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The Representations of Generalist TV: The Role of Talk Shows in Polarisation. Dynamics of the Mediatisation of Political Communication During the COVID-19 Emergency in Gender Issues. The Italian Case

Abstract. The present proposal aims to analyse the dynamics of mediatisation of the political discourse that was inflamed around the COVID-19 emergency within the main talk shows transmitted by Italian generalist TV networks in the period from 24 February 2020 to 24 March 2020 which corresponds to the COVID-19 pandemic's first wave, offering a first quantitative and, subsequently, a qualitative overview of the Italian case concerning the narration of the pandemic in the phases just before and after the first total lockdown, following a mixed methods approach. The final aim of the proposal is to bring out the dynamics of mediatisation of the political discourse around the pandemic alongside the role played by the media in proposing/imposing possible aspects of polarisation of the discourse, e.g. the role of experts and the role of politics, or gender issues, starting from the assumption that, in addition to their function of reporting facts, the media perform another one, that of "polltakers", i.e. they provide indirect representations of the public's response to the issues they themselves tend to provide.

Keywords: media representations; political communication; women with political roles; talk-show; gender studies; COVID-19

Introduction

The proposal focuses on gender identity and spaces of power in the media and communication (Morcellini & Fatelli, 1994), offering a specific focus on women with political roles in the dynamics of mediatisation (Sala & Scaglioni, 2021), of the COVID-19 emergency, in the main talk shows (Crapis, 2014) of the Italian generalist networks.

In Italy, the media, during the emergency period, focused their attention on the media representation of the pandemic, corroborating the thesis that the technical

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medium cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it is immersed (Thompson, 1990) and contributing to the observation that, in addition to their function of reporting the facts, the media perform another, that of "polltakers", in other words, they give indirect representations of the public's response to the issues they tend to provide (Price & Roberts, 1987). In fact, this first quotation brings us back to the awareness that looming changes may or may have altered the objective organisation of culture or institutions (Connell, 2006) of which media representations are often the mirror and, furthermore, that there may be a political dimension linked to gender, which is well summarised by the author's famous quotation saying that the personal is political (Connell, 2006). In the context of new gender politics – originating in trans studies and the intersex movement's critiques of feminist and queer theory – "doing" one's gender sometimes implies "undoing" dominant notions of personality (Butler, 2004). It is necessary to start from certain theoretical assumptions that are well illustrated in Butler's theory, in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990) the author states in fact that gender is to be considered as a social construction, a cultural norm that prescribes to individuals how they should behave. They are therefore mere recipients and passive explanatory objects of a fixed and determined cultural law (gender rules). In this context, a further element to be analysed can be found in the crisis of models that challenge gender relations: for example, changes in the world of work, the emergence of alternative family models to the patriarchal tradition and the action of feminisms and movements for the rights of sexual minorities (Boni, 2004). Nevertheless, the category has found resonance in public discourse and in the media, reproducing the stereotypical dynamics of the dominant culture. Returning to the subject of our paper, we will present data from a broader, and still ongoing, research project called "Experts in the limelight. Decision-making processes, scientific popularisation and dynamics of mediatisation", which aims to compare the language of science with that of politics, trying to reconstruct the narratives on the COVID-19 emergency, which were conveyed by the talk-shows broadcast by the generalist networks, in the period from 24 February to 20 March 2020, corresponding to the first wave (Lombardo & Mauceri, 2020). Therefore, another possible comparison could be that between women in politics and women in science in a particular period for Italy, i.e. immediately before the first lockdown and immediately after. Specifically, two weeks before and two weeks after the first lockdown, which is also known as the strong lockdown for Italy. From this point of view, women in Italy, for various reasons, some of them even opposing each other, the lack of space for women is not to be found in the choice of the editor or the influence of "Berlusconism" on the mediaset networks, but rather our society, in some ways, is secularised in Catholicism and steeped in patriarchy. However, these aspects are specific to Italian culture, which also in other spheres such as the workplace, shows certain tendencies such as that of the glass ceiling, i.e. it is considerably more difficult for women, even given their starting conditions, to reach top positions and/or positions of responsibility, not only

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on the political side. Considering this situation that is peculiar to the Italian context, while it might be ghettoising or demeaning to women, there is probably a need for measures to rebalance this trend in favour of the female component.

Starting from the general objective, the research material provides some insights into the role and space that the media reserved to female politicians who, during the pandemic period, were concretely engaged in institutional roles directly related to the resolution of the emergency.

Objectives

The aim of this paper is to analyse if and how far the discourse on the COVID-19 emergency is intertwined with, or has been influenced by, dynamics intrinsically linked to the issue of gender: the answer, in the writer's opinion, is absolutely affirmative, so much so that it can be asserted that the personal is political (Connell, 2006).

It would be desirable to formulate verified or verifiable hypotheses but the material collected does not allow for such a generalisation because the time span of the data collection is too short, as is the empirical material collected, which nevertheless retains its own value in giving an account of a verified trend, found and verifiable from the data presented. The purpose of the broader research was not to give an account of the presence of women and their representation on talk shows, but, as already mentioned, to give an account of the image that talk shows offered of the language of politics and the language of science and their interconnections at a given time, that of the first lockdown.

In this perspective, we will try to highlight the gender inequalities found in the dynamics of talk show mediatisation, which are directly reflected in the data presented below. For this purpose we will analyse the data on women who have held institutional roles, at national and local level, from multiple points of view: relating them to the general sample, analysing the number of speeches, differentiating them by network and by phase, and then going deeper, trying to provide a key to the weight and the content of the narratives provided.

Research corpus

The entire *corpus* of the research is based on the collection, processing and analysis of data (Di Franco, 2011) provided by the programmes aired in the *daytime*/*prime-time* slot of the Rai, Mediaset and La7 generalist networks. The following are the programmes that, specifically, were the object of our analysis, contributing to build the corpus. The names of the programmes are: *Agorà and Uno Mattina* (Rai); *Coffee Break*, *L'aria che tira* and *Omnibus* (La7); *Mattino Cinque* (Mediaset).

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In this framework, it is also specified that the programmes that have been taken into account are essentially those that have had the highest number of political guests or guests linked to the world of science, this is the only motivation that has led to the choice of that time slot and the choice of those programmes, unfortunately penalising the Mediaset networks by analysing only one programme.

There were 149 guests from the political world who participated in the daytime talk shows, for a total of 347 presences distributed over the four weeks of the survey (two pre-lockdown and two post-lockdown). Of these, 190 were given by politicians operating at a national level (equal to 55.5% of the total interventions), while 157 interventions (equal to 45% of the total interventions) were given by politicians operating at a local (regional and/or municipal) level. A total of 101 national politicians and 48 local politicians were involved in the television narrative of the first four weeks of the pandemic in Italy.

After having provided the clean picture of the interventions of the members of the political forces, it is possible to disaggregate the data by arriving at the dimension of our interest, which already at a first reading helps us to focus attention on a noticeable trend: only 36 women were called to give a media representation of the health emergency within the talk shows, as shown in Figure 1.

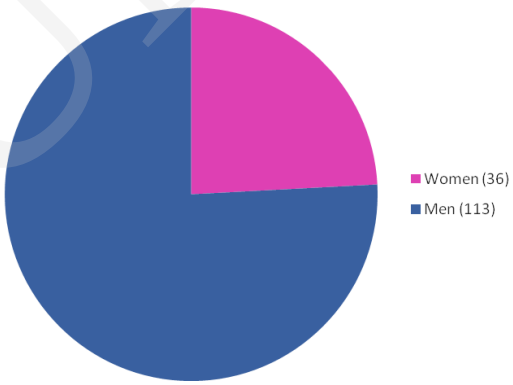


Figure 1. Total political sample: men vs. women
Source: University research. Research project "Experts in the limelight".

The graph above highlights the under-representation of women (24% of the sample of 149 politicians, that is, 36 women in total) who, by virtue of their political role, were called upon on the talk shows covered by our research to outline the shape of the public narrative of the measures taken to deal with the current emergency.

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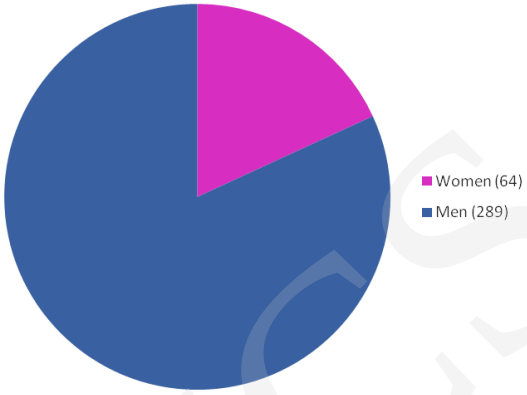


Figure 2. Total political intervention: men vs. women
Source: University research. Research project "Experts in the limelight".

Figure 2 highlights more strongly the nearly total absence of the female counterpart in this narrative (64 female versus 289 male interventions). In this case, women represent the 18% of the sample of 353 politicians.

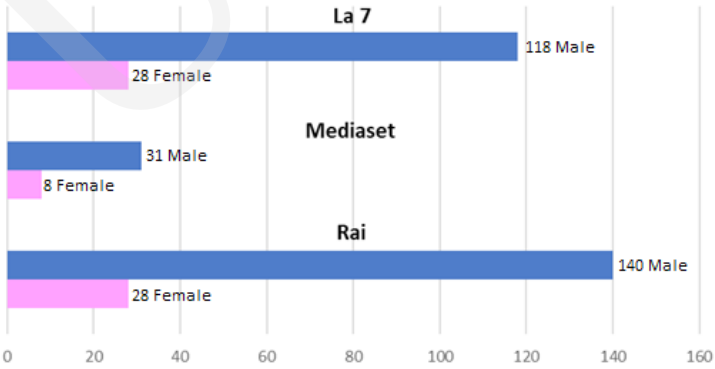


Figure 3. Women and men in the main Italian TV networks
Source: University research. Research project "Experts in the limelight".

Continuing further in the disaggregation of the data, it is possible to state that, proportionally, the programmes of La 7, although in the general under-representation of their female counterparts, invited more women, in relative terms. The Mediaset networks, on the other hand, had the lowest number of interventions, 8, but for the sake of completeness of the data, a specification must be made: the programme of the Mediaset network examined in our research is only one, *Mattino Cinque*. As regards

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Rai, on the other hand, we find the same number of guest appearances as La 7, net of one less programme, so in all probability, if the number of programmes between the two broadcasters had been the same, Rai would have had the highest number of female guests (Figure 3).

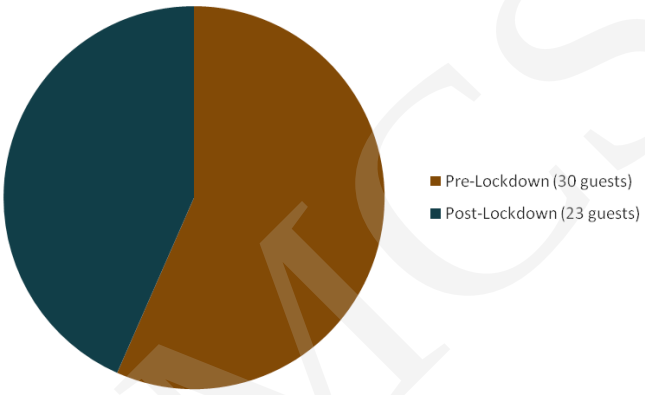


Figure 4. Pre and post-lockdown women guests
Source: University research. Research project "Experts in the limelight". Excel 2020 elaboration

As a conclusion to this series of graphs, a curious and interesting fact arises: although in a smaller percentage, women were invited to take part in the talk shows, covered by our research, more in the pre-lockdown phase (30 pre-lockdown vs. 23 post-lockdown interventions). With regard to Figure 4, it is specified that the media chose to favour the interventions of men, since, in the short survey period considered (four weeks), there was no change of personnel in the political scenarios considered.

If we want to analyse the data in our possession a step further, it is possible to state that 11 of the 36 women speakers hold a prominent institutional position: 3 ministers, 2 vice-ministers and 6 under-secretaries. Following this line of thinking, it is possible to assert that not much importance was attached to the quantity of the women invited as much as to the quality of the roles they held; another element supporting this view is the fact that the Deputy Minister of Education Anna Ascani and the Undersecretary at the Ministry of Economic Development Alessia Morani were called upon to speak several times. In the case of the speeches by Maria Cecilia Guerra and Elena Bonetti, respectively Undersecretary at the Ministry of Economy and Finance and ordinary professor, and Minister for Equal Opportunities and Family and associate professor, it is possible to state that these qualities can be interpreted following a double track: on the one hand, the role played in managing the crisis, and on the other hand, the quality to be understood as professional competence acquired, which in this context is in fact transformed into a power of speech. The findings so far suggest that women who are called upon to intervene on the issue are highly specialised, which raises

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a question, since the same tendency is not found for men in politics; in fact, ministers, undersecretaries, members of parliament and political party representatives often do not have even a university degree, and certainly not an academic qualification, in their curriculum.

The presence of Beatrice Lorenzin deserves a separate discourse, who also reported a higher number of interventions than the average, which is probably due to the fact that, in addition to being the parliamentarian of the majority during the COVID-19 emergency, she was also the Minister of Health in the past.

We can continue to interpret the data by analysing the number of speeches by women belonging to the majority and opposition forces, at this point the evidence is not surprising, due to the general under-representation of the female counterpart, more space was given to those belonging to the majority forces (43 speeches against 11 by the opposition). Finally, as far as the opposition is concerned, the presence of Giorgia Meloni, at the time the only female leader of the opposition party Fratelli d'Italia and, to nowadays, Premier, deserves a specific focus. In this regard, we will analyse some of the most significant extracts from her only speech in which it is possible to trace at least three elements of complexity. First, the Leader demonstrates her antithetical position in relation to the work of the Conte government by maintaining the heated tones, typical of the opposition, despite the emergency period: "I expect to have a Prime Minister who puts the nation before faction, I expect to have a Prime Minister who puts the country before himself". Secondly, Meloni shows an accentuated defence of crisis management by centre-right governments, specifically referring to the case of L'Aquila 2009, when the Berlusconi government was dealing with the earthquake: "one could love or dislike Berlusconi but the idea that Italians had was that there was one man in charge". Lastly, the Leader, using the rhetoric typical of right-wing parties, attempts a vigorous defence against the accusations of sovereignism made against her, which can be found in the following excerpt: "it's not a question of being sovereignists, it's a question of being patriots, this is a moment in which the whole Italy must ask itself how it can be told at this stage »Italy can make it«. [...] I am not afraid, I am afraid for the nation". The Leader, in an attempt at self-defence, ends up getting trapped in his own rhetorical artifice by using markedly patriotic language. In conclusion, beyond the reported fragments, motherland, home and family permeate the entire intervention.

The choice to use excerpts of Giorgia Meloni, at the time the only female leader of an opposition party, makes sense to show how, even during an emergency period such as the pandemic and even during the strong lockdown, the language was polarised (or crushed) on dynamics of antagonism between majority and opposition and how much the leader actually tried in her excerpts to defend the work of her predecessors belonging to the same political camp, bringing back, in this rhetoric, certain strong points such as "homeland", "loyalty" and "family".

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After this section dedicated to the focus on Meloni, it is possible to close the discourse by returning to the interventions of national and local politicians: in this case, a greater space given to women belonging to national institutions at the expense of women from local institutions (6 out of 36 total) can be seen, who, however, intervened on specific measures in some of the regions concerned (e.g. Campania or Calabria). In general, there is a greater number of interventions by women from Northern institutions as an area most affected by the COVID-19 emergency, at least in the first instance.

Results and Conclusions

In this section, space should be left for the results of the study, but this needs a specification: the study is still in progress and consequently not yet concluded. Here, therefore, we cannot speak of results, but of trends on quantitative data (Corbetta, 1999), e.g. the net number of women guests (36), while, as far as qualitative data is concerned, i.e. the analysis of the extracts with specific programmes (IRAMUTEQ), this still needs to be completed, but no significant lexical correspondences related to the gender dimension can be found.

However, the data collected so far regarding women with political roles, providing points of interest, allow us to arrive at the final thesis of our paper: societies have the possibility of reducing the differences between the two sexes through their socialisation practices (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), which are also perpetuated by the mass media. In fact, what has been said so far would, in the opinion of the writer, highlight the need for the instrument of quotas for women even within talk shows! This stereotypical representation of the female side, in this arena of discourse, is intertwined with the deeper need for the democratisation process of organisations at national or local level, which would imply: achieving equal representation of women and men in debating arenas and in public institutions (Connell, 2006), which, still today, is a distant goal.

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