

## **Rai, public service media, and sport** **Exploring the historical bonds and current challenges** **between Italian Rai and global sporting events**

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### **Abstract**

*The article examines the current challenges and opportunities facing the Italian public broadcaster Rai in relation to global sporting events in the digital scenario. Adopting a systemic perspective, the study explores the tensions among the increasing commercialisation/political disenchantment of major sporting events, and the public remits of Rai to secure them within the current EU regulation on sport rights and in terms of public service media. An historical overview of Rai's linkage with sports is provided to contextualise the discussion of the online TV service RaiPlay and its current strategy for both on-demand sports content and the live coverage of recent global sporting events, such as Tokyo 2020 and Qatar 2022. The article concludes by emphasising the potential for Rai to enable new forms of engagement, while also urging a careful consideration of the traditional remits and values of public service in the face of evolving media landscapes.*

### **Keywords**

*Global sports event; Rai; Public Service Media; Public Values; History of Television; Sport Rights.*

## Introduction

The relationship between the Italian public broadcaster Rai (Radiotelevisione Italiana) and international sporting events has been historically based on shared interests in cultural legitimation and growth. For Rai, global sporting tournaments such as the Olympics and World Cups of football, have often served as significant turning points in communication technologies, as well as shared watching experiences able to promote a communal cultural citizenship and national identity (Monteleone, 2001; Carelli, 2017; Martelli, 2012).

However, with these same events currently dealing with increasing social disenchantment (Horne, 2017) and commercialisation (Bifulco, 2015; Boyle & Haines, 2009), a public broadcaster like Rai appears under renewed political and economic pressure. This article examines the current tensions within Rai, considering its public remits, values, and weaknesses in the context of global sporting events. These events are experiencing increasing commercialisation, digitalisation, and encountering social disenchantment, which, in turn, pose challenges to Rai's role as public service provider in this transformed media environment.

Indeed, Rai seems to face a dual challenge: on the one hand, it must address a more extensive crisis of internal legitimacy that has affected Rai for many decades (Chiarenza, 2002; Richeri & Balbi, 2015), and on the other, as a public broadcaster, Rai is obligated to secure global sporting events due to their broader social and cultural significance.

However, this endeavour has become increasingly contentious due to the presence of various competitors and global players who are also eager to secure the rights to these events. As Rowe (2011, p. 61) states, "the combination of new, proliferating post-broadcast technologies and the difficulties of exercising proprietorial and territorial control are creating a very different, uncharted, global media sport landscape". On this path, public broadcasters are being challenged to reconsider their traditional role in promoting cultural citizenship, diversity, and universal access through free-to-air coverage on linear channels. Firstly, the escalating costs for rights to these sporting events and the concurrent reduction in budget for public broadcasters, including Rai, are making the latter increasingly dependent on legislations such as "listed event" rules, which can guarantee universal access to sporting events of national relevance (Smith & Evens, 2018; Evens et al., 2013).

Conversely, the establishment of "convergent television" (Grasso & Scaglioni, 2010) and availability of internet-distributed video content (Lotz, 2017) have contributed to a reconfiguration of the traditional relationship between public service broadcasters (PSBs) and global sporting events. While these events are still primarily broadcasted on traditional linear channels – somewhat acting as a "bulwark" against the advance of streaming platforms (Hutchins et al., 2019, p. 979) – they are also increasingly watched online through multi-platform, mobile, and "connected-viewing" habits (Andò & Marinelli, 2018). On this path, with renewed ideas of public service media (PSM) (Lowe et al., 2018; Lowe & Martin, 2013), the connubium "public service sport" goes beyond linear free-to-air chan-

nels, accentuating the necessity of synergies with non-linear and multi-platform modes of consumption.

In light of the aforementioned issues, two analytical perspectives on Rai and global sporting events are presented. On one side, a diachronic path focuses on the historical background regarding the relationship between sports content and Rai as a public service provider. Conversely, a synchronic perspective emphasises the current challenges, opportunities, and issues encountered by the Italian public broadcaster through its online TV service RaiPlay, while also considering strategies spanning both free-to-air and multi-platform approaches (Sørensen, 2016; Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017). In this regard, a first investigation deals with the potential for Rai to leverage its archive and historical video footage of major sporting events in a digital environment, alongside contemporary and sports-related docuseries. After that, the analysis delves into Rai's multi-platform coverage of two contemporary and global sporting events: The Tokyo 2020 Olympics is examined emphasising the commercial challenges of Rai; subsequently, the more recent case of Qatar 2022 is explored, particularly focusing on the political issues around Rai as PSM and its coverage of a contested sporting event.

More broadly, this study highlights how the cultural role and values traditionally associated with European PSBs are only partially fulfilled in relation to the current coverage and promotion of sports content and major events by the Italian Rai. Emphasising the necessity of a more relevant part of Rai as developed PSM, the article wishes for a better and multi-platform universal access to sports, as well as the fulfilment of Rai's public remit in terms of diversity and promotion of still marginalised sports, both on free-to-air and streaming platforms.

## Public broadcasters, public values, and sporting events

Since their inception in Europe, PSBs have been closely associated with the socio-democratic values that characterised Western European nations in the post-World War II era. Operating almost always as monopolies in these countries, PSBs have been entrusted with various public obligations and principles. These encompass ensuring universal access to programmes of quality and events of socio-cultural significance, addressing the needs of diverse and minority communities, and upholding the ideals of information independence and transparency (Brevini, 2013; Evens et al., 2013). More broadly, one of the main missions of PSBs "has always been to produce television as a form of speaking to, and engaging with, viewers as *citizens*" (van Dijck & Poell, 2015). This same mission has evolved into a broader socio-cultural framework for facilitating discussions and the integration of diverse communities by promoting shared values and processes of nation-building.

As a sub-category of the well-known theorisation of "media events" (Dayan & Katz, 1992), global sporting events like the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup have historically embodied the remits traditionally associated with PSBs as shown above, particularly

emphasising a key public value of their mandate: *universal access* to these events for a national and broader audience.

In the early years of European PSBs as monopolistic TV providers, sports – and especially major sporting events – offered an ideal opportunity to fulfil the classic Reithian mandates of PSBs, particularly those of information and entertainment. In Europe as well as countries like Australia and Canada, PSBs “have played pioneering roles in providing emblematic telecasts of sporting events of national significance for all citizens in real time” (Scherer & Rowe, 2014, p. 3). Conversely, the presence of sports in public service provision serves as cultural legitimacy from both parties. For instance, some minor or national sporting events have become culturally relevant largely *because* of their scheduling on prestigious public providers such as the British BBC, effectively creating “a new national calendar of public events” (Scannell, 1992, p. 322f.).

On an historical path, this public value of universal access to sporting events through free-to-air broadcasting, as largely promoted by PSBs, has been instrumental in solidifying sport as a substantial component of popular culture (Scherer & Whitson, 2009). In promoting ideals of cultural citizenship, public broadcasters must also prioritise diversity and minority representation. In this regard, one of their public remits includes increasing coverage of sportswomen and female athletes, who are still marginalised in the programming and content libraries of commercial television and over-the-top services (OTTs). Additionally, public broadcasters are tasked with offering and promoting international sporting tournaments that feature disabled athletes, such as the Paralympics (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021).

In doing so, the inclusion of sporting events and content on public broadcasters emerges as a “key component of any consideration of the rights associated with contemporary cultural citizenship” (Rowe, 2004, p. 398). This, in turn, fosters the ritual dimension of television (Carey, 2009), which has the capacity to create synchronised and diverse communities of people watching sporting events such as the Olympics.

However, the rise of social conflicts in media events (Dayan, 2009) and the growing commercialisation and social disenchantment surrounding popular sporting tournaments have created significant tensions with the public values traditionally associated with sports on PSM. Political scandals within international sports organisations and escalating manufacturing costs of the venues (Graeff, 2020; Chappelet & Parent, 2015), combined with the awarding of tournaments to countries with controversial human rights records, have undermined the value and significance of these sporting events in public opinion. On this path, sporting events can also reflect prevailing sentiments of disenchantment. Underestimating these issues can now potentially expose the same broadcasters that cover these events to public contestation and delegitimisation (Lünich et al., 2019).

At the same time, part of this current tension between cultural significance of global sporting events and commercial interests of private broadcasters and international sports organisations is especially intertwined with the conflicts surrounding sport rights regula-

tions for PSBs and the advent of global commercial players, as will be shown in the next paragraph.

## EU regulation on sport rights and the “listed events” rules

Unlike the United States, in many European countries, the symbiotic relationship between these sporting events and television was primarily established around national public service providers and their membership in multinational organisations. According to Evens and Lefever (2011, p. 36), the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) was created in the early 1950s “as a response to the growing cartelization of sporting supply (e.g., IOC, FIFA, et al.) in order to use collective bargaining power for obtaining lower rights fees”. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the advent of free-to-air private broadcasters raised questions about the cooperation among European PSBs on securing sport rights, as competitions among various players became a significant concern (Evens & Lefever, 2011). Moreover, the amount of money required to secure these same tournaments has significantly increased over the years with the arrival of commercial intermediaries and pay-TV as relevant audiovisual sport rights buyers on the global market. This circumstance led to a progressive erosion of sports on PSM in favour of pay-TV and the emergence of so-called “premium” sports content that must be paid for by the audience in order to be watched.

However, the historical tradition of public service as a free gateway to major sporting events and content has preserved its relevance within the European Union (EU). This is evident in the EU regulation concerning major sporting events and so-called “listed events” legislation, which were first introduced in the late 1990s. In that occasion, the renovation of the EU Directive called Television without Frontiers (TVWF) gave the opportunity to EU member states to protect sporting events of general interest thanks to the introduction of listed events of cultural significance, which must be available on free-to-air broadcasting in order to reach vast audiences free of charge. The “listed events” rule has been subsequently incorporated into the 2007 Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMS) and its more recent iteration of 2018. In this regard, Italy has transposed the EU directive by proposing its own list of sporting events of national relevance, such as the Summer and Winter Olympics and Paralympics, the European and World Cup of football, but also the Italian Gran Prix of Formula 1 and the Giro d’Italia of cycling (Agcom, 2012).

At the same time, these rules have also encouraged a so-called “dual rights” approach by introducing “an element of mutuality to the acquisition of rights” between free-to-air broadcasters and pay-TV networks (Evens et al., 2013, p. 108). To better understand this passage, an example can be helpful. During a single edition of the FIFA World Cup of football, for instance, a public service provider such as Rai can acquire exclusive free-to-air rights from rights holders (FIFA) or, more commonly, can obtain these same rights in a sub-licence from other global players or organisations which have already acquired the sport rights of the tournament (i.e., Warner Bros. Discovery Group or EBU). Meanwhile,

pay-TV and OTTs can secure exclusive rights on chosen premium matches and events not included in the “listed event” rules (for instance, events not involving the national team), or even the entire streaming distribution of the sporting tournament without sub-licensing their sport rights to free-to-air broadcasters.

In the Italian case, the previous “fairly balanced approach” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 732) between free-market and listed events legislation on sporting events is now potentially challenged by the uncharted streaming distribution of sports as premium content (Callea, 2021), affecting the same Rai and its public remits, as will be shown later. As such, public service providers must balance adapting to the changing media landscape with fulfilling their mandate in terms of universal access to these same global media and events. In this regard, a focus on Rai and the history of its relationship with sporting events can help highlight significant continuities and changes around these same issues.

### **Global sporting events and Rai: A story to tell**

As seen above, across Europe, the association between international and popular sporting events and television has traditionally meant public service broadcasting, with the latter being identified by a possible and unified idea of “European television” (Bourdon, 2010). At the same time, the idea of public service television is not a uniform concept, but rather the result of various strategies, policies, and directions adopted by different countries (Grasso, 2014, p. 47). In this regard, according to Scaglioni (2015, 2016) the core historical categories that define public service Rai in Italy are “control” – particularly political control from national parties (Guazzaloca, 2011, p. 124) – and “project”, referring to the broader understanding of PSM as a cultural enterprise that serves citizens all over the country, and in line with other more independent and virtuous examples of European PSBs. These two somewhat opposing forces have also had a significant impact on the same relationship between Rai and international sporting events.

Rai, like other European examples, indeed remains the sole public service broadcasting licensee in Italy, with licence renewal occurring approximately every ten years (Rai, 2018), and stemming from its previous monopoly on national broadcasting. Unlike more prestigious PSBs like the British BBC, the Italian public service provider is founded by both public licence fees and, to a lesser degree, by advertising and commercial sponsorship. Meanwhile, like other Mediterranean countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), Rai represents a lesser independent and more politicised PSB controlled by political parties through a Parliamentary Commission that elects Rai’s Board of Directors, a kind governance which is commonly known in Italy as “lottizzazione” (Menduni, 2018, p. 59). At the same time, as Rai must account to a Code of Ethics (Rai, 2020), which includes the fulfilment of different public remits and missions, including that of independent and transparent information, pluralism, and promotion of diversity and minorities.



Alongside these inner weaknesses and sometimes even conflictual goals, Rai has also historically encountered positive synergies, especially in relation to sporting events and contents. For Rai, indeed, this relationship not only facilitated the broadcast of sporting events widely, but also provided a means of fulfilling the traditional remits of public service television in Italy, including the unification of a fragmented and predominantly regional Italian audience (Monteleone, 2001) through the affirmation of a national and communal cultural citizenship around these same sporting events.

After years of technical experimentation, including broadcasting live sports matches, Italian public service television officially began transmitting in January 1954. During that time, one of the longest-running TV shows related to sporting events and football, *La Domenica Sportiva* (DS), also began (Grasso, 2019). Two international sporting events organised by Italy in the post–World War II era corresponded with a significant increase in the relevance of sports on Rai, and vice versa. These events were the Winter Olympics of Cortina d’Ampezzo in 1956 and, most notably, the subsequent Summer Olympics held in Rome in 1960. During the latter, Rai had the opportunity to experiment with a renovated technological equipment setup. Four TV studios, one video control room, and hundreds of technicians, engineers, sport journalists, and commentators produced as many hours as possible of live telecasts in the Eurovision TV circuit (Abbiezzi, 2007, p. 93).

The in-house Olympic event in Rome provided a unique incentive to purchase new TV sets, thus leading to additional Rai subscribers (Scaramucci & Ferretti, 2010). Furthermore, an international sporting event of this kind could serve as a means of cultural legitimation for Rai among its audience, both domestically and abroad. Television was already beginning to exert its influence on the collective imagination of the Games, extending their appeal beyond the immediate *hic et nunc* experience of live spectators.

In the following years, it is no coincidence that one of the most significant technological advancements in television, the introduction of colour broadcasting, made its experimental debut on the Italian PSM during the Summer Olympics of 1976 in Montreal, shortly after the reform of Rai in 1975. This Olympic event showcased a more engaging relationship between sport and Rai, with the arrival of satellite transmissions, the use of computer graphics, and a broader attention to entertainment. Furthermore, the Montreal Olympics has been considered a media event first and foremost, which highlighted the primacy of television, and Rai in particular, for sports (Grasso & Scaglioni, 2003, p. 221).

### **The current match on sport rights**

However, since the early 1980s, the competition for sport rights has emerged as a significant challenge for Rai and its mandate to provide universal access to global sporting events. Alongside the emergence of the private broadcasting sector in Italy (Ortoleva, 1995), the commercial TV network owned by Silvio Berlusconi, Fininvest, participated for the first time in the bidding process for the international football tournament “Mun-

dialito of Nations” in Uruguay in 1980-1981. On this occasion, Finevest’s offer surpassed that of the EBU, leading to negotiations between Rai, Fininvest, and the governing body of football in Italy. A compromise was eventually reached: Both television companies were allowed to broadcast the tournament, with Fininvest’s network airing on delay (De Luca & Frisoli, 2010, pp. 119-121).

In the following years, the acquisition of these rights has become increasingly expensive (Boyle, 2015), leading to a growing tension about Rai’s role as a public service broadcaster. From the 1990s onwards, the shift towards pay-TV in Italy resulted in an increasing cost for sport rights, not only around niche and “premium” content, but also for mega-sporting tournaments. While Rai may no longer be seen as the only go-to provider for major sporting events, the tradition of public service providers as a free gateway to such events remains relevant within European PSM, and specifically through the aforementioned EU “listed events” legislation. In this sense, the year 2006 can be emblematic of both the relevance of listed events rules, and the shift from Rai to pay-TV for international sporting events. In February of that year, Rai successfully covered the entire in-house Winter Olympics held in Turin. However, a couple of months later, the FIFA World Cup, eventually won by the Italian team, featured the already mentioned “dual rights” approach. While Rai could only broadcast one match of “cultural relevance” per day, the pay-TV provider Sky Italia purchased all the tournament’s rights.

In the last few years, Rai has faced further limitations in securing global sporting event rights, due to the combination of global players which have escalated the sport rights costs and a squeeze on its own budget both for business choices and political opportunities. As a consequence, some of the relatively minor sporting events have been left to pay-TV or other commercial broadcasters that offer free-to-air access, and sometimes even without the mutuality of the “dual rights” approach. This is the case of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, during which Rai only obtained the rights to show highlights, while the entire tournament was available on the premium channels of Sky Italia and its free-to-air channel, Cielo (Emmet, 2013). Similarly, during the 2018 World Cup in Russia, which the Italian male national team did not qualify for, the commercial broadcaster Mediaset secured for the first time the rights at the expense of the same Rai.

## **Rai as public service media and the case of RaiPlay**

In the current scenario, Rai must now strike a balance between its historical responsibility to provide global sporting events on free-to-air linear channels – as shown above – and its reconfiguration as a broader PSM capable of distributing live and on-demand streaming sports content across a wider media landscape and rising costs of sport rights. In this regard, Karen Donders (2019, pp. 1011-1012) has proposed a possible definition of PSM as “the provision of services by public broadcasters that contribute to the democratic, cultural and social objectives of society, and this on multiple devices and across various



technologies". This definition can be useful insofar as it brings together a differentiated collection of distribution strategies among many co-existing media *and* the reshaping of traditional public values and remits of public broadcasters, such as universalism and diversity, but beyond the technological aspects (van Dijck & Poell, 2015).

The transition of Rai from broadcast to broadband was at first restricted, especially due to political negligence (Brevini, 2013, pp. 100–104). However, a more recent effort of renovation of Rai as PSM is now played by Rai's own internet-distributed service RaiPlay. Replacing the previous service Rai.tv, RaiPlay can be considered a curated and editorially selected audiovisual service which follows the example of the more advanced BBC iPlayer. These types of online services share core features of standalone and over-the-top streaming "portals" (Lotz, 2017) – such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. However, they differ from the aforementioned subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms due to their intrinsic association with linear channels. In the case of Rai and its digital platform RaiPlay, it may be more useful to focus on the continuities between linear and nonlinear television, rather than their differences. On this path, Catherine Johnson (2019, p. 13) offers a suitable definition of online TV "as a subset of internet-connected video services that share core characteristics with earlier forms of television". This definition focuses on the possible inner strengths that affect an online service such as RaiPlay, its relationship with Rai's linear channels, as well as the contradictory issues involving sports content and live sporting events on PSM.

Facing a more fragmented audience and personalised media landscape, Rai as PSM can still rely on the traditional traits of *community-building* and *universal access* fostered by free-to-air traditional linear television, alongside a renovated sense of participation and integration of public values on a multi-platform and multi-device livestreaming experience. However, this reconfiguration of Rai in the digital space represents many opportunities, but also new challenges and potential conflicts.

### **Bringing the past and the present: RaiPlay's on-demand sporting content**

On this path, a first example consists of the heritage of global sporting events and content on public broadcasters, and how it can be capitalised on in a more digitalised environment. In this regard, the linkage between Rai as PSM and sporting events can also further emphasise the role of public service as repository of collective and shared national *memories*.

That is exemplified by RaiPlay, which features the anthology *1960: Le nostre Olimpiadi* (2020) in its library. This anthology provides original footage of the Rome Olympics, including the iconic barefoot marathon of the Ethiopian athlete Abebe Bikila. All of these same images are sourced from the website RaiTeche.it, a complementary feature that is undertaking a significant digitalisation project of past TV footage. As well as a digital audiovisual archive of sporting memories (Carelli, 2021), RaiTeche includes footage featur-

ing live opening ceremonies from past Olympic editions and rare sports news bulletins on global sporting events. As such, Rai not only offers a catch-up service for recently aired programmes, but also promotes a library of original content and past TV shows, reinforcing the broadcaster's historical role in showcasing such events.

Along with its role of repository of collective memories, RaiPlay is also evolving as a complement to traditional linear channels, promoting in-house and on-demand productions that are ancillary to current or ongoing sporting events on television. An example of this is the docuseries *Sogno Azzurro* (2021). Following the example of similar content available on OTTs like Netflix and Prime Video, *Sogno Azzurro* tells the "backstage experience" of the Italian men's football team during the qualifying matches of Men's EURO 2020, which were simultaneously broadcasted on Rai free-to-air channels. The docuseries takes viewers behind the scenes, bringing cameras into training camps and locker rooms of the football team, providing a glimpse into the players' and coaches' lives beyond the 90-minute match broadcasted on television.

A similar content called *Azzurro Shocking, come le donne si sono riprese il calcio* (2022) was distributed at the beginning of the Women's EURO 2022 football tournament. In this case, the documentary offers a deeper focus on the past challenges, achievements, and future goals involving the Italian female football movement as a whole. Furthermore, *Azzurro Shocking* is part of a broader initiative by Rai to generate interest in women's football, alongside traditional TV scheduling, which continues to play a critical role in stimulating audience engagement around less popular sporting events. Rai's commitment to promoting women's football was further demonstrated by their decision to broadcast several matches of the Women's World Cup of football in 2019 on their free-to-air channels, thereby increasing visibility for the Italian women's national team (Seneghini, 2019).

Similarly, another docuseries, *I Fantastici - fly2tokyo* (2021), offers a more in-depth focus on the life and ordinary challenges of some Italian Paralympic athletes committed to the qualification of the Paralympics in Tokyo 2020, including the wheelchair fencer Bebe Vio. In this case, RaiPlay's original content helps to achieve the public service mandate of diversity, thanks to a broader exploration of the nexus between sport, disability, and ordinary life. To some extent, both this docuseries and the subsequent coverage of the Paralympics on Rai's Olympic channels, Rai 2 and RaiSport, have given the opportunity to make sport disability not simply included but, in some cases, even "hypervisible" (Pullen et al., 2019) on linear and generalist television as well as on the online TV service.

During events such as the Olympics and the World Cup of football, these on-demand and sports-oriented contents generally take up prominent spaces on RaiPlay's homepage, similar to "the scheduling of programming in time-slots of broadcast flow channels" (Kelly & Sørensen, 2021, p. 86), rather than a typical SVOD platform catalogue.

## “Loud absences” and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics

Alongside the complementary role of on-demand and sports-oriented original productions, it is interesting to consider Rai’s current strategy of live coverage during some of most recent global sporting events.

Certainly the recent practices of second-screen engagement, endorsed by broadcasters during live sports matches, confirm “the power of television as the primary means through which sports mega-events are experienced”, while also highlighting “the role of social networking services in extending the televisual logics of media sports coverage” (Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017, p. 34).

In this way, Rai’s continued emphasis on free-to-air televisual coverage remains a relevant and effective strategy for fulfilling its public service mission, especially in relation to sporting events, and its intrinsic *liveness* due to the unpredictability of sports results and collective sharing of emotions from fans both on-site and in spatially distant locations (van Es, 2017, p. 1249; Callea, 2023). Moreover, the claim of liveness shared by global sporting events now entails social connection among vast audiences, including their participatory activities through social media during the same live broadcast (Frandsen et al., 2022, p. 9).

At the same time, in the current digital environment, audiences increasingly seek time-shifted and place-shifted viewing experiences, including live sports content. In this regard, Rai’s coverage of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, postponed to August 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has raised concerns about universal access to these events beyond linear broadcasting and despite the listed event rules.

To understand the problematic issues involving the sporting event of Tokyo 2020 and Rai, it is necessary to go back to 2014, when Discovery Group and its subsidiary Eurosport secured the pan-European sport rights to the entire Olympic Games from 2018 to 2024. The following sub-licence agreement for Tokyo 2020 between Rai and Discovery consisted of exclusive streaming rights to Discovery and its OTT service, Discovery+. Rai, on the other hand, has obtained only limited hours of free-to-air coverage (Biondi, 2019).

Under these circumstances, Rai was only able to broadcast the Olympics on a single TV channel, Rai 2. None of the live or on-demand streaming content of the Tokyo Olympics was available on the online TV service RaiPlay during the tournament, which was a time of the year when the vast majority of people are typically not at home in front of a TV set, but more likely on summer holidays in different locations.

The limitations on Rai’s streaming coverage of the Tokyo Olympics extended to the availability of highlights on global video-sharing platforms like YouTube. By securing exclusivity over the video streaming highlights, Discovery was able to displace Rai in the future perception of significant sporting achievements of Italian athletes during the tournament. Due to the significant time difference of the Japanese Olympics, with many people needing to access content on demand, the highlights of the Olympics became a valuable

cross-media commodity (Stauff, 2020, p. 109) that served to promote both the sporting event and the broadcaster.

Furthermore, the actual broadcasting coverage of the Tokyo Olympics on the free-to-air Rai 2 has been criticised too. Due to the narrow scheduling of many contemporary events on a single linear channel, some matches have been suddenly interrupted, while other ones involving Italian athletes have been totally missed to make space for the daily TV news (Yossman, 2021).

Those critics somewhat remember the so-called “NBC fail hashtag” during the recent broadcasting coverage of the Olympics on NBC’s linear channel. The American network NBC, in fact, has historically adapted a so-called “plausibly live” broadcast of the Olympics, in which edited and pre-recorded materials are treated as live by TV commentators (Billings et al., 2017, p. 45). This is done not only to account for different time zones but also to add commercial breaks and to attract the largest possible audience during prime-time.

As well as the American counterpart, Rai, too, “actively edits and manipulates those events to fit into the broadcast window” (McNutt, 2013, p. 124), including adding commercial breaks or skipping competitors who will not factor into the race for the medals. From a valid perspective, this strategy is not a recent implementation of television broadcasting. However, what has changed is the fact that the global information flow now imposed by the internet has demystified this sort of “constructed liveness” enforced by free-to-air broadcasters such as Rai.

As opposed to Rai, Discovery implemented a successful multi-platform, time-shifted, and place-shifted experience on different mobile devices. Its OTT platform, Discovery+, offered for the first time the livestreaming of every single match and discipline during the Tokyo Olympics.

However, the livestreaming experience of the Games was not always ideal. As many events were happening concurrently, some competitions and games were even offered without any live commentary provided by sports journalists. This style of coverage, along with the image of stands often being quite empty due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, transformed the contests into something that appeared to be recorded from a closed-circuit camera, rather than a televised sporting event characterised by its *liveness*.

## “Contested appearances” and the 2022 Qatar World Cup

From a different perspective than the Japanese Olympics, Rai has also faced concerns regarding the coverage of the controversial World Cup football edition in Qatar during the late autumn of 2022.

As aforementioned, the current context of regulation on sport rights often leads to a sort of dual rights approach between pay-TV or OTTs and national broadcasters, with the latter mostly holding only free-to-air rights of the tournament. In the case of Qatar 2022,

Rai decided to secure exclusive rights to the tournament without sharing them with competitors. This decision was partially made in response to the past World Cup edition of 2018, broadcasted by rival Mediaset at expense of Rai four years ago, as well as the natural consequence of Italy's recent victory in the UEFA EURO 2020 football tournament.

Unfortunately for Rai, the national team missed qualifying for the World Cup for the second time in a row. This could potentially lead to further indifference or even discontent from the audience, especially given that the tournament was already strongly contested by countries involved, such as Denmark (Cunningham, 2022).

Amidst the possibility of contestation surrounding the football tournament and the PSB's choice of significant expenditure on the sport events rights, Alessandra De Stefano, the former director of Rai Sport division, made an unusual statement during the inaugural TV show *Il Circolo dei Mondiali*. In her statement, the director of Rai Sport strongly criticised Qatar's bid as the venue for the World Cup, but also emphasised that this sporting event is for every citizen, thus asserting the essence of Rai as a public broadcaster in terms of broader access (Il Post, 2022).

In other words, De Stefano referred to the historic role of Rai in providing global sporting events for every citizen as a way to justify the current broadcasting of a highly contested competition in the public opinion, and even despite the absence of the national team from the tournament. In the meantime, the coverage of the football tournament in Qatar by Rai has been accompanied by daily news reports of human rights abuses before and during the World Cup. This has raised questions about the legitimacy of the broadcasting's coverage and exposed an inherent – and probably irremediable – contradiction for both the public service provider and the audience watching the football matches on television.

Alongside this sort of “self-contradictory contestation” – and in contrast to the aforementioned Tokyo Olympics case study – this time Rai covered all the matches of the World Cup, including on its online-TV service RaiPlay. For this occasion, RaiPlay also offered alternative viewing experiences of the football games. One of the features included the presence of a so-called “tactical camera”, which followed the game from above and, in this way, showed the arrangement of players and game patterns. Moreover, for the World Cup, Rai decided to partially renovate the commentary style of the game by securing new expert commentators coming from pay-TV and other commercial television companies. Those commentators adopted a more entertaining and dramatic style, describing not only the players' actions but “also the wider stories and personal narratives that the actions are placed within and around” (Barnfield, 2013, p. 334). Interestingly, some of the most memorable moments of Rai's coverage of the Qatar Games were associated with the exuberant and emotional commentator Daniele “Lele” Adani during the Argentinian matches. In this case, Adani garnered both praise and criticism for a style considered unconventional for a public broadcaster (Cavalla, 2022).

Finally, in an effort to connect with younger audiences during the tournament, Rai sought to experiment with new formats inspired by the current digital landscape of streaming platforms on its own TV channels. One such format was the already popular podcast known as *Bobo TV*. Originally distributed on the livestreaming platform Twitch and hosted by four former Italian footballers, including the aforementioned Adani, the online podcast was featured on Rai's channels as a five-minute post-match commentary following the World Cup games.

However, while the *Bobo TV* podcast format had been successful on digital streaming platforms like Twitch, it did not receive an immediate and positive response from the audience when it was first introduced on free-to-air television. This highlights the challenges of introducing a successful format from a niche digital ecosystem to a broader and more diverse audience that may not be accustomed to the new language and conventions of livestreaming platforms.

## Conclusion

Alongside and sometimes even more than other European PSM, Rai too is facing relevant issues, challenges, and opportunities involving the current coverage of global sporting tournaments, such as the Olympics and the World Cup of football, and sports content more broadly. In this regard, the adoption of two analytical perspectives – diachronic and synchronic – provides the opportunity to explore Rai and its relationship with sporting events in a more systemic way. This approach allows for an examination of both historical continuities and new challenges that Rai faces in its current involvement with global sporting events. The analysis on Rai in particular, including its weaknesses and a traditionally more vulnerable cultural legitimation among public opinions compared to North European counterparts, has contributed to accentuate the presence or lack of public remits and values related to sports content and events in the current media landscape.

First of all, the aforementioned European regulatory environment highlights the importance of international public service media organisations like EBU in providing universal access to these events in the face of rising global commercial players. On one side, the early relationship between global sporting events and a “weak” public broadcaster like Rai has historically been based on positive synergies, enhancing the credibility and reputation of both in the public eye. On this path, the EU regulations continue to uphold the traditional connection between free-to-air broadcasters and socially and culturally significant events, such as global sporting events.

On the other side, although it is likely that international sporting events will continue to be broadcast on free-to-air national channels by European PSM (EBU, 2023), the cost of doing so may be increasingly difficult to justify for a PSB that relies on public funding. Consequently, the types and number of global events available to audiences in a certain



country are influenced by the escalating costs of sport broadcasting rights and the regulations that govern their availability on free-to-air channels as well as on the online space.

In this regard, the link between Rai and global sporting events has recently developed with persistent frictions, both internal and external to Rai itself. From a certain perspective, the primary challenge facing Rai is to preserve the longstanding commitment to universal and free access to international sporting events on traditional linear TV channels. As noted by Luca Barra (2022, p. 267), linear television can still serve as a powerful tool for creating a synchronised yet heterogeneous audience. In this regard, live sporting events can effectively align with the classic remit of PSBs in attracting and building a vast and synchronised community of citizens.

However, the current digital ecosystem has problematised this somehow natural association between linear television and global sporting events. As the article has shown, although the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were still available on free-to-air television through public service provider Rai, audience expectations for international sporting events have shifted to prioritise a more comprehensive, flexible viewing experience on different mobile devices. This type of experience was offered as premium content on a video-streaming OTT platform like Discovery+, highlighting a marked difference from the traditional free-to-air viewing experience. However, it also presented challenges related to liveness in the context of livestreaming sporting events.

Some of these issues will also be part of the current reconfiguration of RaiPlay as a new resource of the Italian PSM for sports content online. In the case of global sporting events, the development of online-TV services such as RaiPlay aims to cater to the evolving viewing and time-shifting habits of audiences in a more interactive and digital environment. This includes on-demand sports content and docuseries which represent an evermore and necessary complement and counterpart to live sporting events and tournaments. If these same productions can help to promote universal access and visibility to sporting events such as the Women's World Cup and the Paralympics, on the other side, the attention and space allowed to these sporting events from Rai is still too small and erratic, especially considering the current vertical growth of women's football in Italy (Cappelli, 2023).

At the same time, a wider crisis of legitimation and disenchantment has shaken mega- and global sporting events due to the frequent political scandals. This was particularly evident in Rai's recent coverage of the male World Cup of football in Qatar. While Rai's strategy this time could be considered a mature multi-platform approach that includes newer digital formats, the coverage of such an event exposes an already partially delegitimised Rai to a sort of "self-contradictory contestation", where the historical legitimacy of delivering global sporting events to every citizen clashes with the duty of providing news reports of human rights abuses during these same international appointments.

Ultimately, the article has emphasised the multifaceted cultural role of Rai as PSM in the current Italian context. This role combines the traditional positive synergies between

Rai and sports and a public broadcaster with contemporary challenges, some of which remain unfulfilled. These challenges – which include providing a sense of community-building (Scaglioni, 2016, p. 85), promoting marginalised sports, and ensuring universal access to global sporting events – gain significance in the context of the transformed media landscape, where essential access to these sporting events through free-to-air television also necessitates a more multi-platform and multi-device livestreaming experience.

While recognising the need “to avoid conjuring up a ‘golden age’ of sports television that only exists in the nostalgic imagination” (Rowe, 2004, p. 394), the question remains: Will Rai embrace both the opportunities and challenges presented by the current broadcasting and online delivery of international sporting events? This question becomes even more relevant as Rai prepares for the upcoming 2026 Winter Olympics, which will be hosted in Milan and Cortina d’Ampezzo. After all, echoing one of the most popular sayings of Baron de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee, the important thing – in sports as well as in its broadcasting coverage – is not to win, but simply to take part.

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