

Pannella & Pallone

TeleRoma56's Glocal Broadcasting
between Politics and Entertainment¹

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◀ ABSTRACT

The paper examines the history of Italy's local television through the case study provided by TeleRoma56, namely Rome's first over-the-air local television. In particular, we explore how, through its dual focus on sport and politics, TeleRoma56 combined its commercial exigencies with the strong political characterization of its television programming, constantly presenting its broadcasting as a public service to the citizens. As a result, TeleRoma56's historical trajectory defies conventional narratives on Italian commercial broadcasting in the course of the 1980s. Conversely to the tendency to interpret Italian private TV as a de-politicized "dream television," TeleRoma56 prioritized news and political content over entertainment. At the same time, it provided a laboratory to experiment with sportscasting TV formats that mixed commercial and political exigencies. As such, it offers a simultaneously paradigmatic and exceptional case study to re-think our understanding of the history of Italian private television in the transition from RAI's public monopoly over TV broadcasting to the liberalization of the Italian television landscape.

KEYWORDS

Football; local television; Marco Pannella; Radical Party; Rome

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian to English were made by the authors.

² The two authors have jointly conceived and worked on the present contribution. It should however be clarified that Giulia Crisanti wrote the Introduction and the first paragraph, while Damiano Garofalo wrote the second paragraph and the Conclusion. Moreover, the article stems from the research carried out as part of the PRIN 2020 ATLAS – ATLAS of Local Televisions.

Introduction

The present contribution is part of a broader research project³ on the history of Italy's local televisions from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, that is the period that goes from the liberalization of television broadcasting in the country to the approval of the so-called “Mammì Law” (Law n. 223, 1990), which *de facto* sanctioned the RAI-Mediaset duopoly over Italian national television programming. The article focuses on the case study provided by TeleRoma56: Rome's first over-the-air private TV station, which started its broadcasting in July 1976 and was originally founded and owned by the internationally famous Italian architect Bruno Zevi, alongside Professor and psychiatrist Guglielmo Arcieri.

The decision to pick TeleRoma56 as a case study originates from its simultaneously paradigmatic and exceptional nature. In many ways, TeleRoma56 defies conventional narratives on Italian commercial broadcasting in the course of the 1980s. The dominant narrative has tended to emphasize the increasingly commercial nature of local TV stations and therefore their transition from being free TV stations to becoming private broadcasters (Grasso 2006; Dotto and Piccinini 2006). This also meant a shift from invoking a more liberalized mediascape and “freedom of information” to heralding the liberalization of the TV broadcasting market in the name of the audience's right to greater entertainment (Sangiovanni 2013). According to this point of view, private broadcasters embraced and proposed a new model of “dream television” (Ortoleva 1995), namely a kind of television programming un-

³ The Project “ATLAS of Local Televisions” has been intended to establish an inventory of privately-owned local TV channels operating in Italy between 1976 and 1990. It involved four research units from the following universities: The University of Bologna; Sapienza University of Rome; the University of Turin; the University of Cagliari. See: <https://site.unibo.it/atlas/en> (Last accessed: June 2025).

coupled from public affairs, constituting a depoliticized public space of action, as well as a source of distraction from the recurrent political crises, as opposed to an “allotted” RAI at the mercy of the main political parties.

Compared to this common interpretation, TeleRoma56 presents us with a case study of a local TV mixing commercial exigencies with enduring instances of bottom-up political engagement: its programming was neither de-politicized nor centered on entertainment. On the contrary, TeleRoma56 was actually very political, not simply because, from 1979 to 1995, a political party owned it, the “Partito Radicale” (Radical Party), but also because it constantly engaged in the production of political programs and was committed to guaranteeing a kind of bottom-up pluralist information. On the one hand, by financially supporting TeleRoma56 via public subsidies destined for political parties (the so-called “finanziamento pubblico ai partiti”), the Partito Radicale sustained the TV station’s public representation as a media and medium intended to give public voice to the citizens, thereby disclosing a liberal perspective on the media’s public role (Spadaccia 2021, p. 453). On the other hand, throughout the 1980s, TeleRoma56 kept prioritizing information, news, and political content over entertainment, whose time and space remained rather residual and/or equated with sports programming. As we will see, sportscasting represented a kind of entertainment that could be framed in political terms, while also securing profitable advertising contracts.

Overall, then, TeleRoma’s programming during the 1980s could be summarized – to quote its former news director, Carlo Romeo⁴ – as primarily revolving around “Pannella” – from the name of the leader of the Partito Radicale, Marco Pannella – and “Pallone,” namely football. The sources confirm this summarization. As early as 1982, an article dedicated to TeleRoma56, published by the TV magazine *Buongiorno TV*, emphasized how “in terms of programming, there is a lot of sport and a lot of politics, plus some movies: basically, it’s all sport and politics, politics and sport.” This public description is echoed in the words of Italian sportscaster Sandro Piccinini, who worked for TeleRoma56 from 1983 to 1990: noticing the little space given to entertainment by the Roman TV station, he underscored that “TeleRoma was more about content: you could sum it up in two

⁴ The quote comes from an interview that we had with Carlo Romeo on November 22, 2023. Excerpts from the interview can be found on ATLAS Database: <https://historica.unibo.it/entities/fonds/49391154-1d87-4d91-be24-c6d9e2ffa448> (Last accessed: June 2025).

elements, sports and politics; roughly these were its two pillars.”⁵ This is not to say that TeleRoma did not undergo a commercial evolution. The very fact that the TV channel was not re-named Tele-Radicale (as it was instead with the radio directed by the Radical Party) points to its essentially commercial nature: just like all other local TVs, its existence financially depended on securing advertising contracts. It nonetheless provides a sort of “hybrid” TV model, operating in between notions of television broadcasting as a form of public service and the idea that TV programming should meet the public demand for entertainment and distraction.

1. The political and glocal nature of TeleRoma56

Within this broader overview, our research has highlighted how TeleRoma’s dual focus on politics and sport originated, partially but significantly, from the specificity of its locality, that is from its Roman setting. Much of the literature on local TV stations in Italy has so far prioritized the case studies provided by either Northern Italy (largely but not exclusively Berlusconi’s) or by exceptional TV stations from the South, such as Canale 21 in Campania or Telenorba in Puglia. By looking at a local TV station based in Rome, we were compelled to de-center the focus away from Milan to re-center it on Rome. This also meant inquiring about the implications of being a local television in Rome. We have done so by comparing TeleRoma56 to the other major Roman TVs, so as to identify a series of specificities seemingly originating from the Roman context. The first distinctive element is, precisely, the more or less strong political characterization of these stations, which originated from their proximity to the centers of political power (Riccobono 1981). Throughout the 1980s and up until the early 1990s, all major Rome-based local TV stations were either owned by a political party or outspokenly political in their programming: Videouno was part of the publishing group *Paese Sera*, owned by the Communist Party (PCI); the Socialist Party (PSI) bought GBR⁶ in 1985; while TeleRomaEuropa (TRE)

⁵ The quote comes from an interview that we had with Sandro Piccinini on June 19, 2024. See: <https://historica.unibo.it/entities/publication/7eaa3eb1-6759-4be7-8fe5-60de3e7c8abd> (Last accessed: June 2025).

⁶ GBR was the Roman TV station that had first recorded the discovery of Aldo Moro’s dead body in Rome in 1978.

belonged to Gaetano and Filippo Rebecchini and was hence close to the Democratic Christian (DC) Party.⁷ In this regard, we could even say that TeleRoma56 somehow led the way, providing the first and best example of a simultaneously political-commercial management of a local broadcaster.

At the same time, it is worth underscoring that TeleRoma56 – as all other Roman local TVs – operated in a context where being “local” meant something different than elsewhere. According to Umberto Eco’s definition of Italy’s private broadcasting as a kind of “*neotelevisione*,” one of the main characteristics of Italy’s local TV stations was the fact that they upturned the broadcasting telescope, “pointing the camera on the province” and thus away from Rome (Eco 2018). When it comes, however, to those local TVs that were based in Rome, this de-centralizing logic does not work. Furthermore, several of the main protagonists of TeleRoma56’s history (i.e. figures such as news director Carlo Romeo or the journalist Manuela Moreno) have repeatedly underscored how Rome’s local territory was “rather big” and could be equated to, alternatively, the city’s many neighborhoods, as well as to a national and, on occasions, even transnational dimension.⁸ It followed a television gaze that was simultaneously local/urban, national and international.

In the case of TeleRoma56, this multi-dimensional gaze, together with its political characterization, produced two major outcomes. First of all, it made it a glocal TV, ranging from the TV shows specifically dedicated to covering Rome’s municipal life, such as *La voce del Campidoglio*, to the many news services on international events, like those on the Gulf War. Especially in the early years, the focus on national newscasts prevailed over that on the city, with a predominant presence of news programs “devoted to national and international events, to commentary and big politics, to the palace” (Riccobono 1981). At the same time, TeleRoma’s glocal broadcasting also made it more similar to and in greater competition with RAI than with other private TV networks.

Over time, it was precisely the need to differentiate itself from RAI that compelled TeleRoma56 to more extensively present itself and operate as an active media player shaping Roman politics, rooting itself in the local social context in which it operated. This meant an increasingly greater focus, dur-

⁷ Gaetano and Filippo Rebecchini were the sons of Salvatore Rebecchini: a famous post-war member of the Democratic Christian Party and the first mayor of Rome under the Italian Republic.

⁸ See the interviews with Romeo and Moreno collected on the ATLAS Database.

ing the 1980s, on local newscasts and, more importantly, active participation in the city's political life by conducting investigations, hosting municipal council meetings, taking part in the Radical Party's electoral campaigns, collecting requests from the public and, overall, strengthening both its link with local audiences and its commitment to providing a bottom-up public service. In the words of Carlo Romeo, TeleRoma's strength relied on its ability to "intervene on the city's metropolitan and local life," by creating a public space for people to "suggest services, point out the administration's failures and the city's shortcomings [...] providing a direct line between the city and its citizens that could not be found on national networks" (Traveri 1993).

Even more so than through its political programming and local newscast, it was however through its sportscast that TeleRoma⁵⁶ largely played it out both its self-representation as a public-service broadcaster and its strong relation with local audiences. This is also because sport is a television genre that perfectly integrates entertainment and information.

2. TeleRoma's sportscasting: mixing information and entertainment

The two football teams of Rome, *A.S. Roma* and *S.S. Lazio*, represent not only two "local" teams but also two clubs taking part in national competitions, thus potentially interesting football fans from all over the country. Whereas, during the 1980s, *S.S. Lazio* was twice downgraded to "Serie B" (i.e. the second league of Italy's football league system), *A.S. Roma* went close to winning the title on several occasions, earning a "scudetto" (i.e. the highest-level championship) in 1983. It followed the opportunity to cover in-depth sports content interweaving local and national dimensions: throughout the decade, TeleRoma dedicated a significant percentage of its programming to broadcasting local or national football, as well as international football, especially the British Premier League.

Moreover, the other major element connected to the considerable presence of football within TeleRoma's television schedule was the recurrent call for a right to inform the audiences that the TV station made, with the intent of legitimizing its live broadcasting of sports events. In a context in which sports information was entirely the prerogative of the public service – which had an institutional and certainly more ecumenical approach –, the possibility of focusing on two local-national football teams increased TeleRoma's

direct engagement with the audience, as well as the opportunity to provide a more extended covering of events and social contexts surrounding the games. The idea that fans who could not physically attend the matches of their team had nonetheless the chance to listen to the radio commentary on local television was undoubtedly a distinctive feature of such local programming, as opposed to the single radio program provided by RAI, *Tutto il calcio minuto per minuto*, which gave but a little space for single football matches and teams. From a rhetorical point of view, this more direct and less filtered approach to football allowed Teleroma56 to present itself as a democratizing agent, emphasizing its contribution to creating new possibilities to enjoy football on television that were previously unthought of.

As Teleroma56 delegated most of its entertainment to sports programming, it also guaranteed itself a steady flow of advertising revenue, thus combining commercial exigencies with its political perspective on sports-casting as a specific television genre. In this sense, Teleroma56 also provides an effective case study to analyze the contribution that local TV stations gave to making football a TV genre that interweaves elements of news and entertainment, setting some of the premises that have led television to becoming an essential instrument of the public enjoyment of football. To give a few examples, it is worth mentioning the innovative commentaries to A.S. Roma and S.S. Lazio matches proposed by Lamberto Giorgi's TV program, *In campo con Roma e Lazio* (still aired by TeleRoma56). Among those who have carried out such commentaries over the years there are established radio commentators such as Gianni Cerqueti (later on RAI) or Fabio Caressa (one of the leading voices of Sky commentaries). Likewise, some of TeleRoma's most famous Sunday sportscasts, like *Meeting*, hosted by Giulio Galasso, and *Goal di Notte* by Michele Plastino, became the main television reference point for all football fans in Rome and across the Lazio region throughout the 1980s. Many of the journalists involved in these programs even became TV stars, either moving to national networks during the 1990s, or solidifying the local dimension of their star image through their enduring presence in the local television landscape.

As (again) Sandro Piccinini⁹ noted in an interview referencing his initial training as a correspondent from the stadiums:

⁹ After leaving TeleRoma 56, Piccinini worked for many years at Mediaset and is currently a top commentator for Amazon Prime Video. Excerpts from the interview with Sandro Piccinini are available on the ATLAS Database.

As the football clubs began to realize that local TV stations could also pay, they began to sell exclusive rights to the matches: the footage was still produced by RAI, and we did our commentary “in the tube”, as they say in the jargon. After *Goal di Notte* we often aired the recorded *A.S. Roma* or *S.S. Lazio* matches, commenting it live in the studio. In our commentary, we were the first to experiment with having two commentators.

On other occasions, Teleroma56 managed to set up live radio commentaries (to be broadcast on TV) from the stadium, using coin-operated telephones: as Fabio Caressa¹⁰ explained, two journalists would take shifts, watching the match and then reporting it to the studio over the phone.

In 1987, an agreement between RAI and the Italian Football League effectively banned all broadcasting (radio and television) of football matches by any private, local, or commercial broadcaster. Consistent with its political approach to sportscasting, Teleroma56 promoted a campaign under the slogan “They’ll only show you what they want.” This aimed at mobilizing fans from all over Italy against the RAI-Lega Calcio agreement, purposely depicting it as a monopoly that undermined the Italian citizens’ right to follow the matches of their local football teams (Mancini 1987). Several local TV stations joined this initiative. In this context, it is significant that the campaign foregrounded the representation of sportscasting as news rather than as entertainment, consequently laying a claim to the public right to news reporting. It was thus on this ground that local TV stations built their opposition to RAI programming, defying any linear understanding of their historical trajectory as a progressive move toward a “dream television” paradigm.

Football hence became the fundamental pivot of Teleroma’s program schedule because it allowed, better than any other content, to combine the commitment to providing information and a kind of grassroots popular TV with the need to guarantee revenue through entertainment programs attracting an audience large enough to secure advertising contracts. In other words, football broadcasting provided a form of entertainment that, because of the strong relationship between local teams and their respective territories (in the case of TeleRoma56 a territory restricted to the Roman area, but potentially also national), could be presented in political terms, as a public service to local communities. At the same time, the case study

¹⁰ Excerpts from the interview with Fabio Caressa are available on the ATLAS Database.

provided by Teleroma56 is illustrative of how local television stations functioned as laboratories in which some of the languages and television formats characterizing contemporary television took shape, as well as training contexts for much of the professionalism that, from the 1990s onwards, would be absorbed by the national networks (Costantini 1994).

In a context such as Rome, where the local and the national dimensions are intertwined and often overlap and where the city's major football teams are deeply rooted in the social milieu of the entire urban and extra-urban area, TeleRoma56 could easily address citizen-fan-television audiences, mixing its idea of delivering a public service with its inevitably commercial nature. At the same time, the contamination between the local and the global dimensions was made evident by the involvement, in TeleRoma's sports shows, of internationally famous football players like Platini, Boniek, and even Maradona. This latter's interview with Michele Plastino reached its peak when Maradona started juggling an orange in the studios of *Goal di Notte*.¹¹ The episode can be considered paradigmatic of the interplay between the informational and entertainment characterizations of TeleRoma's sports programming.

Conclusion

By interweaving sport and politics ("Pallone and Pannella," in fact), as well as local, national, and global scopes of action, TeleRoma56 provides a simultaneously exceptional and paradigmatic case study within ATLAS research project on Italian local televisions. At the end of 1989, in his reporting on the umpteenth public polemic around sports broadcasting on private TVs, *La Repubblica's* journalist Corrado Sannucci argued how TeleRoma56 was "perhaps the last non-commercial TV left, an ideological broadcaster still." However, its experimental entertaining formats, on the one hand, and its struggles over the right to report news and information, on the other, seemed a swan song concerning the decade to come. During the early 1990s, TeleRoma pursued its continuous commitment to local information, while also aspiring to more substantially "go national." The econom-

¹¹ The video of Maradona's interview at *Goal di Notte* is available on the ATLAS Database: <https://historica.unibo.it/entities/publication/af4027c5-9e28-40e0-8244-a6e2d51940d2> (Last accessed: June 2025).

ic and technological means to do so became nonetheless fewer and fewer, slowly eroding under the pressure of the television overpowering enacted by the RAI-Finvest duopoly, which was officially sanctioned by the approval, in 1990, of the Mammì Law.

To conclude, we could say that a sort of “Roman exceptionalism” lay in the possibility of imagining a third way between the public service broadcasting parceled out by Italy’s largest political parties, and commercial television. TeleRoma56 traced an alternative route that took the form of a television laboratory made up of news and entertainment, where football and politics become complementary manifestations of its continuous intertwining between the local, the national and the transnational dimensions. This is why Teleroma 56 offers a simultaneously exceptional and paradigmatic case study for reinterpreting the history of Italy’s local TV stations. Because it shows both the ultimate prevalence of its commercial characterization and the endurance of strongly politicized programming and – we could say – vocation.

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