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Conflict of Interest in the Media Age: Inferences from the Contrasted Italian Case

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Conflict of interest represents a recurrent challenge in democratic systems. It has historically raised the issue of regulating the public decision-making process in order to avoid improper outcomes, namely that decision-makers benefit economic private interests in taking their decisions. This type of conflict of interest might be called 'top-down' conflict of interest. The paper addresses a more specific influence on public life, namely the one coming from the control of private media industry. And it deals with both sides of the issue, the bottom-up and top-down ones. The conflict of interest coming from the control of the media represents a new formidable challenge that democratic systems don't know how to deal with. Democratic systems have learned how to identify conflicts of interest coming from traditional industrial activities, but they know much less how to deal with conflicts of interest coming from post-industrial ones. Moreover, the latter case of conflict of interest is much more insidious than the former case of conflict of interest. While the industrial conflict of interest could benefit one or the economic actor (firm, group, corporation), the post-industrial conflict of interest might affect the very nature of political competition. More than in other political eras, in the media age information is the strategic resource of the political game. The Italian experience, from 1994 to 2009, constitutes the most striking example of such conflict of interest. The understanding of this experience represents a lesson to be learned by other democratic systems. The paper will be divided in two parts. The First Part will focus on the general topic of the transformation of modern democracies, analysing: (a) politics in the media age, (b) conflict of interest in the media age and (c) the implications of the media conflict of interest for democratic competition. The Second Part will focus on the specific topic of the transformation of Italian democracy, analysing: (a) the transition from the first to the second Italian republic, (b) the rise and staying into power of Mr. Silvio Berlusconi as an unprecedented media tycoon and (c) the strategies elaborated for dealing with this challenge. A conclusion will finally derive some inferences from this contrasted Italian experience.