

Saggi

Beyond virtuality: the case of the latest generation of Italians in London and its use of cyberspace

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Introduction

This paper presents part of the findings from my PhD research thesis completed in 2007. Focus is on the benefits that a group of first generation Italian migrants, between the ages of 20 and 35, living in London, derived from participating in the Italianialondra.com online community, which was created in April 2003. I will analyse the practical impact of the potentialities offered by cyberspace showing that Italianialondra.com is strategically employed and has positive repercussions on its members' everyday life. This confirms theories that point to the advantages that can be derived from new media (Turkle, 1997; De Kerckhove, 1999; Lévy, 2001; Stone, 2001) in contrast to Orwellian views, which depict new media as tools for surveillance and control (Aycock 1995; Foucault in Poster, 1996 and in Turkle, 1997). Prior to reviewing the theoretical framework informing the analysis of the findings, an introduction to my doctoral research is due.

Aims

The overall aim of the study was to provide a more in-depth understanding of the cultural and social role of the online community hosted on the Italianialondra.com website. My task was to ascertain whom the Italianialondra.com online community effectively addresses, to what extent and with what benefits. The purpose was to analyse what kind of virtual community Italianialondra.com is, and to address questions about the representation of

the community, shifting from the investigation of identity as subjectivity to the investigation of group identity, and vice versa.

The Italianialondra.com online community: a presentation of the phenomenon under study

In its presentation, it is stated that Italianialondra.com is an association that aims to be a point of reference for Italian professionals and to facilitate their integration in London through the promotion of events and cultural and social activities. The homepage of the community advertises Italian restaurants and events in London, the performance of Italian plays and the screening of Italian films.

Upon joining the Italianialondra.com virtual community, visitors choose a nickname and create personal profiles. In the profile page they describe themselves by age, gender, profession, physical description, address in London, Italian city of origin, hobbies, a brief description of their personality and attitudes, and why they are in London. The user is then identified by his/her nickname, which appears in the «online users» window every time she/he logs in. All members are able to obtain information about the others by clicking on nicknames when these appear on the interface («online users» window, «new users» window, Chat-room, Forum). Nicknames are linked to each user's *profile* page.

When I started conducting the fieldwork (October 2004), the Italianialondra.com community allowed participants to communicate in ways that were both synchronous (via Chat-room and Instant Messaging) and asynchronous (via Forum). Later, the manager of the community substituted the Chat-room and the section of the Forum dedicated to discussions with the Blog. A section of the Forum is dedicated to advertising flats for rent, jobs and items to sell. In another section named «Events» anyone can propose going out for dinner, or to the cinema, theatre, concerts and clubbing, and on trips. Members are allowed to invite people who are not part of the Italianialondra.com online community. Frequently, large events, such as summer or Christmas parties, football matches or picnics are organised.

In November 2005, the manager of the community published the first issue of the Italianialondra.com Magazine. This is published monthly and is distributed by Italian institutions and restaurants in London and during events. In July 2006, Italianialondra.com advertised the launching of the first UK web-radio programme dedicated to Italians in London: «The Italian Job». Furthermore, since 2005, when logging in to the virtual community, members can also access «Italianialondra.biz», a search engine dedicated exclusively to Italian business (biz) practices.

From April 2003 to 2006, the membership of Italianialondra.com grew from 150 to 5000. Since 2006, the number of the users has remained stable

because many visitors are in London only temporarily, and there are as many leaving the community as there are new members.

Thus, from sociality to culture to business, the Italianialondra.com online community appears to be the exclusive online promoter of the Italian presence in London.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was employed to enable a deeper understanding of the content and meaning of communication as it unfolded on the Web. Between October 2004 and April 2005, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 20 members of the online community, aged between 25 and 35, educated at university level and/or employed at managerial level, living in London¹. I decided to select this particular sample because the literature suggests that online groups that are able to «mobilize ideas, opinions, money, and social linkages» (Appadurai, 1997, p. 195) are pioneered by highly educated individuals who have access to laboratories and universities, and who are able to invest in the construction of networks to boost new political, religious or ethnic movements and produce new immigrant ethos.

In-depth, face-to-face interviews allowed for greater depth and flexibility in looking at the impact of the processes (the construction of identity and community) of online communication. I chose an interpretative approach², which offered a depth of analysis based on experience and understandings and allowed a picture of life as it is lived. Through the interpretation of in-depth interviews I sought to illuminate meaning in subjects' lives, and in their practices, beliefs and actions.

Main results

During the interviews I found that most of the interviewees arrived in London in the early nineties and belong to middle class backgrounds³. On average, the interviewees have been living in London for seven years. These Italians constitute a new migration pattern compared to previous Italian migration waves (post-war labour migration, as defined in Cohen, 1997). They decided to leave Italy because in Italy the market that interests graduates is saturated. Analysis of the Italian political and economic crisis that encourages a «graduate drain» (Pezzulli, 2004) goes beyond the scope of this paper, but the issue has to be mentioned in order to better define this new migration trend. The main reason why the respondents decided to permanently live in London was the career. In brief, according to them, it is not that in Italy they would have been unemployed; rather, the positions they would have been able to obtain

there would not have matched their aspirations. They told me that for this reason they had no intention of returning to Italy.

I analysed «under what circumstances, in what ways, and to what extent» (Herring, 2004, p. 26) technology shapes communication between these migrants.

Looking at the circumstances under which the new Italian migrants found themselves after many years abroad, it emerged that, besides suffering from the same problems that commonly affect the lives of migrants, until they became members of *Italianialondra.com*, they had deliberately been avoiding other Italians. The reason is that their aim was to assimilate into British society. Accordingly, I found that, after many years spent in London, the regular members of *Italianialondra.com* appeared to have acquired patterns of behaviour similar to those of the British. They «transformed» their cultural identity. Italians I interviewed think in English, read in English and write in English.

As a consequence of assimilation, the interviewees argued that they consider themselves «different». As they said, they are «different» from short-term Italian workers arriving in London to find a seasonal job and then return home, from Italian tourists, from upper-class Italians who, taking advantage of class privileges, can return to their country and obtain high-ranking positions, and from working-class post-war migrants, who arrived in England to «make ends meet».

The interpretation is that, in the collective imaginary of the new migrants, post-war migrants and other Italians temporarily in London represent the «non-integrated» person who symbolizes a condition from which the respondents distance themselves. Thus, the respondents build their new identities through differentiation, but, as many of them told me, they were «still looking for something» that would give completeness to their sense of self. They did not forget their roots. They were looking for a new context in which old contents took on new forms. They found it in the virtual community *Italianialondra.com*.

In what ways the online community has helped Italians to reapproach fellow migrants? Since the encounter mediated by *Italianialondra.com* is disembodied, when logging in, members free their imagination in the search of «the similar». Disembodiment encourages them to reapproach other Italians and construct an image of identity built on sameness. Shared characteristics are: commitment and devotion to job, as well as knowledge and new perspectives acquired not only through work, but also through their experience of British culture, which contributed to making them see themselves as «different».

Then, a new communitarian ethos based on sharing the attempt to integrate into the British social fabric, and all the consequences of this (loneliness, adaptation and assimilation), became a defining element of community

membership within Italianialondra.com. The Web legitimizes a new identity made of «what» Italians «have become» (Hall, 1990).

Italianialondra.com became the pivot, the virtual square that Italians in London were missing. One of the respondents said: «The Italianialondra.com online community works because it has given us the possibility to carve a piece of Italy and keep it with us in London».

Getting back to the question posed by Herring, this article explains how and to «what extent» Italianialondra.com has affected its members' daily life. Findings relate to passages of the interviews in which the respondents discuss their usage of the Italianialondra.com online community and why they joined it. Results pertain to two main themes: action in cyberspace (does the virtual dimension stimulate or restrict human action?) and the practical impact of the potentialities offered by cyberspace (does cyberspace have an impact on the offline dimension?).

«Orwellian» visions of new media

In this Section I discuss «Orwellian» visions of the Web that fear that it could become a tool of control more similar to the «Big Brother» rather than an electronic arena for discussion. Two different points of view have emerged. On the one hand, some consider the effects and repercussions of new media in the context of the collective sphere and, on the other hand, some analyse the issue on an individual level.

A starting point might be the question that Poster raises about so-called *Second Media Age* communication: «does it or is it likely to promote the proliferation of little narratives or does it invigorate a developing authoritarian technocracy?» (Poster, 1996, p. 36). Poster, from a post-structuralist perspective, explores how databases reposition our identities. According to Poster, since electronic communications media pre-empt public discussions by turning the content of the media into advertisements for various commodities, the shadow of a «mechanism of domination» emerges. The public sphere, which is the *conditio sine qua non* for every kind of democracy, has been «commodified» and reduced to advertisements. Moreover, high-bandwidth interactive networks, together with other technologies, become means of surveillance, control and disinformation. In this view, the Web could become a huge invisible cage with no way out, and the whole of society could work as a hierarchical and disciplinary machine. Computers could turn into weapons, the inquisitive eyes of a totalitarian government.

Poster quotes Michael Foucault's work. Foucault (1977, in Poster, 1996) elaborates a perspective on information, communication and power that undermines links between electronic communication and freedom. He argues

that power in modern society is not imposed by the actual presence and brute force of an elite, but by the way in which each individual learns the art of self-surveillance.

From Foucault's perspective, rather than force, it is the world itself that is able to control both the bodies and the behaviours of large numbers of people. In his vision, technologies of imprisonment, education and psychotherapy impose a sort of auto-surveillance because individuals learn to see themselves from a teacher's or a therapist's point of view, even in their absence. Foucault uses the image of the Panopticon, proposed by the social philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The Panopticon is a device that enables a prison guard to see all prisoners, without being seen. At any time, a prisoner can be observed. Thus, prisoners have to imagine that they are observed, even if they are not, and behave according to the rules and restrictions imposed by the guards. In the Panopticon, people learn to look at themselves through the eyes of the guards.

Poster argues that, today, increasingly centralized databases provide a material basis for a vastly extended Panopticon that could include the Web. The user knows that online a network censorship works and that artificially intelligent agents monitor. Therefore, she/he is conditioned not to behave freely any longer.

Turkle (1997) argues that from Foucault's perspective, the most important factor is not how frequently the agents are used or censorship is enforced. Like the threat of a tax audit, what matters most is that people know that the possibility is always present. However, Turkle criticizes the view that the conversation about electronic mail, bulletin boards, and the information superhighway in general are steeped in a language of liberation and utopian possibility.

The idea of freedom quickly vanishes if we turn to the Web itself. Aycock (1995) takes as an example the notice appearing on his screen every time he logs in to the Web via the university computer. The screen says:

Use of this system by unauthorized users is prohibited, individuals using this computer system without authority, or in excess of their authority, are subject to having all of their activities on this system monitored and recorded by system personnel. In the process of monitoring individuals improperly using this system, the activities of authorized users «may» also be monitored. Anyone using this system without authorization or in excess of their authorization expressly consents to such monitoring and is advised that if such monitoring reveals possible evidence of criminal activity, system personnel may provide the evidence of such monitoring to law enforcement officials (Aycock, 1995).

Aycock defines this notice as a «panoptic regulation» and argues that it raised issues about freedom, power, technique and privacy, which are linked in the use of the Web. He observes that in only four sentences, some variation

of the word «authority» is used six times, «monitor» or its variants are used another six times, «use» appears five times, and the word «system» is used seven times. He argues that the message is that authorities monitor users on behalf of the system. He admits that perhaps this is an extreme example of Web surveillance, but claims that much Web discourse is at least covertly normative. I have to say that the notice that Aycock mentions is an ordinary Web regulation to maintain control in a particular domain, the university net. The university net is as regulated as the offline university environment is. However, Aycock's aim, in line post-modern scholarship (Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault), is to de-reify the structure of capitalism and to uncover forms of inequality and injustice by making these structures and the problems they produce visible.

I have not analysed the Web as the space of commodity, but my position is that the Web is no more controlled than is real space. I believe that in modern everyday life, it is difficult to definitively classify experience as «real» or «not real». It is more helpful to determine the degree of reality in an event. It is for this reason that I chose an interpretative approach.

Finally, my goal was not to investigate how signs have saturated our lived experiences, but to evaluate what a space for communication signifies for its users and, consequently, to analyse whether and how it benefits their everyday lives.

New possibilities disclosed by new media

Some scholars analyse technologies from a practical perspective, focusing on the new possibilities that technologies can provide. Lévy's visionary anthropology is opposed to those who look at technologies as tools for power and control. He thinks that instead of forming a perfect market, the Web opens up space of knowledge.

New technologies, such as virtual reality and CMC (Computer Mediated Communication), in Lévy's (2001) view, are just tools, mere instruments whose advantages we can be aware of in order to re-elaborate and interpret the world. Lévy argues that software is a highly specialized form of equipment that the updated user can control: the individual animates the virtual domain. According to Lévy, for this reason we have to talk of real presence in the virtual environment. In line with this approach, a virtual entity does not replace the real, but it is as essential as the real: digital media help the real to signify. Lévy criticizes the «Orwellian» images of digital media and argues that new technologies imply a reaction against passivity because they are interactive tools.

Through interactivity the users have the opportunity to modify texts and express their opinions, in contrast to traditional media whose messages they

can only passively assimilate. Through the Web, users interact with the machine; they can learn and contribute to information and knowledge. According to Lévy, the employment of online writing enables us to compare ourselves with people whose backgrounds – their social class, ethnic group or age, for example – are different from our own, and thus makes possible a more balanced and responsive communication. This is true if we consider that writing is a way to objectify, in an organized way, our thoughts and values so that the author can be explicitly recognized.

On the other hand, if a person has mental health problems or a physical illness or disability, anonymity and the absence of the body allow the simplifying of relationships, and help widen the horizons of people who suffer from social or spatial alienation. In the light of similar considerations, Lévy criticizes the «information superhighway» metaphor, created by Negroponte (1996) to describe the Net. This metaphor relates to a mass communication system that is specifically channelled, rather than to interactive relationships and community creation. According to Lévy, it does not take into consideration that new modes of communication and access are themselves defined by their differentiated and personal character, by reciprocity, hyper-textual and transversal interaction, and by the possibility of joining communities and different virtual worlds: «Cyberspace offers a style of communication that is inherently free of media intervention, since it is communal, nonhierarchical, and reciprocal» (Lévy, 2001, p. 206).

Additionally, De Kerckhove (1999) observes that on the Web we would never experience the same frightening authority of the imperialism of television, which advertises only the products of industrial corporations. He argues that the imperialism of television pivots on the broadcast model, in which people can only receive information and listen, without the chance to reply. The Web is not a broadcast system. De Kerckhove claims that the main difference is that, on the Web, no exclusive copyright is required in order to publish, and news items are, like placards, within a space that belongs to everyone. To access it and put up your own placard, you just need to be connected. According to De Kerckhove, the absence of a broadcast system can also make a local culture global. He argues that even the «global village» vision, proposed by McLuhan (1964), was a broadcast idea: an imperialist television idea. He states that, in contrast, all the villages of the world become global through the Web. De Kerckhove points out that when McLuhan theorized his ideas, the Web had not yet become the huge phenomenon it is today.

Thus, to those who fear that cyberspace could be an extension of the American empire, Lévy answers that anyone, who has the basic technological skills, can enter cyberspace, collect data, join communities and react to presumed impositions. The Web system is economic and easy to consult; it gives

every user the chance to download updated software, join conferences and spread information that otherwise would remain known by just a few. According to Lévy, these are just some of the innumerable benefits that highlight the importance of new media as a tool that lets one possess the real. The Web allows doing the «same thing» more quickly and on a major scale, and it allows doing, feeling and organizing «in a different way». Innovations develop new functions. Lévy mentions as an example that written communication has not made verbal communication disappear, but has reorganized communication systems and social memory. Moreover, he argues that the invention of photography, cinema and animation, and the introduction of new perspectives, enriched visual arts, which resulted from the development of potentialities already latent in the older practices. The invention of photography did not mean that drawing disappeared, in the same way that television did not substitute for the theatre. Lévy argues that cyberspace, like other developments in technology, does not change things miraculously, but creates new planes of existence for relationships, knowledge, learning and thinking – both in the literary and artistic genres.

Lévy claims that like film or television, virtual reality is a convention, with its own codes and entrance and exit rituals, and, thus, we cannot confuse virtual reality with ordinary reality more than we can confuse a film or a game with «true reality». Finally, it is up to the individual to understand that the virtual corresponds to a particular fertile modality of reality. And it is up to the individual to make the most of it.

Furthermore, given that the complexity of the real is continually increasing, technologies are considered tools with which to grasp it. Connection, virtual community, collaboration, simultaneity and speed are keywords of post-modern culture. Today, we are embedded in societies that have are no longer monolithic, multiplying themselves in more operating sectors that produce specific contexts with their own communication and knowledge channels, styles and models. Each of these contexts has its own rules, followed and observed by its participants who aim to gain a high communicative competence and be both producers and consumers of messages. In the meantime, the articulation of local and contextual choices has a broader and global link to the rest of national and international society. Choices, then, must be based on what is present in a particular moment, both locally and globally, and must be modified and reorganized in view of future changes. The prerequisites for acting in such an immediate future are rapid reflexes, strategy, creativity, concreteness, competitive spirit, antagonism, co-operation and learning skills.

Individuals in the post-industrial society must be able to identify and solve problems rapidly. They must be practical and fast in producing and elaborating information. Turkle (1997) argues that these skills are the same as those that

children acquire playing video games. Video games «teach» since they send to one's brain different *inputs* depending on different code structures. A child, brought up playing video games, easily acquires the skills required by society. The child's knowledge is not yet structured in the way an adult's is, and she can easily move from the analogical to the digital modality. The child, then, will move easily in today's complex world and be more confident with virtual objects than the adult. In this sense, according to Turkle, the virtual environment can help with learning how to interpret the real.

It is also worth noting Stone's (2001) point of view. She claims that we can consider the virtual space as a playground to experiment with new possibilities in a context of liberation rather than control. She suggests that we could juxtapose the mode of what she calls the «technosocial» (*reinvention and encounter in a technological space viewed as itself a social and physical environment*) with the relentlessly monistic articulations of physical and virtual space that law and science support. Stone looks at the «technosocial» space as a new space, where we can overcome dualistic thought, and where the elements, which Foucault saw as suppressed in the process of «gridding», re-emerge in new articulations:

irruptively constituting identities that are simultaneously technological and social, a catastrophic emergence of the ludic and the unpredictable at the very heart of the ordered mathematical structures that by their nature seek to suppress it. This process is possible, in fact inevitable, because the technosocial, the social mode of the computer nets, evokes unruly multiplicity as an integral part of social identity. There is plenty of precedent for multiplicity as a response to violence, and certainly enough for multiplicity as a response to less overt methods of subjection (Stone, 2001, p. 42).

Stone highlights the irruptive, playful quality of the «technosocial» space of virtual systems, and, consequently, the potential for experimentation and emergence, as *a domain for a non-traumatic multiplicity*.

Hence, in some ways, the scholars I have mentioned in this Section respond to those who mistrust the ability of humans to change their circumstances. Finally, my aim was to highlight the contrast between those who look at technologies as tools that are able to control the bodies and behaviours of large numbers of people – that is, as technologies of imprisonment – and those who, despite their different approaches (Turkle, 1997; Lévy, 1998; Stone, 2001), analyse the question by considering cyberspace as a «playground» where the self is liberated and interaction allows free expression.

The Italianialondra.com online community: control or new possibilities?

The studies I have reviewed persuaded me to investigate to what extent the use of cyberspace affected the lives of participants to this research. The aim was to

understand whether Italians were aware of the possibilities that digital media offer, or whether the machine prevails as a self-governing organism in which authorities have «privileges» that users do not have. Overall, the purpose was to understand whether participants were aware of how to take advantage of digital media. A review of the results from the analysis of in-depth interviews follows.

Business promotion

All the respondents emphasized the importance of the usage of Italianialondra.com as a tool to advertise personal business or activities, but three interviewees in particular gave information which helped in the analysis of the impact of virtual communication in everyday life.

Dario (35 years old, has been living in London for seven and a half years) said that he joined Italianialondra.com to rent his flats in London. Everyday he checked the advertisements published in the section «house, flats and apartments». Furthermore, he imported wood floors from Slovakia. This is because he knew that he would find many clients, especially among Italians who often complain about carpets that are typical of London houses. Dario knew that the demand for wood floors among Italians was high and, at the time of the interview, he was about to put advertisements on to the Italianialondra.biz website to launch his business. He said that he started the floor business encouraged by the existence of an online network of Italians who would be potential clients. He said:

I am always connected, day and night time. Sometime I log in while working or looking for flats. ... Since I use the Chat-room and messaging, I had the occasion to organize meetings with many for my business. I met clients during events like the Italian aperitif.

Business has given Dario the occasion to meet many people quickly and save money. New technologies, in Dario's case, confirmed Lévy's (2001) theory: virtual devices offer new possibilities and help the dimension of reality to signify. Lévy maintains that we animate the virtual space and that this is why we have to talk about real presence in virtual space. According to Lévy, the virtual does not replace the real space. Indeed, the virtual domain accelerates and reduces times like every system of communication, and transportation modifies the system of practical proximities. Dario benefited from the virtual community that allowed him to create a business that already had a network of potential clients who were easy to contact and to meet, thus saving money and time.

Barbara (35 years old, has been living in London for nine years) used Italianialondra.biz for the same purpose. Initially, she was upset with the manager because, although it was cheaper than other ways of advertising, she could

not afford to put an advertisement in the Forum to promote her private business as a therapist. She had just spent quite a lot of money in printing flyers and she was disappointed she could not reach a convenient compromise with the manager. Barbara said:

I think that Italianialondra.com is a great idea, but I personally do not approve of the manager. He is clever and organises online services very well, but what really annoys me is that he promotes the virtual community as a means to connect people and make friends. However this is not its main aim. He thinks of nothing but making money.

Six months after the interview, I contacted Barbara for follow-up questions and in particular to know whether she was still participating with Italianialondra.com. She replied that she was withdrawing from the study because she was too busy with her job. It emerged that her advertisement had been published on Italianialondra.com. Barbara withdrew but she gave an important piece of information: since she had managed to put her advertisement on to the website, her business had improved to the point that she had no spare time. Her case confirms that online communication does not simply replace earlier modes and genres of communication (Lévy, 2001). Barbara would have gone on advertising her activity via flyers, but she perceived the advantages, in terms of both time and customers, that Italianialondra.com offered. Thus, data analysis confirmed that the virtual corresponds to a particular, fertile modality of the real (*ibid.*).

Joe (33 years old, has been living in London for five years) also benefited from cyber communication. He joined the Italianialondra.com online community with the purpose of finding connections and making a name for himself as an artist and photographer. Joe said:

I was and I am still looking for collaborations in the photographic sector. I logged in for my job, but also to find collaboration and cultural exchange.

Joe advertised many exhibitions of his own works in London and he had the chance to meet people and start relationships with those interested in his work. His experience is further evidence of the usage of Italianialondra.com as an instrument to promote private business.

Finally, Italianialondra.com is a space created for an audience of de-territorialized subjects whose common values and interests support and implement its development. Dario and Joe emphasised the importance of the relationship between their successes and the fact that they have been able to target an Italian audience not in terms of citizenship, but in terms of a shared system of values, a «world in Italian» that revealed itself to be a strategic re-

source (Bassetti, 2002). Bassetti refers to a «world in Italian» made up of people scattered across the globe. However, Italianialondra.com emerges because it facilitates relationships and business between people living in the same city. Thus, on the one hand, the importance of digital media as tools to stimulate action and projects that have profitable repercussions on people's daily life is confirmed (Aycock, 1995; Turkle, 1997; Lévy, 1998; Stone, 2001). However, more important is the fact that the Italianialondra.com online community embodies the overcoming of the debate on the relation between the virtual and the real dimensions: the distance between real and virtual space is no longer open to question because the activities that the members of the Italianialondra.com community promote are projected to have repercussions on their offline lives.

The Italianialondra.com online community: a tool to cope with contemporary complexity

The practical usage of the website as a tool to advertise, gather information or plan projects confirmed theories that maintain that individuals in cyberspace are free to act and react with no superimposed conditions (Aycock, 1995; Turkle, 1997; Lévy, 1998; Stone, 2001). Most of the respondents use Italianialondra.com as an instrument to cope with the complexity of the contemporary world: they are aware of the possibilities offered by the virtual environment and enthusiastic about the chances that it gives them to solve problems faster.

Fabio (25 years old, has been living in London for two years), for instance, said that he discovered Italianialondra.com because he was looking for a Forum to help Italians in London with bureaucratic problems. He described his arrival in London as follows:

In the beginning it was really funny. I was like a dog biting its tail. I was looking for accommodation and trying to open a bank account, but bills were required to open a bank account, and to have bills I needed to rent a flat and get a job, but to get a job... it was like a labyrinth, an enigma with no solution.

The Italianialondra.com Forum gave Fabio the possibility to interact with people who had already experienced the same difficulties and, posting messages to the Forum, Fabio obtained quick solutions to get out of the «labyrinth». Virtual interaction helped him to understand the British system faster. Riccardo (32 years old, has been living in London for seven years) agreed with Fabio. He said:

A friend of mine was really enthusiast of Italianialondra. He told me about the existence of the virtual community, through which he met a girl who is currently

his girlfriend, and he wanted me to join the Events to meet more Italians, but what has really attracted me was the possibility of gathering information, and this is the reason why I logged in and became a member. I was looking for help, who could have helped me better?

The findings demonstrated that cyberspace could produce benefits rather than control. According to many authors (De Kerckhove, 1999; Lévy, 2001), CMC becomes a tool that allows you possess the real with the advantage of being faster and economic. This is the case of Italianialondra.com, even if not all the respondents were aware of it. Danilo (33 years old, has been living in London for nine years), for instance as a «senior», criticized younger members:

This Website is not useful... yes, I know, users say it is a source of information, but... the first time I arrived in London, it did not exist and I wriggled out of difficulties alone. It was important because I grew up and matured. It does not make sense if you come here, or if you go to Paris or New York, and you ask Italians to find you a job or accommodation... what does it mean? Go back to Italy! I am definitely opposed to this, I am sorry. The Website has not changed anything in my life. I have just found the right people at the right time. Without it, I would have known people in another way.

However, soon afterwards he contradicted himself by suggesting organizing a medical assistance network that would have attracted the rest of the users. He said:

Why don't we organize a network for sick people? We are all alone here, we are single and healthy, but how long will it last? If I feel sick, whom shall I call? I do not have a brother or a sister who can run straight to my house and take care of me! Here the doctor does not come to your house. It's you... you have to go, even if you have temperature, you have to dress up and go, and book a visit one month in advance. How can you book a visit next month if you are sick today?

Unfortunately, he was not interested in communicating his criticizing to the rest of the members. He was still not aware of the possibilities offered by CMC: he said that without Italianialondra, he would have known people in another way. Also, without the information about how to open a bank account published on the Net, Italians would have had the problems that Fabio mentioned. The virtual community makes things easier and faster, with the advantage that you can save money and time and also meet.

Nicoletta (35 years old, has been living in London for eight years) said:

I logged in because I faced a completely new experience: I was to bring up a child in a foreign environment and I was looking for information in order to understand how it works here.

Nicoletta's husband is English, she works in London, and despite the fact that she has been living in London for seven years, she still defines England as a foreign country. The Web helped her. She accessed Italianialondra.com for the first time, looking for information about schools, pediatricians and further services for infants. She said:

If when I first arrived here, a Website like Italianialondra.com had existed, I would have used it and I am sure that it would have been very useful to gather information about bureaucratic procedures, transport, rents and jobs.

Frank (34 years old, has been living in London for nine years) also said that when he knew that Italianialondra.com existed, he thought:

Wow! This is something that should have happened some time ago! We are in the virtual age and we must have services like the Italianialondra.com virtual community to help newcomers in London who do not still know how to move around!

The point is that new technologies do not replace earlier modes of communication; rather they help individuals who are enmeshed in multiple bonds of belonging created by the proliferation of social positions, associative networks and reference groups (Melucci, 1997).

The respondents are caught up in the increasing complexity of the real life of today, with which they have to cope continuously. The Italianialondra.com community helped them significantly.

One link, three interrelated solutions: activities, information and sociability

Italianialondra.com not only allows users to solve technical problems and ordinary routines, it also allows them to organize social and cultural events. All the respondents, with the exception of two, participated in more than one event. Some of the respondents were among the promoters. Marinella (34 years old, has been living in London for twelve years), for instance, said: «During the summer, I organized one event a week: theatres, trips in England, parties, barbecues».

She planned trips with friends recruited through the Italianialondra.com online community. She used to post notices proposing holidays and organized meetings with those who answered to discuss the details. She travelled with members to the United States, Budapest, Copenhagen and many other European cities. Hence, the virtual community becomes a substitute travel agent, with the advantage that, if you want to do so, you can choose the people who will make up the group you will travel with. Often, social and cultural exchanges are arranged as a secondary consequence of researching for some other purpose. For instance, Emanuele (28 years old, has been living in Lon-

don for two years) joined Italianialondra.com because he was looking for a flat. He did not find the flat through the online community, but while looking through the Forum advertisements, he started communicating with some of the members, with whom he remained in contact. Emanuele said:

I wished to go to Stonehenge and I saw a post on the Website: someone was organizing to go there by car. It was a good chance to save money and know new friends, so I decided to go. It was the first event I took part in. That's how it started.

For Emanuele, a series of encounters began, which he would never have imagined. Therefore, he met more friends as a result of the events. He said that before knowing about the website, he was potentially against new technologies, which, in his opinion, being disembodied, favour a fake form of communication. However, he changed his mind because Italianialondra.com is a tool whose principal aim is to encourage people to meet face-to-face. Then, especially after the trip he joined, he became enthusiastic about the possibility of organizing cheap cultural events.

Contrary to most virtual communities, the Italianialondra.com online community encourages the formation of localised groups. All living in the same city, participants soon meet. The virtual community challenges disembodiment issues. Again the dualism between the real and the virtual dimension is overcome and the Web emerges as a tool that has a direct effect on the offline. Indeed, from information to cultural events to social encounter, the virtual community produces, via a chain effect, multiple benefits that affect life offline. For instance, Fabio, who logged in to find information to help him out of a bureaucratic «labyrinth», said that from the Italianialondra.com community he had more than he was expecting. This is because via the Italianialondra.com he managed not only to solve problems concerning official routines, but also to connect with people in order to go out and to organize events.

Gennaro (25 years old, has been living in London for one year) also confirmed the interrelation of practical and social implications of the Italianialondra.com online community. Asked if he thought that Italianialondra.com was useful, he agreed and gave many reasons:

The Website is useful for its columns, job and houses advertisements. Also events are great because you can organize what you want and meet people who match your tastes. If I invite somebody to a Fellini film, it is good for the movie and because then you can meet someone interesting.

Gennaro highlights the importance of the pleasure to join a typical Italian cultural event and the advantage of escaping loneliness and knowing people who share interests (e.g. the film by Fellini) beyond national territory.

From this perspective, the usage of Italianialondra.com confirms that the virtual environment corresponds to a particular fertile modality of reality (Lévy, 2001, p. 53) and that, like the most important technical innovations, not only does it allow users to do the «same thing» more quickly and on a large scale, but it allows them to do and organize things *differently*. During one visit to Italianialondra.com, a user could find a flat to rent, be advised about all the virtual community activities, find friends who live in the same area of London where she/he lives, and meet with them. The Italianialondra.com online community gives its members a multiplicity of solutions in proportion to the multiple demands they have. It makes things easier.

Projects: the Web as a tool for action

In this Section, I discuss Marinella's project of organizing a kindergarten open to Italian families. Her aim was to provide Italian education to the children born and brought up in London. She was promoting this project through Italianialondra.com. At the time of the first interview, she had already found a place and many teachers, and was looking for funds. She said:

Since I have a child, I started thinking about what could have been done to help the Italian community, especially parents, to transmit our culture to the children [...]. I know, and this is a shame, that a private initiative to create an Italian school in London was rejected by the embassy and the cultural office on behalf of the government. It really surprised me as it would have been an advantage for Italy.

The Italianialondra.com online community gave Marinella the chance to find agreement and support for the kindergarten on a wider scale. She decided to promote via the Net a project that had been rejected by the government. At the time of the interview, her private initiative had been proposed only to the users. It was an attempt to encourage local action through global resources.

Nicoletta was going to support Marinella's project. She said:

My intention is to get my daughter used to Italian language, to make her understand that Italian is not only that strange language spoken by her mother but that it is a real language. I use the Website just for my daughter and not only for her language, but even for her culture. You know, my Italian is not as good at present, when you change from an Italian mother tongue environment to an English one... but there is more: all the culture we metabolised since we were young. If I sing «Jeeg Robot d'acciaio» song, in what ever part of the world I am, I could find an Italian brought up in Italy and he would know the song... it is the same for Topo Gigio⁴ and many other things taken for granted.

My daughter will not grow up knowing her contemporary Italian cartoons and all these kind of things unless I work on it. This is why we have Rai Tv. She will not grow up with Italians and this is important as I am realizing just now that there are many things in British culture I do not understand yet. *It takes really a long time to understand a different culture and I wish my daughter would feel at home in Italy... I check the Website's activities just to know if they are organizing something for the children.* Unfortunately I do not have enough time to participate. I have never been to any event, but I am in touch with a woman who is planning to organize a school for Italian children. She is very enthusiastic and we share a lot.

The importance of the Net as a tool to find support and mobilize ideas emerges. The project imagined by Marinella and Nicoletta is an example of the construction of a diasporic space beyond the confines of local and national contexts. They have been living in London for many years, but they still aim to produce continuity with Italy, handing on their own memories. The idea was to locate the school in Marinella's house and choose the teachers personally, as she had already started to do when interviewed. Nicoletta was ready to support her project even though they had not met yet.

Hence, the idea of a «home-based school» is an example, on the one hand, of a diasporic movement defined by the process of imagination of common frameworks of reference and experiential horizons (Appadurai, 1997; Fazal and Tsagarousianou, 2002), and, on the other hand, of the power and potential of the Web in mobilizing ideas. The Web is the tool that can transform Nicoletta's and Marinella's imagination in a practice (Appadurai, 1997). Thus, the Net becomes the tool with which to develop instruments that will perpetuate Italian contemporary culture.

Finally, using the Italianialondra.com community to promote «diasporic» projects makes it a viable resource for collective action (Appadurai, 1997).

The Italianialondra.com online community and the reconstruction of pre-existing social patterns

The research found that online communication via Italianialondra.com has also its limitations. There was no evidence that, as Lévy (2001) hypothesises, the employment of online writing enables people to compare themselves with those whose backgrounds are different from their own, and thus makes possible a more «democratic» communication. On the contrary, it emerged that pre-existing social patterns were reconstructed online affecting the contents of online conversations, and revealing the limits of reciprocity. Because of this, the manager of the community had to shut down the Chatroom and the Section of Forum dedicated to discussion. He said that a few

characters had monopolized the conversation, and did not allow other members to interact. In order to clarify, I will mention the most symbolic episode that was reported. One of the respondents reported an episode in which, in the Chat-room of the Italianlondra.com, he caused annoyance to the members because he started talking in his regional northern dialect in order to exclude others, and especially a girl from the South of Italy. Analysing regional diversity and its online manifestations goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it has to be mentioned that in Italy the region of origin is a strong factor in identity construction⁵. I found that not only regional, but also gender, as in the mentioned episode, and occupational differences are naturally recreated online and also that they are deliberately emphasized, rather than erased. This reveals that the Web exaggerates rather than eliminates differences, and contrasts with utopian visions of the Web that imagine the Web as a «levelling» place (Lévy, 2001).

Furthermore, I ascertained that, not only online, but also offline, reciprocal communication between the members of Italianialondra.com was guaranteed to the extent that people sharing bonds, such as occupational and educational background, carried on relationships.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Italianialondra.com community's population includes a wide range of people who could differ in social class, occupation and regional provenance: from the pizza-maker to the newcomer to London, to the manager who works in the City. When the virtual community was created there was no intention to limit access except by age (25-40). This gave the virtual community a characteristic of «universality»: it potentially gathers all first generation Italian migrants in London in the name of a shared experience.

However, from the analysis of in-depth interviews with the members, it emerged that a selection is made when people decide to carry on private relations, which often resemble pre-existing social, regional and occupational differences. Thus, even if the Italianialondra.com community is not built on an elitist model, relations are carried on between people who come from similar backgrounds. Barbara said:

I use Italianialondra.com to go out and have a nice time with people I like and who have something in common with me. This is the reason why I use the Website: to meet people who speak Italian, with a high level of education, to meet people I can go to the cinema with, or people I can invite to my house.

She logged in with the intention of knowing a specific kind of Italian: graduates like her. This is what emerged from all the interviews.

In conclusion, the analysis confirmed that Italianialondra.com has supported the articulation of a particular set of social relations and that pre-

existing social patterns influenced choices in terms of relationships and online communication. This result allows developing conclusions according to a critical perspective.

Towards a conclusion

Social studies like this could help develop digital media to improve the life of migrants. I believe that virtual communities like the Italianailondra.com should be designed considering local context and with a deep knowledge of the target audience and its everyday life. I suggest that «native»⁶ people should create these kinds of virtual communities, which should aim to solve immediate and practical needs. The interviewees considered the greatest innovation of Italianailondra.com to be the fact that, logging in only once, they could exchange information, build relationships and join cultural events. This facilitated the members in solving practical problems and overcoming the social isolation in which they found themselves after many years in London. Italianailondra.com is also contributing to the development of Italians' private business, particularly because this is supported by the possibility of finding potential Italian clients online. Italianailondra.com emerges as a tool with which to increase the rate at which things happen (e.g. meeting people) offline. It makes the lives of its members easier because it allows social and business solutions «with one click», speeding up routines as the contemporary world requires (Turkle, 1997; De Kerckhove, 1999; Lévy, 2001). This advantage transformed the Web from something «out there» into another essential household item, and confirmed the hypothesis that new media offer new possibilities for improving these migrants' lives (Lévy, 2001) rather than restricting them (Aycock, 1995; Foucault in Poster, 1996 and in Turkle, 1997).

However, the virtual community did not match the ideal Italian world community that Bassetti (2002) hypothesizes. Bassetti's idea was to go beyond a structure of Diaspora made up of monads that rejected links both internally and with the country of origin. Bassetti encourages the formation of «Italians in the world» business community. He delineates the profile of «meta-national» and «transnational» expansion, which must be thought out and planned with «bottom-up» impetus. Consequently, he recommends taking into account loyalties to more than one national identity, inventing rapid and reticular forms of consultation and policy-making, coming to terms with and even valorizing the regionalisms – and even the municipalisms – that have always been part of the Italian identity.

I believe that the powerful and practical repercussions of the Italian Diaspora supported by the Italianailondra.com can develop only on a local level. This could happen, as Bassetti argues, in respect of regionalisms, municipalisms and

those differences on which social groups developed. The participants in the virtual community were not networked to a global Italian business community. Italianialondra.com was not even found to have links to other websites hosting Italian communities in other parts of the world. The desire to create such links did not emerge from the interviews. In the business as well as in the social sphere, Italianialondra.com was found to support many small local groups. Therefore, despite the fact that there's no doubt that today online social networks websites are having a massive impact on how people around the world communicate, it would not be reasonable to implement the Italianialondra.com website with such tools.

In Italianialondra.com, life on the screen turned out only to complement the life offline. I believe that, in the case of Italianialondra.com, the definition «virtual community» is no longer valid. In this study, the analysis was undertaken with reference to Internet Studies, which suggest that life offline has considerable repercussions on online relationships and communities, and that the interdependency between online and offline must never be underestimated; however, this issue does not even arise in this study. On the contrary, this study confirms Wellman's assumption on online interaction: «It seems that the more people use the Internet, the more they see each other in person (distance permitting)» (Wellman, 2004, p. 126).

This result is also in line with studies showing that, while there is no question that there are a large number of transnational communities on the Web, we must remember that many online interactions are «profoundly local» (Graham, 2004, p. 21).

The manager of Italianialondra.com succeeded in his project since being an Italian in London himself he definitely understood the «actuality» of the target audience. The manager developed the online community to set up something for the new generation. After many evolutions, today Italianialondra.com is the result of the manager's ability to plan and reflect his character, attracting those who are like him: middle-class, educated and resident in London. Yet further researches could be developed to analyse to what extent the population of Italianialondra.com varies. It would also be interesting to analyse the website's evolution which, being continuous, does not allow a definitive conclusion, only a partial one. For this reason I titled this Section «Towards a conclusion».

Finally, Italianialondra.com has the potential to become a cultural focus for Italians in London, a potential that needs to be encouraged, developed and promoted. In order to strategically exploit such potential, I suggest that further studies need to be undertaken on the new Italian Diaspora in the world and on other websites dedicated to Italians, such as, for instance, Italiansonline.net which was created in the same year as the Italianialondra.com and knowledge about which my study attempted to uncover for the first time in relation to the new Italian Diaspora's use of the Web.

Notes

- ¹ This research addresses a particular segment of the Italian population in London, and its outcome is restricted to a particular portion of this segment; that is, to the sample, which in turn does not represent the whole of the latest generation of Italians in London, but a particular slice of it. This study does not try to generalize the findings to the wider Italian migrant population. It also does not try to generalize the findings to contexts other than the metropolis.
- ² In order to accomplish this analysis, I have considered the world as a construction of ideas, meanings and symbols that determine human behaviour. I share the assumption of the interpretative approach (rooted in Geertz's «thick description», 1993) that truth is subjective and that meanings and symbols can be interpreted. This offers a depth of analysis based on experience and understandings and allows a picture of life as it is lived, assuming that human life cannot be understood solely by speculations based on empirical observation or on the qualification of those observations. As with the interpretative methodological strategies, this study aims to illuminate meaning in the subjects' lives and in their practices, beliefs and actions. This aim is addressed within a theoretical framework that highlights that culture, and the identities which express it, are dynamic processes in continual evolution, in which social actors play an active role interpreting, reinterpreting and altering the flows in which they are embedded. Given its interpretative framework, the study is an unrepeatable experiment limited to the period of time and the context in which it was conducted. I must specify that the analysis of data I undertook to generate findings is not replicable and does not seek to find a «fixed truth». Finally, I have to specify that, given the flexibility of the object under study, I accept that my work, like researches in Cultural Studies, is partial: it is openly incomplete. Virtual worlds continually evolve, as do the social relationships and identity constructions that they support.
- ³ I defined the respondents' social class according to the occupations of their parents. I drew on ISTAT (1991) classification.
- ⁴ «Jeeg Robot d'Acciaio» and «Topo Gigio» are cartoons of the 1980s.
- ⁵ In 1861, Italy broke from its monarchy and was officially unified. This very recent unification is important as it helps understand why most Italians still feel more loyalty to their region than the nation as a whole – as evidenced by the great variance in cuisines, dialects, landscape and standards of living throughout the country. Italy has twenty administrative regions that are all very different. Each region has its own separate history and cultural background. The regional dialects continue to be used locally in everyday speech. Differences between regional dialects include pronunciation and vocabulary. Many Italians speak standard Italian and at least one dialect, and many are multilingual.
- ⁶ I use the term «native» to refer to a person who was born in the same country as the target audience.

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