

Media and Political Information Environment in Italy

Media and Politics research paper 2025

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Table of contents

- 1. Supply of political information***
- 2. Quality and Impartiality of information***
- 3. Media concentration and diversity of news***
- 4. Fragmentation and polarization***
- 5. Relativism in news: fake news and misinformation***
- 6. Degree of inequality in political knowledge***

Introduction

How does political information, and the way it is brought and distributed to the population of a country, influence that population's view and opinions about their own politics, as well as their democratic engagement?

There is no concise way to answer such a question, as the topic of politics and media, and their relationship, is complex, encompassing different areas and levels of interest, all of them necessary to paint a full picture of the political environment in any country, and how media's portrayal shapes the public opinion of it. This paper is going to focus on the country of Italy,

and will be studying six different areas in this context, to try giving an exhaustive overview of the situation in the country.

1. Supply of information

The supply and distribution of political information is a fundamental aspect of a citizen's participation in the political arena, and heavily influences the various opinions and points of view that they are going to express in that regard. What matters in this discourse is, first and foremost, the source: where do Italian citizens usually gain information on politics from? To be able to give a complete answer, it is necessary to understand the context in which political information is supplied in Italy. It has been shown in this regard, by an important seminal study done by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini in 2004 titled "Comparing Media Systems" cited by Esser et al. in their research, that the southern part of Europe is characterized by what is called a "*polarized pluralist system*" where television is a much-preferred source to newspapers ¹. There are a series of consequences to this aspect such as, for example, the need for tv broadcasters to keep large audiences as engaged as possible, which leads them to give more space to programs that are "*mass-appealing, entertainment oriented*" ². Because of this, there will be more advertising (and thus less space given to actual political information) in the programming of these channels, compared to the situation of Northern European broadcast systems, which manifest less interest towards advertising in general. Furthermore, a study done by ISTAT (the Italian National Institute of Statistics) in 2023 shows that 86,4% of Italians rely on television to get political information, while 32,5% utilize the radio and 26,9% use newspapers ³; continuing to focus on television as the primary source of political information, it is useful to note that, because of the varying political orientations and opinions in the country, there is a division between the main television channel used by people adhering to different political ideologies: citizens with a leftist ideology rely on Rai News (27% of adults), while

¹ "Political Information Opportunities in Europe: a Longitudinal and Comparative Study of Thirteen Television Systems", Esser et. al, 2012 (pag.6)

² (Esser et al. 2012; pag 6).

³https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/it/dw/categories/IT1.Z0850DAL1.0/POLITICAL_PART/IT1.83_63_DF_DCCV_AVQ_PERSONE_112.1.0

those leaning on the right political wing use Mediaset News (30% of adults) ⁴. Based on a study done by the PEW research center in 2017, what is interesting about the choices of channels based on political ideologies, is that the people choosing specific outlets believe those outlets to be bearers of the same political views as them, even if that isn't objectively true.

Taking the channel La 7 (used at least once a week by 56% of adults) as an example, the study reveals that 40% of left-leaning users believe it to be on the political left wing, while only 19% of them places it on the right. The same thing happens for right-leaning users, with 46% of them placing the outlet on the political right wing, and 16% on the left ⁵. It is important to mention, however, that citizens who place the outlet on one of the two more extreme political positions are those who have only heard of the program, but are not regular audiences, differently from those who watch the channels regularly, who instead fall in a centered ideological category (though still believing them to be close to their own views). This happens for most television programs and newspapers, although not all of them.

Since this trend is visible for other TV channels such as Rai News, but also newspapers (La Repubblica, Corriere della Sera, il Fatto Quotidiano), it is possible to conclude that, most of the times, television channels in Italy are actually providing news with a mostly unbiased approach (or at least center-based). The quite distorted view displayed by people could also be influenced by societal factors, as, based on the 2023 ISTAT percentages mentioned above, 22% of Italian citizens get at least some information about politics from friends and relatives.

Distributing political information to the Italian public has also been, especially in recent years, in the hands of social media and the Internet. There exists another study by AGCOM (law 249/1997), which is an independent collegial authority created in 1997, tasked with the control and supervision of the communication sector and composed of eight members, with a president, a council and two committees⁶. The study was published in 2025 (*Annual observation on the information system*), and is useful in demonstrating the rise of usage of social media as a means of information: in 2023 one in two Italians utilized the Internet to inform themselves, and the same tendency can be seen in 2024 (particularly for online blogs, social media and online

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-media-and-political-attitudes-in-italy/>

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-media-and-political-attitudes-in-italy/>

⁶ <https://medialandscapes.org/country/italy/policies/regulatory-authorities>

newspapers)⁷. This indicates that, despite Italy finding itself at a very low level of the Desi index on connectivity (access to the internet), and due to the inevitable effects of the rise of social media and online platforms, political information in Italy nowadays mostly comes from television and social networks⁸, with a staggering and continuous rise of the latter.

There is another important difference registered in the years just considered, and that is the decrease in television usage by Italian citizens, with 46,5% of the population using it between 2023 and 2024 compared to the 67,4% of 2019, when TV was still the main source citizens relied on to access information. There has been a loss of 21 percentage points, which is extremely high⁹.

2. Quality and impartiality of information

Despite there being plenty of sources open for consultation to get access to news about Italy's political environment, questions could be raised concerning the quality of those news or, connected to it, the level of impartiality found in newspapers and national television programs. For the purpose of inspecting and assessing the impartiality of news, AGCOM is one of, if not the most, important bodies in Italy whose research is extremely helpful to be able to get a clearer understanding of these aspects. Among the many researches and studies published by this regulatory body, one study from 2018 regarding different aspects of the distribution of news in Italy is worthy of mention in the context not only of news quality, but also regarding the topic of fake news and misinformation, which is closely tied to the first one.

Firstly, the amount of content provided by different sources, if it is quite high, could be an indicator of increased possibilities of news transparency, honesty and plurality; in this way, the audience has access to different points of view and more chances to compare various news and sources¹⁰.

⁷ *Osservatorio annuale sul Sistema dell'informazione, AGCOM; 2025 (pag. 4)*

⁸ <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/italy/>

⁹ *Osservatorio annuale sul Sistema dell'informazione, AGCOM; 2025 (pag. 4)*

¹⁰ *Interim Report Sector Inquiry "Online Platforms and the News Systems", AGCOM, 2018; (pag. 22-23)*

A general increase in the quantity of information has been registered up until 2018, with a focus on seasonal effects (such as the annual decrease of information production in the summer, particularly in August, and the opposite increase of produced information during periods of electoral campaigns). However, more does not always mean good: by evaluating the production of information coming from different sources, the analysis distinguishes three types of media, based on the relation between the productive factor and the quantity of contents offered by that production. The first kind of media mentioned is the Internet (online newspapers, blogs, social media etc.) which produces a higher offer of information compared to other forms of news distribution. Because of the “*quickness of updating time required by the online information*”¹¹ and the necessity of constant publishing during the day, journalists have to spend less time researching the information to be able to keep up with the fast rhythms of the internet: this results in a lower grade of attention given to the choice of topics, resulting in a lower quality of the general information (an example of this can be found in many Italian online political blogs, such as *Fanpage*).

A second kind of media are radio and television programs, where we can see that journalists have a lower production intensity, thus making it possible to have higher accuracy when researching and publishing information.

Finally, a third group is formed by newspapers. In this category, the intensity of the production is average, as journalists do not need to follow the fast-paced pattern of the Internet, and are able to concentrate more on the qualitative aspect of the news. This is important to the argument since, despite social media and television being the most utilized sources, people in Italy still rely heavily on newspapers when it comes to an attentive consumption of news, considering them to be the most reliable means of information¹².

The study then distinguishes different categories of news such as sports, economics, science and technology etc. and one called “*hard news*” (politics, facts of criminal, judicial or international importance). It is shown that 40% of information produced in Italy focuses on hard news, while 17% is the percentage dedicated to the other types mentioned above. It is indicated that hard news, as well as culture and show, are the categories for which a higher level of qualification of the journalists and experts providing them is requested and expected

¹¹ *Interim Report Sector Inquiry “Online Platforms and the News Systems”, AGCOM, 2018 (pag. 26)*

¹² *Interim Report Sector Inquiry “Online Platforms and the News Systems”, AGCOM, 2018; (pag. 27)*

¹³. Consequently, the other kinds of news are mostly distributed by journalists who do not possess specialized competences.

3. Media concentration and diversity of news (media ownership)

It is necessary to address the situation of the media ownership system in Italy as it is quite complex in its overall structure (and this has some consequences in terms of transparency). An analysis done by EurOMo (European Ownership Monitor) is indicative in giving a well-encompassed description of the Italian media ownership situation ¹⁴. Before illustrating more detailed information, it is important to note that most of the large media groups belong to Italian entrepreneur families, who have passed down their “possessions” for generations. One of them is *Finanziaria d'investimento Fininvest S.p.A*, a holding company created by Berlusconi (Italian entrepreneur and former prime minister, known for an astonishingly high number of scandals, mostly related to corruption in the economical and political sphere), now managed for the most part by the rest of his family members, and *Gedi*, a publishing group controlled by the Agnelli family through EXOR, their holding company.

18 media outlets were selected for this study, monitoring their market share, audience share, as well as political and institutional affiliations. Focusing on television channels, the outlets able to collect the highest number of shares are RAI (Italy's public broadcasting service) and Mediaset, which is instead a private corporation. Among both of these outlets, we can also find SkyTg24, owned by ComCast, which is a non-Italian media operator. It is clear that RAI and Mediaset are the two biggest TV operators in Italy ¹⁵.

The importance and power of Gedi and CairoRCS Media is reflected in the newspaper/press area as well, with Gedi owning Italian newspaper *Repubblica* and CairoRCS Media *Il Corriere*

¹³ *Interim Report Sector Inquiry “Online Platforms and the News Systems”, AGCOM, 2018; (pag. 34)*

¹⁴ <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/italy/>

¹⁵ <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/italy/>

Della Sera. Berlusconi's family owns *Il Giornale*, while Confindustria is in possession of *Il Sole 24Ore*, one of the most relevant economic newspapers.

The analysis illustrates that the Italian media ownership system can be described with the “Chinese box” structure: this strategy is also used in other areas aside that of the media and it works with “a holding company, generally situated in a tax haven, (which) holds a majority share of a smaller company, which in turn controls a further society, and so on”¹⁶. This strategy makes it much more difficult to pinpoint who is the final beneficiary and owner of the outlet. Berlusconi's tactics offer a clear example, as Fininvest owns 51% of Mediaset outlets, but it is revealed that, in reality, Berlusconi was the “secret owner”, holding 61% of Fininvest's shares¹⁷.

As mentioned above, Berlusconi owned *Il Giornale* as well, but we can read that its main shareholder is a company owned by his brother, Paolo Berlusconi, called *Società Europea di Edizioni*. It is proved once again that, while not being its primary owner, Silvio Berlusconi was still able to have the final choice in most of the matters pertaining to these outlets. Another example is the Agnelli family, whose holding company EXOR, beside *Repubblica*, owns a series of other newspapers such as *La Stampa* and *Il Secolo XIX*, both by relying on their group Gedi.

If we delve further into this study, we can see that, for the most part, the necessary data in regards to the composition of the staff members is not presented in a clear manner for the outlets taken into consideration. The information is “presented as aggregated, and not split off into the specific media outlet or specific functions within the same outlet”¹⁸. This occurrence is also observed in regards to public funding, especially when indirect: for example, AGCOM must be reported to in terms of publishing funds for the advertising sector, but the audiences cannot get access to this type of information in detail. Similarly, tax reliefs, while representing an important source of funding, are not present in financial reports.

It is important to note that direct public funding has decreased through the years: in 2016 the total market revenues amounted to €8.321 bn., there was then a slight decrease in 2017, which was compensated the following year, however the same thing happened in 2019, with a

¹⁶ <https://isog.org/offshore-world/chinese-boxes-game-double-names/>

¹⁷ <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/italy/>

¹⁸ <https://media-ownership.eu/findings/countries/italy/>

decrease amounting to a total of €8 bn.¹⁹ Furthermore, on the 16th of October 2023, Italy's Council of Ministers came forward with a budgetary plan which aimed to decrease the public broadcaster's licence fee by 20%²⁰.

We can conclude that Italy's media ownership system is fairly complex, and is not able to give transparent information to the audiences in regard to its general functioning, both economical and political. It is however clear that most of the media outlets are, in the end, owned by a very small number of companies.

4. Fragmentation and polarization

Italy's political landscape is suitable for an examination of its levels of polarization, as the country is known for its political complexity and, in many cases, instability (fragmented parties, unstable coalitions which lead to frequent changes in governments etc.). In regards to the political discussion framework, a case study presented by SocialData²¹ describes how, even if only 12,6% of contents on social media platforms are dedicated to political debates, over 58% of discussions are extremely polarized, with users expressing, most of the times, extreme political opinions. This goes to show that, when discussed about, political views of Italian citizens can be described as being very polarized. Another instance where it is possible to talk about polarization in Italy is related to the 2022 political elections which saw Giorgia Meloni's party as the winner. The results of the elections indicated a strong polarization connected to the territory: while urban, more populated areas registered a much higher number of votes for progressivist political actors, rural areas preferred for the most part right-leaning forces (60% of votes in favour of these political actors comes from these communities)²². This is a result of both socio-economical factors and communication strategies used by right-wing political actors to gain more votes. These actors (Meloni's party *Fratelli d'Italia* is a clear example) focus on the protection of tradition, of Italian identity and oppose phenomena such as globalization and migration, painting them as a threat to national values and principles. They

¹⁹ "Media Influence Matrix: Italy – Funding Journalism" Trevisan, M. 2020 (pag. 19)

²⁰ <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/licence-fee-cut-no-end-to-turmoil-for-rai/>

²¹ <https://socialdata.it/case-study/vincera-la-polarizzazione-gli-italiani-al-voto-tra-tribu-elettorali-e-disaffezione/>

²² <https://www.labpolitiche.it/la-polarizzazione-politica-e-non-solo-tra-citta-e-periferia/>

are aided in this by some of the media outlets mentioned above in this paper (*Liberio, Il Giornale, Il Tempo*) which, despite not being mainstream sources “physically” (because of the radical views and opinions expressed in them), are often fairly influent on online platforms, especially social media. To prove this point, *Fratelli d’Italia* is shown to be the most popular political party on social media, with 11.2 million total interactions registered in 2023 through their various platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) ²³.

A survey published by IPSOS (a multinational firm focused on multinational market research and consulting), demonstrates that political polarization is indeed quite useful for right leaning parties. The study was conducted by calculating on the total population, and we can see that among those expressing a distinctive political orientation, citizens defining themselves as left-leaning amount to 10,4%, while 16,9% represents those falling into the center-left ideology spectrum. For those on the right, 18,3% defines themselves as right-leaning, while 11,1% is center-right. By summing the percentages, left and center-left amount to 27,3%; right and center-right are at a 29,4%. Citizens locating themselves at the center only represent 8,5% of the population ²⁴.

5. Relativism in news: fake news and misinformation

Moving on, another subject explored by the AGCOM research is the amount of disinformation and fake news present in Italy’s broadcast and communication systems. The analysis shows a monthly trend registered from April 2016 to August 2018 of the amount of fake news produced by social media accounts and various websites, observing that, up until 2017, the levels of fake news remained constant. However, this changes starting from September 2017, when there is a great increase in fake news production every month, resulting in a value that is “*higher than the average of the entire period*” ²⁵. It is possible to conclude that the quantity of fake news produced in Italy has grown significantly in a short amount of time ²⁶.

²³ “*Lo Stato di Salute Social dei Partiti Italiani*”, Arcadia, 2023

²⁴ https://www.huffingtonpost.it/blog/2022/08/26/news/la_polarizzazione_aiuta_la_destra-10091995/

²⁵ *Interim Report Sector Inquiry “Online Platforms and the News Systems”*, AGCOM, 2018; (pag. 42)

²⁶ *Interim Report Sector Inquiry “Online Platforms and the News Systems”*, AGCOM, 2018; (pag. 42)

Having explored these trends regarding the general quality of news in Italy, something important to note is that, despite television and newspapers being the main perceived sources of reliable political information in Italy, some specific topics are not treated in the same impartial way as they should be by them. One of the most remarkable examples of this is immigration: it is one of the most discussed topics in the political environment, since Italy is one of the main countries where immigrants coming from the Mediterranean area go to seek refuge. The way in which newspapers and TV programs treat this subject demonstrates that, despite most newspapers being fairly objective in their reports (as mentioned above in this paper), a few of them display, instead, a heavy tendency to distort the events they describe, based on their specific political ideology. This is the case for journals such as “Il Tempo”, “Libero” and “Il Giornale”, all of them considered to be right-leaning newspapers.

A few examples can be brought to light concerning the misuse of terms and conceptualizations of the immigration issue in Italy. Some of the titles we can find from these journals are: “*Ecco la malaria degli immigrati*” (“*Here is the immigrants’ malaria*”) ²⁷; “*Dopo la miseria portano malattie*” (“*After misery, they bring diseases*”) ²⁸. It is undeniable that the phrasing and usage of terms is a voluntary action taken by the newspapers to paint an extremely biased picture of immigrants as a category of people. This is relevant to the analysis of the impartiality of news in the Italian political communication environment because it evidences the shortcomings of some Italian periodicals and newspapers in meeting the standards of impartiality set by the “*Carta di Roma*”, an ethical protocol created in 2008 by the Order of Journalists ²⁹. The protocol specifically focuses on the treatment of the immigration topic, and stresses the essential obligation for journalists to report truthfully and honestly on this issue, without resorting to any kind of bias or disinformation tactic ³⁰.

By publishing what are essentially false information, these newspapers are actively violating the ethical codes set by their order: this indicates that disinformation and fake news are a trend that, in this country, is not just present in online blogs and social media accounts, but in physical journals as well, even if in smaller quantities, given the fact that these newspapers are found at

²⁷ “Il Tempo” (6/09/2017)

²⁸ “Libero” (6/09/2017)

²⁹ <https://www.cartadiroma.org/editoriale/titolo-libero-tempo-notizia-falsa/>

³⁰ <https://www.cartadiroma.org/cosa-e-la-carta-di-roma/codice-deontologico/>

one of the extremes of the political spectrum in Italy, while most others are still regarded as having centrist political views.

6. Degree of inequality in political knowledge

In light of what has been discussed above, one could ask themselves if, based on the amount of information brought to the public by television programs, newspapers and social media, audiences are able to gain more political information and, essentially, be more politically informed. The “*Report on the consumption of information*” published by AGCOM in February 2018 is extremely useful as it illustrates that increased levels of news consumption does not necessarily result in an effective increase of knowledge ³¹. The analysis was carried out in 2017, on a sample of over 14,000 people, and highlights some interesting discoveries. As mentioned before in this paper, the use of social media and more generally the Internet as a means of information has increased exponentially in recent years; this means that there are more possibilities for people to engage with informative content that they access through more mediums than before. However, the increase in quantity of possible news outlets has also increased the levels of simultaneous consumption (phenomenon referred to as *cross-media consumption*), which leads to a superficial understanding of the contents consumed ³². The fragmentation and quickness of this type of information method leads to the reader’s lack of actual understanding of the topics they stumble on, considering also that, most of the times, the discovery of these news is random (often the result of scrolling through a series of different contents on, for example, social media platforms), as there is no intentional research the user makes ³³.

The data collected in 2017 by this work can be integrated by the analysis, introduced at page 3 of this paper (the *Annual observation on the information system*) published once again by AGCOM in 2025, where it was observed that in 43,4% of cases people click on the links provided to them, and interact with them (by leaving a like, for example). Yet, despite the possibility of these interactions being synonym of a certain level of interest, the amount of

³¹ *Report on the Consumption of information, AGCOM; Feb. 2018 (pag.3)*

³² *Report on the Consumption of information, AGCOM; Feb. 2018 (pag. 5)*

³³ *Report on the Consumption of information, AGCOM; Feb. 2018 (pag. 8)*

attention given to the news itself is often much lower. This is proved by noticing that the behaviours more typically associated with a higher level of attention, such as commenting or sharing the contents the user came across, are much lower: only 14,6% of people share news and information posted by others, and 12,6% post the actual link on their profiles ³⁴. Worthy of note is also the percentage of social media users not engaging at all with the information they come across (25,1%).

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³⁴ Osservatorio annuale sul Sistema dell'informazione, AGCOM, 2025 (pag. 12)

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