

Our First Year in the Internet Piazza

Ottorino Cappelli (October 18, 2008)



i-Italy is one year old. A year of projects and accomplishments. Its success is the living proof that the Internet can be a powerful "piazza" for the Italian American community

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We launched it in October 2007 in an incredibly packed conference hall offered by the [Graduate School of Journalism of the City University of New York](#) [2]. We were then part of an international project funded by the Italian Government and directed by the [Sapienza University of Rome](#). [3] Our goal was to create the first online community and information network dedicated to Italian and Italian American affairs. It was a fascinating experience, thanks especially to our partners and supporting institutions, in particular [America Oggi](#) [4], the [John D. Calandra Italian American Institute](#) [5] (Queens College, CUNY), and the [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [6] of NYU.

The backing of the [Consulate General of Italy in New York](#) [7] has been also essential. An entire section of our magazine (“Italy in New York”) is managed in collaboration with them. The Consul General Francesco Maria Talò has even started a “blog” on i-Italy (called “[Sistema Italia](#) [8]”). Such institutional support is by no means common, and we take it as a genuine appreciation of our work and passion.

One year later, that seminal project is ended, as well as the Italian government fundings – but we have grown more ambitious, and we are still around. We know that we are on the right track. We have incorporated a not-for-profit organization (The Italian American Digital Project, Inc.) to take care of the organizational and fund-raising activities of i-Italy. We are on our own now and need the support of all of you!

The success of i-Italy is the living proof that the Internet can be a powerful “piazza” for the Italian American community.

We have 50 regular contributors and columnists (we call them “bloggers”) from the U.S., Canada, and Italy, including amateur and professional journalists, academics, and “public intellectuals”. Our online magazine (www.i-Italy.org [9]) has reached 250.000 readers, one-quarter of whom are frequent visitors of our site.

But we are particularly delighted by the synergy between the journalistic activity in our magazine and the grassroots-level contributions on our open-access community and social network (www.i-Italy.us [10]). One good example of this is the issue of preserving and expanding the Italian language in America.

In both the online and print issues of our magazine, we have often touched upon this subject which is considered to be a cultural imperative by the Italian American community at large. We have also been actively supporting the campaign to save the Advanced Placement Exam in Italian, which is still in jeopardy as we write.

Last June, we published a special issue of i-Italy dedicated to this topic. At that same time, members of our community at i-Italy.us started two lively discussion threads on this subject: “Studying Italian: Why and why not” and “Why most Italian immigrants do not teach Italian to their children.” In these forums, dozens of multi-generational Italian Americans from all over the U.S. shared their experience with the Italian language: their desire to speak the language, connect with their heritage, their frustration at the obstacles they encounter, and their proposals to improve the situation. And all of them testify to something that is sadly missing. Many lament that Italian is not offered in their school districts. Others point out that Italian is not even offered at college level. Even when Italian is offered in colleges, its absence from high schools may have already determined its future. What emerges from these forums, as well, are the real-life problems related to the experience of children of Italian immigrants, such as mediating between English, Italian, and a regional dialect.

There are “local” discussion groups created by people who want to stay in touch and share information about their place of origin in Italy. These include regional and town-based groups such as Calabria, Abruzzo, Ciociaria, Emilia Romagna Group, Pugliesi in America, Piemontesi of America...and beyond, Guardia dei Lombardi (Avellino), Furore (Costa d’Amalfi), and Roseto Valfortore (Foggia).

Several discussion groups unite those with artistic interests, such as [Italian American Writers and Editors](#) [11], [Cinema Italiano](#) [12], [Italian American Actors and Performers](#) [13], [Italian American Architects](#) [14], and [Fotografia](#). [15] One active writers’ group, called [Cicchetti](#) [16], was created by essayist, poet, and cultural critic [Mary Cappello](#) [17], who writes: “In the interest of cutting through the logorrhea produced by new information technologies, I write to announce a call to cicchetti



makers—a new literary form that I hope we can inaugurate together....[w]ith the idea of the small snack...in mind...I want to use this blog space to post cicchetti...and to ask you to do the same.” In addition to animating this community of writers, Mary also contributes to our magazine where she has recently started a series of conversations with “mostly gay and lesbian writers, artists, filmmakers, and public intellectuals who have some link to Italian or Italian American life and letters.”

[Greenwich Village Italians](#) [18](created by Emily, a freshman at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst), intends to be “a forum for young adults to express what Italy means to them - whether your parents are the first generation to come to America or the fifth.”

One of the largest and most active is [Women in Italy and Italian Women in the World](#) [19], “a forum for sharing ideas, information, and announcements pertaining to the intellectual and creative work of women in Italy and the Italian diaspora.” Understandably, this group has been thoroughly discussing Hillary Clinton’s candidacy during the Democratic primaries. Many interesting issues have emerged here, including a debate about the remnants of the “macho culture” in some segments of the Italian American population in the U.S. This group is definitely worth a special mention and more than a cursory visit.

Last but not least, some discussion groups have been created by Italian citizens residing in the US. One of them, [Terre Promesse](#) [20](Promised Lands) invites people to share critical thoughts about the “unfulfilled promises” of both Italy and America. Another, [Movi-Menti](#) [21], is managed by Italian supporters of Barack Obama who hope to replicate the “Obama phenomenon” in Italy. They ask provocatively: “Obama. Here, We Can. There, Can We?” In the latter case, an interesting relationship exists between the community and the magazine, where several articles analyze both the “Italians for Obama” phenomenon in Italy and the attitude of Italian Americans to Obama in the U.S.

Even Italian Fulbright students who participate in the 2008-09 [BEST](#) [22] (Business Exchange and Student Training) program have created their own group in our community. The program was started in 2007 by US Ambassador to ‘ Italy, Ronald P. Spogli. It trains PhD students and post-doc researchers in business to help them establish technology-based companies in Italy. Participants work as interns for six months in select Silicon Valley companies and attend executive MBA lectures in the evening. Once they return, participants will hopefully start new technology-based companies. We are pleased that i-Italy can provide them with tools to stay in touch and share their experiences.

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