

# **Sports mega-events (2002-2010) and Italian TV audiences. Inside an emerging social configuration: The SMS triangle**

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**Abstract:** In the last decades a new social structure emerged in many European and Western societies: the SMS triangle; it is shaped by relationships of dependence and interdependence among Sports, Media, and Sponsor companies. This paper offers theoretical and empirical observations about this new social configuration, using some findings about its dynamic centre: the TV audiences of sports mega-events, such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cups, and the Olympics and Paralympics (2002-2010) – and in one country: Italy. These findings corroborate the known differences in exposition to these sports mega-events, and also show surprising exceptions, such as the Eris Effect in the female choices. Furthermore, these findings also corroborate the hypothesis of the sports subcultures in Italy.

**Keywords:** relational theory in sociology, mass media, sponsor companies and their investment, sporting audiences, sporting mega-events

## **Introduction**

At the beginning of the third millennium, a new social configuration has emerged: the SMS triangle, which is made up of sports, media and sports sponsors, i.e. the transnational corporations which promote their own brands and goods using commercials and sport champions as testimonials.

The link between sports and media was first noted by Michael Real (1975) and then it was made the object of reflexions by a lot of social scientists, who called it in various ways: sport-media complex (Jhally, 1995; Miller, Lawrence, McKay & Rowe, 2001; etc.); or sport-media nexus (Grainger, Newman & Andrews, 2005; etc.); or the golden triangle (Honeybourne, Hill & Moors, 2000; etc.). However, few social scientists have paid attention to the audiences of sporting mega-events; indeed the dynamic nucleus of the SMS triangle embodies media audiences, which at the same time are both sport amateurs, and customers of the sponsors. So the dynamism, indicated by this social configuration, depends on the satisfaction of this threefold mass of persons; and the secret of its strong dynamism is its increasing successes in fulfilling the functional imperatives of each of the three social institutions which form it.

In the last years the SMS triangle has further strengthened the links inside the three institutions which made it. This occurred with more efficacy and clarity in

some sports mega-events, such as the last two editions of the Olympic Games (Beijing 2008, London 2012) and the Football World Championship, organised in South Africa (2010) by the FIFA, the International Federation of the Associations of this game. These global events attracted billions of TV viewers worldwide (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2011; FIFA, 2010). In reality the conquest of this huge public is the goal of each of the three institutions, which made the new social configuration; but what scientific knowledge can one gain of these sport audiences?

In this paper I present some findings obtained by the SportComLab (2009; 2011), which led a long-time research on Italian TV audiences of the sport mega-events, happened in the years from 2000 to 2010. First I offer a review of the sociological studies about the increasing links among the three social institutions – sport, media, and sporting sponsors –, and then I propose a theoretical study on the social relevance of the sport audiences. Indeed the SMS triangle is fuelled both by global factors – such as technological innovations, international relationships, etc. – and by local/national factors, such as historical traditions in sport and exercise, and socio-cultural ways of life. So it is necessary to know better the SMS triangle within global contexts, i.e. to analyse the empirical data collected about the sport audiences in one or more countries, and so gain a better knowledge about this new social configuration.

I shall try to do it with reference to the sport public in Italy. The second part of this paper offers a selection of the main findings about amplitude and social compositions of the Italian TV viewers, which exposed themselves at the televised Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games, played in the 2002, 2006, and 2010, and even at the FIFA World Football Championships, played in the same years. Sometimes a huge public – made up of twenty million and more TV viewers, i.e. about 40% of the Italian public, saw the main football games, such as the matches played between the Italian team and the national ones of France, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands. Moreover, I will describe an interesting exception at the male preserve, which in Italy sport – and football in a particular way – is. Indeed one can observe an unusual crowding of Italian female TV viewers (I call it the Eris effect), who were attracted by a crucial moment of the final match of the 2006 football tournament.

Finally three sociographic profiles of the Italian TV audiences of FIFA World Championships, the Olympics, and Paralympics, will offer a few considerations about sporting subcultures in Italy. These and other findings, obtained by the SportComLab, confirm that in the Millennial phase of globalisation (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009) some sports mega-events have become a world phenomenon, and that the SMS triangle is a social configuration, whose dynamism is affecting many societies.

## **Theoretical insights about an emerging social configuration: The SMS triangle**

### Sports, media, and sponsors: An alliance going strong

Since the 1970s some sports mega-events (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Ritchie & Brent, 1984; Roche, 2000) have arguably turned into the showcase of an international alliance. Firstly, the finals of the FIFA world football championships and, at the end of the 1980s, some finals of track-and-field events at the Olympics were at the heart of virtually all processes involved with the media production.

Indeed since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sports had been involved in new developments in the forms of mass communications (Bellamy, 2007). From 1900 onwards sports supported new developments in press and journalism. By the 1930s radio broadcasting showed its capacity in enabling nation-wide audiences to imagine being present at live events. In addition, in the 1930s these broadcasts were supplemented by newsreel films of major sporting occasions shown at cinemas. The Berlin Olympics in 1936 were broadcast live by radio in many European countries; they were also televised first, via a local cable system, within the host city; and Leni Riefenstahl, with the movie *Olympia: Fest der Schönheit* (1938), showed that sporting images can be used as a tool of (ideological) suggestion on the audiences.

More than other mass media, television helped to transform the sport spectators (Guttmann, 1986) into much wider audiences (Whannel, 1998). Even television networks gave social relevance to the major sport event cycles, such as the Olympic Games and the Football Championships (Roche, 2000, 159-160). From the late 1980s, neo-liberal politics promoted the deregulation of media markets and communication technologies, which have turned into major agents of the global cultural economy. Today sport mega-events are characteristic examples of the alliance between sports, media, and multinational producers: they attract worldwide consumers; and the global flow of cultural signs and sport meanings broadcasted by television contribute to the reproduction and development of the consumer culture (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006).

Briefly, the new political economy of world sport now includes four social actors. The first three are the most visible actors: they are sports stars, teams, and the international associations and federations, which organise sports mega-events; television networks; and transnational companies, which sponsor sports events and pay media in order to promote their own goods or services. Sport sociologists named the relationships among these three social actors in different ways: they are parties in an unholy alliance (Whannel, 1986), or in a golden triangle (Honeybourne et al., 2000; Nixon, 2008; Rowe, 1999). Other social scientists have termed the interrelationships among sport champions or teams, and their transnational sponsors, and old and new media, as the global sport-media complex (Jhally, 1995; Maguire 1999; Miller et

al., 2001; Raney & Bryant, 2006; Scherer, Falcoux & Jackson, 2008; Wenner, 1995; 1998); or as the sport-media nexus (Grainger et al., 2005; Messner, 2002; Nicholson, 2007); or as the love-match (Rowe, 1996); or as the “ménage à trois” (Thibault, 2009, 10) – a living together threesome, etc.

Each of these stimulating expressions captures the interplay among sports champions and teams, media networks, and transnational corporations, to various degrees. Really each of these three social actors is a player in a new type of social configuration, and each of them takes growing benefits from the relationships with another two actors inside it. But this social system could not have emerged without a big fourth social actor: the sports audiences.

### From sports spectators to sports audiences

Until today, the scientific study of the sports audience has not been studied satisfactorily by social scientists; stadium spectators have received more attention (Wann, Melnick, Russell & Pease, 2001), probably because of the violence perpetrated by hooligans and by other types of football ultras (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Spaaij, 2006).

In Great Britain, until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the growth in the number of sports spectators, and the associated emphasis on gambling, helped to increase the popularity of the press (Guttmann, 1986). Newspapers provided news and results, and fed a betting market on horse races and blood fights among animals. The demand for sports news grew among readers and gave birth to the first magazines devoted entirely to sports; their success in turn attracted the advertising business: literature such as *The Field Magazine*, *Sporting Life* and *The Sporting Chronicle* featured numerous commercial advertisements (Horne, Tomlinson & Whannel, 1999).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technological innovations in the movie industry had a significant effect in providing audiences with information and entertainment of a sporting nature. Moving sport images, such as competitions at Derby Days, or the finals of Football Cups were captured by movies, and broadcasted by newsreel; but only some sports, such as horse racing, football, and tennis, enjoyed greater social visibility through media (Boyle & Haynes, 2009).

Today television is the most important medium to inform public opinion on sporting events. A lot of technological innovations allowed for a rapid social diffusion of this new medium, and its success had great positive consequences also for the social relevance of sport, which grew rapidly (Real 1998). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sport and television became increasingly close; technical difficulties with the quality and the range of transmitted images were successfully overcome in the late 1950s, so that from the XVII Summer Olympics in Rome (1960) sports went live (at the beginning, in the Western countries only). The development of electronic media continued more rapidly in the following decades, as is evident in the fast adoption of satellite television, and then in cable TV, the Internet, and Facebook, Twitter,

and other social forums. News about sports champions and teams are present in each of these new media; moreover TV channels, such as Sky Sports demonstrates, are devoted solely to sport. These innovations prove that today modern mediated sports have become global media spectacles: FIFA World Cups and the Olympic Games, for example, are broadcasted to more than 200 countries across the globe (Maguire, 1999).

The global nature of the “sports/media complex” (Jhally, 1995, 57) is strengthened by new media (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). Each day, sports fans visit various web sites, participate in fantasy sports, celebrate and criticise teams and players on blogs and in discussion groups, and gain joyful pleasure in playing sport videogames (Real, 2006). Each of these new media is based on technologies, defined by increased accessibility, fluidity, and interactivity (Jenkins, 2006; Silver & Massanari, 2006), and these characteristics change the structure of the relationships among the audiences, the Internet (which is not a channel, but an environment) and their objects – in this case, issues relating to sport. In other words the simple, linear model of communication (from one to everybody), which is the communicative template of the mass media age, in the information society must to be replaced by a network model (from many to many). Today, by using a smartphone, tablet, etc., each sports spectator has become an active information provider (Castells, 2002); really every member in a communication network is a potential source of sports news.

The internet offers a great availability for sports online – game-watching blogs; social forums; videogames, or fantasy sport, etc. In particular, new media has facilitated the transformation of a passive follower of sport, who simply received and consumed media texts, into an active supporter or producer, increasingly responsible for generating “media sports text” (Rowe, 1999, 168). This process has led fans and sport amateurs to assert their own competence in sport and to become active agents, despite the fact that the differences, as regards power and ideologies in sports, remain unchanged (Leonard, 2009, 3).

In short, sports audiences hold a growing relevance in post-modern society (Martelli, 2010; 2011; 2012). Sports have become a sought-after source of entertainment in contemporary societies. What are the main features of mediated sports mega-events? According to Beck and Bosshart (2003, 5) they are:

- *public participation*: personal involvement in the stadium with songs and olawaves; and out of the stadium, electronic games and gambling;
- *aesthetics*: the opening ceremonies in sports mega-events are spectacles; some sports, like skating on ice, show many elements, which link them to the arts;
- *rituals*: before and after sports competitions some rituals occur, such as the introduction of athletes or teams, or the award ceremony with national anthems and prizes (medals, flowers, handshakes, etc.);

- *suspense*: dramas, conflicts, combats, victories or failures, uncertainties until the last moment, duels (good vs. bad guys), risks, etc. — sports offer an “ideal combination of the dramatic and the unexpected” (Barnett, 1995, 167);
- *a sense of belonging*: rooting, fandom, patriotism, watching, and talking with friends;
- *identification*: in the eyes of their fans, sports champions become stars, icons, or even heroes;
- *sex-appeal*: bodies in action and on display have a strong sex-appeal;
- *mental pleasures*: they are provided by unexpected tactics and new strategies.

In other words, in everybody’s eyes the sports mega-events, mediated by TV or by new media, have become a pleasant experience, which has its bases in the fulfilling of functions at the physical level (sensory activities), at the psychological level (ego-motions), at the social level (norms), and at the cultural one (values) (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Briefly, the mediated sport has conflated on the entertainment – such as a pleasant, restful, stimulating, and exciting experience – and has become one of the common diffused expressions of the popular culture (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Crawford, 2004). Thus, sports audiences have become a relevant social phenomenon, and sociologists would do well to pay more attention to it.

### The fuelling nucleus of the SMS triangle: The sports audiences

Media owners see sport as an important resource to attract sports audiences, in order to sell them at the companies, which will promote their goods and services by advertisements that are put inside sport programs. Indeed sports easily find their way into newspapers, broadcasting, and onto the Internet, because they are very popular and frequently gain high audience shares. Nowadays there is a competition among media to ensure the most appealing contents, in order to attract growing audiences, and to control and maximise commercials (Ang, 1991). Sports are the driving force of this struggle and, of all the various sports disciplines, football is the most liked by audiences, both in Italy and in many other countries. Accordingly there is a strong symbiosis between sports and media; but the “sports/media complex” (Jhally, 1995, 57), and other concepts have their limits. In order to explain the dynamics of this new social configuration – it may be better explained by the relational theory as a morphogenesis (Archer, 2011).

So any advancement in knowledge for the Sociology of Sport may only come from a more keen way of evaluating the choices of sport audiences, through considering who occupies the core of the relationships among sports, media, and the transnational companies and who sponsors them. In truth, the public of the mediated sport is a threefold mass; it consists of persons, who at the same time are:

- sports practitioners and amateurs;
- fans of champions and teams, who take part in their sporting performances via television and new media;
- customers of the commercial enterprises: these ones sponsor champions or teams, and use the media as channels for advertising, in order to promote their own goods or services.

The SMS triangle is a clearer scheme than other previous models, because through it one can better see that neither a sport, nor a mass medium, nor a sponsor, alone, may explain the growing social relevance of sport, today; this is possible only if one observes all the relations<sup>1</sup> among these three social actors and sports audiences. Moreover the strong dynamism of this new social configuration can be explained only if one pays attention to the mutual relations among their components; so that one can distinguish the different types of relations inside it:

1. a relation of interdependency, between sports and media: each institution changes at the changing of the other one;
2. two relations of dependency: the first one poses the sponsors (and their advertising agencies) as dependent on sports, while the second one links the media to sponsors;
3. really each of the three institutions depends on the audience choices, which are the dynamic heart of the SMS triangle (see figure 1).

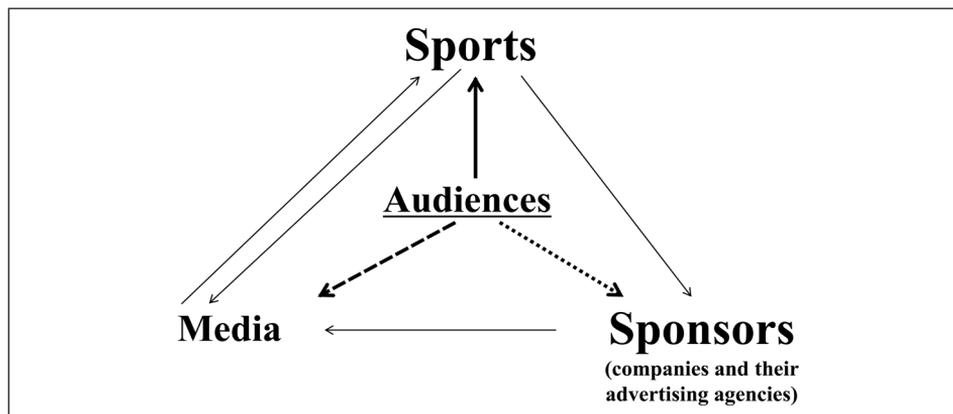


Figure 1: The SMS triangle: the scheme of a social configuration

Figure 1 shows actors and relationships, which shape the SMS triangle; it indicates the central location occupied by the sports audiences inside this new social configuration. Moreover, it is richer than previous schemes, because it specifies the prevalent

<sup>1</sup> Indeed the relation is the object of the sociology of sport, and of the sociology itself: this is the main assumption of the relational sociology (Donati, 2010).

type of relationships (if dependency or interdependency), which shapes inside<sup>2</sup> the new social configuration; and it permits the regular course of sport mega-events, such as the Olympics, international football tournaments, Formula One races, etc.

Moreover this triangle is virtuous, but not in a moral sense – in a sociological one, obviously. In effect nowadays it permits the implementation of the Olympics and of other sports mega-events; but its efficacy depends on the audience choices and these choices might change in the future, according to the opportunity offered by the technological evolution of the new media. Briefly the SMS triangle might begin a vicious cycle, which could have a lot of negative social consequences (Martelli, 2011, 170-173). In short, the empirical monitoring of the social changes in mediated sport is a very important topic, and not only from the perspective of the Sociology of sport, but also for the whole of society.

### **The scientific study of a national sporting audience: Issues and relevance**

Unfortunately, as already some years ago Wenner and Gantz (1995, 241) rightly observed, too few sociologists study this topic. A reason for this scarcity may be the difficulty in elaborating a theory of the sport audience; in fact it cannot be simply deduced by a communication theory (such as, for instance, Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). I would suggest that sport audiences are the resultant of global factors and local conditions – the outcomes of historic and socio-cultural processes –, so that their choices cannot be previewed by a deductive manner only.

Globalisation processes do not simply impact upon different nations in an unitary way. These nations have histories. And sport and television play different roles in these countries; roles that are not pre-given or essential, but still significantly different. (Reimer, 2002, 16)

For instance, in Europe the distinction between a public service model and a market model is still important. The basic premise, concerning responsibility about which sport is to be broadcast, is radically different. Furthermore, European public service stations have attempted to present a broader picture of sport, than American networks, including also minority sports in their coverage; and in so doing, public service stations have also taken a responsibility for sport as such, as the history of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) shows (Barnett, 1990, 21).

Indeed research on televised sport demonstrated that there are differences even within the public service systems. For instance in Sweden the Svergies Television AB

2 Models, previously named, were or are incomplete, or they do not specify the type of relationships among the components of the SMS triangle. For instance, the transactional model of media, sports, and society relationships (Wenner, 1995, 26), is lacking in sponsors. Likewise the model proposed by Maguire (1999) shows one type of relationship only, i.e. the interdependency: so it is able to describe the relations between sports and media, but it is incorrect for all the remaining ones.

(SvT), the national broadcasting corporation, has never considered helping different sports as its goal:

Ever since the start of Swedish television, the choice of which sports to show has been based on professional decisions regarding the quality of and interest in each sport... in Sweden, sport is a physical and popular culture. (Reimer, 2002, 17)

The motivations of audience choices in Great Britain are quite different: sport is an important part of British culture and it is also one of the things that has made the United Kingdom a great nation. Thus already early on the BBC promoted the sport mega-events, while in Sweden the same events were not deemed important. In short, the choices of sport audiences have to be studied from a historic and socio-cultural perspective, too.

In effect, a social scientist cannot follow the explanatory model of the nomological paradigm, which nowadays is dominant in the sciences: i.e., he cannot deduce audience choices by global factors – such as the logic of media production (Ang, 1991; Gillespie, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2006), or the dominating model of sport spectacle (Tomlinson & Young, 2006), etc. Really a sociologist has to mix this global knowledge with the historical and socio-cultural knowledge as regards a national case; and the number of sociologists, who are cultivating these relevant studies, are few, really. For instance in Italy, before the SportComLab research, there was one study (Capranica & Aversa, 2002): its object was the growing interest in sport that Italian females showed in the 1990s and during the 2000 Olympics: but the data about the female exposure via television are few and limited to one edition of this mega sport-event.

The lack of previous studies about the sport audiences in Italy is a further reason that hinders the adoption of the nomological-deductive approach. So the SportComLab opted for a down-up strategy, i.e. for an abductive approach, which started from the large data-bases of Auditel and used a few ad hoc hypotheses, as you can read in the following paragraph.

### **The Italian TV audiences of the FIFA world Cups (2002-2010): Some findings from a long-term research project**

Here you can read some of the main outcomes of the SportComLab analysis of Auditel data about the choices of Italian TV viewers, who saw the last three male football world championships, organised by the FIFA in the Republic of South Korea and Japan (2002), in Germany (2006) and in South Africa (2010)<sup>3</sup>.

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3 This research is part of a wider program of studies about the Italian audiences of sports mega-events (2000-2010), which requested the processing of millions of data. For instance, the study of the three editions of the FIFA World Championships asked for the analysis of the audiences of 192 matches (90 collections of data for every match, each of them described by

## Materials and methods

A lot of data on the Italian audiences of the televised world football Cups, played in the years 2002, 2006, and 2010, were provided by Auditel, the Italian company *super partes* – i.e. constituted by both private actors and public ones –, which involves monitoring the TV audience choices, minute by minute, every day. The Auditel statistical sample is made up of about 5,000 families (about 15,000 individuals), which has been proven to be statistically representative of the Italian population of 4+ years (about 55-56 million individuals in the period 2002-2010). This sample allows for a description of the Italian audience choices according to the main independent variables (sex, age, education, income, place of residence, etc.); other dependent variables, very useful for describing the audience's choices, are the audiometric parameters, such as the mean audience per minute, the share, the rating, the peak, etc.

The SportComLab studied data from Auditel following an analysis plan, which aimed at controlling the research hypotheses described below, and other ones which were made from time to time according to the first findings.

## Research hypothesis

Two hypotheses have been formulated:

- The *territorial nexus hypothesis*: the television audience is composed most frequently of people who live in the same region/state, which their football player/team belong to;
- the *football subculture hypothesis*: the television audience is composed most frequently of people, who form a niche in the socio-cultural sense, i.e. they have a lot of symbols – champions, flags, hymns, etc. – in common.

Independent variables were used to control the two hypotheses. While the territorial nexus hypothesis was controlled by a main variable – the Italian region, which the TV viewers live in –, the latter hypothesised more variables, in order to compare the data with the typical traits of the football subculture in Italy; but the scarcity of previous studies on the Italian audience of the mediated sport allowed one to proceed only through internal comparisons. Moreover the abductive approach permitted the first-level hypothesis to go further and to move towards wider conjectures – for instance on the globalisation of football and the social functions of the SMS triangle (Martelli, 2012, Chapters 1-3).

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8 audiometric parameters and by 14 sociographic variables); so these Italian audiences are described by more than 1.8 million audiometric and sociographic data. The main outcomes obtained by this research program – and by others about the Italian TV audiences both of the Summer and Winter Olympics, of the Paralympics, and of the European football Cups played in the same years –, were published in two books (Martelli 2010; 2012).

### The FIFA World Cups 2002-2010 and the TV viewers: Some trends in Italian audience choices

At a sociographic level of analyses one can observe that the amplitude of the Italian TV audiences and their profile had been very different in the period 2002-2010.

Table 1: The Italian television audiences of the last three FIFA world cups: the average amplitude and the distribution by sex (SportComLab, 2009; 2011)

Tournament	2002 (South Korea & Japan)		2006 (Germany)		2010 (South Africa)	
	absolute value	rating	absolute value	rating	absolute value	rating
Amplitude (average)	5,719,000	10.40%	10,488,000	19.10%	8,098,000	14.20%
Males	3,273,000	12.20%	5,777,000	21.70%	4,674,000	16.80%
Females	2,456,000	8.60%	4,711,000	16.50%	3,424,000	11.60%
Difference M - F	817,000	3.60%	1,066,000	5.10%	1,250,000	5.20%

Table 1 shows the Italian TV audiences of the last three FIFA World Cups, broadcasted live by the free television (Channels 1 or 2 of the Radio Audizioni Italiane [RAI], the Italian public network) or by the satellite TV pay-for-view (Sky sport) in the years 2002-2010. One can observe that the average amplitude of the TV public of each match, played at the 2002 FIFA tournament in South Korea and Japan, was of 5.729 million (10.4% of Italian people, 4+ years); 10.488 million at the 2006 Cup in Germany (19.1%); and 8.098 million at the 2010 tournament in South Africa (10.4%). Therefore the figure shows two different trends:

- *about the amplitude*: the Italian audiences had a peak in the 2006 tournament, and a minimum in 2002;
- *about the distribution by sex*: the Italian female TV viewers had always been less frequent than the males – and the difference between sexes increased along the period –, indeed the Italian females grew in the period by more than 4 percentage points.

Probably the Italian TV viewer's choices were the outcome both of social factors and of reception conditions, such as sex, age, employment status etc., and the day of the week and the hour of the reception of the match in Italy. For instance, the high level of exposition to the matches of the tournaments in the years 2006 and 2010 was favoured due to the similar time zone in Italy and in the two host countries: the time zone in Germany is the same as in Italy; and in South Africa it differs by only 1 hour; therefore the broadcasting of many matches during the first evening had the maximum chance of collecting a wide Italian audience. Conversely, the low level of exposition at the matches of the 2002 FIFA tournament was probably dependent on the quite different time zone in South Korea and Japan: +10 hours more than in Europe (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2002). So the matches, which were played in the afternoon

or in the evening in East Asia, were received on morning in Italy, i.e. during work or school hours. This fact discouraged the exposition of the majority of Italian people.

Obviously the most important reason for the higher rating of the audience registered in 2006 was the triumph of the Italian national team in Germany. The Azzurri – this is the nickname of the Italian national team – won the FIFA Cup on July the 9<sup>th</sup>; that evening the TV exposition of the Italian people was very high: starting from 42.1%, the rating increased to 45.9% – i.e. about one Italian in two was in front of a television set that evening.

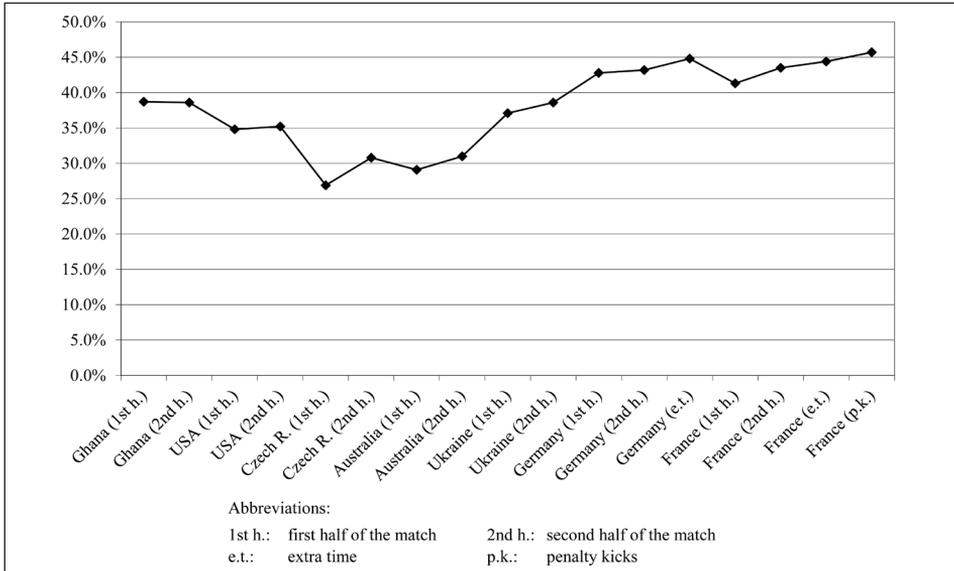


Figure 2: The Italian televiewers of the 2006 FIFA world cup: audience ratings of the 7 matches played by the Azzurri (data collected twice per match; SportComLab, 2009; 2011)

Surprisingly the high performances of the Italian audience at the end of the 2006 FIFA tournament were preceded by low ratings at its beginning. Figure 2 shows the continuous decrease in the Italian TV audience at every match in the group stage: from about 39% registered in the first match against the Ghana team, to the lower ratings registered against the USA (about 35%) and the Czech Republic (26.9%). The average ratings were 34.1%, i.e. lower by about three percentage points to the one registered four years before (36.9%), at the same stage of the 2002 Cup. Indeed the lower exposition of the Italian audiences in the first part of the 2006 tournament depended not only on the controversy surrounding the weak performances of the Azzurri in those first matches, but above all on the mistrust towards the Italian players, generated by the *Calciopoli* scandal<sup>4</sup>. So the first match of the round of 16 teams,

4 The 2006 football scandal (named by Italian journalists: *Calciopoli* or *Moggiopoli*) involved some teams of the Italian top professional football leagues (Serie A and Serie B), such as Juventus F.C., A.C. Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio, and Reggina. Via telephone interceptions the

Italy-Australia, registered just 16.1 million TV viewers (29.2%); only after the penalty shootouts, converted by Francesco Totti, did the audience increase to 33%.

After this victory, which gave access to the knockout stage, the Italian national team began a triumphal march. In the round of 16 teams, the Azzurri defeated Australia 1-0, and the Italian audience grew until 33%. In the quarter-finals the Ukrainian team was defeated 3-0, and the Italian audience increased to 38.7%. In the semi-finals the Azzurri met Germany, the team of the hosting nation; this big match pushed the Italian audience into unusual standards of exposition: more than 23 million Italian TV viewers (42.2% in the 1<sup>st</sup> half, 43.1% in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half, 44.2% in the overtime). The Azzurri's victory reunified the Country around the national team, which redeemed Italian football from the shame of the scandal of Calciopoli, rekindling and restoring confidence and national identity.

Obviously in Italy the most watched match was the final of the 2006 FIFA tournament. The national team and the French one clashed in the *Olympiastadion* of Berlin. That evening, while the minutes are flowing, Italian TV ratings increased again and again: 41.6% in the 1<sup>st</sup> half; 44% in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half; 44.4% in the overtime: 45.9% at the time of the penalty shootouts. The peak in the number of those listening to the whole 2006 tournament was reached when the Italian defender Fabio Grosso scored the decisive penalty: the end result was 5-3; and so Italy won the FIFA world football Cup for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in its history. At that crucial moment the Italian TV viewers reached the huge amount of 25,666,316 persons: almost half of the Italian people remained glued in front of a TV set until late, at first to suffer and, then, to rejoice... in all Italian towns. A lot of people went onto the streets and squares to sing and celebrate the victory until sunrise. No event is so collective in Italy as a victory of the national football team – it is the one way in which one can witness the social cohesion of the whole country.

### **Is televised football still a male preserve? A relevant exception**

Every Italian TV audience of the 192 football matches, played at the FIFA tournaments in the years 2002-2010, was studied thoroughly by the SportComLab researchers. All the variables – both the independent ones, i.e. the main sociographic features of each audience (14 variables), and the dependent ones or the audiometric characteristics (8 measures) –, have been used to analyse the Auditel data. Many other findings were found by the comparative method. Among the sociographics, sex is one of the most important predictive variables to a sociological eye: and this is true to the

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Italian police discovered a thick network of criminal relations among team managers, such as Luciano Moggi (Juventus), and referee nominators, such as Pierluigi Pairetto; they had been accused of fixing the result of the matches by selecting favourable referees. Both the sporting justice (2006), and the judicial courts of Rome (2009) and Naples (2011), condemned Moggi, Pairetto and 13 more accused sporting men.

maximum degree in the study of sport; in effect, among both the sports practitioners or amateurs, and the sport spectators, the (great) majority is male. This is a fact well known to sports journalists and media owners; thus both newspapers, and radio and television networks which broadcast sport, orient their programs to reach a male audience. So sport is said to be a male preserve – and this is true everywhere, and not only in Italy (Guttman 1986; Messner & Cooky, 2010). But the researchers of the SportComLab have found some relevant exceptions to this regularity (see Martelli, 2010, Chapter 6). Here I will present one of these exceptions, and I will try to explain the reasons for it.

In the world football tournaments, organised by the FIFA in the years 2002, 2006 and 2010, it once happened that more Italian females than males exposed themselves to a televised football match: it was the final match of the 2006 FIFA World Cup. After overtime, which had ended at 1-1, the Azzurri had to face up to a crucial moment: the penalties, in order to decide on the upshot of the match against the French team.

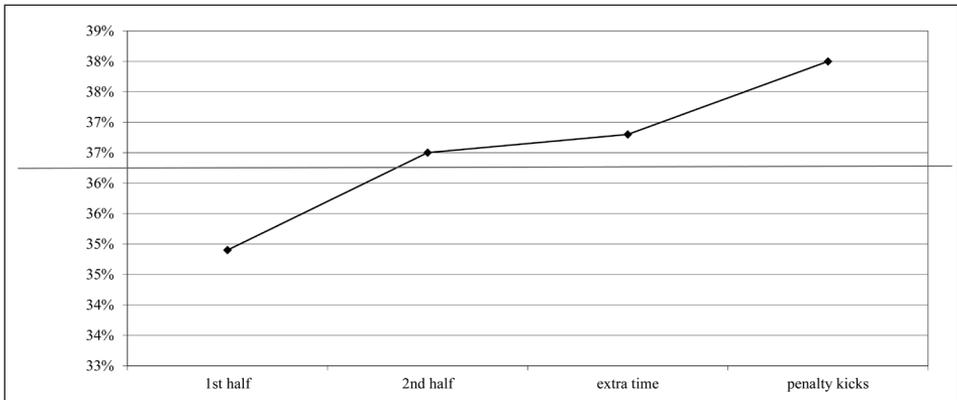


Figure 3: The TV exposition of the Italian females at a crucial match: the final against France at the 2006 FIFA world championship (SportComLab, 2009; 2011)

Figure 3 shows that the difference in exposition of the Italian women TV viewers was lower than the one for the men both in the first half (-0.7 scores in %), and in the second half (-0.2%). Indeed the frequency of Italian female TV viewers inside the audience of this crucial match increased as the minutes passed, so that by overtime it had reached that of the males. Moreover, at the penalties the Italian females’ exposition in front of television sets overcame the one of the males. Here “the Eris effect” (Martelli, 2010, 154-157; 2012, 127-131) is evident: as the Greek divinity of the competition, as many Italian females were pushed to see football on television only when their national team was fighting for victory in a supreme effort!

Probably many Italian females ran in front of the TV set, in order to experience the excitement of a decisive moment, and share together with their males the joy of

winning the FIFA World Cup. Yet another important aspect has to be noted: at the beginning of this match, the rating of female TV viewers was almost equal to the one of Italian males. Another comparative analysis showed that differences in exposure of females to males is much greater, if in the field the Italian national team doesn't play. Briefly, the exposure of women at mediated sport is more frequently due to reasons of a social type – for instance, more frequently they share the excitement and the national pride, because they feel themselves part of an imagined community (Anderson, 1991). On the contrary, more frequently the reasons for males are the love for the game, the appreciation of a clever sporting gesture or tactical configuration, the excitation about the competition, etc.

### **Italian sport subcultures and TV viewers' profile**

In the same years – 2002, 2006, and 2010 –, other sports mega-events took place, such as the Winter Olympics and the Paralympics. The SportComLab researchers analysed the Auditel data on the Italian audiences of these mega-events, in order to accomplish a further scientific goal: the map of the sporting TV subcultures in Italy. Some questions had to be satisfied. First of all whether Italian TV audiences of sports mega-events are composed of the same people, or if there is a difference in the exposition. The question was reshaped so: Have or not the Italian TV viewers of the Winter Olympics the same sociographic profile as the ones who saw the FIFA tournaments that were played in the same years? And have or not the audiences of the Paralympic Games a similar profile?

In the last part of this paper I shall briefly present three sociographic profiles:

- an average profile of the Italian TV audiences, who saw the FIFA male World Championships;
- an average profile of the Italian TV audiences of the Winter Olympics;
- finally, an average profile of the Italian TV audiences of the Winter Paralympics.

Some data about the amplitude and other characteristics will complete these profiles, so the reader will have a better overview of the outcomes, which SportComLab obtained by its analyses on Auditel data on the Italian TV audiences of the sports mega-events, played in the 2002-2010 period.

### **A profile of the Italian TV viewers of the FIFA World Cups**

Already the previous table 1 showed great differences in the exposition of the Italian TV audiences at the last three FIFA World Cups; above I intended to explain the Italian TV viewers' choices as being the result of many different social conditions. Further comparative analysis shows the social composition of the Italian TV audiences of these tournaments; for instance, table 2 shows the average profile of the Italian TV viewers at the 2006 FIFA tournament.

Indeed the sociographic profiles of the Italian TV audiences at FIFA World Championships, played in the years 2002 and 2010, are similar; so one can say that the profile of the Italian public of the mediated football Cups is the following one:

- the *males* exposed themselves at the mediated football more frequently (rating: 15.6%) than the females;
- the *oldest viewers* exposed themselves more frequently (18.1%) than the persons of other ages;
- the *inhabitants* of the medium-sized towns (populations between 100,000 and 250,000 individuals: 14.1%) exposed themselves more frequently than the residents in the big towns (250,000+) or than the inhabitants of the smaller ones (between 10,000 and 100,000 individuals);
- the *residents* in the regions of Central Italy (20%) exposed themselves at the mediated football more frequently than the ones in the North or in the South of Italy;
- the *persons*, who *attended primary school* only, exposed themselves more frequently (15.4%) than the ones who received a high school diploma;
- those who live in a *small family* exposed themselves more frequently (2 persons: 16.6%) than those who live in a 3 person family or more, or than those living alone;
- those who *own 2 or more TV sets* in their home exposed themselves at the mediated football more frequently (13.2%), than those who own one TV set;
- those who more frequently receive *high incomes* exposed themselves more frequently (12.9%) than those who have low incomes;
- those who view sport *by pay TV satellite* exposed themselves more frequently (13.9%) than the ones who view it by free TV.

It is possible to draw the sociographic profile of each Italian TV audience for each match, so that one can compare these profiles both in a synchronic perspective – all the matches of one tournament –, and from a diachronic point of view – all the matches played by the Azzurri, or by other national teams, in last three FIFA World Cups. This comparative analysis was led by the previous two hypotheses, and presented many interesting findings. As I do not have the space to present a detailed breakdown of these findings, I will summarise some main findings of these studies only, as follows:

- The first hypothesis, the one about a territorial nexus between a football team and the TV viewers, was corroborated by the Auditel data in a few cases only. For instance, the TV audiences in Lombardia and in Emilia-Romagna (two regions in the North of Italy), during the 2002 World Championship, more frequently saw the matches played by Turkey, than the audiences of other Italian regions, because some Turkish footballers in that year played at two club teams of those regions, such as Emre Belözoğlu, Ümit Davala and Okan Buruk at F.C. Inter (Lombardia) and Hakan Sükür at F.C. Parma (Emilia-Romagna).

- Much more findings corroborated the football subculture hypothesis, which previews a correlation between the exposition to a match of a world championship, and a set of sociographic characteristics, which identify the subculture of football in Italy. For instance, the Italian TV viewers of Eire – Cameroon (0-0) – a match which was played on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2002, (about 2.4 million people, rating: 4.3%) –, and the audience of the match between South Africa and Mexico (1-1) – the opening competition of the 2010 FIFA Cup (June, the 16<sup>th</sup>; about 3.8 million TV viewers, rating: 6.7%) –, present a very similar profile. These two audiences were composed more frequently of males, of older persons, of inhabitants of small municipalities, of people living in regions of Central Italy, of persons of HI status (High income, Low education). More frequently the Italian TV viewers of international football live in a family of 2 persons; in a home in which they have 2 TV sets or more; and more frequently they expose themselves to pay-for-view television.

In brief, the exposition of the Italian audiences at the 2002-2010 FIFA World Championships, mediated by television, may be explained more frequently by the sub-cultural hypothesis, than by the territorial one.

### The Winter Olympic Games 2002-2010, viewed from Italian living-rooms

The Auditel data accurately also describe the Italian television audiences, which exposed themselves to the televised Winter Olympic Games, held in the same years at Salt Lake City (USA, 2002), Turin (Italy, 2006) and Vancouver (Canada, 2010). Their amplitude and sociographic profiles were carefully analysed by the SportComLab from many viewpoints.

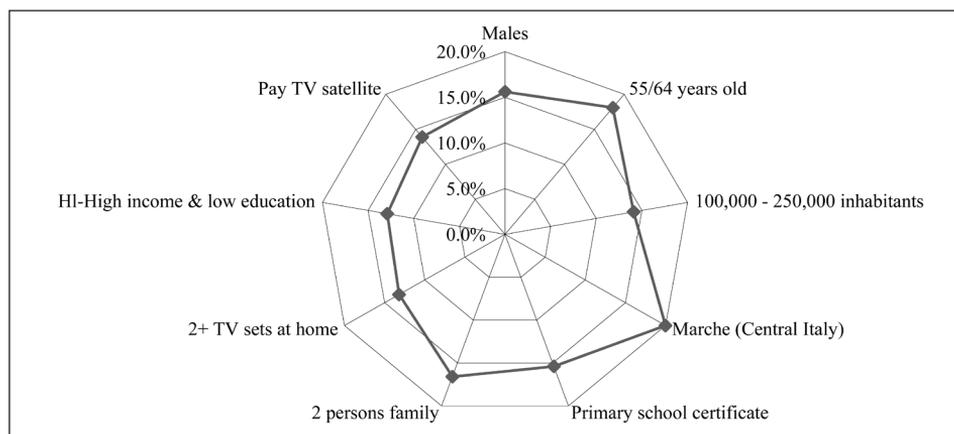


Figure 4: 2006 Winter Olympics: the sociographic profile of the Italian TV audience, that watched Enrico Fabris' victory in speed skating on ice (January 21; SportComLab, 2009; 2011).

From the first one, the average amplitude of the TV public of each Winter competition at the 2006 Olympics was about 2.6 million Italian TV viewers (rating: 4.7%),

and this rating was much higher than the 2002 Games and 2010 ones, too: both these Games were seen by an average of a bit more than 600 thousand Italian TV viewers (rating: about 1.2% in each Olympics). Two main reasons explain these differences. The first one is the same as before seen for the FIFA tournaments: the 8 hours of difference in time zone between Italy and Utah (USA), and the 10 hours between the Italian time zone and the one of Western Canada, explain the lower amplitude of the Italian TV audiences in the Winter Olympics 2002 and 2010; unfortunately the TV images were diffused in Italy but in hours not compatible with leisure time: a lot of people were at work or at school. The second reason is patriotism: the 2006 Winter Olympics were in Italy. So, both the better time for the reception from the audience, and the national pride fuelled the exposition at the mediated Winter sports.

As regards the second perspective, the sociographic profiles of the Italian TV audiences at the 2006 Winter Olympics can be seen in figure 4. Even if the average amplitude of the Italian TV audiences at this home edition of the Winter Olympic Games is greater than the other two editions, the audience profile is quite similar.

The reader can note that the profile of the public of the 2006 Winter Olympics presents some similar traits to the one of the average audience, which exposed itself at the FIFA World Cups, played in the same year; but there are some differences, too:

- similar traits are the *sex* (more frequently males); the *social status* (it is a HI status: in fact more frequently the viewers were persons with low education – they attended primary school only –, and with high income); the small amplitude of the family (2 persons); the number of TV sets in the home (2 and more);
- you can also note some differences between the two Italian audiences. The TV viewers of the 2006 Winter Olympics were a bit younger more frequently (55/64 years old); more frequently they lived in small municipalities (less than 10,000 inhabitants) and in a region in the North of Italy (more frequently in Piedmont and the Aosta Valley); more frequently they watched the Olympics via a free TV channel (RAI). While the Italian TV audience of the 2006 FIFA World Cup was on average a bit younger (more frequently it was made up of ripe aged persons: 65+ years old); more frequently these TV viewers lived in middle amplitude towns (100-250,000 inhabitants) and in a region of Central Italy; more frequently they watched the Winter Olympics via a pay-TV (a Sky channel).

Here I have no more space to write about the findings of the comparisons among the profiles of the Italian TV audiences, distinguished according to each Olympic Winter discipline. In effect, they present different characteristics, depending on the 5 groups of Winter sports: alpine skiing, Nordic skiing, ice skating, figure skating and ice hockey. Table 2 shows the findings obtained by these comparative analyses, limited to the 2006 Olympics only, and to two Winter sports only: Nordic skiing and ice hockey.

The two sociographic profiles in table 2 differ for one relevant trait: the level of education. In effect, the Italian TV viewers of Nordic skiing more frequently have a

low education level (primary school); on the contrary, the TV audiences of ice hockey matches were more frequently made up of persons, who had a higher degree (bachelor). Moreover each of the other three sociographic profiles of the Winter sports, overlap at one or at the other of the presented profiles: more exactly the profile of the TV viewers of the alpine skiing overlaps with the profile of the TV audience of Nordic skiing competitions; and the profiles for ice skating, and for figure skating, overlap with the profile for the matches of ice hockey. In short, the analyses led by SportComLab allows us to distinguish two main subcultures of winter sports in Italy: the ski subculture, and the ice skating one.

Table 2: The two main subcultures of winter sports in Italy: a comparison of 6 main characteristics, presented by Italian TV audiences at the 2006 Olympics in Turin (I) (SportComLab, 2009; 2011).

2006 Winter Olympics		
Main characteristics of the Italian TV audiences of winter sports	Ski subculture	Ice skating subculture
Sex	Male	Male
Age	55-64 years old	55-64 years old
Members in the family	2 persons	2 persons
Education level	Primary school	Bachelor
Italian Region	Piedmont & Aosta Valley	Piedmont & Aosta Valley
Socio-economic status	High income & low education (HI)	High income & high education (Hh)

These findings enrich the sport audience studies, both at the sociographic level, and at the explicative one. From this latter point of view, the Auditel data give evidence more frequently for the subcultural hypothesis, than for the one of a territorial nexus between an Italian champion and the TV viewer living in his/her territory. For instance, the TV audience who watched the Enrico Fabris' victory at the 2006 Olympics in ice skating, as one can see in figure 5, was composed more frequently of the TV viewers living in Piedmont and the Aosta Valley than by the inhabitants of Veneto, i.e. the Italian region where Enrico was born, and where he lives.

### **The Italian TV audiences of the Winter Paralympic Games: Some observations**

The Paralympic Games are still not a global sport, in the way of the FIFA World Cups or the Olympics; but equally the SportComLab researchers studied the Auditel data of these Games in the years 2002-2010. As everybody knows, from the 1990s onwards the Paralympics have taken place in the same locations as the Olympics; so in those years the Winter editions took place in Salt Lake City (USA, 2002), in Turin (Italy, 2006) and in Vancouver (Canada, 2010). And the mediation by television of these Games suffered from the same problems, caused in 2002 and in 2010 by the

very different time zone. But this reason is not enough to explain the much lower amplitude of the Italian TV audiences at the Paralympics, as took place in these years: an average of about 100,000 Italian TV viewers only. Probably the prevalent social images of the sporting body collide with the ones of the disabled body when on the field and engaged in a Paralympic competition (Howe, 2008a); so the dominant culture strongly reduces the television appeal of these Games. Nor was the national pride in hosting these Games sufficient to much increase the small width of their audience: in fact the number of the Italian TV viewers at the 2006 Paralympic Games was a bit more ample, about 480,000 persons (rating: 0.9%); and everybody can note the great discrepancy between this and the much higher numbers obtained by the other sports mega-events, broadcasted in the same year.

The sociographic average profile of the Italian TV audience of the Paralympics, indeed, shows some interesting differences, if it is compared with the average profiles of the other two publics. As one can see in figure 5, some characteristics are the same: most frequently the Italian audiences of the 2006 Paralympics was made up of aged persons, inhabitants of small towns (between 10,000 and 100,000 individuals), residents in a region in the North of Italy (Liguria), by persons who live in a small family, and who have 2 or more TV sets in the home, and see sport via free TV.

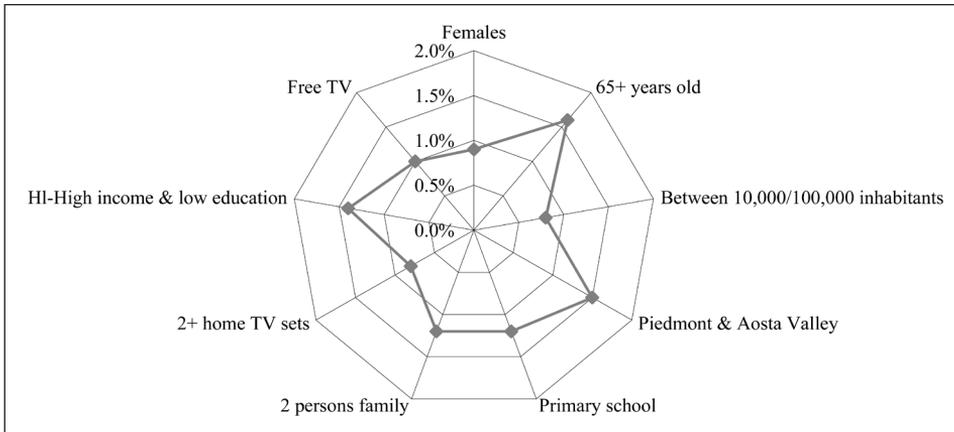


Figure 5: The sociographic average profile of the Italian TV audience at the 2006 Winter Paralympics (SportComLab, 2009; 2011).

But one can note three relevant differences, too. Firstly, the mediated Paralympics are not a male preserve: in fact, Italian females expose themselves at the mediated Paralympics more frequently than males. Secondly, the education level among the public is higher: more frequently the Italian TV viewers have attended high schools. Thirdly, more frequently the social status is HI, i.e. they have a High level of education, although low incomes.

These differences with the sociographic profile of the audiences of the Olympics and the FIFA World Championships outline a singular portrait of the Italian

public of the mediated Paralympics; probably the good level of education allows TV viewers to avoid the cultural prejudices and to appreciate the different athletic ability of the disabled bodies (Howe, 2008b).

## Conclusions

Changes in contemporary society pose hard questions for sociologists. In this article I wanted to suggest the importance of observing an emerging social structure, the SMS triangle, which is producing a lot of changes in cultural and political processes, from consumer choices to voting behaviours. I suggested that the strength of this new configuration, according to relational sociology, rests in its dynamic heart, which is composed of a threefold mass of persons: at one and the same time they are TV viewers; they practice sports or are fans; and they are consumers, who may buy goods and services, promoted by sport advertising. Thus the choices of this threefold mass – millions and millions of persons – explains the dynamics of the SMS triangle, because from it the future of sports, of mass media, and of sponsor companies depends.

I have not enough space here to describe this threefold mass, so I presented some findings about one facet of the dynamic centre of the Italian SMS triangle – the TV audience of sports mega-events 2002-2010 – and in one country – Italy. In fact it is not possible to study these dynamics abstractly: each SMS triangle refers to a national context, even if it is sensitive to global changes. Briefly in these pages I offered a selection of the main findings on the Italian TV public of sports mega-events, celebrated in the years 2002, 2006 and 2010, such as the FIFA World Cups, and the Winter Olympics and Paralympics. These findings were compared with other ones, obtained by the SportComLab researchers in previous complementary analyses on the Italian audiences of the Summer Olympics and Paralympics, and the European Football Championships in the years 2000, 2004, and 2008 (Martelli, 2010); briefly:

1. Not all the televised sports mega-events are great ceremonies of the media (Dayan & Katz, 1992): in Italy only the football matches of the national team are so. For instance, the average TV audience of the glorious 2006 FIFA World Cup, won by the Azzurri against the French team, is much more ample than the average TV audience of the Winter Olympics, which were played in the same year; and in turn this one is much more ample than the average TV audience of the Paralympics was.
2. The comparative analysis, made by the SportComLab researchers, has drawn a first map of the Italian TV viewers choices at sports mega-events. Three sociographic profiles were plotted: a first one of the average TV audience at the FIFA tournaments, and the other ones for the Olympics, and for the Paralympics. Each of them can be used for comparative analyses and for tracing the evolution of the sporting subcultures in Italy.

3. The type of sport differentiates one Italian TV audience from another, and these differences are described by sociographic variables. For instance, the lower education strata see more frequently football matches and the Olympic competitions; at the opposite end, the more educated people more frequently see the Olympic ceremonies and the Paralympic competitions.
4. Moreover the analysis of the Auditel data gives more credibility to the sporting subcultures hypothesis, than to the alternative one, which supposes a territorial nexus between a player/team and his/her TV viewer fans, living in the same territory.
5. For Winter sports, the findings of the comparative analysis show that in Italy there are two main subcultures: the first niche (Ski subculture) more frequently is made up of TV viewers, who see the alpine skiing competitions, and the Nordic skiing ones. The second Winter sport subculture, the Ice skating one, is made up of TV viewers, who more frequently expose themselves to the mediated ice skating, figure skating and ice hockey.
6. As one can note in other countries, so it is in Italy that each sport, football especially, is a male preserve. Yet I found an interesting exception to this regularity: indeed the Eris effect is evident in the unusual crowding in front of the TV sets by Italian females viewers, attracted by a crucial moment in the competition, such as the penalties, at the final match of the 2006 FIFA World Championship.

Many other findings were obtained by the SportComLab, but here I have no more space to present them. Briefly, they support the hypothesis that in Italy – as it happens in many other modernised countries –, the TV sport audiences are at the core of the SMS triangle; and this recent social configuration is a relevant topic both for the sociologists of sport, and for anybody who sociologically wishes to explain the cultural dynamics of contemporary European or Western societies.

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