

What i-Italy Could do With Those Subsidies...

Letizia Airos (April 22, 2015)



America Oggi – NJ-based Italian newspaper – puts its journalists to unemployment. The contributions from the office of the prime minister are not sufficient. We have been managing without them for years. We believe that the economic crisis can be turned into a new opportunity for information. And we think that those who distribute these contributions should see that too. What do you think?

Articolo in lingua italiana >>>

[2]I'll start with two facts. Though apparently unrelated, they are tied to the topic I want to discuss.

The first is the “unemployment” announcement of the journalists at America Oggi, the historical Italian language newspaper in the United States. The second is the Bruno Vespa’s interview of us, which took place last Sunday and will be aired on Porta a Porta.



What I want to talk about is the possibility that the economic crisis, in which the whole world is involved, will transform itself into a new opportunity for information. I'm talking about this because i-Italy was born in 2008, right when the crisis was exploding.

Initially we were only present online but then, with great passion and many difficulties, we have consolidated, becoming an important multichannel presence: online, in print, on television, and on social networks.

It's an ambitious format, for its innovative characteristics, its independence from big editorial groups, and for the choice of not only using the Italian language, but mainly English in order to reach a vast audience: Italian Americans, especially young ones, and Americans who love our country, of whom there are many.

These have been and continue to be difficult years, but also full of great satisfactions: from having the New York Times call us to know more about Italian events in New York we had written about (in English, it goes without saying), to getting an important Italian TV critic to point to us as a model for RAI!

So we are perceived under many aspects as a "best practice". And we owe it to two things: to the voluntary contribution of part of the journalists, writers and intellectuals, both Italian and American, and to an editorial staff that's very young but with a knack for quality and the desire to distinguish themselves from the many amateur bloggers who go around with their little digital camera. Not to mention the precious support given to us by two important American academic institutions: the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (CUNY) and la Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò (NYU).

And that's how we stubbornly go on, without any contributions from the state, constantly searching for funds in the midst of a devastating economic crisis.

America Oggi: A newspaper that didn't manage to adapt

But let's get to America Oggi. The newspaper was born in 1988 as another historical Italian emigration newspaper was shutting down, *Il Progresso ItaloAmericano*. Directed by a cooperative made up of ex *Il Progresso* workers, it represented a true jump for Italian information in America. Thanks to the foresight of using computers and the new technology of the time; and later on thanks to the generous subsidies received from the office of the prime minister, of the order of millions of dollars.

That's how for years America Oggi was able to act as an important reference point for the community. But unfortunately, this newspaper wasn't able to keep up with the times and with the transformation of its own readers, and especially of their children who no longer speak Italian - even though they love Italy. The number of copies sold is slowly dropping, the original stories are increasingly rare compared to the ones built on pre-existing press releases, and the destiny of the newspaper tied itself to the natural exhaustion of the old generation of Italian Emigration.

Then the crisis came and the contributions from the office of the prime minister have been reduced over the last few years. Although today they continue to cover what I believe to be a conspicuous amount. A sum that, if well distributed, could provide enough tranquility to get through daily work, unrushed by the struggle to gather funds. And it could above all guarantee the compensation of collaborators.

There's a need for a different reality, a true calling that America Oggi seems to have lost. A different mindset is required, the ability to capture the innovative essence of modern technology. Just like the newspaper born after *Il Progresso* had at its inception, twenty years ago. But instead, they've decided to fire all their journalists...

Bruno Vespa, *Il Volo*, and us...

But what does Bruno Vespa have to do with this discussion? I'll explain. He interviewed me during an American tour organized for a special episode of *Porta a Porta* dedicated to the members of *Il Volo*. A



great example of teamwork coming from Rai Uno. It has been interesting to watch them operate here in New York. The success of the popular journalist and that of the young singers certainly justifies the project's share of investments. But as I watched them work - for example in the restaurant Ribalta, which was transformed into a TV studio for the occasion - I couldn't help but reflect on my experience.

As I looked at their cameras, the lights they were using, their staff, I thought: "How did i-Italy get so far? How did we manage to produce quality work with such fewer resources?" Passion is indispensable but it certainly isn't enough. The secret lies in using the available resources creatively and exercising good judgment.

Fundamental is the contact with our readers both online and on paper, with our viewers, with the real life of the territory. With the youth. And I remembered how we conducted our first interview three years ago, on paper and on video with the guys from Il Volo, which was a huge success. It's a good example to show what I'm trying to say.

Il Volo came to our office for an interview during one of their first American tours. It was conducted in English, which was important for them. We didn't yet have an appropriate studio for it. I'll even say that in that moment we only had one "lavalier" microphone (the small clip-on ones). It wasn't even wireless...and we only had one camera! (we're better equipped now, don't worry).

But how could we get all three of them to talk all while creating something different, not too boring? We decided to have them sit close together on three chairs, with a white screen behind them. Only one microphone, and only one camera, but the three of them close, amused, and on screen. Fast pace, dynamic atmosphere. There we had it. The eloquence and likeability of Il Volo did the rest. This is only one of the many insights, the little sparks of genius of my collaborators.

Realizing an original half-hour of television each week is pretty challenging. Even now that we have more full HD cameras, some spare microphones, sometimes we rent out equipment to obtain true cinematographic quality. We chose to enrich the program with different segments and various reports from different locations. And we always give it all we've got. But it can't cost a fortune. And it's doable!

We carry the camera on our shoulders, we take the subway, we ask our friends involved in New York's Italian intellectual scene to participate. And then everyone on our team knows they'll have to take on the most diverse roles, to deal with - and resolve - all sorts of unforeseen events. We also have a tricolor fiat 500 designed by Massimo Vignelli to move around, but we don't get to use it too much. Parking is hard to find in New York.

It's like going back to the origins of Television. With limited resources but fortunately with technology on our side today. Each upgrade in equipment has been a small victory for us. The same goes for our print magazine. The costs are there, but they are alleviated by the integration of content produced for the web and for video. We edit it ourselves, based on a template set up by a great graphic designer from Rome. And in the end an expert makes corrections and adds her artistic touch. Because quality and elegance are a priority, especially for Italians.

Translating, creating subtitles for our show, explaining and "translating" our culture, these are other challenges that our primarily Italian staff faces. Challenges that naturally come with their costs. For this we must thank our Italian-American collaborators, who are fundamental for this cultural - not only linguistic - mediation.

And finally, social networks, particularly Facebook, which best fits the way we communicate, accompanies our lives and follows us everywhere with photos and videos. We take care of each one of our Facebook "friends", and in a very short time they became almost 125,000 and they post thousands of comments every day, they intervene, and they interact.

So then the question naturally pops up: What could we do with those contributions that for some don't suffice? I've asked myself that and now I'm asking you. I think we would...fly (like Il Volo). And I'm certain that after a few years, we would even stop needing that money. Because Italy, with all its



culture, is the best product to sell, in America and throughout the world, it's the best story to tell.

You just need to know how to do it. And want to do it.

We hope to make it and to grow in the coming years. I say "hope", the first thing I'm aware of is the uncertainty with which nowadays we must have the humility to live with.

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