

Aliens in Emilia-Romagna: TeleSanterno from Local Roots to National Entertainment*

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Submitted: September 30, 2025 – Accepted: October 8, 2025 – Published: December 22, 2025

Abstract

The article reconstructs the historical trajectory of TeleSanterno, a private television channel located in the rich broadcasting context of the Emilia-Romagna region. After detailing some methodological challenges involved in researching a “minor” case history without proper audiovisual and documental archives, and with ageing, nostalgic expert informants, the traces collected of audiovisual sources, oral accounts, and print materials are triangulated to highlight the evolution of the local network from its pirate start to its consolidation, and later its failure. Founded in 1974 as a small experimental and amateur local broadcaster, TeleSanterno was rapidly acquired by entrepreneur Domenico Berti, who included it into his large portfolio of industrial assets. With strong ambition and many creative and economic investments, the channel combined a strong connection with the local territories and the willingness to provide entertainment shows able to compete, at least partially, with national outlets and the other more ambitious private networks. The broadcast of a fake UFO landing on the hills of Imola, in 1979, contributed to promote the channel and made it known across all the region, and beyond, opening a phase of increased visibility, thanks to original productions and the involvement of already popular personalities, as Daniele Piombi, Walter Chiari and Ilona Staller (Cicciolina). This strong effort was not adequately compensated by revenues, resulting in the bankruptcy. TeleSanterno shows well the constant tension between local grounding and national imageries, the great expectations and the concrete day-to-day work to build its programming and identity.

Keywords: Audiovisual archives; Broadcasting; Emilia-Romagna; Local television; Television history.

Acknowledgements

This contribution is one of the results of the wider research on TeleSanterno 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 Emiliano Rossi and Luca Antoniazzi. The authors express their gratitude to Fabrizio Colliva, for setting the first contact with the professionals involved in TeleSanterno and for making available to the researchers his previous work collecting and digitising the channel’s audiovisual archive. The in-depth interviews to Domenico Berti, Giampaolo Gulmanelli, Raffaele Matteucci, Fabio Orsi, Gabriella Pirazzini, and Tonino Ronchi provided useful insights, and the authors thank all the informants for their kind availability.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Domenico Berti and Giuliana Bendanti Berti.

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

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1 Introduction. The Context, and Some Methodological Challenges

In the broader context of the rapid and disorderly development of local television broadcasting in Italy during the latter half of the 1970s, Emilia-Romagna was an important region. This rich, industrious area was pervaded by social and political movements and divided into many neighbouring communities that were at the same time closely connected and somehow rivals—and each community claimed and built its own television station, and often more than one. The result was a large number of broadcasting experiences directly connected to grassroots movements, political parties—with an especially active role by the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), which for a long time has been a stronghold in the region—, small and medium companies, and cooperatives. Examples of local channels include Punto Radio TV (later rebranded as Nuova Televisione – NTV), TeleReggio, TeleModena, TeleRadioBologna, Tele Rubicone, and Tele Zola, all of which vividly represent in their names and cities a mobile scenery of competition and collaboration. All these experiences aimed to tell the stories of their stratified territories, to mobilize local communities, and to inform and entertain in ways that were explicitly different from public service broadcaster Rai (Bartolomei, Bernabei 1983; Colliva 2015).

In this multifaceted context, one interesting and relevant story is the one of TeleSanterno. This local television station began as a pirate broadcaster in 1974, one of the first to transmit in colour, and soon reflected the ambitions of a small local entrepreneur named Domenico Berti, who devoted himself to this venture for a decade. The channel is named after the Santerno River, which is an ideal geographical link between the two parts of the region, Emilia and Romagna, with Imola and its surroundings occupying an intermediate position. Similarly, in the heyday of its programming, the station's signal managed to cover both sides, extending well into neighbouring regions. Initially, in a context often characterized by strong political impulses and positions, TeleSanterno linked itself somewhat instrumentally to the Catholic area, but very soon it developed an alternative model of mainstream entertainment that was essentially apolitical. Despite its strongly provincial nature, clear commercial needs emerged, evident in highly appealing shows featuring nationally renowned stars, in highly discussed promotional stunts, and in a constant attention to advertising, and direct connections with other local economic and entrepreneurial activities. This article aims therefore to highlight and reconstruct the story of TeleSanterno channel, which unfolded over ten years across the Seventies and Eighties. It traces the channel's uncertain beginnings, its increasingly clear objectives, the search for a space in the regional context (and beyond), a growing public interest, the rise and fall. This is one of the many stories that build the commercialization process of Italian broadcasting and risks being forgotten or entrusted to anecdotal memory: a story of hope and failure and, in its own way, an example of the window of opportunity that opened, and quickly closed too, with local private television.

Reconstructing TeleSanterno's trajectory in detail presented a considerable series of methodological struggles that had to be overcome, circumvented, and compensated for. As with the other case histories in the ATLAS project, in addition to secondary literature, newspapers and magazines, and institutional documents, the three main original sources have been the channel's audiovisual archive of programs, the company documents and working materials related to the network, and the in-depth interviews with several professionals involved in the venture. In each of these areas, the research on TeleSanterno faced significant and inevitable limitations. Regarding the programming, the archive of early broadcasts of the channel has largely been dispersed and lost, due to bankruptcies and changes in ownership. No space, formal or informal, preserves adequate amounts of the main shows and other programmes. Only the careful recovery of some private magnetic tape recordings, then digitized, has made it possible to track at least a few programs and other fragments of what has been broadcast on the network. This material, collected and prepared for documentary purposes by Fabrizio Colliva, has been made available in its entirety to the researchers, granting access to at least some of TeleSanterno's news and entertainment content. This is a very limited set of titles in relation to the complete programming, and a random collection of it too. Nevertheless, the material includes some of the channel's most significant and debated programs, and also extends to minor, apparently peripheral parts, such as advertising breaks and bumpers, thus giving a hint of the viewing experience and the brand evolution. Even working documents, such as scripts, schedules, contracts, market research, and investor relations, are no longer (if ever) archived, so the totality of these materials has been lost long time ago. Some compensation has been then provided by a handful of other relevant texts, particularly photographs taken in the television studios and other workspaces. These photographs were taken and preserved by professionals in their private albums and shared with the

researchers. They often capture famous figures passing through TeleSanterno or moments of fun, familiarity, and even intimacy, helping to restore at least some traces of the working dynamics, relationships, and general atmosphere at the time.

Regarding the in-depth interviews, finally, the situation has been very complex. It was only possible to meet with the TeleSanterno founder and the majority of the professionals on a single date, on March 11, 2023. They all met in a group setting, in a shared space at the country home of Domenico Berti and his wife, Giuliana Bendanti; their daughter allowed and mediated the meeting. For many of them, it was the first time in many years that these individuals, who had shared the channel's professional adventure decades before, met again; everyone had gone on to lead very different lives. So, this was a (final) opportunity to meet and celebrate. Some interviewees, as the founder, were elderly, tired, and with increasingly imprecise memories. All these factors made the whole day, and all the individual and group in-depth interviews, very emotionally charged for everyone involved, including the researchers: the project provided an opportunity for this group of expert informants to share long-delayed experiences, reconstruct precious memories, and engage in grateful conversation with their former colleagues. The awareness of a unique and very exceptional moment compensated, at least in part, for the inevitable inaccuracies. Limited opportunities for subsequent discussion with one professional—as well as access to other interviews conducted years earlier for Fabrizio Colliva's documentary project—made it then possible to enrich, complete, and sometimes verify the various testimonies collected on the main field day. And this gave further solidity to the results, life stories, and understanding of past production cultures.

Despite the many difficulties of accessing programs, documents, and interviews, the interest and quantity of materials collected as part of the research¹—cross-referenced and triangulated with other available information—has made it possible to precisely and thoroughly reconstruct and map the broadcaster's trajectory, including its main nodes and general trends. Thus, TeleSanterno can become another piece in the rich mosaic of the explosion and development of Italian local TVs.

2 From Experimental Illegitimacy to Local Legitimacy (1974-1979)

The history of TeleSanterno began in Spring 1974, when Tonino Ronchi, an amateur and electrical appliance trader from Casalfiumanese, installed a repeater on a hill near Imola (Giovannini 2000: 107). His aim was not to establish a local television station, but to repeat the colour signals of TV Koper-Capodistria (Yugoslavia), and Swiss public television, both broadcasting in Italian language. That same year, Sentence 225 of the Italian Constitutional Court legalised the installation of equipment for receiving foreign channels, which, unlike the public service television (Rai), were already broadcasting in colour (Ortoleva 1995: 67; Menduni 2018: 17–18). This practice aimed to stimulate new consumption by opening a market for colour television sets, which had been penalised by Rai's impasse (Gipponi 2024: 24–25; Gabrielli 1987). In fact, Ronchi candidly admits that he aimed to receive foreign signals to encourage people to buy colour televisions in his shop (Ronchi 2023).² However, he went even further: exploiting the signal of Istrian television, Ronchi began to broadcast from his basement, intermittently and irregularly, still images, pre-recorded sequences (such as a bicycle race) or the footage taken at the *Fiera del Santerno*, which is remembered as the first “public showing” of this newly born channel (Giovannini 2000: 114). It is still the phase of the “illegal genesis” of local broadcasting, yet the cultural climate, especially in Emilia-Romagna, supportive of a “decentralised communication experience from below” (Dondi 2022: 278, 282) and of a new “public service” with a communal or regional character (Sangiovanni 2013: 70), helped the development of this and other such experiences.

However, public service does not necessarily entail socio-political commitment. Ronchi's programming broadcasted local events, such as festivals, competitions and sports, as well as entertainment: the first editions of *Scacciapensieri* (lit. *Jaw Harp*, 1974–1977) began, hosted by DJ Gaetano Vecci, a local singer and record dealer

1. 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 AMS Historica collections: <https://historica.unibo.it/collections/feb5410b-ce30-4e26-b3d5-6639dad59c89> (last accessed: 01-10-2025).

2. Excerpts of many interviews are in the database: <https://historica.unibo.it/handle/20.500.14008/81141> (last accessed: 01-10-2025).

from Imola. On winter weekends, Vecci would bring his record player in Ronchi's basement in Casalfiumanese, Via Montanara 90, introduce the song, and get the young people present dancing, all while being filmed on camera. "We also had the idea of allowing telephone calls for dedications," explains Ronchi (2023). The concept came from radio but anticipated a device typical of late 1970s television entertainment.

1976 was "the turning point" (Giovannini 2000: 107). With the Constitutional Court's ruling 202, broadcasting on a "local scale" was legitimised, allowing experiences such as the one by Ronchi to be legalised, and opening new possibilities for growth and investment. Channels multiplied, with "almost every locality having its own station with the prefix 'tele-'" (Barra *et al.* 2024: 95–96), such as TeleSanterno, which began official broadcasts. Ronchi claimed ownership of the name, which echoes that of the Santerno River, flowing through Imola and Casalfiumanese. However, "Santerno" is also a recurring trademark of the group headed by Imola entrepreneur Domenico Berti, who at the end of the year took over the small broadcaster (Sorgi 1983).

Berti has "the classic biography of the provincial self-made man" (n.a. 1979): he started his business in 1963 and soon earned the respect of many regional politicians. By 1975, he had built a "small empire", comprising the renowned Ceramiche Santerno S.p.A., which had a turnover of 5 billion lire and 260 employees, as well as the industrial engineering company SIM and Elettronica Santerno. He was also a councillor at the Cassa di Risparmio di Imola (Imola Savings Bank) and sponsored motorsport competitions (Sorgi 1983). Decades later, Berti recalls that he had a reputation as a "company doctor", a "saviour" of businesses in crisis. Once taken over, these failing businesses were healed thanks to the profits of the companies he already owned (Berti 2023). However, in this case, the profits went into constructing a company from almost scratch. The year after the takeover, the new television station moved to studios in Via Fratelli Cervi 6. These were in a renovated former fruit warehouse and were equipped with state-of-the-art cameras and technology (Giovannini 2000: 108).

One day in 1976, a young graduate of the Bologna Academy of Fine Arts named Fabio Orsi tuned to channel 40 (TeleSanterno), where he saw an advertisement that promoted courses for professionals as "part of the station's future development". Berti indeed launched free training courses for workers, and Orsi and others joined under the supervision of Giampaolo Gulmanelli, the director of a large number of the channel's original programmes (Orsi 2023b). In July 1977, a second cycle of courses in "electronic television filming" aimed at "young graduates in electronics or telecommunications, or other filming experts interested in specialising as operators" was held (n.a. 1977a). Enters Raffaele Matteucci, a cameraman who, decades later, recounts in his testimony having worked without pay at TeleSanterno for at least four years: "I really thought it was useless to do a normal job, to pass the weekend spending money looking for what was already there: namely, a job you liked and beautiful women. Moral of the story: I went, and I said I was going for free. Otherwise, I wouldn't have got in." For Matteucci, at least, the symbolic capital accumulated at TeleSanterno was worth far more than the economic one. This explains his posthumous deference to Berti, whose entrepreneurial rationality he justifies even in the face of legitimate labour demands (Matteucci 2023).

After all, the regularly paid staff was reduced to the bare minimum. Until 1980, the TV station only had four permanent employees (n.a. 1979). Until 1980, the channel manager is Demos Palladini, a member of Imola's Christian Democratic Party (Orsi 2024). This reflects the channel's initial ties and good relationship with the local Catholic establishment. In 1977, *Il Diario Messaggero*, the diocese's weekly, began publishing the new TV station's schedules, although this was immediately challenged by a letter from a reader accusing TeleSanterno of broadcasting a pornographic film. The weekly's response to this letter was the perfect opportunity to make the conditions of collaboration explicit by way of warning: "If this were to happen again, it would no longer be possible for us to continue with the requested publication" (n.a. 1977d). Nevertheless, the relationship continued without too many problems for a few years, and a diocesan priest was pleased that TeleSanterno gave space to the "local church", with celebrations and religious programmes, leaving the door open for other forms of joint activity (Giacometti 1977: 166). However, this did not make TeleSanterno a confessional or politically aligned network. Although ideologically moderate (Orsi 2024), Berti cultivated important relationships with individuals and institutions in Imola across the political spectrum, instrumental in enabling him to run an editorial and commercial enterprise without interference. This initial support played a crucial role in launching the television venture, although it faded with the emergence of economic and legal problems for Berti's group (Sorgi, 1983). But politics was just one factor involved, as the programming was primarily dictated by commercial considerations (n.a. 1979). It was not possible indeed to alienate an ideologically diverse audience, which

clearly included many voters of the Italian Communist Party, deeply rooted in Imola and the 'red region' of Emilia-Romagna. When the network scheduled political tribunes and talk shows related to local and national elections—profitable, low-cost formats that increasingly incorporated entertainment elements—it included members of all parties. Furthermore, the channel sold airtime for the electoral campaigns of both the Radical Party of Marco Pannella and far-left parties (Orsi, 2024).

Palladini's overall role was indeed marginal, politically and administratively speaking, and the channel remained strictly family-run. Berti's wife, Giuliana Bendanti, was the general coordinator and "all-rounder", initiating programming, supervising content, coordinating the workforce, and writing some of the on-screen texts (Colliva 2015). Her brother, Michele Bendanti, was the programmes' director (n.a. 1979). This family structure, the porosity and flexibility of internal working relations and the multiple roles concentrated in few individuals tunes in TeleSanterno with the "Third Italy", the socio-economic context emerging in Central and North-Eastern Italy at the time. It was characterised by small and medium-sized family-run businesses that stood out from both the large-scale industry of the northern cities and the traditional agricultural economy of the South (Bagnasco 1978; Bartolini 2016).

Berti himself was personally involved in many stages of the process. His former subordinates will say that he was a combination of entrepreneur, visionary and artist. "When he gave us an idea, we became like lumberjacks being sent to Manhattan," recalled Matteucci, using this vivid image to emphasise the gap between Berti's ambitions and their level of expertise and resources (Matteucci 2023). However, Berti's investments paid off at the end of the 1970s: TeleSanterno managed to establish itself in Emilia-Romagna as the "most beautiful station [...] with the greatest resources", as journalist Mauro Roffi of *Millecanali* would say (Colliva 2015). Firstly, the visual quality was due to an increase in signal strength and the multiplication of transmission facilities, which by the end of the 1970s guaranteed the remit to all the Romagna sub-region, Bologna, Modena and part of the province of Reggio Emilia (n.a. 1979). On the other hand, there was a substantial investment in original productions that had to look "decent", as Berti said. Although they were far fewer than films, television series and cartoons purchased on international markets, the engaging original programs were central to Berti's strategy of avoiding the sloppiness associated with local television in order to be competitive (Berti 2023).

However, insisting on quality did not mean abandoning the local side. From 1976 to 1977, the network broadcasted and sponsored fairs, as well as swimming, running, cycling and car races (n.a. 1977b; Sangiorgi 1977). While *Prima comunicazione* writes that the schedule was organised "according to purely commercial criteria", meaning "no information, only films, spectacles and sports", this is only partially true. TeleSanterno did not have a traditional newsreel, but it scheduled political debates and featured several soft news segments edited by the young journalist Gabriella Pirazzini. From 1978, these inserts multiplied and emphasised the channel's decentralised nature, and its deep connection to the territory in which it broadcasted, marking the difference from national Rai newscasts. Interviews, on-location reports and programmes showcased everyday life, while promoting the channel beyond the Santerno Valley. In *Terza pagina* (lit. *Third Page*), an arts show dealing with "problems and cultural events", Pirazzini interviewed artists and intellectuals, focusing on the "intimate and private" to avoid "falling into somewhat boredom" (Cassotti 1980); *Miscellanea* (lit. *Mixed Elements*), on the other hand, was a hybrid show mixing an almanac, cooking and anecdotes with live calls and a horoscope invented by Giuliana Bendanti, all sponsored by Loacker (Pirazzini 2023).

In entertainment genres, *Scacciapensieri* (n.a. 1977e) was joined by a musical variety show hosted by the Bolognese singer and comedian Dino Sarti. Kicca Mauri Cerrato and Ignazio Cerrato, who worked at Rai respectively as a director and editor, provided support behind the scenes. "Working with these professionals greatly enhanced our skills and was extremely beneficial for future productions," writes Orsi (2023a). Another of the network's early successes was *Traguardo a sorpresa* (lit. *Success by Surprise*): during the head titles, host Giorgio Santi emerges from the waters of the Santerno in front of the Alidosi bridge in Castel del Rio, wearing a black suit and top hat and singing in Romagnese dialect, startling the bathers (Gulmanelli 1978). In this "tele-radio-quiz", TeleSanterno collaborated with five local radio stations that acted as mediators between the television institution and the viewers, who had to phone in to answer quiz questions based on archive footage (Giovannini 2000: 108). TeleSanterno's entire light production, then, aimed to position the channel as a friendly neighbour—something viewers could recognise in their daily routines and interact with thanks to

the open telephone lines, and the collaboration with other stations.³

3 A Foundational Episode (1979)

TeleSanterno situated nature is also showcased in what the professionals remember as the channel's foundational episode. During the programme *L'ora del topo* (lit. *The Hour of the Rat*), dedicated to discussing genre films and literature, presenter Eugenio Marchi—a science fiction enthusiast—started to talk about *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), when a phone call announcing the sighting of UFOs on top of the nearby Rocchetta Hill arrived, leading to the cancellation of the evening's plans in favour of covering this alleged alien landing. In truth, this was all a set-up inspired by Orson Welles's radio drama *The War of the Worlds* (1938), an idea of Marchi immediately approved by Berti because of its marketing potential. In fact, the broadcast, which was recorded earlier and aired on the evening of February 1, 1979, created the illusion of live coverage. Marchi sent a crew led by Gianluigi Armaroli of VideoBologna, with Gulmanelli, Orsi and Matteucci, to the top of the hill (Orsi 2023b). They narrated the landing, which was simulated using shadows and light effects (Colliva 2015). Meanwhile, Giovanni Maselli of VideoModena was in the studio with the presenter, commenting on the event and receiving fake phone calls and proposals to connect with other networks. Once again, TeleSanterno tries to legitimise itself through intermediality and references to a shared regional broadcasting landscape. At times, the chronicle of the landing itself took a back seat in favour of a fictional narrative involving made-up radio links with local TV and radio stations across Italy, marked by Marchi on a map of the Italian peninsula. However, the illusion of reality was sometimes undermined by exaggerations such as boasting about connections with NATO and NASA bases, as well as footage of military deployments involving rockets, aircraft carriers and submarines, reused from the material the Italian army provided local TVs for recruitment purposes.

According to Fabio Orsi's testimony (2023a), the communicative and promotional objectives, as well as its status as a playful experiment, were all clear. And the show was also intended to test both the medium's potential and the production skills of the channel's professionals, here involved in various roles:

TeleSanterno was slowly beginning to make a name for itself. We were interested in its success with viewers as in attracting advertisers, because it was something new for everyone [...]. It was all blatantly fake. We had prepared some footage with Medardo, Domenico Berti's handyman, the one dealing with impossible missions. We dressed him in one of those suits used for spraying plants with fungicides, complete with a nice, round helmet. Late in the evening, we filmed him with a shaky camera and improbable lighting. We told him to pretend to be a robot, and he walked like this. And we put everything aside for this broadcast [...]. We started showing these things live and improvised, at least the viewers believed so. We told stories and showed blurred photographs. We aired a bunch of tapes, where you could see this humanoid walking around in the dark. And people went crazy.

One outcome, perhaps unforeseen altogether, was the local uproar created by the event. For fear that someone was falling into a misunderstanding, an overlay was added at one point: "UFO landing simulation". But it was said the network was still flooded with phone calls, the Carabinieri were put on alert, and cars were seen heading for the Rocchetta. Orsi reminds that when the trick was revealed at the end of the program, a belligerent crowd gathered outside the network, so much so that he decided to spend the night inside the studios (Orsi 2023b). The operation guaranteed TeleSanterno a relative space in the regional and national press, which also reported the alleged panic among the population (Zanotti 1979; n.d. 1979b), while Maselli would return to the event in a later programme on VideoModena, explaining his and his station complicity (Colliva 2015). However, the controversy, if there was any, did not drag on, and the network did not suffer any negative consequences. After all, watching the programme from start to finish makes us doubt the scale of the intentions and effects: the fake news is set in a science fiction context, as emphasised in the premise, and the ending brings the "experiment" back to the familiar warning about "media influence" (Orsi 2023b). Rather than an attempt at fake news or a joke, this was, on the one hand, a re-adaptation of Welles's radio drama and an homage to the mythology of the panic it unleashed (Schwartz 2015). On the other hand, it was a parody of a

3. Excerpts of many shows are in the database: <https://historica.unibo.it/handle/20.500.14008/81141> (last accessed: 01-10-2025).

genre (Gray *et al.* 2009: 17-19)—or rather, of an imaginary from abroad (Eghigian 2024) but very present in the Italian pop culture of the time: in fact, the year before news about UFO sightings in Italy, contact with aliens and abductions by extraterrestrials reached its peak of approximately two thousand. This was an astonishing phenomenon, for which only a preliminary chronicle has been traced (Dalla Casa 2019). So far, only fiction has offered an interpretation of the UFO-mania within the framework of national history (Wu Ming 2022) and more has yet to be done on the side of historical research (Palmieri 2023).

4 Local Broadcast, National Stars: Success and Downfall of TeleSanterno (1980-1984)

This story illustrates how, while remaining rooted in the Emilia-Romagna area, TeleSanterno managed to incorporate significant elements of the national imagination of the time. UFOs are part of a wider mosaic characterised by debate about the “reflux” (*riflusso*) into the private sphere and the flight from 1970s politics towards other worlds, such as the paranormal, disco music, intimate feelings, new religions and drugs (Morando 2009; Sangiovanni 2015; Masini 2018). These were all fragments of which Berti’s network became a reflection and container in the early 1980s, as its area of emission expanded. By 1982, the Casalfiumanese channel’s signal covered Emilia-Romagna in its entirety. To the South-East, it reached Pesaro; to the South-West, part of Tuscany. In Lombardy, the signal was received in Mantua and Brescia provinces, while in Veneto, it reached as far as Verona. With 18 repeaters, TeleSanterno was the largest Emilia-Romagna network in terms of potential viewers (n.d. 1982, 1983a).

This raises the question on the dimension of Berti’s ambitions. According to Gulmanelli, “he wanted to create a television channel that could become national over time”. However, Berti stated that he never intended to compete with Rai, but rather “to follow on the experience Rai had acquired in so many areas” (Colliva 2015). While Gulmanelli may be exaggerating in his emphasis, Berti, on the other hand, may be downplaying the scope of his past goals while simultaneously being unable to deny their significance in the events that led to the network’s downfall. However, the ambiguity has never been fully resolved and has remained in all the various accounts, and perhaps it should remain so. Ambivalence is inherent in TeleSanterno, as evidenced also by the dual-track advertising collection. One was entrusted to Lorenzo Niccolini’s STP (n.a. 1979) for the national market from 1979 onwards, while the second was entrusted to less formal network of agents and mini concessionaires who maintained relations with sponsors in Emilia-Romagna (Berti, 2015). What distinguishes TeleSanterno from Antenna3 Lombardia or TeleMilano (Barra and Guarnaccia 2014), and partly explains its fragility, is the absence of its own advertising concessionaire—or at least one belonging to the Berti group.

The simultaneously local and national character is then confirmed by the original productions, even during their heyday. From 1980 onwards, soft news and smaller, more intimate programmes continued, such as *L’angolo della posta* (lit. *The Mail Corner*), hosted by Claudia Testaj and others under Pirazzini’s supervision (V. F. 1982). These programmes emphasised the “direct relationship with the people” by appearing “live even when you were not live”. At the same time, many notable figures starting from Daniele Piombi (Giovannini 2000: 108), along with numerous singers, comedians, performers, and even politicians, gradually made their way onto the evening shows. As Pirazzini states: “the characters were of national fame, but it is clear that behind them there was all the craftsmanship of professions born from the imprint”; and, as these national stars appeared in programs primarily based on interactions by phone, “the context became local because the audience that could make telephone calls was restricted to the territory in which the broadcasts were aired” (Pirazzini 2023). Therefore, we can conclude that Berti was determined to invest in a hybrid type of content, that in the majority of its outputs localised the national imagination by bringing to Casalfiumanese faces, formats and styles made famous and familiar by the former Rai monopoly.

Indeed, this happened in 1980 when Berti hired Piombi to launch his “living room variety show”, *Ed è subito sabato* (lit. *And It’s Saturday Already*). A mix of game, talk, and variety show, the programme relied heavily on audience phone participation and was broadcast on Saturdays at 10 p.m. to avoid direct competition with Rai’s big productions. Piombi was known for presenting several singing programmes on Rai, as well as for organising and conducting the *Premio Nazionale Regia Televisiva* award show (Grasso 2008: 592). Despite being not as sought after as other great national television entertainers, his role at TeleSanterno was similar to those of

Mike Bongiorno's at TeleMilano and Enzo Tortora's—of whom he was a close friend—at Antenna 3 Lombardia. Piombi was a national TV professional with a keen interest in local TV stations' development and experience (Piombi 2015). He brought all the necessary symbols, skills, social networks and money to sustain the network. And, like them, in addition to his unofficial role as artistic director, he hosted a programme centred on prize games and sponsorships. Piombi repeatedly stressed the importance of the fruitful relationship with both sponsors and staff to make the whole thing work. "Berti was smart in that he didn't just want to create a programme hosted by a popular character with money," he said. "He had highly qualified young cameramen at his disposal, as well as a director like Giampaolo Gulmanelli, who came from the world of advertising and understood the need for certain rhythms in the broadcast" (Colliva 2015). Furthermore, Piombi wrote that Fabio Orsi's set design was comparable to "the splendour and perfection of a Saturday evening programme on Rai TV" (1980).

The other professionals also recall the quantum leap that occurred after the host's arrival: "We turned from amateurs into professionals," said Pirazzini (Colliva 2015), as Piombi attracted high-profile guests such as Claudio Villa, Enzo Biagi, Dori Ghezzi, as well as big sponsors (Piombi 1980; Orsi 2023a). This was thanks not only to Piombi's network of relationships built up on the backstage over the years, but also to that of his close collaborator and former *Sanremo Festival* stage manager, Luigi Mocchi. After Piombi and Mocchi had drawn up the guest list, they set up the timetable together with Gulmanelli and decided which parts of the programme would be broadcast live and which would be recorded, depending on the specific requirements of certain guests, who, due to their national profile, needed some flexibility (Gulmanelli 2023). The stars engagement process was often informal, and Piombi himself recounted how he had personally persuaded many guests (Piombi 1980), often tempting them with the region's culinary delights: in his account, Domenico Modugno agreed to appear on the programme on the condition that he be taken to a particular restaurant for tortellini. Piombi thus realised that TeleSanterno's local dimension could be an asset in backstage negotiations (Colliva 2015).

In fact, the local aspect permeated all levels of the programme, coexisting with the elements that looked beyond the borders of Emilia-Romagna. Guests such as Vincenzo Muccioli from the San Patrignano drug rehabilitation centre, presenters as Piombi, and comedians as Pippo and Mario Santonastaso embodied this dual identity: they were relevant figures in national media with strong regional roots. Originally from the province of Bologna, Piombi played on mixing these two identities, especially during phone calls when he indulged in dialectisms with the contestants—*còm cosa c'era?*—, encouraging them and ironically reprimanding their choices, like he did to a lady that opened the wrong envelope and won a bicycle instead of a FIAT Panda car (Piombi and Grandi 1982).

Piombi was not the only high-profile face that the broadcaster put at the helm of an evening programme. In 1982, *Ritmo* (lit. *Rhythm*) was launched, hosted by Patrizia Caselli and Walter Chiari. The latter brought his talent for monologues to the Romagna network, alongside sketches rooted in the long tradition of Italian variety show, which was undergoing a profound redefinition on a national scale at the time (Marinello 2025), but still found success in some local channel: a repertoire that for Chiari dates back to the Fifties (Muggeo 2020: 105–145), staged with Carlo Campanini and now, on TeleSanterno, with Sergio Renda (Chiari and Renda 1982). Orsi explains that no expense was spared for Chiari either: "We went overboard with the set design. We practically reconstructed a corner of an old town centre with porticoes, streetlamps and benches". The set designer also recalls other major productions from that period, as *A come amore* (lit. *L for Love*), a talk show about love and feelings presented by Andrea Giordana, and *Profumo d'infinito* (lit. *Scent of infinite*), hosted by Mike Bongiorno's *Rischiatutto* champion and paranormal expert Massimo Inardi. The show featured guests who could bend forks with their minds, men buried alive who were then exhumed in perfect health, and experts in therapeutic hypnosis (Orsi 2023a). Finally, the days of fearing the opinion of the local Catholic community are gone: TeleSanterno experimented with softcore (Barra and Rossi 2026). In *Cicciolina on TV*, the popular erotic star Ilona Staller entertains late-night viewers while building positive relationships with the network's employees, called by her "the *cicciolini* of TeleSanterno" (Colliva 2015).

To meet new production needs, the station moved to new, larger, fully equipped premises at Via di Vittorio 5 in the summer of 1981. However, expansion and significant spending on original content were accompanied by mounting debt. According to documents held at the Bologna Chamber of Commerce, the company's share

capital was zeroed due to losses in the summer 1980 and was then reconstituted at 200 million ITL. In 1982, however, the capital was subsequently reduced to 99 million ITL and the company transformed from a joint-stock company (s.p.a.) to a limited liability company (s.r.l.), with the board led by Giuliana Bendanti (Camera di Commercio di Bologna, 2023). TeleSanterno suffered the repercussions of the broader crisis affecting all other Berti's industries, which began in the late 1970s and culminated in the bankruptcy of Ceramiche Santerno in the summer of 1982. This also led to Berti's arrest and a severe personal crisis (Sorgi, 1983). Just over a year later, on 19 October 1983, TeleSanterno was declared bankrupt too, unable to pay debts amounting to 40 million ITL. A message appeared on screen: "Due to circumstances beyond our control, broadcasts are temporarily interrupted" (n.a. 1983b).

The previous year, TeleSanterno had joined Callisto Tanzi's Euro-TV circuit, a syndication of twenty-eight television stations formed from the merger of SIP—to which TeleSanterno had also been entrusted—and Radiotelevisione (Bartolomei and Bernabei, 1983: 188-189; n.a., 1983a). However, this was not enough to compensate for the huge losses. After the failure and a period of trusteeship (n.a. 1983b), the television channel was purchased by Euro-TV itself in January 1985 for 1.6 billion (Giovannini 2000: 109). From that moment on, TeleSanterno—which had attracted public attention with its "external services in direct contact with individual local realities", its busy schedule of original productions, and its record of launching "the Saturday night show" first in Emilia-Romagna (n.a. 1983a)—gave way to mostly ready-made content and teleshopping, fading from public and professional memory. As Matteucci recalled, "TeleSanterno became something else [...], it had become routine" (Matteucci 2023).

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