

# The Italian adaptation of *Undercover Boss* and the Rai's public service remit

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## Abstract

This article concerns the Italian adaptation of multi-national reality television series *Undercover Boss* (*Boss in incognito* in Italian translation). The show (2014 – present) is aired in primetime on the Italian public service broadcaster, Radiotelevisione Italiana (Rai), and shows one of the rare examples of labor thematization in the mainstream Italian television. As such, it constitutes an iconic title which makes important contributions to the socio-cultural role of screen storytelling.

This essay approaches the tv series as a source, and explores how *Boss in incognito*, in a manner similar to the original format, is able to provide Italian viewers with a popular narrative not free from ideological implications. Furthermore, it hypothesizes that the programme does not fully correspond to the Rai's public service obligations.

## Keywords

*Undercover Boss*; Rai; reality television; adaptation; public service

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## Introduction

Over the past years, the body of research examining the audiovisual (cinema, television, video art, and other media products) representation of labor has gathered momentum. Most generally, international scholars have explored how, within our media world, audiovisual landscape seems to establish a contrasting view or suggest that the lives of working people deserve to be seen on the screens of our televisions or digital devices<sup>1</sup>.

In contrast, recent Italian academic<sup>2</sup> has highlighted, with particular attention paid to televisual dimension, how the usual Italian media landscape commonly shows few images of working people and workplace environments. Indeed, I'm unaware of any book published in several decades that deals explicitly with labor and Italian television, with the notable exception of Rositi's pioneer study<sup>3</sup>; particularly, the relationship between Rai and labor topics remain to be studied and identified. Put otherwise, there has been a distinct lack of academic work carried out on such programs and at first glance Italian television has addressed these issues only in a fragmented or oblique fashion<sup>4</sup>.

Subsequently, it seems apparent on reflection that the Italian adaptation of *Undercover Boss* bears an obvious relevance and acquires a certain importance in attempting to introduce a reflection on the differences in attitudes between labor issues and contemporary television narration in Italy.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mazierska 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Carelli 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rositi 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cipriani 2000.

Firstly, this involves thinking about reality shows on the one hand, and public television on the other. Reality-style shows are not new to television, but over the last few years there has been a measurable increase in series of this kind, and reality tv has grown to occupy a huge presence in the topography of broadcast and cable television around the world.

According to Lemi Baruh and Ji Hoon Park<sup>5</sup>, reality television, by portraying our social world, offers a series of implications on the construction and perception of social reality, in terms of ethics, politics, conditionings, and so on. On the basis of these considerations, many scholars have investigated the ways in which class depictions on television have increased in visibility and complexity since the advent of reality tv in the final decade of the twentieth century<sup>6</sup>. While the moniker "reality" to describe tv programs of this kind deserves to be received with skepticism (the criticism beg the question of how much of the hit series is "staged", or if the production edits and manipulates the footage to fit a fixed narrative), the affinity some reality shows exhibit to other nonfiction forms, such as news reporting and documentary film, invites us to question the connection between reality TV and other nonfiction media. "Reality television", taking up the matter of what is meant by this term, is a broad one, encompassing a range of formats (formula, style, template) that are mainly hybrid in nature, such as docusoaps, real crime and emergency programming, talk shows, talent shows, video diaries, dramatic reconstructions, and "gamedocs". Such a generalised term is required to assess the breadth of aesthetics and ideologies that may be represented by this diverse group of television productions. Indeed, reality television can in turn be understood as a subset of factual entertainment or unscripted formats<sup>7</sup>; the range of available categorizations provides an insight into some of the changes that have occurred within the television industry as new forms of programming have expanded across the schedule.

Nevertheless, I do not intend to extensively revisit here the question of what reality television is. It is more useful to highlight how, as a television show, *UB* delivers a range of nuances and values by using many narrative and visual strategies also found in other reality tv series: confessional daytime talk shows, docusoaps, documentary programming, makeover shows, test of endurance shows, court shows, game shows, and so on.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Baruh and Hoon Park, 2010, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Relatively to reality tv and labor topics, see Skeggs and Wood 2012: 187-214.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fiacco 2022.

First of all, this contribution is concerned with understanding *Undercover Boss* within the context of national cultural practice. As Ilana Gershon states<sup>8</sup>, comparing the US version to the UK one, it is possible on the one hand to focus on national differences through the same text, and to reveal what kinds of tacit critiques of contemporary capitalism are possible on the other, transcending national boundaries. This also suggests that there are some overriding factors, affecting many countries which can be identified by analyzing the narrative structure. In their chapter about the internationalization of TV show, Luca Antoniazzi and Luca Barra, referring to Albert Moran's notion, note that:

Three intertwined levels of decision-making determine the nature of the end product: first, decisions about forms and styles, the poetics of television, involving sound, *mise-en-scène*, shooting, editing and all the choices that shape the show's audiovisual aesthetic; second, intertextuality, relating to the codes and norms of both television production cultures and cultures of consumption (see for example changes in casting practices and, in turn, on the narratives of some adapted programmes); third, the broader national culture and society, often leading to controversial decisions on issues like religion, gender and language. (Antoniuzzi and Barra 2022: 83)

My lens, then, does not attempt to merely confirm this critical discourse, but also tries to extend and to question the inconsistency between this programme and the institutional context (Rai) in which it is produced and located in Italy.

## The Italian macro-variants

First produced for the U.K.'s Channel 4 in 2009, *Undercover Boss* today operates as a global franchise with local variants and regional editions produced in more than thirty countries. It currently runs on CBS and multiple cable channels (TLC, OWN etc.). In Italy, the show (2014 – present) is aired in primetime on the second channel of the Italian public service broadcaster, Radiotelevisione Italiana (Rai).

The series' global franchising exemplifies a current trend in global media production, one where a customizable template-format is combined with a local cast. Within this transnational production system «what

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gershon 2019.

is exported is not the content itself but a recipe for creating a local version of the internationally successful TV show» (Andrejevic 2004: 12).

The premise of the “pitch” (the show’s episode-by-episode formula) is quite simple. In each episode of *UB*, the CEO (or similar high-ranking executive officer) of a large corporation gets made over in disguise and poses as an entry-level employee who has been assigned to train at a series of locations with other workers or lower-level supervisors, and goes undercover in his/her own company. Working five jobs in five consecutive days, the boss observes labor practices, receives feedback from workers (presumably, will use these observations to improve the company), meets a series of employees who represent the struggling middle-classes and poor communities.

After spending a few days performing a variety of jobs – or discovering that they are unable to perform them – and listening as the workers they meet describe the difficulties they face in their jobs or lives – the CEOs return to their boardroom and confront each of the workers they encountered during their undercover stint, revealing their true identity and dispensing rewards – money, vacations, college funds, and so on – for those who do their job well while criticizing those who do not. Touched by their narratives of economic struggle, the boss, in a display of beneficence, and after an informal conversation, bestows economic and professional rewards upon these employees.

At the time of writing, all 48 episodes of *Boss in incognito* (produced by Endemol Shine Italy) follow this basic structure. As we have mentioned above, although the segmentation of its recurring formula, a closer look at the adaptation reveals specific choices of the Italian production practice.

Firstly, starting from the first series, a popular face on Italian television or talent appears in each episode and serves as a host for the show: Costantino Della Gherardesca (2014, 2015), Flavio Insinna (2016), Nicola Savino (2017), Gabriele Corsi (2018-19 and 2019-20), Max Giusti (2022, 2023). The program typically begins with a television-style introduction by the celebrity host, establishing the audience’s point-of-view as a companion of a corporate CEO who impersonates a reality show contestant. What might be of particular interest is that, starting from its seventh season in Spring 2022, due to the presence of the comedian Max Giusti, the same host participate as character in another entry-level and undercover employee’s role, helping the real Boss in discovering his workplace’s reality.

During the course of all Italian series, nobody is made redundant and no supervisors are present.

It is (sadly) notable that, among the 47 CEOs involved in the show, only seven are women (Chiara Nasi for CIRFOOD, Franca Semplici for

Magnani Sposa, Nenella Impiglia Curzi for Linea Marche, Giulia Adragna for Premiati Oleifici Barbera, Francesca Ossani for Crik Crok, Carmela Schettino for La Contadina, and Martina Oliviero for Oliviero).

It is crucial, moreover, to highlight how the format adaptation is also related to the social in the social context and connected to external events<sup>9</sup>. In particular, I'm referring to the fifth edition's season finale, which is set in Accumoli and features four different CEOs (Bachisio Ledda, Eugenio Preatoni, Guido Di Stefano and Federico Lombardo) in helping Gianfranco Castelli (Salumificio Sano) after the 2018 earthquake in Central Italy.

Nevertheless, it is the Covid pandemic that has had a major, direct impact on audiovisual production throughout the world<sup>10</sup>, starting from the first half of 2020. After the *Boss in incognito's* production shut down in 2019, the subsequent season located the pandemic in relation to the show and to its transformative impetus. The implicit justification for peering into the private life of actual people in the sixth edition is a documentary about work and unemployment during the pandemic time made by a television crew.

## **The Italian job. Employee's standardized representation**

As we mentioned above, in attempting to explore *Undercover Boss's* textual implications, much critical attention has been given to how the tv series plays a pivotal role in transmitting the ideological frames of capitalism and neoliberalism. This literature is guided by many of the theoretical advances and suggestions developed under the rubric of "cultural studies".

The portrait of the working world presented by the series is bereft of organized labor, government safety or labor regulation, deflecting attention from these issues by highlighting only the drama aspects. Surveillance reinforces rather than reforms corporate philosophy, goals, and capitalistic agenda.

Susan Schuyler<sup>11</sup>, through the context of Victorian melodrama, points out how *UB* «makes use of the conventions of melodrama that have defined American and British popular culture since the nineteenth century.» *UB*, in

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<sup>9</sup> Just to make an example, the second episode's CEO (Giovanni Battista Pizzimbone) has been arrested in 2022 for bankruptcy and insider trading.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Barra and Scaglioni 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Schuyler 2015.

each of its episodes, repeats a familiar melodramatic narrative: an individual (usually male, most often white) of social and economic privilege masquerades as a commoner in order to investigate the living conditions of the underclasses. The television series, like its theatrical predecessors, uses the familiarity of melodramatic conventions to depoliticize contemporaneous socioeconomic issues. This analysis ultimately demonstrates the continuity and elasticity of the melodramatic mode while concomitantly revealing a pre-history of reality television. The show does this by delivering to viewers an array of dramatic devices and emotive, individual-centered scenarios, in place of an analysis of the harsh economic conditions we see. As they are represented in the narratives of *UB*, these conditions are matter for a mix of emotional-personal disclosures by workers, achieved through deceit and shenanigans.

To other scholars<sup>12</sup>, *UB* reinforces "American Dream mythos" framed within corporate capitalism. In this pattern, hard work reaps proportionate rewards (capitalistic justice) dispensed to worthy individuals; CEO persona (as agent of justice) dispenses rewards, usually in time/money; laborers, productive and useful, rededicate themselves to their jobs (and to employer).

Similarly, this emotional investment is also predominant in *Boss in incognito*, which completely adheres to the original concept. As one among the many worker-focused reality TV shows, it presents for audiences an inventory of the workplaces and the services, clerical, and manufacturing jobs performed now in Italy: garbage collectors (Biancamano), warehouse workers (LogiMed, Mail Express), fast food restaurant servers and cooks (Fratelli La Bufala, Queen's Chips Amsterdam), food processing and food industry workers (Cerealitalia, Decottopia, Pastificio G. Di Martino, Pomì, Salumificio Sano, Crik Crok, Megic Pizza, Birra Peroni, Oliviero) cruise line workers (Moby Line), amusement park workers (Zoomarine), and so on.

Alongside the variable of different tasks in different ways and environments, the recurring formula revolves around the precarious conditions and hard lives of the working class people. In the same way as the original, the adaptation depicts individuals who work long hours in poor labour practices for inadequate compensation, cannot afford comprehensive health care or education for themselves or their families, and face a range of other problems (caring for an invalid parent, struggling to pay student debt, raising children as a single parent, battling a life-threatening

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Brayton 2014, Hungerford 2020.

disease, or pursuing a dream of bettering themselves that lack of education keeps out of reach). This narrative also points to the dubious consequences for social class inequality and social mobility of a system where only the wealthy middle class can afford to subsidise their access to the most desirable types of work.

Throughout of each episode, viewer hears a series of confessions by workers about their lives, problems, personal failings, unhappiness, revealing information about their health or the health of family members, financial difficulties, personal tragedies, traumas and so on, all delivered in the passive speech of the confessional and bereft of any demand for the general reform of these conditions. Thus, the confessions delivered by workers in the show are rooted in a television self-help culture, toward self-sacrifice, and not practices of advocacy or labor organizing.

The viewer is always privy to the knowledge that the workers seen onscreen are talking with an undercover boss, and not with another regular worker. But the workers we see onscreen did not know they were speaking with a boss when they videotaped; they believed they were talking with a new co-worker. These interactions are likely not recognized as acts of solidarity, since the viewer knows that one of the workers onscreen is not a worker at all.

Camera work, editing and sound convey familiarity, authenticity, and encourage voyeurism and the close observation of actual setting and human subjects. Video confessionals and voice-over's guide interpretations of the events unfolding on screens, and promise to take tv viewers closer to the "truth".

In the series, the speech presented is not the testimony of individuals demanding a voice in civil society. Instead, it is composed of a series of confessions that are presented to viewers as each illustrative of one individual worker's experience. Within this confession-centered environment, the first person is raised to the status of sole truth.

### **The family business element and the CEO's family story emphasizing**

In the opening sequence, the CEO is portrayed at home, in the office, with the family, as a genuinely concerned and empathetic boss. These moments of 'voice-of-god' narration, usually at the beginning of each episode, frame the show as part of execs moving closer to employees, and capturing their family entrepreneurial backstory.



Subsequently, viewers watch as the episode’s bosses have their appearance, behaviour and social status physically transformed as they try to present themselves to their employees as one of their own.

The Boyle and Kelly’s 2016 study<sup>13</sup> has begun to demonstrate how pervasive the entrepreneur presence into the mainstream of British popular culture is, while also highlighting that business and entrepreneurship can provide material for entertainment-led factual productions.

Likewise, examining the ways in which the world of business and entrepreneurship are represented in *Boss in incognito*, recent socio-economics references<sup>14</sup> are useful to recall that:

Italian capitalism is essentially a family affair. Behind the largest industrial groups and banks, family firms have traditionally been the leading players. Family-owned and managed firms represent a key component of the Italian entrepreneurial fabric, not only numerically but also for their contribution to GDP and employment. In Italy, it is estimated there are around 784,000 family firms, accounting for more than 85% of the total number and contributing to approximately 70% of the employment, in line with the major European economies. [...] Two main features set apart Italian family firms. First, less reliance on external managers: 66% of the Italian family firms are fully managed by family members compared to 26% in France and only 10% in the UK. (Amato and Patuelli 2023: 107)

Family business significantly contributes to the Italian economy, and it is possible to observe that these firms represent the backbone of Italy’s business and entrepreneurship. Family business is a commercial organization in which decision-making is influenced by multiple generations of a family, related by blood or marriage or adoption, who has both the ability to influence the vision of the business and the willingness to use this ability to pursue distinctive goals. Thus, these enterprises are distinguished from other organizational forms by the overlap of family and work systems as members of the controlling family significantly influence the strategic direction, and in turn, performance, and survival of their enterprises. They are usually more complex than similar non-family businesses. As all the businesses, for longevity and prosperity, a family firm must achieve efficiency and effectiveness focused business objectives but, in addition, family-oriented goals

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Boyle and Kelly 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Basco, Stough and Suwala 2021.

such as harmony, generational transition, and ownership issues must also be managed.

These considerations immediately lead to the opening segment of each *Boss in incognito's* episode, indissolubly linked to the CEO's family. The sequence often documents an upscale family appearance (homes, clothes, leisure activities, values, interests, and everyday behaviours), which reinforces inequalities and dominant norms, and perpetuates the proliferation of differences and distinctions.

### The "Reward Sequence"

These are, surprisingly, not the ubiquitous advice of corporate consultants worldwide: benefits reductions, downsizing, and massive lay-offs. Instead, *Undercover Boss* repurposes the well-known free-market script in an attempt to charge it with positive imagery. In the show, the extreme measures taken are an affective investment in the average worker, heart-felt personal contact between CEO and employees, as well as financial rewards for hard work. (Aho 2016: 94)

The plot structure and characterization recast the persona of the distant, greedy CEO as a vulnerable, caring dispenser of just rewards to deserving employees. The featured company must not only meet the eligibility criteria and be willing to give up its time, but it must commit to the "reward" portion of the show. That's at the end of each episode, where the undercover boss reveals themselves to the featured employees with whom they worked and offers them financial rewards to help them in their personal situations. The individual worker is plucked from their daily surroundings and peers and brought to their employer's head office for the episode's reveal. The boss discloses his real identity to each of the workers he encountered while undercover and individual cases seem resolved by the boss' benevolent action as she or he dispenses rewards or praise on the tiny cadre of deserving individuals encountered while undercover. CEO is usually reduced to tears. The workers, post-reveal, speak directly to camera, telling how they feel about the show's outcome or about their surprise at appearing in it. After a solid lesson in humility, realizing how difficult their underlings work, bosses arrange to meet with the deserving employee on some pretense, reveal themselves to have been the hapless trainee, and reward the worker with funds, scholarships, and so on.

Each employee "sob story", establishes grounds for CEO to intervene later as heroic and empathetic savior, relieving employee suffering; dispenses individual rewards episodically based on severity of suffering; doles out prescriptive solutions in the form of advice or charitable gifts and promotions, scholarship, raise or bonus, assistance with medical bills, college fund; monetary gifts buffer low pay scales; vacation compensate for oppressive work schedules. Individual rewards presumably "cure" systemic hardships of low pay, excessive workload, oppressive work schedules.

Often the undercover bosses get deeply emotionally involved and desire to give even more than they had originally planned. They've connected with their employees on a new level and value the experience of doing kind things for those associates in need.

Ultimately, *Boss in incognito*, as emanation of the original format, shows that workplace difficulties and problems in the force of production are solvable without systemic reforms that could broaden employee's access to better conditions, and offers no sense that the conditions it depicts deserve wide-reaching reform.

Workers are depicted as taking action and making a difference through their own initiative, but they can't ease the problems and challenges they confront without their company's charity. Each worker's involvement in the series will bring rewards only for them as individuals, and these rewards are divorced from any collective experience of advocacy or a movement towards labor solidarity. Similarly, in an era of flexible working and individualisation, there is perhaps less likely to be solidarity based on shared career paths, occupation and craft skills.

## **Conclusions and implications. Brand integration and public service**

Television studies in Italy are often concerned with understanding the broader economic and institutional framework that has helped shape the patterns of television production since its early years. It is generally assumed that television, as an industry, is crucially shaped by an uneven combination of economic, political, technological and institutional factors that are often enacted in practice and policy through key individuals in broadcasting organizations. At the core of this complex process are competing discourses about the role and function of television in contemporary society, which in the Italian context inevitably leads us to engage with

debates around public service and more market orientated visions of television's role in the lives of audiences.

In light of the above, and whereas Rai continues to occupy a central place within the Italian media landscape as a PSM organisation<sup>15</sup>, our point is that the representation of work given by this international format, in a sense, compromise Rai's public service obligations. In this work we have examined what is called a *brand integration* product, within the Italian public service broadcaster. It is important to outline how media narratives and cinematic depictions dictate societal ideas and trends, influencing people's beliefs and perceptions of the world. We have tried to demonstrate how the labor portrayal that emerge from *Boss in incognito* undermines the public service remit.

It cannot go unnoticed that the "visibility aspect" constitutes an important one. From Birra Peroni and Moby Lines to Cinecittà World and Crik Crok, the show has featured some Italian major brands and well-known CEOs. The bosses who appear in the show may also benefit personally and professionally. National and local mainstream news coverage of the series may position the companies featured on-screen to cash in through the advertising of their products or services and the enhancement of their public relations image. The bosses may also accrue prestige within their professional peer networks by appearing on the show, with the opportunity to improve the competitiveness of his company. Many companies get involved initially because of the amazing branding opportunity and the widespread visibility of being televised nationally during prime time on a major network.

Moreover, this is a unique chance for the higher-ups to get candid and unfiltered feedback from the people on the front lines in a way they never could from behind their desks, using this opportunity more to gain insight into the company's operations and customer relations. The real outcome and true benefit of participating, is the ability to give back and make a difference in the lives of employees, who are a company's most valuable and competitive advantage.

Put otherwise, *Boss in incognito*, through its rhetoric surround, turns Rai into brand ambassador and establishes a false dividing line between narrative content and promotion, creating format adaptations from the transnational scenario that conveys the values of commercial tv.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Połńska and Beckett 2019.

A number of recent analysts<sup>16</sup> have pointed to the way in which the identity-building mandate of Rai, reflective of its public service mission, endorsed the commercial dictate of the Italian media system starting from the 1990's. During the Berlusconi era, characterized by a duopolistic television system, Rai opted to counteract the increasing popularity of commercial television by engaging with the same corporatized logic of Mediaset. Thus, rather than strengthening its public service mission and consolidating its potential for civic involvement, Rai stubbornly pursued the same formats and platforms that were popularized by its commercial counterpart: game shows, dance-ridden variety shows, hours-long sports programs, and sensationalistic talk shows. Through *Boss in incognito*, Rai continues to compromise its original charge, but also delimits its potential as a viable institutional network.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. D'Arma 2015, 2019, Padovani 2019, Pavani 2018, Vigevani 2018.

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