

Italy's Second Generations and the Expression of Identity through Electronic Media

Dorothy Louise Zinn

Università degli Studi della Basilicata

*Abstract: By means of a comparison of the Italian second-generation groups *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*, *Rete G2* and *Associna*, this article explores Internet discussion groups as a privileged site for the expression of second-generation identities. These forums offer a space for virtual aggregation across lines of geographical location within Italy and/or across differences in national or ethnic group of origin, allowing participants to share and compare different ideas, experiences and opinions. The electronic discussions offer a particularly rich source of reflexive and critical thinking on issues of identity. By considering these media as a place in which "everyday multiculturalism" transpires (Colombo, 2005; 2007), the analysis will examine some of the ways in which second-generation youths construct identity and difference by engaging group outsiders as well as each other. In effect, the electronic media allow participants to act together as a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), negotiating their identities along with their second-generation peers, creating a common sense regarding their shared condition, and developing the grounds for potential off-line mobilisation.*

Keywords: second generations; internet; identity; multiculturalism

Today, digital communication and migrations make up the central factor in the constitution of late-modern subjectivity, a subjectivity that has become massively globalised, active over wide and irregular transnationalised territories and capable of expressing itself in the intersection between global and local.[...] [We can] begin to understand the digital turbulence and communicative practices of social groups that are able to imagine themselves, interact and shift between the paradoxical desire to move in order to get settled, and the mobile, electronic and digital whirlwind that wraps them like a thick blanket of clouds (Jacquemet, 2002: 25).

This article will attempt some preliminary reflections on a phenomenon that lies at the intersection of the two great transformations cited above by Marco Jacquemet: the use of electronic media by Italy's second generations, children of global migrations.¹ I explore electronic expressions of identity in

three different second-generation groups that are active nationally: the Rete G2, Associna and Giovani Musulmani d'Italia (GMI). I have chosen to focus on these three groups because they are among the oldest and most prominent of such associations in Italy, and they have all made extensive use of electronic media.² In addition to giving these variously accented groups a certain public visibility, the Internet is contributing to new forms of self-definition among many of the Italian second generation, and the analysis here will seek to identify some of the key aspects of this process.

I initially became interested in these virtual spaces in 2007, when I started looking at the Rete G2 as an Italian second-generation movement. In the present discussion, I aim to build on that earlier work by considering second-generation electronic media in a comparative vein. As I began to focus more steadily on the content of the exchanges in the various forums, I increasingly realised that such content could not be considered divorced from the platform itself (or, to cite McLuhan's (1964) famous maxim, it became clear that "the medium is the message"). After a survey of the three cases considered, the discussion here will demonstrate how the treatment of identity in second-generation electronic media is quite multifaceted, dealing with key issues such as ethnicity, gender, generation and being Italian. In discussing recent conceptualisations of immigrant incorporation that seek to go beyond the older assimilationist paradigm, Colombo (2005) cites the factors of globalisation and changes in how difference is conceived and claimed. In this light, it is interesting to examine how some members of the second generation utilise electronic media central to youth cultures in this globalised era, and with these media, seek to advance their own identity politics. Electronic media are a fertile ground for the formation of youth cultures that, as Queirolo Palmas emphasises, are "...an available resource for subjects' empowerment...", and further, "...an inevitable field of research for those who want to explore the capacity of *agency* and *writing* of the second generations" (2006: 189, emphasis in original). The Internet presents a privileged space for sharing and commenting upon second generations' experiences of "everyday multiculturalism" (Colombo, 2005; 2007); the sites themselves become spaces of everyday multiculturalism in which group members, potential members and various outsiders come into contact and elaborate reflections on and representations of identity. I suggest that these media function as "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) for second-generation members: the electronic spaces serve as sites for displaying and sharing models of behaviour and practice within each group; one might say they act as training grounds for the construction of individual and collective identities and for the negotiation of forms of difference, both from within and without the group. Finally, the analysis will consider how group members, by frequenting these virtual spaces, are

invited to take on an active collective identity which may serve as a basis for various forms of off-line mobilisation.

Second Generations Online: A Brief Survey

Among the various features of electronic technologies, three characteristics make these media particularly intriguing: the ways in which they overcome the limits of physical space, allow for anonymity, and connect with youth cultures. These media unify people dispersed across Italy and even beyond,³ creating a virtual space for gathering despite the geographical fragmentation that characterises the general distribution of migrant populations in Italy and hence their children (Ambrosini, 2004). These sites are instruments of organisations that seek to bring together youths, each on a different basis: Rete G2, as people who identify with the project of full inclusion of the second generation in Italian society, with the particular goal of making it easier for the second generation to acquire Italian nationality; Associna on the basis of an interest in and/or relations of descent with China, with special attention paid to combating anti-Chinese stereotypes and Sinophobia; GMI to embrace those of the second generation who identify as both Muslims and Italians and others with an interest in Islam. It is important to keep in mind that while actual association membership in each case may be more or less restricted to the second generation, these electronic media are at least somewhat open to a broader public outside of the core membership, though the analysis here will touch only marginally on the participation of such outsiders. The fact that users can interact with a relative degree of anonymity means that these media permit very high levels of self-disclosure (Annese, 2002: 63).⁴ Finally, users of all of the electronic forums discussed here have an age profile typical of Italian bloggers (Totaro, 2007), displaying forms of communication – for example, text-message type abbreviations in posts – that are widespread in the new youth cultures.

GMI was the first major national association to identify itself as “second generation”. The group was formed in 2001 following the Twin Towers attack, by youths who already knew each other through previous Islamic association experiences (Frisina, 2007: 14), and the site was created very soon thereafter.⁵ In our interview (04.11.09), current GMI President Omar Jibril noted that the use of electronic media among second-generation Muslims has become much more widespread since the early days of the association. The site underwent a restyling in April of 2009, so at present the forum archive dates only from that period. In the last year or so, the group’s Facebook page has become quite active, and the local sections of GMI have their own Facebook pages. On these pages as well as in the forum, Arabic invocations and ritual expressions are very common, be they in Arabic script or in Latin transliteration: they include greetings;

phrases such as 'inshallah', 'alhamdulillah', 'mashallah', and special holy qualifications when mentioning Allah and the Prophet. Additionally, Islamic emoticons (veiled, bearded or Arabic-speaking smileys) frequently embellish the posts.

The Rete G2 began in 2005 among a group of second-generation friends in Rome. These youths created a collective blog in order to share their experiences and frustrations as 'Italians with residence permits'. Online visibility was instrumental in attracting the attention, throughout Italy, of others of the second generation, and the group quickly expanded and developed several local face-to-face sections. Within a year, the collective blog had evolved into a full-blown site: in addition to blog articles and commentary upon them, the site features group news and an active forum for discussion.⁶ Over the last year Rete G2's presence on Facebook has grown tremendously, though not everyone in the group looks favourably upon this development.⁷ Rete G2 also has a page on myspace which is used primarily for distributing a CD of second-generation music, *Straniero a chi?* ('Who are you Calling a Foreigner?'), and soon they will be opening a channel on YouTube.

As *associna.com*'s 'about us' description notes, a group of second-generation 'Chinese Italians' formed the association in 2005, and the site was created in the same period. The site has a rich collection of articles and news items about China, Chinese culture and the Chinese Diaspora, along with announcements of association events and sections that appear in Italian and Chinese.⁸ Although there is also a Facebook page for Associna, as in the case of Rete G2, the site's very active forum remains the primary place where discussions take place.⁹ Of the three groups examined here, only Associna has a chat space on its website. Compared to the other two sites, Associna's forum is visually striking for widespread use of special avatars, often with a Chinese theme or recalling Japanese cartoon or manga culture.

The Electronic Community as a Community of Practice

The electronic groups I consider here certainly do not embrace all potential constituents among the second generation. For example, while GMI places a lot of importance on its site as a form of official representation and on Facebook for visibility, President Jibril estimates that some 20 percent of youths the group would like to reach do not have regular access to Internet, so it cannot expect to recruit new members solely or even primarily through the electronic media.¹⁰ More generally speaking, a certain selection likely takes place according to cultural and economic capital. While G2 moderator Singh acknowledges the crucial role that the Internet has played in expanding Rete G2's membership, in his view age plays a role: youths must reach an age at which they can reflect critically upon their situations,

and usually this takes place around age eighteen when they have a head-on encounter with the problem of renewing their residence permits.¹¹

Keeping in mind that all such factors may operate to create a selection of group members, I suggest that the users of such electronic media come together and function as 'communities of practice'. The notion of communities of practice arose from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who studied the social context, or 'situatedness', of learning in informal groups. Group members may participate to different extents - variously defined, for example, as 'core' or 'peripheral', 'marginalised', 'outsider' - but they are united to at least some degree by a common interest or intent; through constant interaction and practice over time they develop repertoires of knowledge and behaviour, in explicit and implicit forms. Although the theoretical model of the community of practice has primarily been applied to the study of educational processes, cognitive anthropology and organisational behaviour, I suggest that it is useful here for grasping how the electronic media may function to forge various second-generation identities. In fact, Wenger's subsequent elaborations of communities of practice deal at length with the social aspects of identity development through such groups (Wenger, 1998). With regard to the Italian second generations, electronic media furnish sites in which a community of practice may coalesce and interact. As I will demonstrate below, these communities create and experiment with models of behaviour, and the practice of participating in the group is central to the negotiation of meaning and the formation of a certain group 'common sense'. As we shall see, for many members, taking part in the community plays an important role in the construction of a collective identity as second generation *protagonists*.

Entering the Electronic Community: Presentations

New users of the forums are invited to present themselves, and each forum contains a specific area for such presentations. The presentation posts take on a certain ritual aspect: users introduce themselves, often revealing their real name alongside the nickname, sometimes explaining how they became interested in the forum, and usually mentioning at least something about their identity.¹² Depending on the group involved, certain aspects of identity tend to be highlighted, while others are minimised. A new user may further personalise online identity with an avatar and with a tag line that appears below his or her posts. Both Associna and Rete G2 have a ranking system that defines users playfully according to how many posts they have made by means of labels such as *clandestino* ('illegal immigrant'), *straniero* ('foreigner'), *G2 integrato* ('integrated G2'), *cittadino di Associna* ('citizen of Associna'), *cittadino del mondo* ('citizen of the world'), *G2 con doppia cittadinanza* ('G2 with dual citizenship'), *sanatoria* ('amnesty').¹³ The new user's introduction is generally greeted with a series of ritual

welcomes in posts by established users. Sometimes these posts can take on an ironic, teasing tone (more rarely in GMI), or coax the new user into telling more about him- or herself.

Presentation posts in the Rete G2 forum often make reference to parents' origins, outlining the specific way in which the author belongs to the broad category of the 'second generation'. They will also typically refer to the author's local affiliations in Italy (for example, "*son di Bergamo*" [I'm from Bergamo]; "*sono un toscano*" [I'm a nasty Tuscan]; "*sono un romano de roma*" [I'm a Roman from Rome]), their age and current occupational status (more often than not, student). In initial or subsequent presentation posts, the user usually mentions whether he or she has Italian citizenship or a residence permit, this aspect being very central to the *raison d'être* of Rete G2. Frequent users in particular often have tag lines at the bottom of their posts (for example, "non-Italian citizen since 1991. university student. Residence permit valid since 2007"; "fake Chinese").

In the GMI forum users make few references to their parents' origins.¹⁴ Although one contributor invited users to specify their locality (there is a space for this in the user's profile bar), to date not very many have done so. The presentations, like nearly all of the posts, tend to open with ritual greetings in Arabic ("*salam aleikom*", etc.), usually transliterated into the Latin alphabet, saluting "brothers" and "sisters". Since the site's overhaul, many presentations have actually been re-presentations in which the user has described his or her involvement in GMI to date. Tag lines at the bottom of posts are not very common (one reads: "false information in everyone's ears, this is the situation since 2-0-0-1").

In presentations posted to Associna's forum, users generally define themselves as Chinese or Italian (there being many autochthonous users), their local or regional affiliations in Italy, age and occupational status (very often students). A Chinese user may present a more specific affiliation within the overarching category of 'Chinese': the user "Nick", for example, presents himself as competent in the dialects of Wenzhou and as knowing some Mandarin. He states that he lives in Pesaro, but in his profile sidebar his locality is listed as "Wenzhou". As in the other forums, some Associna users underline their posts with tags (for example, one bilingual Chinese-Italian tag reads "defeat is the mother of victories").

Narratives of Discovering the Group

New users come to the sites via other electronic spaces (for example, Google, Facebook and other forums), sometimes through word-of-mouth or at friends' encouragement, and in still other cases through the direct public action of the group (for example, where members have participated in school initiatives). In the case of Rete G2 in particular, many new forum users relate their discovery of the group, expressing palpable relief in finding someone with similar predicaments, despite the great diversity of their situations. Writes one user:

When I discovered the existence of this forum (about a year ago), I had just begun to “conceive” of myself as second generation: it might seem absurd to you, but before I was one without even knowing it. [...] Well, for me it was fantastic finally to see written in black and white what I had been formulating bit by bit in my soul, to read about guys raising their voices to get considered citizens of this State (in theory and in practice), and like me, trying constantly to sort out this mess of their own identities. (“lilady”, G2 article comment, 04.11.09).

Lilady’s comment reflects very well what Parker and Song (2006a: 576) have noted, with regard to the British ethnic websites they have studied in their pioneering work, when they write that “...social identities that mediate between the self and the Net, the individual and the public, can be disseminated and recognised through the sharing of personal experiences in these forum discussions”. Due to the overhaul of GMI’s site, there is a limited number of narratives available for study. Even so, we may note how one new user presents her own contentment:

[...] It’s wonderful to know that there are people who are concerned with uniting us Muslim youths in Italy, who are concerned with facing problems with current events and religion we have in our country (I say our for those who like me also feel Italian). [...] (presentation by Lala, GMI forum, 09.11.09)

In the case of Associna most of the presentations seem to take on a lighter aspect, emphasising sociability and the desire to make new friends, or else participating in the forum as a way of learning more about Chinese culture.

Negotiating Identity and Difference

Through the various discussions that take place, second-generation users in each of the three groups negotiate their points of identity and difference with other group members. As noted above, the high level of anonymity can produce great self-disclosure. The contents of such self-disclosure, however, are not random, but instead tend to address issues of central concern to the group.¹⁵ At the same time, self-disclosure is a risk when it takes place in the spaces that are accessible to a broader public that may interact in a friendly, neutral or hostile fashion in cyberspace.¹⁶ Self-disclosure is part of a process of sharing and negotiation within the group through posted commentaries and exchanges. Such sharing and commentary is often initiated by the posting of a newspaper article of group interest, but it may also begin with, and entails, relating episodes of ‘everyday multiculturalism’ based on personal experience. Among the

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very numerous examples that could be given of such experiences, I will cite only a few.

The "ethnic body"

In many cases, the "ethnic body" (Valtolina, 2006: 109) repeatedly emerges as a locus of routine episodes of discrimination and harassment. Associna's forum is chock-full of users who discuss their frustrations with being the targets of insults, for example in the thread, "what are we doing here?" (by sorellina, 27.08.08), in which the initial post provoked 52 comments. "Sorellina" mentions being constantly hailed "Hey, China!", "Look at the Chinese girl!", "as if I were the latest strange breed of dog". In another thread (entitled "father, brother, boyfriend?"), "Obeso" complains that when he is with his mother, he is always mistaken for her husband or boyfriend. Other Chinese users followed this post with their own experiences of misrecognition, the implication being that "they think we all look alike"; whereas some of the Italian users attempted to relativise the situation by giving examples of analogous experiences of their own.

Similarly, the "ethnic body" appears as a factor that distinguishes some Rete G2 participants: in a post on Rete G2's forum, for example, "wimbe" reviewed her own everyday experiences of racism in the light of the brutal murder of Abdul "Abba" Guibre, a black Italian youth. In the post, she strategically employs the term *negra*.¹⁷

Hi guys,

on this day and after the news of the barbarous killing of Abba, as a black girl [*ragazza negra*], I feel utterly lost. I was born in Italy, I have Italian citizenship, but my phenotype doesn't show it. My mother is African. And today I woke up and needed to go around and about my city, Milan, as if I wanted to challenge people's glances. Yeah, because in the end you forget that you're niggers [*negri*] and discriminated but then these events happen and we are suddenly brought back to the cruel reality that isn't one of integration but one of hatred. [...] And I can't deny that I'm afraid. Because here you're not just insulted on the street (as is by now an ordinary routine), or considered a prostitute given the colour of your skin. Here the risk is that you go out to have some fun with your friends and never come home again. (wimbe, 15.09.08, Rete G2 forum)

In such cases, we see how the Internet can offer spaces for what Parker and Song (2006a: 583) have termed "reflexive racialisation": a racialisation that does not simply arrive "from above", but which becomes articulated through the shared experience of racism, marginalisation and social inequality.

The “gendered body”

In wimbe’s post we also see a concomitant dimension to the “ethnic body”: that of the “gendered body”. This aspect is conspicuous in many of the complaints by young Chinese women in the *sfoghi* (‘letting off steam’) section of the Associna forum. Many of the posts here critically relate everyday experiences of being objects of sexual interest on the part of Italian men. Other users post messages of support and further criticisms of “Italian men” and their views of women who are foreign or clearly of foreign origin.¹⁸ The gendered body is treated very differently in the case of the GMI forum, where there is some shared discussion over situations of everyday multiculturalism like veiling or wearing a burqa. In one thread, “do you think they’ll accept me in the army with a veil?”, “ila” inverts the widespread Western stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman in expressing her desire to be a soldier with a veil:

I think it’s a very funny image and at the same time when someone asks me if I’m forced to wear the veil, I feel something inside me that catches on fire. I want it to come out how much God (*sobhanaho wa taala*) values women and how much freedom and dignity he gives them; I want the message of peace that the prophet Mohammed gave us to come out. (ila, GMI Forum, 20.09.09)

In one of the replies to ila, “Abdelhakim” seeks to discourage her by asking, among other things, “Are we sure that the best way of demonstrating the dignity of the veil is to put it together with a uniform?” (04.10.09) Furthermore, he adds, “In my view we don’t need to ‘demonstrate our freedom.’ All human beings are free and are destined to remain so until their death. Islam does not give us more or less freedom, but instead teaches us to use it in the best ways.” In many such discussions in the GMI forum, Islam is invoked in different ways to assert a point.

*Italian or not?*¹⁹

On the Rete G2 site, many users describe everyday forms of frustration or embarrassment in being mistaken for foreigners. In one post, entitled “...how do you reply?”, “maganò” (04.08.09) initiates a discussion of how she responds when people ask her “Where are you from?” and “Are you Italian?” She states that she is “Italian” but also “Croatian”, with the common problem of lacking Italian nationality.²⁰ The first question is relatively unproblematic: “I answer, ‘from Rome’. Even if I wasn’t born in Rome, there’s no doubt. I’m from Rome.” When they ask her if she’s Italian, “I get stuck, I look like an idiot faced with such a simple question, and I generally sputter something like, ‘it’s complicated.’” This article spurred a series of posts in which others replied that for them, “Where are you from?” becomes the key problem, because they don’t “look” Italian. In another contribution, “Migena” proposes using “hyphenated” expressions of identity (cf. Colombo, 2005):

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Even if I had citizenship I wouldn't say that I am Italian. Because I don't feel it. The Italian terms are too reductive for a society that's evolving. I don't know, we should use definitions like the American ones "Afro-American" etc. etc. (migena, Rete G2 blog, 05.08.09)

Not all Rete G2 members share everyday experiences of the "ethnic body", since - like *maganò* - they may manage to "pass" for Italian phenotypically. On the other hand, they may or may not have in common the problematic status of non-Italian nationality, which creates numerous daily complications for many of the second generation. A classic shared narrative appearing on the G2 blog and forum is that of "Q-day", as Abdel Qader (2008) puts it: the ritual day (or days) in the Questura [Police Headquarters] to renew a residence permit. Such accounts always elicit a plethora of sympathetic remarks and reflections by others on their own status. Many posts, such as one by "ahimsa", point out factors of variability and individual solutions (cf. also Zinn, 2008):

If a child born in Italy or who came here very young, who studies here from elementary school to university, gets to [age] 20-25 or 30, and finds that every year he has to wait on line at the police headquarters to renew his residence permit...well, someone like this has very little hope - as much as he might try - to "feel Italian", despite it being natural for him not to feel foreign [...]" (ahimsa, Rete G2, 19.10.09)

Among members of Associna's forum, the question of Italian nationality assumes different connotations, because unlike many others of the second generation, the Chinese cannot hold dual nationality. In a thread such as "Italian citizenship" (15.06.06), we find "Alexblue" undecided as to whether or not he should apply for Italian nationality, because he would have to renounce Chinese citizenship. The ensuing posts compare various considerations: China's global rise could make for greater opportunities; some users relate how their Chinese parents in Italy have advised their children to seek Italian passports for the sake of convenience. There is a certain consensus that giving up Chinese nationality would not make someone a "traitor", though in another thread, "BlackPepper" says she would keep her Chinese nationality, because giving it up would be like "turning one's back on one's origins."

In the GMI forum, everyday multiculturalism can take on special symbolic dimensions, as in the discussion mentioned above of the veil, or in comments on an article announcing the removal of crucifixes from schools in Spain (01.06.2009). Such discussions may demonstrate different notions of affirming identity as Italian Muslims. Not everyone posting in the crucifix thread was in agreement as to whether or not this was a

desirable solution; one post directly related the issue to a wider reflection on belonging in Italy:

the crucifix isn't bothersome, it simply should stay in its proper place. So let's be coherent with our laws and our constitution: is public school really public? Are school and the public administration secular or not? We didn't arrive here. We were born here, this is our country and we are not nor do we feel foreign. If Islam is a minority religion, that doesn't mean that the State can't also represent me, a Muslim [...] ("basmala", 11.06.09).

Generational difference

Another site of sharing and negotiation in second-generation forums is that of generational difference with respect to first-generation parents. This subject is particularly present in the Associna forum, as for example in a long thread started by "francesca85", with some extracts here:

... my greatest fear is to have a traditional Chinese life after all the efforts I've made to get out of it (run a business, have a ton of money and not have any free time, work like a cow and when he dies he's only left the money and a lifeless memory) (francesca85, economics student, Associna forum, 06.03.09)

welcome, francesca, I think that leading the traditional Chinese life won't be fun, but we Chinese certainly get seen in other ways, too, due to our traditional life, that consists of a great willingness to work and also great sacrifice. you can obviously lead the life that you want [smile emoticon]. a teacher once said to me: it's incredible how you Chinese work, I've never seen anything like it, for me it was a great pleasure to hear that. ("savesichuan", 07.03.09)

for me instead when I hear someone tell me something like that I'm always ashamed [crying emoticon] (francesca85, 07.03.09)

You're Chinese but you've gotten used to Italy, eh? [three grin emoticons] ciao welcome ("nessuno", 07.03.09)

A number of other posts then follow, telling francesca that she should not be ashamed. She elaborates. In a subsequent post, with a smile emoticon, she says it's all past; then "marcowong" (the deacon of Associna and Honorary President) takes up a point from one of francesca's previous posts. He first quotes francesca:

francesca85 wrote:

... my parents have a factory, and they work all day every day, my house is always messy I can't bring my friends over to my house and I always have to make up excuses to not have them over, the same excuses I have to make up when I have to work and I can't be with them ...

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Then he comments:

Francesca these are things that a great many of us have experienced or still experience every day. We have to make the effort to remember that our parents are doing it to guarantee a better future for you too, explain the situations, it shouldn't be shameful to have to work or help out one's family. I know that many of your friends don't understand this now and it's normal to suffer for this, but most of us in Associna understand what you're going through and we support you in this. (marcowong, 11.03.09)

Still other Associni intervene with posts that identify with francesca's feelings, but like marcowong, they emphasise the parents' sacrifices.

The issue of the relationship with the first generation is not so salient in the Rete G2 forum, though like many of the Associni, "laura_arg" recognizes her parents' sacrifices:

I love my parents for what they've done for us. I admire them when I see how they've sweated to make their dreams come true. It makes me want to cry when my mother says she doesn't have any friends except for the usual two Argentinians who live near my town. (31.10.09)

Currently in Italian society, the most negatively stigmatised cases of intergenerational conflict regard families originating from Islamic countries, especially in the highly publicised killings of daughters Hina Salim and Saana Dafani. Discussions on the GMI forum re-frame these tragedies with respect to the widespread conception among Italians that such actions spring from Islamic culture, and in fact they disassociate the fathers involved from proper Islamic behaviour. For GMI youths, Islamic identity and practice should not lead to such dramatic conflicts with one's parents. For example, one sixteen-year-old writes that she would like to become a singer, but her parents are against it, and she seeks advice from GMI forum users ("Djneba", 28.07.09). "Basmala" advises her to listen to her parents above all:

... my advice as an older sister, if you will, is above all to listen to one's parents. Even when we think they're wrong, in the end, and sometimes really at the end, we find that we should have listened to their advice. [...]

Furthermore, Basmala suggests that she cultivate knowledge of faith and spiritual life to come to a better judgment as to the appropriateness of such a career. Here as elsewhere in the GMI forum, users are quick to point out that they do not have the authority to declare something "halal" or "haram"; even so, varying interpretations of what may constitute a 'proper' Islamic approach do not leave the door wide open to relativism for members of GMI.²¹

Cyberspace as a Place of Everyday Multiculturalism

When I first started working on the second generation in the electronic media, it soon struck me that there is a rather high level of participation on the part of people who are group outsiders (generally, autochthonous Italians). In this sense, the websites, forums and Facebook pages serve a pedagogical function, both for group insiders and for outsiders. From the point of view of the core membership, the electronic media are conceived in this light as a way of presenting a positive view of the group (countering stereotypes and prejudices) and providing sources of information regarding the group's central concerns. For Rete G2, this means above all creating awareness about the plight of second-generation non-Italian nationals. In Associna, there is the desire to celebrate Chinese culture and promote knowledge of it, but also a mission to combat the many urban legends and stereotypes surrounding the Chinese presence in Italy. GMI instead seeks to promote a positive image of young Italian Muslims, as well as make resources available for learning about Islam.

With respect to hostile outsiders, these media serve as training grounds for group members (and potential members) on how to respond to provocations in a dignified and composed manner. Indeed, Jaskarandeep Singh, one moderator of the Rete G2 forum, in our interview commented with regret about the fact that a previous forum administrator had deleted a series of threads in which G2 members had had some heated exchanges with "trolls" (hostile outsiders who crash forums). In Singh's view, such posts were very useful for demonstrating to others of the second generation appropriate ways to reply in such encounters.

There are, however, also many outsiders (including journalists and students, not to mention social scientists conducting research on the second generation) who present themselves online in a benevolent manner. Interactions with such users create opportunities for deconstructing monolithic conceptions of identity, be they Italian or Other. Each group tends to do this in various ways. In the Rete G2 forum, for example, the moderators often insist on problematising the categories employed by outsiders, more or less polemically. For example, one sociology student posted a query for the G2ers in which he asked if they felt "50% Italian, 50% foreign". He received this sophisticated response from "clandestino":

... at least within sociology one should know by now that the process of identity construction is very complex and depends on an infinite multiplicity of factors and variables that coming together in a case multiply their combinations.

When we talk about feeling Italian in some percentage for the children of immigrants, maybe we should first ask what it means to be or to feel Italian. Like Ahimsa said, the only things that make Italians equal among themselves are:

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The passport

Political rights

Everything else is highly varied. ...So before asking us how we feel as the children of immigrants, we should ask what it means to be Italians today

(clandestino, 08.11.09)

Sometimes the replies can be rather playful, as in the following exchange:

Hi folks...nice to meet everyone!! i'm viviana...i'm Italian, i hope i'll be welcome all the same! i learned about this site through facebook...!! what to say about me...i live in Cremona, a small city in northern Italy..and im here...2 meet all of u (I wish!) at least some of u...!!! i'm attracted to foreign cultures..particularly asian culture...in fact i know more Chinese than Italians [wink emoticon] but i'm willing to widen my horizons!!! maybe if there's someone who lives in northern Italy, all the better..that way maybe we can go out, a pizza, chitchat!!! Have a nice day, all of you!!!! I hope to make new friends!! (Lavivy, 25.11.08)

maybe i'll be disappointing you if i tell you that we are ALL Italians here!!!! ["Lots of Laughs" emoticon] (ahimsa, 25.11.08)

In other cases, we see the second generation deconstructing monolithic categories of 'Italian' and 'other'. For example, on the Associna forum, "kinzika" presents herself as an Italian interested in Chinese culture. "Wen" replies asking, "which Chinese culture?" with laughing emoticon.

On GMI's Facebook page, "Sandra" introduces herself as an Italian whose boyfriend is a Moroccan Muslim. She says she has not yet met his parents because "in your culture, the daughter-in-law meets the parents only when the couple gets married". "Nadia" replies "When you say 'your culture', which one are you referring to? This association is made up of youths with various origins. I'm Moroccan too, and in my area the daughter-in-law meets the parents way before the wedding" (GMI Facebook national page, 10.09.09). In other posts on GMI's forum where friendly non-Muslims appear, GMIs often reply by pointing out where they are in agreement, yet drawing boundaries where they find they need to reaffirm the specificity of Islamic belief and practice.

The significance of cyberspace as a place for cultivating everyday multiculturalism *within the second-generation group itself* also unfolds in peer interactions among the second generations. In Rete G2, this may occur with celebratory references to parents' cultures of origin, or, in Associna, with references to regional/local affiliations within China. The use of dialect in posts, or references to local affiliations, may be other strategies for establishing distinctions within the group and at the same time affirming Italianness through local attachment. For example, in one exchange on the Rete G2 forum (24.11.08 on) "Jeg" from Bergamo introduces himself with the expression "*pota*" - creating some confusion on the part of "Pipit" and

other users. Seeing that Pipit's locality is Rome, Jeg compares "*pota*" to the Roman "*ahò!*" (hey!) "*El Persiano*", who often participates in the forum citing his own Bergamasco affiliations, joins the fray with a post written entirely in Bergamasco dialect.

In Associna, too, we find forms of connection along regionalist lines: "*frol_brothers*" welcomes a new member: "*we veneta!* Here's to you, associna is getting filled with Veneto Chinese [smile emoticon]". "*Sephiroth*" (locality: Lombardy) greets a newcomer: "*Ciao, welcome varesotta* [girl from Varese]! The Lombards are growing [wide smile emoticon]".

Identities in Action

The sites examined here offer various levels for the production and management of the group's intimacy. By opening its public presence to some degree, the group negotiates its own intimacy vis-à-vis the wider society (autochthons, mass media, institutions), as well as non-group users present in the medium ('trolls' and friends). Each site has different levels of access, more or less public and private 'faces'; registered users may also contact each other through private messaging available on the sites. The communities define their own levels of intimacy, involvement and when to admit someone further into the inner circle, and each has its own rules, both implicit and explicit norms of participation.

Much of the communication that takes place in these forums is of a phatic nature, and the electronic posts often manage to transmit the affective ties that are created within each group. Many posts in Rete G2 refer to the group using family metaphors (cf. Zinn, 2008),²² while the Associna posts tend more toward 'joking relationships' as a style of interaction; but in the discussion of serious topics on both forums there is a high degree of empathy and mutual support. GMI users constantly invoke the Islamic family metaphor of 'brothers' and 'sisters' within the *umma*.

Ralph Grillo (2010: 21-22) has commented with regard to the Italian second generations in Switzerland and young Muslims in Italy, "...like their counterparts in Britain, France or Germany, their public and private personae are seemingly under intense and constant scrutiny and evaluation..."; this observation holds true for other second-generation groups in Italy. I suggest that the electronic media afford some freedom to play with these personae. In Mininni's (2002: 52) view, "the psychologically decisive point of [computer-mediated communication] is that it renders the experience of identity socially available as a 'plurality of voices'"; this plurality is not haphazard, however: the encounter and continuous interaction with the group as a community of practice does define certain forms of collective identity, and for a certain core of participants it becomes a public face, too, in terms of mobilisation.

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Intimate, personal feelings and experiences become subsumed in the group; personal experience can be re-framed in terms of group identity. As Rete G2 forum moderator Singh told me, "The things that are told aren't so private; they are situations that many of us have experienced. Injustices in the legislation create situations of distress in individuals." When I asked him if this might be comparable to the old feminist notion of "the personal is political", he paused and replied, "Yes, it's like that. We've often chatted about other collective movements, such as the Afro-Americans'". One example that effectively illustrates this reciprocal mirroring between self and group is a post by "purple woman" (09.03.09), responding to a prior post documenting a user's immense frustration over the bureaucratic problems created by her foreign status: "What can I say, my dear? i saw myself in your words, we saw ourselves in your/our words... this seeing ourselves gives me strength...."

Such practices of sharing and mutual affirmation create a "social validation of identity", as Susanna Annese's puts it. As she states:

Virtual relations seem to offer an extremely favourable setting - more favourable than face-to-face relations - for strategies of self-representation. The individuals construct images of self that, in order to become identities, must be socially validated...[Computer-mediated communication] translates identity into social reality to be constructed intersubjectively. (Annese, 2002: 65)

At the same time, this social validation does not lead to the construction of a monological or monolithic group identity, but instead one that allows personal variability. As noted above, the practices of sharing leave a good deal of room for individual choice in terms of identity strategies. As Wenger observes, "the formation of communities inherently gives rise to 'economies of meaning' in which various participants have various degrees of 'ownership' of the meanings that define their communities" (1998: 148).

One post that stirred many responses demonstrates how a forum "novice" comes into contact with established ways of thinking in the forum:

Hi everyone I'm a new user on this forum, reading various articles on the home page, I noticed one regarding P., but how can he say that I don't feel Chinese and not even Italian?! Excuse me maybe I'm stupid, but I think in any case you have to recognize your own origins! We're Chinese and we'll be Chinese for life! You shouldn't lose your cultural baggage for another one, at most keep both, ok for integration [...] but like this [P.'s case] it's like betraying our country. Excuse me if I'm nationalist or something but I really see it this way. Bye ("ziner" 13.05.05)

Some of the more experienced users re-frame ziner's discourse with reference to other experiences and reflections shared in the forum. For

example, Associna founder (and current president) “idra” is among the many weighing in on the issue:

I think that P. said that to make people understand that the second-generation Chinese, in a certain sense, are very different in terms of culture, ways and lifestyle, from the Chinese that live in China and they're also different from Italians. This is something that many of us have realized and feel the need to express. If someone's nationalist or not, it's up to him to decide, the important thing is not to be extreme. (idra, Associna forum, 13.05.05)

Another discussant, “sephiroth”, advocates adopting a “cosmopolitan” identity (cf. Colombo, 2005):

[...] As someone in this site has already argued, we should have a transnational mentality that lets a man in any part of the world feel like he's part of the “world” country. [...] (sephiroth, Associna forum, 15.05.05)

Even so, rather than consider some of the various identity strategies possible among second-generation individuals (e.g. Bosisio et al., 2005 or Valtolina, 2006), it is interesting to attend to the strategies that are actually privileged in these communities. These are identities that are ‘resistant’, but not in the sense of closure within particularism: rather, they crucially affirm their Italian-ness and the demand for inclusion within Italian society. The key point is not the affirmation of difference per se, but the legitimacy of a hybrid identity that is ‘Italian-but-not-only’ – or to borrow from current politically correct language in Italy, *diversamente italiano* (differently Italian). Yet this is not a hybridity that is free-floating and infinitely recombinable, as many have criticised post-modern conceptions of identity for positing. Rather, it is a hybridity anchored in concrete features that go against the grain of what is ‘normally’ considered Italian: in some cases phenotype (as in the “ethnic body”), in other cases religious identity, in still others linguistic or cultural difference, and in any case pushing the envelope of (an already problematic) Italian identity (cf. Pratt, 2002).

In all three cases examined here, the collective identity is one that affirms awareness and agency, accented in different ways according to the specificity of the group. In the Rete G2, the aim is to change the definition of ‘Italian’ in terms of nationality law and the collective imagination. Forum moderators frequently remind discussants that there is distinction between the condition of merely being offspring of immigrants and being “a G2”: the latter requires an active assumption of identity as a member of the second generation. As “paula” puts it in a Rete G2 post:

The fact is that G2 arose and is developing through the refusal of persons any longer to put up with things [*subire le cose*] and to share activities, thinking them up and doing them together. (paula, Rete G2 forum, 03.03.07)

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“Helly” also writes:

We must be protagonists of the spheres that regard us, not be subject to [*subire*] other people’s choices. ‘[E]mpowerment’ ...should be pursued not only on the formal-political level, but above all in daily life, in social insertion, in creating a new figure of Italian. (Helly, Rete G2 forum, 23.05.07)

In Associna, the emphasis on activism is one way in which the ‘associni’ distinguish themselves from their first generation parents, whom many posts critique for their ‘passivity’ within Italian society. A post by “Shaoyan”, for example, stresses second-generation potential for agency:

Anyway guys, it’s ok to let off steam, but life is not only what our parents have given us, life is ours.
Seeing as we work every day to build a life that’s suitable for us, set in a place where we feel good, living in a style that we want and with whomever we want...let’s get to work! Not everything is possible, but let’s work to find the right path!!!
We make our own lives, remember! (shaoyan, Associna forum, 27.08.08)

Although I have focused here on personal narratives in the forums, it is important to note that awareness and empowerment through the electronic community result not only from relating personal cases, but also from the posting of newspaper articles and videos and more generally, the sharing of concrete knowledge, from ‘how-to’ information (on the renewal of residence permits, clarification and updates regarding legislation, or even, say, pointing out where Chinese language schools are located in a certain city) to relating and commenting upon group initiatives. Moreover, it should be pointed out that there are also forms of sharing among the three communities: several of the second generation belong to Rete G2 as well as Associna or GMI, and occasionally there are moments in which members of one association make ‘guest appearances’ on the forums of the others.

Coming together as communities of practice through the Internet, second-generation groups and their medium reciprocally shape themselves. As Annese observes in her study of online interactivity:

The interaction among actors, who have aims and interests, and an environment ... renders the role of the *social context* salient within [computer-mediated communication]. This no longer appears as a simple organisational structure, but as a conceptual construct, since the actors, in order to formulate their plans of action, filter situations through the models offered by the cultural order, models that are in turn continuously modified by the subjects’ actions. (Annese, 2002: 62)

Conclusion: From Online to Offline Practice

The point regarding the reciprocal shaping of identity through interaction leads me to a final reflection on the sorts of mobilisation that might arise from second-generation electronic media. As Parker and Song (2006a, 2006b, 2007) have observed in their groundbreaking research on Chinese and Asian ethnic websites in Britain, such online communities can effectively translate into forms of off-line political mobilisation. Indeed, they write that “By drawing together dispersed users, facilitating social gatherings and encouraging political action, they could become the distinctive social institutions of these emerging British born generations” (2006a: 589). Their works seem to apply well to other politically marginalised youths, such as those in the Italian second generations. For example, with regard to the second-generation Muslims she studied, Frisina (2006: 63) has commented on how everyday multiculturalism can work to “gather their potential for creativity and ‘resistance’”.

For many (but not all) participants in the electronic community of practice, the sites and forums offer effective and economical means for bringing together widely dispersed groups in offline reality.²³ All three of the groups explored here are committed to creating positive visibility for themselves and for non-group members who share their concerns in some fashion (for Associna, the Chinese in Italy; for GMI, Muslims in general; immigrants and their children in general for Rete G2), not only to counter stereotypes but also to bring about social change within Italy, both symbolically and through concrete actions. The forums of the groups all reflect a concern to promote anti-defamation/antiracist forms of engagement. Dramatic incidents (such as the uprising of the Chinese community in Milan in 2007; the murder of a second-generation youth, Abdul “Abba” Guibre in Milan in 2008; the murders of second-generation daughters Hina Saleem and Saana Dafani) are taken up by the electronic communities and discussed at length, leading to various forms of action (press releases, candlelight vigils, demonstrations, calls to reach out further to peers) and cultural productions to be disseminated beyond the community (videos, music, Rete G2’s *fotoromanzo*). Rete G2 in particular, thanks to its aim of changing Italian nationality law, is perhaps more focused than GMI or Associna on acting as an actual pressure group, and it has achieved some striking successes in becoming an institutional referent on such questions.

We thus see that these electronic media function on various levels: by coming together online, second-generation youths engage each other and express themselves, and in doing so foster individual and collective identities in which they recognise themselves as ‘second-generation’. These media constitute virtual communities of practice in which instrumental know-how is shared, and through electronic participation, the groups

develop a common sense about members' subjective and objective conditions as members of the second generation. Yet these electronic expressions of identity are not totalising, as can be seen in the different positions that members assume and through the processes of negotiation of meaning that take place in the exchanges. At the same time, the media are places of everyday multiculturalism where members not only relate and discuss their own crucial experiences and episodes publicised in the press, but also interact with various outsiders who enter into the electronic space. The active, agency-affirming identity as second-generation members promoted in the groups examined here can and does lead to forms of offline mobilisation.

If those of the second generation are presently in some manner an 'in-between' generation, then these groups look ahead to a future society that their work is actively helping to construct. As Sherif Fares, one Rete G2 activist, commented in our interview on the use of these media (28.10.09), "One day, whoever comes across the term 'second generation' and looks it up on the Internet, will find our outbursts, our thoughts and our activities... so they'll find a valid discussion [*confronto*]." I can only concur with Fares' optimistic hope that the struggles related by these second-generation communities will in a near future end up being 'past history': in this sense, the forums will indeed be able to serve as a precious repository of collective memory for each single group and for Italian society as a whole.

Notes

1. With reference to the broad debate over the legitimacy of using the term 'second generation', as discussed in other contributions to this special issue, I will assume the readers' familiarity with the problems surrounding this expression. As such, I will not seek further to qualify my own use of it, except where it comes into direct discussion in the paper's contents. I would like to thank those who have contributed to this ongoing study, and in particular Rete G2 members Jaskarandeep Singh and Sherif Fares, and the President of *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*, Omar Jibril, for having generously shared their thoughts with me. I am also grateful to the organisers and participants of the American University of Rome conference, "The Sons and Daughters of Migrants: Italy's Second Generations" (13 November 2009), where a shorter version of this work was originally presented. All translations from Italian into English, unless otherwise noted, are my own. The translations of forum posts attempt to reflect the grammatical and orthographic idiosyncrasies of the Italian originals.

2. A fourth group, *Genemaghrebina*, has appeared online since late September 2009, and will not be considered here (www.genemaghrebina.it). As of this writing, *Genemaghrebina* members can post articles, comments and letters, but there is no forum. Yet another second-generation group is *Anolf Giovani della 2a Generazione*, a nation-wide group affiliated with the CISL trade union: www.anolf.it/coordinamento_II_generazioni/coordinamento_II_generazioni.htm.

Their website has no discussion forum, but they have an active Facebook page. An interesting electronic resource linked to the concerns of the second generation is the online magazine www.yallaitalia.it, but it does not have members or discussions.

3. Currently, for example, several “G2ini” e “associni” (members, respectively, of Rete G2 and Associna) are abroad for work or study, and continue to contribute regularly to discussions.

4. Forum registration procedures allow users to disclose as much or as little about themselves as they choose, and the data may or may not appear in the profile bar that accompanies forum posts. Without the necessity of new registrations, Facebook participants may be able to make posts with even more anonymity.

5. www.giovanimusulmani.it Registered forum users (at time of writing): 235; messages posted: 491; Facebook (national page): 1049 members.

6. www.secondegenerazioni.it Registered forum users (at time of writing): 731; messages posted: 15,272; Facebook: 1851 members.

7. Interview, forum administrator Jaskarandeep Singh (25 October 2009).

8. Presumably Mandarin, but I was unable to confirm this. It would be interesting to examine the linguistic politics of the members’ interactions and how this interfaces with some of the questions of identity discussed below, but such an endeavour would obviously require considerable knowledge of Chinese language and dialects.

9. www.associna.com Although attempts were made to interview Associna’s president and forum moderators, the lack of response places some limits to the information presented here. Registered users (at time of writing): 2439; messages posted: 101,668; Facebook: 1089 fans.

10. Interview, President Omar Jibril (4 April 2009).

11. Interview, forum administrator Jaskarandeep Singh (25 October 2009).

12. I am focusing here on users who are clearly potential in-group members, not the outside visitors who in some cases (especially Associna) are very numerous and active in the forums.

13. One novice user in Rete G2’s forum was disturbed to see himself tagged “clandestino” and asked how to remove the label, until a moderator explained that it was a joking means of ranking users’ participation.

14. To some extent, as GMI President Jibril observed in our interview, members view the parents’ national origins as less relevant than their shared Islamic affiliations.

15. There are, however, spaces in each forum for questions aimed at more general sociability and exchange, and even frivolousness, with topics such as “summer vacation” and leisure time activities, “what are you reading?” “what music are you listening to?”

16. GMI President Jibril noted in our interview that the GMI forum had previously been closed on several occasions due to hostile incursions; he reported that one user had even pretended to be a Muslim and used the forum to make provocative, offensive remarks about non-Muslims in an attempt to discredit the group.

17. From its previous relatively unselfconscious and generally benignly intended usage to describe people of African origin, the term '*negro/a*' in Italian has, in recent years, assumed a more pointedly derogatory connotation.

18. Interestingly, however, there are several Italian users on the forum who are rather forthright about their interest in trying to meet Chinese women through the forum itself. The term '*cinesina*' abounds in posts, though according to forum rules, the male form '*cinesino*' is considered unacceptably racist. It is not clear to what extent this term may be deployed strategically or sarcastically by Chinese women themselves.

19. Overall the second generations in these forums demonstrate a sophisticated reflexivity about their status, their self-definitions, and many are quite well read in the sociological literature regarding their 'category' (cf. Zinn, 2008). On the Rete G2 and Associna forum, one commonly finds posts employing Rumbaut's (1997) categories (uncited), in users' descriptions of themselves as "generation 1.5" and the like.

20. 'Nationality' is almost invariably glossed as 'citizenship' by second-generation members in the electronic media.

21. See Frisina (2007) for a discussion of the prevalent interpretations of Islam within GMI. As the new Genemaghrebina site develops further, it may be interesting to compare the general conceptions of Islam presented with those of GMI.

22. A recent birth announcement provoked a host of congratulation posts from G2 'aunts' and 'uncles'.

23. Skype has also emerged as a popular tool among Rete G2 and GMI activists for conducting business and arranging meetings.

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