

# LSE MEDIA POLICY PROJECT

## Production Strategies and Audience Practices in the Convergent Media Landscape

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The process of media convergence is not just a matter of technological evolution: it affects all aspects of the television supply chain, from production routines, to content features, to viewing practices and habits. Regarding content, certain kinds of audiovisual works (or television programmes) have been protected by EU policies aimed at promoting the creation and distribution of European productions, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which established a quota mechanism for the member states. Nevertheless, the distinctions made between the protected audiovisual works and others has led to a “dualism” between resolutely protected fiction productions (for both cinema and television, in the form of series, serials or films) on one side, and all the remaining genres, particularly factual and other types of entertainment, on the other.

This dualism is especially marked in Italy, where it is also associated with a sort of “cultural distinction”. While films and fiction works are quite widely perceived as specifically catering for the national identity and its cultural legacies, other TV genres and types of content – even if locally produced by national or European companies – are frequently dismissed as “culturally worthless” though they often reach a broad popular audience.

This brief presents evidence from a two-part multi-year study conducted in Italy: one part focused on the television industry and the other on audiences. The trends identified in the Italian case indicate that there is a need to revise the definition of audiovisual works to take into account transformations in both production and consumption practices, and reconsider the

various types of content to which European protections and quotas could, or should, be applied.

### Industry: Hybridisation & Blurred Boundaries

The first part<sup>1</sup> of the study found that from the standpoint of media production cultures, a clear-cut distinction in types of audiovisual work seems increasingly unjustified.

- Professionals, broadcasters and production companies were frequently involved in a variety of different projects, often transcending fixed genre boundaries.  
*e.g. a single production company buys and produces scripted and unscripted global formats*
- Authors, directors and other practitioners worked both on “audiovisual works” and on products to which the definition does not apply, reflecting contemporary television’s tendency towards strong hybridisation of its content.  
*e.g. some editors work both on fictional products and on pre-recorded factual programming or talent shows that may also include online-only and interactive elements*
- Taking into account communication and promotion, mixed content and network branding activities were among the most important means for boosting product circulation, regardless of genre and destination (movie theatres, TV schedules, online, etc).  
*e.g. social media management is a space of negotiation between production companies and broadcasters*

## Audiences: Convergent Mixed Practices

The second part<sup>2</sup> of our study identified individual practices of “convergent viewers”. Some are deep, complex and less widespread but with greater engagement such as blogging, buying merchandise, illegal downloading. Others are superficial, adopted (often unnoticeably) by a large majority of the audience, yet simpler and easier to learn and use, such as finding information online, sharing on Facebook, or watching on YouTube.

Again, viewers’ choices demonstrate how difficult it is to distinguish between different types of TV (or audiovisual-media) content, in two ways.

- The same media object leads different viewers (or the same viewer at different times) to adopt diverse and variable practices: the consumption of the content is less linked to television networks and schedules as programmes can be downloaded or shared through social media; at the same time, this adoption can change according to motivations, previous habits, peer groups, sets of recommendations and/or instructions. *“Sometimes I want to look for information, sometimes I just want to disconnect my brain on the couch...” (w,32)*
- Similar viewing practices can be adopted by the same spectator, or by different spectators, for media objects that fall inside or outside the audiovisual works definition: the denotations of genre, cultural traditions or linguistic/geographic regimes are immaterial to the audience that is viewing it, or using it as part of their (weak or strong) media identity. *“In some ways, they [reality television and factual programming] work for me just like a TV series!” (m, 25)*

The distinctions between types of content are made obsolete by the audience’s voluntary (or involuntary) choices in carefully selecting when and where to use (or dismiss) some kinds of convergent practices.

## Policy Recommendations

In the Italian scenario, both the practices and strategies of the television industries and audience consumption practices show the limits and inefficacies of a strict distinction between different kinds of audiovisual works; one carefully sustained by suitable national and supranational policies; the other left to the commercial forces in the market or only to other interventions, mainly public-service broadcasting, which is under serious pressure in many countries.

**“A better approach to audiovisual content should include ... a greater variety & hybridity in genres, content and multiple platforms.”**

A better approach to audiovisual content, therefore, should include news and entertainment productions (games, shows, factual programming, etc.) in the European system of quotas, thus encouraging a greater variety and hybridity in genres, content and multiple platforms.

In a complex media environment, with a multiplication of distribution platforms (broadcasting, online, linear and non-linear services) and a variety of ways for the audience to access and engage with TV contents, European policies should focus more on sustaining the production efforts of the various players, indifferently to their genres and platforms, rather than define strict broadcast quotas.

Together with the profitability that drives abundant, even excessive, production, it is important to note the symbolic, cultural, social and political value of the programming broadcast on networks or shown online. With a wider definition, or at least a more graduated method, regulation could be more responsive both to the balances required by the industry and to the audiences’ needs. <sup>LSE</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. Barra, M. Scaglioni, “Produzione convergente. Dieci regole per il broadcaster”, in A. Grasso, M. Scaglioni (eds.), *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca, RTI, Milano 2010, p. 33-56; L. Barra, M. Scaglioni, “TV Goes Social. Italian Broadcasting Strategies and the Challenges of Convergence”, in View. *Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 3(6), 2014, pp. 110-124.

<sup>2</sup> L. Barra, M. Scaglioni, “Consumo convergente. Pratiche, orientamenti e discorsi”, in A. Grasso, M. Scaglioni (eds.), *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, Link Ricerca, RTI, Milano 2010, pp. 57-78; L. Barra, M. Scaglioni, “Risalite e discese. Le trasformazioni dei percorsi degli spettatori nell’ecosistema mediale”, in C. Bioni, V. Innocenti (eds.), *Media Mutations. Gli ecosistemi narrativi nello scenario mediale contemporaneo*. Spazi, modelli, usi sociali, Mucchi, Modena 2013, pp. 165-174.