


Article

“Intolerant Television”—The Coverage on Antisemitic Events in Italian Television News in 2019–2022

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Abstract: Communicative misunderstandings, cultural misinterpretations, and tribal hatreds are not phenomena that emerge and develop only in the digital world. Within platforms, conflicts explode and circulate mainly in crisis situations, but the relationship (constructive or destructive) with the similar and the different, as well as the narration of the symbolic meanings of specific cultural events, originate first and foremost in interpersonal relationships, institutional political contexts, and the representations (and consumption) of traditional media, such as the television space. Italian television is still one of the reference means of communication for the majority of the population, a figure that has been recorded especially during the recent pandemic emergency despite the significant collapse in advertising investments. Hatred, especially anti-Semitic hatred, is increasingly present in the information ecology, linked to nationalist narratives or aimed at restoring traditional values and fuelling an already highly polarised political debate in a now “dense” public sphere. In particular, during the health crisis, television journalists found it very difficult to report in depth on cases of discrimination or COVID-19.

Keywords: media pseudo-science; incivility; hate speech; religion; Italy



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1. Introduction

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the field of Italian television journalism becomes even more overloaded with (hybrid) news related to anti-Semitic phenomena.

For research purposes, it is important to remember the exceptional nature of this relatively recent event.

A situation that was perhaps unpredictable or simply one of the side effects of global society, a global shock forced billions of people to stop and lock themselves up at home, leaving schools, factories, and offices for months on end (Giaccardi and Magatti 2020).

In a society that is constantly evolving and striving for continuous progress where risks are no longer simply related to the consequences of a single decision but arise from the aggregate effects of the entire social organisation, the inability (or unwillingness) to think and the lack of foresight have increased exposure to a multiplicity of possible shocks, capable of affecting the whole of humanity (Beck 2000).

In an emergency, what is taken for granted breaks down and everything is called into question.

The common experience is one of psychic alienation and the partial or total disintegration of collective frames of reference.

David Lockwood (1992) uses the term “anomic declassification” to describe the situation in which there is a vertical collapse of the system of legitimate beliefs (roles, power relations, collective goals) that support a particular social order. This is a state of perceptual,

economic, normative, and informational disorder that brings to light tensions, doubts, and new beliefs.

From March 2020, the spread of COVID-19 imposed an isolation for many weeks, with opening and closing phases, affecting many nations including Italy. This lasted until mid-2021.

The term that best characterised the pandemic period was, unsurprisingly, “infodemic”, first coined by the political scientist David Rothkopf (2003) and then reused by the World Health Organisation during the health emergency.

Infodemic refers to the presence of an overload of news about a particular event that confuses public opinion, overwhelms the media, and undermines institutions, as it strongly affects our minds and our ability to process multiple pieces of information correctly. Some facts, writes Rothkopf (2003), mixed with fear, rumours, speculation, amplified and transmitted around the world by modern information technologies, have the ability to influence the economies, politics, and the security of many nations.

To the “historical hatreds” that target minorities, ideologies, and other beliefs, culminating in violent extremism, we now add forms of hatred that are less structured and less identifiable according to the criteria of political ideology or racial or religious discrimination. A particular type of hatred is emerging that we could define as “social” (Monaci 2022), understood in a double sense—as an extension of the phenomenon of “hate” and its normalisation in a communicative register and, at the same time, as a daily narrative and storytelling, widespread in old and new media environments (Boccia et al. 2022).

Social hatred is becoming a dominant register in many forms of communication, such as journalistic, political, and legal communication, regardless of the opinions expressed and the content published. What is at stake, therefore, is not only respect for the other and the quality of information, which is now saturated, but also the credibility (and responsibility) of all actors who interact and who create, distribute, and consume media products.

This is accompanied by new and constantly changing communicative trends, namely infodemics, conspiracy theories, new racisms, and denials (Faloppa 2020). In particular, they range from trivialisation to the denial of the Shoah, actions accompanied by gestures of intimidation and violence, which affect many Western countries and which take on paroxysmal tones in Eastern Europe and Arab countries.

Violent anti-Semitic phenomena, which then grow in the online scenario, feed on the logic of the new media and the transparency and interconnectedness of the digital environment, exploiting the persuasive mechanisms generated by infotainment, the invasion (now overlapping) of spectacle/entertainment into the information space and vice versa (Sfardini and Mazzoleni 2007; Sorrentino and Splendore 2022).

A process that has transformed the treatment of real events (a characteristic element of journalism) into an increasingly less journalistic exclusive has led to the triumph of reality TV and reality shows (Sorrentino and Splendore 2022; Ziccardi 2016; Faloppa 2020).

It is precisely this constant oscillation between fiction and reality and the non-substantive nature of information, accompanied by the bureaucratic organisation of the world by journalists, that has favoured the transition from the information age to that of “post-journalism” (Altheide and Snow 1991; Mir 2020), that is to say, to an era characterised by news that do not arise from the reality of facts but from decisions or needs of centres of power that guide the parable of news and decide its disappearance. The perverse mechanism of media shows, such as talk shows, reinforces and imposes the birth, development, domination, and cancellation of artificial news or news born from the deformation of facts until they are reduced to the desired material.

The point is that there is a profound difference between staged violence and represented violence. The representation of violence can serve different individual purposes

and social functions. It can channel and control violence by giving it a ritual form and allowing the public to participate vicariously, or it can itself generate or encourage violent dispositions and behaviours, for example, on the fringes of religious or sporting events or following exposure to violence in the mass media (Gunter et al. 2003). In this sense, even the narrative of hate and the representation of violence can become a mechanism capable of producing conflict and forms of violence in turn (Gili 2005).

Such narratives have long been present in many media environments, starting with painting, literature and theatre. From the 19th century onwards, journalistic reports in the press, on the radio, and later, on television, began to include details of the crudest and most gruesome colours of history, with reference to verbal violence, murders, executions, and disasters caused by man or nature (Gili 2005). Hatred and forms of violence, including those with discriminatory aims, are therefore nothing new in the television and platform media landscape.

More generally, it is a question of understanding the specific “shape” that forms of violence have taken and are taking today in electronic and digital media and, more generally, how they are linked to the mechanisms of the contemporary cultural industry, taking into account, on the one hand, the processes of convergence that have led to the incorporation in new media of some technical functions typical of more traditional means and the change in the technical skills specific to information operators and, on the other hand, the transformation of the audience and of consumption methods/participation.

With regard to this last aspect, it is important to emphasise, for the purposes of the research results presented below, that the reception of information produced by the media is above all a routine activity that overlaps and interacts in various ways with other practises and behaviours of daily life. Each medium, such as the television analysed here, is linked to specific concrete practises of exposure, more or less focused or distracted, occasional or continuous, individual or communal, involving habits, times, and spaces of daily life (Sfardini and Mazzoleni 2007; Monaci 2022). Furthermore, reception always takes place in structured contexts alongside broader socio-cultural contexts and requires specific skills and abilities, such as the ability to recognise and understand languages and genres (Gili 2005).

2. Media Spaces of Violence

The recent literature (Ziccardi 2016; Pasta 2018; Faloppa 2020; Littler 2020) explores the problem of hate in relation to the capacity of information technology to incite new discriminatory and intolerant behaviours.

Since 2017, according to a recent OSCE report, hate crimes have also increased in Italy and mainly concern racism and xenophobia, where Jews and immigrants seem to be the main targets. At the same time, other research (Jo Cox Committee 2017; Idos 2018; Vox 2018; Rome Charter Report 2018) underlines how narratives within traditional and digital media appear rather fragmented, violent, confused, and intolerant in the history of the other and diversity.

Within this complex and worrying scenario, in recent years in Italy and Europe, issues of a different nature have emerged that are not easy to resolve, such as the relationship between immigration and terrorism after the 2015 Paris attacks or the existence of a link between the right to information and citizens’ freedom of expression following serious cases of information manipulation, such as the Brexit case or the 2016 American presidential elections, where there was a very bitter debate between the Republican magnate Donald Trump and the Democratic Front candidate Hilary Clinton (Hassan and Pinelli 2022).

Another rather important topic recently discussed in the public and scientific panorama, after the one related to fake news, is in fact that of hate speech, a term coined by

American jurisprudence to define the use of a denigrating, unconventional language full of intolerance, with the sole purpose of insulting those who think differently or creating discrimination against certain social categories (Buoncompagni 2021).

In the wake of information disorder and the search for victims to hate, the issue of journalistic coverage of reality moves, starting from print and television journalism, the risk of distortion, and the institutionalisation of procedures for selecting, hierarchising, and treating newsworthy material.

There is a risk that the choice of what to report will be determined not by what the public expects but by what the other media or the communication system as a whole expects. “Saying to be believed”, an identifying element of journalism, is replaced by “saying to avoid making mistakes” in the direction of homologating production choices and conforming to mainstream ideas (Neuman 2017).

As highlighted by Marwick and Lewis (2017), the contemporary information space is also inhabited by subjects and groups who act in a hidden manner, proposing topics and points of view to journalists and operating through practises that can mutually influence mainstream media and platforms and thus the complex circuit of public debate. Their tactics often include the practice of sharing content from local newspapers that contains minimal false news in order to gain credibility in the overall information system by impersonating individual profiles that ideologically support this narrative.

These are actors who operate in a mix of ideological motivations, economic–political goals, and entertainment dynamics and who derive satisfaction from manipulating the official media system.

The networks do not discriminate on the basis of the authenticity of the content; in reality, this would be the task of the users: their behaviour in this respect can make a difference, for example, by choosing to quote an external source or to criticise a news story.

Often, the multiplicity of information is presented without context or its original source; it is perceived as “noise” in cognitive terms, since the same fact can have diametrically opposed interpretations or be refuted by other information. Rumours, gossip, and unverified news constantly emerge about war situations, celebrities, economic indicators, election campaigns, and government programmes and are tweeted, shared, endorsed, publicly discussed, and become part of the new media ecosystem (Kapferere 2012).

Even in the specific case examined, that of the media representation of hybrid forms of hatred and anti-Semitism, this risk is run.

Among the various forms of hostility and aggression towards others, anti-Semitism today represents a peculiar and worryingly growing phenomenon throughout Europe.

According to the Jerusalem Post, with an average of at least ten incidents per day, 2021 was the most anti-Semitic year of the last decade for the European continent (Reich 2021). At a global level, the World Zionist Organization defines the spread of anti-Semitic episodes as “worrying”, even in Italy. It is no coincidence that in the recent Map of Intolerance, created by the Vox Rights Observatory (2023), Jews are the fourth cluster on which the greatest number of negative tweets fall in Italy (after women, homosexuals, and disabled people).

It is an ancient hatred, the longest-lasting in the history of humanity, expressed towards the Jews as such or—as Jean-Paul Sartre observed—even in the absence of Jews, influenced by deep-rooted fears and prejudices, a hatred that translates into a discriminatory attitude that fuels “political incivility” (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2021) aggravated by information overload and the proliferation of conspiratorial ideas (Santerini 2020).

This incivility was partly already visible in media spaces well before 2021.

In the first months of 2018, Amnesty International reported the presence of 787 offensive, racist, and discriminatory public messages. The reports were attributed mainly to

political candidates during the election campaign, of which 77 were subsequently elected. Added to this are episodes of anti-Semitism (251) recorded during 2018, +66% compared to 2017, which is also a reflection of the political and economic climate in Italy. Many cases can be linked to events that see Jews and/or the State of Israel at the centre of attention connected to migratory flows towards our country, such as Remembrance Day, the Giro d'Italia starting from Israel and the celebration of his 70 years of Israel, the clashes in Gaza, and the nomination of Liliana Segre as senator for life (CDEC 2018).

As of 2019, such violence continues to increase (251) and manifest itself in different forms and in different spaces, increasingly attracting the attention of traditional media and its online audiences. From crime news reported on national news to racist posts published on social networks, as well as to acts of defamation, to verbal insults or insults written on walls, and up to two physical attacks (CDEC 2019; Monaci 2022), these incidents were reported.

Events and contents are also present daily in digital spaces but are mainly narrated starting from the traditional television medium and the main Italian news programmes, in particular during the pandemic crisis (Scaglioni 2022).

Television, with its different genres and languages, as well as its potential but also with the constraints necessarily imposed on its production routines by the very circulation of the virus and hybrid forms of hatred, has given a visible form to invisible threats, catalysed and relaunched speeches and set agendas, defined issues that were difficult to interpret, and negotiated from time to time the containment measures adopted by the various political decision-makers, their communication methods, and the interpretations and meanings of verbal or physical acts of violence (including those of an anti-Semite). At the same time, it was able to maintain a narrative/relationship with a large audience, making it a reference medium in a period as serious and dramatic as that of COVID-19 (Sala and Scaglioni 2020).

In the digital and “networked” society, characterised by fragmentation, personalisation and the disintermediation of communication, television is the traditional domestic medium—the most widespread and transversal across ages, generations, and social classes—that characterises the media consumption of Italians, both in the search for reliable information and in-depth analysis and in the desire to organise and structure leisure time, which is increasingly combined within the home, with work or study time “at a distance” (Barra 2022).

The medium of television has thus seen in recent years a resumption and explosion of some of its traditional characteristics as a medium, which seemed to be disappearing in the indistinct “convergence” of digital means.

Its information function is certainly characterised by editorial control and professional responsibility, which are often lacking on the web and in social media, which are besieged by fake news, but it is also characterised by its ability to organise and punctuate an extended and apparently “suspended” time, characterised by ordinary ritual moments (such as watching the evening news) or extraordinary ones, as in the case of media events in which Pope Francis was the main protagonist between the Urbi et Orbi prayer on 27 March and the Easter rites at the beginning of April 2020.

3. Methodology

This research is part of a broader phase of analysis on anti-Semitism that examines the relationship between journalism and anti-Semitic hatred and its public narrative in different media environments.

In the light of the scenario described above, some of the results of the research are presented below, which involved the identification and study of three specific themes

relating to groups of news items reported by the main Italian news programmes, concerning Judaism and anti-Semitic hatred in Italy over a limited period of time.

First of all, there are two main research questions as follows: how does Italian television news cover anti-Semitic hatred? What hidden cultural meanings are challenged in the news and what conflicts and misunderstandings are created in the public sphere?

The methodological and analytical path adopted was particularly promising for reconstructing the main journalistic arguments that emerged on specific topics, taking into account the spatio-temporal dimensions, agendas, and forms of public narrative that recur in the mediated public sphere.

The main objective of the mainly descriptive analysis of the various news items from the news archive of the Pavia Observatory was to carry out a theme detection analysis in order to identify the most current themes around which the media representation of anti-Semitism in Italy revolves.

The subject of the research was the prime-time editions of the news programmes of the seven generalist Italian television channels—Tg1 at 8 pm, Tg2 from 8.30 pm, Tg3 at 7 pm, Tg4 at 6.55 pm, Tg5 at 8 pm, Studio Aperto at 6.30 pm, and Tg La7 at 8 pm.

The choice of television and its journalistic services as opposed to other media is due to the fact that in Italy, television is still one of the reference media for the majority of the population, especially during the recent pandemic emergency.

As Scaglioni (2022) points out, during the “pandemic years” (2020, 2021), something very special happened, unique in the history of Italian television but also understandable. Despite the significant drop in advertising investment, there was a general increase in audience for all the channels. Locked up in our homes, afraid of the pandemic, we consumed a lot of linear television and, of course, streaming consumption also increased. It was a somewhat “drugged” consumption and only at the beginning of the second phase of the pandemic (2021) did things return to normal.

According to the CRTV and Auditel Research Office (2021), the slow decline in audience recorded over the last 10 years has shown a decisive trend reversal since the first months of 2020, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemiological emergency. The annual average viewership (AMR) has therefore increased by 11.4% (compared with 2019), reaching approximately 11.1 million viewers (25.1 million in prime time with an increase of 9.3%). This growth is mainly supported by the increase in viewing time (TV), which increased by 29 min (+11.9% compared to 2019) to reach 273 min per day (4 h 33 min) in 2020, less in terms of overall reach (+2.1%).

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency, television, and more specifically television news, has been the means of communication that, more than any other, has been able to represent, narrate, and “mediate” the pandemic and all the hybrid phenomena associated with it (apparently or not) for a very wide audience of Italian citizens.

For these reasons, the research focuses on television news, illustrating the changes and trends in the thematic agenda and, in the cases considered most relevant, reporting parts of the text or titles specific to the journalistic services considered, thus offering a diachronic analysis useful for recording the main changes. At the end of each year analysed, a graph shows the evolution of coverage over the three-year period considered.

The aim was to reconstruct the main arguments on the subject from the television journalistic discourse on anti-Semitism. Three specific recurring themes emerged from the analysis, which constitute those macro-narratives that are presented in a discontinuous manner in order to move from one reality to another in the logic of the media flow.

The proposed data are based on an important survey of the media representation of anti-Semitic hatred in prime-time news programmes, which are apparently more “traditional”, but which retain a central role in defining different agendas and themes.

The period considered for analysis is from 2019 to 2021.

The chosen period is particularly important because, on the one hand, 2019 is configured as a “container” year for several crises and political–social events that are particularly relevant for our country (partly illustrated in the introduction); on the other hand, the two-year period 2020–2021 represents the period of the pandemic shock that has put information, including television, in great difficulty, hosting content that is often uncivilised and toxic for Italian journalism.

Starting from a corpus of approximately two thousand contents, the analysis of the three-year period 2019–2021 considered a total of six hundred news items from Italian television news with services dedicated to anti-Semitism and Judaism.

In order to achieve the objectives set, the first step was to select the programmes archived in the Pavia Observatory’s thematic database. The contents were identified and then manually filtered by searching for keywords belonging to the semantic field of the topic under study.

Thus, three arguments (themes) emerged in the news space that recurred in a more or less similar temporal order (at least in the first months of each year) over the three-year period considered and that were often linked from a symbolic–cultural point of view¹.

1. “Return to the past” refers to the numerous episodes of denial, protests, and institutional clashes during the week of remembrance;
2. “political-institutional racism” refers to verbal or psychological violence against political actors or witnesses of the Shoah;
3. “symbolic-situational violence” refers to those news stories that focus on real aggressions of different forms and nature in a limited space against cultural institutions or ordinary people who are attacked because they are Jewish or because they are somehow connected to Jewish culture.

4. Journalism and Anti-Semitism Before the Pandemic (2019)

Anti-Semitism is openly expressed in the media through extremely aggressive and demonising iconographic and lexical forms. In particular, the contemporary media environment seems to be increasingly acting as an incubator of hatred and this type of poisonous information, which is difficult to combat even with the analyses, interviews, and insights offered by the press and television services.

Having identified the main aspects describing the information scenario and anti-Semitism in Italy, it is now possible to proceed to a more specific analysis.

Firstly, from 2019 onwards, the 267 news items that they have as a central focus, there is the question of Jews and anti-Semitism. Looking generally at the monthly trend of news on the topic, it is striking that the peak of Yes is concentrated in the month of November of the same year, with an increase in coverage starting as early as September.

Looking at the annual news in chronological order, it is from the month of January that the news programmes begin to address the issue of anti-Semitic hatred with reference to the date of 27 January, the day of remembrance (43%).

Particular attention is paid to the warning of Mattarella against hatred and racism, with the recall of the head of state to “not lower there guard we have to fight everything is fine outbreak of hate, racism, indifference, denialism wherever it lurks” (Tg1, 24 January) because “the Shoah is a virus ready to awaken” (Tg2, 24 January). Interest in the news unfolds in a journey between the past and the present. During the week in question, Tg3 dedicated a series to the “theme” in the form of a report which it defined as “Our journey between the past and the present”, in which the memory of the Holocaust, evoked by the testimonies of survivors, alternates with the narration of signals and concerns about a new anti-Semitism on the rise.

In the January news agenda, there are also some reports (2.8%) dedicated to the story of the Five Star Movement senator Elio Lannutti, who published on his Facebook profile a comment supporting the theses of the anti-Semitic pamphlet “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”.

In February, he was a hero in the news and there was news of two acts of violence, both occurring beyond the Alps. The anti-Semitic insults to the philosopher Finkielkraut by representatives of the yellow vest demonstrators (“a new mixture of intolerance” as Tg5 defines them; “episode hateful and unacceptable” are the words of a journalist from Tg La7) and the desecration of 96 graves of a Jewish cemetery in Paris (“a gasp of racial hate” Tg1 19 February; “racist paranoia: fascism on the one hand, anti-Israeli Islamism on the other” Tg1 20 February) comprise these two incidents.

Between March and April, some episodes of anti-Semitism occurred in Italy (swastikas in Rome and insults to a child in Ferrara), but there is little relevance and news on the topic, while it is in the month of May that attention was given more consistently to the topic (32.3%), with news devoted to the attack on a Jewish woman in Stockholm, which in the news programmes that talked about it, raised the question of the increase in attacks against Jews in Europe (“the Swede is an episode that rekindles concerns for the safety of Jewish communities among many villages” Tg2 15 May).

News attention was heightened in October (71.1%) by the attack in Halle, a raid on a German synagogue by a young extremist. Even this episode, which was widely followed, became an occasion for reflection on the rise of extreme right-wing racist extremism. The history of the insults was equally visible in the October news, where anti-Semites turned on social networks against their senator for life Liliana Segre (“Pushing anti-Semitic find an unlimited sounding board on the web against the senator”, underlines Tg3 of 26 October) and the institution in the Senate of the Commission against hatred.

These latter events determined for the following month a certain visibility of the theme of anti-Semitism, with news of controversial policies in merit to the institution of the Commission, accompanied by Salvini’s statements expressing his desire to meet the senator. In this regard, “Hatred and intolerance are concrete dangers today”, underlines Tg1, while Tg5 speaks of “vulgar racism” (11 November) and all the other news programmes report the condemnation and solidarity expressed by various institutional actors, including those of the Israeli President Reuven Rivlin.

At the end of the year, the media coverage continued to expand.

They fit into the Italian narrative two episodes of violence in the United States. The first was a shooting in Jersey City at the doors of New York, where a couple belonging to an extremist anti-Semitic movement (“The Black Hebrew Israelites Movement, the so-called black Israelites who consider the Jews to be impostors of God” Tg1 29 December) killed three people in a kosher shop; the second was an attack in the house of a rabbi near New York by an African American who entered the house armed with a machete during the celebration of Hanukkah. The news of these two violent episodes prompted the media to comment on the worrying growth of the phenomenon. “A worrying phenomenon”, Tg5 del 29 December; “religious hatred that is becoming an emergency”, pointed out Tg1 the same day; “long series of episodes of anti-Semitism that have increased in the United States and also in Europe”, recalls Tg3 (Table 1).

Table 1. Selection of recurring topics (2019).

Topics	Period	News Segment
Return to the past	January	“The Shoah is a virus ready to awaken” (Tg2)
Political–institutional racism	October	“Anti-Semitic sentiments find unlimited resonance on the web against the Senator” (Tg3)
Symbolic–situational violence	March, April	“the Swedish one is an episode that rekindles concerns about the safety of Jewish communities in many countries” (Tg2)

Journalism and Anti-Semitism During the Pandemic (2020–2021)

In this context, this second phase of analysis provides interesting data on the relationship between television information and anti-Semitism in the two-year period of 2020–2021.

In the face of a pandemic, information overload has fuelled doubt, social anger, polarisation, and hatred of the other, be they migrants, tourists, or neighbours, as they are all possible carriers of the virus (Alfonso and Comin 2020).

In the Italian media, the narrative of the pandemic has occupied the front pages of print and online media for many weeks. All the news editions dealt (almost exclusively) with COVID-19, until the Conte government announced the first reopenings in the summer months of 2020.

In relation to the news programmes analysed, this time there are 167 pieces of news that give visibility to the anti-Semitism/Judaism issue, with attention concentrated in the month of January, where there are 87 dedicated services with more reduced attention throughout the rest of the year.

In the first month of 2020, even before the outbreak of the epidemic in our country, the news covered some episodes of anti-Semitic attacks (+90%). Already in the weeks preceding the 27th of January, we found numerous episodes in the news, such as the attack on the deputy Arturo Scotto in Venice by young people who were singing the Duce, and they laughed Anna Frank. They find space then towards a succession of intimidating episodes, from the anti-Semitic writing on the door of the house in Mondovì of Aldo Rolfi, son of the partisan deported Livi, to the discovery of a leaflet that sings at the reopening of the ovens in front of a site of the PD in Vicenza and the presence of swastikas and Nazi symbols on the door of Laura Beccuti, daughter of a partisan and trade unionist in Turin.

Faced with these cases, the condemnation of Italian journalism is unanimous; the La7 news programme speaks of an “infamous story that returns” (24 January), “a worrying escalation of anti-Semitic hatred” (Tg1, 28 January), and a dangerous resurgence of the phenomenon, as commented by Tg5 on 30 January.

At the end of the month, the coverage of the subject again focused on the many initiatives directly linked to Remembrance Day, an institutional event that once again proved to be a powerful catalyst for media attention. In this, the journalistic reports on student trips to concentration camps and meetings go in the direction and interventions of Liliana Segre in Italy and to the European Parliament on the celebrations to the Quirinale with the speech of President Mattarella.

In February, the news dealt with the anti-Semitic writings that appeared in San Daniele del Friuli, Turin, and on the walls of two schools in Pomezia. Mattarella’s visit to the Jewish community of the Capitoline Islands and the awarding of an honorary doctorate to Liliana Segre by La Sapienza University are also reflected in Tg’s services this month. From March

to August, the coverage of “anti-Semitism and Judaism” was very low in the prime-time news, and there is a very low number of news items (7.7%).

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to completely overturn the agenda on television and beyond, which became monothematic and hosted news on the number of COVID-19 cases and emergency announcements of an institutional and health nature.

It was between the months of September and October that attention was awakened on the subject.

In September, there were essentially four focuses of interest for news broadcasts.

The first concerned the European Day of Jewish Culture, with Mattarella’s warning against the dangers of intolerance and racism, followed by the presentation of the film *Don’t hate at the Venice Film Festival* and the 90th birthday of Senator Secrets. But it was the last of the senator’s public statements that was on the journalistic agenda.

“A lady of whom we are proud” is what the news defined her as on La7 on 9 October in a meeting with students in Rondine, the citadel of peace near Ad Arezzo; also present were the higher charges of the State.

At the end of the year, in the months of November and December, there was very little attention on the subject (8.1%). We only found a few news items about anti-Semitic attacks via social media on a contestant of Israeli origin in a beauty contest in France (Table 2).

Table 2. Selection of recurring topics (2020).

Topics	Period	News Segment
Return to the past	January	“Infamous story that returns” (TgLa7)
Political–institutional racism	October	“A lady we are proud of” (TgLa7)
Symbolic–situational violence	February	“Anti-Semitic writings in San Daniele del Friuli”

Continuing the analysis towards the year 2021, there are 129 news items dealing in various ways with Judaism and anti-Semitism in the television news. In this case too, among the many news events, there were only a few specific periods in which there was a significant percentage of events related to ethnic hatred or anti-Semitism, mainly due to the numerous programmes still devoted to COVID-19 and the topic of “vaccinations”.

January is confirmed as one of the hottest periods, again in relation to Remembrance Week, with around 40% of the selected content relating to protests or debates on the Holocaust. In this particular case, the news covered the appeals of Pope Francis (“Remembering the Shoah is a sign of humanity, Tg1) and the President of the Republic, Mattarella, the initiatives organised by various associations, and the testimonies of survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust.

In the first days of February, the journalistic narrative focused on three events, namely the attack on the Polish Jewish writer Marek Halter in Paris, a survivor of the Shoah, the threats against Liliana Segre, the victim of anti-Semitic and racist insults on social media on the day the senator for life resigned, subjected to the anti-COVID vaccine (“Evidently a vaccine against intolerance, against racial hatred” and the comment of the presenter of Tg3 on 19 February), and the surprise visit of Pope Francis to the Jewish poet Edith Bruck.

After a considerable media silence in March, in the month of April, we found news of national and international importance (6.9%) on the controversy about the preface of anti-vaxxers and anti-Semites written by the prosecutor of Catanzaro Nicola Gratteri in the book “Massacre of the State”; the celebrations in Israel remember the victims of the Holocaust, and other news on protests in France follow at the decision of the Cassation Of

Not to process the man that, with anti-Semitic intent, killed a Jewish woman Sarah Halim in 2017.

At the end of the summer, the news reported on Pope Francis’ apostolic trip to Hungary and Slovakia, during which the pontiff issued a warning against anti-Semitism. In the agenda, the “political” story concerning the criticism of the Jewish community of Rome against mayor Virginia Raggi announced in the full country electoral the beginning of the construction of the museum of the Shoah (20.9%). The delivery of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany to the senator for life Liliana Segre was the other newsworthy event of the month of September.

The end of 2021 promised to be particularly full of hard news.

The month of November opened with the news of the controversy and the condemnation that followed a No Green Pass demonstration in Novara (14.8%), where the COVID restrictions were compared to the Holocaust (Tg4 of the 1st and of the 2nd of November: “la parade shock of Novara with the No Green Pass clothes of deportees from Auschwitz—“demonstrations that were really at the limit of decency”).

The same month, in the news programmes taken as reference, there were also services on the diffusion of today’s anti-Semitism in occasion of the publication of the relationship of the Agency European for Fundamental Rights that puts into light how forms of anti-Jewish hatred proliferate in Italy and in Europe, especially on the web. The year 2021 ends in December with a handful of news of a different nature, namely threats and anti-Semitic insults to Lucio Allegretti, a volunteer of ANPI (National Association of Italian Partisans), an interview with Segre, and a cultural exhibition in Rome on the crucial role of the Jews in the history of the Risorgimento (Table 3).

Table 3. Selection of recurring topics (2021).

Topics	Period	News Segment
Return to the past	January	“Remembering the Shoah is a sign of humanity” (Tg1)
Political–institutional racism	February	“A vaccine against intolerance and racial hatred has yet to be found” (Tg3)
Symbolic–situational violence	November	“The shock parade in Novara with No Green-pass dressed as Auschwitz deportees” (Tg4)

5. Discussion of the Results

The aim of this article was to analyse the content of the main news reported by seven Italian news programmes on the topic of anti-Semitism over a specific period, which was the three-year period of 2019–2021.

The study highlighted both the general trends—a dominant narrative present both across the channels and over the period of observation—and some specificities that emerged from a longitudinal analysis focused on the different channels.

From the analysis carried out, the first relevant aspect has to do with the quantitative and temporal dimension of the television news stories on anti-Semitism.

In fact, we went from 267 news items in 2019 to 129 in 2021.

This is a significant decrease from a numerical point of view, but as the analysis highlights, with the pandemic, news on anti-Semitic hatred decreased as it became increasingly difficult for journalists to intercept this due to its “hidden” dimension.

Before the pandemic, therefore, there was the highest number of news items on the subject, which was often defined in the context of political–institutional discourse and concentrated above all in the last weeks of January on the occasion of Remembrance Day.

A second aspect that is considered particularly interesting is how, in the field of television journalism, the various media contents on hate crimes seem most often to take on the appearance of rumours or subversive stories (Ewick and Silbey 1995), stories united by narrative elements such as race or whiteness, a source of systemic racism, belonging to groups that are increasingly ideologically polarised against Jewish immigrants, or Holocaust witnesses who are blamed for modern social crises.

The lack of depth that often characterises the journalistic coverage of these issues is lost on the surface of the news. The reasons for anti-Semitic hatred are often neither contextualised nor revealed to refute their underlying elements, with the risk that only the “surface” narrative aspects take shape as implicit and therefore given.

Once again, television information (and the media, in general) played a dual role. On the one hand, they were powerful narrative tools whose purpose was to inform about the complexity of the anti-Semitic phenomenon, its characteristics, and its victims; on the other hand, they were a source for the construction of frames of meaning.

Referring to the data that emerge in particular in the second phase of the analysis, starting from 2020, it seems that journalistic services, regardless of the facts reported, tended to be structured around recurring emotional narratives that “get out of hand” for the editors during the thematisation (Agostini 2012) and end up mixing with minor or parallel events to the point of triggering “narrative binomials” (for example, the issue of “COVID and Holocaust”).

All are united by a common theme, which is anti-Semitism.

This *modus narrandi* is characterised by the creation of a dramaturgy that includes, on the one hand, news content that can be considered as “activators of hate” or productive texts resulting from an aberrant reading, capable of generating “resonance”; on the other hand, in a fairly constant manner, the presence of three specific media actors, namely “conspiracy theorists”, “experts”, and “politicians”, speak in the journalistic field and address an “audience” made up of the public of the wider society (Rufin 2004).

The increasingly hybrid nature of both journalism and forms of anti-Semitic hatred and the “hiding” of facts in the new languages and spaces of journalistic communication means that news about Judaism and anti-Semitism takes the form of a confusing and at times conspiratorial “anti-Jewish story” beyond the intentions of the individual television journalist who “shapes” (and broadcasts) the news about the hate crime (Schudson 2013).

A news story is often followed, beyond time, by reactions on the part of social actors with different roles (creators, disseminators, and followers), long structured in representations of a theological religious nature (e.g., these have deep historical roots and, in the modern era, have taken the form of ideological constructions or worldviews centred on a series of accusations (conspiracy, social parasitism, etc.), with a role-playing political significance fuelled by the transparent and public nature of social and digital technologies and the ability of the public to disseminate them.

Overall, the findings of this part of the study could be summarised in three points.

The journalistic portrayal of anti-Semitism reveals a “hidden” dimension of anti-Semitism that the news programmes do not bring out. It is complex to trace the specific causes, but from what emerges from the data given the socio-cultural changes that characterised the three-year period studied, the difficulty in recognising and adequately commenting on this form of hatred by television journalists seems to be more an effect of the prevalence and thematisation of news on COVID—in the two-year period of 2020–2021—or on issues related to migration or national politics during the election campaign—in the pre-COVID period—i.e., an agenda effect.

Television news on anti-Semitism seems to allow narrative aspects limited within three institutional–historical–symbolic macro-arguments to prevail. In terms of news events, the

public debate, sometimes “uncivilised”, generally concerns the Shoah in the first half of the year and episodes of racism and anti-Semitic hatred through forms of verbal or symbolic violence and involving various actors in the following months.

With regard to the broadcasters analysed, limited to the topics selected and analysed, there seems to be a difference between the way anti-Semitism is presented in the Rai networks and in the Mediaset networks, especially at the beginning of the pandemic crisis. While in the first case, the arguments generally seem to concern issues of a historical-cultural nature (interviews with Holocaust witnesses, attention to the issue of memory, etc.), in the second case, it is the cases of racist crimes or episodes involving political personalities as victims of hate.

Faced with the difficulty for political actors and those in charge of information to manage and limit culturally stereotyped, violent, and discriminatory narratives, even in traditional media channels, which have increased today as a result of the two ongoing wars in Ukraine and Palestine, the National Council of the Order of Journalists unanimously approved a document calling for a narrative that respects human rights and professional ethics. The Council is committed to providing tools for analysing the complex reality of Gaza, the Occupied Territories, and Israel. The episodes of intolerance and hatred in recent weeks, which can be linked to the conflict between Israel and Hamas, are also fed by the space given to false or uncontrollable news, stereotypes presented as truth, and extremist positions that feed new cases of anti-Semitism, anti-Islamism, and other forms of racism.

From the meetings that the CNOG has held since the end of 2023 with affected communities and third-sector associations, there is a call for a human rights-friendly narrative that applies to all and the adoption of fair and balanced language. The CNOG urges colleagues to avoid sectarianism of any kind and to oppose fake news and hate speech while respecting deontological rules. The Order of Journalists undertakes to promote discussion initiatives as soon as possible in order to provide further tools for analysing a complex reality such as that of Gaza, the Palestinian Territories, and Israel².

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, what has emerged from the analysis of the themes helps us to reflect more deeply on some of the issues that characterise the contemporary journalistic panorama in terms of the relationship between television and the digital world and the media and the public in relation to complex issues such as racial hatred and anti-Semitism.

While, on the one hand, the media tend to pay little attention to episodes of anti-Semitism (often reported as isolated cases), except in the case of murders or verbal violence against political figures, on the other hand, the excess of information that develops in the new information ecology often does not allow the journalist to “take care” of the information (Silverstone 2009), which is often reported hastily, thematised in political arguments or containing linguistic and interpretative errors (in the specific case also of a historical and religious nature).

These are elements that make the circulation of online-offline news even more toxic, further polluting the political debate and human relations, risking overshadowing some fundamental dimensions of the journalistic profession (culture, awareness, and responsibility), as well as the credibility of information professionals themselves in favour of an “infocracy”, a communication regime in which information appears increasingly personalised, with its own logic and dignity beyond truth and lies (Buoncompagni 2023; Chul-Han 2023).

The crisis of (and in) television and digital journalism and its consequences (such as the avoidance of news) is a much-debated topic not only in terms of the role of the media and journalism in relation to the needs and capacities of the public.

The basis for this seems to be the need to modify the characteristics of the authoritativeness of journalism, emphasising its dialogical aspects, alongside a strategic and orderly management of the (now) converging media spaces and cross-media narratives (news via radio, TV, web), thus limiting abuse and further hybridisation of content, as well as the risk of misinformation and distortion in the public's reading and interpretation of news, especially when faced with complex issues such as anti-Semitism.

For the world of television information, this can be translated into the need for a better involvement of the public (especially television) and users in the production processes and a greater communicative pluralism against any form of division and polarisation (Sorrentino and Splendore 2022).

It might be more useful to reflect not only on how to “do (good) journalism” and how to invest better and more in the construction and identification of so-called good news or counter-narratives but also on “being a journalist” today in a society in constant transformation (Gans 2018), that is, to uphold professional ethics, to limit spectacularisation, and to promote greater professional awareness and knowledge (including scientific) of the phenomenon being reported, so that the media public can understand the events in progress in greater depth beyond any form of emotional empathy that renders them incapable of critically evaluating the morals and consequences linked to media representations (Bloom 2023).

And this starts with television and information on television.

In this regard, Roger Silverstone has already linked the peculiar characteristics of the medium of television to what Antony Giddens has defined as “ontological security”, the attitude of the majority of people who trust in the continuity of their own identity and in the constancy of the social and material environment in which they act. It is certainly no coincidence that in the face of increasingly hybrid phenomena of hatred and in the wake of an unprecedented and unexpected pandemic that has threatened the security of individuals, television has not rediscovered its central role.

Television, and especially television information (in its ritualised and recurring in the news), remains a key institution in the mediation of fear, risk, and danger, and it is central to the “care” of our communication of the social and to our understanding of our capacity to create and maintain the same ontological security. Information as knowledge, as a contribution to the understanding of the social world, remains the fundamental principle that informs “TV news”.

And in an increasingly dense and fragmented mediated public sphere, there are often hidden uncivilised attitudes and toxic narratives that permeate social reality and the media, polluting political debate and human relations, spreading prejudices and clichés, and sharpening social divisions. They risk suffocating the values and the need for culture and training that are also the roots of fundamental professions that have to do with safeguarding democratic participation in public life, such as journalism.

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Notes

- ¹ In analysing these points, the author had to resort to seemingly similar terms in popular culture, using them as synonyms to make the writing of the paper more articulate and non-repetitive. These are terms such as hate, racism, xenophobia, etc. It should

be noted that these terms are used and applied in this specific case within the narrative framework of anti-Semitism. This means that beyond the legal and socio-cultural nuances, the reader here should understand them as a voluntary conflict, an aversion to the other who is different from me, in this specific case, precisely because of Jewish origin and culture.

- ² Note excerpted from the Order of Italian Journalists statement titled “War narrative respects human rights”: <https://www.odg.it/la-narrazione-della-guerra-rispetti-i-diritti-umani/53099> (accessed on 3 April 2023).

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