



**Mauro Buonocore**

## Wow! There are other models

*Bringing public service television principles to Italy*

What are the duties of public service television? To inform viewers on issues that affect their lives, making them better able to form opinions and make decisions, and motivating them to actively participate in the public sphere. By looking at James Fishkin's method of Deliberative Polling and public service television abroad, Mauro Buonocore provides possible models for the future of public television in Italy.

If we had asked John Reith, the first general director of BBC from 1924 to 1938, what public service radio and television consist of, he would have answered briefly but clearly with three verbs: educate, inform, entertain. Reith's definition, born in radio and translated into television in 1936 (the first year of regular public television broadcasts in England), has, since its first appearance, permeated public service radio and television throughout Europe. Since then, broadcasts have been issued in a strict routine of state monopoly, and programmes have been born in response to imperatives brought about by historical events, such as the "Reithian triad". We draw on the words of Reith to view the situation in Italy and the aspects of public service television that are missing from the television schedule of Rai (Radiotelevisione Italiana).

On one hand, for the Italians, television represents a privileged (in many cases exclusive) instrument of information, of mediation between citizens and the political arena, of formation of public opinion.

At the same time, the television marketplace is showing a growth in dynamism thanks above all to new technologies, which broaden the horizons for increasing the number of channels and offering a broader range of content. However, in the face of this complexity, Italian television does not know how to escape from the anomaly of two extremes, in which two single subjects (one public, the other private) divide the resources in the television sector among themselves in a restricted and exclusive competition. The direct consequence of this situation is that the commercial competition has become the protagonist in television programming, and the rush to reach the audience suffocates essential characteristics of public service television. In particular, television loses its fundamental functions inside contemporary democracy: the duty of propping up public opinion in order to increase participation in debates on topics of public interest, improving competence and quality.

### **Against rational ignorance**

The norms that regulate the broadcasting of information, such as the so-called *par condicio* — norms whose only objective is to ensure certain essential elements in the communication of political issues in a democratic country — are insufficient in producing true public service television. It is not enough to offer an equal slot for each political force on television because there is no

guarantee of impartiality among the journalists and operators who conceive of, produce, and moderate programmes of analysis and debate.

Public television can play a concrete role in engaging the television audience, as citizens, in activities that get them involved and participating in public discourse — with the goal of gaining a greater awareness and competence in issues that closely concern the lives of everyone, where politicians are called on to make decisions.

Pension reform, questions of bio–ethics, immigration, and revision of the fiscal system — these are just a few examples of issues that demand an in–depth analysis in order to be understood completely. In order to form an opinion and be able to adequately judge the decisions of the government, more knowledge is required.

Public service television must be a space for confrontation of ideas and for participation in public discourse.

Public television seems to avoid this participation, to dodge it in order to remain a simple spectator of the theatre of politics. The amount of interest each citizen has in being informed and expressing their own opinions, in comparing these opinions with those of other citizens, and discussing them in order to improve them and deepen them, comes, among other things, from their perception of the degree of social importance of their own thoughts. In other words, a person may not express themselves, may not show their own opinions, because they believe their opinions to be uninfluential. This is what experts call rational ignorance, or the absence of any incentive to participate consciously as a result of the perception of the practical uselessness of personal opinions in changing something that's already been decided. Therefore, if my opinions get lost, disappear, and dissolve among those of the millions of other spectators (or voters), I will suppress them, judging them unable to produce changes or offer any contribution to the democratic process and to the reality in which I live. I will have no interest in paying attention and in reflecting on public questions that I judge to be distant from my reality; while, on the contrary, these questions determine fundamental aspects of my existence, from pensions to domestic consumption of energy, to the taxes that I must pay every year.

Now, if television is one of the principal places of mediation between institutions and people, between those in power and individuals, between politics and society, then the work of avoiding rational ignorance among citizens and trying out new forms of experimentation that spark the interest in active participation in public life lies with public service television.

Comparison of opinions; production of balanced, impartial, and in–depth information; explanation of controversial questions that span public debate; research into finding innovative solutions that create conditions for forming competent and conscious public opinion — these are the duties of public service television.

### **Examples from abroad**

One of the principal obstacles in the realization of programmes inspired by the mission of public service television is the opposition by those who consider the rush to conquer the audience as the most important aspect of television. In reality, this type of criticism does not hold weight for at least two reasons.

First, public service television manages to produce programmes that, regardless of the number of viewers, remain useful, if not necessary, in the improvement of democratic life.

Here we must reflect on how Rai, despite the multiplication of channels made possible by digital technology, still does not provide a channel for civic information that is completely dedicated to parliamentary work and journalistic services, constantly explaining the institutional life of our country. This delay in Italian public television is aggravated by the examples that come from other European countries, such as BBC Parliament (in the UK), Phoenix (in Germany), and LCP (in France), which guarantee live broadcast of parliamentary work, offer in-depth journalistic programmes on the current political debates in the European Union, and, thanks to their respective internet sites, maintain an ongoing space of accessibility and contact with the public.

Second, there exist concrete examples from abroad of experimental transmissions financed by public television and inspired by the objective of fully carrying out the mission of public service television.

Therefore, there already exist broadcasts that have been created as a result of the desire to stimulate citizens to participate actively in public life; to supply in-depth explanations on controversial issues; to give spectators the instruments of awareness needed to expand their autonomous vision of the questions at hand and to explain their competent opinion in confrontations with others. The programmes in these broadcasts are able to use the convergence of television, internet, and radio innovatively in order to create discussions and debates with experts and politicians. They put at the disposal of the citizen-viewers the possibility to carry out an active, participatory, and reasoning role in the formation of a more competent and dynamic public opinion than the one created by viewing simple talk shows. The mechanism of rational ignorance is in this way broken up by innovative modes of creating television, calling on individuals, citizens of the community, and simple viewers to participate first-hand in debates, to express their own ideas, to fill in the gaps in their knowledge, to confront themselves with the variety of opinions coming from other people.

In Italy, all of this is missing — channels dedicated to civic information, any type of initiative that brings public television to experiment with innovative techniques in order to improve the viewers' competence in questions of public interest and encourage active participation in public discourse.

### **James Fishkin's Deliberative Polling**

Our response to which programmes fulfil the mission of public service television looks at the concrete possibilities for improving the Italian discussion on issues of public interest. The realization of a better, more competent, and participatory public opinion is not a utopian idea, but a necessity whose satisfaction is part of Rai's duties: a question that has a concrete and realizable answer. An answer that already exists in other countries.

Deliberative polling is an experiment born out of the research of Prof. James Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Polling at the University of Stanford.

The essential question that deliberative polling tries to answer is: "What would be the opinions expressed by citizens if, placed in front of a precise issue, they had the possibility to inform themselves by discussing with and asking questions of experts?"

To answer this question, Fishkin invented a type of polling that is articulated in different phases. A representative sample of the population under consideration is selected; these people are then asked questions on a specific topic (the campaigns of the candidates in an election, how to reduce energy consumption, how to combat crime, opinions on constitutional reform). They are then supplied with informative materials on the selected issue. Next, the members of the sample are invited to participate in a deliberative session: in small groups they discuss among themselves, and can then ask experts and political representatives questions. Once they have read the materials, discussed, posed questions, and listened to the responses, they are again presented with the initial questions. The contrast in the responses given before and after the deliberative session show the difference between an informed and uninformed sample of public opinion.

The fundamental role of television in the experiment lies in the possibility it provides to broadcast the entire deliberative session — the debates in groups, the encounters with politicians and experts — on a national scale. In this way, television acts as a true catalyst in the formation of an informed public opinion, an exhibition of active citizens who are engaged in showing their own opinions and comparing them with those of others.

From 1988 to the present, Fishkin and his staff have carried out more than twenty deliberative polls in various countries.

Here are some examples.

### **2004: Bush or Kerry?**

Two weeks before the day on which American electors would re-elect George W. Bush as president, it was Deliberation Day in 17 US cities, followed by television cameras and broadcast by PBS on *Newshour*.

At the end of the experiment, there was a significant difference between the initial opinions and those expressed after the deliberation. When we look in detail, we see that key issues of the electoral campaign, such as the Iraq debate and the economic policy of cutting taxes, were the main areas in which a major shift in opinion is visible. The voters who had received in-depth and critical information on the positions of the two sides, who had discussed and formed competent opinions, shifted dramatically towards the democratic side in comparison to voters who had just seen televised debates consisting of dramatic slogans and moving words. For a complete report of the Deliberative Polling from Deliberation Day on 16 Oct. 2004, see:

[www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/polls.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/polls.html).

### **2002: Combating crime in Bulgaria?**

In Bulgaria, the Deliberative Poll was organized by the Centre for Liberal Strategies and by Alpha Research, with media coverage by the television channel BTV. The questions put to the sample were on the possible solutions for combating and reducing criminality in the country.

Once again, the results showed a large change in opinion before and after the deliberative session. Above all, the amount of people with no opinion dropped considerably for every question.

Most importantly, national television coverage of all of the events provided the opportunity to demonstrate that democracy is not limited to free elections. Democracy can create citizens who are informed and who can play a part in the political decisions of the government. For a complete report of the Deliberative Poll of 2002 in Bulgaria, see: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/press/2002/bulgaria.pdf>.

### **1999: A republican Australia?**

Approximately one month before the referendum to decide whether Australia should become a republic, a sample set of thirty people met in Canberra for two days of Deliberative Polling organized by Issues Deliberation Australia and the Hawke Institute. Media coverage was provided by ABC television and News Radio, which broadcast the entire event live, while another national channel, Channel 9, dedicated a one-hour special to the conclusions of the Deliberative Poll.

After the deliberative session, the results showed a pronounced change in opinion towards "Yes" (+20 per cent). However, the most interesting result was the number of people responding "Uncommitted" — 7 per cent before and 0 per cent afterwards. For a complete report of the Deliberative Polling on the Australian referendum of 1999, see: [www.ida.org.au/repub\\_press.htm](http://www.ida.org.au/repub_press.htm).

### **"Public journalism"**

At the beginning of the 1990s, a new type of journalism was born that looked to engage citizens directly in discussions on issues of public interest. If traditional journalism sees readers and viewers simply as passive receivers of news, public journalism encourages the use of information as an instrument for comprehending reality and forming a democratic citizenry participating actively in public life. Thanks to discussion forums on the internet, televised broadcasts, and radio debates, the work of the journalists comes closer to the citizens, bringing the voice of the citizens to the fore and calling on them to express themselves and confront experts and politicians. Some concrete examples will give real dimensions to this phenomenon.

### **Best Practices in Journalism**

Best Practices in Journalism is an organization that encourages television programmes that, on one hand, research the opinions of common people on issues of public interest, and, on the other hand, create in-depth debates with politicians and experts. The broadcasts produced by Best Practices in Journalism demonstrate how public service television is capable of creating a space for meeting, explaining, and looking deeper into issues — a space between politics and civil society, between spheres of power and decision-making, and the life of the citizens. In this way, public service television creates a veritable means of confrontation between political power and a citizenry that is active in politics, explaining its doubts, showing its true priorities, demonstrating interest in politics, actively approaching the sphere of decision-making, and participating with attention and with doubts in the public life of the country.

## Citizen Voices

Citizen Voices collects broadcasts inspired by the idea of public journalism, which have already found space in the television programme of viewers in some states in the US. Among these:

### Voter's Voice

Journalist Chip Neal travels to the state of New Hampshire, trying to reveal, with interviews and enquiries, which themes of the public agenda the public find most important and why; the second part of the broadcast shows experts and political representatives confronting a focus group that is representative of the population. From this debate, there emerge in-depth explanations and determined positions from both political sides regarding the themes brought up by the citizens.

The programme was broadcast on New Hampshire Television (of PBS), but was born from an idea in 1996 when, during the presidential campaign, the Pew Center for Civic Journalism produced a series of similar programmes involving television channels and public radio stations not only in New Hampshire, but also in California, Florida, Boston, and Iowa. The initiative was born from the desire to overcome the limits of traditional journalism coverage of the presidential campaign. An example of this would be the so-called *horse-race poll*, in which two candidates from opposing sides argue without the slightest possibility for citizens to intervene — no chance to make their voices heard, to clearly say which topics they find most important, to express their needs for clarification in order to understand what issues will decide their destinies. From this came the effort to construct high-quality journalistic stories, allowing the voices of the electors and of the citizens, who clearly express where their interests lie and what has not been sufficiently explained, to emerge from civil society. All of this is transmitted on public television.

### We the People

We the People is a project based on a partnership between diverse media, aspiring to reinforce and improve the relationship between private citizens and public life through live meetings — forums with exponents of the political world dedicated to particular issues on the political agenda, journalistic enquiries — in cities in Wisconsin. The partnership involves Wisconsin State Journal, Wisconsin Public Television, Wisconsin Public Radio, and WISC-TV.

What does the project We the People consist of? Periodical meetings and forums that allow the citizens to ask questions and discuss problems that they find most important with politicians, experts, and others. The project, which has been around for over thirty years, sets initiatives in motion that have to do with national interest (like the presidential campaign) as well as exclusively local initiatives.

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