

MARTA PERROTTA\*

## WOMEN WORKING IN RADIO Methodological Approaches Comparing Italy and the International Context

### *Abstract*

For several years, studies on media production have cut radio work out of consideration. This is due to the structural and economic lightness of the audio medium, which employs fewer people than the audiovisual sector in percentage terms; it is also due to the flexibility of professional roles, which are often subject to reshuffling and overlapping; and finally, to an unstable factor in the evolutionary dynamics of the medium, which has continually changed formats, technologies and organisation models over the last century. The dearth of academic work on radio production is much more evident if we focus on gender issues, and even more when looking at the Italian landscape in comparison with similar international realities. Therefore, the article aims to review a wide range of sources on the ways in which the role of women in radio production has been studied in scholarly contexts across the world. Then it briefly traces the state of the art of radio studies in Italy and in particular the gaps and opportunities of production studies applied to radio, proposing ways in which Italian scholarship on radio can and should “catch up”.

### *Key words*

Radio; gender; production culture; female voice; sound.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200\_000175

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

### 1. THE GENDER FACTOR IN RADIO STUDIES

It is now well established that the tradition of radio studies is one of the most difficult to create and expand, at least in Italy. At the international level, there has recently been a surge of interest confirmed by the release of three manuals between 2022 and 2023<sup>1</sup>, but in Italy radio studies are a niche, for historical and structural reasons<sup>2</sup>. Research that addresses the medium’s production cultures and gender imbalances is even harder to find.

Despite this marginalisation, which demonstrates the persisting invisibility of radio studies compared to other areas of media studies, such as film and television studies, the

\* Università degli Studi Roma Tre – [marta.perrotta@uniroma3.it](mailto:marta.perrotta@uniroma3.it).

<sup>1</sup> M. Lindgren, J. Loviglio, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies*, London: Routledge, 2022; H. Chignell, K. MacDonald, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Radio*, London: Bloomsbury, 2023; A. Bottomley, M. Hilmes, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Radio Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See T. Bonini, “La lunga strada verso la maturità. Radio e production studies in Italia”, in *Backstage. Studi sulla produzione dei media in Italia*, edited by L. Barra, T. Bonini, S. Splendore, Milan: Unicopli, 2016: 63-80, and E. Menduni, “An Unheard Story? The Challenge for Radio Studies in Italy”, *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 2, 1 (2004): 15-26.

aim of this article is to review international research dedicated to radio production from a gender perspective and compare it with that concerning Italian radio. The article will highlight the work still to be done in the Italian context, suggesting potential avenues for future work, proposing a range of research questions and methodologies, and pointing to how these approaches can open up new perspectives on gender and labour in the broadcasting industries.

The first step is to reconstruct and connect the research paths<sup>3</sup> that have highlighted the contribution of women in radio as one of the most vibrant sectors of the cultural and media industry, while at the same time reflecting on methodological approaches capable of illuminating production cultures and unveiling gendered power dynamics.

There are studies that have given space to a historical perspective on national realities, also by virtue of a vertical approach that privileges the analysis of broadcasting cultures linked to a language and a culture. Thus, we have studies on women in English radio<sup>4</sup>, French<sup>5</sup>, German<sup>6</sup>, Spanish<sup>7</sup>, North<sup>8</sup> and South American radio<sup>9</sup>, while in Italy this reconstruction work, already *in nuce* in the contributions of some radio historians<sup>10</sup>, has only just begun<sup>11</sup>.

While the Italian perspective will be analysed in the next section, it suffices for now to point out that putting these studies together in a comparative perspective, a common

<sup>3</sup> The main contribution that initiated the reflection on the subject is that of C. Mitchell, who edited the book *Women and Radio. Airing Differences*, London-New York: Routledge, 2000. It contains research carried out ex novo as well as studies that have already been published, presented in partial or complete form with the intention of building an organic repertoire on the subject.

<sup>4</sup> K. Murphy, *Behind the Wireless. A History of Early Women at the BBC*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. The author falls into the category of insiders responsible for reporting on certain production cultures, as she was producer of the BBC *Women's Hour* for 18 years.

<sup>5</sup> M. Beccarelli, “‘Croyez-moi, mesdames, n’abusez pas du micro’... Per una storia delle voci femminili alla radio francese”, *Genesis, Rivista della Società Italiane delle Storie*, XIX, 2 (2020): 137-155.

<sup>6</sup> K. Lacey, “From Plauderei to Propaganda. On Women’s Radio in Germany 1924-1935”, in Mitchell, ed., *Women and Radio. Airing Difference*: 48-63.

<sup>7</sup> J.E. Perez Martinez, *Radio y mujer en las ondas de radio nacional (España, 1960-1975)*, Madrid: Abada Editores, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> See the work of M. Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting 1922-1952*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 and above all D. Halper, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting*, Armonk-New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> C. Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930-1950*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Gianni Isola’s studies that reconstruct radio listening cultures, also focusing on female audiences are worth mentioning: *Abbassa la tua radio, per favore... Storia dell’ascolto radiofonico nell’Italia fascista*, Scandicci (FI): La Nuova Italia, 1990; *Cari amici vicini e lontani... Storia dell’ascolto radiofonico nel primo decennio repubblicano*, Scandicci (FI): La Nuova Italia, 1995 e *L’ha scritto la radio. Storia e testi della radio durante il fascismo, 1924-1944*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1998. Furthermore, Paola Valentini’s studies on the voice (and the female voice) in 1930s cinema trace an important furrow on this terrain of analysis, as they connect the role of radio in constructing the fascination towards the disembodied voice, and the fallout of this phenomenon on the power of audiovisual narratives. See P. Valentini, *Presenze sonore. Il passaggio al sonoro in Italia tra cinema e radio*, Florence: Le Lettere, 2007. Branciforte’s book has reconstructed the female presence in the radio industry during the 20-year fascist period: L. Branciforte, *Donne in onda nel ventennio fascista. Tra modernità e tradizione (1924-1939)*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino. Anna Lucia Natale’s study recent is dedicated to the Italian public radio phone-in show *Noi, voi, loro, donna* (1978-1982), a space for women-led discussion on women’s issues: A.L. Natale, “Radio Programming by and for Women in Italy in the 1970s: The Case of *Noi, voi, loro donna*”, *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, 11, 2 (2023): 369-385.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, the research project *Donne in Onda – Women On Air* ([www.donneinoda.eu](http://www.donneinoda.eu)), funded by the German-Italian Center for the European Dialogue Villa Vigoni and coordinated by Marta Perrotta, Golo Föllmer and Pascal Ricaud: an international network of radio scholars dedicated to the analysis of women and radio in three countries (Italy, Germany and France) and from a comparative perspective.

theme emerges that may be of interest to us if we are concerned with the radio industry as a workplace and cultural and creative practice: the difficulty with which women have had to conquer the microphone over time, compared to a more agile professional perspective in backstage roles<sup>12</sup> – production and editing, directing – or only recently in senior roles in the industry.

### 1.1. *Approaches to early radio*

The advantage of lightness and volatility that radio brings, a disembodied voice to listeners, could theoretically favour a fairer representation and a greater presence of women in radio: “the radio practice itself could in turn be a liberating experience for women working in the world of audiovisual media, often judged on the basis of their body”<sup>13</sup>, their age and physical appearance<sup>14</sup>.

However, the marginalisation of women in the sound broadcasting industry is a phenomenon that has its roots in early radio, and research identified some recurring reasons for this early on, such as men’s prejudices about the aesthetic qualities of women’s voices<sup>15</sup>, or even the idea that it was inappropriate for women on the air to be involved in news, sports, or any other topic besides home economics<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, Marine Beccarelli argues that voice has long been a “building block in the construction of social and cultural hierarchies in the radio world”<sup>17</sup> and the same is confirmed by Jason Loviglio, who notes that the development of radio broadcasting culture is characterised by a defensive attitude towards “the destabilising potential of women’s voices unmoored from their bodies, their sexuality, their objectification within a male gaze”<sup>18</sup>.

We will not go into the details of the theories that may help us shed light on the deeper aspects of the issue<sup>19</sup>, and which would lead us to speak of the power of the female acousmatic voice. According to Anne Karpf, the latter is a “deep echo of our

<sup>12</sup> See F. Brunati, S. Zambotti, *A microfono spento. Il mestiere del producer radiofonico in Italia*, Milan: Unicopli, 2022, 10.

<sup>13</sup> M. Perrotta, “Corpi senza voce o voci senza corpo? Donne al microfono nell’informazione radiofonica”, *Problemi dell’informazione*, XL, 3 (2015): 601-623 (602). All the translations in this article from original Italian and German are by the author.

<sup>14</sup> Among the most recent studies on the subject, Gober states that “women and specifically older women are discriminated in and through television production in Poland because they are, as employees and as guests, expected to possess a specific type of physical capital which is connected to their gender but, as women, also to their age”. G. Gober, “Gender and age inequalities in television and news production culture in Poland: Ethnography in a public broadcasting company”, *Critical Studies in Television*, 15, 1 (2020): 49-68 (51).

<sup>15</sup> See R. Gill, “Justifying Injustice: Broadcasters’ Accounts of Inequality in a Radio Station” in *Discourse Analytic Research: Readings and Repertoires of Texts in Action*, edited by E. Burman and I. Parker, London: Routledge, 1993: 75-93. The debate is taken up in other texts including: K. Michaels, C. Mitchell, “The Last Bastion: How Women Become Music Presenters in UK Radio”, in Mitchell, ed., *Women and Radio. Airing Difference*: 238-249; A. McKay, *Speaking Up: Voice Amplification and Women’s Struggle* in the same book, 15-28.

<sup>16</sup> There is much evidence of this deep-rooted prejudice. See A. McKay, *Speaking Up: voice amplification and women’s struggle*.

<sup>17</sup> Beccarelli, “Croyez-moi, mesdames, n’abusez pas du micro’... Per una storia delle voci femminili alla radio francese”, 137.

<sup>18</sup> J. Loviglio, “Sound effects: Gender, Voice and the Cultural Work of NPR”, *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 5, 2 (2007): 67-81 (74).

<sup>19</sup> See for example M. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; K. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988; D. Pettman, “Pavlov’s Podcast: The Acousmatic Voice in the Age of MP3s”, *Differences*, 22, 2/3: 140-167; M. Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2006; A. Karpf, *The Human Voice*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2006.

earliest, prenatal experience of hearing a disembodied voice – our mother’s”<sup>20</sup>. Instead, we need to emphasise that the acousmatic female voice, so common in the experience of listening to the radio medium and any of its digital remediations, has constituted a perennial challenge to the enunciative authority, predominantly male; this led to various attempts at containment over time<sup>21</sup>.

Signs of this systematic removal of women from the microphone come from studies focusing on production cultures, with methodologies favouring direct sources and analysis of the trade press. Michele Hilmes cites a 1924 column in the pages of *Radio Broadcast* titled “The Listener’s Point of View”, which states that the audience dislikes women’s voices in radio because women, without being able to be seen, are “very undesirable, and to many, both men and women, displeasing”<sup>22</sup>.

Rosalind Gill, for example, performs a discourse analysis of interviews with programme controllers and male DJs as they explain the reasons for the lack of female DJs in the radio stations where they work. These reasons very often seem interdependent and in no way unmask deeper motivations, proving that the origins of the imbalance lie elsewhere: “women just don’t apply” or “there aren’t many who are interested in doing it”, or “research has proven [...] that people prefer to listen to a man’s voice on the radio rather than a woman’s voice”<sup>23</sup>, are only a few of the explanations given by the interviewees, but they are all in some way disclaimers of those – the programme controllers – who would be able to redress the balance. On the other hand, when questioned about the reasons why women would not be interested in this job, one of the interviewees gives a series of answers which rather seem to explain why he himself avoids hiring them, suggesting that women lack the necessary skills and qualities to be DJs.

Some of the interviewees go so far as to venture the hypothesis of sexism, defining the work environment as a harsh place where women are antagonised: “it’s a man’s world... they’re picked on if they are here”<sup>24</sup>. Others strike at the heart of the matter, namely the alleged (or in the case of those who present these reasons, indubitable) unattractiveness of female voices, defined as “grating” or “high” or “shrill”<sup>25</sup>, blamed for turning listeners off; or, on the other hand, too “dusky”<sup>26</sup> and blamed for turning listeners on. If they are high-pitched, as they can be due to the different physical conformation of female vocal cords compared to male ones, women’s voices are annoying. If they are breathy and tenebrous, they are too sexy and should be restricted to certain time slots with specific programming (late night shows with calls from listeners - usually men).

A number of other analyses developed in the wake of Gill’s study, all focusing on the deconstruction of a gendered work culture in the radio industry. Michaels and Mitchell’s study focused on the gradual dismantling of the last barriers to the presence

<sup>20</sup> See A. Karpf, “The Sound of Home? Some Thoughts on how the Radio Voice Anchors, Contains and Sometimes Pierces”, *The Radio Journal. International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 11, 1 (2013): 59-73 (71).

<sup>21</sup> McKay already points them out when she observes that the process of women’s legitimisation in the public sphere coincided with the possibility for women to use microphones and megaphones to overcome their natural vocal insufficiency compared to men, but this was always accompanied by criticism of the voices themselves and how amplification made them shrill or croaky. McKay, *Speaking Up: Voice Amplification and Women’s Struggle*.

<sup>22</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*: 42.

<sup>23</sup> R. Gill, “Justifying Injustice: Broadcasters’ Accounts of Inequality in Radio” in Mitchell ed., *Women and Radio. Airing Difference*: 138-145 (141).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 140.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*: 142.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

of women as music presenters in the UK, a path that since the 1960s has made it difficult for many aspirants<sup>27</sup>. One of them was Annie Nightingale, the first woman to appear at the microphones of BBC Radio 1 in 1970:

When Annie Nightingale first applied to the BBC national youth station Radio 1 in 1967, she was told that they did not intend to take on female presenters because the male DJs functioned as ‘husband substitutes’ to the identified female listeners. [...] Women seemed to be invisible as ‘makers’ of music radio until the 1980’s. This is partly explained by the background roles that they performed ‘off air’, particularly as producers – including producing male DJs<sup>28</sup>.

The authors also identify in this process the limitation constituted by the absence, up to the end of the 1970s, of role models that could inspire women to pursue this professional path. They also point out how both commercial and public radio stations only implemented a “girlification strategy”<sup>29</sup> at the beginning of the 1990s to broaden the target audience of radio stations by employing women in non-secondary roles, thus increasing their overall share and not relegating them to unfavourable time slots.

The 1990s are also the context for Caroline Millington’s research which examines gender balance in British public service, highlighting a positive trend during that period, which led to a gradual improvement in the percentage of women in primary positions<sup>30</sup>.

## 1.2. *News radio and gender balance*

More recently, studies have brought together stories of female speakers who have fought, especially in journalism, to carve out their own space in hostile, male-dominated professional environments: the prejudice about the non-authority of the female voice, therefore, becomes even stronger when the sphere of the production culture is limited to news, regardless of the medium. In their book on women and journalism, Chambers, Steiner and Fleming<sup>31</sup> reconstruct some of these stories and show interesting parallels between the United States and Great Britain despite the fact that these are systems in which competition between broadcasters presents very different characteristics. In particular, the authors point out a clear division of labour between men and women, the former assigned to hard news, the latter to soft news: women were in fact required to produce “something that came to be called ‘human-interest’ news. This emergent news genre not only emphasised consumerism, fashion and housework, but also reported events in a style aimed at evoking emotion, compassion and sensationalism”<sup>32</sup>. Although mitigated over time, this division of domains has given rise to a strong correlation between women’s journalism and a style more devoted to emotion and mainstream stories, as a result of which women have gradually been co-opted into every branch of radio journalism, but only to expand the traditional news audience. With the gradual

<sup>27</sup> K. Michaels, C. Mitchell, *The Last Bastion: How Women Become Music Presenters in UK Radio*, in Mitchell, ed., *Women and Radio. Airing Difference*: 238-249.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: 238

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 243

<sup>30</sup> C. Millington, “Getting In and Getting On: Women and Radio Management at the BBC”, in Mitchell, ed., *Women and Radio. Airing Difference*: 209-218.

<sup>31</sup> D. Chambers, L. Steiner, C. Fleming, *Women and Journalism*, London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

employment of female voices on the air, “management realised that a woman reading the news – especially on a male-DJ-dominated station – provided balance and added texture to the rest of the output”<sup>33</sup>. Despite being a historically male-dominated sector, the authors note how radio journalism has gradually been populated by women who choose to adapt to this profession, which is made up of long shifts, unpredictable emergencies and few career opportunities. Indeed, although there are renowned male and female radio presenters, “very rarely did journalists achieve major reputations and journalistic successes on the basis of radio. Not only has radio been relegated by television to the margins, but the centralization of radio by the radio networks means that there are few high-profile radio reporting jobs”<sup>34</sup>.

In regard to radio journalism and the changes brought to production routines and newsrooms by digital disruption, Haworth interviewed a sample of British female journalists in the role of news chief<sup>35</sup>. Her research confirms the continuing prejudicial claim about female voices being too sharp or too scratchy (“postcoital”, as was noted about a BBC Radio 4 female journalist)<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, the analysis shows how the entry of women into editorial offices and particularly into prestigious roles has not made a difference in the articulation of the journalistic product, nor in the internal organisation of work. According to the author, the male dominated editorial culture, which exploits staff in exhausting and unpaid shifts, is not sufficiently challenged by women in power, hired for being compliant with the hegemonic culture. If a female news agenda exists, according to the sample interviewed by Haworth, it is dictated by target needs rather than by a gendered approach in news research. Indeed, female journalists choose to prioritise lifestyle news in order to appeal to young-adult listeners, giving more space to topics such as health, entertainment and fashion and leaving out more hierarchically relevant news (crime, politics and foreign affairs). Haworth concludes by bemoaning the anachronism of this trend, which offers the female audience poor information content and fuels their social exclusion. Instead of leaving the subject areas considered to be masculine to men - Haworth argues – women should take up more space and authority, not only vocally, and pursue their own style in news management: a more direct way of interviewing, a focus on the jargon and a natural tendency to address everyone, not just women.

### 1.3. *Music radio, gender, and genres*

A recent study by Patricia A. Williamson and Ethan A. Kolek<sup>37</sup> has focused on gender balance at the microphone of all FM radio stations in the top 30 markets of the United States. The article correlates the share of female speakers with factors such as radio format (Adult Contemporary, Contemporary Hit Radio, Rock, Sport, Religious), the characteristics of ownership (large, medium, small-sized) or the gender of the corporate board members. The study notes that women are under-represented in almost all dayparts – about a third of the on-air presenters and 14% of the presenters in the most

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>35</sup> J. Haworth, “Women in Radio News: Making a Difference?”, in Mitchell, ed., *Women and Radio. Airing Difference*: 250-261.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: 254.

<sup>37</sup> P.A. Williamson, E.A. Kolek, “The Underrepresentation of Women on Commercial FM-Radio Stations in the Top 20 Markets”, *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 28, 2 (2021): 307-326.

prized morning slot – but with differences across formats – there are more women in Adult Contemporary stations and fewer in Rock, News/Talk and Sports stations. No significant correlation was found between the characteristics of the ownership and the air talent gender, nor between the gender of corporate board members and that of speakers. However, it is interesting to note the methodological concerns of the scholars, who point out that “this study did not directly talk to programmers, consultants, or air-talent at individual stations or station groups”<sup>38</sup> to understand the hiring practices that have allowed men to dominate the radio ranks. Future research is therefore invited to focus on century-old biases embedded in radio industry practices.

Kiron Patka’s study spotlights the professional culture of the analogue radio studio in post-World War II Germany as its own area of experience and knowledge<sup>39</sup>. His work reconstructs gendered routines of sound production, for which men and women receive different training from the national radio academy: the former, to occupy the mixing desk, and the latter to cut the magnetic tape, two activities with markedly different economic treatment. Methodologically, the scholar starts from the song written by a sound engineer of the Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1950, the score of which was framed and posted in a studio of the same broadcaster: “Wir sind die Mädels vom Band” (*We are the tape girls*). The song “was never released on record and probably not even produced with the intention of being broadcast on the radio. It was presumably a project with a social, community-building function within the station, intended solely for the production staff”<sup>40</sup>. But although the dedication that the author writes on the sheet music is a thank-you to the tape girls for their patience in the work, upon closer inspection, the lyrics of the song seem to suggest that it is more of a mockery than a celebration “What comes across as a homage to a profession, to the women in the recording studio, can actually be read more as a caricature. All the actions of the female sound technicians are associated with expressions of lacking professionalism”<sup>41</sup>. From here, Patka addresses the motivations behind such a massive employment of women in a technical profession – certainly not usual for those times: many had been trained in radio broadcasting technology for wartime reasons, and after the Second World War employed in the broadcasters established under Allied supervision. He goes on to explore the professional culture, which clearly shows that “the connection between the activity performed or assigned, training opportunities and gender [...] arises from the systemic interplay between broadcasting institutions and schools. In this way, it adds a vertical order to what at first seems to be a horizontal gender segregation”<sup>42</sup>.

## 2. RADIO PRODUCTION STUDIES IN ITALY

The second focus of this article is to compare the international research work on gender in radio production – and radio more broadly – with the relative dearth of Italian research on this topic, and to suggest ways in which to make up for lost ground. As

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*: 321.

<sup>39</sup> K. Patka, “Männer, Mädchen, Mädels. Gegenderte Berufsrollen in der analogen Radioproduktion”, *Navigationen - Zeitschrift für Medien und Kulturwissenschaften*, 18, 2 (2018): 119-133

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*: 123.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*: 124.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*: 130.

Tiziano Bonini has noted<sup>43</sup>, Italian radio studies have two fundamental characteristics: an originally purely historiographic approach that began in the late 1970s, and a certain difficulty in focusing on objects of investigation such as production, social uses, and listening cultures, partly due to the lack of archives and the lack of access to production sites.

As Bonini claims, “radio passes under the radar of the academy” and later, with the spread of media studies in Italy from the end of the 1980s onwards, is eclipsed by television, which attracts more scholarly attention<sup>44</sup>. At the same time, though, the popular diffusion of free radio during the 1970s led to the flourishing of a series of memoirs written by ‘insiders’ and circulated by non-academic publishers, which recount the phenomenon from the inside and provide testimony that, whilst apparently devoid of scientific value, is still important from a historical point of view. These are, in many cases, “unaware autoethnographies”, stories told by “Italian radio amateurs, activists, and professionals whose perspective we might describe as ‘unknowingly’ oriented toward production issues, in many cases even with a critical eye”<sup>45</sup>. These stories give an account of interesting internal dynamics, of the distribution of production roles, of economic or professional issues, but without providing comments from a gender perspective. They are important sources for historians, and a great enrichment of the landscape of studies on the medium, but they do not allow us to adequately investigate the production context, and its gender dynamics.

Academic works on radio increased in the period from the late 1990s through to the year 2000, thanks to the thirtieth anniversary of free radios in Italy in 2006. Some of them can be considered useful for the study of radio production cultures through the category of gender. With regard to public service radio, the work of RAI executive Lidia Motta deserves mention<sup>46</sup>. Motta develops an analysis of her own career progression and discusses her work as a creator of a type of production made by women and designed for women, such as the feminine and feminist programme *Sala F*<sup>47</sup>.

With regard to Italian private radio stations, two books in particular stand out. One is a history of Milan’s Radio Popolare, which covers the radio’s production and organisational environment, as well as the contribution made by women<sup>48</sup>. The other is the very rich catalogue of an exhibition celebrating the 30th anniversary of free radio stations, edited by Peppino Ortoleva, Giovanni Cordoni, and Nicoletta Verna<sup>49</sup>. These are texts that collect direct testimonies and are based on a critical reworking of interviews, shedding light on production dynamics, on the cultures of access to radio practice, on the genesis of ideas, programmes and their evolution over time, up to a listing of significant figures, a definition of the most common professional profiles and an assessment of the social impact of radio and radio work.

<sup>43</sup> Bonini, “La lunga strada” (2016): 63-80. He cited Menduni, “An Unheard Story?”: 15-26.

<sup>44</sup> Bonini, “La lunga strada”: 67.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 68.

<sup>46</sup> L. Motta, *La mia radio*, Rome: Bulzoni: 2000.

<sup>47</sup> M. Perrotta, “La differenza in radio. Donne al microfono di Sala F (1976-79)”, in *Filmare il femminismo. Studi sulle donne nel cinema e nei media*, edited by L. Cardone and S. Filippelli, Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2015: 193-204.

<sup>48</sup> S. Ferrentino, L. Gattuso, T. Bonini, eds., *Vedi alla voce Radio Popolare*, Milan: Garzanti, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> P. Ortoleva, G. Cordoni, N. Verna, eds., *Radio FM 1976-2006. Trent’anni di libertà d’antenna*, Bologna: Minerva, 2006.



### 2.1. Recent developments

About ten more years must pass before the first works expressly dedicated to the working conditions of producers in the Italian public and private radio industry are published<sup>50</sup>. As Bonini argues, the ethnographic approach to radio production cultures matures:

in the wake of another tradition of studies consolidated over the last fifteen years, that of the study of media work, or more strictly the analysis of workers in the cultural and creative industries, which has played an important role in deconstructing the positivist rhetoric built by the media itself around media work: studies in this tradition have shown the real living conditions of these workers, far removed from the glossy portraits devoted to them in magazines, and has allowed us to shed light on the conditions of increasing instability within these industries and the phenomenon of self-exploitation of these workers, who are willing to do anything in exchange for access to the media world<sup>51</sup>.

But media production studies have originally neglected radio. This is due, according to Fabrizia Brunati and Sara Zambotti, to the structural and economic lightness of the audio medium, which employs fewer people than the audiovisual sector in percentage terms<sup>52</sup>; to the indefiniteness and flexibility of professional roles, which are often subject to reshuffling and overlapping; and finally to a factor of instability in the evolutionary dynamics of the medium, which has continually changed its technologies and work organisation models – including the rise and disappearance of certain professions – over the last century.

It is only from 2014 onwards that the critical nature of the radio professional environment is highlighted and framed in the broader context of cultural work in the media. Bonini and Gandini in fact recognise, in the radio work observed in public and private radio stations between Rome and Milan, a dual character: on the one hand, it corresponds to the binary nature of the freelance profession, which is flexible but tends to be precarious, with some negative repercussions on the quality of work; on the other hand, it presents peculiar aspects of fandom-based work, of a supportive and not particularly competitive productive subculture, far removed from the personal branding dynamics present in other creative work, such as above-the-line workers of the screen industries. Radio work dispenses symbolic rewards and guarantees job satisfaction, even in the absence of high remuneration: “fandom makes the invisible and unbranded condition of radio workers bearable, insofar as it renders their passions a trap that prevents them from engaging in entrepreneurial competition on the broader labour market. They love the work they do, a kind of work they dreamt of when they were young and passionate fans of radio shows”<sup>53</sup>.

The two authors do not use gender as a variable in their object of study, but to all their considerations they add a reflection that is relevant to our perspective. The study is based on an ethnographic methodology with in-depth interviews on a sample of 20 freelance producers from 5 Italian public and private radio stations – 14 women and 6 men.

<sup>50</sup> T. Bonini, A. Gandini, “Invisible, solidary, unbranded and passionate. Everyday life as a Freelance and Precarious Worker in Four Italian Radio Companies”, *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, 10, 2 (2016): 84-100.

<sup>51</sup> Bonini, “La lunga strada”: 75.

<sup>52</sup> Brunati, Zambotti, *A microfono spento. Il mestiere del producer radiofonico in Italia*: 26.

<sup>53</sup> Bonini, Gandini, “Invisible, solidary, unbranded and passionate. Everyday Life as a Freelance and Precarious Worker in Four Italian Radio Companies”: 87.

Participants were identified in a non-statistical way but starting from participant observation, which then led to the first interviewees contacting other potential candidates in the community of freelance radio producers. The fact that the sample includes a much higher number of women does not mean that women are the majority of the population of freelance radio producers in Italy: the ISTAT data on which the research is based (2011) only tells us that among the 3,803 permanently employed people in the Italian radio sector, 2,232 are men and 1,571 are women. However, we know that among the radio stations analysed in Bonini and Gandini's study there are certainly more women than men in the role of freelance producer. Although not statistically relevant, the results resonate with the observations of Brunati and Zambotti, authors of the first study of backstage professionals in Italian radio, which pose the terminological problem, understandable only when speaking Italian, of using the masculine (*il*) or female (*la*) article before the word *producer*<sup>54</sup>:

Radio work like all social practices is gendered. The most 'visible' part [...], that of those working as speakers, was for many years occupied almost exclusively by men. Women were entrusted with the task of announcing the start of programmes, in radio as in TV. Especially in the development of *personality radio*, those channels that focused on the signature and recognisable identity of the voices, the latter has long been male. On the other hand, the 'behind the scenes', the preparatory work (that of the 'editorial staff'), has over the years seen an increasing presence of female figures who have gradually 'conquered' the microphone, so that today it is customary to have a male/female pair hosting. It will not be difficult to note that the top radio figures on the Italian scene are still more often men (although a gradual re-balancing is underway), but the intermediate role of producer still seems to us to have more female connotations. Thus, we will speak of female curators (*curatrici*) when referring to female work (as in our case) and use producer to indicate the role in general<sup>55</sup>.

There is no statistical evidence supporting this claim, but the concern of the two researchers – who are also respectively producer and host of Italian public service radio – stems from their observation of the reality in which they have been operating for several years and of those selected for the study (the top ten most listened to radio stations in Italy). It can be said that this work is a 'conscious' autoethnography, to stick to Bonini's hypothesis, and it is certainly a methodologically situated work, inspired by the ethnography of media<sup>56</sup>, by the work of Jerome Bourdon in analysing public service television<sup>57</sup>, and by sociological studies such as those by Hervé Glevarec carried out inside public radio headquarters in Paris to observe the production dynamics of the *France Culture* channel<sup>58</sup>. Originating from two insiders, the research seeks to capture "unwritten", informal dynamics, automatism (which are always present in productive work). All this, the 'non-verbal' of which our practices are made, is material of which people are only partly aware and which would therefore not emerge in more formalised research settings, such as interviews<sup>59</sup>; it is in this way that the authors strive to look beyond words and discourses and to explore how organisa-

<sup>54</sup> Brunati, Zambotti, *A microfono spento. Il mestiere del producer radiofonico in Italia*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>56</sup> F. Boni, *Etnografia dei media*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> J. Bourdon, *Du service public à la télé-réalité. Une histoire culturelle des télévisions européennes, 1950-2010*, Paris: INA, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> H. Glevarec, *France Culture à l'œuvre, Dynamique des professions et mise en forme radiophonique*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Brunati, Zambotti, *A microfono spento. Il mestiere del producer radiofonico in Italia*: 23.

tion and production are mediating dynamics that are essential to the outcome of the programme, also emphasising how often these mediations – totally invisible – are entrusted to women.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR CATCHING UP: ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES

A comparison between the international research that has focused on the role of women in the medium's production routines and the experiences concerning Italian radio shows us some interesting insights into the methodologies that can be applied in realities – like the Italian one – where much remains to be explored.

Undoubtedly, the research discussed in this article has elements in common: 1) the use of ethnographic approaches such as participant observation, in a triangulation between voices of leading or intermediate figures<sup>60</sup>, analysis of contexts and structures – think of the sexist song about the tape girls hung in the SDR studios, analysed by Patka – and complementary documentation; 2) the great contribution of accounts written by insiders, in a more or less conscious form, capable of grasping structural elements of the production routines, despite some limitations in neutrality and distance from the object of study; 3) the predominance of written sources – written archives of the radio stations, newspapers, magazines, sector press, radio guides, fan magazines, listeners' letters – over the more perishable, difficult to access, and sometimes poorly preserved sound sources.

An immediate application of the indications stemming from this analysis is beyond the scope of the article. However, the aforementioned *Donne in onda - Women on Air* project is focused on creating a network of multidisciplinary scholars divided between Italy, France and Germany, and soliciting the collection and analysis of primary and secondary sources on radio production routines in its one hundred years of history, with a comparative look at the three countries<sup>61</sup>. In my work for the Italian part of the project, I draw on the schedules published and available for the most part on *Radiocorriere* and from secondary sources – sector magazines, memoirs and sound materials in the possession of the broadcasters, the availability of which is unfortunately far from assured<sup>62</sup>. These sources are being used to set up a database of women in hosting or production roles over a period of time ranging from the dawn of radio broadcasting to the 2000s, a series of figures to investigate, in search of hidden stories at the microphone and behind the scenes of programmes and radio stations.

By way of conclusion, I would like to highlight two more points as to what still needs to be developed in order to strengthen this field of study – not only in Italy. The first concerns the focus on sound: the professional radio environment, whether one looks at who is at the microphone or in backstage roles, always overwhelmingly calls into question the sound dimension, the analysis of which is not always possible. As Christine Ehrick argues, it is crucial to overcome the problem of the scarcity of sound sources

<sup>60</sup> As advocated by Luca Barra in his “La virtù sta nel mezzo (e nel confronto). Questioni di metodo per i production studies televisivi e mediali”, *Schermi*, 3 (2019): 65-80.

<sup>61</sup> [www.donneinonda.eu](http://www.donneinonda.eu).

<sup>62</sup> [www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it](http://www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it). This website has the entire archive of the weekly official magazine of Italian Public Service Broadcaster RAI for 70 years, from 1925 to 1995.

by processing written sources with a sonic thinking<sup>63</sup>, “understanding the parameters of written sources, and consciously reading these sources for sound”<sup>64</sup>. Moreover, one cannot understand the role of women in the backstage of radio without focusing on the gender soundscape, which has been historically male dominated, but has recently been moving toward a more balanced situation. That is why, even in production studies, it is important to focus on how gender is performed through the voice.

A second closing point is based on John T. Caldwell’s considerations regarding the media industries:

Many production companies are permeated by problematic sexual and gender politics. The camera crews of films and prime time television programmes provide dramatic examples of how gender segregation in specific roles is justified on the basis of suspected notions of ‘natural’ abilities. Women must hyper-masculinize themselves to prove themselves as capable operators or assistants; [...] sneaky expectations abound that women are better at detail work, record-keeping, or managing communications between different departments<sup>65</sup>.

Noting with amazement a substantial absence of ecological approaches and analyses that connect production dynamics from one industry to another<sup>66</sup> – from cinema to radio, from television to radio, from music industry to radio, from dubbing to radio – future research should develop a type of analysis that addresses, at the very least, the ecosystem of creative industries dealing with voice and sound<sup>67</sup>. Bringing into the aforementioned sonic thinking also a ‘gender thinking’ that combines the analysis of female professional figures with multidimensional tools, will help us begin to understand the links between production routines, delivered content – for women or for men, but female-led –, reception by women, and representations of women on air.

<sup>63</sup> See J. Sterne. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> C. Ehrick, “Ethereal Gender: Thoughts on the History of Radio and Women’s Voices”, in *The Routledge Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies*, edited by M. Lindgren and J. Loviglio, London: Routledge, 2022: 144-151 (148).

<sup>65</sup> J.T. Caldwell, “Intorno alle industrie dei media. Dieci tratti distintivi e sfide per la ricerca”, in Barra, Bonini, Splendore, eds., *Backstage*: 163-176 (167-168).

<sup>66</sup> Bonini and Gandini do this by broadening the field to include creative industries close to radio, such as television – often integrated into the same media company –, but without considering the gender variable; Patka does this by looking for connections between radio and the recording industry, or by studying the links between professional schools and broadcasting institutions; those who deal with journalism do this, perhaps the only field of study that has been oriented towards integrated and supply chain analyses from the outset.

<sup>67</sup> Rai Ufficio Studi, *Audio-Sound Ecosystem. From Radio to Public Service Audio*, Rome, Rai Libri, 2023. [https://www.railibri.rai.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Audio-Sound-ecosystem\\_DEF.pdf](https://www.railibri.rai.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Audio-Sound-ecosystem_DEF.pdf).