

Collaborative Networks in the TV Fiction Industry: Italian Serials and Sitcoms before the Digital Switch Off (1996-2009)

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Abstract

In this short paper I propose to analyze the transformations in the Italian TV fiction production industry adopting the sociological perspective of the production of culture approach (Di Maggio, 1977), and specifically focus on the dispute between autonomy and control in the production of popular culture.

First, I will be looking at the relations between the political and regulatory policy of Italian tv broadcasting and the evolution of audiovisual fiction productions in the decade anticipating the so-called 'digital switch-off' (1996-2009) and the proliferation of TV channels. According to Martina and Palmieri [Martina & Palmieri, 2015], during this decade Italian TV fiction 'became the field on which the huge battle, or rather imbalance, between import and export was played out in favor of the latter'; the same battle, however, paved the way for renewal of Italian serial fiction productions before the emergence of digital television offer.

Second, applying the methodology of social network analysis (SNA) to map the space of the Italian television industry, I will show how television broadcasters re-allocated resources in new areas and launched collaborative programs with other national and international broadcasters, developing new organizational forms for managing cultural prominence. Described in organizational studies as constellations, these collaborations under specific institutional and market conditions have proved to incentivize innovation in the diverse cultural sectors.

1 Introduction

In cultural and social sciences the attention of researchers for the historical evolution of the audiovi-

sual television production industry has been constant as there is a unanimous perception that TV fictions and related publics have become important components of the global digital culture. As highlighted by Bourdon [Bourdon, 2011] television is still essentially a medium of national communication and national cases provide an interpretation of the complex evolution in cultural domains and cultural worlds. Tv fictions, specifically, convey and express contents relevant for understanding the structure and reproduction of niche cultures and for generating complex narrative worlds [Zanatta, 2011].

Since the nineties, the European national television systems, in particular, changed their structure and underwent deep transformations in their assets and roles [Franquet et al., 2020]. Privatization of broadcasting services and product segmentation of television fiction products were two most visible effects, while on the background aspects concerning the relationships of the media sector with political and financial systems were becoming evident and subject to public debate. The European Commission in the same years contributed both to innovation and reform of the media sector (the first Creative MEDIA program was in 1991), as well as to merging national television audiences, promoting european circulation of films and joint TV fiction products.

Compared to extensive studies carried on in the American fiction industry - see among them Bielby [Bielby and Bielby, 2009], the Italian case represents a topic rather unexplored; the period situated between the crisis of generalist television (early nineties) and the advent of digital media television contents (the first digital switch-off in Italy was in 2009), in particular, is the most debated and obscure, consisting in the years when Berlusconi dominated both as Italy prime minister and broadcasting media tycoon. The

sources of broadcasting data about this period are also scarce because EAO (European Audiovisual Observatory) monitoring started only in 2015.

Among the few sources about the Italian case was the OFI (Osservatorio Italiano sulla Fiction, [Buonanno, 2017]), a private university based foundation that from 1988 to 2000 published yearly guidebooks of Italian audiovisual products broadcasted on the two main TV services (Rai and Mediaset). According to OFI data presented in Figure 1 the quantitative evolution of audiovisual production in Italy (broadcasted hours per season/year) from 1989 to 2008 was marked by a significant decline in production at the end of the eighties, followed by a stable and constant rise during the nineties. In 2009 television series 'made in Italy' reached 40% of broadcasted products in public tv and only in the second half of the 2010's with digital television and pay per service channels the non-domestic fiction became more popular than the Italian one (45% in 2015).

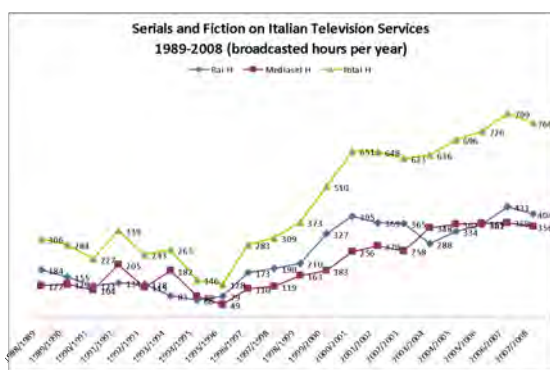


Figure 1: TV production in Italy (1989-2008).

However, considering the number of fiction producers for the two main broadcasting services (Rai and Mediaset), a sharp difference is evident between a pre-crisis (up to 1996) and post-crisis period (from 1997 to 2008).

The crisis and the subsequent rise in broadcasted fiction, in particular, had an effect on the industry organization. Specifically, it enlarged the core number of independent and external producers, multiplying the number of companies, of different size and market share and the average number of producers working seasonally with Mediaset and RaiTV channels rose 40-45% from the pre-crisis period. Large and medium TV production companies that appeared on the market between 1996 to 2000, in particular, were the first ones to embark in the design of original tv fiction products and to develop narrative and organizational standards according to 'modern' tv seriality, adopting new forms of collaboration and partnership with the main TV broadcasters (Rai or Mediaset).

These new organizational forms can be described by means of the concept of constellation. Constellations are organizational alliances with multiple and different partners; among their characteristics are the

use of different specialists and services to cope with short term collaborative projects and the employ of multiparty complementary requisites of production. Graphically, constellations can be represented as social networks generated by the practice of relations over time in which relational power is continuously reproduced and generated by dynamic exchanges of relations and resources among actors.

2 Constellations in TV Production

Media industry and in particular the cinematographic industry have been assimilated to constellations and studies carried on early and contemporary cinematographic industry or other innovative sectors such as biotechnology industry put in evidence the pro-innovation aptitude of these collaborative structures [Jones, 2001; Cattani and Ferrani, 2008]. Tv movies are produced under network-based control and the more certain actors are in the 'kernel' of these networks the more powerful, and at the same time dependent, they become on the reproduction and prolongation of already established social (power) relations. They establish themselves as 'critical actor constellations', as described by [Manning & Sydow, 2007] and decide the timing of innovation (or resistance to innovation) until external factors (institutional actors or environmental drivers) modify the context of their relations and the balance of power among the partners. So, how did these mechanisms work in the Italian context? How innovation and control were balanced in the long-term panorama of Italian TV fiction production?

2.1 The Impact of Italian TV Duopoly

First, the duopoly of the Italian television system favored preferential relations with a limited number of 'critical actors', functional to set the seasonal TV fiction panorama according to specific cultural contents and formats. In long-term fiction scheduling the choice of a specific show of any type of fiction (soap, serial, tv film,..) is in fact indirectly associated with its main characteristics (format, subject, etc.) and its (multiple) contributors (screenwriters, directors, etc.). Because the production of fiction and broadcasting on TV are tightly connected, it is rare that a product is rescheduled on a channel different from the one that originally 'commissioned' it and even less probable that the product is 'reselled' to competitors. As illustrated in the Figure 2 below, the large/top producers - the green dots - are more interconnected and distribute their activity across multiple years of TV scheduling, while other smaller producers - the red dots - have marginal position and depend on seasonal collaboration with the core players.

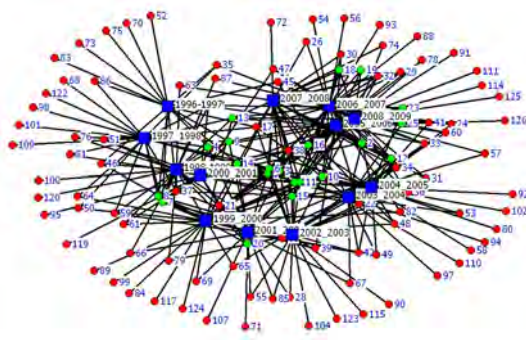


Figure 2: 2-mode network of relations between TV fiction producers (1996-2009).

The constant confrontation in a institutionalized duopoly - Rai and Mediaset - prevented competition, as well as alliances among middle and small fiction producers, and resulted in a small number of big and stable producers (often financially associated with the two main TV broadcasting companies) involved in the production of consequential tv seasons and in a periphery of small and uncertain firms that operated on a one shot logic.

2.2 The Role of Collaborative Alliances

Second, the innovative component in the system was introduced by collaborative alliances and partnership at the national and international levels. During the so-called period of consolidation of Italian fiction production (1999-2007), in particular, italian companies started to invest in new products and seek partnership and innovative formats [Cardini, 2013]. Of a total of 594 fictions produced by Italian companies in the period starting from tv season 1999/2000 and ending with season 2005/2007, only 51 fictions were developed in partnership among Italian companies, while 119 were produced in collaboration with at least one international media company. Initially (1999-2001) the collaborative products with more than one foreign partner represented 35% of the total; in a second moment (2002 to 2004) the proportion of international projects involving companies based in Europe (above all Germany, France, and Great Britain) or other international context (United States, Canada, and Latin America) rose to 69% of the shows co-produced, then stabilizing to 54%. In the latest period (2008-2009) the collaborative projects diminished and international co-productions stabilized around 40% of the total.

Finally, the proceedings of EU governance in the media sectors accelerated this process aiding the largest media companies, and those already working globally in fulfilling their marketing strategies. The top 6 Italian media companies are in fact involved in 45% of all the collaborative projects and 65% of those involving an international partnership.

3 The Emergence of a New System

To test the aforementioned mechanisms I applied a SNA analysis [Borgatti & Everett, 1997] to the networks of collaborative projects among producers (2-mode network matrix 814 nodes/ audiovisual products by 238 nodes/ companies) and according to literature suggestions repeated the analysis on the whole set of data as well as on the sub-set of collaborative productions, looking for specific differences in the network structures.

The longitudinal analysis of the structure of the networks of domestic and international fiction collaborations, showed the high fragmentation of this cultural industry, exemplified by the presence of a distinct core-periphery structure (blockmodelling density matrices with 0,63 and 0,16). Results showed, in particular, that convergence of the two functional mechanisms generated constellations across three phases of growth (1996 to 1999), consolidation (2000 to 2005) and institutionalization (2006 to 2009) of the Italian fiction industry. Each phase represented a step towards a new system of production and distribution of media products, highlighting how the constellations of Italian producers were focused in pursuing individual firms' advantage and innovation when dealing with products designed for attracting new public and the international market.

To exemplify this last statement, I will rely on the results of longitudinal analysis of the OFI dataset, recorded as sequenced relational data to perform Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). The aim of this analysis was to map the progressive change of the TV fiction system in terms of both types of products and organization of production. The bi-dimensionals cultural space in Figure 3 represents cultural and organizational space of tv fiction in a probabilistic perspective [Roberts, 2020]; each deviation from the two axes representing sets of TV products and sets of TV producers signify a change by direct or indirect consequence of variations in the reciprocal distances between these sets during the five time sequences.

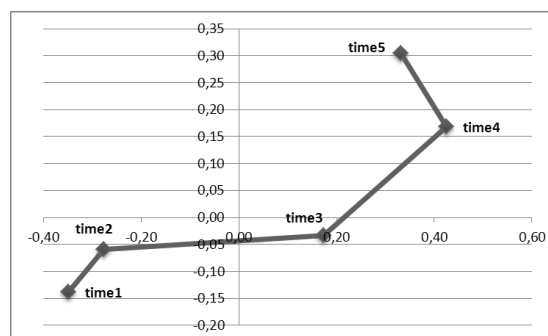


Figure 3: Plotting of the changes in the cultural space of Tv fiction production (1996-2009).

While the overall structure of the TV-production industry presents mainly a core-periphery network structure (global tendency), the MCA plot shows that when fragmentation of the TV production sector increased (see the interval between time3 to time5) and the production for foreign markets privileged distinctive genre niches, such as historical melodrama, significant variations in product orientation (genre and type of fiction) and in the forms of collaboration among producers (local effect) emerged. The final variation in the mapping (time4 to time5) finally signifies the presence of new production strategies linking Italian companies and the advent of alliances between the TV production sector and other media companies (internet/multimedia entertainments services).

Concluding, this analysis of network constellations generated by Italian collaborative TV projects shows how re-constructing and documenting national cases of the TV fiction production sector can raise our knowledge about the mechanisms that operate in a specific cultural production domain [Ibert & Muller, 2015]. It also puts in evidence the organizational factors that favor or reduce innovativeness in the media production sector and how the same factors can reduce their impact due to institutional changes (the tv digital switch off, 2009) or unanticipated socio-economic effects (collaboration of media producers and the first European Creative Media program, 1991).

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