



## CS2. Country case studies on critical junctures in the media transformation process in Four Domains of Potential ROs (2000–2020)

The aim of the second case study is to provide analysis of risks and opportunities concerning the diachronic changes in four domains defined by the project in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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# ITALY

## Critical junctures in the media transformation process

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### Aim

The aim of Task 2.2 [CASE STUDY 2] of the Mediadelcom project is to provide an analysis of critical junctures in the transformation processes in our four domains of ROs [Legal and Ethical Regulation, Journalism, Media Usage Patterns and Media-Related Competencies]. It uses the literature and other data sources identified during Task 2.1 [CASE STUDY 1] but goes beyond it by offering an in-depth analysis of changes within each domain and identifying the actors behind them. The Italian case study also includes a background chapter concerning social and political changes because these changes have influence on the ROs.

### Executive Summary

The present study details the critical junctures in the change of risks and opportunities in the four domains of Italian media systems – the legal domain, journalism, media usage patterns, and media competencies – that are expected to contribute or deter from deliberative communication as the outcome variable. The study finds a legal framework that is in most respects in accordance with European standards of freedom of expression and information, but a significant degree of conflicting legislation, especially regarding various defamation offences. In Italy, frequent legislative changes are seen in the media field, attesting to the fact that it has still not stabilized into a coherent policy-led system. Evidence of hybridity of media systems is seen in media practices, which take place in a diverse yet highly concentrated media system, most like the Mediterranean polarized pluralist media system model from the Hallin and Mancini (2004) typology. Media related competences and media literacy appear to better in some areas and population groups than in others. The journalism market is still diverse and varied, although subject to economic constrictions as well as pressures in the form of many SLAPP lawsuits.

## 1. Introduction

The country report to Case Study 2 focused on Italian media ROs for deliberative communication and offered a literature review based on a collection of about 300 academic articles and other legal documents, reports, studies from institutions and public bodies and private organizations -national and international- that exceeded the reliability and trust cut off established by the Mediadelcom researchers in Italy.

By adopting an actor-centred perspective, our analysis aimed to assess the actors' behaviours and their conditions of possibility with regards to media ROs in each of the four domains accounted for. The paper identified six actors, namely 1) transnational organizations globally monitoring media systems (e.g., Freedom of the Press, Reporters Sans Frontières); 2) large research projects collecting and comparing data over time periods (e.g., WJS); 3) media indus-

try's structures and unites (e.g., Audiweb, Auditel, Nielsen); 4) scholars and academia's research groups; 5) independent organizations and/or professional associations (e.g., *Carta di Roma*, *Ordine dei Giornalisti*, *Rai Code of Ethics*, *l'osservatorio sul giornalismo*); 6) organizations standing as government's branches or public bodies (e.g. Italian Communications Regulatory Authority - *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni*, AGCOM).

All the outlined actors are institutionalised in terms of being equipped and structured to monitor ROs and, as showcased in the report to Case Study 1, the outputs they produce are trifold: i) reports based on collected data; ii) raw data; and iii) policy proposals. The extent to which those data are produced and properly analysed may be considered as an undeniable sign of the wealth of the ROs sub-field, in terms both capabilities to monitor itself and to propose policies able to exploit opportunities at the expense of risks.

Our analysis has shown that wealth related to the ability to analyse ROs in the Italian context is essentially due to the institutionalisation of communication disciplines (such as, for instance, political communication, media and journalism studies) in the Italian universities, showing how the academia is greatly ensuring the maintenance of a high attention on these issues. In addition to the academia, the media's performances over the proper functioning of democracy have been monitored also by other observatories. There is, however, a parallel, double-track production seeing the academia on the one hand, and other private organizations on the other hand – whose main shortcomings are i) the incommunicability between the two spheres; ii) the evident prevalence of the legal discourse about the production of policies.

Specifically, we noted that: i) in the case of the legal domain, ROs' future evaluations will shift from the conflict between open data to privacy protection. Another aspect to be considered is the excessive production of rules which paradoxically makes harder to enhance and improve the media performances; ii) the journalistic domain is featured by a clear conflict between various actors trying to define the field of ROs. The result is a divergence of analysis and solutions running the risk of transforming opportunities into further risks. iii) The media usage domain is that one where the production of analysis and data is most present, as we are witnessing an adaptation of the production of information content to the logic of the new media, also featured by an increased attention for the mechanisms of diffusion of inaccurate/false news contents. Finally, iv) the media-related competencies domain emerged as the field in which the academic intervenes the least, and other actors are absent too.

Considering the above and taking the lead from the report to Case Study 1, the present report focuses on ROs for deliberative communication identifying the main Critical Junctures of Media Development occurred in the decades 2000-2020. The following sections identify and explain the main social, political, economic and technological transformations occurred in the Italian media landscape and detail the main changes within each of the four domains [Table 1].

## 1.1. Background

Italy is located in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, in southern Europe, with a population of 60,257,566 (Istrat, 2021) that maintains a negative growth of the -0.6. It is the 30th country in terms of human development according to the 2020 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2020 report). The official languages are Italian (95%), Venetian and Sicilian. French, German, Ladino, Slovenian, Friulian and Catalan are co-officials in some regions of the country. Italy is a democratic republic, it is part of the G7 and it is a developed country with a very high quality of life. According "Better Life Index" (2021), created by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)<sup>259</sup>, Italy scores well on

<sup>259</sup> Website of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/italy/>

well-being in areas such as income, wealth, balance work-life, civic engagement, sense of community and health status.

Since June 2, 1946, Italy is a parliamentary republican system with representative democracy. In 1951 Italy became one of the six founding States of the European Coal and Steel Community, to found, together with the Federal Republic of Germany, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957.

Silvio Berlusconi (1994-1995) and Romano Prodi (1996-1998) governed the country during the last years of the XX century, so that the figure of Berlusconi determined the country's policy during the first decade of the 21st century (2001-2006 y 2008-2011). After Berlusconi's resignation, a technocratic cabinet led by Mario Monti was in power until 2013, moment in which Enrico Letta formed a new government (from April 2013 to February 2014). In 2014, Enrico Letta resigned and was replaced by Matteo Renzi, who did the same in December of this year, becoming the new Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni.

The “Five Star Movement” (*Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S*) and the “League” (*Lega*) determined the general election in 2018 when Giuseppe Conte became the Prime Minister based on this populist coalition. In February 2021, Conte resign and Mario Draghi was his substitute as the head of the country. After Draghi's resignation, and the victory of the centre-right coalition in the elections of September 25, 2022, Giorgia Meloni, head of the extreme-right “Brothers of Italy” (*Fratelli d'Italia*) party, became the first female prime minister in the country on 22 October of this year.

One of the main problem of the alpine country is the high level of corruption. According to “Corruption Perceptions Index”<sup>260</sup> the level of public sector corruption is high (56/100 in 2020) and has increased in recent years (42/180 in 2012). Even so, Italy is the world's ninth-biggest economy and the third largest in Europe (PIB nominal de US\$1.886.445,27 million, according to World Bank) — Services and manufacturing represent three-quarters of the total GDP.

Italy is a strategic administrative and financial point with 40 important ports, 129 airports, 16,781 km of Railway, and 6,500 kilometres of highways (The World factbook, 2022)<sup>261</sup>. Although it is one of the founding members of the European Union, with more than 500 million potential consumers, Italy is divided into a highly-industrialized and developed northern region and a less-developed southern region.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights that the Italian population has a good qualification, since more than 60% of adults between the ages of 25 and 64 have completed their upper secondary education. The unemployment rate in Italy remained at 7.8 percent in September of 2022, maintaining a downward trend since 2014 after the strong increase in 2008 due to the economic crisis. However, it should be noted that the youth unemployment rate is extremely high, since one in four young people (23.7) do not have a job (Trading Economics, 2022)<sup>262</sup>.

The media environment in Italy is traditionally characterised by a strong television sector and a weak newspaper sector (Reuters Institute for the Study of journalism in its Digital News Report 2022). The new millennium began with the migration from analogue to digital television — as part of the digital transition of the all mainstream media, the journalistic regulatory body pro-

<sup>260</sup> Website of Transparency International. The global coalition against corruption: <https://www.transparency.org/>

<sup>261</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/italy/>

<sup>262</sup> Website of Trading Economics: <https://tradingeconomics.com/italy/unemployment-rate>

posed by *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* (AGCOM)<sup>263</sup> (law 249 of 1997), and the strong parallelism between media and government because the figure of Silvio Berlusconi.

According Human Freedom Index (2021)<sup>264</sup>, although the personal freedom in Italy is high, the economic freedom maintain a medium level (7.61), similar level like internet freedom (76/100) (Freedom House, 2022)<sup>265</sup>. The index of Individuals using of the Internet (% of Italians that have used the Internet in the last 3 months) is 70, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2020) and Telecom Italia (Ministry of Economic Development-Communication).

## 1.2. The country-specific critical junctures and related paths or trajectories that may cause major (general) risks and opportunities

### 1.2.1. Television duopoly

The television landscape, including news, is dominated by the public service broadcaster RAI and by Mediaset, the private broadcaster controlled by the former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The Italian TV duopoly remains in place ever since the early 1990s, yet it was already back in the early 1980s that the Italian political parties and leaders begun using the TV to establish a relationship with the voters (see Marletti & Roncarolo, 2000). The first televised political advertisements had been broadcasted in 1983 (Vaccari, 2015), yet it was in the early 1990s with the advent of Berlusconi on both the political and media scene, that political ads begun to play a determinant role. The apogee and the slow decreasing of importance of the sometime called *Berlusconi's media empire* was for sure one of the main critical junctures in Italy.

Silvio Berlusconi served as Italy's Prime Minister from 1994 to 1995, from 2001 to 2006, and from 2008 to 2011, yet he also was/is the owner of the private broadcaster Mediaset – which put him in a contradictory position of representing both the private interests of those in power and the interests of the public at large. This peculiar situation has been term “Italian anomaly” (Ragnedda, 2014) and, according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCED) reports, such a situation was at odds with liberal democracy as we know it, as “in a democracy, it is incompatible to be both in command of news media and to hold a public post” (Haraszti, 2005).

In respect to ROs, however, it is important to note the peculiar and impressive role Berlusconi and his way of using the media had on ‘democratising’ the information. The former PM, in fact, skilfully employed the media to achieve greater exposure and visibility, reinventing the way of doing politics and state management (Jones 2003). He used techniques of propaganda imported from the US, and by combining populism with a highly ‘liberalised broadcasting system’ he gave birth to the so-called *Berlusconismo* (Ragnedda, 2014, p. 16).

Thanks to his media empire, Berlusconi was able to win election multiple times: not only he had control of most of Italy's broadcast media – both private and public, as he was/is in direct control of own private media holdings, *Mediaset*, and indirect control of the state-owned outlets RAI. But he also was/is the owner of Italy's largest magazine publisher, *Gruppo Mondadori*, as well as *Publitalia*, the largest advertising company, alongside with other local radio and television stations (see Mancini, 1977).

Worth to mention is also Berlusconi's ability to define the language with which issues have been discussed in the public sphere throughout the 20 years of his political career, as the “Italian political language has shifted from “politichese”, the politicians' language, to “gentese”, the

<sup>263</sup> Website of AGCOM: <https://www.agcom.it/>

<sup>264</sup> Website of Cato Institute: <https://www.cato.org/human-freedom-index/2021>

<sup>265</sup> Website of Freedom House: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

people's language (Vaccari 2015, p.29). Considering his political power and media management's impressive skills, Berlusconi was and still can influence the Italian public opinion and liberal democracy, gaining influence over public discourse by staging media events (Ragnedda 2014). Nevertheless, while acknowledging Berlusconi's pioneering use of media for political marketing and propaganda, it is fair to say the techniques he employed shall however be considered in line with the newly born process of 'mediatisation of politics' happening back in the 1990s - nowadays evolved and consolidated.

### 1.2.2. Digitalization

A further critical juncture allowing for a greater democratisation of the media as well as posing many risks, has been the process of digitalisation and, by extension, that of "mediatisation of politics" - namely that process by which political institutions and actors become increasingly dependent upon media, conforming to their logic of production and distribution (Splendore and Rega, 2017).

The transition to digital terrestrial radio (digital audio broadcasting, or DAB) took place at a rather slow pace, while the switch to digital terrestrial television and web TV happened faster - considerably increasing the number of viewers between 2007 and 2010. Channels such as *RAI News* and *Sky Tg24* - once only available by satellite or pay-tv, have now become available to anybody, representing a significant improvement of audience reach (Mazzoleni, Vigevani, Splendore 2011). Nonetheless, the digitisation has not impacted significantly on television ownership - as the *RAI-Mediaset* duopoly remains in place.

#### 1.2.2.1. Online settings

A major change occurred with the digitalisation process was that concerning the online setting. According to the Census reports, between 2007 and 2010 the 'digital divide' narrowed, as the number of people who never use the internet dropped from 71% to 51.3% (see Mazzoleni, Vigevani and Splendore, 2011).

#### 1.2.2.2. Social media platforms

Alongside with the widening of the online information, the advent of social media too impacted the ROs for deliberative communication. Social media, in fact, changed the way politicians communicate and interact with the citizens-voters and, while the TV continues to have a leading role in political communication, social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* have come to represent extremely efficient and powerful tools to reach and mobilize followers/voters (Kriesi, 2014). The increasingly popular use of social media platforms by both the hand of politicians and citizens has, in fact, allowed the elite and the people to communicate with each other directly and more spontaneously (Bobba and Roncarolo, 2018). Yet, while on the one hand the flexibility and immediateness of the internet and the social media allowed political parties and leaders to establish a closer relation with their electorates, shaping voters' behaviour (Garzia, 2011); on the other hand, such unfiltered and disintermediated communication concurs to increase polarisation, extremism and hate speeches alike. As Vallespín and Bascuñán (2019: 171) noted, political parties' use of social media 'enables them to use particularly aggressive and polarising messages, including "cybermobbing", "shitstorms", and manipulated information'. They can also exasperate the polarization between the citizenry and other groups (e.g., the domestic elite; the international elite; the foreigners; etc), influence the public debate, as well as traditional media and agenda-setting (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018), eventually embodying both opportunities and risks for deliberative communication, as well as for the overall quality of democracy.

### 1.2.3. Economic crisis (2008)

The financial and economic crisis that hit Europe in late 2008, and the consequent austerity all over the countries of European Union, deeply impacted Italy's socio-political fabric — as unemployment rates skyrocketed and poverty levels risen (with gross domestic product falling and unemployment rising to 7.8%, according to European Foundation for the Improvement of living and working condition<sup>266</sup>), exacerbating social anxiety and insecurity. During the following years, according to World Economic Forum, Industrial production plunged by a staggering 24%. Only thanks to stubbornly persistent inflation had Italy's nominal GDP managed to remain constant. Consequently, populist political parties and leaders profited from the situation by advocating protectionist and conservative measure, increasing nationalism and Euroscepticism alike (De Cesari, Bosilkov and Piacentini, 2019). In this respect, the Italian mainstream media displayed a tendency to cover European Union issues through a more positive frame compared to domestic political issues (Bobba and Seddone, 2017). Yet disappointments and frustrations, largely reflected in the outbreak of right-wing populist parties, have also been fomented by the increasing in-flows toward Europe of migrants coming from faraway lands.

### 1.2.4. Migrant crisis (2013)

Immigration has thus become pervasive within both the Italian and the wider European and international contexts, representing one of the most controversial social, political, and even economic phenomena our age. Debates on immigration have been fully integrated into the online world too, allowing the growing community of digital users to negotiate meanings, exchange opinions, sentiments, and judgements, also discussing experts and political leaders' points of view in a dynamic dialogue between different forms of knowledge (de Rosa and Manarini, 2020). Nevertheless, as noted earlier in this report, social media constitute an arena particularly apt for polarized social representations and opinions, hence also in the immigration case they confirmed themselves as "powerful 'echo chamber' of the institutional and political discourse, leading to opposite inclusive/exclusive policies, and as one of the arenas where the negotiation and development of polemical social representations around immigration take place" (de Rosa *et al.*, 2021: 1183).

Ever since the 1990s, Italy has been a major country of destination for immigrants coming from Eastern Europe first, and North Africa and Middle East then (especially because of the Arab Spring and the wars in Afghanistan and Syria). As a result, the 'immigration issue' has gained salience within both the Italian political and media spheres, entering the Italian political agenda as a threatening phenomenon challenging the (already precarious) socio-economic equilibrium of the country. The increasing attention paid to immigration in the news has obviously reflected the most important events happening on a global and local scale, hence influencing the public debate, the agenda-setting, and citizens' electoral behaviours alike (Urso, 2018).

Given its salience, immigration has attracted the attention of political parties from both the entire political spectrum, yet it has been the right-wing populist parties emphasising immigration as a top priority problem, envisaging exclusivist containment measures while spreading xenophobic and intolerant rhetoric (Krastev, 2017; Piacentini, 2020). A clear boost in this 'illiberal direction' has come from the *Northern League's* leader Matteo Salvini, whose use of his social media accounts have contributed to increase intolerance and nationalist feelings among the Italian population.

<sup>266</sup> Webpage: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/article/2010/effects-of-economic-crisis-on-italian-economy>

### 1.2.5. The Populist zeitgeist

Because of the multiple crisis that featured the last two decades, populist parties have risen to power all over the European continent, making scholars talk about a ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde, 2004). In this respect, social media largely contributed to the success of online populist communication, demonstrating to be particularly fit (Gerbaudo, 2018) thanks to the possibility of directly communicating with the audience/voters (Berti and Loner, 2021) while relying on personalisation and emotionalisation of politics (Bracciale and Martella, 2017).

Nevertheless, populist political parties are not a novelty in the Italian political landscape, and the ‘beginning’ of Italian populism has been marked by the creation of the Northern League in the late 1980s (see Biorcio, 2004), and by Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia in the early 1990s. Thanks to online settings and social media communication, however, a number of populist parties and leaders, from both the right and the left, have recently gained the electoral support of a considerable percentage of the Italian population — till the point that scholars have described the Italian situation as ‘characterized by the presence of an “endemic populism” that overflows from strictly populist precincts into the general political discourse (Bobba and Roncarolo, 2018: 53).

In respect to ROs deliberative communication, it is worth to mention, among others, 1) the birth of the Five Star Movement — *Movimento 5 Stelle*, and 2) Matteo Salvini’s — leader of the Northern League (La Lega) — communication strategy on the social media platforms.

#### 1.2.5.1. The Five Star Movement

After a decade of activism as social movement beyond institutions, the Five Star Movement (5SM) was created as a political actor that aims to compete at the political election in 2009. The 5SM competed in several local and regional Italian elections before contending the general elections in 2013. As many other populist parties across Europe, the 5SM represented the popular response to the insecurity, disappointment and dissatisfaction stemming from and brought about the 2008 economic crisis (Bosco and Verney, 2012). Among others, in fact, a major consequence of the economic crisis concerned the countries’ party systems, ‘representing an opportunity for new political actors to capitalize on political dissatisfaction and anti-party sentiment, strengthening their positions in the political arena and weakening the consolidated dynamics of political competition’ (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017: 428). The so-called ‘movement parties’ — a hybrid between political parties and social movements, combined electoral representation with extra-institutional actions, displaying peculiar organizational and ideological features (ivi). In the case of Italy’s M5S, next to the economic crisis, also the corruption scandals, the resignation of Berlusconi’s government in 2011, and the subsequent formation of a technocratic government (Mosca, 2014), are among the factors which allowed for birth and rise to power of the Movement — which took advantage of the situation becoming the first Italian party in the general elections of 2013.

Besides displaying programmatic, biographical and geographical proximity with social movements (see Mosca, 2015; Mosca, Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016), the M5S established a peculiar relation with the digital technologies making of the digital and social media its main instrument of communication. Precisely, ‘digital media have not only been used as channels of communication, but also for facilitating members’ participation through an online platform called “Rousseau”, recalling one of the main theorists of direct democracy’ (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017: 433). Yet the roots of the 5SM — funded by the television comedian Beppe Grillo, are to be traced back to 2005 and to its leader’s counter-information blog. Ever since 2005, Grillo’s blog has grown in visibility and followers, leading first to anti-corruption protests and demonstrations

(such as the nationwide ‘V-Day’<sup>267</sup> in September 2007); and to the then birth of the mentioned 5SM, eventually engendering a ‘media–political circuit’ (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017: 433) which affects both the mainstream media and the societal fabric.

Considering our focus on ROs deliberative communication, it is fair to say that the M5S’s online setting and digital communication represented crucial resource for organization, decision-making, communication and identity-building (Mosca, Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016).

#### 1.2.5.2. Salvini’s social media communication

The case of Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing populist party Northern League (NL), has been considered a critical case study for populist social media communication, as it combines anti-immigration attitudes (Garzia, 2019) and exclusionary politics, anti-elitism (Berti, 2021), nationalism, and Euroscepticism (Ruzza, 2018), with disintermediation, personalisation, emotionality, and virality (Berti and Loner, 2021). Salvini’s communication strategy is, in fact, characterised by a heavy use of the social media (*Facebook*) to directly communicate with his voters, adopts emotionally charged contents (Bobba, 2018), and massively relies on personalisation. The NL leader does extensively use the social media to foster polarisation and antagonism, feeding and profiting from the insecurity and challenges posed by the refugee crisis (2015 onwards), hence making of anti-immigration attitudes his main political claim. In this respect, particularly the social media — with their algorithm-driven tendency to create bubbles, have ended to cement and amplify ‘a distorted perception of the percentage of immigrants actually present in the country’ (de Rosa *et al.*, 2021: 1172).

Considering our focus on ROs deliberative communication, it is once again fair to say that, while digital communication and social media may represent an opportunity for deliberative communication by reaching a wider audience; the unfiltered communication operated by the hand of right-wing populists may favour polarisation and extremisms, hence nationalism and illiberalism, conceptually at odds with liberal democracy.

#### 1.2.6. Pandemic SARS-CoV-2 (2019-ongoing)

Finally, a further critical juncture affecting the ROs for deliberative communication and democracy is represented by the spread of the pandemic Sars-Covid 19, which has become the media and institutional discourses’ main protagonist all over the globe. The emergence of the unknown virus, spread from China on a global scale, has represented an unprecedented threatening event, intensively discussed in public and private communication.

The first confirmed case of SARS-CoV-2 in Italy was identified in January 2020 and, ever since then, the virus has enormously spread — making of Italy one of the countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world. Among other issues, the pandemic refocused the media agenda, transferring citizens’ attention from immigration to health risk. As discussed by de Rosa and Mannarini (2020), Italian citizens have been exposed to a different set of institutional communication which, if on the one hand contributed to reassure the population — legitimising the recommendations and containment measures through rising awareness; on the other hand, increased uncertainty — as multiple discourses emerged.

##### 1.2.6.1. Infodemic

At the time of COVID pandemic, both tradition and new media represent essential tools for scientific updating; yet although providing great opportunities, particularly the social networks have created a very fertile ground for misinformation to spread. Digitalisation and technological developments allowed for synchronic and interactive communication, enlarged the communica-

<sup>267</sup> *Vaffanculo Day - Fuck Off day.*

tive flows, and allowed citizens to access an impressive amount of information, hence making of science too a key point of interest (de Rosa and Mannarini, 2020). At the same time, however, divergences in the communication strategies of scientists and politicians, alongside with the uncertainty intrinsic to the development of the pandemic, concurred to the spread of fake news, making very hard for the public to ‘distinguish reliable sources of information’ (de Rosa and Mannarini, 2020: 5.9).

Stereotypical explanations over nature and diffusion of the virus, suspicion for scientists and health authorities, as well as conspiracy theories, are likely to produce dangerous consequences for public health – potentially ‘undermining trust in health institutions and programs, especially when governments rely almost solely on empirical evidence for policy-making’ (Murri *et al.*, 2020: 3).

In this respect, the term *infodemic* has been coined to outline the perils of misinformation phenomena during the management of disease outbreaks, and the case of the COVID-19 shows the critical impact of this new information environment. As Cinelli *et al* explained (2020: 1), ‘the information spreading can strongly influence people’s behaviour and alter the effectiveness of the countermeasures deployed by governments. To this respect, models to forecast virus spreading are starting to account for the behavioural response of the population with respect to public health interventions and the communication dynamics behind content consumption’.

### 1.2.7. Electoral victory of “Brothers of Italy” [*Fratelli d'Italia*]

After Mario Draghi's resignation – a year and a half after he was appointed as Italy's head, the victory of the centre-right coalition in the elections of September 25 2022 has caused an earthquake in the heart of the European Union. Because that, Giorgia Meloni, head of the extreme-right “Brothers of Italy” (*Fratelli d'Italia*) party, became the first female prime minister in the country on 22 October of this year. The consolidation of the leadership of Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia, FdI*) in the alpine country – a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party led by Giorgia Meloni - become the main risk for the deliberative communication in Italy and, also, for the stability of the liberal democracy of the country and the European Union. A result that can act as a precedent for other far-right parties in the rest of the countries of the European Union. A tendency to extremism that is positioned as the main risk for the development of the deliberative communication model proposed in the MEDIADELCOM project.

With this political context, the communication strategy of the current government may tend towards a more restrictive, polarized and instrumentalized application of the Communication and Media Regulation. These will face in the coming years a greater state interventionism in their journalistic practice. In addition, the risk of polarization increases among citizens due to models of political communication based on populism, fake news and hate speech. Deliberative communication is presented in Italy as the only option at a communicative level to achieve an increase in plural citizen participation and reduce social polarization.

## 1.3. Assessment of monitoring capabilities<sup>268</sup>

The legal and ethical regulation, journalism field, media usage patterns and media usage related competencies domains are covered and studied in an unbalanced and focused way. One reason why potential risks and opportunities in areas such as usage patterns and media competencies are more complex to analyse. Not so much so in the domains of journalism and legislation.

The legal and ethical regulation domain is well-researched by the Italian scholars during the last twenty years. Although we must consider that the legal and regulatory norms determine this

<sup>268</sup> Based on Case Study 1.

domain. Both at the legislative and administrative level (*Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana* and *Codice penale italiano*, *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle comunicazioni*, as main examples) and professional rules (e.g., *Ordine dei Giornalisti*, *Associazione Carta di Roma*). The domain of legal and ethical regulation is more studied in an academic level concerning the freedom of expression (defamation, privacy, disinformation, copyright, among others) and information (access to documents, the protection of journalistic sources, whistleblowing, trade secrets and transparency in media ownership, among others). One fifth (17%) of the research carried out on the four domains concerning deliberative communication in Italy focuses on this domain. Although the first legal and regulatory references and studies were raised from the Government at the legislative level (Constitution) and professional regulatory norms (*Ordine dei Giornalisti*), academic studies have been taking on greater relevance since 2013, becoming more noticeable in the last two years - A growth trend in research that is maintained in the four domains studied due to the greater number of high-impact publications that have been made in recent years. Not only at the national level, with special relevance universities located in Milan (Pierri, 2020; Splendore, 2016, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2006), Rome (Grisolia, 2020; Martino, 2021; Bentivegna, 2020), Turin (Scamuzzi, Belluati, Caielli, Cepernich, Patti, Stecca & Tipaldo, 2021), Bologna (Razzante, 2005), Perugia (Mancini, Mazzoni, Barbieri, Damiani & Gerli, 2021), among others; but also at the international level as Lugano (Porlezza, 2019; di Salvo, 2020; Puppis, 2007), Dublin (Cornia, 2016), Edinburgh (Craufurd Smith, 2021), New York (Molé, 2013).

The best researcher domain in Italy is the Journalism field. Specifically, dimensions as market condition, production, public service media, working conditions, organization, professional culture, journalistic competencies. More than half (56.4%) of the studies carried out on the four domains concerning deliberative communication in this country focuses on its domain. Although the reports that establish the professional regulatory standards in journalism published by journalists' associations (*Ordine dei Giornalisti*, *Carta di Roma*, AGCOM) stand out, academic studies have been taking on greater relevance in the last twenty years, especially since the beginning of the second decade of this millennium, for its constant growth and international relevance within the academic community.

In the study of journalism, highlight universities located in Italy like Milan (Mazzoleni, 2006; Splendore, 2016, 2020; Carlo & Mazzanti, 2020; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018; Calliandro & Airolodi, 2016; Rega, 2017; Vigevani; Curini, 2020; Garusi & Oller, 2022), Rome (Cultrera, 2006; Grisolia, 2020; Giglioni, 2004; Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2018), Perugia (Mancini, Mazzoni, Barbieri, Damiani & Gerli, 2021; Gerli, Mazzoni & Mincigrucchi, 2018), Naples (Bifulco, Tirino & Castellano, 2022; Marrazzo, 2020; Avvisati, 2015), Pisa (Bracciale, 2020; De Gracia, 2013; Martella, 2016; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018), Siena (Bentivegna & Rega, 2020), Florence (Sorrentino, 2002, 2022), Parma (Ferrandi, 2011), Udinese (Fortunati, 2010), Ferrara (Gardini, 2004, 2008), Catania (Nicolosi, 2019), Bologna (Barbieri, Campus & Mazzoni, 2019), Venice (Azzalini, 2015), Piemonte (Pogliano & Ponzo, 2019), Udine (Fortunati, 2021), among others.

However, other universities are in other countries, in cities like Lugano (Portezza, 2016; Richeri & Prario, 2016; Corchia & Bracciale, 2020; Prario, 2005; Evens, 2012), Zürich (Humprecht & Esser, 2018; Büchel, 2013; Zerback, 2020), Dublin (Cornia, 2016; O'Sullivan, Fortunati, Taipale & Barnhurst, 2017), Oregon (Russ-Mohl, 2012), Hamburg (Engesser & Brüggemann, 2016), Louvain (Standaert, 2021), Oxford (Örnebring, 2013) and London (Dalpiaz & Ravasi, 2010; Markova & McKay, 2013). This is mainly due to two aspects. First, because there are Italian researchers who study the journalistic context in Italy who work in universities abroad. Second, and taking on increasing prominence, the interest of universities from other countries and international comparative studies (WJS, Journalistic Role Performance, ECREA, PHARM, among others) have offered an external and comparative perspective of Italian journalism that has opened other interesting fields of study. At the international level, the role of Switzerland stands out, which has a not insignificant research production due to its language parity, geographical

proximity, and its professional link because a considerable number of Italian researchers work in Swiss universities (something that is reproduced in all analysed domains in this report).

The domain of Media usage patterns is well-researched in Italy since the second decade of this millennial, especially regarding access to media and diversity in the media system in universities in Rome (Mingo, 2009, 2015, 2018), Milan (Splendore, 2020; Mosca, 2017), Pisa (Bracciale, 2018; Andretta & Bracciale, 2017) and Bologna (Valeriani, 2018). The second variable more highlight is the relevance of public service media, especially in universities located in Ferrara (Gardini, 2004, 2008) and Milan (Orofino, 2011).

For its part, functionalities of media (Toraldò, Vergari & Toraldò, 2015 from University of Salento; Calenda & Mosca, 2007 from University of Florence; Tosoni & Tarantino, 2013 from Catholic University of Milan; Fortunati and Vaccari, 2016/2021 from University of Southampton), trust in media (Splendore & Curini, 2020 and Ricci & Splendore, 2021) from university of Milan; Memoli, 2014 from University of Catania; Lovari, 2020 from university of Cagliari; Stefani, Cavicchi and Romano, 2008 from university of Florence; Pogliano, 2015 from university of Piemonte; Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2020 from university of Urbino), and relevance of news media (Mosca & Quaranta, 2016 from university of Florence; Curini, 2020, Ceron & Splendore, 2018 from university of Milan; Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2019 from university of Rome; Steppat, Castro Herrero & Esser, 2021 from university of Zürich) according to users are maturing in the last decade.

Other fields of study as quality of news media (Corchia & Bracciale, 2020 from university of Pisa), media literacies policies (Doni, 2015 from university of Rome; Cappello & Rizzuto, 2020 from University of Palermo; Ranieri, Fabbro & Nardi, 2019 and Tirocchi, 2017 from university of Turin; Silva, 2017 from university of Verona) and access to media and channel preferences (Mosca & Quaranta, 2016 from university of Florence; Curini, 2020 from university of Milan) are incipient in Italy.

One fifth of the research carried out on the four domains concerning deliberative communication in Italy focuses on this domain (20.66%). Although the reports published by the *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* (AGCOM) stand out, academic studies have been taking on greater relevance since 2016. In the study of media usage patterns, highlight universities located in centre/north of Italy (Milan, Rome, Florence, Pisa, and Bologna). As in the rest of the domains studied, the Universities of Lugano (Richeri & Pario, 2016; Cola, 2012) and Zürich (Humprecht & Büchel, 2013; Castro-Herrero & Nir, 2018) maintains a strong link with Italy, systematically producing publications focused on this country in a comparative perspective.

The domain of media usage related competencies is analysed in a partial and unbalanced way, constituting itself as the least investigated research area. Only slightly more than five percent (5.9%) of the investigations carried out around the four domains concerning deliberative communication in Italy focus on this domain. Although there are some publications at the beginning of the second decade of this century, the truth is that it was not until 2017 when there began to be a certain systematization of these publications. Above all, by a small group of researchers who work, mainly, at the universities of Pisa (Andretta & Bracciale, 2017) and Rome (Mingo, 2018).

Similarly, some of the longitudinal data that exists for Italy around media usage related competencies comes from reports published by international institutes, mainly European (Bauer & Clemm von Hohenberg, 2021 from Mannheim Centre for European Social Research and European University Institute; Lessenski, 2021 from Open Society Institute; European Commission, 2012).

## 1.4. Critical Junctures highlighted and the deliberative communication in Italy

Each of the critical junctures we have highlighted so far have different kinds of effects upon the four domains the Mediadelcom project analyses. The table 1 summarizes those effects on each domain. The next paragraphs describe them going through each of the highlighted critical juncture.

Table 1. Critical junctures and their effects on studied domains in Italy

	Legal domain	Journalism Domain	Media Usage Domain	Media Related Domain
TV duopoly	Different laws to ensure pluralism	Increasing politicization	Continuity of TV consumption and slow adaptation to digital platforms	More capacity for plural participation and generation of opinion bubbles
Digitization	Laws to regulate the increasing complex market, but also deregulations	Increase in polarized content, as well as in pluralism and freedom of the expression	Change in the consumption patterns	More pluralism, more risks (Polarization, disinformation, hate speech)
Economic crisis	Revision of the support to PSB and to general media	Risk for professionalization, more precarity	Closure of companies, increase in unemployment, decrease in the economic capacity of citizens	Populism, euroscepticism
Migrant crisis	Laws to regulate the the migratory flow	New rules also about coverage (carta di Treviso)	Development of phenomena such as hate speech or fake news	Polarization
The populist zeitgeist	creation of the Northern League and Forza Italia	Endemic populism	Electoral support of the Italian population	Personalisation Emotionalisation Populist communication
Pandemic SARS-CoV-2	EU proposal against disinformation	Efforts to identify quality information, factchecking	Strengthening the use of digital media	Misinformation and polarization
Electoral victory of "Brothers of Italy" [ <i>Fratelli d'Italia</i> ]	Regulation of freedom and media	Media parallelism	Increase of hate speech and fake news	Decrease of plural participation, populism and social polarization

## 2. Risks and opportunities of legal and ethical regulation domain

### 2.1. Development and agency of change

The legal domain is the slowest to react at any change. Nevertheless, due to the different critical junctures highlighted during the two decades (2000-2020), many laws have been introduced in Italy and many other failed attempts to introduce brand new laws have been made to change the overall media scenario.

In principle, we can identify the various measures taken from the legal point of view as genuine attempts to strengthen deliberative communication. These attempts have been ambivalent in their results. Let's start with what we have defined as TV duopoly, in short, the structural lack of pluralism in what is still the media most used by Italian citizens: television. Although a change is

taking place in this regard. Slow but steady. Until 2020, the main source of information was television (48.2%), followed by the internet quite a distance (26.3%) (AGCOM, 2018). However, today, according to “2022 Digital News Report”, the media sector is now fully experiencing the impact of the digital transition. The main sources of information are online (75%) and TV (70%) and social media (47%).

Until Silvio Berlusconi (Calise 2004; Pasquino, 2004), owner of *Mediaset*, was not a direct participant in the political agone, the media scenario did not appear to be a problem (despite, as already noted, the *parallelism* of those TVs towards some prominent representatives of the so-called “First Republic”).

The Berlusconi’s media empire parabola was the most influent upon the legal domain. Especially in the first part of the time span we are here considering, a constant discussion about how to regulate such an anomaly was in place. The anomaly was precisely the ownership of an important part of the Italian media system by a politician who was a three-time prime minister. Since the overall mood that attributes to television a major impact on audience (see media related competences above) as owner of a huge part of the Italian media system (see Cornia, 2016; Mazzoleni, 2006), it appears that Berlusconi was able to gather consensus and gaining votes. Beyond the political debates, constantly focused on this issue, the Italian Parliament and the Italian Governments were able to produce some laws trying to mitigate the potential political support Silvio Berlusconi might have received from his media. One of the most debated was the “Gasparri Law” (3 May 2004, no.112) that enhances “Regulations and principles governing the set-up of the broadcasting system and the *RAI-Radiotelevisione italiana* S.p.a., authorizing the government to issue a consolidated broadcasting act”. The Gasparri Law and the ensuing Frattini law tried to provide a solution to guarantee pluralism of the media, avoiding the duopoly built on Rai and Mediaset, opening to other commercial actors and de-politicising RAI (i.e.: making it effectively independent from political parties and governments, a never-ending effort that has never been really realized).

In this sense, another peculiar law was the so-called “Par Condicio”, a rule that was created to stem conflicts of interest regarding media content. It is a law – it still rules in Italy – to ensure that candidates are treated equally and fairly, so they are meant to have the same amount of free airtime on public state broadcaster *RAI* as well as on commercial TV. Among other directives, “Par Condicio” prohibits the dissemination of opinion polls two weeks prior to a general election. Also in this case is *the Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* (Authority for Communications Guarantees, AGCOM), the national communications industry authority, to get the role to supervise the respect of the law.

The digitization process, the transition from analogue to digital television, also crossed paths with the regulation due to Berlusconi's media power. Politics has been very sensitive at this passage, in those years of contest and political alternation, it represented an important stake. The political management of this transition resulted in a frequency planning aimed at maintaining the *status quo*. In short, the choices were aimed at not losing either *Rai* or *Mediaset* dominant positions (Mazzoleni, Vigevani and Splendore, 2011).

At the same time, the combination of Berlusconi's progressive distancing from the electoral contest and the further acceleration from a technological point of view (e.g., growth in the diffusion of the network, mobile connection, speeding up of data transmission) led to a phase of deregulation. Or rather, more correctly, Italy gradually adopts European laws on these issues, not imposing further regulations.

This same situation, Italy adopting the measures introduced by the European Union, seems to happen to the subsequent steps of digitization. The debate is widespread and involves all the six actors listed in the introduction. Furthermore, both the academic sphere and organizations

standing as government's branches constantly monitor and produce data to understand the effects on the use of digital media. Despite this, the legislative production was not extensive. In this sense it seems that the national legislative context is entrusting itself to the European Union. On the other hand, the relationship with moguls of the size of *Facebook*, *Google*, *Amazon* and *Apple* requires large-scale interventions both to counteract the effects in terms of disinformation, and to mitigate their dominant positions in economic terms. In this sense: "The European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union, has imposed a combined \$9.5 billion in antitrust fines against *Google* since 2017, and its boss hints *Amazon* and *Apple* might be next in line. *Facebook*, meanwhile, has been subject to probes from competition and data protection authorities across the EU since the region's strict new set of privacy rules called the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) went into effect last year"<sup>269</sup>.

The development of digital technologies, the change in the habits of Italian citizens in terms of use of the media, however, have mitigated the concerns related to the dominant position of Silvio Berlusconi in Italian television. This is certainly due to the understanding that the field is now global and that the effects of the media to be monitored are not only those of television.

## 2.2. Freedom of expression

The right and protection to freedom of expression is presented in the main legal documents that legislate the Republic of Italy, such as *Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana*, art. 21 of 1948 (Italian Constitution), *Codice Penale Italiana*, art. 595 de 1930 (Criminal Code) and legislative decrees (as No. 97 of 2016) and other laws (as Law No. 112 of 2004). The freedom of expression of media professionals and of all professionals is one of the rights that Italian law most vigorously protects. However, *Freedom of the Press* and *Reporters Sans Frontières* have been ranked Italy as a country where the level of freedom of the press is lower than its area and Western democracies in general. Due to these inconsistencies, the main risk for the freedom of the expression and press, in addition to being legislated directly and precisely, is the political parallelism between media and government, media oligopoly, the increase of populism and polarization, and the high level of corruption.

Regarding defamation, the *Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana* (1948) affirms that everyone has the right to express their thoughts freely in speech, writing and any other media; and the law recognizes honour and reputation. Besides, the press may not be subject to authorisation or censorship. If exist the "positive" part of the right to report the news, there is, also, a "negative", interspersed with the defence that the law recognises to honour (understood as including reputation). It is, therefore, in the "balancing of opposing interests" that the solution to the limits of the reciprocal expansion (Pacileo, 2013). In the event of default, if the offence is committed by means of the press or any other means of publicity, or in a public document, the penalty shall be imprisonment for a term of between six months and three years or a fine of not less than five hundred and sixteen euros (*Codice Penale italiano*, 1930).

The defamation law continues its discussion in the Constitutional Court and Italian Parliament (Article 19)<sup>270</sup>. In the journalistic and media Italian context this phenomenon is relevant because, according to the ISTAT, in 2017 alone, a total of 9,479 proceedings for defamation were initiated against journalists, of which 60% were dismissed after preliminary investigation and 6.6% went to trial. Resolution No. 157 of May 15, 2019, of the Council of the communication in

<sup>269</sup> Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/07/how-google-facebook-amazon-and-apple-faced-eu-tech-antitrust-rules.html> (last access 20 January 2022).

<sup>270</sup> Website of Article 19: <https://www.article19.org/resources/italy-decision-of-constitutional-court-on-prison-for-journalists/#:~:text=A%20year%20after%20the%20Constitutional.not%20compliant%20with%20the%20Constitution>

Italy, regulates containing provisions on respect for human dignity and the principle of non-discrimination and combating hate speech:

*Audio-visual and radio media service providers, in compliance with the principles of Article 3, and taking into account the provisions of the current Consolidated Law on the Duties of Journalists of the duties of journalists in force, observe a series of cautions and guidelines, paying particular attention to the identification of the specific context of reference with respect to possible stereotyped representations and generalisations which, through the use of hate speech, could generate prejudice against people who are associated with a certain category or group of people associated with a certain category or group subject to discrimination, thus offending human dignity and harming the rights of the individual (Art. 4).*

*Rai, in its role as manager of the public radio, television and multimedia service and multimedia, also in execution of the service contract, promotes the diffusion of contents that enhance the principles of respect for human dignity, non-discrimination, social principles of respect for human dignity, non-discrimination, inclusion and social cohesion, as well as combating incitement to violence and hatred (Art. 5).*

Equally, the article 13 on the Law of the Press no. 47/1948 points out that “personal freedom shall be inviolable and that “no one shall be detained, inspected, or searched nor otherwise restricted on one's personal liberty save by order of the judiciary for which the reason must be stated, and then only in such cases and in the manner as the law provides for”, (p. 4).

Defamation in Italy began to be part of the interest because the popularization of digital platforms as social media that gave citizens a greater voice and visibility at the beginning of this century. Reports such as “*News vs. Fake-news nell Sistema dell'informazione*”<sup>271</sup> shows that Italian national information system is seeing an increase in the volume of fake content. In this regard, “*Le strategie di disinformazione online e la filiera dei contenuti fake*” determines that the textual analysis of the fake content produced by disinformation sites in 2018 leads to the identification of 9 main topics: politics, rights, economy, health and environment, family and faith, news, foreign affairs, science and immigration. Both reports have been published by the *Autorità per le garanzie delle comunicazioni*.

According to the *Codice penale italiano* (1930), disinformation shall be punished, unless the act constitutes a more serious offence, with imprisonment of up to three months or a fine of up to €309. The disinformation is one of the main risk due to its highly detrimental connotations for the development of a deliberative democracy. To combat misinformation in Italy, the “*Testo unico dei doveri del giornalista*”<sup>272</sup> (Journalist's Text of Duties) propose a set of deontological rules relating to the processing of personal data in the exercise of journalistic activity (Ordine dei Giornalisti, 2021): the protection of personal data, the dissemination of the data and the protection of journalistic sources. In addition of this, according the *Ordine dei Giornalisti*, “journalists and editors are obliged to respect professional secrecy about the source of news, when required by the fiduciary nature of the news, and to promote a spirit of collaboration between colleagues, cooperation between journalists and editors, and trust between the press and readers” (Art. 1).

While the role played by copyright in protecting and encouraging the production of Italian journalistic articles has so far remained largely in the shadows, the advent of new forms of

<sup>271</sup> Interim Report Indagine Conoscitiva del. 309/16/cons (Autorità per le garanzie nelle comunicazioni): <https://www.agcom.it/documents/10179/3744102/Allegato+22-11-2018/3aff8790-8039-4456-8f9a-dae2497289a4>

<sup>272</sup> Ordine Dei Giornalisti. Consiglio Nazionale: <https://www.odg.it/testo-unico-dei-doveri-del-giornalista/24288>

online usage has put the spotlight on copyright protection as a possible panacea to the deep economic imbalances affecting the journalistic sector (Priora, 2021). There are legislative interventions in this direction, like the article 15 of the 2019 EU Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market that presents numerous critical issues, which make the prospects of effectiveness in the medium and long term uncertain.

The introduction of a new exclusive right represents a protectionist squeeze in favour of publisher-investors rather than a step towards sustainable regulation in step with the times. Although the obligation to redistribute the proceeds generated by the exploitation of related law in favour of individual authors remains a fundamental and long-awaited intervention in the contractual framework of copyright, Article 15 DSM Directive risks failing in the attempt to find the right balance between fundamental rights and freedoms of those who invest in the production and dissemination of journalistic content and of the users to whom it is intended. The arduous task to which the Italian legislator is called today is to remedy the weaknesses and flaws of the Community law, in favour of a regulatory approach capable of responding to the challenges of the times, sensitive to all the interests at stake and well calibrated - a task difficult, but not impossible.

### 2.3. Freedom of information

The *Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana* and the *Codice Penale Italiana* protect the freedom of information in Italy. The FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) legislation, introduced by Legislative Decree No. 97 of 2016, is an integral part of the public administration reform process, defined by Law No. 124 of 7 August 2015.

When right of information refers to the access to information/documents, there are several problems in obtaining data: (1) Data exist but are not available in open and digital format; (2) Data exist, are in table format, are accessible and open, but have unprocessable extensions (pdf, scanned images, closed format); and (3) Data exist, can be accessed, but are not provided in a tabular and structured format (Splendore 2016; Porlezza and Splendore 2019). These are the main risk to develop the freedom of information between citizens and communication professionals.

Talking about trade secrets, the *Codice penale italiano* (*Codice Rocco*, 1988) states that “if the news is indispensable for the purposes of proving the offence for which proceedings are being brought and its truthfulness can only be established by identifying the source of the news, the court orders the journalist to indicate the source of his information” (Art. 200).

The Italian law establishes, by general rules, that the means of financing the periodical press shall be disclosed (*Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana*, art. 21). Something related directly with the media ownership and transparency. In this sense, the Italian law offers greater prominence of audiovisual media services of general and public interest:

- Law No 112 of 2004 (the so-called Gasparri Law) redefined the tasks of public service broadcasting and of the concessionaire, defining when and how to start the privatisation process of RAI, modifying the duration of the concession and the composition and appointment procedures of RAI's bodies. These rules were then incorporated in the Testo Unico della Radiotelevisione.
- The tasks of the public broadcasting service and the public service tasks in the regional and provincial spheres are defined. The public broadcasting service must be guaranteed.
- Full coverage of the national territory

- An adequate number of hours of television and radio broadcasting devoted to education, information, training, cultural promotion and the implementation of distance learning activities.
- Access to programming in favour of political parties and groups, associations of local authorities, national trade unions, religious denominations, ethnic and linguistic groups, and other groups of major social interest who request it, and the free transmission of socially useful messages.
- The establishment of a company for the production, distribution and broadcasting of radio and television programmes abroad, aimed at the knowledge and enhancement of the Italian language, culture and enterprise.
- The broadcasting of radio and television programmes in German, Ladin, French and Slovene for the border regions and the enhancement and strengthening of decentralised production centres for the promotion of local cultures and language tools.
- The broadcasting, at appropriate times, of content specifically intended for minors.
- The preservation of historical radio and television archives.
- The allocation of at least 15% of total annual revenues to the production of European works.
- The protection of people with sensory disabilities.
- The law n. 112/2004, so-called Gasparri, decrees the resurgence of representatives of political parties in the Board of Directors of Italian public service corporation, the RAI. This change of the previous 1993 law along with the governance pattern of the corporation stated by the law call off its industrial nature and reduce pluralism in the Italian duopolistic market of broadcasting. The law represents a meeting of interests between the Government of the actual premier, owner of the private side of the TV duopoly, and the system of political parties, as represented in the Parliament, in watching the RAI in sight of its privatisation, also provided for by the law (in Spada, 2005).

The legal environment and implementation of the laws concerning freedom of expression and information could be an opportunity in Italy to protect the integrity of the citizens based on a theoretical and normative perspective and other instruments of media accountability. However, from a critical point of view, there is an excessive number of regulations that Italian journalism has adopted without effective sanctions (Splendore, 2017) and a dynamic fuelled by a widespread clientelism, a partisan news media, an alternative definition of public interest, and a weak professionalism (Patterson, Smith Fullerton & Tuñón Navarro (2017).

Defamation, as a defined crime, creates risks for freedom of expression and a paralyzing effect on journalistic discourse. Defamation laws that are too broad or protective can also have a negative effect on freedom of expression and even if these are far-reaching sanctions, including excessive fines or disproportionate compensation, they can similarly undermine freedom of expression. While excessive damages in civil cases can undermine freedom of expression, criminal sanctions (fines or imprisonment) have far greater chilling effects. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has not openly called for the decriminalization of defamation. However, it has argued that the imposition of a prison sentence for a press offense will be compatible with the freedom of expression of journalists guaranteed by art. 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), only in exceptional circumstances, such as: when inciting violence or a case of hate speech. According to the ECHR, any requirement to prove the truth of value judgments is 'impossible' and therefore infringes freedom of opinion, which is a component of freedom of expression. The exercise of journalism in good faith and in order to provide information on a topic of public interest (defence of reasonable publication), adherence to journalistic ethics with a view to offering truthful and reliable information to the public, etc. Relevant defences are essential for defamation laws to meet standards consistent with Art. 10 ECHR.

In addition, a highly regulated system (Padovani et al, 2021), focused on aspects of misinformation between citizens and the government due to COVID-19 in the last two years (Lovari, 2020), migrants and media newsmaking practices (Gemi, Ulasiuk & Triandafyllidou, 2013; Arcila et al, 2021) can be a burden due to excessive bureaucratization.

## 2.4. Accountability system

### 2.4.1. Development and agency of change

The Register of Communication Operators (ROC)<sup>273</sup> in Italy is the instrument to which the institute law of the Authority entrusts guarantee functions, in terms of transparency and publicity of the ownership structures of communications operators. Keeping the ROC constitutes an essential fulfilment for the purpose of exercising a variety of institutional tasks such as, among other things, the protection of information pluralism, the verification of compliance with the limits set for shareholdings in foreign companies, activities relating to anti-concentration discipline. In the last year (2020), according to “*Relazione Annuale 2021. Sull’Attività svolta e sui programmi di lavoro*” published by AGCOM, the judicial litigation has concerned areas of intervention of the Authority, as well as the discipline of the proceedings. Here are the two of most relevant decisions: (a) Electronic communications, with reference to the obligations regarding universal service, the Council of State, with the sentence of 6 April 2021, n. 2790; (b) Audio-visual media services, regarding advertising crowding and the notion of cross-media group, the ordinance of March 25, 2021, n. 2504, with which the Council of State made a preliminary reference to the Court of Justice of the European Union<sup>274</sup>.

It is important to highlight that AGCOM represents in Italy a complex body, in terms of objectives assigned by law, assigned skills, functions performed, relationships with stakeholders and institutional networks to which it belongs at national and international level. In the last year, however, the administration has had to deal, on the one hand, with the health emergency and the related repercussions both on the markets of its competence and on its own organization, on the other hand, with the attribution of new skills and the beginning of a new cycle, as always happens at the start of a new Consiliatura (p. 179). In this context, the figure of the ombudsman offers the possibility of establishing a confidential dialogue environment and establishing a discussion with perspective and context. However, the role of ombudspersons as part of communication processes and journalism in Italy has hardly been on the agenda of the domestic media players (Splendore, 2017). Historically, Italian journalism has experienced only two ombudsmen initiatives and neither that of *Il Messaggero*, one of the most important dailies in the Italian central region, nor of *La Repubblica*, one of the most influential national newspapers, lasted. The basic problem facing ombudsmen is that they are perceived as an odd institution in the Italian political and cultural ecosystem.

### 2.4.2. Existing media accountability instruments and an evaluation of their effectiveness

The list of what can be considered instruments dealing with media accountability in Italy is long, detailed and puzzling. Italy is an assortment of a state-regulated domain, some self-regulation and a consistent mixture of the two (where public and private sectors jointly operate) (Puppis, 2007).

<sup>273</sup> Web page of Ministero dello sviluppo economico:

<https://www.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/comunicazioni/servizi-alle-imprese/registro-operatori-di-comunicazione-roc>

<sup>274</sup> In the matter of level playing field, the Lazio Regional Administrative Court, with the sentence of 2 December 2020, n. 12915, annulled the order-injunction (resolution no. 152/13 / CONS) with which the Authority sanctioned a national broadcaster for violation of the electoral level playing field (political elections 2013).

In terms of influence on Italian journalists' practices and behaviour, state law is unequivocally the most significant (Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni, Porlezza and Russ-Mohl, 2014). The ethics and media responsibility are an areas of great interest to our analysis of deliberative communication because the difficulties that Italian journalism face to be accountable depend on the excessive number of regulations that Italian journalism has adopted without effective sanctions. The result is that in Italy even the simplest quarrels, that could be solved by a system of self-regulation, tend to be regulated by law (see Splendore 2017).

This has been so because the discourse about the press council and the code of ethics is extremely complex. The Italian equivalent to a press council is the *Ordine dei Giornalisti (OdG)*, which the Association of Journalists established by law, and to which all journalists must belong to see their profession publicly recognized. The OdG can be regarded as a press council, at least in the meaning of an institution established in the defence of press freedom, which is guaranteed by the Constitutional Law, and which should monitor the accordance of the content provided by media associates. When media practitioners become members of the OdG, they must, now being professional journalists, sign the OdG's code of ethics. The OdG has the legal ability to ensure the code is abided by. The journalistic code of ethics is thoroughly articulated (and generally based on co-regulation) (Splendore, 2017).

## 3. Risks and opportunities of journalism domain

### 3.1. Development and agency of change

If we look through each of the critical junctures, we can affirm that the journalism domain is the one that have been affected the most. Italian journalistic culture has famously been characterized with a weak development of a mass circulation press, a high level of political parallelism, a low level of professionalization, and a relentless state intervention in the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The first part of the time span we are here considering (that is unavoidably linked to Berlusconi), it goes without saying, has even exacerbated those characteristics. Political journalism appeared to be more and more *parallel* to politics. All Governments, regardless of if they were or not lead by Berlusconi, were even more invasive against the journalism domain.

Many of the actors that supervise the functioning of the field of deliberative communication highlighted frantically problems Italy was facing. From 2009 to 2013, the Freedom House ranked Italy among the 'partly free' countries, raising many concerns about the functioning of the media. AGCOM constantly warned media actors. Journalistic associations (among others FNSI – *Federazione Nazionale Stampa Italiana*, the most important Italian journalist's association) denounced the pressures on journalism. Many scholars highlighted the diverse pressures the Italian media system was facing (among the plethora of publications two examples Durante and Knight 2012 about bias and political parallelism, Ciaglia et al. 2014 about the commercialization and popularization of the Italian media system). About politicization a comparative study explains also that news organizations appear to compose strategically political consistent newsrooms, providing incentives to journalists more aligned to the political line of newspapers (see Ceron *et al.*, 2020). The revision of the Public Service Broadcasting (i.e.: efforts to make it more independent, how to free journalists and make them more autonomous) has been constantly at the centre of the debate (see Gardini, 2004; Vigevani, 2012; Richeri, 2018).

Nonetheless, the end of the *Berlusconi era*, or at least its weakening, did not mean a new golden era for the Italian journalism. To some extent, the ongoing digital disruption (Eldridge & Broersma 2018) was even more effective and *disruptive* on Italian journalism. Italian journalism keeps a long history of political parallelism, Italian professional roles are almost entirely built upon autonomy on politics (see Sorrentino and Splendore, 2022), but the relations Italian journalism have been building with any technological innovation always were fragmented and conflictual (Agostini 2004). Italian journalism and Italian journalists found themselves to *reinvent* and *reshape* their professions. Many studies in Italy have investigated this ongoing process of adaptation (see among other Splendore 2017; Bentivegna and Marchetti, 2018). In this period the academic field has also increased and intensified its ability to monitor comparatively the role of Italian journalism (Örnebring and Mellado, 2018; Humprecht and Büchel, 2013). The wealth of this study makes difficult summarizing which main changes have taken place in the field. It is obvious, as well as worth to mention, that this change is deeply intertwined with global trajectories (commercialization and platformization of the press among others). What it is important to underline is the fact that the process of commercialization appears to be a sort of novelty for the Italian journalism, which is now driven also by economic aims rather than just political ones.

In this scenario, the combined effect of the economic crisis first and the global pandemic subsequently is further modifying and weakening (*disrupting*) journalism. These two events are further increasing the insecurity of journalists, leading to the death of many news media outlets and the need to reshape business models for many traditional companies. Global platforms drain large chunks of advertising revenue, and no alternative ways of making a profit have yet been found. Finally, the many discourses on disinformation, fake news, infodemics are obviously

also involving Italian journalism too, like many others it appeared unprepared to withstand this impact that erodes its foundations and its legitimacy.

### 3.2. Market conditions

About market condition in Italy, one of the highlight risk is the ownership diversity. In Italy leads to a media environment poorly supervised and therefore strongly influenced by both economic and political factors, that are often strictly intertwined (Cornia, 2016; Manchini et al., 2021). Specifically, Cornia (2016) suggests that in Italy the digital transition has led to only moderate changes within the Italian media system and generated limited implications for pluralism of information because although the new media, compared to the traditional media, have lower technological barriers inhibiting entry, market and political factors still hinder the entrance of newcomers: it is only legacy outlets, which are in a position to invest in innovation, that are able to reach a large audience. Cornia (ibid.) also highlights that pluralism is not the automatic result of technological developments.

According the Centres for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) (2020)<sup>275</sup>, the most important service operator in Italy are *Sky Italia* (Comcast Corporation), *RAI* (State-owned), *Mediaset* (Fininvest), *RCS* (Cairo Communications), *GEDI* (Exor), *Walt Disney* (Institutional investment companies), *Discovery Italia* (Discovery Group), *Gruppo 24 ORE* (Confindustria), *Caltagirone Editore* (Francesco Gaetano Caltagirone), *Viacom CBS Networks Italia* (Viacom CBS), *Società Editoriale Il Fatto* (No majority shareholder), *Ciaopeople Media Group* (Gianluca Cozzolino) and *Editoriale Nazionale* (Monrif) [more information in Index]. This distribution of operators shows that “the Italian media market is increasingly characterized by a strong cross-mediatlity” (p. 7). A tendency that present itself like an opportunity for the deliberative communication and the increase of the different points of view.

In this sense, it is remarkable like a real opportunity for the deliberative communication that in recent years the “new life” of regional and local information in Italy is a reality (Marrazzo, 2020; Splendore, 2020; Sorrentino; Carlo and Mazzanti, 2020; Pogliano and Ponzo, 2019; Bifulco, Tirino and Castellano, 2020; Ferrandi, 2011). The local information is acquiring new life thanks to the new dynamics of the digital information ecosystem, rediscovering a role that is no longer in the background in the continuous flow of information of social networks (Marrazzo, 2020).

News media income and the labour market define the journalistic ecosystem in Italy. Although television remains relatively stable in terms of popularity (dominated by the country’s two historical players, *RAI* and *Mediaset*), and online portals are steadily growing, the revenues in this segment are still only a fraction of the total media market. Moreover, online portals are increasingly dependent on intermediaries, the large tech companies. In 2018 alone, 41% of the advertising revenues generated by traditional online publishers was collected through programmatic advertising (CMDS, 2020). And online advertising revenues overtook television advertising revenues for the first time in 2019, and now represent almost half (49%) of overall advertising revenues in the Italian media sector (AGCOM, 2021)<sup>276</sup>.

In a fragmented profession like journalism, where the competition between the media increasingly voracious (Rea, 2010; Splendore, 2016), the growth of commercial logic among digital platforms and social media hurts journalists, users, and regular consumers (Curini, 2020; Mazzoleni and Sfardini, 2009; Curini, 2020; Dalpiaz and Ravasi, 2010; Porlezza and Splendore, 2016; Capra, 2003; Bifulco, Tirino and Castellano, 2020; Ferrandi, 2011; Schaiavazzi and Tallia, 2003) is an obvious risk in Italy. “Digital News Report of 2022”, published by Reuters Institute, point

<sup>275</sup> Website of CMDS: <https://www.ceu.edu/unit/cmds>.

<sup>276</sup> More information in the web page of AGCOM: <https://www.agcom.it/relazioni-annuali>

out that “in 2022, for the first time, a digital-born outlet, *Fanpage*, obtained the widest online reach in our survey (21%), surpassing established broadcasters, the main Italian news agency (ANSA), and the most important newspapers. Other digital-born outlets achieving good online results are *HuffPost* (9%), *Il Post.it* (7%), and *Open* (4%). Conversely, the offline news market is still dominated by the main Italian broadcasters (the public service broadcaster *RAI* and the commercial players *Mediaset*, *StyTg24*, and *TgLa7*), followed by established print outlets such as *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*” (p. 88).

The “overturn” that is occurring in the international media ecosystem during the last twenty years, increasingly influenced by transnational digital platforms, can become a risk or an opportunity for deliberative communication in Italy. An opportunity for the diversification of the media market and the plurality of information, but a risk for the economic sustainability model due to the increase in foreign competition and the large technological platforms.

### 3.3. Public service media

The autonomy of public media is seriously affected and threatened by competition and multiplication of platforms and media channels that follow commercial logic in Italy. The competition exacerbated by the multiplication of information channels due to the advent of the Web 2.0 and social media platforms have brought newspapers to slant the content of the news they produce.

In the case of Italian public media, the first decade of the 2000s is defined as a “performance measuring and assessing phase”, based on the digitalization processes and the new criteria for measuring and assessing achievement of the public sector organizations' performance objectives (Ducci, Materassi and Solito, 2020). However, their main objective today is to control their regular audience. This process has also led *RAI*, the Italian Public Service Broadcaster, to follow commercial logic to survive (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009). Moreover, because during the first nine months of 2020 total revenues for the Italian media sector fell by €780m, with considerable decreases observed in both the newspaper (-15%) and broadcasting sectors (-8%), while online advertising grew (+7%) (*Osservatorio sulle comunicazioni*, AGCOM, 2021).

The fear for the loss of autonomy of public media is a concern due to the parallelism between politicians and the media that has characterized Italian journalism since Berlusconi came to power. According to Ducci, Materassi and Solito (2020), in connected societies like Italy, some topics of reflection which to some extents have always accompanied the evolution of public communication – also in terms of its regulation – now become inevitable challenges and priorities. For these reasons, these authors propose the following aspects in the public communication review as part of deliberative communication: regulation, competences, training, coordination, listening, and languages.

The relevance of the financing of public service media is shown as a prominent level of Italian legislation because of the direct relationship between the independence of the public media and the strength of Italian democracy. The Gasparri law (Law No 112 of 2004) establishes the financing of the public broadcasting service, introducing the obligation for the concessionaire company to allocate the revenues deriving from the license fee only to the costs incurred for the provision of the public service, providing, to this end, for the keeping of separate accounts, subject to the control of an auditing company in an independent position.

### 3.4. Production conditions

The production conditions of the Italian media have been transformed due to the digitalization process during the last twenty years. Nonetheless, Italian journalism has generally been slow to adopt new technologies (Splendore, 2017). A reluctance to change that has caused that Internet,

and digital communications in general, have had a limited impact on the Italian market when compared with other European country markers (Richeri & Prario, 2016).

However, since the arrival of COVID-19 (2020), the entire media digitization process has accelerated. Hence, this trend towards studies on the digitization of the media and all communication processes is not surprising. It is even obvious, since the digital market reached 44.6 million users connected to the internet in December 2021; ranking the four global giants - *Google, Facebook, Amazon* and *Microsoft* - as platforms with the largest number of users; below are the rest of the Italian media companies - *RCS Media Group, ItaliaOnline, Governo Italiano, Mediaset, GEDI editorial group* and *Mondatori* (AGCOM, 2021).

In addition to digitization, the production conditions have been determined by the investigative resources. Beyond its traditional political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), another reason why in Italy the economic and political factors that shape the media environment are often strictly intertwined regard the fact that since Italian newsrooms in many cases lack the necessary resources to promote independent coverage, they tend to heavily rely on institutional sources (Tiffen et al., 2014; Splendore, 2020).

Regarding to the foreign offices/correspondent despite enjoyed prestige and autonomy in their work traditionally and had had an important language and cultural translation functions, due to the crisis in the Italian journalistic sector the funding of these expensive foreign bureaus was cut (Splendore & Mazzoleni, 2008). Moreover, Italy has witnessed an increment in service due to increased competition from both foreign and domestic firms since the regulations were implemented (Richeri & Prario, 2016).

The relevant role of investigative journalism by Italian journalism, even with the Covid-19 pandemic, is shown in the “Piacenza Manifesto - Deontological Charter of Scientific Journalism” (2018) presented by the Union of Italian Scientific Journalists (UGIS). According this document, science and technology require a dedicated professional update in the Italian context, even more in this post-pandemic period.

### 3.5. Agency of journalists

Italian professional journalists have to be part of the *Ordine dei Giornalisti* [Order of Journalists] by law to legitimately practice the profession. An almost unique measure in the world that aims to protect journalists against the intrusion of other professionals and to provide it with a professional entity.

At the internal level, the organizational conditions of Italian media platforms directly affect their workforce (Comunello; 2015; Markova and McKay, 2013; Josephi and Oller Alonso, 2021). Especially regarding women, who continue to occupy lower positions in the hierarchical ladder (Azzalini, 2015; Comunello, 2015). The profile of the typical Italian journalist is almost in line with the Italian white-collar composition; the group of journalists also includes a similar percentage of women (42.4%) in comparison to other professions - such as doctors or lawyers (Splendore, 2016).

The perceived level of autonomy for Italian journalists is one of the lowest in the world (Hantzsch *at al.*, 2019). Specifically, journalists who do not hold positions of responsibility in the newsroom perceive less freedom in the selection of news and aspects to be emphasised. Those who work for private editors consider that have more freedom in the choice of topics and frames, especially if the online private media. Regarding journalists working for national newspapers, they feel less autonomous when they cover the news (Sorrentino & Splendore, 2022).

According WJS (2013-2016), most of the Italian journalists held a full-time position (62.9%), whereas 4.8 percent of the respondents indicated that they had part-time employments, and

32.3 percent worked as freelance journalists. These professionals held in average a professional experience of 16.84 years ( $s=9.79$  and  $median=15$ ), 67.7 percent worked on various topics, more than half (56.8%,  $s=0.8$ ) worked just for one newsroom and 27.5 percent held other jobs outside the area of journalism (in Splendore, 2016).

### 3.6. Journalists' working conditions

AGCOM has pointed out the economic crisis that affects the Italian media system and has repeatedly highlighted the lack of its pluralism. Circumstances because that among public opinion there is a lack of trust in the content publish by media mainstreams and the level of autonomy of journalists. Autonomy is a very important factor in the journalist's professional careers (Ceron et al., 2019), even more in an environment in which media polarization and political instrumentalization of journalists is a reality in Italy. A real risk to create the conditions for the construction of a deliberative communication model in the country.

The increase of precariousness during the last years of the condition of journalists inside of media newsrooms causes the reduction of the satisfaction of Italian with their working conditions. Even more, although in Italy the Ordine dei Giornalisti is a professional association in which journalists must join to be included by law and legitimately practice the profession, only six out of ten of them work full-time in a fragmented profession with profound differences between various segments (Rea, 2010).

All this occurs in a context of clear manifestation, in one site, of the political polarization e instrumentalization of the public media – a tendency that influences the left-leaning and right-leaning editors (Ceron, Splendore, Hanitzsch and Thurman, 2019) - and, in another site, the commercialization of the journalism and the concentration of the traditional media mainstream and the extremely fierce competition by the multiplication of information channels due the advent of the Web 2.0 and social media platforms (Curini, 2020; Mazzoleni and Sfardini, 2009; Splendore and Curini, 2020; Mancini, 2013, 2020).

There are two aspects that the law contemplates as fundamental about the conditions of Italian journalists. The first, education and training (Splendore, Di Salvo, Eberwein, Groenhardt, Kus and Porlezza, 2016), which gives access to the journalistic profession (Art. 32 of Law No. 69/1963); the second, which has taken fervent interest in recent years, the threats/harassment/hate against journalist (Garusi, Splendore and Oller, 2022) due to the number of incidents of intimidation against them recorded by the Ministry of the Interior's Observatory that has risen by 21 per cent. Almost one threat in two (47 per cent) comes via the web and social networks (Federazione Nazionale Stampa Italiana, FNSI, 2021). Specialized journalists who work on specific issues, such as migration, suffer from hate speech (crime) on a recurring basis (according results from PHARM<sup>277</sup>).

It is worth mentioning that the publication by Elda Brogi (2018), with the investigation of the Application of Media Pluralism Monitor 2017 in the European Union (MPM), describes the alarming situation of journalists in the area of basic protection (36%), considering this item in crisis in terms of “working conditions, professionalization, autonomy, the independence of journalism and of Italian journalists”, (p. 4), all this with a growth in threats to journalists (“19 of them with protection through the use of armed escorts”), (p. 4), caused by death threats from the mafia and populist groups of the extreme right.

“The basic protection indicators measure: the possible risks, the existence and effectiveness of the implementation of regulatory guarantees for freedom of expression and the right to information, the protection of journalists, the ability to work, the effectiveness of the organizations

<sup>277</sup> Web page of PHARM: <https://pharmproject.usal.es/?lang=es>

national regulators that have the competence to regulate the media sector and the scope of traditional media and internet access”, (ibid, p. 6).

### 3.7. Intra-organizational diversity of human resources

The profile of the typical Italian journalist is a man (only 42% are women) and they are and they are in their thirties and forties (media of age is 42.98 years old and median is 43 years with an standart deviation of 10.54) (Splendore, 2017). Professional values and rules of the Italian journalists are legitimised by a wide range of normative guidelines that were previously ignored (Örnebring, 2013; Splendore, 2017; Sorrentino and Splendore, 2022). Based on these professional and legal guidelines the knowledge and ability of journalists are tested based on the regulated training they must have before entering the profession (Örnebring and Mellado, 2018; Pogliano, 2019; Pogliano and Ponzo, 2019). Because that, in an educational level, according WJS (2013-2016), Italian journalists generally are well educated (72.9% of the sample got at least a college degree; 24.5% got a university degree). Just half of them (50.1%) hold a degree in journalism or communication. Regarding this subject, since journalists covering immigration often lack the specific skills to put the events they report on into the broader context, even greater power to define the situation is given to actors from the political field (Pogliano 2019; Pogliano e Ponzo 2019).

### 3.8. Journalistic competencies, education and training

According to data obtained from the Atlas of Professions (permanent observation of the professions [www.atlantedelleprofessioni.it](http://www.atlantedelleprofessioni.it)) in Italy. The 3 most important activities that a journalist must perform to fulfill their role are the following: 1) Collect information, 2) Carry out journalistic reporting 3) Transmit information from press releases. To carry out these activities, a journalist must possess several skills. First, you must identify and contact representatives and experts of the sector to collect information about the subject or object of the service by analyzing documents and, materials on the subject being investigated. Secondly, you must define what you plan to create to specify what information to look for and thus interact with other professionals to be supported in some phases (for example, by the photographer, the filmmaker, the sound engineer among others) and finally you must prepare and transmit press releases publicizing events and news related to the institution to which you belong organizing press conferences, promoting the image of it and therefore solve possible problems from a communicative point of view.

To become a professional journalist in Italy there are two options: Firstly, complete 18 months of internship (Article 34 of Law No. 69/1963 and interpretative criteria at [www.odg.it/leggi-e-documenti](http://www.odg.it/leggi-e-documenti)) and, in addition, attend one of the theoretical preparation courses, including “distance learning” courses, lasting at least 45 hours, promoted by the National Council or Regional Councils of the Order. Secondly, obtain a title from an official school of journalism, attending for two years one of the schools of journalism recognised by the National Council of the Order of Journalists ([www.odg.it/scuole-di-giornalismo](http://www.odg.it/scuole-di-giornalismo)) and passing the examination of professional suitability (Article 32 of Law no. 69/1963).

Once the process that regulates the National Council of the order of journalists is completed, you get the journalist card that guarantees you to be able to practice the profession but there are two types: publicists and professionals. The difference between a publicist and a professional is due to the fact that the former not only carry’s out journalistic activities and receives a salary, but also has with the possibility of exercising other professions or work activities at the same time; while the latter exercises the profession exclusively. (it.indeed.com)

Although no specific qualification is required, to obtain eligibility as a publicist or professional it is necessary to follow certain paths, regulated by law n. 69 of February 3, 1963, which also established the Order of Journalists (ODG) as a representative public body of the category.

The strict regulation, and according to WJS (2013-2016), makes Italian journalists well educated as they have at least a university degree (Splendore, 2017). However, the discrepancy between the normative ideals and practice is transparent as to the possibility of fulfilling a surveillance function in Italy is threatened by the instrumentalisation of the media by external agents, the weakness of the written press market and the low level of professionalism (Genli, Mazzoni and Mincigrucci, 2018).

### 3.9. Professional culture and role perception

In Italy there is little cooperation, if any, between journalists. For example, although this country is one of the few countries around the world that has a national association of journalists (*Ordine dei Giornalisti*), the main purpose of which is to supervise and protect its members, his codes of practice and social norms are fought over, challenged, not unanimously recognised or legitimised even by journalists themselves (Splendore, 2017a).

In recent years, the media and the journalistic profession in Italy have been marked by the digitization process that the profession is undergoing and the changes that journalism is undergoing due to periods of crisis, political interests, market demands and the evolution of the professional profiles and roles of journalists (Splendore and Brambilla, 2021; Standaert, 2021; Sorrentino and Splendore, 2022).

Most Italian journalists identify with the monitoring role and consider especially important to report things as they are. The results from WJS study (2013-2016) about professional role orientations show that Italian journalists found it most important to report things as they are (mean=4.60 and s=0.71), to be a detached observer (mean=4.47 and s=0.81), to provide analysis of current affairs (mean=4.13 and s=0.89), and to let people express their views (mean=3.82 and s=1.17). The relevance of roles like the first two (“to report things as they are” and “to be a detached observer”) are common in Western journalism, nevertheless they are in contrast with the typical representations of Italian journalism. Conversely, it is less common within Western journalism that “let people express their view” covered a massive support as in the Italian case. The two items that carry the lowest level of support are “Support national development” (mean=1.32 and s=0.67) and “Support government policy” (mean=1.32 and s=0.65).

Fulfil a watchdog role in Italy is threatened by the instrumentalization of the media outlets by ‘external’ actors, the weakness of the print press market and the low level of professionalism - understood as the self-censorship of journalists (Gerli, Mazzoni and Mincigruci, 2018). In line with the perception of the role declared by Italian journalists, there is an objectivism characterised by “limiting oneself to reporting reality as it appears”. However, the youngest journalists are the ones who differ the most from this evidence (Sorrentino and Splendore, 2022).

## 4. Risks and opportunities of media usage patterns domain

### 4.1. Development and agency of change

Developing a context of deliberative democracy presupposes that citizen are well-informed about the topics that politicians and other relevant actors discuss in the public sphere. In the first decade of the period, we analyse here, the TV news and traditional newspapers were the media sources most used to obtain news about politics and daily news (Mazzoleni, Vigevani and Splendore, 2011). As mentioned, the television landscape, including news, was dominated by

the public service broadcaster RAI and by Mediaset. As far as the Italian press is concerned, there was a period of high concentration in the market, with the first four newspapers – *Corriere della Sera*, *Repubblica*, *Gazzetta dello Sport* and *La Stampa* – covering over 35% of the overall sales volumes (Fabbri, 2002). At that time the use of the internet for information was already widespread (Mazzoleni, Vigevani and Splendore 2011), more than half of the users who consulted the internet for news still obtained information by going to the websites of the most popular newspapers in Italy.

A critical juncture related to media consumption, on the other hand, undoubtedly concerns the advent of digitalization and “platformization”, which occurred during the second decade of the new millennium. People today are more likely to get the news they want, when, how, and where they want it. According to several authors, this has fragmented the media ecology, resulting in a much more complex flow of communication than in the past, which poses a serious threat to the gatekeeper role hitherto played solely by the traditional media (e.g., Benkler, 2006). Social media have been described as environments characterised by an abundance of choice and therefore exclusively dominated by dynamics of “selective exposure”, including to news (e.g., Stroud, 2007; Prior, 2007). However, an empirical study conducted in Italy shows that accidental exposure to news on social media is a very frequent experience that is likely to reduce the gap in online engagement between citizens with high and low interest in politics, also potentially broadening the range of voices that make themselves heard (Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016). Nevertheless, since the Italian journalism has traditionally been very reluctant to use alternative sources (Curran *et al.*, 2013; Splendore, 2017), it emerges that the range of information consumed by citizens may not grow as social media platforms become widespread.

During the pandemic spread of the coronavirus, several studies show that, in contexts where the amount of false or problematic information in circulation is very high, opinion-building processes become more complex for citizens and, at the same time, confusion, cynicism, a reduced sense of efficacy, but also distrust in the others and institutions spread (Balmas, 2014; Faris *et al.*, 2017; Humprecht *et al.*, 2020). The Italian debate about the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic was characterised by a lack of scientific knowledge on the virus, disagreement between experts and politicians, and an abundant circulation of contradictory, problematic, and sometimes even false information (Battistelli and Galantino, 2020).

One of the many consequences of this situation is undoubtedly the unprecedented increase in the population's demand for information: all media, from television to the web, saw a real surge in the search for news (Scaglioni and Sfarini, 2021). Nevertheless, it is still the television to cover a leading role in the dynamics of accessing and acquiring information of public and social interest. Television consumption of information has increased considerably thanks to the diversification of the information offered in terms of genres, languages, and tones of voice used in the various programmes.

## 4.2. Agency of media-users and analysts

Italian media suffer due to market concentration and economic crisis. In terms of consumption, audiovisual media are the main source of information in the country, while it is known that newspapers have considerably decreased the number of readers, compared to a growing consumption of online news. According to Brogi (2017), the Government of Matteo Renzi promoted reforms that affected the media sector, some of these were: the reform of the governance of the Public Service Media (PSM), the reform of the freedom of information law and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the reform of public press financing, and the introduction of a “fund for pluralism”, (p. 2).

The concentration of ownership of the Italian media is 54%, affecting the media market in the last thirty years, since their management is polarized in a few people who control them, such as: the audiovisual market, which is dominated by the two main operators in Italy. This combined with political ownership of one of the major media companies has contributed as a negative feature of the Italian media system.

According to data from the Centre for Social Investment Studies (CENSIS), a socioeconomic research institute in research on the media and the construction of identity.

The results show that the five main sources of information used by Italians include traditional tools such as: news broadcasts, news television networks and paper newspapers, along with the innovation provided by the most widespread social platform, Facebook, and by Internet search engines, such as Google. that allow in seconds to add results by keywords or topics. The news maintains its leadership: they are the programs that Italians use the most to inform themselves (59.1%). The appreciation is widespread, but increases with age: from 40.4% of the very young to 72.9% of those over 65. There is also a high degree of favoritism towards televisions dedicated to continuous information 24 hours a day.

Another aspect analyzed by CENSIS shows that national politics is the queen of programming. Users compose a custom mix of fonts, online and offline. It is recorded that interest in the political sphere represents 42.4% of the population: the events of governments and political parties represent the most popular type of news. They even exceed by more than 10 percentage points the classic games of the informative schedules, such as sport (29.4%) or police (26.1%) and pink press (18.2%).

According to CENSIS projections, it is foreseen that the majority of Italians are convinced that in the future Italy will lose its economic and political weight on the international stage (57.5%) and the European Union will not be strengthened (55.3%). But there is no need to fear the risk of liberal democracies entering into crisis (14.8%). We will carry out most of our daily activities through the internet (67.4%). For many, however, paper media (newspapers, magazines, books) are doomed to extinction (49.6%) and information will be less free than today (42.4%). In general, it is above all people more familiar with personal means who show a more positive attitude towards the future. Not only young people, but also the most cultured subjects and inhabitants of large cities.

### 4.3. Access to news and other media content

Regarding media access and diversity in Italy, should be highlighted three main risks for the deliberative communication: firstly, the important level of ownership concentration for free broadcast TV that has now persisted for over 20 years. Two companies control 87.2% the Italian broadcast television market: the public *RAI* and the Berlusconi's family's *Mediaset*. Secondly, the high concentration of advertising investment in the field of television. For several years, Italian television has received over half of the total advertising investments made. Thirdly, the political corporate relationship in Italy. A prime example of this was the invest founder Silvio Berlusconi, who served as prime minister three times: in 1994, from 2001 to 2006, and again from 2008 to 2011 (Richeri & Prario, 2016).

In addition, the media have an increasingly closer link with social networks. According to Valeriani and Vaccari (2016), inadvertent encounters with political content on social media are likely to reduce the gap in online engagement between citizens with high and low interest in politics, potentially broadening the range of voices that make themselves heard. In line with this result, a study by Mosca and Quaranta (2016) finds that social movements and protesters use online platforms extensively to inform and mobilize other citizen's by-passing the gatekeeping function of traditional media. For all these reasons, and despite the high level of media concen-

tration in Italy, an opportunity for the deliberative communication is a growing proliferation of media options to consume news (Castro et al., 2021). Specifically, Italian media users have full access to media and preferred channel (97.4%) and offer high relevance to media news because 94.9% of them watch/read news on their average day (AGCOM, 2018). However, this opportunity could become a serious risk because, according to Castro *et al.* (2021), a considerable proportion of Italian users opt-out of news use or have a low-source and low-frequency news media diet.

#### 4.4. Relevance of news media

The *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* (AGCOM), as independent Italian regulatory and guarantee administrative authority, watches over the General Public Broadcasting Service based on the principles laid down by the Italian Constitution and by the European Union. It is important because, for example, the public canal *RAI* is the television news program with the highest number of publics (AGCOM, 2020). Hence, AGCOM not only regulates aspects in that area, but also establishes itself as the main regulatory body for aspects such as the relevance, access, preferences, quality, and functionalities of news media.

The mission of the General Public Broadcasting Service is based on the principles laid down by the Italian Constitution and by the European Union in the TV without Frontiers Directive of 1989 and subsequent amendments, the 9th Protocol on Public Television annexed to the Treaty of Amsterdam of 1993 and the subsequent Communication of the Commission of the European Communities 2009/C 257/01 published in the Official Journal of the European Union of 27 October 2009.

Public service obligations are defined by Law No. 249 of 31 July 1997, Law No. 112 of 3 May 2004, the Consolidated Law on Audiovisual and Radio Broadcasting Media Services, approved by Legislative Decree No. 177 of 31 July 2005, and the Service Contract signed with the Ministry of Communications. According to Article 45 of the Consolidated Law on Audiovisual and Radio Broadcasting Media Services, the public service broadcasting must guarantee the following, thus setting the minimum mandatory content, which may be supplemented through the Service Contract:

- a. the broadcasting of all public service television and radio transmissions with full coverage of the national territory, insofar as science and technology allow;
- b. an adequate number of hours of television and radio broadcasts devoted to education, information, training and cultural promotion, with particular regard to the promotion of theatrical, cinematographic, television, including original language, and musical works recognised as being of a high artistic level or more innovative; this number of hours shall be defined every three years by resolution of the Authority; entertainment broadcasts for minors shall be excluded from the calculation of such hours
- c. the broadcasting of the transmissions referred to in subparagraph (b), in a proportionate manner, in all time slots, including those with a high audience, and on all television and radio programmes;
- d. access to programming, within the limits and according to the modalities indicated by the law, in favour of parties and groups represented in Parliament and in regional assemblies and councils, of the associative organisations of local autonomies, of national trade unions, of religious denominations, of political movements, of political and cultural bodies and associations, of legally recognised national associations of the cooperative movement, of associations of social promotion registered in the national and regional registers, of ethnic and linguistic groups and of other groups of relevant social interest that request it;

- e. the establishment of a company for the production, distribution and broadcasting of radio and television programs abroad, aimed at the knowledge and enhancement of the Italian language, culture and enterprise through the use of the programs and the diffusion of the most significant productions of the national audiovisual panorama;
- f. the broadcasting of radio and television programs in German and Ladin for the autonomous province of Bolzano, in Ladin for the autonomous province of Trento, in French for the autonomous region of Valle d'Aosta and in Slovene for the autonomous region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia;
- g. the broadcasting, free of charge, of messages of social utility or of public interest that are requested by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the broadcasting of appropriate information on the viability of Italian roads and motorways
- h. the broadcasting, at appropriate times, of content specifically intended for minors, taking into account the needs and sensitivity of early childhood and developmental age;
- i. the preservation of the historical radio and television archives, guaranteeing public access to them;
- j. the allocation of at least 15% of total annual revenues to the production of European works, including those made by independent producers;
- k. the realization, within the deadlines provided for by law no. 112 of 3 May 2004, of the infrastructures for radio and television broadcasting on terrestrial frequencies in digital mode;
- l. the implementation of digital interactive services of public utility;
- m. compliance with the advertising crowding limits provided for by article 38 of the Consolidated Law;
- n. the articulation of the concessionaire company in one or more national seats and in seats in each region and, for the Trentino-Alto Adige region, in the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano;
- o. the adoption of appropriate measures to protect people with sensory disabilities;
- p. the enhancement and strengthening of decentralized production centres;
- q. the implementation of distance teaching activities.

Also, *RAI* is committed to guaranteeing an offer dedicated to the country's linguistic minorities. Based on the agreements currently in force, *RAI* guarantees television and radio programming for the following linguistic minorities in the German and Ladin-speaking areas of Italy, in the provinces of Bolzano and Trento, Slovenian in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and French in Valle D'Aosta.

In Italy there is uncertainty within the functionalities of media. The excessive fragmentation of the market and strong competition without proper regulation will discourage investment. The sector is moving to grow high-speed broadband networks and to diversify its offerings, but it is still unclear as to who will undertake the requisite infrastructure investments (Fortunati and O'Sullivan, 2021). Until 2020, according to the "*Rapporto sul consumo di informazione*" published by AGCOM<sup>278</sup>, the main sources of information were television (48.2%), internet (26.3%), newspapers (17.1%) and radio (8.4%). And, until before the Covid-19 pandemic, 94.9% of Italians watch/read news on their average day (AGCOM, 2018).

Today, according to the data from "2022 Digital News Report", the media sector is now fully experiencing the impact of the digital transition. The main sources of information are online (75%) and TV (70%), social media (47%) and newspapers (15% in free fall for years). The social networks most popular for news are *Facebook*, *WhatsApp* and *YouTube* [*TikTok* (4%)].

<sup>278</sup> Link to download this report: <https://images.agi.it/pdf/agi/agi/2018/02/19/124325678-b198b2cb-affe-4842-b6b8-4e297aba9a82.pdf>

However, the economic model of online media in Italy is still undergoing restructuring, since the percentage of users willing to pay for news is also low (12%).

And, of course, the functionality of the media in Italy is directly related to the quality of news media and the emergence of a marked cross-media phenomenon. This phenomenon causes fewer and fewer users to access the media for information purposes, which now concerns more than three-quarters of the Italian population. Only television still resists as a medium with its own pool (about 8% of the population) of exclusive users (the so-called “television” of the population). Finally, there remains a niche of Italians (about 5%) who do not get informed at all (at least not through the mass media) (Corchia and Bracciale, 2020). In Brogi's MPM research (2018), it is highlighted that the indicator of transparency in media ownership in Italy has a medium risk (50%), which shows that it is partially transparent.

#### 4.5. Trust in media

Despite the relevance of the media as information services in Italy, the level of trust that users place in them is particularly low in Italy. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020)<sup>279</sup> confirm that the level of trust in the Italian government is 35/100, one of the lowest in the world. According to Reuters Institute (2020), after an 11-percentage point fall in 2020, trust recovered all that this year but is still relatively low. The most trusted brands are generally those that are known for lower levels of political partisanship (ANSA, SkyTG24 and Il Sole 24 ore). The main risk is that least trusted are outlets with a pronounced partisan bias and the popular digital-born outlet (Fanpage, Libero Quotidiano and Il Giornale). A situation that, rather than decreasing, is currently increasing: On average, just 13% and 15% of users believe that the Italian media are independent of undue political and commercial influences, respectively (Digital News Report, 2022).

The partisan nature of Italian journalism (Splendore and Curini, 2020) and the strong influence of political and business interests on news organizations (Memoli and Splendore, 2014) cause the brands that are most trusted are generally those that are known for lower levels of political partisanship. Among these, the least trusted is the popular digital-born website *Fanpage* (Lovari, 2020).

What is clear from the European Union about freedom of expression on a comparative level in all European countries is that the lack of freedom and pluralism of the media can represent a further serious obstacle to freedom of expression as well as to that of receiving and disseminating information and creating, by weakening public trust in the media, a vulnerability to democracy (Servizio Ricerca del Parlamento europeo, 2019), and a polarization of Italian audiences.

<sup>279</sup> Website of OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/italy/>

## 5. Risks and opportunities of media related competencies domain

### 5.1. Development and agency of change

The reconstruction of this domain with respect to the critical junctures displays a very clear pattern. Throughout the first part of the new millennium, those who used the traditional media, those who sought information and tried to participate in the public debate, did not suffer pressures with respect to their ability to deal with the media content. Consumption habits were historically rooted and incorporated. (i.e., people were very familiar with those media). It is hard to find pieces of research that measure the satisfaction of Italians with media, but if we just consider the level of consumption of TV as well as newspapers sold at kiosks, we may affirm that Italians generally were satisfied with the news offer, or at least they were more likely to use those two media. One of the effects of the critical juncture due to the combination of TV duopoly and the presence of Berlusconi was the fact that Italians witnessed an increase in the polarization that revolved around the figure of Silvio Berlusconi. Indeed, polarization had never been a main characteristic of the Italian contest, historically dominated by a multi-party that found its equilibrium at the centre of the political spectrum.

By contrast, the last decade was dominated, as in any liberal democracy, by process that regard an increase in polarization, circulation of misinformation, online hate speech, spread of conspiracy theories (see among others Van Aelst *et al.*, 2021; Teocharis *et al.*, 2021, Humprecht *et al.*, 2021). This scenario, that was already emerging from the widespread of social media, was even reinforced by the Coronavirus.

It is obviously difficult to briefly describe these processes and it is even more difficult to trace them back as Italian peculiarities. As Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri affirm: “The public space of deliberative communication is now a background noise, built on conversations that are more and more partisan” (2021: 158). The information environment is now characterised by increased choice as well as fragmentation and multiplication of the ways of consuming information. The two Italian authors talk about an interrelated public debate where convergence and divergence are at stage.

If we said that at the end of the last millennium the Italian population seemed to know the affordances of the media system in which it was involved, the digitization processes have brought it into a scenario where the necessary skills to gather adequate information have increased. However, there is no empirical evidence that leads to say that this process is different in Italy than in other countries. The growth of disinformation, online hate speech, polarization appear characteristics of the global media system.

### 5.2. Overview of media related competencies in policy documents

Social inclusion is the area that presents the greatest risk in Italy. Social inclusion is understood as the access by various groups of society to the media. 1 Its area of analysis includes indicators to assess media policies and access to them by minorities, communities, women, people with disabilities or specific groups, in the context of media literacy. This indicator in Italy is the highest in the MPM for Italy, (Brogi, 2017, p. 8), since media literacy represents 88%. Media access by minorities is scored at 42%: “The Italian media landscape is characterized by a very high number of local radio and television stations, which provide viewers with a relatively wide variety of content which is also addressed to minorities”, (idem, p. 8).

The polarized pluralist communication model presented by the Italian media has been referenced (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), which integrates the media with party politics and a weak

level of professionalization of journalism (Campos-Domínguez & Redondo- García, 2015, p. 188), noting that "newspapers were run by a small elite, with politicized content and a low print run that was complemented by a strong influence of the audio-visual media on public opinion." Which are in a constant search for economic profitability by the media, with a frivolization of information and a continuous loss of readers as a result of journalistic manipulation and power relations between the media and the financial.

The role of the receiver as a passive agent in the communication process influences the content creation paradigm, where users play a leading role. Where three models of journalism have been typified: participatory journalism (the media assumes the information of its citizens), citizen journalism (amateur and non-professional) and user-generated content (generated by the user in the digital sphere and not necessarily journalistic); Barred, 2013.

In the results of the investigations by Campos-Domínguez & Redondo-García, 2015, a weak advance towards media transparency can be seen, mainly in the public and private financed media in Italy, where the progression is uneven, verticalized and without being able to locate a clear strategy for connecting with citizens to recover media credibility through accountability.

### 5.3. Information about the media literacy programs in formal and/or in non-formal education

Media literacy is related to all media whether digital or not, with this we include radio, television, film, recorded music, print media, internet and digital media of information and communication technologies, for which constitutes an essential factor for the media literacy of citizens, whether young or old. According to Silver (2009), media literacy is "the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate its content and create communications in a variety of contexts", (p. 12), which is based on three elements: 1) access to media and media content; 2) critical approach, ability to decipher media messages, knowledge of how media work; 3) creativity, communication and production skills. The European definition of media literacy is understood by Silver (2009), as "the ability to access the media, understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and their content, and create communications in a variety of contexts" (p. 13); this does not exclude any medium and focuses on three fundamental areas: media literacy for commercial communication, media literacy for audiovisual works and media literacy for online channels. Therefore, the commission proposes the development and exchange of good practices in digital environments through programs that encourage initiative and research.

In Italy, the National Digital School Plan (PNSD), is provided for in the law 'La Buona Scuola' (Law 107/2015), which contemplates the strategies of media literacy in the country, focused on innovation in the school system and the opportunities of digital education. This Plan creates the conditions to make the 'Right to the Internet' a reality and that all schools have access to the information society, encompassing the entire chain of digital access in schools, to enable digital teaching, access to digital tools, connectivity with the deployment of ultra-broadband fiber to the door of each school, the internal wiring of all school spaces and the connectivity fee, (EACEA, 2022).

The PNSD includes a teacher appointed by the school to support the director in the planning and implementation of digital innovation projects. Their tasks include:

*Stimulate internal training within the school in the areas of the PNSD through the organization of online or face-to-face courses, as a trainer or as a training organizer, encouraging the participation of the school community both in internal workshops as well as those organized by the axes and areas of training, encouraging participation and stimulating the role of students in the organization of workshops*

*and other activities, even structured, on PNSD issues, also through training moments open to families and other actors in the territory, for the creation of a shared digital culture, the creation of innovative solutions: identification of sustainable methodological and technological solutions to be disseminated within school environments (for example, use of particular didactic tools with which the school has been equipped; the practice of a common methodology; information on existing innovations in another s schools; a coding workshop for all students), in line with the analysis of the needs of the school, also in synergy with the technical assistance activities carried out by other figures. (ibim, p. 2)*

#### **5.4. Actors and agents of media related competencies: risks and opportunities**

In the study carried out by Suárez-Villegas (2015), some features of journalistic practice in traditional media and digital natives are described, highlighting as the most important: 1) the verification of news and citizen contributions where "native digital media are more open to public participation than traditional ones" (p. 392); 2) there are two informative environments or two professional cultures: conventional journalism and digital journalism, where there is a generalized view that digital media are more informative, more up-to-date, and favour citizen participation to a greater extent ( in terms of a critical view of them), where public debate and democracy are promoted, enabling greater transparency and accountability, all linked not to the professional journalist (the one who is entitled or has a contractual relationship), but ethics and journalistic quality.

As elements of risk in digital media, it was evidenced that the immediacy of digital information affects the ability to verify information and sources, as well as delve into that information and contextualize it, where there is a greater tendency to sensationalism, associated with the need to gain followers, and where an excess of information can reduce the differences between what is important, what is banal or what is anecdotal, fundamentally predominating a culture of "free", which makes it difficult to monetize business models on the network, making it difficult to carry out journalism of quality, these digital media have a greater possibility of manipulating the information of the digital media.

Digital media journalists place more emphasis on the importance of economic viability and transparency when it comes to knowing the media's sources of funding, as factors that can guarantee a more professional and less ideological editorial line. Quite the contrary, it happens in traditional media where journalists feel conditioned to their superiors when carrying out their informative work and the commercial interests of the owners of the medium, which is why they show a less critical spirit and greater complacency.

It cannot be denied that there are opportunities and novelties for journalism in digital environments that cannot be ignored and that have constituted an evident change in the interaction between professionals and citizens, as well as in information resources and rhythms, warning that the overabundance of information can trap the journalist in news synthesis and not in tasks of verifying information and its sources and far from constituting an opportunity to be informed, a conflict may arise since it is not possible to guarantee the truth of the information.

The investigation of Suárez-Villegas (2015), summarizes that journalists from traditional media show: convinced of the importance of participation for the functioning of the democratic system, the real effects of the role of users, more demanding in terms of requirements that must comply with public participation in the media, (p. 395).

## 5.5. Assessment of media related competencies among citizens

In the Italian society, deliberative communication strongly depends on the news media's ability to provide truthful information and to carry out argumentative discussions to solve problems and reach agreement (Van Der Wurff *et al.*, 2016). Understanding the mechanisms of diffusion of inaccurate and false news contents – among media, digital platforms, and social media – is key to knowing the individual mechanisms by which Italian citizens believe in those news (Vegetti and Mancosu, 2020). In a similar vein, Bauer and Clemm von Hohenberg (2020) argue that even though the increasing spread of fake news represents one of the greatest challenges societies face in the 21st century, there is little understanding of how sources influence whether people believe and share what they read. Analyses of this kind would be particularly useful in Italy, where the level of media literacy is relatively low. Also, in the specifics of the school system, the situation could be improved. As noted by Doni (2015), despite some valuable attempts to introduce Media Education in Italian schools, unfortunately, non-systematicity, non-organicity, and poor interdisciplinarity still shape the educational and teaching practices.

For all these reasons, Ferro Allodola (2020) underlies the urgent need to spread “media resilience”, that is the ability to be aware of the risks of false, incomplete, and obsolete information to which we are subjected on a daily basis and to be able to cope with it in order to be able to exercise control over our choices, decisions, and actions, both in personal relationships and in the political and Italian social life. As pointed out by Bracciale (2017), in Italy new forms of social “ghettoization” are taking shape for those excluded from the circuits that allow them to exercise their rights of political and cultural citizenship, which are less and less linked to the relations of production, but more dependent on the effective capacity to manage information flows in the information society.

Ferro Allodola (2020) continues by stating that the empowerment of Italian citizens through media resilience is only feasible if free and sustainable access to the information and infrastructures of the digital society is guaranteed. As a matter of fact, deliberative communication in Italy could be based on the utopia of the democratizing narrative, based on the idea of the Internet and social media platforms as tools capable of guaranteeing more solid rights of citizenship; more intense collective participation, thanks to the simplification in the processes of accountability made possible by the technological infrastructure; and the redistribution of decision-making power into the hands of citizens is strongly dependent on the level of digital inclusion in the various territorial and socio-cultural contexts (Andretta and Bracciale, 2017).

There is a paradox inside Italian society, in which risks and opportunities converge for the creation and strengthening of deliberative communication. On one hand, the deep transformation of Italian democracy itself - will be put to the test with the current government led by a president of extreme right-wing ideology, the new discourses and narratives that take place within a pluralised public sphere, the processes of mediation that are closely linked to technological affordances, and the emergence of a downsizing of the pre-conceived opportunities for participation that sharpens the distance between elites and non-elites (*ibid.*).

In this context, the case of Italy is peculiar because the country suffers from digital backwardness due to the more conspicuous presence of citizens who belong to the group of *information have nots* compared to other European countries; which results into the inability to fully exploit the benefits of digitalisation (Bracciale and Mingo, 2015; Mingo e Bracciale, 2018).

Although the digital divide has further grown during the covid-19 health crisis, the pandemic has contributed to increase the salience of the topic in the public debate and shifting the axis of the discourse from an economic frame to a more politicised one concerned with socio-economic imbalances (Selva, 2020). Whether this shift will only be temporary, it seems anyway to represent a good starting point.

## 7. Conclusion

In this report, Italian team provides an analysis of critical junctures that have determined the transformation processes in Italy during the last twenty years (2000-2020). Based on the in-depth analysis of the changes in the legal and ethical regulation, journalism, media usage patterns and media-related competencies of users [four domains that systematize the paradigm of deliberative communication proposed by Mediadecom], we can conclude that the background [political, social, media, education, and economic system; technology] influences the risks and opportunities (ROs) around the stability of the democracy in Italy<sup>280</sup>.

In Italy, the legal framework is in most respects in accordance with European standards of freedom of expression and information, but a significant degree of conflicting legislation, especially regarding various defamation offences. Frequent legislative changes are seen in the media field, attesting to the fact that it has still not stabilized into a coherent policy-led system. Evidence of hybridity of media systems is seen in media practices, which take place in a diverse yet highly concentrated media system, most like the “Mediterranean polarized pluralist” media system model from the Hallin and Mancini (2004) typology. Media related competences and media literacy appear to better in some areas and population groups than in others.

The journalism market is subject to economic constrictions as well as pressures in the form of many SLAPP lawsuits. Even though the free market and the technological development of the Italian media have allowed access to more - and varied - actors - journalists, communicators, technicians, and platforms - digital and analog, the TV duopoly - public service broadcaster *RAI* and by *Mediaset*, the private broadcaster controlled by the former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi - remains solid. A clear risk to the independence of the media, journalism and, above all, the constitutional powers themselves due to the strong parallelism between journalists and political actors.

The digitization process of all Italian public and private institutions, and of course the media and journalism, has accelerated in recent years. Even more so since the start of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, which forced the structures and processes of millions of professionals to change. It was not just teleworking, but a whole paradigm shift and way of understanding the journalistic exercise. Due to the parallelism mentioned in the previous paragraph, phenomena such as the “mediatisation of politics”, digital transition, audience atomization, new online setting, among other, the Italian political scene has become the ideal space for digital confrontation with the help of the media, political and media actors, and users in general. The social media platforms mobilize followers/voters, polarise messages - including “cybermobbing”, “shitstorms” -, and manipulate information. This has been done before, but never with this level of diffusion and repercussion.

As a result of this conglomerate, the rise of the extreme right has been favored to lead the Italian government in the coming years. Boosted by two critical junctures like the economic crisis of 2018, that impacted Italy’s socio-political fabric and the populist parties, and migrant crisis in 2013, that created a “powerful ‘echo chamber’ of the institutional and political discourse in institutional and informal platform as social media.

The deliberative communication in Italy is established by the populist zeitgeist based on the creation of the *Northern League* in the late 1980s (see Biorcio, 2004), and by Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*. In respect to ROs deliberative communication, it is worth to mention, among others,

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<sup>280</sup> This research in Italy is more necessary today than ever before after the victory of the extreme right in the elections in Italy the September 25, 2022. The centre-right coalition has obtained about 43% of the votes, led by the post-fascist “The Brothers of Italy” (*Fratelli d’Italia*) with 26.2%. Her leader, Giorgia Meloni, will be the first woman to hold the post of prime minister.

1) the birth of the Five Star Movement — *Movimento 5 Stelle*, and 2) Matteo Salvini's — leader of the Northern League (*La Lega*) — communication strategy on the social media platforms; and the 3) consolidation of the leadership of Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia, FdI*), a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party led by Giorgia Meloni that become the largest party in the 2022 Italian general election.

The Five Star Movement represents to the electorate an opportunity for new political actors to capitalize on political dissatisfaction and anti-party sentiment. But there is a risk that play a main role paralleli: Salvini and her populist strategy base on the social media communication. There for, while digital communication and social media may represent an opportunity for deliberative communication by reaching a wider audience; the unfiltered communication operated by the hand of right-wing populists may favour polarisation and extremisms, hence nationalism and illiberalism, conceptually at odds with liberal democracy.

The pandemic has been another trigger that must be considered as a critical juncture, since due to the confinement of citizens due to the measures taken to counteract the spread of COVID-19, people - and professionals - were forced to change their daily and work routines and adapt to a greater extent to the digital environment. A change that, initially, was an opportunity to innovate and advance in the implementation of new technologies in the work environment of Italian citizens. But that, however, has become a risk due to the spread of negative communicative flows and misinformation phenomena. We can even say that two epidemics took place in parallel in Italy: COVID-19 and the infodemic.

In the case of the **legal domain in Italy**, the evaluation of risk and opportunities in Italy regarding to deliberative communication must shift from the conflict between open data to privacy protection. Another aspect to be considered is the excessive production of rules which paradoxically makes harder to enhance and improve the media performances. Although different laws ensure the pluralism of media ecosystem, the television duopoly is the best example of the oligopoly in matters of communication system – public and private, analogic and digital platforms and citizen initiatives. To the point that laws to regulate the media system – and the journalistic exercise – complex the market, but also the deregulations. Both are determined by the high rate of bureaucratization of state processes and structures. Hence, Laws to regulate the migratory flow, which at first could be an opportunity to generate a consensus communication model, could become a tool for tension and polarization.

The difficult economic situation that the country is going through has worsened since 2008 and COVID-19. Both critical junctures that focus on the sustainability of public service broadcasting, and the general media. The autonomy of the public media due to cutbacks in funding, the political parallelism - personalized in Berlusconi, and the creation and consolidation of parties such as the Northern League, Forza Italia, and Brothers of Italy - with their communicative practices of disinformation, manipulation and fake news - is seriously at risk. Even more so after the rise to power of a far-right party like the Brothers of Italy in 2022.

ii) The **journalistic domain** is featured by a clear conflict between various actors trying to define the field of ROs in Italy. The result is a divergence of analysis and solutions running the risk of transforming opportunities into further risks. For example, the increase of politicization of journalism and media discourses, and the increase in polarized and interested content, as well as in pluralism and freedom of the expression and information. Another risk for the journalism in a macrolevel is the level of professionalism. Since although due to the strong legal and associationism component that the journalistic profession in Italy has, we could think that it is assured, but the increase in the professional precariousness of Italian journalists can become a risk. Something to which are added new rules are attached about coverage – as *carta di Treviso*, and that the phenomena of populism has become endemic. In recent years, media work on factchecking has become more and more necessary due to the increase of disinformation and

fake news. This is an opportunity to identify the quality information, but the increase in citizens' distrust -as detailed in international reports- means that, once again, it could become a reason for risk to the credibility of Italian journalists and media.

iii) The **media usage domain** in Italy is that one where the production of analysis and data is most present, as we are witnessing an adaptation of the production of information content to the logic of the new media, also featured by an increased attention for the mechanisms of diffusion of inaccurate/false news contents. However, the continuity of television consumption and the slow adaptation to digital platforms of the journalists and media is producing a gap between the different actors and media platforms. Therefore, something that at first is an opportunity to combine a traditional business model with new opportunities becomes a risk of increasing competitiveness and generating oligopolistic business niches. An aspect that together with the closure of media companies, the increase in unemployment, and the decrease in the economic capacity of citizens has change the production patterns of journalists and the consumption patterns of citizens.

Political actors are playing a leading role in the media use of content. Communication has become a strategic asset for the parties with the most extreme tendencies in search of the electoral support of the Italian population. However, and despite the fact that television retains a prominent role in the information/communication process of citizens, the truth is that, as studies such as Reuters show, the strengthening of the use of digital media is changing the rules of the political game.

iv) The **media-related competencies domain** emerged as the field in which the academic intervenes the least, and other actors are absent too. One reason why analysis at this level is difficult. Despite there is more capacity for a plural participation, something that is an opportunity, are being generated opinion bubbles that facilitate the consolidation of resonance boxes between the different population strata. Hence, greater pluralization of the media, journalists and content does not automatically mean a greater ability for Italian citizens to access higher quality content. Even the lack of media literacy is causing them to fall more heavily into environments and discourses loaded with polarization, disinformation, hate speech and populism. Phenomena of which the parties of extreme ideology are becoming creditors through the personalization and emotionalization of its propaganda and communicative strategy.

Although up to now we have mainly dealt with the supply of information regarding the media related competencies domain, it is however necessary to understand and investigate what the "media repertoire" of citizens are. The offer of information in its absence or presence of pluralism can represent a risk, determined only by how that content is used.

The premise is that, within a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) people have developed several ways to be involved in media communication. Indeed, also in the Italian media landscape a move toward a high media choice environment has been accomplished (see Castro et al. 2021). According to Lewis (2012), in the contemporary media environment makes easier for individuals to participate in the creation and distribution of media, on a scale and with a reach unimaginable in earlier times, mainly because of the rise of Web 2.0 and social media platforms. In this regard, the author (*ibid.*) speaks about a tension between the "professional logic" of journalism, built around an elitist perspective of exclusion that emphasises the specific skills possessed by journalists, and the "participatory logic" promoted by the advent of Web 2.0 and the social media platforms, which "encompasses the idea system of distributing control over content to end-users for the normative purpose of achieving a more engaged, representative, and collectively intelligent society" (848).

Now it remains to analyze what is to come from what is presented as one of the most important critical junctures in Italy of the last 80 years: the rise to power of the extreme right.

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