




## News Consumption in Italy in an Era of Crisis and Innovation: The Decline of Print and TV News

### El consumo de noticias en Italia en una época de crisis e innovación: El declive de los informativos impresos y televisivos

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#### ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the contemporary crisis within Italian journalism against the backdrop of the hybrid media system and the global proliferation of disinformation strategies. Over the past five years, a new stage of information consumption has been evolving in Italy. This transformation is driven not only by the fact that social networks have become fundamental sources of news, even though they often present isolated, biased, or fake content, but also due to the decline in the use of traditional news channels. The contemporary crisis of Italian news media will be discussed through the presentation of relevant recent changes in Italians' information habits. This aims to connect these shifts to the traditional peculiarities that still impact the modern equilibrium between production and consumption, thereby shaping a new scenario for journalism.

#### KEYWORDS

Infodemia, consumo de información, redes sociales digitales, infoxicación, pandemia.

#### RESUMEN:

El artículo se centra en la crisis contemporánea del periodismo italiano en el contexto del sistema híbrido de medios de comunicación y la proliferación mundial de estrategias de desinformación. A lo largo de los últimos cinco años, se ha ido desarrollando en Italia una nueva etapa en el consumo de información. Esta transformación viene impulsada no sólo por el hecho de que las redes sociales se han convertido en fuentes fundamentales de noticias, aunque a menudo presenten contenidos aislados, sesgados o falsos, sino también por el declive en el uso de los canales de noticias tradicionales. La crisis contemporánea de los medios informativos italianos se debatirá mediante la presentación de cambios recientes relevantes en los hábitos informativos de los italianos. El objetivo es relacionar estos cambios con las peculiaridades tradicionales que siguen influyendo en el equilibrio moderno entre producción y consumo, configurando así un nuevo escenario para el periodismo.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE:

Periodismo italiano, paralelismo de la prensa, era digital, consumo de noticias, infoentretenimiento.

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## Acceden mediante RR. SS., pero confían en la TV: Consumo informativo en jóvenes de una comuna chilena en el contexto de pandemia durante 2021

### 1. INTRODUCCIÓN

In recent years, Italian journalism has undergone profound changes due to the process of digitization. In the contemporary hybrid media system, where traditional and new media coexist (Chadwick, 2013), people's consumption of information not only provides access to reality but also allows them to selectively avoid certain information. Aiming at analysing the reputational and economic crisis of Italian journalism, it seems very useful to present and discuss some emerging trends in news consumption. This effort seeks to establish connections between these trends and some enduring characteristics of the Italian media system, which continue to influence the delicate equilibrium between information production and utilization.

This article draws on data collected by AGCOM (the Italian Communication Authority), Reuters, and ADS (*Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa*) to argue that recent shifts in Italians' information consumption habits highlight the economic and cultural struggles faced by TV and print journalism. These struggles have been emphasized in numerous studies dating back to the 1990s (Bergamini, 2006; Morcellini, 2011; Valentini, 2012; Murialdi, 2014). In the era of informative cyber cascades, this traditionally "anomalous" news system must confront new challenges that could foster distrust toward the media and potentially harm democracy. The reason is that news has the power to negatively influence citizens' political engagement, either by fostering civic apathy or by bolstering polarized communities where fake news and conspiracy theories can propagate freely (Quandt, 2018; Vaccaro, 2020; Chambers, 2021; Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri, 2021).

Without disregarding the diverse national manifestations of news systems, the foundational premise of the subsequent pages is that within the Italian media system, traditionally perceived as "weak" and politicized, new paradigms of news production and consumption have been reshaping not only news values (Splendore, 2017), but also the roles of news professionals and the audience. Since the 1990s, the ascendancy of infotainment logic and its commercial orientation has reshuffled the conventional rapport between the audience and news, effectively marking the demise of the *pedagogical-formative* concept of journalism. As per Morcellini's perspective (2011), this transformation is one of the pivotal

factors contributing to the decline of traditionally dominant news channels, particularly newspapers.

Furthermore, as elucidated by numerous studies (Castronovo & Tranfaglia, 1994; Mazzoleni, 2021), erroneous economic strategies, removed from the market and reader needs, catalyzed a substantial consolidation process that forced many newspapers into closure. In the contemporary *platform society* (Van Dijck et al., 2018), the emergence of unprecedented information sources and narrative formats, characterized by ambiguity between truths, falsehoods, and plausibility (Albright, 2017; Riva, 2018), underscores the increasing importance of comprehending how *old* peculiarities (political alignment, limited readership, absence of pluralism) and *new* practices (particularly the utilization of social media as information sources) are shaping the current crisis within Italian journalism.

Subsequent pages will primarily focus on historical reconstruction, aiming to spotlight distinct aspects of the Italian information system and emergent trends over the last five years. This timeframe was chosen not solely because social networks have transformed into foundational news sources, but also due to 2022 representing the worst year for Italian TV news broadcasters, following an extended period of substantial audience dropping, while newspapers continued their decline. Additionally, this year can be seen as a pivotal juncture for the Italian news system from an economic standpoint. Legacy news organizations, which have long dominated the online news market, were overtaken by digitally-native entities in 2022, with digital advertising revenues taking precedence.

It should be noted that this article does not aspire to analyze the entirety of recent transformations within Italian journalism. Instead, it offers a selection of reflections arising from the initial phase of a comprehensive research project on “Journalism in the Disinformation Era,” undertaken by the University of Palermo and other academic collectives. The research team is presently dedicating its attention to the second part, focusing on Italian online newspapers and social networking platforms.

## 2. THE “ANOMALY” OF ITALIAN JOURNALISM: FROM ADVOCACY TO INFOTAINMENT.

In order to emphasize the distinctiveness of the transformation process within Italian journalism, tracing its origins in the publishing market and the subsequent impact on languages, content, and formats over the past decade, numerous authors (Solito & Sorrentino, 2020; Sorrentino & Splendore, 2022) have proposed an interpretative framework for the “Italian declination” of journalism in the digital age and its ramifications. These scholars frequently allude to the “anomalies” intrinsic to this news system when juxtaposed with other national contexts (Rizzuto, 2019). An extensive body of scholarly

literature delves into the transformations of journalism, particularly within the context of the digital revolution (Sorrentino, 2008; Antenore & Splendore, 2017), focusing on the fundamental query of how the web has fundamentally altered not only news production practices but also the professional rationale of Italian social actors involved in the production and consumption of news (Splendore, 2017).

The contemporary debates concerning the boundaries of what constitutes “journalism” and, correspondingly, what falls outside its purview, inevitably lead back to the intricate definition of journalistic identity within Italy. This definition is closely interlinked with the values deemed fundamental, which are deeply entrenched within the political, cultural, and economic fabric of this milieu. Italian journalism has often been regarded by scholars (Forgacs, 2000; Morcellini, 2000; Bergamini, 2006) as an *anomaly* in comparison with its counterparts in Western countries, owing to its historical lack of autonomy, pronounced political parallelism, and a “weak” news market marked by limited readership. As a result, the concept of journalism in Italy has been historically intertwined with a distinctive information dynamic where newspapers served as political tools (Rizzuto, 2009).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) situated Italian journalism within the Mediterranean or *pluralist-polarized* model, underscoring its anomalies attributed to the delayed development of capitalism and democracy in comparison with other settings. This prolonged transition to political democracy, spanning from the *Risorgimento* in the 19th century to the establishment of the democratic Republic in 1946, ingrained the perception that news media functioned as instruments for political mobilization rather than mere sources of information. This viewpoint persisted even after World War II, where a *pedagogical-formative* concept of journalism centered on the objectives of organized mass parties gained prominence. However, the traumatic experience of Fascism, marked by repressive measures against journalists including censorship and comprehensive content control, left an enduring impact. This period further cemented the notion that information was a potent instrument to cultivate and uphold consensus.

In this new democratic sphere, the coalitional nature of the Italian political landscape granted significant authority to party actors, relegating mass media to tools employed for message dissemination or to lend greater resonance to divergent viewpoints. Consequently, for several decades, the Italian information ecosystem suffered from a glaring divide: politicians clung to communication formats and languages anchored in direct interaction contexts, often disregarding the characteristics and demands of each medium (Mazzoleni, 2021). Conversely, news professionals scarcely considered the media market, leading to newspapers predominantly targeting educated elites

or being employed as mere *microphones* (Murialdi & Sfardini, 2009). This historical trajectory underscores the inherently *weak* nature of the Italian cultural industry, marked by economic and political dependence as well as a detachment from market dynamics. This disposition arose from an inflexible pedagogical framework intertwined with distinctive political, cultural, and social factors:

1. Structural proximity between media and politics
2. Scarce readership due to elevated illiteracy rates
3. Dominance of “political” interests among media owners, dubbed “*editori impuri*” (not-pure publishers), who wielded influence across various economic sectors and sought to shape policy rather than prioritize the media market or readers’ needs (Forgacs, 2000; Murialdi, 2014).

Particularly, this structural proximity manifested through an organizational link between political parties and media entities, often resulting in major political parties owning newspapers such as *L’Unita’* (Communist Party) or *Il Popolo* (Christian Democracy). This link wielded direct influence over content, news selection, and hierarchy. Moreover, this connection birthed newspapers with a “specific” readership comprised solely of party supporters. Alongside the traditional advocacy model (Schudson, 2003) and the fragile expansion of the commercial media market, it’s worth noting that in Italy, the widespread adoption of radio, cinema, and public television (RAI) since 1954 preceded a corresponding increase in average education levels. This anomaly deviates from other European contexts where the presence of numerous readers bolstered the success of popular newspapers. However, in Italy, the substantial illiteracy rate (around 90% in southern regions in 1861) hindered the coexistence of *quality* and *tabloid* papers targeting different segments of society. As a result, modern newspapers have consistently displayed a distinct blend of content.

The overarching perception that media primarily served as political tools, coupled with their economic reliance on the State, political parties, or the Church, impeded their autonomy for decades. It wasn’t until the 1980s that the turning point emerged within the Italian media system (Castronovo-Tranfaglia, 1994; Morcellini, 2000; Sorrentino, 2008). Before 1980, the Italian cultural industry was marked by substantial economic disparities between the North and South, high illiteracy rates, and a vertical cultural consumption pattern closely tied to rigid social hierarchies. However, the following decade brought about an era of prosperity and widespread education, fostering horizontal cultural engagement and a focus on the entertaining logic of private national television.

Within this more “modern” media landscape, news, for the first time in its history, became economically lucrative with the rise of commercial TV channels. The advertising market doubled investments between 1979 and 1984 (Sorrentino-Splendore, 2022), yielding positive repercussions for the printed press as well. Simultaneously, technological advancements reshaped news production and dissemination. The integration of computers in newsrooms lowered production costs, prompting an explosion in local, cultural, and economic information, with specialized supplements on fashion, travel, and leisure.

This economic shift prompted a change in news production, emphasizing attractiveness to audiences. Journalism shifted towards soft news, prioritizing readership and ratings (Morcellini, 2011; Valentini, 2012; Rizzuto, 2019; Marinov, 2020). Over the past four decades, Italian journalism has transitioned from a pedagogical and subordinated form closely linked to politics to a spectacle-driven market-oriented version. Concurrently, a dynamic of support and non-subordination accompanied the news market’s economic growth, as demonstrated by the success of innovative *party-affiliated newspapers* such as *La Repubblica*, founded by Eugenio Scalfari, and *Il Giornale*, founded by Indro Montanelli; both founders are still among the main actors of Italian public debate. These publications, embodying strong political-cultural identities, aimed to influence policy. Nevertheless, politicians remained oblivious to the new media landscape, and only in 1990 did Parliament enact the *Mammì Law* to adapt regulations to the transformed context. From this point onward, private television channels, many owned by Silvio Berlusconi, were *required* to offer live news programs, reshaping the media landscape and journalism’s role within it.

Media logic became progressively attuned to commercial goals, impacting public television (RAI) as well, fostering innovation in news formats and language. Consequently, news began to be viewed as a product needing to captivate audiences (Castronovo & Tranfaglia 1994; Scaglioni, 2011). This marked the inception of the spectacularizing process of information in Italy, with infotainment logic based on visual and dramatic elements gaining traction (Thussu, 2007; Rizzuto, 2018). From the 2000s onward, Italian news media underwent a transition from traditional party-centered reporting to infotainment, manifesting in new formats and languages merging information and show. News, even political news, adopted a narrative TV structure, with only events and issues easily transformable into drama being featured.

*Emotional reporting* (Santos, 2009) became prominent over the course of two decades, coexisting with traditional elements. This synthesis gave contemporary Italian journalism distinctive features, stemming from the amalgamation of traditional political parallelism and the *new* dramatizing logic. This transition has fostered the decline of journalism’s traditional sense as a serious engagement in political life, giving way to various forms of politainment that align with the broader secularization of politics. This shift redefines

politics as a struggle among differing viewpoints rather than a mission or world view (Mazzoleni, 2021).

In conclusion, over the last thirty years, Italian journalism has hosted a spectrum of value approaches coexisting within the three traditions identified by Donsbach in 2009: “public service,” “subjective,” and “economic.” On one hand, the journalistic model predicated on objectivity, rooted in the Italian subjective tradition, historically characterized by advocacy, persists. On the other hand, commercial imperatives have grown so significant that capturing audiences has become paramount, resulting in journalism dominated by entertainment and spectacle, typifying the story model and amplifying perceptions of reporters’ crisis of social role (Splendore, 2017).

Alongside the evolution of information’s meaning, the past decade has witnessed systemic hybridization emerge as a distinctive feature of Italian journalism. This hybridization arises from the dismantling of traditional news organizations and consequential shifts in professional dynamics due to new reader interactions. The coexistence of diverse technological tools, the ubiquity of social media in daily life, the importance of data, and the influence of search engines have catalyzed a radical transformation in news production. This transformation is in stark contrast to the historical dominance of television journalism and limited newspaper readership.

### 3. THE END OF TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM? TRENDS OF NEWS CONSUMPTION

In the following pages, we will delve into the most pressing challenges facing Italian news media by presenting the key recent shifts in news consumption. We contend that the data concerning television news program audiences and print newspaper circulation illustrate the troubling conclusion of an era marked by an economic, cultural, and professional crisis. This multifaceted crisis demands multifaceted solutions, such as innovating media industrial policies or prioritizing quality journalism.

From our perspective, attributing this crisis solely to the impact of the digital transition within the Italian media system is an oversimplification. The inadequacy of business models for news media predated the internet era. As previously highlighted, Italian journalism remained detached from the market and television remained under political party control until well before the digital age.

To highlight emerging news consumption habits, we will reference prime-time television news audiences and newspaper circulation figures from 2018 to 2022. We will draw on data from the Italian Communication Authority (AGCOM) published in the *Communications Observatory (Osservatorio sulle comunicazioni)* and *Reuters Digital Reports*

for 2021 (Newman et al., 2021) and 2022 (Newman et al., 2022). These sources reveal the decline in Italians' reliance on traditional media as their sources of information, as they increasingly seek news from alternative sources in their daily *onlife* (Floridi, 2017). The *Communications Observatory* is a quarterly publication prepared by the Authority's Research and Statistics Department. The section relevant to media and platforms (section 2), from which we draw, utilizes data from external sources (Auditel, Audiweb, ADS). The data presented is current as of June 2022. Percentages are automatically rounded to one decimal place.

Examining the diverse data sources unveils a doubly intriguing phenomenon. On one hand, the numbers validate historical weaknesses inherent in the Italian media system, as previously discussed. On the other hand, these figures underscore the new equilibrium among different news sources, yielding significant and tangible consequences for journalism, from channels to content to revenue. The crisis of information is not solely attributed to factors like the success of sensationalist news coverage driven by infotainment logic or recent changes in newspaper ownership. The distrust towards news, which was amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic, has also played a role (Salzano & Scognamiglio, 2020; Cappello-Rizzuto, 2020; Bracciale-Grisolia, 2020).

As we have established, one of the most defining features of Italian journalism is the primacy of television as the primary source of information for the majority of people, coupled with a stagnating news industry traditionally distant from its readers. Starting from the 1980s, the growing popularity of info-entertainment logic ushered in a crisis for newspapers. However, data from the last five years show that not only has newspaper readership continued its steady decline, but the traditional supremacy of television also faces a reduction in audience. Although the decline in television audience is smaller compared to many other countries (Newman et al., 2022:88), it's evident when examining TV news consumption from 2018 to 2022 (Figure 1). A consistent downward trajectory is observed, except for a surge during the Covid-19 crisis.

Referring to data from the *Osservatorio sulle comunicazioni* n. 3/2022, report by AGCOM, we focus on the audiences of the nine main prime-time national TV news programs. Notably, TG1 (RAI Italia Public Television) retains its status as the most-watched program, though its viewership decreased from 5.18 million in 2018 to 4.99 million in 2022. Following suit is TG5 (Mediaset private commercial TV), which saw a decline from 4.14 million to 4.02 million in 2022. Examining the percentage breakdown, all the major TV news programs experience a decline, albeit with varying magnitudes. The first national news program, prime-time public television TG1, experiences a 3.6% decline, TG5 (private television) sees a 2.9% decrease, while RAI TG2 and *Studio Aperto* (Mediaset) suffer declines of 29.2% and 24.9%, respectively (AGCOM, 2022:17).



Reviewing 2020 data reveals that all these programs witnessed significant audience growth during the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic led to a surge in news consumption across various media, with figures surpassing averages and those from the same period in 2019. This trend applied to both news production and consumption. It is characteristic that in times of emergency, both information and disinformation proliferate. The weeks following the emergence of the crisis in Italy saw media platforms (newspapers, TV, radio, web) allocating increasing coverage to the epidemic, accounting for 4% of total coverage during January 1-February 20, and soaring to 45% between February 21 and March 22. Subsequently, coverage gradually tapered off (Bracciale & Grisolia, 2020: 67).

Addressing Italians’ response to the Covid-19 pandemic, it becomes evident that the crisis underscored the necessity for reliable institutional information about the disease and government-imposed protective measures. As the data indicates, Italians frequently sought information from institutional sources, with increased traffic on these sites corresponding with the disease’s progression. These trends waned during the last stages of the emergency, only to surge again during the gradual reopening of activities (AGCOM 2020, Censis 2021).

Contrary to the optimistic outlook of 2020, driven by new information consumption patterns, AGCOM’s data reveals that the crisis in journalism persisted once ordinary life resumed, culminating in 2022 becoming the most challenging year for Italian broadcasters’ TV news. Between 2021 and 2022, the two leading TV news programs suffered significant audience declines, with TG1 losing 11.1% and TG5 experiencing a decline of 9.8%.

**Table 1.** Average monthly audience of main national news programs.

Source: AGCOM, Osservatorio sulle comunicazioni n. 3/2022.

**2.4 TELEVISION (DVB-T E SAT): AVERAGE MONTHLY AUDIENCE OF MAIN NATIONAL NEWS PROGRAMS**

		Average viewers 1H (in millions)					Change (in thousand)		Change (in %)		
		National news programs	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	'21 - '22	'18 - '22	'21 - '22	'18 - '22
TIME SLOT: 12:00 – 14:30	RAI	Tg 1 (13:30 edition)	4.31	3.40	4.38	4.03	3.58	-446	-732	-11.1	-17.0
		Tg 2 (13:00 edition)	2.06	2.11	2.54	2.01	1.80	-216	-263	-10.7	-12.8
		Tg 3 (12:00 edition)	1.27	0.93	1.23	1.06	0.83	-224	-434	-21.2	-34.3
		Tg 3 Regionale (14:00 edition)	2.35	2.41	3.31	2.98	2.31	-674	-40	-22.6	-1.7
		Tg 5 (13:00 edition)	3.35	2.90	3.65	3.13	2.87	-254	-478	-8.1	-14.3
Mediaset	Tg 4 (12:00 edition)	0.48	0.37	0.44	0.34	0.29	-45	-186	-13.5	-39.0	
	Studio Aperto (12:25 edition)	1.09	1.35	1.86	1.51	1.19	-324	98	-21.5	+9.0	
	La 7 Tg La 7 (13:30 edition)	0.94	0.63	0.78	0.65	0.57	-76	-369	-11.8	-39.2	
		Average viewers 1H (in millions)					Change (in thousand)		Change (in %)		
		National news programs	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	'21 - '22	'18 - '22	'21 - '22	'18 - '22
TIME SLOT: 18:30 – 20:30	RAI	Tg 1 (20:00 edition)	5.18	4.99	6.08	5.61	4.99	-626	-187	-11.1	-3.6
		Tg 2 (20:30 edition)	1.81	1.64	1.98	1.70	1.28	-424	-528	-24.9	-29.2
		Tg 3 (19:00 edition)	1.82	1.83	2.45	2.30	1.84	-456	+19	-19.9	+1.0
		Tg 3 Regionale (19:30 edition)	2.31	2.36	3.36	3.04	2.36	-683	+48	-22.4	+2.1
		Tg 5 (20:00 edition)	4.14	4.09	4.99	4.46	4.02	-438	-120	-9.8	-2.9
Mediaset	Tg 4 (19:00 edition)	0.70	0.60	0.75	0.66	0.63	-33	-65	-4.9	-9.3	
	Studio Aperto (18:30 edition)	0.76	0.73	0.99	0.80	0.57	-222	-190	-27.9	-24.9	
La 7	Tg La 7 (20:00 edition)	1.22	1.22	1.35	1.26	1.10	-168	-126	-13.3	-10.3	

While the crisis in TV news has become evident in recent years, a significant decline in newspapers has been highlighted since the 1990s. Data provided by ADS (*Accertamento*

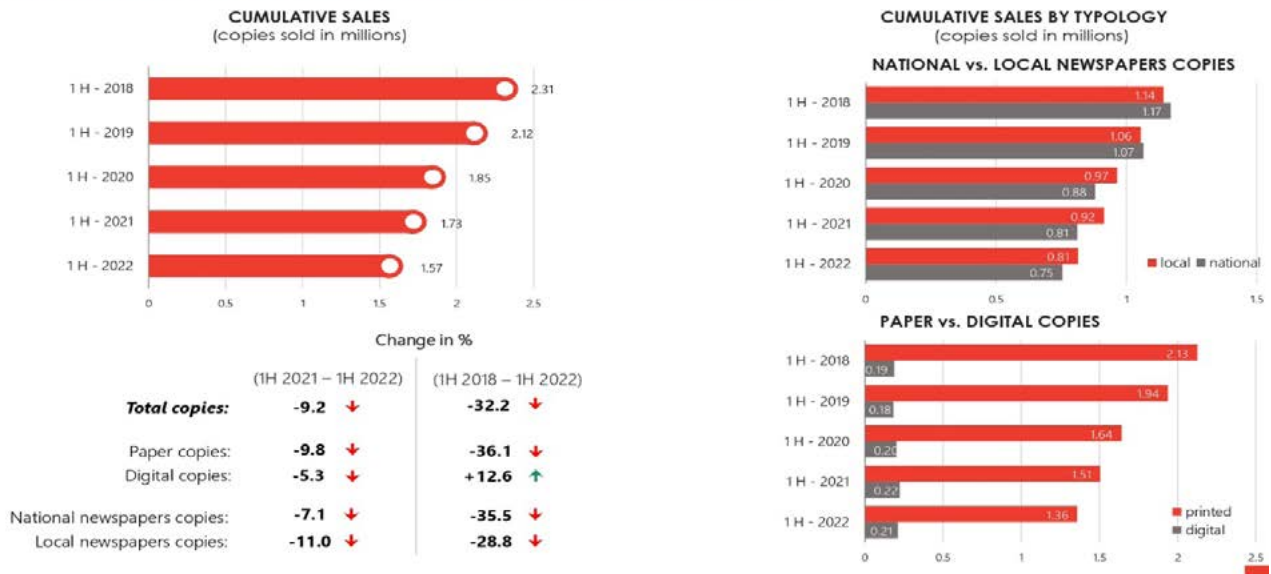
*Diffusione Stampa*) reveals that, when compared to the 6.8 million copies reached in 1991, the year 2000 concluded with an average daily circulation of six million copies. However, the low levels of readership are not solely attributed to distribution system inefficiencies. Factors such as Italians' limited inclination for reading, a generally low literacy level, and the strong presence of competing media (primarily television and magazines) contribute to Italy having the lowest newspaper consumption among developed countries. In 2000, there were only 102 copies per 1,000 inhabitants, compared to 574 in Japan, 321 in the United Kingdom, 300 in Germany, and 149 in France.

According to the 2023 *Report on Newspapers and News Agencies* from the Osservatorio Tecnico "Carlo Lombardi," the past decade has seen a decline of over 50% in average daily circulation and a 60% reduction in advertising income for newspapers and magazines (*Rapporto sull'industria dei quotidiani* 2023). The decline in the newspaper industry continued from 2018 to 2022. During this period, the struggling Italian newspaper sector underwent significant changes (Figure 2). The data pertains to national newspapers from 2018 to 2022: in the first half of 2018, 2.31 million copies were sold; by the same period in 2019, copies amounted to 2.12 million, followed by 1.85 million in 2020, 1.73 million in 2021, and only 1.57 million in 2022. These numbers clearly illustrate the persistent crisis facing Italian print national and local newspapers. Additionally, they also reveal varying news consumption habits: from 2018 to 2022, the decline in printed copies was 32.2%. However, it's worth noting that when considering the differences between print and digital copies, print newspapers experienced a decline of 36.1%, while their digital versions witnessed an increase of 12.6% (AGCOM:18).

In general, even though the offline news market is still dominated by major broadcasters (such as the public service TV RAI and commercial players like Mediaset, SKyTg24, and TgLa7, followed by newspapers as *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*), data underscores the growing relevance of online information for Italians. For instance, in June 2022, there was a growth of 1.2 million users compared to June 2021 (rising from 35.2 million in 2019 to 38.2 million in 2021, and further to 39.4 million users in 2022). In this context, each user spent an average of 1 hour and 9 minutes seeking information (current events and global news) on online news sites or apps (AGCOM: 22).

**Table 2** Newspapers daily copies sold. Source: AGCOM elaboration on data from ADS.

**2.5 NEWSPAPERS: DAILY COPIES SOLD SINCE THE BEGINNING YEAR (1/2)**



However, an intriguing trend in the newspaper sector emerged in August 2022: data provided by ADS (*Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa*) reveals that while print newspapers continue to decline, a notable exception pertains to those more closely aligned with politically right-oriented parties, whose directors actively participate in TV political debates. It is evident that during the electoral campaign (national elections occurred on September 25, 2022), newspapers supporting the most promising parties (according to polls) experienced an increase in circulation.

When compared to July 2022, the most significant decline was observed in *Corriere della Sera*, which experienced a drop of 4,628 copies, going from 261,227 in July to 256,599 copies sold in August 2022. This represents a decrease of approximately 1.7%. Following closely, *La Repubblica* (Gedi editorial group), led by Maurizio Molinari, recorded 139,029 copies sold, as opposed to 143,059 in the previous month (a decrease of 2.8%). The next prominent Italian economic newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, experienced a decline from 132,114 copies in August to 129,920 in July (a decrease of 1.6%).

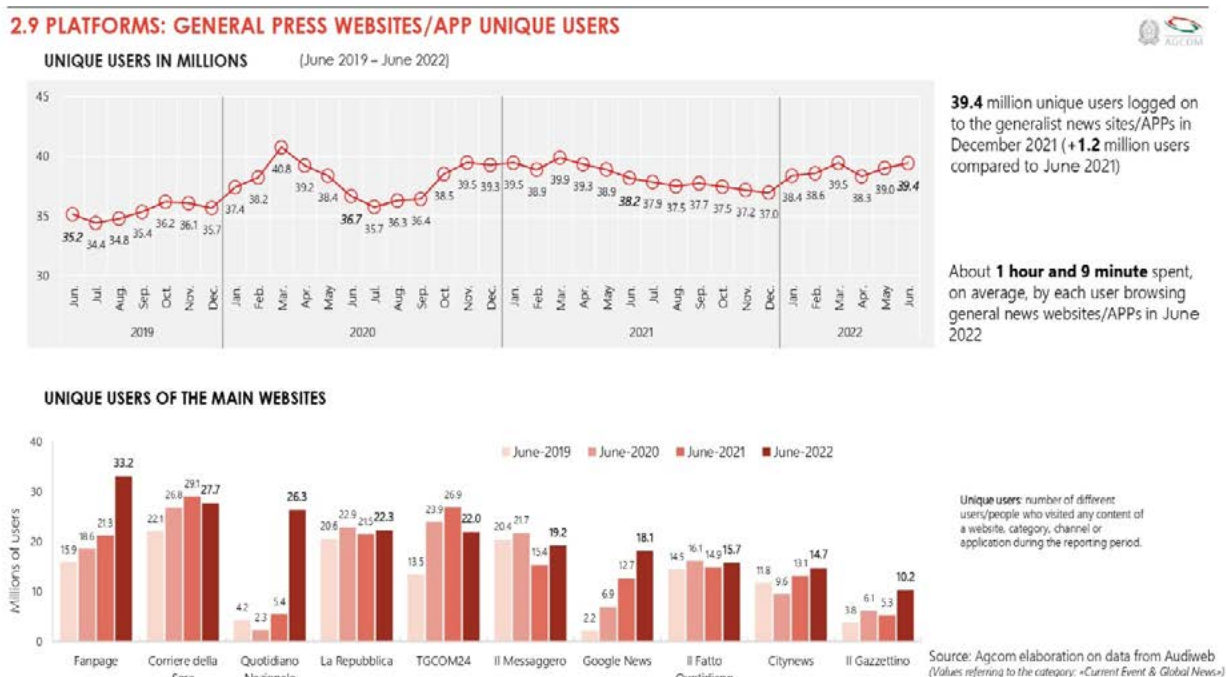
Among the major national newspapers, *La Stampa*, under the direction of Massimo Giannini, experienced the smallest decline, approximately 1.1%, with a total of 1,068 copies sold less than in July 2022. *La Stampa's* distribution went from 97,104 copies to 96,036. In the same period (August 2022), some newspapers actually witnessed an increase in circulation. Foremost is *La Verità* by Maurizio Belpietro, which recorded 37,807 copies sold, compared to 36,509 in July, reflecting an increase of 3.5%. The additional copies sold amounted to 1,298. Following closely, *Il Messaggero* recorded 72,312 copies sold, in comparison to 70,075 in the previous month, representing a 3.1% increase. Subsequently, *Il Giornale's* total circulation in August reached 33,513 copies, compared

to 32,767 in the previous month (July 2022), marking an increase of 2.2% with 746 additional copies sold. Similarly, the newspaper directed by Marco Travaglio surpassed the performance of July, escalating from 53,616 copies to 55,120, an increase of 2.8% and an additional 1,504 copies. Finally, the newspaper led by director Alessandro Sallusti, *Libero*, saw 23,496 copies sold compared to 23,095 in July, reflecting an increase of 401 additional copies sold (+1.7%) (ADS, 2022).

These data underscore the persistent advocacy function of traditional Italian print journalism and the continued relevance of a strong political connotation for Italian newspapers. It is evident that those aligned with center-right positions experienced a modest but existing increase, while the left-oriented ones, like Repubblica, which maintained a stringent stance toward Giorgia Meloni and her allies during the campaign, witnessed a decrease in readership.

In addition to these substantial changes in TV and print news consumption, we must also consider the emerging habit of browsing news websites/apps. As depicted in Figure 3, new information sources have become central for many Italians, and users of generalist press websites/apps have increased. For example, the number of users logged in rose from 35.2 million in June 2019 to 39.4 million in June 2022.

**Table 3.** Platforms: general press websites/app unique users. Source: AGCOM 2022 elaboration on data from Audiweb (Values referring to the category: «Current Event & Global News»)



In our perspective, 2022 can be considered a turning point because, for the first time, digital-born players have surpassed the main broadcasters and most important newspapers, and digital advertising revenues have become predominant. Therefore, the impact of the digital transition has also been evident in the Italian market structure. However, according to the *Reuters Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022), “digital disruption has been slower in Italy than in other European media systems. Legacy news organisations have dominated the online news market for many years, with the most popular news outlets in the offline market also being the top players online” (Newman et al., 2022: 88). A clear example of this is *Fanpage*, a digital-born outlet, which achieved the widest online reach in Italy in 2022. When comparing 2021 and 2022, it had a reach of 21% in the last year, surpassing the national broadcaster TGCOM24 (Mediaset), which was at the top with 24% in 2021, the main Italian news agency, ANSA (from 20% in 2021 to 18% in 2022), and the two main newspapers: *La Repubblica* (from 20% in 2021 to 15% in 2022) and *Il Corriere della Sera* (from 16% in 2021 to 14%) (Newman et al., 2021; Newman et al. 2022).

These data clearly highlight the economic and cultural crisis of Italian TV and print journalism. Within the context of informative cyber cascades, the news system must face new challenges connected to emerging social actors, requiring different languages, formats, and business models. Over the last five years, models of news production and consumption have undergone complete transformations, yet this transformation appears riddled with contradictions: Italian journalism has always been economically weak and not autonomous from politics; nevertheless, its contemporary crisis seems distinct from the one discussed in previous decades.

In the contemporary scenario of Italian journalism, we can observe the coexistence of trends stemming from processes initiated several decades ago (such as the spectacularizing of TV news or the decline of the traditional gatekeeping function of print newspapers) and the recent emergence of a new meaning for information practices, linked to the cultural context of post-truth (Lorusso, 2018) and the pervasiveness of digital media. In the second part of our research project, we will exclusively focus on digital information actors to highlight not only new information habits among Italian audiences but also the main policies adopted by Italian institutions to counter dangerous disinformation practices.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have argued that in recent years, the Italian news system has transitioned from following traditional rhythms (from TV news to newspapers and magazines with their distinct moments of news metabolism) to experiencing a sudden rupture of all previous paradigms and business models. This transformation has been driven by the digital era, where everything from production and consumption to temporal synchronization with events, manipulability, and even the meaning of journalism's presence in society and its relationship with citizens has changed (Solito & Sorrentino, 2020). Data support the decline in Italians' use of traditional media as sources of information and their inclination to seek news from other sources in their daily *onlife*. However, the new habits in news consumption also highlight crises that began in the 1990s, connected to the inadequacy of business models in the Italian news media long before the Internet. As we previously mentioned, Italian journalism had long been detached from the market and was heavily controlled by political parties.

Over the past decade, Italian news media have undergone a complete transformation due to new business models and technological innovations. Both TV news and newspapers have rapidly evolved, leading to changes not only of a technological nature but also on social, cultural, and economic levels. These changes have compelled the entire daily news industry, from publishers to journalists and distribution, to rethink and redefine their roles and economic sustainability models. Concurrently, in the contemporary Italian media landscape, audiences are altering their information consumption practices. The internet has emerged as the primary medium for accessing information, posing a significant challenge for reporters and publishers. This challenge extends to the quality and reliability of the information provided, as evidenced by the proliferation of false news and the exploitation of social networks for creating genuine "disinformation campaigns" aimed at commercial or political goals.

In our view, the data presented in the preceding sections underscore the concrete risk of a potential collapse of Italian journalism. This risk stems from both the long-standing economic crisis and more recent technological and cultural transformations. Additionally, the fluid boundary between truth and probability (Corner, 2017; Riva, 2018), the blurring of lines between entertainment and participation, and the heightened significance of emotional components should be viewed as factors that might contribute to the eventual erosion of credibility for traditional agents of information mediation. These agents, traditionally considered authoritative and reliable sources of news, may experience a toxic transformation of public discourse (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021: 97).

From this perspective, the continuous decline in TV news audiences and newspaper readership must be regarded as a tangible “issue,” not solely affecting professionals or publishers, but also Italian democracy. If more individuals disengage from news consumption, they may become less politically active and involved.

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