

i-Italy: "A Space as We Define It"

Eleonora Mazzucchi (March 20, 2008)



The jury's out. A Pulitzer Prize-winner, a heartthrob of the silver screen and a teen journalist all agree: i-Italy's got a bright future. A capacious auditorium at the CUNY Graduate Center is where interested parties of Italians and Italian-Americans gathered for the Italian American Digital Project's official launching on Monday. The event served to inaugurate IADP, the not-for-profit organization



that will head i-Italy.org, and to recognize the students of the Empowerment for Italy-U.S. Community (EUSIC) project who helped get i-Italy off the ground and make it what it is today: both a community space and a website for journalistic content

It started Italian-style: a little late and amid the sanguine din of various conversations going on at once, with some people sitting and reaching across aisles to shake hands, and others standing to greet incomers like long-lost friends. A capacious auditorium at the [CUNY Graduate Center](#) [2] is where interested parties of Italians and Italian-Americans gathered for the Italian American Digital Project’s official launching on Monday. The event served to inaugurate IADP, the not-for-profit organization that will head i-Italy.org, and to recognize the students of the Empowerment for Italy-U.S. Community (EUSIC) project who helped get i-Italy off the ground and make it what it is today: both a community space and a website for journalistic content.

The website’s ambitious agenda, which many readers here are familiar with, was brought to fruition with the participation of professors, journalists and intellectuals. Chief among them is [Prof. Anthony J. Tamburri](#) [3] ([John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, City University of New York](#) [4]) who opened Monday’s ceremony by saying that at first he had been skeptical about a web-venture that teaches “Italian-American culture to Italian-American citizens”. But the results spoke for themselves. Over the next couple of hours, [Prof. Ottorino Cappelli](#) [5], one of the website’s loving and charismatic creators, used an onstage projector screen to guide the audience through the website’s multimedia capabilities—from blogs that are its journalistic backbone to You-Tube- facilitated video content-- and the wide array of issues it covers. Though the blogs provide in-depth commentary and news from professional writers, the site’s “community” (that has since its inception attracted over 300 registered users) has also contributed some of the most entertaining and thought-provoking pieces. [Annie Lanzilotto](#) [6], a writer from the Bronx who also keeps an i-Italy blog, showcased her very funny video “[La Signora and the Soprano](#) [7]” (generating laughs all around), while Prof. Cappelli introduced, via Skype connection, [Marina Melchionda](#) [8], a university student from Naples writing a chapter-by-chapter interview of her grandfather’s emigration from Italy to Maryland.

i-Italy’s dynamic functions are indeed precisely what’s required, in the words of Prof. Fontana, who co-championed the EUSIC portion of the operation from the University of Rome La Sapienza, to reflect the “different stratifications and attitudes” of an Italian-American community that falls on a spectrum “of those who feel very Italian to those who feel very American”. He and Prof. di Nicola went on to honor EUSIC’s students with diplomas for their contributions. Though these students may represent a distinctly Italian end of the spectrum, they all have experience living in the U.S. and can be credited for starting a meaningful, overdue conversation between Italians and Italian-Americans that has hardly ever existed in any formal capacity.

Among the evening’s notable speakers were Michael Arena, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist (Cuny University Director of Communications and Marketing) and [Vincenzo Amato](#) [9], the star of Emanuele Crialese’s films, including most recently “The Golden Door”. Mr. Arena underscored i-Italy’s progressive philosophy of bringing news and user-generated content to the web, especially at a time when the newspaper business is in failure. When I spoke to him personally, anxious to figure out what i-Italy’s chances were for the future, he responded optimistically. “We’re in a very exciting time. There’s no comparable place for gathering like this website.” He added: “with blogging things are changing for everyone”, and the Italian-American community is going along with the change. At the podium Mr. Arena had also spoken out on behalf of Italian-American writers. Because of the nature of their professions, he said, they have tended to be isolated and out of touch with one another. Like Annie Lanzilotto, who earlier echoed a similar feeling, in i-Italy they have found a forum for expression.

Mr. Amato, a genial, handsome young man in loose khakis and sneakers, bounded onto the stage with boyish zeal. He submitted to an onstage interview with Prof. Tamburri and on his part, talked



about his experience as an Italian living in New York for 15 years. Though Amato has only appeared in Italian-language movies—his acting career began when he met Crialese, his then-neighbor, smoking a cigarette in the hallway of their East Village apartment building—he describes himself as thoroughly Italian-American, or at very least, as a New Yorker. As such he is a fan and regular reader of i-Italy despite, he joked, the fact that he is media-incapacitated (he owns neither computer nor television and dedicates the bulk of his time to sculpting). For his role in [“Golden Door”](#), [10] that of an Italian coming to the U.S. at the turn of the century, he had researched the rural Sicilian villages from which many immigrants originated. What he said he had found were people leading extremely secluded lives, very tied to their land and who, a hundred years ago, could never even have imagined what America looked like—who thought that going to America was “like going to the moon”. Amato’s glimpse into the past presented a fitting and jarring contrast for the high level of connectivity, through media and web-based initiatives, that exists between Italy and America, and between Italian-Americans and Italy today.

In their warm, hopeful video addresses, broadcasted through i-Italy’s website, [Consul General Francesco Maria Talo’](#) [11] and [Renato Miracco](#) [12], the director of the Italian Cultural Institute, reiterated the need for a “modern channel” that acts as a junction for different generations of Italian-Americans, newly-arrived Italians to the U.S. and contemporary, every-day Italy. [Vice Consul Maurizio Antonini](#) [13] attended in representation of the consular office, while Dr. Amelia Carpenito Antonucci, attaché for Cultural Affairs, represented the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [14].

Part of the process of forging a relationship between Italian-America and Italy, of discovering the relationship that always existed, is honoring it. [Maria Sauer](#) [15], a 17-year old from Bayside, New York, senior editor of her high-school newspaper and member of i-Italy’s community, was also in attendance on Monday. When I met her after the event, she said in earnest that she thought the website was “very cool”. She told me she had come because, with the encouragement of her Italian AP teacher, she had submitted an essay to i-Italy’s Italian/American Citizen Journalist-Digital Witness Contest (she was one of the contest’s 10 selected finalists). Her thoughtful essay—which she will also use to win a scholarship from the [Columbus Citizens Foundation](#) [16]—traced her Italian grandfather’s journey from immigrant to law student and, through his story, her own attachment to Italy. During Monday’s proceedings the contest’s top three submissions, stories like Maria’s that explore identity and family history, were announced and the winners awarded prizes. Thierry Aucoc, the Senior Vice President of [Alitalia for North America](#) [17], was present to award the 1st place prize, two round-trip tickets from any American gateway to any destination in Italy.

i-Italy certainly has a lot going for it. [George de Stefano](#) [18], a journalist and i-Italy contributor, praised the high quality of the website’s posts and its “open, lively and dynamic environment”. He even stated that the blog posts were much better than anything he had seen on the New York Times’ website in response to Ian Fisher’s widely-read article on the state of present-day Italy. Ms. Lanzilotto, also unequivocally enthusiastic about the site, said it was a free, un-censored zone, “a space as we define it”. Nevertheless, before the event’s participants were invited to join in a dinner at—you guessed it—an Italian restaurant and to revel in wine and conversation, Prof. Cappelli made some closing remarks. He asked that i-Italy.org continue to be supported because now that it is past its founding stages, “we must see if it can stand on its own two legs”.

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Links

[1] <http://108.61.128.93/files/conve1206051336jpg>

[2] <http://www1.cuny.edu/about/index.html>



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- [4] <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/index.html>
- [5] <http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/italian-american-netsurfing>
- [6] <http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/icewoman>
- [7] <http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/1073/la-signora-and-soprano>
- [8] http://www.i-italy.us/xn/detail/u_Marina85
- [9] <http://www.vincenzoamato.com/>
- [10] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXrGtAXs5Rw>
- [11] <http://www.i-italy.org/sections/multimedia/video?nid=1470>
- [12] <http://www.i-italy.org/sections/multimedia/video?nid=1467>
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