An emerging social configuration: the “sports-media-sponsors triangle”
Observing its Dynamic Centre in Italy (2002-2010)

by Stefano Martelli*

INDEX

1. Introduction
At the beginning of the third Millennium, a new “social configuration” (Elias & Dunning, 1986) has emerged: the ‘Sms triangle’, which is made up of sports, media and sports sponsors.

The link between sports and media was first noted by Real (1975) and then it was made the object of reflexions by social scientists, who identified it in various ways: “sport-media complex” (Jhally, 1995; Miller & al., 2001; etc.); or “sport media nexus” (Grainger & al., 2005; etc.); or “the golden triangle” (Honeybourne & al., 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, showed by this social configuration recently, depends on the satisfactions offered by this threefold configuration to the needs of a huge 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 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 last two editions of the Olympic Games (Beijing 2008, London 2012) and the Football World Championship, organized in South Africa (2010) by FIFA, the International Federation of the Associations of this game. These global events attracted billions of TV viewers worldwide (Ioc 2011; FIFA 2011). In reality the ‘conquest’ of this large audience is the goal of each of the three institutions, which made the new social configuration; but what scientific knowledge can be acquired by studying these sport audiences?

In this paper I present some findings, obtained in the University of Bologna ‘Alma Mater Studiorum’ by the SportComLab¹, which led a lot of researches on Italian TV audiences of the sport mega-events, such as Olympics, Paralympic Games and World or European Football Championships, played in the years from 2000 to 2010.

In the first part of this paper I offer a review of the sociological studies focusing on the SMS triangle, and I shall sustain the social relevance of the sport audiences, which are its dynamic nucleus. Indeed the study of empirical data on their choices, collected in one or more countries, can help much to gain a better knowledge about this new social configuration (n. 2).

In the second part of this paper I try to do it with reference to the audiences of the “mediated” sport mega-events in Italy. Here I offer a selection of the main findings about amplitude and composition 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 millions and more TV viewers, i.e. about 40% of the Italian people– saw the main football matches, such as the ones played between the Italian team and the national ones of France, Spain, Germany and Holland. Moreover, I will describe an interesting exception at the “male preserve”, which sport –and football in a particular way– is in Italy. Indeed one can observe an unusual crowding of Italian female, who were attracted in front of the TV more frequently than males by a crucial moment of the final match of the 2006 World Football Cup (n. 3).

In the last part of this paper, three socio- graphic profiles of the Italian TV audiences of FIFA World Championships, of the Olympics, and Paralympic Games, offer a start to study the sporting subcultures in Italy (n. 4). These and other findings, obtained by the SportComLab of the Alma Mater, confirm that in the “Millennial phase” of globalization (Giulianotti & Robertson 2009) some sports mega-events have become world phenomena, and that the ‘Sms triangle’ is a social configuration, whose dynamism is affecting many societies.

¹ The SportComLab of the Alma Mater is a study and researches Center of the Department of Educational Sciences, in the University of Bologna (you can see an English introduction in: http://www.sportcomlab.it/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/12SportComLab-ofAlmaMater_AnIntroduction.pdf
2. Theoretical insights about an emerging social configuration: the ‘Sms triangle’.

2.1. Sports, media, and sponsors: an alliance going strong

Since the 1970s some sports mega-events (Richtie, Brent, 1984; Roche, 2000; Horne & Manzenreiter, eds., 2006) 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 ‘80s, 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 XIX 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, 1973) 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 ff.). 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).

From ‘90s the scene of world sport is crowded by many social actors. The first three are the most visible actors, namely sports stars, teams, and the international associations and federations, which organize sports mega-events; but also one has to consider television networks; and transnational companies, which sponsor sports events and pay media in order to promote their own goods or services. Sport sociologists identified the relationships among these social actors in different ways: they are parties in an “ unholy alliance” (Whannel, 1986), or in a “golden triangle” (Honeybourne & Al., 2000; Nixon, 2008; Rowe, 1999). Other social scientists have termed the interrelationships among sport champions or teams, and their transnational sponsors, mediated by old and new media, as the global “sport media complex” (Jhally, 1989; Maguire 1999; Miller & al., 2001; Raney & Bryant, 2006; Scherer & Al., 2008; Wenner, ed., 1995; Wenner, ed., 1998); or as the “sport media nexus” (Grainger & Al., 2005; Messner, 2002; Nicholson, 2007); or as the “love-match” (Rowe, 1996); or as a
“ménage à trois”– a living together threesome (Thibault 2009).

Each of these stimulating expressions captures the interplay among sports champions and teams, media networks, and transnational corporations, to various degrees. 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 wide fourth social actor: the sports audiences.

2.2. 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 & al., 2001), probably because of the violence perpetrated by hooligans and by other types of football ultras (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Spaaji, 2006).

In Great Britain, until the late 18th 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 & al., eds., 1999).

At the beginning of the 20th 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. Many 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 20th 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 “sports/media complex” (Wenner, Jhally, 1989: 57) is strengthened by new media (Lievrouw & Livingstone, eds., 2006). Each day, sports fans visit various websites, participate in fantasy sports, celebrate and criticize 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. Today, by using smartphones or tablets 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. Moreover the Internet offers a great availability for sports on line. So new media have facilitated the transformation of sport audience, from passive followers of “mediated” sports (who simply receive and consume media texts) into active supporters or producers, 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 they have become active agents, despite the fact that social differences in society and sports, as regards power and ideologies, have not much changed (Leonard, 2009, 3).

Briefly, 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. 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).

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, but they are often neglected in the literature.

2.3. The fuelling nucleus of the ‘Sms triangle’: the sport audiences

Media owners see sport as an important resource to attract sports audiences, and to promote goods and services by advertisements. Really sports easily find a way to be accounted 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 more and more audiences, and to expose them to 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”, and other concepts (see upper, 1.1) have their limits to explain the dynamics of this new social configuration –it may be better explained by the relational theory as a ‘morphogenesis’ (Archer 2011).

The choices of sport audiences are the fuelling nucleus of the relationships among sports, media, and sponsors. In truth, the public of the ‘mediated’ sport is a threefold mass; it consists of persons, who at the same time are:

a) sports practitioners and amateurs;
b) fans of champions and teams, who take part in their sporting performances via television and new media;
c) 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.

Moreover the strong dynamism of this new social configuration can be explained only if one pays attention to the mutual relations among its components; so that one can distinguish different types of relations inside it (see fig.1).

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2 Inside the triangle SMS one can observe three types of relations:
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’ (Martelli 2010, 2011, 2013; Id. & Porro, 2013, pp. 116-124).

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3 Models, previously named (see upper, 1.1), 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, ed., 19954, 26], is lacking in sponsors. Likewise the model proposed by Joseph 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.
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.

2.4. The scientific study of a national sporting audience: issues and relevance

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 deducted 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 their behaviour cannot be explained only deductively.

“Globalization processes do not simply impact upon different nations in a 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 SvT, the national broadcasting Corporation, has never considered helping different sports as its goal, because in that Country “sport is a physical and popular culture” [Reimer, 2002, 17; italic style in the text]. In Great Britain the motivations of audience choices 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 BBC promoted 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/she cannot deduce audience choices by global factors—such as the “logic” of media production (Ang, 1991; Gillespie, ed., 2005; Hesmondhalgh, ed., 2006), or the dominating model of sport spectacle (Tomlinson & Young, eds., 2006). So each social scientist is invited to test this global knowledge inside the historical and socio-cultural features of a single country; and the number of sociologists, who are cultivating these relevant studies, are few, really.

The lack of previous studies about the sport audiences in Italy is a further reason that

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4 Before the SportComLab researches, in Italy there was one study (Capranica & Aversa, 2002): its object was the growing interest in sport that Italian females showed in the ’90s and during the 2000 Olympics; but the findings about the female
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\(^5\) and used a few “ad hoc” hypotheses, as you can read in the following two paragraphs.

### 3. The Italian TV audiences of the FIFA World Cups (2002-2010): from theory to empirical findings

The SportComLab analysed the exposure choices of Italian people, who via TV saw the last three male World Football Championships, organised by FIFA in the Republic of South Korea and Japan (2002), in Germany (2006) and in South Africa (2010)\(^6\).

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Data on the Italian audiences of these three world football Cups, were collected from Auditel national statistical sample, which 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.

#### 3.2. Research hypothesis

Two hypotheses were formulated:

i) **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;  

ii) **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\(^7\).

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\(^5\) Auditel is the Italian company “super partes” –i.e. constituted by both private actors and public ones–, which is collecting data on exposure at TV, minute by minute, every day. Auditel uses the meter people, which is a tool installed in every TV set inside each of the household, part of the Italian sample.  

\(^6\) 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 8 audiometric parameters and by 14 socio-graphic variables); so these Italian audiences are described by more than 1,8 million audiometric and socio-graphic data. The main outcomes obtained by this research program –and by other ones about the Italian TV audiences both of the summer Olympics and of the Winter ones, and of the Paralympics, also, and of the European football Cups played in the same years–, were published in two books and other papers (see: http://www.sportcomlab.it/?page_id=56).

\(^7\) 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 hypothesis needs 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 (see below, ch. 3). Moreover the abductive approach
3.3. The FIFA World Cups 2002-2010 and the TV viewers: some trends in Italian audience choices

At a socio-graphic 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 2 shows the Italian TV audiences of the last three FIFA World Cups, broadcasted live by the free television (Channels 1 or 2 of the Rai, the Italian public network) or by the satellite TV pay-for-view (Sky sport) in the years 2002-2010.

Table 2: The Italian television audiences of last three Fifa world cups: the average amplitude and the distribution by sex (2002-2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tournament</th>
<th>2002 (Korea &amp; Japan)</th>
<th>2006 (Germany)</th>
<th>2010 (South Africa)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>v.a.</td>
<td>rating</td>
<td>v.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplitude (average)</td>
<td>5,719,000</td>
<td>10.40%</td>
<td>10,488,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>3,273,000</td>
<td>12.20%</td>
<td>5,777,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>2,456,000</td>
<td>8.60%</td>
<td>4,711,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference M - F</td>
<td>817,000</td>
<td>3.60%</td>
<td>1,066,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Auditel (I). Analyses: SportComLab of the “Alma Mater”.

permitted the first-level hypothesis to go further and to move towards wider conjectures – for instance on the globalization of football and the social functions of the ‘Sms triangle’ (Martelli, 2012, 11-112).
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:

a) about the amplitude: the Italian audiences had a peak in the 2006 tournament, and a minimum in 2002;
b) 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 points in percentage up.

Probably the Italian TV viewer 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 favored 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’ won the FIFA Cup on July the 9th; 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.

Surprisingly the high performances of the Italian audience at the end of the 2006 FIFA tournament were preceded by low ratings at its beginning. Fig. 3 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 %, i.e. lower by about three points in percentage to the one registered four years before (36.9%), in the same stage of the 2002 Cups. 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 ‘Azzurri’ in those first matches, but above all on the mistrust towards the Italian players, generated by the

8 “Azzurri” is the nickname of the Italian national team; it comes from the color of the jersey, worn by players.
‘Calciopoli’ scandal⁹. So the first match of the round at 16 teams, Italy-Australia, registered just 16.1 million TV viewers (29.2%); only after the penalty shootouts, transformed 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%.

**Fig. 3:** The Italian television of 2006 Fifa world cup: audience ratings of the 7 matches played by the ‘Azzurri’ (data collected twice for match).

[Graph showing audience ratings]

*Source: Auditel (I). Analysis: SportComLab of the “Alma Mater”.*

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⁹ 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 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 another 13 accused sporting men.
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 1st half, 43.1% in the 2nd half, 44.2% in the overtime). The ‘Azzurri’ victories reunited the Country around the National team, which redeemed Italian football from the shame of the scandal of “Calcioptoli”, 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 1st half; 44% in the 2nd 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 4th 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.

3.4. Is televised football still a “male preserve”? A relevant exception

Each of the Italian TV public, which saw 192 football games, played in the tournaments FIFA of the years 2002-2010, has been thoroughly studied by researchers SportComLab. All the variables – both the independent ones, i.e. the main socio-graphic features of each audience (14 variables), and the dependent ones or the audiometric characteristics (8 measures), have been used to analyze the Auditel data. Many other findings were found by the comparative method. Among the socio-graphics, sex is one of the most important predictive variables to a sociological eye: and this is true to the 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 (Guttmann 1986; Messner & al., 2010). But the researchers of the SportComLab have found some relevant exceptions to this regularity (see Martelli, 2010, ch. 6). Here I will present one of these exceptions, and I will try to explain the reasons for it.

In the world football tournaments, organized by 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. Fig. 4 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%).

Fig. 4: The tv exposition of the Italian females at a crucial match: final against France at the 2006 Fifa World Cup

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 Eris, the Greek divinity of the competition, 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 that evening, in order to experience the excitement of a decisive moment, and share together with their males the joy of winning the FIFA World Cup, too.

Yet another important aspect has to be noted: at the beginning of this match, the rating of

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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.

Breafly, 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.

4. Italian sport subcultures and TV viewers profile: some findings from a long-term research project (2000-2010)

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 socio-graphic 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 last part of this paper I shall briefly present three socio-graphic profiles:

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

4.1. A profile of the Italian TV viewers of the FIFA World Cups

Already the previous fig. 2 shows great differences in the exposition of the Italian TV audiences at 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, fig. 5 shows the average profile of the Italian TV viewers at the 2006 FIFA tournament.
Indeed the socio-graphic profiles of the Italian TV audiences at FIFA World Championships, played in the years 2002 and 2010, are similar at this one.

Also it is possible to draw the socio-graphic 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 summarize some main findings of these studies only, as follows:

i. 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

Fig. 5: The 2006 Fifa World cup: the socioigraphic profile of the Italian tv audience

Source: Auditel (I). Analysis: SportComLab of the “Alma Mater”.

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matches played by Turkey, than the audiences of other Italian regions, because some Turkish footballers in that year played in two club teams of those regions, such as Emre Belözoğlu, Ümit Davala e Okan Buruk in F.C. Inter (Lombardia) and Hakan Sükür in F.C. Parma (Emilia-Romagna);

ii. 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 socio- graphic characteristics, which identify the subculture of football in Italy. For instance, the Italian TV viewers of Eire- Camerun (0-0) – a match which was played on June 1st 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 16th; 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, by 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 subcultural hypothesis, than by the territorial one.

4.2. 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 socio- graphic profiles were carefully analysed by the SportComLab from many viewpoints.

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 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 socio- graphic profiles of the Italian TV audiences at the 2006 Winter Olympics can be seen in
fig. 6. 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:

**Fig.6: 2006 winter Olympics: the sociographic profile of the Italian tv audience, that watched the Enrico Fabris’s victory in speed skating on ice (January 21)**

![Sociographic profile of the Italian TV audience](image)

*Source: Auditel (I) Analysis: SportComLab of the “Alma Mater”.*
a) similar traits are the **sex** (more frequently males); the **social status** (it is a LH 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);
b) 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 of 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 Middle 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 7 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.
Tab.7: The two main subcultures of winter sports in Italy: a comparison of 6 main characteristic, presented by Italian tv audiences at 2006 Olympics in Turin (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main characteristics of the Italian tv audiences of winter sports</th>
<th>Ski subculture</th>
<th>Ice skate subculture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>55-64 years old</td>
<td>55-64 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members in the family</td>
<td>2 persons</td>
<td>2 persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education title</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Region</td>
<td>Piedmont &amp; Aosta Valley</td>
<td>Piedmont &amp; Aosta Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economics status</td>
<td>H1 - High income &amp; Low education</td>
<td>H1 - High income &amp; High education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Auditel (1) Analysis: SportComLab of the “Alma Mater”.

The two socio-graphic profiles in table 7 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 the higher degree (bachelor). Moreover each of the other three socio-graphic 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.

These findings enrich the sport audience studies, both at the socio-graphic 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 fig. 6, was composed more frequently of the TV viewers living in Piedmont and the Aosta Valley.
Valley than by the inhabitants of Veneto, i.e. the Italian region where Enrico was born, and where he lives.

4.3. 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 ‘90s 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 distance between this and the much higher numbers obtained by the other sport mega-events, played in the same year.

The socio-graphic 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 fig. 8, 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 of 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.
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 HL, i.e. they have a High level of education, although Low incomes.

These differences with the socio- graphic 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 these pages I would suggest the importance of observing an emerging social structure, the ‘Sms triangle’, which is producing numerous
changes in cultural and political processes, from consumer choices to voting behaviors. 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 2011a). So one can say:

(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 sport mega-events. Three socio-graphic 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 socio-graphic 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 is it also 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.

These findings support the hypothesis that in Italy—as it happens in many other modernized 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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