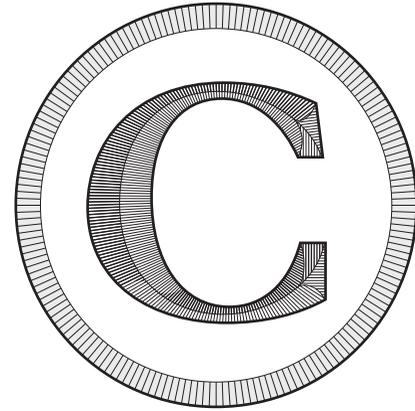




REPORT
Milena Gabanelli



ITALIAN INQUISITION —*Rome*

Preface

In a media world dominated by reality TV and celebrity chat shows posing as news, Milena Gabanelli's 'Report' stands out. Since 1997, her investigations have tackled corruption in Italy head on, criticising politicians while other programmes cosy up.

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Seated in her office at RAI television studios in Rome's leafy Prati neighbourhood, journalist Milena Gabanelli reaches for one of her extra-slim cigarettes. It's been a hectic morning and she needs something to take the edge off. Editing for this week's episode, an exposé on Italian fashion houses cutting corners on quality, is behind schedule and now she's received word her show has another lawsuit on its hands.

"That takes us up to 23, but I have a feeling another lawsuit will arrive next week," says Gabanelli, looking more annoyed than anxious. The threat of multi-million euro cases that could bankrupt her TV news programme, *Report*, doesn't seem to faze the former war correspondent. "We've never lost a case," she says with a certain satisfaction.

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Since 1997, *Report* has engaged its viewers with painstakingly researched episodes that tackle head-on the problems ailing Italian society. Packed into each 90-minute programme are stories documenting the profligacy of Italy's many public sector industries, corruption and corporate scandals. Gabanelli delivers her signature script that is, like the footage aired, a stinging indictment against those who look to bend the rules.

Broadcast on the Italian state channel Rai Tre, the award-winning show has raised the bar for high-quality journalism in a country that has been poorly served in recent decades. "It's like a spotlight that grabs your attention," says Paolo Ruffini, the director of Rai Tre, gesturing to make his point. Legal bills aside, *Report* has outperformed Ruffini's expectations. The show pulls in up to four million viewers in its Sunday evening time slot and is the cheapest programme to produce on a per minute basis in his stable.

The origins of *Report* can be traced back to 1991 and the Balkans war. While on assignment for RAI, Gabanelli became separated from her camera crew as news broke that Serb forces were laying siege to the Croatian city of Vukovar. As reports trickled out about war crimes against the civilian population, she hitched a ride to the front, armed only with a small Hi8 video camera.

"It was a mess because I had only a few tapes and it was my first filming on my own. A lot of situations I didn't shoot, thinking the major networks would get them, but they didn't." After that experience she decided to work on the other side of the lens and go solo.

The competition

Bruno Vespa

Considered the country's unofficial third chamber of parliament, *Porta a Porta* is the definitive Italian talkshow. Broadcast on Rai Uno, its host Bruno Vespa has a flair for the dramatic – each show starts with the theme from *Gone With The Wind*, before politicians bicker with a regular cast of characters, from actresses to psychologists.

Capitan Ventosa

The satirical *Striscia la notizia*, on Berlusconi's Mediaset, focuses on petty grievances – its populist formula is further helped by the wacky get-ups of caped-crusader Capitan Ventosa, complete with plunger on his head, who reports on the woes facing commuters, such as broken ticket machines and overcrowded trains.

Ilaria d'Amico

La7's current affairs strand *Exit* hoped that high heels would translate to high ratings. D'Amico's thin CV features work for Rupert Murdoch's *Sky Italia* football show and a stint on a reality show. Critics' hopes that *Exit* would dedicate more time to well-researched reports quickly foundered on the formula of inciting heated exchanges.

Viewed next to the BBC or CNN, *Report's* final product appears less polished. In place of fancy graphics there are awkward close-ups of important documents highlighted by hand. Yet the hand-held video camera provides immediacy when it comes to interviews.

Initial reaction to the show from inside RAI was mixed at best. "We were considered cameramen improvising as journalists," recalls Sabrina Giannini, a video journalist who has been with *Report* from the start. But any criticism was soon deflected by the positive reception the show received from critics and viewers. "We were seen as doing what RAI had been neglecting, and that is providing a public service."

A brief scan of Italian television reveals little that could pass as public

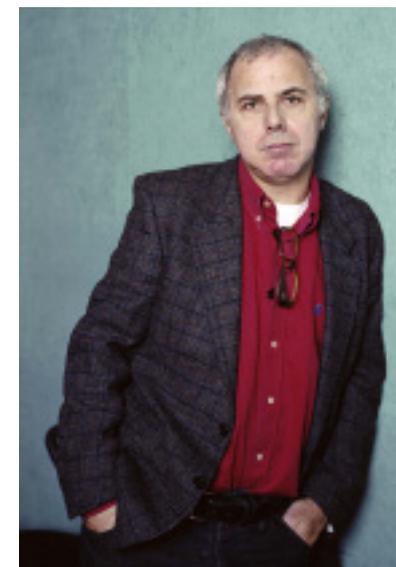
service. From *Big Brother*-alikes to variety shows with poorly choreographed showgirls, the networks are awash with low-rent programming. And though most lay the blame at the feet of Mediaset, owned by former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, RAI is not blameless.

Instead of investing in news, the station has followed Mediaset's lead and dumbed down its offerings. In place of in-depth reporting, Mediaset and RAI have both preferred to focus on the talkshow format. In primetime it's common to find politicians and personalities arguing over the day's hot-button issues in debates that often run longer than a Hollywood blockbuster.

While it makes for good theatre – and ratings – many feel it doesn't serve as a model for good journalism. Topics are



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lifted from the day's papers and tough questions are rarely asked of guests.

"It is the big vice of Italian TV," says Aldo Grasso, television critic for the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper. "In 50 years of broadcasting, it has been very rare to see journalists rail against those in power. Someone like Gabanelli is an anomaly." Grasso blames the lack of critical reporting on the fact that promotions in broadcast media are often based not on merit but on connections. "There's a class of journalists who are tied to those in power, those in parliament."

In the case of state-owned RAI, key posts at its three channels are allocated to friends sympathetic to whoever is part of the sitting government. Mediaset, too, has witnessed the same phenomenon ever since Berlusconi entered into politics.

According to journalism professor Matteo Scanni of the Catholic University of Milan, the end result of such political meddling is a broadcast media that under-reports or shuns controversial topics, such as the recent surge in violence by the Camorra in Naples.

"There's a symbiosis between journalists and politicians," says Scanni. "Here, the media is not so much a watchdog as a lapdog." In one infamous case, referred to in the press as the "Bulgarian edict", Berlusconi accused two RAI journalists of "criminal use" of state TV. Unhappy with their negative appraisal of his policies, "Il Cavaliere" had them banned from the air during his tenure.

Following the uneasy period under Berlusconi, the media has recovered its footing. Nonetheless, many observers

assume that conditions are still not conducive to watchdog journalism, particularly the kind practised by Gabanelli.

Surprisingly, she has no horror stories of run-ins with nervous network bosses wanting to muzzle her. "In 10 years of doing this, nobody has once stopped me from covering a subject. Sure there were discussions over the approach, but only in terms of making the episode better."

Gabanelli points instead to a bigger problem that faces the Italian media, something she sees as endemic to the culture. In her 25 years of experience, she has noticed an unwillingness of reporters to challenge authority.

"The journalist is a figure who is courted a lot here; if you are susceptible then your hands are tied. Italy is a masterpiece of self-censorship." — (M)