



# Who Helps Berlusconi win general elections? Political Communication in Italian entertainment shows

¿Quién ayudó a Berlusconi a ganar las elecciones?

La comunicación política en programas de entretenimiento italianos.

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**Abstract—** *The present study is based on the hypothesis that the viewer/elector might consume political information even when watching family-targeted entertainment shows featuring lively discussions, interviews to celebrities, music and quizzes. What's more, by focusing on such urgent issues, these programs might affect the viewer's political behavior thus helping a candidate to the detriment of his opponent. In Italy this kind of program is represented by two Sunday shows: Domenica in and Buona Domenica. Therefore hypothesis will be validated through the analysis of four installments of this programs aired in April 2008, at the time of the electoral campaign.*

**Keywords:** entertainment show, electoral campaign, soft news/hard news, information-processing

**Resumen—** Este artículo está basado en la hipótesis de que el espectador/elector consume información política aún cuando ve programas familiares de entretenimiento, que matizan debates, entrevistas a celebridades, música y concursos. Incluso más, estos espacios, al focalizarse en temas de actualidad, pueden influir en el comportamiento político, ayudando a un candidato en perjuicio de su oponente. En Italia, este tipo de programas está representado por dos espacios dominicales: Domenica in y Buona Domenica. La hipótesis será validada a través del análisis de cuatro ediciones de estos programas emitidos en abril de 2008, durante la campaña electoral.

**Palabras claves:** Programa de entretenimiento, campaña electoral, noticias blandas/noticias duras, procesamiento de información.

**E**ntertainment shows play their role in letting Silvio Berlusconi win general elections. This might be, in short, the main achievement of the research presented in this paper. On 13th April 2008 Silvio Berlusconi and his party get a clear win at general elections to the detriment of their main opponent Walter Veltroni, leading the *Partito Democratico*. This result is the expression of the deep dissatisfaction the Italians have been feeling for Romano Prodi's resigning Government. The centre-left coalition proves to be unable to cope with the most urgent issues such as the ever growing cost of living, work security and national health disservice. Moreover, the surveys show that local people are willing to banish illegal immigrants, Roma and anybody who might be seen as a threat to their domestic reality (Mannheimer & Natale, 2008). The voters' response and electoral results reflect the Italians' fear of immigrants, their need to feel safe when it comes to healthcare, work security and food safety. A situation of general malaise that has helped the right-wing parties (namely Silvio Berlusconi) to the detriment of the left-wing ones.

Who played the leading role in the creation of such a puzzling climate? Where did the Italians get their information on immigration, the cost of living, national health disservice or food safety? Such important issues have no doubt been treated by news, newspapers and political talk shows. The fact is that Italian citizens/electors are getting less and less interested in politics and as a consequence they rarely watch the news or read newspapers. Yet they are eager TV consumers. Hence a further question is to be asked: are there any other TV programs, apart from the usual ones, which could inform viewers/citizens/electors about social issues? Yes, there are.

The present study is based on the hypothesis that the viewer/elector might consume political information even when watching family-targeted entertainment shows featuring lively discussions, interviews to celebrities, music and quizzes. What's more, by focusing on such urgent issues these programs might affect the viewer's political behavior thus

helping a candidate to the detriment of his opponent. In Italy this kind of program is represented by two Sunday shows: *Domenica in* and *Buona Domenica*. Therefore the above mentioned hypothesis will be validated through the analysis of four installments of *Domenica in* and *Buona Domenica* aired in April 2008, at the time of the electoral campaign<sup>1</sup>.

#### WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT

Not surprisingly, most mainstream research regarding the media's impact on political attitudes, opinions, knowledge and behaviours focuses on news and public affairs genres, largely ignoring the vast majority of media content labelled "entertainment." Spurred in part by technological, economic, cultural and political changes that have increasingly blurred the line between news and entertainment, a small but growing body of empirical research is exploring the political influence of popular culture, particularly entertainment television (Zaller, 2003; Corner & Pels, 2003; Jones, 2005; van Zoonen, 2005; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2006; Baum & Jamison, 2006; Baum, 2003, 2007; Riegert, 2007; Kim & Vishak, 2008). In Italy, only few researches (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2007) have focused on the relationship between politics and entertainment media.

In order to better understand any further development of the topic, we should point out what scholars mean by TV entertainment and popular culture. John Street asserts: "popular culture is a form of entertainment that is mass produced or is made available to large numbers of people (for example, on television)" (Street, 1997, p. 7). Politics has started being associated to popular culture and entertainment (Corner & Pels, 2003) since there was a shift from a politicised media situation – where media independence is limited by the control of politics – to a mediatised politics, where the reign of politics is colonised by the media logic thus losing its specificity and integrity. "*Politics has become an adjunct to show business*" (Corner & Pels, 2003, p. 4); as a consequence, the two scholars maintain that the so-called three Cs (consumerism, celebrity and cynicism – or political

<sup>1</sup> Italian scholars have never focused on the possible connection between politics and such programs as *Domenica in* and *Buona Domenica*. Thus the main limit of this research is that there are no data about the impact of such programs on the viewers/voters/citizens.

All the scholars quoted recognise that there's a strong relation between entertainment and politics. So, what about the possible consequences this relation might have? Those who are part of the show world might find it easier to move to the world of politics. And what about possible consequences on citizens/electors/viewers? This question marks one of the main aspects of the research.

indifference) the show world is shaped on lead to a new representation of politics getting the citizens/electors/viewers to minimize their political beliefs and pay great attention to "matters of aesthetic and style" (Corner & Pels, 2003, p.7). In short, this re-shaping of politics in compliance with the media logic Altheide and Snow (1979) have well described has an important implication: any event, issue or political actor is expected to conform to mass media's organizational needs and entertaining tasks as well as to the audience's expectations. This might be an active process – when political actors willingly reject their communicative patterns to accept television or commercials' constraints – or a passive one – when political/electoral messages are filtered and re-shaped to suit the media logic (Mazzoleni, 1992).

All the scholars formerly quoted agree on recognizing that there's a strong relation between entertainment and politics. So, what about the possible consequences this relation might have? Those who are part of the show world might find it easier to move to the world of politics; moreover it could make many infotainment programs successful. And what about possible consequences on citizens/electors/viewers? This question marks one of the main aspects of the research. We'll try to make the matter clearer by quoting the question Liesbet van Zoonen suggests in his volume *Entertaining the Citizen*. When politics and popular culture converge (2005, p. 4): "does entertainment provide a context to contemplate the concept of citizenship, does it provide an environment in which citizenship can flourish, and does it make citizenship pleasurable?"

A first answer comes from a research carried out by Stephen Coleman (2003). The British political scientist, in his book *A tale of two house: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home* (2003), has discussed the lessons that politics could learn from the immensely popular television reality program *Big Brother*. Comparing the representative qualities of the *Big Brother* House and the House of Commons, Coleman concludes that the fans of the program consider *Big Brother* candidates as much more re-

presentative than politicians because the candidates are like the fans themselves (Coleman, 2003, p. 33). In this way, the *Big Brother* is useful because the politics understands that has to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens; otherwise it becomes an alien sphere, occupied by strangers no one cares and bothers about. Thus, what an entertaining program can do is to get politics pay attention to the most urgent social issues.

However, if we want to find out whether entertainment has got any other aim but making fun, we should delve deeper into the scientific debate that animated the USA. In *Let us infotain you: politics in the new media environment* (2001), Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams refer to Murray Edelman's *From Art to Politics* (1995)<sup>2</sup> when saying that politics "is largely a mediated experience; that political attitudes and actions result from the interpretation of new information through lenses of previously held assumptions and beliefs; and that these the lenses that are socially constructed from a range of shared cultural sources" (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 161). As a consequence, entertainment media, popular culture, art, etc. should be considered as widely shared cultural sources due to their remarkable contribution in shaping the news and public opinion. Delli Carpini and Williams point out that entertainment media analysis had been ignored so far due to the ever present wall separating news and no news, public affairs and popular culture, citizens/consumers and experts/consumers. Now this wall has been crumbling down; the traditional gatekeepers are losing most of their agenda setting authority and somebody else is going to replace them. Delli Carpini and Williams seem to have clearly identified this "somebody": "entertainment media are real sources of factual information; they spur the social and political debate and criticism towards the rulers; political information media are too evasive, politically irrelevant and disregard the overall situation" (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 163). This is also confirmed by a study carried out by Young Mie Kim and John Visual (2008) that underlined the relevance of television entertainment as a source of poli-

**2** According to Edelman politics is a drama which takes place in an artificially created world. This is the reason why we can feel a real engagement. The models, scenarios, narratives and images into which audiences for political news translate that news are social capital, not individual inventions. They come from works of art in all genre: novels, stories, paintings, films, dramas, television sitcoms, even memorable jokes" (Edelman, 1995, p. 1).

tical information, mainly among young electors. Two scholars show how, in November 2004, 48% of adults regularly or sometimes used entertainment media such as *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Late Night* as a source of campaign news and 17% of voters reported that they regularly learned something about candidates or issues from those entertainment programs. More than 60% of young voters said that they often learned about the campaign, and nearly 30% of those who used entertainment media for political information reported that they learned something new from those programs. "Given this, entertainment media have begun to be recognized as an important venue of "infotaining" citizens" (Kim & Vishak, 2008, p. 339).

The scenario we have described so far makes a second aspect worth noting. From Delli Carpini and Williams's study we can deduce there's a further element to be considered within the relation between entertainment and politics. We refer to the distinction between hard news – the ones produced by such factual programs as news or political talk shows, etc. – and soft news – the ones which succeed in conjugating both show and entertainment and sometimes even politics. The review *Political Communication* has dedicated a whole issue (2003, n. 2) to the analysis of whether soft news provide "enough political information". In this issue two different research trends emerge supporting contrasting theses. On one hand scholars think mass media are obliged to fairly inform citizens in order enable them to choose the best candidate (Bennet, 2003; Patterson, 2003; Prior, 2003). However the increase of the so-called soft news is eating its way into political knowledge and citizens' democratic competences giving political news a bleak treatment. Moreover Patterson (2003, pp. 139-140) declares that hard news – defined as coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life – are far better than soft news as the latter lack public policy component and are rich in sensationalism and dramatisation. On the other hand some scholars (Zaller, 2003; Baum, 2003; Graber, 2003) maintain that even though mass me-

dia provide a limited quantity of political information, they shouldn't be necessarily regarded as dysfunctional. In fact, clearly referring to Popkin (1994) and Schudson (1998) attention should be drawn on the fact that citizens can make their voting decisions even when coping with little information. Zaller, Graber and Baum's researches mainly focus on the role of soft news.

The issue's opening article –to which all the following ones refer– is by John Zaller: A new standard of news quality: burglar alarms for the monitorial citizen. The scholar gives his own definition of soft news: "it is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining" (Zaller, 2003, p. 129). Apart from the entertaining component, a remarkable stress is placed on soft news' personal usefulness. This aspect leads Zaller to pose a question that sounds very much like van Zoonen's: Can soft news provide enough information to citizens thus enabling them to reach a motivated voting decision and *make democracy work*? Zaller gives a positive answer. Zaller (2003) points out that the line between news and entertainment is getting more and more blurred. Traditional news is getting lighter and lighter and new information patterns –mainly produced by TV entertainment– have been conveying public affairs information" (Zaller, 2003, p. 111). Zaller compares entertainment to a grocery store: "grocery stores are places where foodstuffs are mainly sold; however you can find any kind of goods there: tongs, socks or even reading glasses. This is what happens in entertainment shows whose main aim is to amuse; yet they do provide contents on public affairs. Grocery stores offer the widest range of goods to prevent buyers from going to hardware stores; just like entertainment shows where political contents are provided to avoid the viewers' turning to traditional news" (Zaller, 2003, p. 111).

What does a regular soft news consumer look like? This is another important aspect of the matter. According to Zaller (2003), when information trespasses on entertainment, it can alarm the citizen, who is not a hard news consumer, to the most urgent political issues. Looking at the title of

Matthew Baum's research points out that soft news might provide political issues to those who are not interested in politics, thus replacing the traditional news media. This kind of elector feels political news are too expensive to consume (in terms of efforts to be understood), mainly with respect to their few benefits.

Zaller's issue, it is pretty clear that the UCLA scholar refers to the "monitoral citizen" as described by Schudson (1998). "My account relies heavily on Michael Schudson's *The Good Citizen*" (Zaller, 2003, p. 112). The "monitoring citizen" is a person who is not interested in politics, does not watch the news and hardly reads newspaper; yet he is an eager TV consumer. His little exposure to hard news does not necessarily imply a lack of political knowledge. The monitoring citizen is a good citizen; in fact despite his careless outlook on political matters, he can always show a fair political competence when it comes to personally useful issues. In short, the monitoring citizen mainly turns to the information provided by entertainment shows. These assumptions are confirmed by Matthew Baum's researches, too (2003, 2007). Starting from Delli Carpini and Keeter's study (1996), the American scholar points out that soft news might provide political issues to those who are not interested in politics, thus replacing the traditional news media. This kind of elector feels political news are too expensive to consume (in terms of efforts to be understood), mainly with respect to their few benefits. The consumption of any political information is strictly linked to a cost-benefit analysis: "this is only likely if such information is cheap to consume" (Baum, 2003, p. 175). Therefore such people are unlikely to consume hard news; political information would rather get accessible to apolitical individuals through soft news. In other words, such low-awareness individuals usually tend to ignore political information unless it is provided within a soft news context.

Baum and Angela Jamison wrote an article - *The Oprah effect: how soft news helps inattentive citizens vote consistently* (2006) - where they affirm that electors who are hardly interested in politics still want to vote for the candidate that presumably meets their needs and interests at best (voting consistently). Starting from this point Baum and Jamison formulate five hypotheses.

1) Soft news could be defined as "high quality" when they get apolitical individuals to vote consistently, thus increa-

sing benefits rather than costs.

2) However a vote which is coherent to one's interests is not an absolute priority. Therefore apolitical individuals -who are soft news consumers- are keener to accept the possibility of a wrong choice than hard news consumers who are very interested in politics and have their vote at heart.

3) Low-awareness electors are unlikely to invest their time and resources to make voting consistently more probable. The choice to be made is not between consuming hard or soft news but whether to consume soft news at all. Hence, low-awareness individuals who consume soft news are more likely to consistently vote than those who do not even turn to soft news (Baum & Jamison, 2006, pp. 948-949).

4) Most low-awareness voters chooses the candidate to vote on grounds of his personal qualities. Such electors turn to an information shortcut which gets him to endorse a candidate without even knowing his policy positions.

5) Finally, soft news - more than hard news - are responsible for persuading low-awareness individuals into voting consistently. Therefore "among low awareness individuals, consuming hard news will have a relatively weak effect on the relationship between soft news consumption and voting consistently" (Baum & Jamison, 2006, p. 949).

The elector/viewer/citizen we have been describing looks very much like Donatella Campus's "lazy elector" (2000)<sup>3</sup>. Campus's study is mainly useful as an introduction to the next paragraph where attention will be drawn on the kind of information provided by such programs as *Domenica* in and *Buona Domenica*. The Italian scholar maintains that "information processing can not be analysed using a single behaviour pattern; it rather implies a number of cognitive processes whose activation strictly depends on the elector's skills, motivation and opportunity" (Campus, 2000, p. 19). When referring to low-awareness electors and soft news consumers we could guess that the kind of information provided by the two above quoted programs may start information-processing, thus improving the elector's political competence.

**3** The lazy elector is not so willing to get interested in politics; anyway he is distracted by a lot of different priority matters relating to his private and professional life (Campus, 2000, p. 21)

#### TO WHAT EXTENT DOES BUONA DOMENICA AND DOMENICA IN'S SOFT NEWS IMPINGE?

The main achievements of the above quoted researches might be summed up as follows: TV entertainment, through soft news, provide enough political information to affect lazy electors' (monitoring citizens') political behaviour. Now we want to check whether *Domenica in*<sup>4</sup> and *Buona Domenica's* soft news<sup>5</sup> conveys political information, thus behaving as agenda setting authority. We are going to find out whether such programs, aired during the 2008 electoral campaign, accounted for the widespread sense of insecurity which hel-

ped Silvio Berlusconi –centre-right leader– win the span elections. Moreover, we believe that Berlusconi has won and still keeps winning the Italian elections not only because he is the owner of the most important Italian commercial television (Mediaset), but also and mainly because he perfectly knows how to interpret the culture produced by the mass media (and his television).

First of all, variety shows, the main forms of TV entertainment in Italy, are defined by Elisa Zambarbieri (2004, p. 87) as “national-popular” programs, family-suitable shows. This TV genre revolves around a charismatic host/hostess

**Table 1. L'Arena, Domenica in, from 30th March to 20th April 2008**

Date and installment title	Issue	Frame
30 March 2008 “Does the contestant offend the Medical register (Ordine dei medici)?”	Medical register and morals National Health disservice	The medical register is expected to cope with more serious matter than the public condemnation of one of the Big Brother's contestant. Some people argue this is a case of false moralism. Some others think measures had to be taken to prevent her from taking part in the reality show. Other people think a doctor's private life shouldn't be passed any judgement.
6 April 2008 “Who fears the buffalo mozzarella?”	Food safety The dioxin threat to genuine mozzarella	The alarm caused by dioxin-contaminated mozzarellas is blunted. Guest are trying to confine the problem to isolated case. They defended Italian mozzarella and reassure the audience.
13 April 2008 “The defeat of Waterloo”	Culture and Education in Italy	Democracy needs culture. Education is one of the main Italian problems. The Government is expected to tackle the education issue more carefully. Deprecatory attitude as regards the imbalance between Managers' salary increase and workers'.
20 April 2008 “Milan – Rome. Two rapes more”	Violence on women immigrants	Concrete measures are urgently needed as the country is facing a real war; a war to defend the citizens' right to security. Citizens must be allowed to go out in the evening without fearing attacks or assaults.

<sup>4</sup> *Domenica in* is the Sunday entertainment show that has been airing on the public network (Rai) since 1976.

<sup>5</sup> *Buona Domenica* is the Sunday entertainment show that has been airing on the main commercial network (Mediaset) since 1985.

who proves to cope with all that can interest and amuse the public; the widest range of performances (songs, chorus lines, impersonations, interviews) makes this host-centred frame even livelier. Great attention should be paid to the relationship with the viewer, embodied by the audience in the studio. The communicative interaction transforms the television from “a window onto the world” into a Tv-screen intrusion into our daily life and domestic dimension; the constant, over-reference to the studio audience, the creation and over-presence of the viewer as a necessary partner of the interaction make the distance between those who are behind and beyond the screen shorter and shorter. The two dimensions (behind and beyond) tend to overlap, thus feigning a natural interaction based on familiarity and mutual custom (Eco & Wolf, 1981).

Domenica in is divided into three parts. The first one—called L’Arena—airs from 2 pm to 3 pm and it is moderated by a famous Italian host, Massimo Giletti. Starting from news items, the host engages guests/opinion makers and the studio audience in lively discussions about the most delicate public affairs: national health disservice, lack of security due to massive immigration, the stagnant school system. My attention will be drawn to this very part of the show. The second part—called Domenica in Rosa—includes a 30/35 minute segment dedicated to music, a 20 minute segment where health issues are treated and a final 90 minute segment characterised by entertainment and interviews. Finally, in the third part—entitled Ieri, oggi e domani—Pippo Baudo, the most famous Italian entertainment host, welcomes celebrities to present new books or films.

**Table 2. Il Salotto di Paola Perego, Buona Domenica, from 30th March to 20th April 2008**

Date and installment title	Issue	Frame
30 March 2008 “Losing the job, giving up living”	Cost of living	People denounce the difficulties ordinary citizens have to get to the highest levels of power to allow their urgent needs to be met
6 April 2008 “A country on the verge of a breakdown”	Salaries, job, mortgages	Guests spur people to denounce abuses and report to Codacons or lawyer to bring laws into force
13 April 2008 “We want the State back”	The State is getting farther and farther from its citizens. Report and accounts from ordinary citizens	According to the guests, problems cannot be salved by appearing on Tv. The State is expected to give positive answers. The show is urged to invite politician to reply to people.
20 April 2008. “Security Emergency”	Violence on woman	Police force is urged to be intensified. People fears and problems should be carefully taken into consideration. A stronger relation between citizens and police force is needed. More severe measures to adopt against non-EU immigrants.

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The structure of Buona Domenica is rather similar. The first part features *Il Salotto di Paola Perego*—the segment under study—moderated by Paola Perego, a famous Italian hostess. This segment is very much like *Domenica in L’Arena* as for 90 minutes guests are engaged in lively discussions about the most recent Italian news items. Next, there is a 20/25-minute segment dedicated to comedy followed by a two-hour period when celebrities are interviewed by Paola Perego. The second part of the program lasts about one hour and is hosted by a famous Italian singer, Iva Zanicchi. Here, music, cinema and TV events are talked over.

We are now going to analyse *L’Arena* and *Il Salotto di Paola Perego* aired at the time of the electoral campaign anticipating general elections (30th march, 6th and 7th April 2008). After a careful watching the following elements have been set out: a) the issues the debate was focused on; b) the guests attending the instalment; c) the events the debate was spurred by; the main frame emerging from the discussion. The above mentioned elements have been included in table 1 (*L’Arena*) and 2 (*Il Salotto di Paola Perego*) [in appendix]. The frame of a topic is the outlook adopted on that very topic, its interpretational perspective; as Entman (1993) suggests, it represents the way in which mass media or individuals convey meaning through discourses or reasoning, thus making it comprehensible according to a certain viewpoint.

Considerations on Table 1 and 2 have been made in compliance with what Baum (2003, 2007) and Zaller (2003) have already suggested. Most soft news consumers are apolitical viewers/electors; moreover, as Francesco Casetti states in his *Tra me e te* (1988), there’s a communicative pact, a confidence agreement between the viewer and the variety show. This relates to the relation between soft news and public affairs information, that is to the possibility for the entertainment-show viewers/electors to get information about policy issues. The discussion engaged during the analysed program segments always starts from recent news items (some exam-

ples: the problem of dioxin-contaminated buffalo mozzarella cheese, the case of a worker who committed suicide after losing his job, the sexual intercourse between two of the Big Brother’s contestants, one of whom being a doctor) and then expands on a related public affair subject (food safety, the cost of living, national health disservice). The cases we have just mentioned refer to Zaller’s definition of soft news: The kind of news viewers get in touch with both amuses and concerns them a lot. There’s still another element which is worth noting. If there’s a confidence relationship between variety shows and their viewers, not only are variety viewers more likely to consume soft news that concerns them personally, but it is also possible that soft news effects are more remarkable than hard news’. In fact hard news come from political information media (the news, political debates, etc.) which either lack the everyday-life approach or don’t make it central.

Hence the question turns to whether all this helped Silvio Berlusconi’s ascent to the position of Italian Government’s Prime Minister. The answer should be in the positive as any issue treated resulted in a sense of mistrust of public institutions and, as such, of the centre-left coalition which was ruling at that time. When talking about health disservice, cost of living and food safety the ruling party is the inevitable target of sharp criticism for its being unable to avoid such threats to the Italians. Moreover a growing sense of general malaise animates the public opinion. Thus, Sunday entertainment shows, (maybe) unwillingly support the centre-right leader’s choice to stand as the only trustworthy candidate who has deeply understood the electors’ needs and is ready to meet them. In short, it could be said that the two variety shows help Berlusconi in so far as they spread a general discontent that feeds the leader’s ambitious projects and new expectations.

The most significant example in this sense comes from the instalments aired on 13th April 2008, the day when Ita-



It is rather unusual for politicians to attend variety shows; however, as to the analysed instalments, they wouldn't have been allowed to, due to the "par condicio" restraint. It regulates the information media access for political communication during electoral campaigns in order to ensure equal and fair treatment to the different political actors. The absence of political actors within such contexts is a significant element.

lians were expected to choose between Silvio Berlusconi (centre-right candidate leader) and Walter Veltroni (centre-left candidate leader). In *Il Salotto di Paola Perego* a lively discussion is engaged on the ever-present distance between the State –namely the Government– and citizens. The opening part is dedicated to two interviews: the father of a child who died due to health disservice is the protagonist of the first one while the other is centred on the figure of a parent who sold a kidney to face his desperate economic situation. The grief they expressed through their words starts a lively discussion where both guests and the audience seem to be irritated by the State's poor response. They agree on the general consideration that no ruler can accept such humiliation for his citizens. The topic under discussion in *L'Arena* is softer but still rather hard to tackle for a ruler. The program segment opens with a footage showing the big blunder a manager from Telecom –an Italian giant telephone company– made when trying to motivate his team. He said "Napoleon had his masterpiece in Waterloo". This huge blunder is the pretext to start a debate on the Italian school system. The guests and the audience agree on stressing two main points: a) culture is urgently needed by any democracy; b) the school system is one of the main social problems in Italy. Once more, rulers are accused of carelessly tackling the problem of education. In other words, with polls still open, many viewers/electors (maybe low-awareness electors, yet electors) watch and listen to people claiming the Government has kept too far from ordinary people; therefore a new trend is needed. Calling up the question Baum and Jamison (2006) have already analysed, we might ask the following: What if any viewer/elector needed these two programs to get information and choose the candidate to vote? This is a hard question to answer, mainly because we lack audience data. However the attacks the resigning Government came under cast a growing slur on the centre-left ruling coalition and made the right-wing wind blow stronger

and stronger (Manheimer & Natale, 2008).

There's a further remarkable aspect to be noticed in both *L'Arena* and *Il Salotto di Paola Perego*. In both the two program segments highly relevant political issues are talked over with no politician to join the debate. Most guests are usually celebrities, gossip-journalists, managers or representatives from different associations. It is rather unusual for politicians to attend such variety shows; however, as to the analysed instalments, they wouldn't have been allowed to, due to the "par condicio" restraint. The "par condicio law" regulates the information media access for political communication during electoral campaigns in order to ensure equal and fair treatment to the different political actors<sup>6</sup>. The absence of political actors within such contexts is a significant element. Personally useful issues are presented to viewers but there are no politicians to suggest moral comments or effective measures to be taken (priming effect).

#### **L'ARENA AND IL SALOTTO DI PAOLA PEREGO – 20TH APRIL 2008**

A different analysis should be made for the segments aired on 20th April 2008. This time attention was drawn on the two cases of rape that had occurred in Rome (a university student from Lesotho) and Milan (a US university student) few days before. The delicate issue that was put forth was the relation between personal security and the uncontrolled number of immigrants in Italy. National elections have already given their response, yet the following Sunday many voters would be summoned to the polls to choose their mayor and this would be the first important test for the newly elected Government. The most awaited challenge took place in Rome where Gianni Alemanno (centre-right candidate), who won the runoff against Francesco Rutelli (centre-left candidate), successfully rode the momentum of Berlusconi's triumph in national elections. Moreover Gianni Alemanno had focused his campaign on demands for improved security.

On the following days, the two rapes are given a great emphasis by newspapers, news and political talk shows, thus making them a real issue (security). Once more, *Domenica in* (namely *L'arena*) and *Buona Domenica* (*Il Salotto di Paola Perego*) deal with events which might remarkably affect the electoral response, owing to their dramatic, emotional drive. Once more a debate is engaged on a subject –security– which has always been considered as a right-wing topic. In both program segments the host/hostess warns the ordinary treatment will be altered so that attention will be exclusively drawn on a personally useful issue –security– through press review, reports and interviews. Thus, the viewer is getting information on an issue which has had a remarkable media coverage for many days. However the kind of viewer/elector we have in mind when analyzing the two variety shows is a “lazy”, “monitoring” one, who hardly reads newspapers or watches the news. Yet, he is an eager entertainment media consumer who is expanding on a subject he has surely heard about on variety shows.

Besides, the two segments often mention police force members whose courage and sacrifice are poorly rewarded. Courage and humility is the ideal matching to outline a dramatic (moving) story. *Domenica in* provides a fully-detailed account of the adventure in which two carabinieri were involved to prevent a Rumanian from raping a young student. The story makes the viewer feel highly involved owing to its great emotional drive. In both programs the story ends with the host/hostess's comment which makes security the core of the debate (Giletti: “I don't want to put on any trial; that's what TV has already done too often. We are not going into details, but as a citizen I don't really care about his being drunk...I don't want them about anymore. Such crimes can't be tolerated”. Perego: “I know you are not the people who should answer my question, however why does just one quarter of the expelled people really leave our country?”). This is a tough stance which conveys information to the viewer. Therefore we can easily understand that variety shows match entertainment (the police force's brave adventure) and political information (immigrants who com-

mit crimes must leave our country). It is also worth noting that such programs do not put forth random issues; information is provided on the issues the right-wing candidates have centered their campaign on; the result is that mayoral elections are deeply affected.

A central role is played by the audience in the studio and the guests joining the debate, most of whom are celebrities having a “non-expert” outlook on the matter. Alba Parietti is a clear example of such celebrity-guests. The famous Italian show-girl told about the “dramatic” experience her son lived as a victim of a crime committed by non-EU immigrants. An unlucky experience that occurred to a celebrity but might have happened to an ordinary person; hence the celebrity becomes an important reference for the average citizen/viewer's daily actions. It is a representation of reality that is strengthened by the audience's contribution. The main feeling emerging from the debate is a deep sense of fear for non-EU immigrants and the conviction that the State is unable to punish (and condemn) those who commit rape. Thus, on 20th April, while watching *L'arena* and *Il Salotto di Paola Perego*, the viewer is consuming soft news mainly centered on dramatic stories that provide a great deal of public affairs information as well. All that we have just presented seems to confirm Delli Carpini and Williams's theories (2001): not only do entertainment media –variety shows in this research– have their own agenda setting authority, but they are even part of what Carlo Manetti (Prima e dopo, 1986) calls “thematization process”. The Italian sociologist maintains that a publicly-interesting event can't turn into an issue unless it is followed by a stance coming from political/non political contexts. *Domenica in* and *Buona Domenica* could be regarded as non-political contexts as they use the interviews, audience's contribution and press review to turn Rome and Milan rapes into a real issue: “security and immigration” (this is mainly true for the viewer/citizen/elector who is not used to consuming hard news).

## CONCLUSION

At this stage we can try to answer the following question:

6 Guaranteeing all the main majority and opposition political forces to have equal media treatment, in terms of times and spaces has become a priority since Silvio Berlusconi became owner of Mediaset, which broadcasts three national private channels.

Does TV entertainment, during electoral campaigns, help a group of electors to endorse a certain candidate? Does this occur even in Italy? Taking into account what we have claimed so far, the answer must be in the positive. In fact entertainment programs are responsible for providing public affairs information (security, health disservice, cost of living) to soft-news-consuming viewers/electors, thus affecting their vote. If we refer to the installments we've just analysed (aired on occasion of 2008 national elections' campaign) it seems that somebody among the candidates has got the greatest advantage; his name is Silvio Berlusconi. Hinting at the too many illegal immigrants living in our country, stressing on their crimes, denouncing a general malaise and the stalling economy is a way to make the centre-left ruling coalition more and more unpopular. As a consequence the right-wing candidate who claimed to be able to solve the most urgent Italian problems got an easier way to the electoral win.

TV entertainment spurs a further consideration: viewers/electors are provided information on publicly useful issues with no political actor joining the debate. Hence, whenever TV entertainment conveys information, no mention is made of the outlook a politician might have on such issue. On the contrary, great emphasis is given to the dramatic, emotional side of the matter as it suits the viewer/elector's "liking".

In conclusion, we could state that the variety show viewer/

elector is not so un-informed on political matters. We might call him uninformed if we consider factual programs being the only source of political information. Actually it is exactly this kind of programs –such as *Domenica in* and *Buona Domenica*– that reveal the viewer the daily political reality he lives in. However many viewers/electors are unlikely to turn to serious sources of information, owing to their being boring and complicated. Should this be the case, soft news –rather than hard news- would have a greater impact on these people (even thanks to the relation existing between entertainment programs and viewers described by Casetti). In the end we should underline that in Italy electoral campaigns can't be studied without taking into consideration entertainment programs. If we look at the success these programs have, the viewers they appeal to and the issues treated, we might say that they share the same (maybe even greater) agenda setting authority as the traditional news media. In this sense a clear example is represented by the study referring to the two segments aired on 20 April 2008. On Sundays, at 2 p.m. both the variety show on the public network and the one on the main commercial television, at the same time, are engaging celebrities into a plain, lively discussion on security. In short, a delicate and highly interesting issue is brought to the attention of a vast audience, just few days before important electoral dates.

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