authors. Paragraph 2 and 3 have been written by Emiliano Rossi; paragraph 1 by Luca Barra; paragraph 4 by both, in equal parts.

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1 Introduction

The element that perhaps best characterises the rich environment of Italian local television in the 1970s and 1980s is the wide range of approaches, goals, strategies and tactics employed. In many cases, the desire to express themselves and tell the story of a specific territory was intertwined with the need to compete commercially, attract viewers and advertising investors, and make their mark in an increasingly crowded and competitive landscape. Some companies were small-scale, artisanal, while others sought to develop industrial mechanisms. Some networks never progressed beyond the experimental stage, while others became regular broadcasters. Some channels were content to serve a specific local community, while others found these boundaries restrictive. This pioneering phase, marked by a trial-and-error approach, saw the establishment of a rich alternative to national television via cable and, subsequently, terrestrial transmission, in a period of fifteen years marked by notable successes, some spectacular failures, as well as numerous intermediate steps. While the situation resembles the commercialisation processes that took place across much of Europe during the same period, this richness and variety is specific to Italy.

In this context, the case of Lombardy is of particular interest. It is one of the most populous and active regions in the country and has traditionally been a centre for media industries, including newspapers, publishing, advertising and public television. In this area, more than in others, the economic and commercial dimension is crucial to the existence of the emerging local broadcasting. Here, the stories of creatives, entrepreneurs, and companies from all sectors intersect. It is also here that ambitions to expand beyond the local dimension and cover the entire region, a group of geographical areas or even the whole country began. The story of TeleMilano clearly demonstrates this. Starting out as a cable broadcaster in a newly built garden city, it was soon acquired by Silvio Berlusconi and able to cover all Milan and the Lombardy region with its signal; it produced shows that could be broadcast everywhere; and, within a few years, it became a national network with Canale 5 and, subsequently, a group of three networks that directly rivalled Rai with Fininvest (Barra and Guarnaccia 2014). And the evolution of Antenna 3 also highlights this feature. As a Lombardy-based channel, Antenna 3 was unique in how it sought and achieved transregional primacy through its ambitious and forward-looking objectives and rapid growth, until its subsequent stumbles. And it did this by fostering a strong dialogue between the local and national spheres, by blending dialect and modernity, and by anticipating processes later pursued elsewhere.

Despite some quick mentions in early theoretical and academic frameworks (see, for instance, Barra, Brembilla and Innocenti 2024; Grasso 2004, 2006, 2019; Monteleone 2021; Ortoleva and Di Marco 2004; Piazzoni 2014) and a small number of accounts combining *memoir* and journalistic reportage (Dotto and Piccinini 2006; Villa Re. and Villa Ro. 2010), the trajectory of Antenna 3 still remains a largely underexplored area in Italian television history and, more broadly, in its national cultural and social history. It is a story that has been frequently mentioned and recounted, with enthusiasm and nostalgia, but seldom historicised, particularly in its relevant impact on both the imagery and the business structures of the national broadcasting industry. This article seeks at least partially to address this gap, tracing the roots and the development of this Lombard channel, especially in its most relevant and adventurous first decade; and then focusing on a small number of prime-time entertainment shows as an important example of the crucial entanglements between production models, textual forms, commercial needs, and forms of audience engagement through popular personalities and strong ties with the regional territory.

Within the broader framework of the ATLAS project, which identified Antenna 3 as one of its five main case studies, research on the Lombardy-based broadcaster followed three main paths. Firstly, access was granted to a considerable segment of the broadcaster's historical audiovisual archive, which is currently undergoing a partial, informal digitisation. This allowed for the direct viewing of a substantial part of the network's programming from the second half of the 1970s to the first half of the 1980s, often in its entirety. The archive made available by the family of the channel's founder, and accessible thanks to the permission granted by the current owner, comprised a *corpus* of forty-three programmes, totalling over 200 distinct episodes and digitized in 2100 clips. This audiovisual collection served as the primary research material, allowing the researchers to make sense of a rich, varied, and often largely inaccessible offer. At the same time, the archive's scattered, sometimes random nature required collecting complementary information and triangulating sources to bet-



Fig. 1. – The large audience gathered in Studio 1 at Antenna 3's headquarters in Legnano (courtesy of Wally Giambelli and Mediapason).

ter understand timeframes, connections, and contexts.¹ Secondly, the research focused on several archives, accessing documents, other materials, and photographs. These included the public archives of newspapers and magazines, which contain traces of the broadcaster in current affairs news, in weekly or daily television schedules, and in advertising pages. Other sources included chambers of commerce, which hold registrations and other documents. The most difficult to access were the private documental archives, containing miscellaneous operational materials, schedules and scripts, contracts, promotional photos as well as private photos of the various workers involved. Finally, a third line of research consisted of eight in-depth interviews with seven expert informants, involved in various aspects of the development of Antenna 3, including managerial, creative, and technical roles. By intertwining the reconstruction of their life and career stories with an understanding of historical Antenna 3's production and distribution cultures, it was possible to contextualize what emerged from the audiovisual and paper archives more effectively.² These multiple primary sources, in constant dialogue with secondary literature, allowed a strong triangulation and a careful reconstruction of the case study.

2 “The Major Among the Small Broadcasters”: a Chronological History

To fully understand the origins of Antenna 3, a necessary step back is to consider the launch of the station from which the channel emerged, in a mix of events and contingencies. Antenna 3 originated, in effect, from the ashes of an earlier venture, TeleAltoMilanese, which began broadcasting in 1975 from Busto Arsizio, a town of 80.000 inhabitants located 25 kilometres from Milan. While Rai was still broadcasting in black and white, TeleAltoMilanese is credited as the first private over-the-air television station in Italy to transmit in colour (Anon. 1976a; Pedranzini 1976).³ Founded by Renzo Villa together with Giuseppe Florita and Giuseppe Mancini (a petrol entrepreneur and leading importer of Pepsi Cola in Italy), the station's transmission facilities

1. To contextualise the pieces of archival materials, a review was conducted of magazines devoted to TV listings, as *TV Sorrisi e Canzoni*, *Millecanali*, and *Radiocorriere*. Notably, from 1977 onwards, *TV Sorrisi e Canzoni* began to feature local programming in its pages, also introducing a dedicated supplement. Similarly, *Radiocorriere*—Rai's official magazine, in publication since 1925—allocated specific space to local content in 1979, signalling that the public service broadcaster could no longer ignore this phenomenon.
2. A wide portion of audiovisual fragments from the shows, of documents, photos and other materials from the archive, and of excerpts of the in-depth interviews to professionals are available on the ATLAS open-access database, hosted by the Università di Bologna digital library AlmaDL in its AMS Historica collections: <https://historica.unibo.it/collections/feb5410b-ce30-4e26-b3d5-6639dad59c89> (last accessed: 01-10-2025).
3. The level of interest surrounding the station is demonstrated by the fact that renowned Rai presenter Mike Bongiorno was invited in 1975 to document its launch in a reportage published by *La Domenica del Corriere* (Bongiorno 1975: 12).

were sealed by judicial order only a few months after the launch. The intervention of magistrate Gaetano Cioffi in 1976 recognised the station's legitimacy (Anon. 1976b). His judgment entered legal history for effectively sanctioning a long-awaited "freedom of the airwaves" (*libertà d'antenna*; cf. Rodotà 1976; Scalfari 1972) and marking the end of the state broadcasting monopoly, only weeks ahead of the landmark Constitutional Court pronouncement (no. 202) which formally authorised private over-the-air broadcasts on a local scale.

This ruling came during a transitional period in which the so-called "free" broadcasters, no longer confined to cable transmissions, began to proliferate across Italy. These channels embodied a call for renewal and openness and paralleled the growth of small and medium enterprises across the country (Barca 2007; Menduni 2014; Ortoleva 1995; Richeri 1981; Sangiovanni 2013 and 2021), absorbing, among other influences, the push towards youth-centric values and the post-'68 rhetoric. It was, as Piazzoni described it, an "auroral, localistic, effervescent and rough-hewn"⁴ experimentation (2014: 132). Under the banners of accessibility and pluralism, local stations sought to offer an alternative to the traditional programming of the public service broadcaster Rai.

TeleAltoMilanese was a product of such a drive for freedom of information and entrepreneurship, which inspired other similar ventures, often combined with a desire to explore new visual languages. Villa was the pivotal link between TeleAltoMilanese and Antenna 3: an employee in the public sector from Luino (Varese), he had long nurtured a deep passion for entertainment and communication (Anon. 1983; Bussola 2022; Giorgi 1979; Sodi 2021). This led him to found Italy's first association of private broadcasters, which included such signatories as the popular presenter Enzo Tortora and Peppo Sacchi, founder of TeleBiella, with whom Villa had been in contact since the early 1970s (Esposito 2010; see also Sacchi 2011). Upon launching TeleAltoMilanese, Villa described its mission in deliberately non-political terms, a position that would, at least apparently, come to define Antenna 3 as well:

The purpose of TeleAltoMilanese is primarily commercial, which is why we steer clear of any political affiliation. This is a business and should be run as such. We do not peddle social messages [...]; this is an investment, and we are looking for the best ways to balance budgets. We're not trying to create culture or counterculture: we simply want to give viewers the chance to pick up the phone and add their voice to the broadcast (Bruno 1977: 29).

Following an expedition to Australia to study the functioning of commercial networks and their schedules, tensions between Villa and his partners came to a head. In spring 1976, Villa ultimately left TeleAltoMilanese to focus on the development of Antenna 3, a project in which he would finally be able to fully express his artistic vision in a true creative enterprise.⁵ The transition was swift: from the "diaspora" with TeleAltoMilanese, Antenna 3 emerged, formally established in 1976 under the name Società Lombarda di Produzioni Televisive, and beginning its broadcasts in 1977. What drove Villa in this new venture was a desire to experiment, take risks, and articulate an entrepreneurial vision.

While most of the numerous fledgling stations attempting to gain a foothold across Italy struggled to translate good intentions into a coherent industrial model, the case of Antenna 3 proved markedly different, quickly establishing itself as the leading broadcaster in northern Italy before the arrival of Berlusconi's Fininvest networks. Above all, Antenna 3 provided Villa with the opportunity to continue his partnership with Enzo Tortora, who also left TeleAltoMilanese, where he had been hosting a current affairs talk show. Villa's exuberant personality—combining the roles of executive manager and showman—was thus complemented by Tortora's more authoritative presence, who brought his name and considerable symbolic capital to the enterprise.

The station's rise began in a 5600-square-metre former industrial warehouse, prominently located along the Autostrada dei Laghi,⁶ on the border between the municipalities of Legnano and Castellanza, between Milan and Varese (Rotondo 2016). The site was acquired thanks to the backing of a group of ten major figures from Lombardy's financial sector, who provided an initial investment of two billion lire, and through a public share

4. All translations from Italian into English of excerpts from written sources or interviews are by the authors.

5. TeleAltoMilanese was acquired by the Rizzoli-Corriere della Sera group and relocated from Busto Arsizio to Cologno Monzese, in the outskirts of Milan. It ceased broadcasting in 1981, when its frequencies were purchased by Silvio Berlusconi for his Fininvest channels. On the history of Fininvest group, see Balbi and Prario 2010; Molteni 1998.

6. Autostrada dei Laghi is the highway connecting Milan to Varese and Como, in the Lombardy region.

offering coordinated with the kitchenware companies Pastamatic and Italinox (16,000 shares were sold within hours). From its very name, the channel signalled its ambitions to secure a prominent place on viewers' television remote controls, reflecting a desire to become, in all respects, the third channel of Italian television. In three years, the shareholders were 50.000 (Anon. 1980a), with investment packages available for as little as 10.000 lire (Dotto and Piccinini 2006: 78).

The broadcaster's launch took place between 3 and 5 November 1977, with a three-day sumptuous *gala*, relayed across Italy by twenty other local stations, including TeleSanterno and Videogruppo. The event garnered significant visibility and extensive coverage in regional and national press (Anon. 1977a and 1977b; Caris 1977; Danè 1981; Di Rienzo 1977; Pedranzini 1978).

With its signal reaching a wide part of Northern Italy, the station offered a potential viewership of over ten million, in a region responsible for nearly a third of national GDP and home to around one-fifth of all operational television sets in the country. The inauguration of what soon became "the major among the smaller broadcasters", as described by much of the Italian press (see for example Caris 1977: 9), received considerable attention.⁷ An article in *l'Espresso* of 19 June 1977 (Di Rienzo 1977: 30) highlighted the proximity of Antenna 3's production hub to Milan—"the driving force of the nation's economy"—underlining its strategic significance. In an editorial from *Il Giorno* dated 27 July 1977 (Bruno 1977: 29), Villa pledged to "steer as far as possible away from politics," while *Il Settimanale*, in its coverage of the "Legnano battle", emphasised how "the public will be able to enter Antenna 3's studios freely to see first-hand how television operates" (Blondet 1977: 41). The press also noted how Antenna 3's initial adventurous spirit had evolved into a more structured industrial model, particularly in the management of advertising, which was handled by an internal *concessionaire*. Sipa – Società Italiana Pubblicità e Affini⁸ was able to engage both major national clients and local advertisers, maintaining a direct relationship with its sponsors and involving them in pioneering marketing initiatives.

A few days after the launch, Villa stated: "We are starting solidly, in the Lombard way, with our feet on the ground and clear ideas" (Anon. 1977a: 35). Owing to its scale and technical facilities, Antenna 3 was regarded as a modern television production centre; moreover, it hosted training courses in professional operations led by Cino Tortorella, who directed several of the station's most significant productions and helped establish a highly skilled team of directors, cameramen and technicians. The infrastructure comprised five studios—including a main auditorium with 1200 seats—along with control rooms, offices, service areas, storage facilities and a public café. It boasted an advanced network of antennas, towers, and transmitters, as well as mobile units for outside broadcasts. With a core staff of approximately 50 employees, rising to nearly 200 during peak periods, the station's operation was a complex undertaking. By 1978, Antenna 3 began third-party production and rented its facilities to national and international clients. Notably, Libyan television produced a drama on-site, and Jean-Bédél Bokassa, then emperor of the Central African Republic, contemplated producing some programmes at the Legnano studios.⁹

Producing television demanded substantial investment, and programming schedules acted as vehicles for audience engagement, and thus revenue, tightly intertwined with the advertising market. Grounded in these principles, Antenna 3 defined its identity with a strategy of measured experimentation guided by public response. With nine hours of daily programming, the channel positioned itself from the outset as an entertainment-focused channel. Antenna 3 was conceived as a family television: transversal and daily programming, aimed at all age groups, appealing to an audience keen on enjoyment, relaxation and play. The era of full success (roughly 1978–1983) coincided with the founder's belief that "this *omnibus* would soon acquire express-train speed" (Anon. 1980b). In a 1980 feature by major television weekly magazine *TV, Sorrisi e Canzoni* (Cerrai 1980: 21), he said: "We always viewed TV as a domain for the few *élite* and now, with our channel, we succeeded, in one region, in surpassing [...] even Rai's national viewership." Yet Antenna 3 did not confine itself to entertainment. From the start, it included a daily newscast, thanks to synergy with daily newspaper *Il Giorno*,

7. ATLAS researchers found that it featured in at least 27 daily newspapers.

8. The name wasn't accidental: Sipa was the in-house advertising body at Rai, and Antenna 3's *concessionaire* became consequently known as "Sipa without the r".

9. This detail is evident from the extensive industrial documentation preserved in the broadcaster's paper archive, kindly made available by Wally Giambelli and Alessandro Di Milia. One of the latest television shows produced in Legnano and sold externally was *Il Grillo parlante* (1986), featuring Italian comedian Beppe Grillo and sold to Euro Tv (Bussola 2012: 63).



Fig. 2. – Promotional *brochure* showcasing Antenna 3's production facilities (courtesy of Wally Giambelli and Mediapason; image archived in the ATLAS project's database).

then owned by Eni, Italy's largest petroleum group. The collaboration increased the newspaper's circulation by over 80% within Antenna 3's reception area. Afternoon programming targeted younger viewers, featuring, for example, *Telebigino* (*Tele-study guide*, hosted by Cino Tortorella and songwriter/teacher Roberto Vecchioni, designed to help complete homework assignments), alongside early-evening cultural magazine slots. In 1980, the station temporarily emphasised informational content: following the devastating earthquake in the Southern region of Irpinia, Antenna 3 interrupted its usual lineup to dedicate several prime-time slots to in-depth reporting from Campania, thus highlighting its role in contrast to Rai's centralised coverage.

"I always nurtured the dream of owning a TV station to communicate directly with people, to reach the heart of the audience," Villa said in a 1984 interview (mentioned in Villa Re. and Villa Ro. 2010: 47), still unaware of the severe financial challenges ahead, which led Antenna 3 first to transition in *Espansione Tv* (1987, following a capital injection of seven billion lire), then in other syndications (1989) (Barca and Novella 1997; Bartolomei and Bernabei 1990), finally to be absorbed by Sandro Parenzo's Mediapason group in 2004. Prior to its formal collapse, it is worth noting the repeated attempts by Silvio Berlusconi to acquire the station; after multiple refusals from Villa, Berlusconi adopted one of the strategies behind the success of his own network: offering significantly higher remuneration to Antenna 3's top talents. As a result, in 1985 alone, the station lost many high-profile personalities who moved to Fininvest channels (Nicotri 1984; Giovanelli 2003). The consequent redirection of advertising towards national networks precipitated the rapid, inexorable decline of Antenna 3, exacerbated by the outsourcing of part of its advertising revenue to external agencies, while only a few national circuits consolidated.



Fig. 3. – Promotional materials featuring some of the most popular prime-time productions of the channel; Renzo Villa is clearly visible alongside the mascot Ciuffo (courtesy of Wally Giambelli and Mediapason; image archived in the ATLAS project's digital exhibition).

3 In Full Colours: Entertainment Shows and Commercial Attitude

When examining Antenna 3's prime-time productions in its peak years, a distinct aura of craftsmanship emerges, suggesting both creative intent and technical ambition. It is very rare to find traces of amateurishness, technical inadequacy, or the rudimentary execution typical of several contemporary counterparts; on the contrary, from its inception, the Legnano-based local channel carefully conceived its programming and assembled its offering with thoughtful structure, even aligning to try to meet Rai standards in terms of rhythm, stylistic coherence and technological sophistication. Drawing on the station's partially digitised productions and archived records, it is evident that the genre of entertainment dominated Antenna 3's prime-time schedule.

Especially through evening shows, Antenna 3 responded to a widespread appetite for light-hearted content and escapism, endorsing what Sangiovanni (2013: 69) refers to as the "right to entertainment". This was the driving force behind a programme roster rich in variety shows, game formats and musical features. Such a mission is especially clear in the many shows which reinterpreted the traditional variety model, blending cabaret, music, *revue* theatre, and even some elements of *vaudeville* and circus.¹⁰ Another consistent thread across Antenna 3's landmark shows was the presence of an irreverent, unpredictable and sometimes subversive humour. Villa himself recruited writers and comedians from the celebrated Derby Club in Milan, a crucial venue at the time, offering to talents a space in Legnano to develop and showcase their craft: among those who reached their artistic maturity there were Massimo Boldi, Armando Celso, Gino e Michele, Giorgio Faletti, Ric e Gian, Teo Teocoli, Mauro Di Francesco, and Zuzzurro e Gaspere. Moreover, the station integrated several local performers from nearby theatrical and musical groups, reflecting a conscious ambition, emphasised also in archival documents, to represent and give voice to the region's vibrant cultural vitality.

10. For brevity, this article cannot explore the full range of shows offered by Antenna 3 and archived in the ATLAS database. With regard to cabaret and comedy shows, other titles include *Lo squizzofrenico* (roughly translatable as *The Squizzophrenic*, a comic take on "schizophrenic", 1981-83, hosted by Roberto Brivio), *Non lo sapessi ma lo so* (*If I Didn't Know It, I'd Still Know It*, 1982, featuring Teo Teocoli and Massimo Boldi), and *Il guazzabuglio* (*The Hodgepodge*, 1984, hosted by Teo Teocoli). Excerpts of many shows are on Historica: <https://historica.unibo.it/handle/20.500.14008/81141> (last accessed: 01-10-2025).

Within this creative *milieu*, Villa and his team initially planned to feature a different production each evening, with the sole exception of one weekly film slot in the schedule. As Ettore Andenna—one of the station's most celebrated hosts, with a lengthy Rai career—recalled during an interview:¹¹

It was through entertainment that our television took a leap forward, becoming a school for all. [...] In Antenna 3, we were free to build and experiment, imagining something truly new. It was an undertaking by seven individuals—the “magnificent seven”, as I call them: Villa and Tortora, first of all, then Enzo Gatta, Lucio Flauto, Beppe Recchia, Cino Tortorella and myself. [...] Villa and Tortora gave me complete freedom to invent.

To better understand some of the distinctive features of Antenna 3's entertainment offering it is therefore useful to examine a selection of the channel's flagship shows, identified through the close analysis of the wide *corpus* of audiovisual materials granted to ATLAS researchers, as well as through interviews with Wally Giambelli, the widow of Villa.

A first programme worth highlighting is *Il pomofiore* (lit. *The Tomato Flower*), initially on TeleAltoMilanese and, from 1981 onwards, on Antenna 3. Modelled on *La corrida*, a popular radio show broadcast since 1968 and later adapted for television on Canale 5 in 1986, it featured a competition among amateur performers in a deliberately rustic format. Hosted by Enzo Tortora and later by Lucio Flauto (a former variety performer known for introducing the Beatles at their iconic 1965 concert in Milan; see Anon. 1980b), the show presented singers, mimics, and comedians in grotesque performances. Audience participation was central: studio spectators were allowed to throw vegetables or flowers onto the stage as a form of judgment; these were collected by the *spigolatrici* (gleaners), showgirls who appeared with playful, flirtatious gestures designed to entertain and provoke. The programme—a forerunner of modern talent and people shows—stood out for the extent of its audience engagement, its irreverent tones, and the hosts' charisma. On more than one occasion, the studio was replaced by the football stadium in Busto Arsizio, to accommodate the crowds willing to participate.

Another cult favourite in Antenna 3's line-up was *La bustarella* (lit. *The Small Bribe*), aired between 1978 and 1984 and hosted by Andenna. Drawing inspiration from the spirit of village *fêtes*, local competitions and countryside fairs, the show featured team-based games combining elements of chance and physical challenges, often sponsored by partner companies (Baroni 2005: 73). The format was influenced by the pan-European *Jeux sans frontières*, developed by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), in which Andenna had served as the Italian host shortly before *La bustarella*'s launch. In its 283 episodes, the show worked as a testing ground for many games that would later be adopted in international editions of *Jeux sans frontières*. Absurd and amusing, imbued with a light-hearted tone, *La bustarella* offered a stage for joyous contestants. The pacing of each episode was carefully calibrated to maximise dynamism and involvement, eliminating stasis through live telephone interactions which allowed team representatives to communicate with viewers at home. As Andenna recalls (quoted in Villa Re. and Villa Ro. 2010: 89):

On 1 February 1978, we decided to produce the first four episodes of *La bustarella* without any advertising coverage. [...] Villa took the risk and won. From the fifth episode onwards, every single commercial slot was sold. We were making up to 100 million lire per episode.

Reportedly, Berlusconi himself was irritated by the programme's record-breaking ratings, which in Lombardy normally outperformed both Rai's second channel and Fininvest's Canale 5. Its popularity, confirmed by a Telegatto award in 1984, was such that it was even referenced in Rai's 1978-79 audience research reports investigating the reasons behind the growing appeal of local TV (Anon. 1978; 1979).

A third example which sheds light on Antenna 3's remarkable creative vitality is *Bingooo*, a musical take on bingo involving live studio participation. Broadcast until 1987 and totalling 420 episodes, the show was hosted by Villa himself: he was praised for his gentle style, his warm voice, and his spontaneity with contestants. Airing every Tuesday night, the programme was loosely based on the traditional game popular in the UK and the US yet enriched with distinctly Italian twists and regionally adapted rounds. Prizes included an impressive array of sponsor-provided items: cars, mink coats, shopping vouchers for local supermarkets, holiday travels,

11. The in-depth interview with Andenna was made in Grazzano Badoglio (Asti) on June 22, 2024. Excerpts of all interviews used in this article are in the database: <https://historica.unibo.it/handle/20.500.14008/81141> (last accessed: 01-10-2025).

and even diamond jewellery (Camfa 1978); roughly half a million households participated annually via a system of pre-printed postcards sent to the station (Cerrai 1979).

One of the main features that becomes evident when reviewing Antenna 3's main entertainment shows is that the broadcaster's commercial imperatives served as a key driver of its creative output: the integration of commercial content transformed the station's formats and stylistic codes, adapting them to suit the promotional needs of its sponsors. The brands were not merely acknowledged but explicitly showcased, frequently mentioned by the hosts and prominently displayed on camera during most live segments, particularly when prizes were introduced or awarded.



Fig. 4. – Enzo Tortora (left) is one of the guests of Renzo Villa (right) in one episode of *Bingooo* (1978) (courtesy of Wally Giambelli and Mediapason; image archived in the project's database).

Antenna 3's flagship programmes were saturated with logos and branded graphics, seamlessly woven into the shows' narrative and visual structure. Branding appeared not only on sets and costumes, but also in comedic sketches, phone-in contests, and game segments. In shows as *Bingooo*, *La bustarella* and *Il pomofiore*, up to eighteen products could be showcased and promoted in a single evening. At a moment when mass communication was reshaping the relationship between consumers and businesses, and a new promotional space on both private and public television emerged (Canova 2004; Codeluppi 2013; Falabrino 1989; Scrocco, Taggi and Zanacchi 1987), commercial goods and their brands thus became core characters in Antenna 3's programming. Regional broadcasters provided an outlet for many companies previously excluded from national commercial exposure.¹² The Legnano channel quickly became a strategic platform for visibility in a region undergoing intense economic expansion (the area between Brescia, Milano and Varese accounted for 5–7% of the European Community's total GDP in the early 1980s). Through Sipa, Antenna 3 gradually refined its commercial ability, establishing long-term partnerships with major multinational corporations. As former commercial director Angelo Costanza remarked, the decision to rely on an in-house advertising agency from the outset proved a considerable strategic advantage:

In just a couple of years, we saw a real surge in clients, including some big, prestigious names. We managed to build a strong and effective sales network, and by 1979, we were nearly hitting a turnover of nine billion lire. [...] Let me tell you a little story. Braun came to Antenna 3 with

12. A 1980 estimate showed for instance that nearly two-third of potential advertisers couldn't access the small screen because of market entry barriers still imposed by the public broadcaster (Capuzzo 2006: 102).

their top executives from Germany, and they said: “wherever your channel’s signal reaches, we sell the Minipimer. Where it doesn’t, we don’t. If you expand your coverage, we’ll flood you with money”. It was an extraordinary result; we were real pioneers in the sector. [...] At some point, we were even forced to decline advertising requests due to the sheer volume of requests.¹³

Advertising, fully integrated into both the content and structure of the station’s output, became the primary vehicle through which Antenna 3 connected with—and gave voice to—local enterprise. It was the sponsors themselves who shaped the tastes and desires of the audience, in line with the station’s broader promise of freedom, indulgence and audience empowerment. In this context, the provincial identity of Antenna 3 acquires an additional layer of significance. With the rise of large-scale retail and the pervasive spread of mass-market consumer goods across Italy (Gundle 2006; Sassatelli 2004), it was precisely the provinces, beyond the major centres, that played an increasingly influential role. Moving away from an ethic of austerity and self-restraint, these areas embraced a consumerist *belle époque* (Fasce, Bini and Gaudenzi 2016), where Antenna 3’s commercially driven entertainment found fertile ground.

4 Conclusion: the Value of Entertainment

The general evolution of Antenna 3 and its programming, the three main case studies, and the crucial entanglements between creative and commercial aspects provide clear evidence of the entertainment genre’s predominance in the channel’s schedules and in its late-Seventies and early-Eighties success. Such a clear orientation takes into account many underlying factors and serves multiple functions, shaping the channel’s proposal and core values through prime-time shows and games.

Firstly, Antenna 3’s programming offered escapist shows aimed at a broad, family-oriented audience to achieve and maintain a mainstream dimension. As already observed, entertainment works here as a kind of *lingua franca*—a shared, common language—carefully balancing attention to more traditional segments of the television audience with openness to evolving tastes and younger viewers. The constant goal, though ultimately unattainable, is a balance between tradition and innovation (Carminati 1979).

Secondly, the network’s major entertainment titles oscillate between familiarity, closeness to everyday life, and escapism, while also fostering a sense of estrangement from it. On the one hand, thus, thanks to its entertainment offer, the channel aligns to the ideal of a “dream television” (Ortoleva 1995): phantasmagorical, suspended in a self-contained dimension and detached, when and if necessary, from reality, through the evocation of a temporality in-between an idealised present and an equally idealised past. Yet, as has been shown, entertainment on Antenna 3 also serves as a platform to celebrate local cultures, dialects, and folkloric elements, even if it never fully embraces the excesses of a so-called “backyard television” (Serra 1979). Such an ongoing revival of popular repertoires reflects a broader return to tradition—often in a sort of their “televised invention” (Grasso 2004)—which may be interpreted as a tacit or deliberate response to anxieties surrounding global cultural flows and homogenisation. However, provincialism becomes the building ground (and sometimes, even, an excuse) for an offer presented as modern, innovative, and different from others. Similar coincidences of opposites are seen at other local stations and at Antenna 3, also in the softcore elements in some night programming, with both modern and naïve features (Barra and Rossi 2026).

Thirdly, entertainment concerns the channel’s success in building a deliberate sense of closeness and immediacy with its audience, and even in fostering renewed, direct forms of engagement and interaction with the most active portion of local viewers. Revisiting excerpts from the channel’s flagship shows reveals a gallery of human and anthropological types caught in their naivety, aspirations and ambitions: far more than local newscasts or sports coverage—which have never found a strong foothold at Antenna 3—it is variety and game programming that effectively seemed to unite an otherwise dispersed community of people. This is what Ortoleva (1995) refers to as the “utopia of community television”, a model that dissolves the boundaries between the TV set and the outside world, between broadcasting and the local territory, fostering a dynamic interplay among television, its audience, and the whole society. Antenna 3 forges a direct, strong connection with both its viewers and the region it serves, through a relationship cultivated by the presence and active

13. The interview with Angelo Costanza was realised in Azzate (Varese) on 25 June 2024.

participation of live studio audiences, as well as by extensive use of telephone interactions. These elements contribute to shaping the channel's communal spirit, giving rise to an early participatory culture, reflected in the then-contemporary newspaper discourse.

It is against this backdrop that Antenna 3 captures the need to give voice and visibility to local realities, with their desire for expression and meaningful engagement. This continuous dialogue fosters a sense of belonging, cultivated both on-screen and in the studio. The ambitious local channel extends an open invitation to “be there”: viewers are not only invited to watch but to appear, perform and seize a fleeting moment of visibility. In doing so, the boundaries between public and private become sites of constant negotiation. Antenna 3's prime-time programmes brought to the fore an Italy that had long remained outside Rai's field of vision; as Villa recalled in an interview with *TV Sorrisi e Canzoni* in 1979:

When we started out, it felt strange to find ourselves inside a talking box: everything was new, everything seemed possible. [...] You had the impression that joining that world was, all in all, easy: everyone wanted to “enter” it. [...] The real owner of Antenna 3 is the people, who need to throw tomatoes to feel involved in every decision.

Angelo Costanza, the station's commercial director, also emphasises the emotional bond with audiences as the company's greatest asset: “Every evening, five nights a week, people would queue up to get into the studios. [...] They wanted to perform, to be on camera. [...] There were traffic jams at the highway tollgate. It was madness!”¹⁴ This resonance in the daily lives of viewers, thanks to the entertainment show, is also at the foundation of the channel's positioning in a crowded market, in its competition with other, less distinctive, offers, and in its commercial strategies and tactics to meet advertisers' goals.

Entertainment, as a genre and in some of its formats, has therefore played a strategic role in Antenna 3's overall strategy and scheduling practices. With average runtimes of up to four hours, these unscripted shows allowed the channel to occupy vast portions of airtime with a flexibility rarely afforded by other, more rigid titles. Characterised by both genuine and staged improvisation, these long-form programmes represent a celebration of live broadcasting and uninterrupted flow, qualities intrinsic to the medium itself. Their modular structure—comprising thematic spaces and returning segments, often directly linked to advertised products—lies at the heart of the commercial model. Given that entertainment was self-produced, its primary function was to construct a space functional to advertising, drawing sponsors to sustain costly original productions.

For Antenna 3, the entertainment programming offered in its initial, growth, and rapid development phases was a distinctive feature and a tangible sign of the project's ambitions, as well as of the clear transformation of local broadcasters into profit-oriented companies in contact with an audience of consumers and advertisers. This impetus was an integral part of a cultural climate characterised by the so-called “riflusso”, in which the noble ideals of participation and egalitarianism of the previous decade gave way to unabridged individualism, asserting consumption as a right, the seduction of well-being and the liberation of customs and commodities (Ciofalo 1980, Colombo 2012, Gozzini 2011). Antenna 3 both benefited from this climate and helped to shape it. However, the sincere optimism and the drive towards the future of the early years soon had to contend with a more nuanced and complex reality, including strategic errors and a more intense competition than expected. And so, the long-term financial unsustainability of many of Antenna 3's flagship shows—despite their significant advertising revenues—emerges as one of the key factors behind the station's economic difficulties in the second half of the 1980s. In the absence of a diversified content strategy and due to a severe imbalance between in-house productions and third-party acquisitions, the channel's orientation towards entertainment paradoxically became one of the main causes of its crisis. What had put the channel on the map with such great success in the first place, later contributed to its profound, necessary redefinition.

14. As stated in the already-quoted interview.

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