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UNLOCKING TELEVISION ARCHIVES IN THE DIGITAL ERA

EDITED BY

LUCA BARRA, MATTEO MARINELLO, EMILIANO ROSSI,
SUSANNE EICHNER, ANNE-KATRIN WEBER

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“Hello, is the Mayor Here?”

Local Politics in Turin Private Broadcasting. The Case of Videogruppo Piemonte

Riccardo Fassone and Paola Zeni[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of the local broadcaster Videogruppo Piemonte in shaping political communication and civic discourse in Turin between 1976 and 1990. Based on a range of sources – including audiovisual materials, internal documents, and oral interviews – retrieved from an informal and partially dispersed archive, the study reconstructs the channel’s editorial orientation and its efforts to position itself as a public service platform at the local level. Particular attention is devoted to the program *The City Calls – The Mayor Answers*, a weekly live show that enabled direct interaction between citizens and political institutions through call-in participation.

The case of Videogruppo exemplifies the cultural and political relevance of minor broadcasters within Italy’s decentralised media ecology, as well as the challenges and opportunities tied to researching their legacy. By engaging with fragmentary yet rich archival traces, the paper highlights the value of unofficial and informal sources in documenting alternative forms of civic and political communication.

KEYWORDS

Citizenship; city; local television; Turin; Videogruppo Piemonte

[1] The contribution was conceived and developed jointly by the two authors: the introduction was co-authored; section 1 (“An accidental Archive: Researching Videogruppo”) was written by Riccardo Fassone; section 2 (“Broadcasting Politics: *The City Calls – The Mayor Answers*”) was written by Paola Zeni.

Introduction

A handwritten label on an old U-matic tape promises something improbable – or at least unexpected: "Agnelli nudo" ("Naked Agnelli") – an unlikely glimpse of one of Italy's most iconic industrialists, Gianni Agnelli, longtime president of FIAT, the carmaker that shaped not just Turin's urban planning, but its identity. Whether the label referred to a real segment or was an internal reference lost over time, the tape is today unreadable. But the label endures, offering a small yet telling fragment of a media landscape where locality, experimentation and, one might say, immediacy shaped production practices. This anecdote does not merely amuse. It gestures toward the understudied field of Italian local television, a field that, while increasingly recognised, has often operated on the margins of both media systems and historiography.

The mid-1970s marked the beginning of a brief yet intense phase of proliferation of local broadcasters across Italy: following key Constitutional Court rulings and the partial deregulation of the airwaves, local stations rapidly multiplied, offering a proliferation of voices, perspectives, and programming strategies. These stations were not only central to the emergence of commercial television in Italy but also triggered a broader rethinking of the civic and institutional functions traditionally assigned to the medium. And yet, despite their density and diversity, local broadcasters have remained somewhat peripheral in historical accounts. Their stories circulate through nostalgic memoirs or celebratory retrospectives, while their systemic relevance remains underexplored. Italy is not alone in this: across Europe, local television has often received only partial academic attention, even though it played a significant role in the development of national media landscapes. The result is a historiographical gap: a mismatch between the widespread presence of these broadcasters and the relative scarcity of academic research devoted to them.

This paper aims to offer a contribution to ongoing re-evaluation of local television's place in media historiography. Focusing on *Videogruppo Piemonte*, a broadcaster active in Turin from 1976 to 1990, it examines how local television could function not only as a commercial venture, but as a platform for civic engagement and political experimentation. This paper draws on a dispersed set of materials to explore both the structure of Videogruppo's informal archive and the editorial vision that informed the station's approach to local politics and civic engagement.

1. Assembling an archive: the case of Videogruppo

The first challenge in researching Videogruppo emerged from the absence of a structured institutional archive. The station's material legacy had been shaped by relocations, industrial acquisitions, and a general lack of preservation policy. A first set of materials – primarily U-matic tapes – was recovered from a utility closet in the offices currently occupied by the station, following its acquisition by the Mediapason group. The tapes were stored beside cleaning supplies and water cooler refills. In total, a few hundred tapes had survived, though often without any clear cataloguing system. Of these, around sixty were selected for viewing, though their content frequently diverged from the handwritten labels. These labels, rather than following a consistent set of references or codes, were mostly composed of loose, sometimes whimsical descriptions – seemingly practical, and likely meant for internal use, clearly not intended to serve as archival metadata.

A second group of sources was located in the garage of the station's founder, Sergio Rogna Manassero di Costigliole: three cardboard boxes containing schedules, program descriptions, and annual summaries. Unlike the audiovisual materials, these documents were relatively well-organised and systematically compiled by Federico Peiretti, a long-time collaborator and on-screen presence at Videogruppo. Conceived explicitly to record and preserve the station's original programming output, they offer a detailed overview of its editorial activities up to 1990 – the year in which the documents were produced. Among them were lists of all personalities who had appeared on air in a given year, which helped map the broadcaster's political and cultural reach within Turin's civic life.

Such conditions – in which structured materials coexist with more casual or non-institutional forms of preservation – are not uncommon among re-

gional broadcasters in Europe. Limited resources and the absence of formal archival mandates have often resulted in uneven documentation and archival gaps. Yet even partial collections, whether carefully assembled or serendipitously preserved, can offer critical entry points into broader narratives of local media cultures and the socio-political contexts in which they operated.

Founded in 1974 in Pino Torinese, on the outskirts of Turin, Videogruppo soon relocated to the city centre in order to reach a broader and more urbanised audience. Its founder, Sergio Rogna Manassero – later elected to the Italian Parliament in the late 1990s, where he first served on the Transport Committee and subsequently on the Oversight Committee for Broadcasting Services – envisioned the station as a local platform for information, political discussion, and cultural programming. While the schedule also featured content typical of local broadcasting – such as syndicated films, commercials, and cooking shows – archival materials and a set of oral sources, including interviews conducted with the founder and several technicians active during the station's early years, point to a clear editorial orientation towards civic engagement and public service.

This ambition was pursued through a double strategy. On the one hand, the station's journalists developed informal but effective collaborations with colleagues from *La Stampa*, a Turin-based national newspaper. According to some interviewees, this took the form of reciprocal information exchanges: Videogruppo's newsroom would sometimes receive leads or confirmations from La Stampa journalists and occasionally provide them in return. These connections helped the station produce relatively high-quality coverage of key local events, including the fire at Cinema Statuto in 1983 – one of the deadliest tragedies in Turin's postwar history, in which 64 people lost their lives.

On the other hand, Videogruppo experimented with formats inspired by radio broadcasting, especially those built around direct interaction with the audience. The use of the telephone became a recurring feature across different programmes and was particularly central to a weekly show that allowed viewers to call from home and speak directly with Turin's mayor. As Sergio Rogna Manassero recalled in a recent interview with the authors:

> The most successful segment in *La Stampa* was *Specchio dei tempi* [*Mirror of the Times*], a column with readers' letters on local issues. So, we asked ourselves: can we use the phone? Are we a mono-directional or bi-directional channel? […] The telephone became our weapon. But it was also the weapon of radio. We learned this from Marco Pannella at *Radio Radicale*.

> When he came to Turin he told us: 'Take every phone call, give them thirty seconds, then cut them off. Let's see if the mayor is up for answering'.[2]

2. Broadcasting politics: *The City Calls – The Mayor Answers*

The broadcaster's political aspirations were explicitly declared from its earliest communications. On 12 September 1976 – the day of the channel's official launch – *La Stampa* published a press release in which the channel presented itself as "an instrument of participation" open to "media and democratic political and social forces". That evening, the news program *Videonotizie* aired for the first time. Anchored by Rogna Manassero, it would remain on the schedule well into the following decades, gradually expanding from a single daily edition in 1976 to five daily live editions by 1990. Over the years, the program became the backbone of the station's editorial project and its most enduring legacy.

Its centrality reflected a broader editorial strategy: from its early years, Videogruppo's programming devoted significant attention to political affairs and civic life. As documented in the recovered program schedules, in the final months of 1976 political and news segments accounted for approximately 40% of the total airtime; this proportion increased to nearly 50% the following year. Though these figures later decreased as the overall programming schedule expanded (from just three hours per day in 1976 to eighteen hours daily by 1990), they attest to the centrality of political coverage in the station's initial editorial vision. The growing number of live editions of *Videonotizie* over the years further reflects this sustained commitment to real-time engagement with the city's public life.

Cristina Rogna Manassero, daughter of the channel's founder, in her unpublished thesis written in 1994, articulated this idea in particularly evocative terms. In one passage, she wrote: "Thanks to television, the audience had managed to reach the moon on July 21, 1969, and to take the world-famous first step with Neil Armstrong, but it had never entered the chamber of the Turin City Council". The comparison may sound outrageous, but it underscores a widespread perception: that national and international news

[2] Interview with Sergio Rogna Manassero conducted by the authors on December 12, 2023.

had long eclipsed the visibility of local political processes. Videogruppo's mission aimed to address precisely this gap.

Among the station's clearest efforts to fulfill this ambition was *La città chiama – Il sindaco risponde* (*The City Calls – The Mayor Answers*), a weekly live call-in show aired from 1979 to 1987. The program offered citizens the opportunity to speak directly with the mayor of Turin, raising questions or complaints over the phone during a live broadcast. The show's success was closely linked to the charisma and media sensibility of Mayor Diego Novelli, who served from 1975 to 1985. Novelli's television appearances, preserved in a handful of surviving U-matic tapes, show him engaging with callers on a wide range of issues – from noise complaints to transportation – responding with calm, clarity, and a notable ease in front of the camera. Seated in the studio, he addressed the public in a tone that combined institutional gravitas with emotional proximity. His command of televisual codes – gaze, gesture, voice modulation – did not obscure his political function but rather amplified it.

This communicative style exemplifies what Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Anna Sfardini have described as the *popularisation of political discourse* – that is, the adaptation of political language and performance to the narrative forms and affective registers of popular media (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009). In this hybrid space, the politician is not only an administrator or policy-maker, but also a media figure whose efficacy depends on his ability to inhabit both roles simultaneously. *La città chiama* anticipated the tropes of *politainment* and *infotainment*, transforming the mayor into a relatable, accessible presence within the domestic space of viewers.

The program's visibility extended well beyond the station's immediate audience. Statements made during the show were frequently quoted by local newspapers, notably *La Stampa*, as unofficial yet influential political declarations. According to some accounts, the program was discontinued not for lack of popularity, but because Novelli's successor, Giorgio Cardetti, lacked the same media fluency – an observation shared by several interviewees who had worked at Videogruppo at the time. The correlation between political effectiveness and televisual performance did not go unnoticed by commentators of the era. In March 1982, *Il Giorno* (a Milan-based national daily newspaper) ran an article with the title *Gratta l'assessore, scoprirai il divo* [*Scratch the councillor and you'll find the star*], highlighting the extent to which local politicians were becoming recognizable media figures through their appearances on regional television. Such visibility was not merely symbolic: it reshaped the modes and rhythms of civic engagement, foreground-

ing immediacy, presence, and a shared emotional register. The call-in format was a distinctive feature of *La città chiama* among Videogruppo's political programs, although other shows also provided space for political presence, particularly at the regional level, through more conventional formats. One notable example is *Spazio Regione*, a talk show focused on Piedmont regional politics. In a surviving excerpt from a 1980 episode, Giovanni Astengo (then regional councillor) and Aldo Viglione (then President of the Regional Government of Piedmont) engage in a conversation on urban planning and territorial governance. These programs not only gave visibility to regional institutions, often neglected by national networks, but also helped integrate different levels of governance within a shared televisual horizon. By including both municipal and regional representatives in its programming, Videogruppo forged a narrative space that reflected the multi-layered complexity of civic life in the "third Italy."

These editorial choices reveal the station's ambition to operate not merely as a broadcaster, but as a platform for civic mediation – what we might describe as a cultural interface between institutions and their constituents. Though modest in its technical infrastructure and without the financial stability of larger networks, Videogruppo nonetheless created enduring formats for political communication. Its investment in immediacy and accessibility shaped an alternative public sphere, more porous and dialogic than the centralized model epitomized by Rai, Italy's national broadcaster.

The case of Videogruppo demonstrates how regional broadcasters, even when operating with limited resources and precarious archives, could function as sites of democratic experimentation and cultural innovation. Today, the scattered remnants of its programming (U-matic tapes, printed schedules, handwritten documents) allow us to reconstruct a media ecology where civic engagement was not only represented but enacted, often in real time. The significance of these materials lies not simply in their content, but in the communicative model they embody: one that blurred the lines between news and performance, authority and accessibility, spectacle and service. In that sense, Videogruppo's history offers more than a local anecdote. It stands as a reminder of the pivotal role played by minor broadcasters in reshaping political discourse and civic imagination during a transformative moment in Italian media history. "Here, if you want a slogan, it could go like this: our studio, is the city", Rogna Manassero once said – a phrase that summed up Videogruppo's effort to remain fully immersed in the urban fabric it aimed to serve, merging newsroom and city space into a shared communicative environment.

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