

The Marcegaglia Dossier: News or Threat?

Television Coverage of a “Smear Campaign”

Summary

1. What this study provides

This study analyses the news coverage of the case concerning Emma Marcegaglia, the president of Confindustria (the National Association of Italian Entrepreneurs), and the judicial investigation into *Il Giornale* newspaper—owned by the family of Prime Minister Berlusconi—for allegedly preparing a “dossier” against her. According to the investigators, *Il Giornale* was preparing to smear Marcegaglia in retaliation for her criticism of the government's handling of the economy.

This research has a twofold relevance for the debate about the relationship between the political system and the media industry in Italy.

First and foremost, the Marcegaglia case revived the long-term debate regarding the “Berlusconi anomaly”.¹ Even more important, the episode became part of a wider controversy touching on the political use of the media against the government's critics. As a matter of fact, Berlusconi's opponents saw the alleged threats against Emma Marcegaglia as part of a broader strategy to suppress critics of the government, the so-called “*macchina del fango*” (mud machine), a form of attack already used against other public figures.²

For their part, supporters of the ruling party labelled the whole episode as a harmless joke that the Confindustria president had misunderstood, and that had grim consequences for freedom of the press: “*We see that the Public Prosecutor is contributing to freedom of the press by searching Il Giornale and some journalists (...) We are eager to know the reasons for this and the consequences of an initiative whose effects are devastating.*”³

Instead of examining or assessing the basis for these allegations, this research focuses on the television coverage of this affair, in order to assess how far the reporting reflected the real nature of the event, and how

¹ This term refers to the fact that Silvio Berlusconi—leader of *Il Popolo della Libertà*, PdL, ‘The People of Liberty’, the main party in the governing coalition, as well as prime minister—also owns the main private media conglomerates in Italy. He is the majority shareholder in Mediaset, Italy's largest commercial broadcaster, whose vice-president is Berlusconi's son. Mediaset possesses three TV stations—Canale 5, Italia 1 and Rete Quattro—and the powerful advertising agency Publitalia. Silvio Berlusconi's brother Paolo owns *Il Giornale*, a well-known daily newspaper published in Milan. His former wife Veronica Lario owns 49 percent of *Il Foglio* newspaper. Silvio Berlusconi also owns 48 percent of Mondadori, Italy's biggest publishing group, whose chairman is his daughter Marina. Such is the background of the conclusion drawn in 2004 by the Council of Europe's Committee on Culture, Science and Education: “*The concentration of political, commercial and media power in Italy in the hands of one person, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, is recognised as an anomaly across the political spectrum. Successive Italian governments since 1994 have failed to resolve the problem of conflict of interest and appropriate legislation has not yet been adopted by the Parliament. The television market is dominated by the duopoly of Mr Berlusconi's Mediaset and its main rival, the public broadcasting company RAI, which has always been a mirror of the political system. The newly adopted law on the reform of the broadcasting sector may not effectively guarantee greater pluralism and it manifestly allows Mediaset to expand even further.*” See: Council of Europe, **Monopolisation of the electronic media and possible abuse of power in Italy. Doc. 10195, 3 June 2004**, Report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education. (Available at <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/doc04/EDOC10195.htm>.)

² Against Mr. Boffo, former editor-in-chief of the Catholic magazine *Avvenire*, and Mr. Gianfranco Fini, speaker of the Lower Chamber of Parliament and a former political ally of Mr. Berlusconi.

³ Statement by Mr. Fabrizio Cicchitto (head of the Parliamentary Group of the ruling party) to *Libero* newspaper on 9 September 2010, available at http://www.libero-news.it/news/504909/Caso_Marcegaglia_Libero_pubblica_il_dossier.html.

coverage was affected by the traditional editorial policies informing news programs on Italy's main television channels.

This study analyses the seven main free-to-air news programs produced by private and public TV channels (the public RAI, the private Mediaset and La7) by examining a number of elements: the explicit dimensions emphasised by the journalistic coverage, the different 'frames' used to interpret the affair, and the thematic categories associated with the story.

The findings show that the case was treated with an array of reporting styles and narratives reflecting the specific editorial line of each newscast: the Mediaset channels tended to minimise the issue, while RAI and La7 channels provided wider scope to the story by reporting it through a plurality of voices and views.⁴

This research is based on the assumption that political leanings of news programs in Italy may be mirrored not only by political coverage and news selection, but also by the way news is reported. This is particularly evident when the news touches on sensitive issues and reflects a broader political debate. In this regard, the study may also represent an operational and methodological baseline to develop a systematic mapping of how the main Italian media treat and frame politically sensitive events.

2. Background I: Threat or joke?

The timeline of events starts in September 2010 when Mrs. Marcegaglia criticises Italy's political leadership, in particular the government's weak response to the economic crisis and the lack of reforms. Following Marcegaglia's criticism of the Government on different occasions, Alessandro Sallusti, editor-in-chief of *Il Giornale*, publishes an editorial attacking her.

In October, Nicola Porro, the deputy editor-in-chief of *Il Giornale*, sends a text message to Marcegaglia's spokesperson threatening to publish a smearing dossier about the Marcegaglia family business. This threat comes to the knowledge of the police, who are intercepting calls and text messages in relation to another case. The police search *Il Giornale*'s premises and the homes of Sallusti and Porro, both of whom are put under investigation. When answering the magistrates, Marcegaglia states she felt both her name and image had been jeopardised by Mr Porro's alleged threats.⁵ According to the recordings, Porro said: "Now we're going to have some real fun for the next 20 days, giving Marcegaglia a hard time like she's never seen before." He added that *Il Giornale* had moved its "bloodhounds" from "Montecarlo to Mantua", the first referring to the newspaper's ongoing campaign against Gianfranco Fini, speaker of the Lower Chamber of Parliament, and the second to the centre of the Marcegaglia family's business activities.⁶

While the police investigate the anti-Marcegaglia dossier allegedly created by *Il Giornale*, the newspaper rubbishes all the allegations. Mr Porro states that the alleged threats were simply a joke and Mr Sallusti, referring to the police search of the newspaper's premises, calls it "violence not even used against common criminals".⁷

⁴ With the exception of RAI 1, which tended to adopt a "minimalist" approach.

⁵ ANSA, 7 October 2010, English translation available at <http://www.lifeinitaly.com/news/en/49220>.

⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 2010.

⁷ *La Repubblica*, 7 October 2010.

3. Background II: News programs between information and entertainment

Of Italy's three main television companies, RAI and Mediaset account for roughly 80 percent of the audience share.⁸

- RAI is the Italian state public service broadcaster and operates three main free-to-air generalist channels (RAI 1, RAI 2, RAI 3), each of which has its news programs: TG1, TG2 and TG3.
- Mediaset is the main private network. Its national free-to-air televisions include the generalist channels Rete 4, Canale 5 and Italia 1, with their respective news programs: TG4, TG5 and Studio Aperto.
- La7 is the other private national television channel often labelled as the Third TV Pole between the duopoly characterising the Italian media market. Its news program is TG La7.

Italian news programs are generally characterised by widely differing editorial lines in terms of selection, production, and thematic priorities. While some bulletins privilege political issues and hard news (TG3, TG La7, and TG2), others focus on soft news and lighter non-political topics (TG1, TG4, TG5 and Studio Aperto). Moreover, the former usually adopt more analytical and diverse approaches in their coverage, while the latter tend to simplify or ignore certain angles or positions.⁹

4. The Coverage: One story, multiple angles

Levels of attention to the story vary across the programs analysed. In the course of the overall news cycle—September and October 2010—TG La7 and TG3 give the broadest visibility, both to Marcegaglia's critical comments about the government and to the alleged dossier against her. The other two RAI news bulletins (TG1 and TG2) also report her statements. The Mediaset news bulletins either give her minimal attention (TG5 and Studio Aperto) or do not cover the story at all (TG4).

The **narrative connotations** informing the coverage of Marcegaglia's criticism of the government reveal editorial differences, too: TG3, TG La7, and (partly) TG2, emphasise the arguments about the government's lack of action. TG1 tends to define its coverage in terms of a general need for economic reform, which is less controversial for the ruling coalition. The relations between Marcegaglia and the government – as openly or implicitly defined by the media narrative through comments, images, footage or associations – show that TG3 and TG La7 emphasise confrontation, while TG5 and TG1 give a consensus-seeking shape to Marcegaglia's remarks. TG2's coverage is balanced between conflict and cooperation.

The **journalistic treatment given to the alleged threat** and to the existence of the Marcegaglia dossier is another element that exposes differing editorial lines and styles. TG3's main construct refers to the reality of the dossier and the menace. TG2 and TG La7 adopt an equidistant position, by resorting to a multi-sided type of reporting where different angles are presented and analysed.

The non-existence of the dossier and the supposedly facetious nature of the threat are, by contrast, the main themes of the coverage by TG1, TG5 and Studio Aperto. The framing and interpretation create a narrative

⁸ Mavise—Database on television channels and TV companies in the European Union, TV Market in Italy. November 2010. Audience data source: Eurodata TV Worldwide / Auditel / AGB Nielsen Media Research Italy. Available at <http://mavise.obs.coe.int/cocoon/tp/country/18/country.pdf>.

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the correlation between channels' partisan bias and their news preferences, see Ruben Durante and Brian Knight, *Partisan Control, Media Bias and Viewer Responses: Evidence from Berlusconi's Italy*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 14762, March 2009.

context where the attribution of responsibilities and the identification of the aggrieved party are not univocal. Those news programs adopting a mixture of “threat-joke” and “much ado about nothing” narrative scheme tend to portray *Il Giornale* as the main victim, searched by the police and investigated by the judiciary (TG5, Studio Aperto, and partly TG1). On the other hand, the combination of “threat-real” and “smear campaign” frames tend implicitly to define Marcegaglia as the victim of a broader system of de-legitimation and degraded political climate (TG3). The other news bulletins TG2 and TG La7 show a combination of both approaches.

Based on these elements, news programs can be categorized by their approach to covering the story and the narrative angles they select:

1. The opponent – TG3: this news coverage focuses on aspects of the story that are problematic for the government, such as Marcegaglia’s criticism and the involvement of *Il Giornale* in smear campaigns.
2. The analyst – TG La7: this approach tends to thematise and analyse the story by adopting different angles. It presents the viewer with a plurality of elements and perspectives, and it does not stick to an openly pre-established position.
3. The storyteller – TG2: this third model is based, like the second, on the systematic representation of fact and events according to a plurality of sources and perspectives, although the analytic approach is less central. The program portrays the different dimensions of the story, trying to balance voices and opinions and reconciling the controversial elements.
4. The neutralisers – TG1 and TG5: this model emphasises the uncontroversial aspects of the story while playing down those aspects that are particularly critical of the government. In this type of coverage, Marcegaglia’s position is often reduced or minimised.
5. The simplifier – Studio Aperto: this approach gives limited visibility to the story, in line with the “soft news” vocation of the program. When the case is covered, the issues are simplified and dimmed. Aspects that may be critical of the government and/or supportive of Marcegaglia are not considered, or are played down.
6. The absentee – TG4: no coverage of the story.

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