



It Takes a Network

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The Italian/American presence on the Internet may seem, at first, desolante. Try and type “Italian American” (with or without the infamous hyphen) in your google search bar.

A few institutional websites will come up first, some of them well designed but rarely updated, which present, however, only one-way information and no room for user interaction. Then you’ll find a host of amateurish pages striving to rally Italian Americans around a big tricolored flag and a sound file that, all of a sudden, launches the Italian national anthem at full volume. Lastly, come those e-commerce sites that want to sell you Italian food, clothes, and merchandise; plus some attempting to make money by helping you find “Beautiful Italian Singles.”

Yes, there are a few online newspapers that offer free-access discussion forums, but they’re mainly in Italian – www.americaoggi.info stands out among them. True, there are a few news services (Ansa.it, for example) that have some sort of English-language version – but they’re mainly about Italy, and you’ll peruse them for hours in search of an entry about Italian America. And yes, in the past decade a sequel of self-defined “web portals” about Italy mushroomed – but they proven to be commercial failures: raised money, couldn’t define their audience, failed to find or retain users, and ended up in a handful of broken links.

Well, you might surmise that this gloomy picture reflects a fact of life: fifteen million Italian Americans (U.S. Census Bureau data) – most of whom are on the net like everybody else in this country – don’t have an “identity” of their own: a sense of, or need for, “community,” some sort of social capital to be spent in telling their stories on line, meeting each other and exchanging ideas and opinions, while also engaging in discussions and other forms of interaction.

Italian Americans are a success story of ethnic assimilation and disintegration after all – they are Americans; they don’t have much to say to or exchange with each other as a group. You might think so, indeed. But you’d be plain wrong!

Just go and search MySpace.com – the famous website that millions of people use to build their own personal pages and make friends. You’ll find 58,200 entries for “Italian American” (7,440 of which are hyphenated), 110,000 for “little italy”, 519,000 for “sopranos,” and so on. Now try something similar with that rising star in the social networking firmament on the web: Facebook.com. You’ll find several hundreds discussion groups with an “Italian American” label, some with a few hundreds members and a few with several thousands members. And what about YouTube.com – the video-sharing site everyone is talking about? Over 100,000 videos are tagged “Italian” or “Italian American”, almost as many have “Italy” in their keywords, and countless more tell you about personal and family stories, describe trips, report events, and voice people’s opinions and feelings about every angle of Italian and Italian American lifestyle. And I’m not going to talk about blogs:



browse for yourself with a good blog-searching utility such as technorati.com.

To make a long story short: Italian Americans are out on the web, they do try to relate to each other on the basis of shared feelings of “community”, they do express their views through the entire array of multimedia tools the web offers them, and they are eager to find - and provide! - information about all aspects of their life. What is missing - and is badly needed - is a network connecting them.

That’s exactly what i-Italy is going to be. Yes, we’ve got a magazine for you to read, and op-eds, and special reports, and a webTV to watch. And we are assembling an editorial board made of authoritative journalists, commentators, and public intellectuals. But make no mistake: the web is not just about information, not even about communication - all the web is about is conversation. It’s your stories that matter, your opinions, your comments - and your will to share them among yourselves and with us! It takes a network to build a community. Now we’ve got the network: let’s build our community together.

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Links

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