

It is Never too Late

Chiara Motta Filippo Palomba

Draft available upon request

Abstract. Can technology relax constraints on educational supply and expand local productive capacity? We exploit a quasi-natural experiment in postwar Italy to estimate the causal impact of educational television on adult skills and local economic activity. In 1960, the Italian public broadcaster and the Ministry of Education expanded televised adult education, with *Non è mai troppo tardi* (“It Is Never Too Late”) as a flagship program—a daily literacy course supported by a national network of collective viewing centers designed to broaden access. We digitize historical records of transmitter locations and technical characteristics to predict television reception and link these predictions to industrial- and population-census data. Our effects are identified from variation in signal diffraction caused by topography, conditional on transmitter placement. We estimate stacked long differences across the 1951, 1961, and 1971 censuses for roughly 7,700 municipalities. A one-standard-deviation increase in signal strength raised adult literacy by 0.18 percentage points during the program decade relative to the preceding decade—17% of the average decadal gain. It also increased labor-force participation by 1.0 percentage point overall and 1.4 percentage points among women, and shifted employment out of agriculture. Labor-market outcomes responded to reception in neighboring municipalities within approximately 15 kilometers, consistent with local spillovers. Estimated literacy gains were larger in initially less literate municipalities and in places with collective viewing centers. Our findings suggest that broadcast technology can expand educational provision and support structural transformation, with benefits extending across municipal boundaries.