

FAUSTO COLOMBO (ed.)

A Trivial Country

Essays on Media and Politics in Italy

MEDIA SPETTACOLO
PROCESSI CULTURALI
CONTRIBUTI

V&P

www.vitaepensiero.it

Le fotocopie per uso personale del lettore possono essere effettuate nei limiti del 15% di ciascun volume dietro pagamento alla SIAE del compenso previsto dall'art. 68, commi 4 e 5, della legge 22 aprile 1941 n. 633.

Le riproduzioni effettuate per finalità di carattere professionale, economico o commerciale o comunque per uso diverso da quello personale possono essere effettuate a seguito di specifica autorizzazione rilasciata da AIDRO, Corso di Porta Romana n. 108, 20122 Milano, e-mail: segreteria@aidro.org e sito web www.aidro.org

© 2010 Vita e Pensiero - Largo A. Gemelli, 1 - 20123 Milano
ISBN 978-88-343-1956-7

What Has Been and What Should Have Been The Representation of the Government's Performance in a Television Interview with Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi

1. *Introduction*

When they reconstruct the government's performance, both politicians in power and their interlocutors are likely to focus not only on what has happened but also on what *could* or *should* have happened. In making this comparison between reality and its alternatives, everyone makes reference to their own expectations or reference standards, that is, to what is perceived as 'normal' or 'right'. If the politician in power, and people who are on the same political side, seeks to emphasise the coincidence between the government's performance and these reference norms, others may instead emphasise the discrepancy between the performance and those same norms or other norms.

In this paper, we analyse how the representation of a government's performance may shape itself during a televised political debate. We examine an episode of a well known Italian infotainment programme, «Porta a Porta», devoted to the so-called 'Contract with the Italian people', a kind of programmatic commitment in five points that the future Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi made with Italians five years before, undertaking to respect it if he were elected. The presentation of the Contract, and the symbolic signing of this, took place during a past episode of the very same programme. In the present episode, Silvio Berlusconi, having reached the end of his mandate as head of government, takes up the points of the Contract, attempting to show that he has kept all the promises made. We could, therefore, say that, through reference to the Contract, Berlusconi himself tries to establish the norms with which to compare his performance in government. Managing to show a substantial coincidence between reality and expectations is obviously important for a politician to confirm his image as a competent and reliable person. Nevertheless, during the debate between Berlusconi and his interlocutors, it is not only the case that the coincidence between the performance and the norms referred to by the politician is placed in question, but also that a variety of other reference norms are evoked, which the

politician may not have met. These norms regard both the politician's performance and the way in which the politician communicates it to citizens through the media.

To carry out our analysis of how the representation is shaped through the comparison between reality and reference norms, we have adopted an interdisciplinary perspective, by combining a psychosocial with a socio-semiotic approach.

2. The Psychosocial Approach: A Comparison Between the Reality and the Norms Evoked by the Social Context

When we compare reality with its alternatives, what has happened with what could or should have happened, we use a particular type of reasoning, called counterfactual reasoning (Kahneman - Miller, 1986; Roes, 1997). Both in everyday life and in specific contexts (such as the political or the judicial ones), there are several circumstances in which we are given to thinking about how things might have turned out differently. In these circumstances, we generate hypothetical scenarios where a factual antecedent is mutated so as to undo the factual outcome. Sentences such as «If I had taken my usual route, I wouldn't have had that road accident» or «If our leader hadn't been involved in a scandal, we wouldn't have lost the election» are examples of counterfactuals. We are more likely to generate counterfactuals when we are faced up with events that we perceive as negative, or as exceptional, or in any event different from our expectations. The alternatives that are more likely to come to mind are those consistent with our expectations or reference standards with respect to that type of event. These standards may concern what is 'normal', in the sense of what usually happens in similar circumstances, or what is 'normative', in the sense of what should happen in similar circumstances. In some cases, the counterfactuals deriving from reference to what is normal and to what is normative may coincide (Catellani - Milesi, 2006). For instance, at the origin of the counterfactual «If our leader hadn't been involved in a scandal, we wouldn't have lost the election» there may be the reference standard whereby «leaders are not usually involved in scandals», but also that whereby «leaders should not be involved in scandals».

Psychosocial research has shown that counterfactual thinking has a significant influence on the process of event explanation, the identification of responsibilities and guilt in relation to these events, as well as the planning of future actions. In the present study, our attention is especially focused on

how counterfactual thinking can be used strategically in a televised political debate, in order to defend or criticise the performance of a politician in power. In our classification of counterfactuals employed in the political debate we make reference to the Social Context Model of Counterfactual Constraints (SCMCC) (Catellani - Milesi, 2005), according to which counterfactual thinking is constrained by reference to two main categories of norms: *a)* norms triggered by the social context in which the event focused on took place; *b)* norms triggered by the social and communicative context in which the event is reconstructed. Consistently, we assume that counterfactuals expressed both by a politician in power and by the politician's interlocutors may be influenced: *a)* by the social context in which the government's performance took place; *b)* by the communicative context in which the government's performance is reconstructed.

As regards the government's performance, among the reference norms evoked in the counterfactuals there might be the performance of previous governments in the same nation or governments of other nations; or else there might be ideal performances based on general and shared laws governing politics and economics (cf. Tetlock - Henik, 2005). For example, a journalist might ask a politician: «Why, in a situation of crisis of consumer spending such as this, has the government reduced taxes for the high income population sector without reducing them for those on low incomes, as other governments have done?» The last part of the question implicitly includes the counterfactual: «If the government had reduced taxes for the low income population sectors, then things would have been better».

As regards the communication context in which the government's performance is reconstructed, we should consider that the televised debate is a highly ritualised communicative context (as is, for instance, the context of court proceedings) and it is therefore characterised by the presence of a host of norms, to which people are expected to conform. These norms may concern the turn-taking between the interlocutors, the degree of conflict deemed acceptable, the level of complexity that the discourse can have, and so on. If some of these norms concern the relations between direct interlocutors, that is, those actually present in the television studio (politicians, journalists, experts, the audience, etc.), others concern the relations with the indirect interlocutors, namely the viewers and, more generally, the electors. The specific format of the programme within which the political debate takes place may lead to a further definition of the communicative reference standards. For example, the programme «Porta a Porta» that we are discussing is typically characterised by the presence of a low level of conflict

between the interlocutors and broad scope for the politician guests to express their positions without being contradicted or interrupted by the host.

It is more than likely, therefore, that in a televised political debate the interlocutors sometimes focus not so much on the contents of the debate as on the communicative context of it, highlighting the violation of one or more context-related communicative standards. For instance, a journalist could say to a politician: «Instead of answering my question on what you have done, you have set about attacking your political adversaries» and in this way implicitly express the counterfactual «If you had answered to my question, your communication would have been more appropriate».

To summarise, we might say that when we express a counterfactual we highlight that a reference norm has been disregarded. In this way the norm, that might otherwise have gone unnoticed, is made salient. If the context in which this happens is of the dialogue type, then it is very likely that the expression of counterfactuals corresponds to the emergence of a (more or less accentuated) conflict between the interlocutors, due to the fact that one of the interlocutors points out to the other that a normative expectation has been violated.

3. The Socio-semiotic Approach: Television Editing and Viewing Figures

To test whether the use of counterfactuals focused on the performance of the politician in power or on his/her way of communicating raises the emotional climate of the programme, we may analyse the verbal (and/or non-verbal) reactions of the participants. However, other elements proper to the television medium may also be usefully analysed. In this study, we focused our attention on the rhythm of the direction and the fluctuations in viewing figures (Casetti - Di Chio, 1998; Grasso - Scaglioni, 2003).

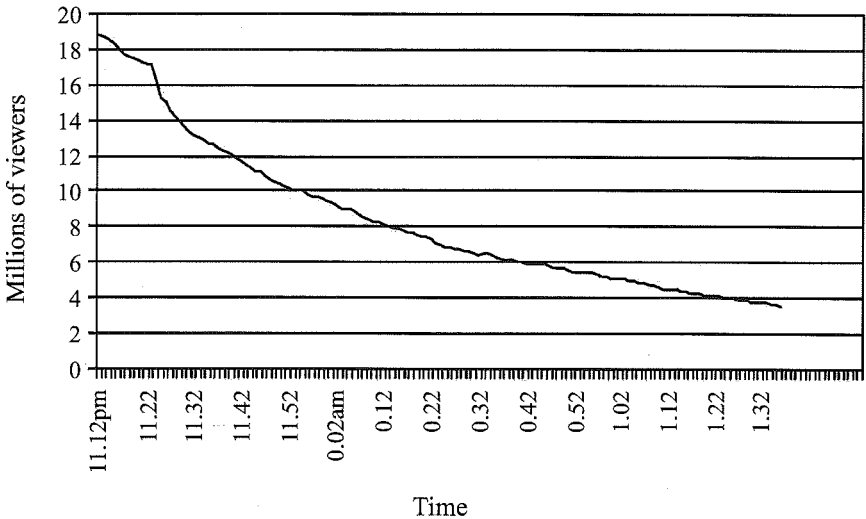
The direction choices, from the identification of the shot to the rhythm of the editing, constrain what the viewers see (e.g., either the speaker or the reactions of the listeners) and what they are asked to direct their attention to (a movement, a mannerism, a certain object or notice, but also the very discourse that one of the participants is developing).

As regards the variations in viewing figures, they may be considered, at least partially, as indicators of the attention that viewers devote to the programme they are watching. The minute-by-minute audience flow on the Auditel TV ratings may offer a quantitative indicator of the viewing dynamics. In order to do this, we must first of all distinguish between two differ-

ent kinds of viewing dynamics: *schedule-driven dynamics* and *text-driven dynamics*.

Schedule-driven dynamics depend on the entire landscape of the broadcasting output at a specific time. In this case, relevant factors are: a) the end of prime time programming and the re-distribution of viewers between the national channels after 11 p.m.; b) the decrease in the overall audience of the broadcasting over the night time period (Figure 1).

Fig. 1 - Minute by minute viewing figures of terrestrial broadcasting on December 19th, 2005



Text-driven dynamics are more specific dynamics depending on the construction of the programme itself and on the audience flow it is able to generate. In this case, the relevant factor seems to be the *talk and dialectic animation* during the programme. In short, in the minute-by-minute audience flow we can see an increase in ratings during the more conflict-ridden and combative phases of the debate.

Distinguishing between schedule-driven and text-driven dynamics is particularly useful for identifying and isolating the most viewed moments of the programme, bypassing the increasing/decreasing logic depending on schedule reasons.

4. *Aims and Hypotheses*

Our analysis of how the representation of the government's performance is constructed in the televised debate was focused on the comparisons, as referred to by the participants in the debate, between the actual and the expected performance of the politician in power. As already mentioned, we hypothesised that reference to a reality different from expectations through the use of counterfactuals would increase the level of conflict between the politician and his interlocutors, and that this would in turn be reflected in the rhythm of the television direction and the viewing figures for the programme. Research on communication conflict often makes reference to a distinction between an *ad rem* communicative conflict, focusing on the contents of the communication exchange, and an *ad personam* communicative conflict, focusing on the interaction, and often more generally on the relationship between the interlocutors (Mizzau, 2002; Watzlawick - Beavin - Jackson, 1967). Using this type of distinction in our analysis, we expected counterfactuals focused on the politician's actions to favour the emergence of an *ad rem* conflict, in which the interlocutors would clash over a different view of the contents of the debate. On the contrary, we expected counterfactuals focused on the politician's communication methods to more easily bring about the emergence of an *ad personam* conflict, in which the interlocutors would end up attacking each other as people, accusing each other of being incapable of establishing an appropriate communicative relationship.

5. *Method*

5.1. The TV Programme

The analysed episode of the programme «Porta a Porta» took place on the first RAI channel on 19 December, 2005. The main guest was, as mentioned, Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi. Among the other guests, in the studio there was trade unionist Luigi Angeletti; remote guests, visible on large screens, were journalist Vittorio Feltri and industrialist Diego Della Valle.

The analyses carried out on this programme concern the presence of counterfactuals in the debate, the editing of the television programme and the viewing figures, in accordance with the criteria specified below.

5.2. Analysis of Counterfactuals

Counterfactual thinking can be expressed in the discourse explicitly through the use of hypothetical periods of unreality. More frequently, however, it is conveyed implicitly, through linguistic indicators alluding to scenarios that have never occurred in reality or to unrealised expectations. In order to identify the counterfactuals present in the programme examined by us, the whole text was first transcribed word-by-word and then analysed, identifying the linguistic indicators of counterfactual thinking (Catellani - Milesi, 2001; Sanna - Turley, 1996), which are summarised below.

1) Hypothetical conjunctions used in hypothetical periods of unreality (of the type *if...then...*), gerunds and relative pronouns with hypothetical value of unreality. For example, the sentence: «A tremendous success that could never, ever have been brought home by someone *who was not* authoritative» implicitly hints at the counterfactual hypothesis: «That success would not have been achieved if someone had not been authoritative».

2) Conjunctions, adverbs and adverbial syntagms making reference to scenarios that have never occurred in reality or to expectations that have not been met (e.g., *you can't exactly, without, even, not even, besides*). For example, in the sentence: «There are 3701 neighbourhood policemen in the vast territory that is Italy, but *you can't exactly* do it like that, with a wave of the hand, and have people take up a new profession» a counterfactual is implicit of the following type: «If only we could have people that take up a new profession with a wave of the hand...».

3) Reinforcing or superlative adverbs and extreme formulations indicating that a phenomenon has occurred to a decidedly greater/lesser degree, or very differently, compared to what we expected (e.g., *indeed, truly, never, nobody*). For example, in the sentence: «I can tell you that there has indeed been a *truly* important decrease in all offences that harm people» a counterfactual is implicit of the following type: «If there had not been such an important decrease in offences...».

4) Negations (for example, *not*) both when they are contained in allusive and polemical, often accusatory passages, in which a comparison is established between what has happened and what could/should have happened and when they are contained in passages that rebut accusations that they could/should have acted differently. For example, in the sentence: «Let us always remember this, that we have inherited problems, we did *not* create them» an implicit counterfactual is contained of the following type: «If we had been the ones who created the problems...».

As well as to identify the counterfactual reasoning, the indicators listed above have been used to highlight prefactual reasoning. This second type of reasoning is similar to the first, since it too involves a mental process in which alternative scenarios to reality are simulated. The difference between the two types of reasoning consists in the fact that in the case of counterfactual reasoning the scenarios simulated mentally concern the past, whereas in the case of prefactual reasoning they concern the future. The linguistic indicators used for the analysis of prefactual reasoning are therefore wholly similar to those described above, with the only difference that all the scenarios envisaged are projected into the future.

5.3. Analyses of the Editing of the TV Programme and the Viewing Figures

Two socio-semiotic analyses were carried out on this programme, in accordance with the criteria we specify below.

The first consists of recognition of the direction techniques employed. We focused in particular on two dimensions: the *rhythm* associated with the more or less fast succession of shots (longer sustained shots correspond to a slower rhythm and vice versa) and the *type of shot* employed (Barbieri, 1996). In both cases we made a comparisons between the sections of the programme including counterfactuals and the rest of the programme.

«Porta a Porta» always has a certain arrangement of the participants in the studio, with a contrast between the host standing and the guests seated, as well as the 'remote' guests visible on large screens behind the guests in the studio. Corresponding to this is a certain rhythm of the editing, which is mainly concentrated on the speaking guest, but quite regularly also samples the listening behaviour of the audience in the studio, the other guests and the host himself. If this rhythm may be considered as the norm of this programme, in our analysis we focused attention on the deviations from this norm, which may consist in the speeding up or slowing down of the rhythm of the editing, or the changing of the type of shot that acts as the basis for the staging of the programme.

The second socio-semiotic analysis regards the viewing figures. Here too we did an analysis by comparison, focusing on the deviations from the norm of the programme. To evaluate the effectiveness of given sections of the programme, we compared the number of viewers watching a given section of the programme with the mean number of viewers of that programme. In doing this comparison, we also took into account the general trend of the

television audience at that time of the day. «Porta a Porta» is a programme in the late evening segment of the television broadcast, when viewing figures tend naturally to decline as the minutes go by. Therefore, a section of the programme can be considered effective not only if the related viewing figures increase, but also if they remain the same, despite the natural tendency towards reduction.

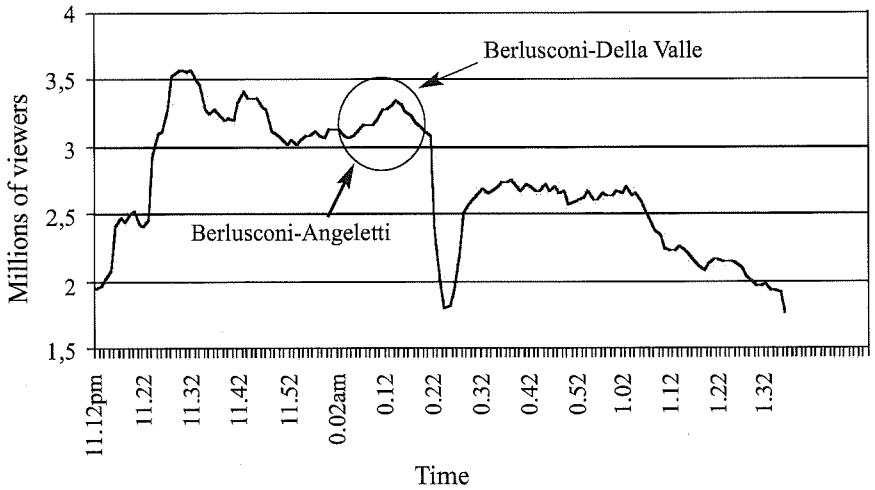
6. Results

As already mentioned in the introduction, the first norms referred to in the programme examined by us are those suggested by Berlusconi himself. The government's performance is compared with the five points provided for by the so-called 'Contract with the Italian People', signed by Berlusconi five years earlier in an episode of the same programme. In a section of the programme characterised by a low level of conflict (i.e., with relatively obliging interlocutors, host Bruno Vespa and the editor-in-chief of a right-wing newspaper, Vittorio Feltri), Berlusconi has the opportunity to say that there has been a substantial correspondence between the performance of the government and the expectations defined by the Contract with the Italian People. Where these expectations have not been met, this has been for exceptional, unpredictable, and uncontrollable reasons.

More interesting for our purposes is the analysis of two subsequent sections of the programme, in which two less obliging interlocutors (trade unionist Luigi Angeletti and industrialist Diego Della Valle) focus their attention on normative expectations that are different from those initially set by Berlusconi, highlighting (through recourse to counterfactuals) that these expectations have not been met. While the first of the two interlocutors places the emphasis on a violation of expectations regarding the government's actions, the second places the emphasis on a violation of expectations regarding how the government's performance has been communicated to the electorate.

It is late in the evening, and the normal trend for viewing would be a gradual and increasingly significant reduction as time goes by. Instead, as can be seen in Figure 2, between 11:58 p.m. and 00:14 a.m. the opposite takes place: First a stabilisation and then a rather significant growth in viewing figures. Let us see what happens during this period of time.

Fig. 2 - Minute by minute viewing figures of the analysed programme. Interaction between Berlusconi and Angeletti and between Berlusconi and Della Valle is highlighted



6.1. Focus on the Politician's Performance: Ad Rem Conflict

The first communicative exchange on which we focus our attention is that between Berlusconi and Angeletti. In his speech, the trade unionist rejects the reference norms established by Berlusconi from the outset, that is, those included in the 'Contract with the Italian People', and instead makes reference to other norms, other expectations that would have been entirely ignored by the government. The debated issue is the difficult economic situation of the country, and replying to a Berlusconi's statement Angeletti says:

A: So, either misfortune or the euro have not been, so to speak, the real, the real reasons... the real reasons have been others, that, for example, we had, for a long time, been asking the Government to do two things that seemed to us to be sensible: the first was not to have all those taxes on wage increases paid; the second was to revalue pensions. You have not done either one or the other. (...) The vast majority of the Italian population has an income... below thirty thousand euros... right? ... these people should have been helped and since financial resources are not, unfortunately, unlimited, you should have done what we suggested, concentrate all the resources on these people, not make us pay the taxes on the wage increases, because contractual increases are only received by employed workers, and revalue pensions. It was a matter of making two specific choices!

In the above quotation, as in those that will follow, the linguistic indicators of counterfactuals are underlined and the whole text of the implicit counterfactuals is reported in italics. If stated explicitly, the above counterfactuals would have been: «If the government had not had all those taxes on wage increases paid, things would now be going better», «If the government had revalued pensions, things would now be going better», and so on.

Berlusconi replies in various ways to Angeletti, which is already in itself a signal of the tension created in him by the accusation of the trade unionist.

Initially, Berlusconi denies the violation of the expectations referred to by Angeletti in his speech.

B: That's what we have done!

A: But that's not true; you've done the opposite!

Then Berlusconi counterattacks, saying that other expectations have been violated by the trade unionists.

B:... These gentlemen have held twenty thousand strikes in the last two years. When the Left was in power strikes could be counted on the fingers of your hands. Why did you not come out with these things with the Left, since they existed then too?

Subsequently, he highlights that the respecting of the norm referred to by Angeletti would have been impossible or would have had negative consequences.

B:... six million people that can be in conditions that we consider difficult... now, there isn't exactly the possibility for the State to go and support pensions with payments that are for every month, for every year, so they have a profound effect on the government budget for everyone.

Thus, in this phase of the programme, we note an escalation in the conflict between the interlocutors. The analysis of the editing seems to confirm this departure from the normal course of the programme and, as we have already said, viewing figures visibly increase.

Let us focus on the editing rhythm in some more detail. At the beginning of the exchange between Berlusconi and Angeletti the editing rhythm substantially coincides with the mean rhythm of the whole programme (around 7 seconds per shot). After Angeletti accusation (see above), the rhythm of the editing sensibly increases. In the period of time between

minute 50' 58" and minute 52' 30", we count 28 shots, with a mean duration of about 3 seconds each. The fast and furious nature of the verbal exchanges between the protagonists and the overlapping of voices makes it very difficult for the direction to alternate shots between the speaker and the listener as usual. The direction tries to follow the speaker, who nevertheless changes continuously. There emerges a fast rhythm, capable of grabbing the attention of the viewer (probably already drawn by the simple verbal conflict as such). This thesis is supported by the trend of the audience, where precisely in these minutes there is a halt to the descent, typical of this evening segment of the TV broadcast (see Figure 2).

It is interesting to note that the viewers' attention increases precisely at the moment when it is hardest to follow the arguments, due to the excitement of the discourse, to the overlapping voices and to the very alternation of images.

6.2. Focus on the Politician's Communication: *Ad Personam* Conflict

But the viewing figures reach their peak in a subsequent moment during the programme, when Diego Della Valle, a well known Italian entrepreneur, intervenes in the debate, shifting the attention from expectations related to the government's performance to those related to the way of communicating this performance, and notes that Berlusconi has not met these expectations. In his speech, Della Valle makes reference to a communication strategy used by Berlusconi in the first part of the programme: to illustrate the actions of his government by showing tables and drawings representing the social sectors that, in his view, had benefited particularly from his government.

DV: But, well, I repeat, I don't want to make a political discourse, believe me. As a citizen and as an entrepreneur, I only want you to be aware of some things. As a citizen: we do not need campaigns where someone goes around with some leaflets and thinks that we are all illiterate... and shows us how things have been done... why? Italians are not illiterate and, above all, if for an instant you close your eyes and think about a family of normal people who work in a factory, with a child who is studying and with an aunt receiving a pension, none of these has a relaxed future, we cannot present them with a leaflet again and say that tomorrow everything will be all right.

Through the use of negation («we do not need...»; «we cannot...»), Della Valle clearly highlights the fact that the communication norms used by Berlusconi are not the ones he should have kept to. Thereafter, he introduces the reference to how we expect a politician to communicate, arousing a

strong reaction from Berlusconi, who initially seems to share the new reference norms, but then denies them firmly.

DV: I would be happier as a citizen if you were to say: we have been able to do some things, others we have not ...

B: That is what I am saying!

DV:... we haven't been able to do them for these reasons, I, Berlusconi, have got a series of things wrong...

B: None!

DV:... which are the followings...

B: None!

DV:... and I think that if you give me time...

B: None!

DV:... I will do the others well.

B: None!

The use of the present tense to describe an expected communication behaviour increases the perception that this behaviour has a value as a reference standard that is always valid. It is also a way to emphasise that Berlusconi has not followed this standard in the past and is likely not to follow it in the future. This is clearly made explicit in the passage that immediately follows, in which Della Valle draws inspiration from Berlusconi's reaction in order to explore fully the comparison between reality and expectations.

DV: But if you say that you have not got any wrong, in 50 million houses they are smiling now, because in every house you have got at least one thing wrong. Therefore, as a marketing expert, as you are, I only wish to tell you this: I repeat, the evils of this country do not all come from the Berlusconi government, which does have some responsibility for them, but they are structural and come from way back. But, as an entrepreneur, what I ask you is... we need to make a very strong ethical point, we need those who govern us now to place the respecting of the norms at the first place... the morality and the support for others, and, incidentally, above all for those who are in the most need. If we do not do these things, this country will never get started again, we can't say that we're competitive. You are now forced to be in Rome to work, let's say, but for me and for many entrepreneurs like me, large and small, who have to go around the world and see what's happening, I assure you that life is hard. So, we need those who govern us today and who will govern us tomorrow to give us the credibility that is to one side, near to us, to sustain us and consequently also those who work with us. If I see you arriving with a leaflet where you have done a few doodles, then I despair, do you understand?

In this passage, more than the presence of counterfactuals, we can observe the presence, even explicit, of prefactuals, that is, hypothetical future scenarios (e.g., «If we do not do these things, this country will never get started again»). If, as regards the past, the evocation of an expectation, and therefore counterfactual reasoning, is equivalent to the accusation that the interlocutor has not behaved as he should have, as regards the future, the evocation of an expectation, and therefore prefactual reasoning, has the underlying idea that the interlocutor will probably not behave as he should.

Therefore, underlining that Berlusconi has infringed the rules of communication with citizens leads Della Valle to question Berlusconi's very capacity to establish a relationship of trust with citizens. At this point, the attack no longer relates to the contents, but rather to the person (*ad personam* conflict) and it is no surprise that this brings about the emergence of a situation of maximum conflict between the interlocutors. The evidence of this is the long response from Berlusconi, which we will not show here in full, but which begins with a strong attack on Della Valle as a person: «I am embarrassed by the way in which you frame the question, because truly I had never ... I did not believe that an entrepreneur could descend to such levels of demagoguery».

In this phase the viewing figures show a further increase in the surge of interest in the programme. The viewing figures are increasing, going against the usual trend towards reduction that is typical of this phase of TV broadcast in the evening (Figure 2).

From the point of view of the direction, the rhythm of the shots is just a little above average, not showing the same excitement that we noted in the case of Angeletti. Nevertheless, here too the direction style is different from the normal course of the programme. To get an idea of what happens, we should remember that Della Valle – unlike Angeletti – is a remote guest and appears on a screen behind Berlusconi. This enables the two interlocutors to be included in a single shot: on the right the whole figure of Berlusconi seated; in the background, Della Valle, in a higher position. This shot is present in 80" of the 138" of the overall duration of the section (57%). It enables us to follow both Della Valle's arguments and the Prime Minister's observations-interruptions, as well as the signs of nervousness and tension from both. In this way it is possible to avoid continuous movement from one interlocutor to the other, so the viewer can easily follow the dialogue. Furthermore, the direction chooses to reduce to a minimum the other types of shots usually employed in this programme (shots of the audience in the studio, of the other guests and of the host), instead concentrating the attention on the two rivals.

7. Conclusions

Our analysis has highlighted that the strategic evocation of alternative scenarios to the real ones is one of the ways through which politicians, journalists, and so-called opinion-makers construct the representation of the government's performance through political debates (also probably orienting the representation and evaluation of this performance by citizens). In the political debate analysed by us, the interlocutors often compare what happened with what could or should have happened (counterfactual reasoning) or with what could happen in the future (prefactual reasoning). These comparisons between reality and possible alternatives appear to be conditioned not only by reference to the social context in which the government's actions developed, but also by the communication and media context in which this action is reconstructed (see Social Context Model of Counterfactual Constraints, SCMCC, Catellani - Milesi, 2005).

Increasingly, in today's politics, it seems clear that the gaining of consent depends not only on the quality of the action or the political programme as such, but also, if not above all, on the way in which these are communicated, given the increasing importance acquired by media in politics. Not coincidentally, perhaps the event that has most characterised the 2006 general election campaign in Italy was the tug of war between Prodi and Berlusconi over the rules that should characterise their TV face-off. Consistent with this, from our analysis it has clearly emerged that what is questioned in televised political debates is not only the politician's performance, but also the way the politician communicates. As we have seen, while the focus on the politician's performance facilitates the emergence in the debate of an *ad rem* communication conflict, the focus on the politician's methods of communication is more likely to determine the emergence of an *ad personam* communication conflict, which is notoriously more intense than the previous kind and, probably for this reason, also more effective in attracting the attention of the TV audience.

The evocation of a contrast between reality and expectations therefore facilitates the emergence of a communication conflict and this in turn increases the attention of the viewers. These dynamics can be used in various ways by the protagonists in politics. In some cases, the comparison between various alternative scenarios, as well as the communication conflict and the increase in attention that derives from this, may serve to give us a greater understanding of politics by citizens, in the sense that citizens find themselves interested in evaluating a series of elements that are useful for mak-

ing a knowledgeable political choice. In other cases, the alternative scenarios proposed and the communication conflicts deriving from them can have the sole purpose of increasing the audience, and, after all, of increasing political conflict as an end in itself. In these cases an increase in the attention of citizens probably does not correspond to any increase in their political knowledge, but if anything a worsening of the prejudices already established. Hence the importance of setting rules so that the role of reasoning more than that of spectacle may be emphasised. It is no coincidence that the already mentioned face-to-face programme featuring Prodi and Berlusconi registered high viewing figures even though the rules for the direction were totally rigid and non-violable.

The examination of how the representation of politics is constructed through the media and of what the consequences are on the representation of politics by citizens surely needs to be studied in further depth. To do this it certainly appears useful, or even necessary, to integrate various disciplinary approaches, such as those of social psychology and socio-semiotics. The research presented here, the result of the collaboration between people working in these different disciplines, has been an attempt to progress in this direction.

References

- BARBIERI, D. (1996), *Questioni di ritmo. L'analisi tensiva del testo televisivo*, Eri-Rai VKPT, Roma.
- CATELLANI, P. - MILESI, P. (2005), *When the Social Context Frames the Case: Counterfactuals in the Courtroom*, in D.R. MANDEL - D.J. HILTON - P. CATELLANI (eds.), *The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, pp. 183-198, Routledge, London.
- CATELLANI, P. - MILESI, P. (2001), *Counterfactuals and Roles: Mock Victims' and Perpetrators' Accounts of Judicial Cases*, «European Journal of Social Psychology», 31, pp. 247-264.
- CATELLANI, P. - MILESI, P. (2006), *Juries in Italy: Social and Legal Norms in Sentencing*, in M.F. KAPLAN - A.M. MARTIN (eds.) *Understanding World Juries Through Psychological Research*, pp. 125-145, Psychology Press, New York.
- CASETTI, F. - DI CHIO, F. (1998), *Analisi della televisione*, Bompiani, Milano.
- GRASSO, A. - SCAGLIONI, M. (2003), *Che cos'è la televisione*, Garzanti, Milano.
- KAHNEMAN, D. - MILLER, D.T. (1986), *Norm theory: Comparing reality to its alternatives*, «Psychological Review», 93, pp. 136-153.

MIZZAU, M. (2002), *E tu allora? Il conflitto nella comunicazione quotidiana*. il Mulino, Bologna.

ROESE, N.J. (1997), *Counterfactual Thinking*, «Psychological Bulletin», 121, pp. 133-148.

SANNA, L.J. - TURLEY, K.J. (1996), *Antecedents to Spontaneous Counterfactual Thinking: Effects of Expectancy Violation and Outcome Valence*, «Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin», 22, pp. 906-919.

TETLOCK, P.E. - HENIK, E. (2005), *Theory- Versus Imagination- Driven Thinking about Historical Counterfactuals. Are we Prisoners of our Preconceptions?* in D.R. MANDEL - D.J. HILTON - P. CATELLANI (eds.), *The Psychology of Counterfactual thinking*, pp. 199-216, Routledge, London.

WATZLAWICK, J.H. - BEAVIN, D. - JACKSON, D. (1967), *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*, Norton, New York.