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# Introducing Italy's Intercultural Digital Media: Mapping the Landscape

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Keywords: Interculturalism; alternative media; citizenship; Italian immigration; cultural diversity

## Abstract

The paper focuses on a particular case of alternative media that emerged in Italy from the early 2000s offering alternatives to mainstream media coverage of immigration and cultural diversity. Involving practitioners of diverse immigrant backgrounds as well as of single Italian heritage, Italy's intercultural digital media represent an under-researched media form with the potential to add complexity to and re-think the boundaries of the widely researched field of 'ethnic minority media'. Drawing on a detailed mapping of the intercultural digital media landscape, the study critically examines the key dimensions of the platforms including the socio-cultural context of emergence, agenda, and organisational-economic structures. The analysis shows that while these platforms are geared towards more pluralist, inclusive and democratic media practices, the realisation of an inter-cultural media agenda grounded on common civic goals involves a careful cultural politics of negotiation with established discourses and funding resources. Furthermore, the transient nature of public and political debates situated in specific socio-cultural contexts determines the availability of funding opportunities and may limit the financial viability of the platforms. Overall, the study introduces and critically examines Italy's intercultural digital media as an object of research potential by offering an insight into the possibilities and limitations of interculturalism in practice.

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, a wide range of alternative, small-scale, community-oriented media initiatives has been established worldwide in many 'immigrant-receiving countries' as a response to the need for more authentic and pluralistic portrayals of ethnic minorities alongside enhanced access to the means of production (Cottle 2000; Deuze 2006). However, while the emergence of media outlets produced by and/or targeted to specific 'ethnic minority' or 'immigrant' or 'diasporic' communities worldwide has attracted significant scholarly attention for decades (for example, Riggins 1992; Cottle 2000; Matsaganis et al. 2011; Budarick and Han 2017), the possibility of the existence as well as the examination of inter-cultural alternative media engaging and addressing individuals from *diverse* immigrant backgrounds has rarely been examined in the literature.

Therefore, this paper will explore an under-researched media form emerging in Italy since the early 2000s – including collective blogs, web-zines and news portals – grounded on the principle of inter-cultural collaboration across 'difference'. Involving contributors of various immigrant backgrounds as well as practitioners of solely Italian descent, inter-cultural media assign importance – at least in principle – to the practice of inter-cultural relations beyond the particularistic interests of specific 'ethnic' groups. While interculturalism has been discussed extensively in the literature as a framework for theoretical and normative approaches to cultural diversity (for example, Cattle 2011; Barrett 2013; Kymlicka 2003; Meer and Modood 2011; Boucher and Maclure 2018), the working of interculturalism *in practice* through the setting up of joint (media) activities (Rattansi 2011) grounded on common objectives has not been yet sufficiently explored. Therefore, Italy's intercultural digital media – encompassing collective blogs, webzines, and news portals – represents an original case study for understanding and exploring the practiced possibilities of constructing more inclusive media spaces with the potential to reach out to a broad and diverse national audience.

This study proposes a broadening of the boundaries of alternative media set up for and/or by 'ethnic minorities' by assigning scholarly importance to initiatives established by the joint effort of contributors with different 'ethnic' or cultural affiliations demanding institutional and representational recognition as 'citizens' in the country of settlement. With the potential to serve as practice grounds for the construction of more democratic, pluralistic, diverse and inclusive media spaces, intercultural media offers an insight into how intercultural projects have emerged, functioned and evolved in practice.

The study provides a comprehensive and longitudinal overview of the varied and fast-evolving landscape of intercultural digital media in Italy. Through a systematic and detailed mapping, the paper critically examines the socio-cultural context and the key distinct features of this media form, including the context of emergence, audience and social actors involved, agenda and political economy. Drawing on the framework of interculturalism, the article will argue that the conditions of possibility of intercultural digital media are grounded in micro-level processes of inter-cultural encounters (Mansouri and Modood 2020) fostered by local authorities, third sector organisations and wider society. At the same time, ongoing national demands of citizenship rights equality for the long-settled population of immigrant background have played a pivotal role in prompting the establishment and defining the agenda of inter-cultural projects. Yet, the full realisation of inter-cultural media practices is side-lined in favour of an emphasis on citizenship discourses as a shared civic project across 'differences'. Therefore, the study will illustrate the possibilities as well as limitations of interculturalism in practice, raising broader questions about the collective inter-cultural politics of under-represented individuals seeking inclusion and recognition as 'citizens' in increasingly diverse societies.

### **Immigration and Diversity in Italy: Mainstream Media Discourses and Practices**

Intercultural digital media in Italy must be understood as a response to dominant media discourses and practices about immigration and cultural diversity in Italy. As in many countries worldwide, immigration has traditionally been a highly politicised and mediatised field in the Italian public and media discourse (Urso 2018; Geddes 2008). A vast body of research has registered an over-focus on the periodic sea arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers on Italy's Southern coasts which tend to be reported as sensationalised and politicised events defined by calls for 'emergency' measures to curb the numbers of undocumented migrants (for example, De Bartolo 2007; Montali et al. 2013). Despite media and political discourses have contributed to the public perception of the exceptional, episodic and 'irregular' character of immigration, since the mid-1970s and increasingly throughout the 1980s, Italy has become the home of a diverse population of largely economic migrants who travelled via 'legal routes' from a wide range of world regions including North and Central West Africa, South America, South and East Asia (Colombo

and Sciortino 2004).

Yet, research examining the Italian press throughout the 1980s and 1990s found that the residents of immigrant background have either been under-represented or their 'foreigner' status was made newsworthy when featuring as either victims or perpetrators of a crime (Dal Lago 1999; Mansoubi 1990; Calvanese 2011; Morcellini 2009). Criminalisation and stigmatisations of certain nationalities or 'ethnic minority' communities in anti-immigration rhetoric has perpetuated an essentialist view of the Italian identity based on a fictional model of national identification as 'homogeneous', 'Catholic' and 'white' (Grillo and Pratt 2002). As studies show, far-right political parties have mobilised populist arguments pointing to alleged incompatible differences between 'the Italians' and 'the others', promoting an 'ethnic' view of national identity and citizenship (Sorgoni 2002; Clough Marinaro and Waltson 2010).

Alongside under- and mis-representation, residents and citizens of immigrant background can face institutional exclusion and experience an uncertain and lengthy pathway to Italian citizenship. Despite an increasing young population of immigrant background awaiting to be formally recognised as 'citizens' (ISTAT 2021), a restrictive Nationality Law (Law no. 91 of 1992) based on the 'ethnic' principle of *ius sanguinis* (right of blood) hinders the legal and social inclusion of residents of immigrant background who cannot obtain Italian citizenship by descent (see Thomassen 2010). A reform of the Nationality Law based on a moderate version of the principle of *ius soli* (birthright citizenship) was announced by a centre-left coalition government in 2013. The proposed bill aimed at relaxing citizenship acquisition requirements for those children to non-EU immigrant parents born and/or raised in Italy who would only become eligible for citizenship application after the coming of age at 18 and upon demonstrating uninterrupted legal residency. To date November 2020 – yet to be enforced – the bill is awaiting to be approved by the Senate amidst ongoing opposition from far-right parties.

Grassroots campaign initiatives by civil society organisations – with and without the support of institutional actors – put institutional pressure on the reform by raising awareness on the urgency of granting equal citizenship rights to people born and/or raised in the country (see Clough Marinaro and Waltson 2010; Musarò and Parmiggiani 2017). Research carried out since the reform was announced showed that while the demands of young residents of immigrant background started receiving attention by the national media, the voices of the so-called 'second-generations' as the 'beneficiaries of the reform' remained largely silent in news reports (Faloppa 2015: 123). Similarly, Sredanovic and Farina (2015) found an

unprecedented volume of TV news coverage about the reform in 2012. Yet, the debate tended to be dominated by the voices of politicians, while young people of immigrant background were portrayed with emphasis placed either on their ‘differences’ or ‘sameness’ with Italian youth of single heritage reiterating an essentialist view of identity (Sredanovic and Farina 2015).

The representation of ethnic minorities and cultural diversity in mainstream media is profoundly influenced by the institutional structures and daily routines of news production (Van Dijk 2008). In Italy, journalists or news presenters from an immigrant or ethnic minority background are still largely under-represented in major national news organisations including public service broadcasting. Despite a lack of systematic data, few studies point out the very limited diversity in mainstream media newsrooms (Meli 2015; Godano 2021) both at the production and representational level. Meli (2015) notes how Italian both public service and commercial broadcasters show limited awareness and understanding of diversity beyond an ‘assistentialist’ logic of ‘solidarity’ and ‘equal opportunities’. What is lacking in Italian mainstream newsrooms – compared to some of their European counterparts – is a view of diversity that recognises the value of ‘difference’ as an opportunity towards innovation, creativity and experimentation with media content inclusive of a wider range of experiences, stories, and representations (Meli 2015). Furthermore, institutionalised barriers of access to mainstream media organisations have hindered aspiring journalists who could not rely on socio-financial capital for professional journalistic training, connections, or not (yet) in possession of Italian citizenship – which was until 2014 a necessary requirement for taking up senior editorial roles in a national news media outlet – to pursue a career in national mainstream media organisations.

In recent years, civil society organisations in Italy have played a key role in raising awareness about the need for more pluralist representations and media spaces. The *Associazione Carta di Roma* (‘Charter of Rome Association’), for example, is a not-for-profit collective of journalists and communication professionals collaborating with mainstream media organisations in the drafting of deontological guidelines for the use of accurate, balanced, and inclusive language for reporting on issues concerned with immigration, asylum and diversity.

Yet, despite some progress, recent reports note how in Italy’s mainstream news media organisations – including the national public service broadcaster – the voices, stories and experiences of residents and citizens of immigrant background are still under-represented at both production and representational level (Godano 2021). Perceived lack of recognition

as ‘citizens’ with equal opportunities of self-representation and participation in the construction of national media narratives in the home society, has been a catalyst for the setting up of alternative media initiatives.

### **Broadening the Field: From ‘Ethnic Minority’ to ‘Intercultural’ Media**

A vast body of literature has observed and examined the worldwide proliferation of alternative, minority, community-oriented, participatory media initiatives which seek to move away from dominant or established ways of producing media content (Deuze 2006; Bailey et al. 2007; Atton 2002). Facilitated by the democratic potential of digital communication (Siapera 2006), alternative media attempt to restore voices, stories and perspectives that its practitioners believe that have been under/mis-reported in mainstream media (Atton and Hamilton 2008).

In contexts of increased global mobility and critical awareness towards the limit of hegemonic media in multicultural societies, alternative media outlets produced by and/or for ‘ethnic’, ‘immigrant’ or ‘diasporic’ communities have been established in many countries worldwide. In particular, the widely researched field of ‘ethnic (minority) media’ has explored the production and consumption of media outlets set up by and/or for specific communities or groups sharing a common language, ‘ethnicity’, religion, and/or nationality in their country of settlement (Matsaganis et al. 2011: 9). Research has largely focused on the twofold role these media play: providing access to information concerning the ‘new’ community or country of settlement and maintaining transnational connections to the home country (Cottle 2000; Budarick and Han 2017; Yu 2017).

As an alternative media form, intercultural media introduced and examined in this study, share with ‘ethnic media’ the aspiration to broaden the spectrum of dominant representations and restore centrality to the interests, needs and self-representational narratives of marginalised or misrepresented voices in today’s increasingly diverse societies (Matsaganis et al. 2011). However, while ‘ethnic minority’ media cater to the particularistic interests of a group with ‘minority status’ – not only numerically but also in terms of socio-political power – intercultural media aspire to and have the potential to engage members of the broad ‘majoritarian’ resident population either as audience or content producers, challenging the minority-majority dichotomy.

With a renewed focus on the importance of inter-cultural relations, the concept of interculturalism offers a useful paradigm and a set of dynamic conceptual tools for understanding and critically examining Italy’s intercultural digital media. Interculturalism has been long

implemented as a practice-oriented conceptual model for developing methodologies, policies, frameworks, and activities by a range of institutional and civic actors aiming at fostering inter-cultural dialogue between citizens with different cultural affiliations and equal status largely in the areas of pedagogy and education (see Council of Europe 2003). Yet, scholarly interest in ‘interculturalism’ was prompted by criticism surrounding multiculturalism – or some versions or interpretations of it – both as a theoretical framework and a policy strategy deemed responsible for the reification of cultural group difference and an essentialist view of identities (see Cantle 2012; Kymlicka 2003).

Scholars who have contributed to debates surrounding the definition of interculturalism highlight the role played by inter-cultural encounters – beyond the mere co-existence of groups and individuals – in fostering a shared sense of belonging and community cohesion (Cantle 2001). Ali Rattansi stresses the importance of the setting up of joint activities based on the positive encouragement of encounters between different ethnic and faith groups (2011: 152). Similarly, Kymlicka emphasises the process of mutual sharing and learning in interacting with people from other backgrounds (2003). The importance of the local dimension of inter-cultural relations is often emphasised in the literature. Many authors highlight the role played by communities and municipalities at ‘micro-level’ in the development and promotion of intercultural activities, policies, and programmes (Mansouri and Modood 2020; Zapata-Barrero 2017) as opposed to a macro state-centric policy approach. Yet, Boucher and Maclure view the state as a key actor in providing institutional support for long-term intercultural projects (2018). The national level of politics, they argue, can also be the locus of important common goals formed around a collective societal project (Boucher and Maclure 2018).

Similarly, other scholars note how through contacts and socialisations in diversity, people develop feelings of membership (Zapata-Barrero 2016) and a sense of belonging grounded on a shared value system (Meer and Modood 2011). In this, the role of national citizenship – to be intended as membership to a common civic project – in fostering commonalities between equal citizens is a crucial dimension of both multicultural and intercultural approaches to the cultural politics of diversity (Modood 2007).

The conceptual framework of interculturalism is instrumental to contextualise, understand and analyse the case of Italy’s intercultural media as collective initiatives formed around common calls for fairer media and institutional representation by individuals of diverse backgrounds sharing inter-cultural membership to a national community.



## Introducing Italy's Intercultural Media-scape

The emergence of intercultural media projects is grounded on contextual factors specific – yet, not exclusive – to the Italian socio-political approach to diversity.

Some scholars argue that Italy's weak and inconsistent approach to national policies of integration and the absence of a state-led multiculturalism project has on the one hand, hindered the process of institutional inclusion of residents of immigrant background as a prerogative of the central government (Allievi 2010; Grillo and Pratt 2002). On the other hand, the 'missing multiculturalism' experience (Allievi 2010), might have led to more decentralised and locally based approaches to social inclusion, or 'interculturalisms'. Third-sector immigrant advocacy groups as well as local government institutions have played a major role in redressing the shortcomings of national politics through initiatives geared not only to the provision of services or material support but also to the enhancement of participation opportunities, inclusion, and inter-cultural relations. It is within this context that Italy's intercultural media platforms have been conceived and established, growing out of an existing network of localised practices and collective endeavours committed to the promotion of participation and civic opportunities for the resident population of immigrant background.

It has been argued that Italy's relatively recent history as a destination country of global migration alongside a missing model of multicultural policy has led to a territorial dispersion of the immigrant population across metropolitan and suburban areas of the country (Maneri 2011; Maneri and Meli 2007). Consequently, the distribution and circulation of the 'ethnic press' targeting specific groups who may have not settled cohesively in communities make it a smaller audience for 'ethnic' publications and this might have been a contributing factor to the decline of the 'ethnic press' since 2004 (Maneri and Meli 2007). Whilst evidence of the causal link between settlement patterns and the thriving of an inter-cultural media landscape has not been sufficiently explored, Italy's intercultural digital media remain a distinct media form within the alternative media landscape.

As scholarly work has largely concentrated on the 'ethnic media' landscape, in the few instances when media produced by 'ethnically' diverse teams of contributors have been considered, these have been included within the all-encompassing category of 'ethnic (minority) media' or – as in the Italian literature – under the generic term of *media multiculturali* (Maneri and Meli 2007; Maneri 2011). Maneri and Meli's study of 'multicultural

media' outlets including press, TV and radio stations in Italy is a valuable contribution providing a systematic picture of the 'ethnic minority' media's landscape in Italy from the late 1980s to 2007. However, the work does not make any reference to the 'digital media landscape' that in 2007 had already started attracting interest on behalf of immigrant communities and that might have partly explained the decline of the ethnic media sector from the early-2000s (Maneri and Meli 2007). Furthermore, the authors do not seem to provide a clear differentiation between media produced by and/or for specific immigrant communities and media with culturally diverse teams of contributors addressed to an Italian-speaking public of diverse backgrounds. Within the Italian context, no further research has been carried out to focus on the case of media produced by teams of contributors of diverse immigrant backgrounds. Although individual outlets have been examined in the studies of Saitta (2010, 2014) and briefly touched upon in Maneri (2011), the field of 'intercultural media' has hitherto lacked a comprehensive and in-depth scholarly investigation.

This study contributes to existing scholarship on alternative media and 'ethnic minorities' by introducing the case of Italy's intercultural digital media as an object of research potential. As a media form challenging the boundaries between majority and minority audiences, the case of intercultural digital media contributes to a greater understanding of those media practices set up by under-represented groups and individuals with diverse 'ethnic' affiliations based on inter-cultural collaboration across difference and common goals of media and institutional representation and inclusion. More specifically, the study will explore the following questions:

RQ1: What are the principal characteristics of Italy's intercultural digital media landscape?

RQ2: What are the conditions of possibility, the potential, and limitations of interculturalism in practice?

## **Methodology**

This article draws on a systematic mapping of Italy's intercultural digital media platforms from which commonalities and patterns can be observed, examined and discussed. The mapping exercise enables the researcher to understand and establish the boundaries of a sample or the whole 'population' of media outlets sharing a set of common characteristics.

The mapping presented and discussed in this article is broadly influenced by methodologies aimed at providing a comprehensive description and examination of the key features of a certain media landscape, largely used for investigating alternative or minority media outside the mainstream media sphere (Georgiou 2003, 2005; Yu 2017). Drawing on mapping approaches and tools used in media research for collecting and analysing quantitative or descriptive data of a specific media form or genre, the mapping provides a necessary starting point, especially in areas where data is scarce or lacking (Georgiou 2003: 23).

Constructing an operational definition based on a set of criteria was both preparatory and instrumental to undertaking a mapping of intercultural digital media. Since 2011, I have recorded descriptive data and information corresponding to each individual website falling under the operational definition of 'intercultural digital media', which I define as:

Media outlets published online in Italian whose content is produced by diverse teams of contributors, largely residents or citizens of diverse immigrant backgrounds with a principal or significant focus on matters relating to immigration and cultural diversity.

The scope of the mapping aims to be exhaustive as it seeks to identify all existing sites whether currently active as of November 2020 or not. Those initiatives that did not meet all the criteria outlined in the operational definition were excluded from the mapping as they would have not been sufficiently relevant to the scope of this study. To identify the platforms to include, a range of digital tools were consulted, including: the Italian 'multicultural media database' provided by the website *media & multiculturalità* ([www.mmc2000.net](http://www.mmc2000.net))<sup>1</sup>; the Internet Archive website (<https://archive.org/>); and Google keyword searches.<sup>2</sup> Despite the search for the platforms aimed to be exhaustive, realistically few initiatives might have slipped the researcher's net. A population of 34 websites responding to the above criteria was established and for each platform (see Appendix 1) and descriptive data were collected in relation to the following fields: (a) name; (b) web address; (c) self-definition; (d) launch date; (e) location; (f) editorial team; (g) themes/agenda; (h) ownership/affiliation; (i) funding strategies; (l) current status or termination date.

Data concerning the above fields were gathered largely through retrieving the relevant information published on the website and cross-checked with further accessible or shared information sources. This included published press releases following the launch of the

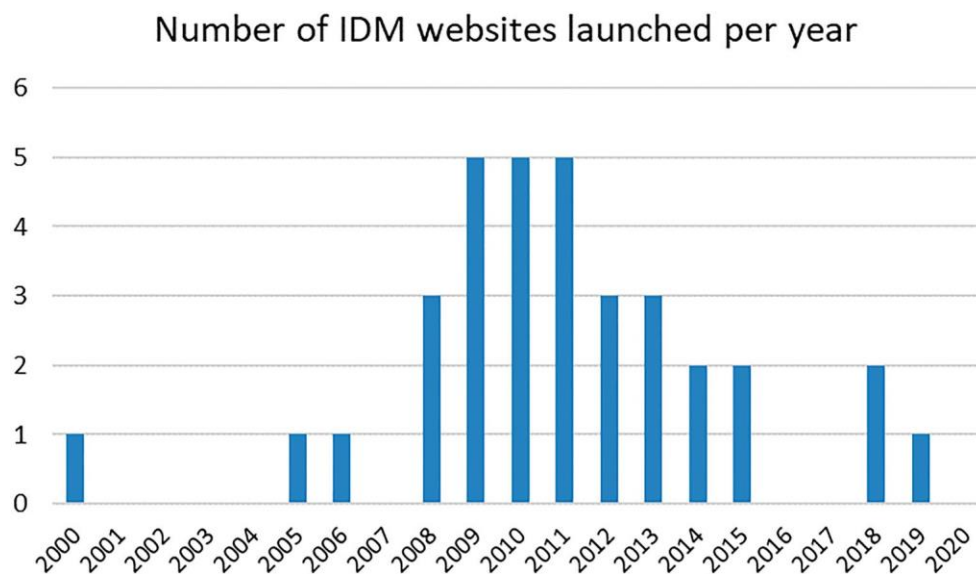
initiatives and editorial guidelines material that the practitioners shared with the researcher. As for coding the themes as part of the agenda of the website, the following coding process was undertaken. A total of 12 different common recurring themes (or topic categories) were identified across the 34 platforms by coding the principal topic categories in the sites' menu bars. In those instances where the themes of the articles published under those categories did not fully reflect the category description in the menu bar, a judgement was made on which category would best describe the content of that particular section.<sup>3</sup>

Coding descriptive data relating to the websites' information enabled the researcher to draw a systematic picture of intercultural sites that have emerged online in Italy since their first appearances. The mapping also enables a longitudinal overview of intercultural websites over a span of 20 years (2000–2020) which facilitates the identification of common characteristics as well as changing patterns across a significant period of time.

## **Mapping Italy's Intercultural Digital Media**

### ***The Context of Emergence: National Demands, Local Practices***

The mapping revealed that intercultural digital media originated in a specific socio-cultural context which had its momentum in the years 2008–2013 as Figure 1 illustrates. Whilst on the one hand incidental circumstances and motivations may have played a role in the establishment of the media outlets, on the other hand it is plausible to argue that a socio-political and cultural climate in which citizenship rights demands by residents of immigrant background gained momentum might have played a key role. With demographic data showing a steady increase in the immigrant resident population and a consequent surge of citizenship applications (ISTAT 2013), calls for social and juridical recognition started gaining public, political and media attention in those years.



**Figure 1.** Number of intercultural digital media (IDM) websites launched per year from 2000 to November 2020.

Grassroots groups of first- and second-generations Italians of different immigrant backgrounds calling for a reform of Italy's Nationality Law were becoming more visible at media and institutional level. In 2011, the association *Rete G2* launched the national campaign *L'Italia sono anch'io* ('I am Italy, too') paving the way to a 'climax of mobilisations' in the following years supported by a range of civic and institutional actors from national parliamentary groups to local municipalities (Tintori 2018).

Within a context in which civic demands of the long-settled immigrant population were gaining public attention, the establishment of intercultural digital media platforms might have been facilitated by access to funding from public and private institutions committed to inclusion and social change. In many cases, digital media outlets such as collective blogs, news portals, webzines and web TVs have been developed as part of the (inter-)cultural activities of third sector organisations engaging residents of immigrant background in media practices and situated in a specific local-municipal context whereby a physical newsroom was maintained. This shows that, despite the digital/ online nature of the platform, a micro-politics of the local (Boucher and Maclure 2018; Mansouri and Modood 2020) played out within civic demands articulated at national level was instrumental to the establishment of intercultural media platforms. The mapping also shows that the majority of intercultural media platforms have been set up in the large metropolitan areas of Northern

(14, 39 per cent) and Central regions (11, 30 per cent) with only a minor proportion based in the South (4, 12 per cent), while seven (19 per cent) – and increasingly the most recently established – were set up and operated fully remotely. This uneven distribution patterns pointing to a North–South divide is consistent with Maneri and Meli’s findings of ethnic minority media in Italy (2007). Intercultural media projects, I argue, tend to be set up in large metropolitan areas – such as Rome and Milan which ‘host’ half of the platforms – where a well-established media and communication sector meets the demands of large and diverse audiences. Northern and central major cities also tend to possess a thriving third-sector sensible to the themes of cultural diversity and inclusion which is also instrumental to the establishment of inter-cultural programmes and initiatives.

### ***Broadening Audience and Production Teams***

Intercultural digital media have the aspiration to reach out to a broad national audience. The online availability of the platforms alongside the language of publication shared across the national community ‘of settlement’ have the potential to enable accessibility by a wide readership. Shared membership to the national context and an interest in issues about cultural diversity through an inter-cultural approach to social change is therefore implied in the construction of the ‘model’ audience of the projects. The choice of publishing content in Italian – which often is the first language for many citizens and residents of immigrant background – moves the attention away from the commitment to promote the identity politics of a specific ‘ethnic minority’ group (Husband 2005). Instead, it opens up the possibility of engaging with a broad and diverse national audience despite and across different ‘ethnic’, religious, linguistic, and transnational affiliations. Therefore, the audience of intercultural digital media can include residents or Italian citizens of immigrant or ‘ethnic minority’ background, Italians of single national heritage, ‘multiracial’ Italians, diasporic citizens or Italians settled in a different country.

Yet, as Maneri and Meli (2007) note, the language of publication is always a ‘political choice’ that speaks to what relationship the platform seeks to perform with its audience. On the one hand the adoption of the ‘majoritarian’ language has the potential to enable engagement with a broad audience sharing linguistic status and cultural affiliation in the national context. On the other hand, it might exclude social actors (Siapera 2006) – either as practitioners or readers – who do not master the language, such as newly arrived migrants or asylum seekers or those who would rather entertain affiliations with multiple languages

instead of or beside the ‘dominant’ one. Overall, an individual who is a long- settled resident or citizen in Italy, with a good mastery of the Italian language alongside Internet access and digital skills, educated and subscribing to an inter-cultural approach to the politics of diversity is implied in the construction of both the model audience and contributors of intercultural websites.

The diverse composition of the teams of contributors responds to the intent of practising with more inclusive and pluralistic means of content production. While the ‘ethnic identity’ of media producers is a salient facet of their professional practice in ethnic minority media (Husband 2005), in intercultural media the ‘ethnic origin’ does not constitute the primary lens through which practitioners (or audiences) become involved. However, the composition of the newsroom with regards to age, social status and interests of the contributors reflects the genesis of the project and the range of social actors involved in its establishment and operations.

Typically, the editorial operations of the media platforms are coordinated by an ‘editor-in-chief’ (or ‘coordinator’) with a background in journalism or in professional communication who is responsible for the coordination of the editorial team and

operations. Similarly, practitioners involved in the content production of the websites tend to be individuals with high education levels and an interest in journalism and in the themes of the projects. The mapping finds that of the 34 websites, in 19 (56 percent) the coordinator is an individual of single Italian heritage and in 15 (44 per cent) an individual of immigrant background (largely naturalised Italian citizens). This shows that while there is overall diversity in the editorial teams, the top coordinating role is mostly filled by Italians of single cultural heritage reiterating the power imbalance dynamics of the mainstream media sphere (see Meli 2015).

### ***Negotiating an Inter-cultural Agenda***

The level of content is regarded as a crucial dimension of those alternative media outlets seeking to fill the gaps that its practitioners believe have been left by mainstream media (Atton and Hamilton 2008: 79). The agenda of intercultural media reflects the intent to present alternative narratives about cultural diversity to the highly politicised and polarised debates concerned with ‘immigration’ in Italy (Musarò and Parmiggiani 2017). A wide spectrum of themes exploring the different facets of cultural diversity, citizenship, global migration is covered according to the editorial choices and interests of each individual

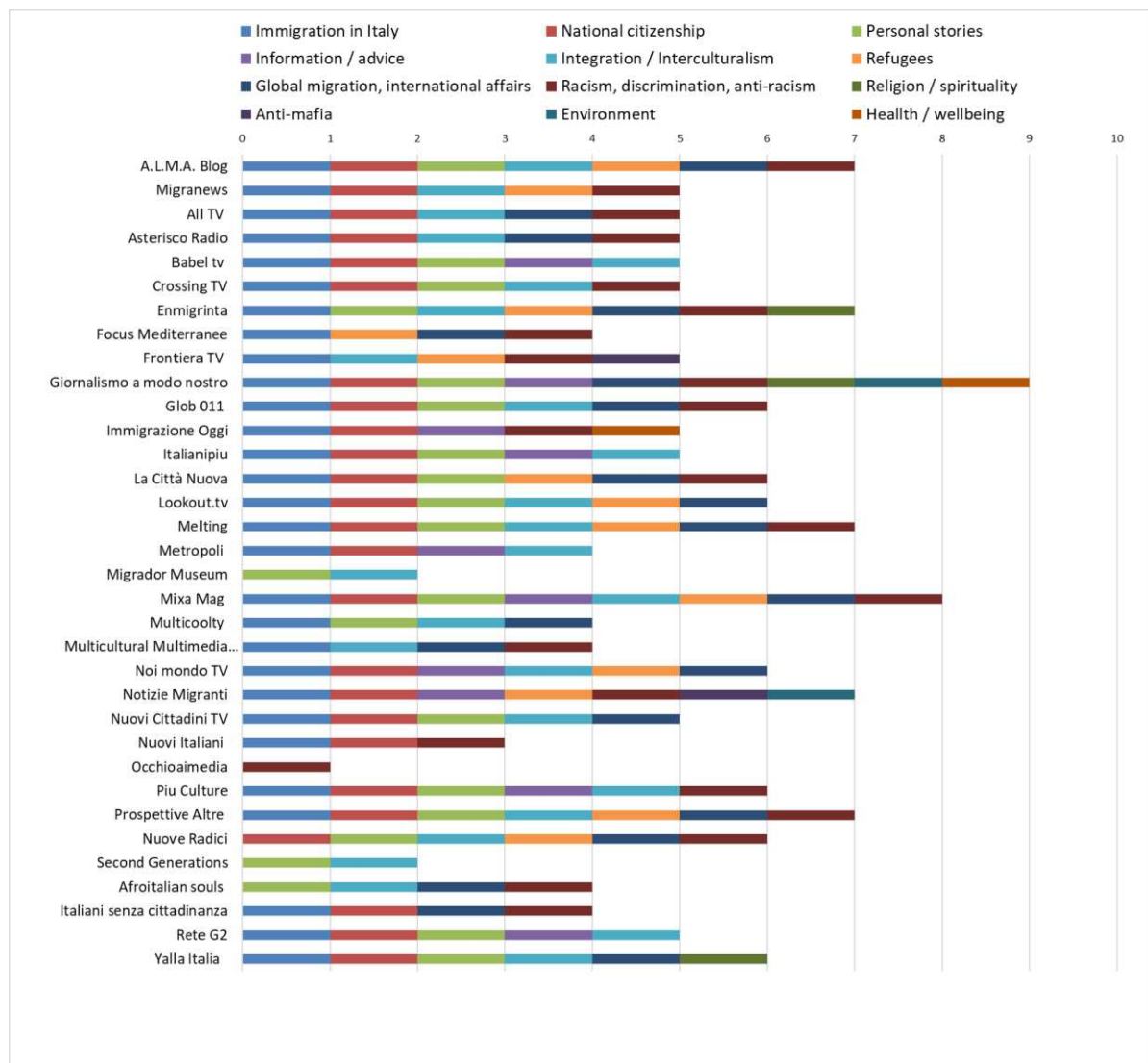
platform. Table 1 illustrates the 12 topic categories identified across the media platforms and their operational definition.

**Table 1:** Operational definition of thematic categories featuring in IDM platforms

<b>Principal topic categories</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Immigration policy</b>	National, regional, local immigration policies and impact on socio-economic issues (e.g., economy, employment, residency).
<b>Settlement services</b>	Practical information and advice on regular settlement in Italy: residence permit, citizenship application, education, employment.
<b>Citizenship law reform</b>	Parliamentary debates on citizenship law reform; advocacy initiatives; opinions and experiences on the pathway to citizenship.
<b>Stories of ‘new citizens’</b>	Personal stories of ‘new citizens’ (or ‘new Italians’); identity exploration; self-narration and personal reflections.
<b>Inter-culturalism (events, representation, identity)</b>	Events promoting inter-cultural dialogue and social integration through arts, sport, education, multi/inter-cultural festivals.
<b>Displacement, asylum seekers and refugees</b>	Asylum seekers and refugees in Italy, Europe and worldwide; reception and humanitarian aid; asylum policy; grassroots activism.
<b>Global migration, international affairs</b>	Global migration; European and international affairs; war and conflicts; peace processes and international cooperation.
<b>Racism, discrimination, anti-racism</b>	Discrimination and racism in Italy; exploitation of immigrant labour; anti-racism civic activism.
<b>Anti-mafia education</b>	Anti-mafia civic initiatives (e.g. activities by NGOs and activist groups committed to anti-mafia education)
<b>Religion and spirituality</b>	Commentaries on religions, inter-faith dialogue, or other forms of spirituality.
<b>Health and wellbeing</b>	Healthcare in Italy and services for newly settled residents, general wellbeing.
<b>Environmental issues</b>	Environmental issues (climate change, pollution), sustainable living.



**Figure 2** – Visualisation of thematic categories in each individual website



As Figure 2 shows, the local-national ‘dimension of settlement’ is the dominant lens through which stories are selected and narrated. The majority of the websites manifesta journalistic vocation featuring ‘news’ sections discussing a wide range of issues concerned with the ‘politics’ of the common civic space including the latest developments on the citizenship reform in Italy, the reporting of municipal initiatives supporting citizenship rights campaigns, local inter-cultural events and programmes through the arts and educational activities. Some of the early platforms receiving funding from public institutions have hosted features for advice provision such as help guides or ‘how-to’ sections devoted to practical information and advice about residency and citizenship application, employment and education to facilitate the process of settlement into the local-national community. Overall, a shared sense of national citizenship (Modood 2007)

and aspired formal membership inform the agenda-setting of intercultural digital media. References to formal citizenship are also embedded in recurring self-defining labels such as ‘new citizens’ or ‘new Italians’ used in the content of the platforms and in the names of the website themselves (for example, *Italiani+ /Italians plus*, *Nuovi Cittadini TV*/New Citizens’ TV, *La Citta Nuova*/The New City). Content and language promoting national identity and belonging suggest the re-articulation of a shifting politics of (self-)representation from ‘immigrants’ to ‘new citizens’ and it is strategically deployed to claim or assert a place in the nation (Antonsich 2018: 6).

Alongside the dominant national focus, 20 platforms host categories devoted to international affairs concerned with global migration, conflicts, and peace processes worldwide (see Figure 2). However, the total absence of sections specifically devoted to ‘homeland issues’ points to a significant difference between ‘intercultural’ and ‘ethnic minority’ or ‘diasporic’ media (cf. Yu 2017; Georgiou 2003). In pursuing the aim to reach out to the whole resident population of immigrant background across/ beyond ‘ethnic group’ differences, the interests and concerns of specific communities are side-lined in favour of the local-national dimension ‘of settlement’ or explored as part of personal narratives.

Most platforms include sections devoted to the personal stories of resident or citizens of immigrant background and are written either directly by the author-protagonist of the story or as third-person narratives. As largely positive stories emphasising the professional achievements of the ‘new Italians’, these narratives reflect the intent to restore agentic and self-representational power to the protagonists of the stories and construct a positive, pluralist and entrepreneurial view of cultural diversity in Italy. These stories, I argue, draw on established pro-immigration discourses of ‘model citizenship’ strategically constructed to contrast with the stigmatising and victimising frames informing mainstream media discourses about ‘immigration’ Italy.

Interestingly, only a small number of platforms (three) have sections specifically devoted to the discussion of religion, faith, and spirituality. This suggests there are challenges in establishing an inter-cultural agenda requiring negotiation between different cultural-religious affiliations within a national community with a hegemonic religious heritage that has been discursively used to set boundaries between Catholic Italians and ‘the Others’ (Grillo and Pratt 2002).

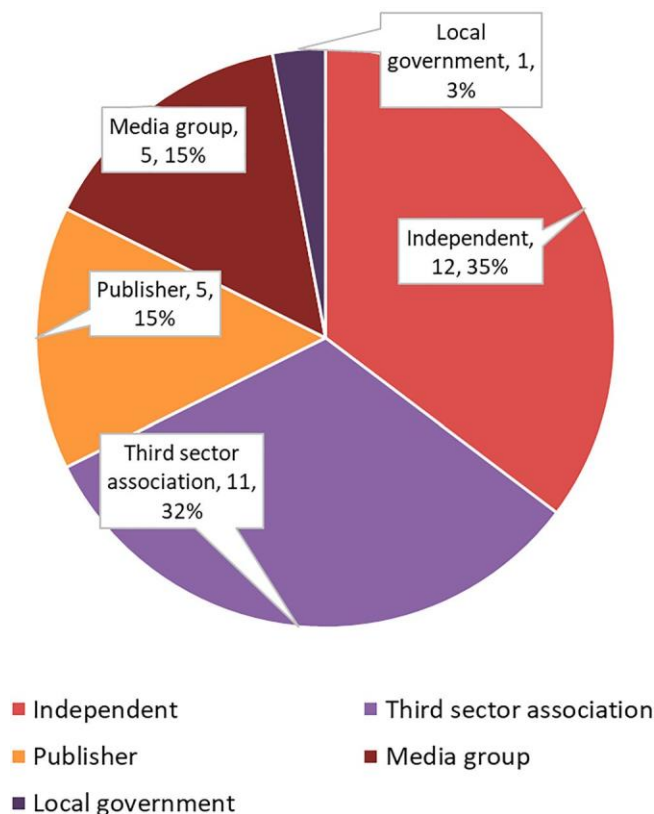
Overall, the agenda of intercultural media favours the perspectives and concerns of long-settled residents and citizens of immigrant background calling for recognition and

inclusion as ‘citizens’ within the national dominant space of negotiation. Therefore, an inter-cultural agenda in practice implies shared identification with a model of citizen-ship that emphasises aspired formal recognition as a common civic goal across difference. This suggests the practice of an inter-cultural politics of negotiation whereby ‘difference’ is carefully integrated within the dominant representational and symbolic paradigm of national identity. It implies that, subsequently, certain stories, voices and representations may be underplayed or excluded. For instance, the voices of those discussing potentially contentious or divisive issues or not subscribing to a citizenship-centric perspective on cultural identity may not find representation in these sites.

### ***A Varied and Precarious Political Economy***

Although intercultural digital media are largely not-for-profit enterprises, to secure the continuity of their activities, they entertain ties of dependencies with various institutions and organisations both public and private, corporate and third sectorial, professional and citizen-operated. As Figure 3 indicates, the mapping of ownership models reveals that 12 out of 34 (35 per cent) websites are completely independent from structures of ownership or affiliation, whilst 11 (32 per cent) were set up within the activities of a third sector organisation (NGO, cultural association or cooperative) with an agenda geared towards an inter-cultural politics of participation and representation. Ten media initiatives in our mapping (30 per cent) are subsidised by a media organisation or a publisher and one initiative was directly set up as part of a local government ‘social integration’ scheme.

Financial precariousness can limit the range of activities of the platforms and hinder the motivation of the practitioners in contributing to the project in the long-term (Bailey et al. 2007). Therefore, most platforms rely on a mix of funding types sought from different



**Figure 3.** Ties of affiliation or ownership of 34 intercultural websites.

organisations that can span beyond their main structure of affiliation. While only 7 of 34 intercultural websites (20 per cent) operate exclusively thanks to the voluntary work of the contributors, the majority resort – or have resorted during the course of their operation – to a mix of financial resources from various organisations or institutions. One in three platforms (11, 32 per cent) have secured grants allocated by a public institution as part of municipal, regional, national government or EU grant schemes for the development of ‘inter-cultural’ programmes with a participatory and professional vocation such as the provision of journalistic training for aspiring journalists of immigrant background. The same proportion of the platforms (11, 32 per cent) has received funding through the activities of a third-sector association that have contributed to establish the inter-cultural media project in the first place. Some of the platforms (8 in the mapping, that is 23 per cent) have received funding through being affiliated with publishing groups or media organisations with an interest in establishing a progressive agenda of inclusion and social change. Supplementary grants can also be provided by private organisations such as foundations (think tanks), private donations, online advertising as well as fundraising or crowdfunding initiatives.

The mapping of ownership models and funding resources confirms what other studies have found about the complex and seemingly contradictory political economy of ‘alternative

media’ – including that of ‘ethnic media’ – which often maintain various forms of dependencies with corporate and institutional power (Atton and Hamilton 2008; Coyer et al. 2007; Bailey et al. 2007; Maneri and Meli 2007). Furthermore,

financial precariousness due to the short-term nature of grants and funding schemes can limit the range of activities of the platforms and hinder the motivation of the practitioners in contributing to the project in the long-term.

### **Has the Momentum Gone? Reflecting on the Limitations and Potential of Intercultural Digital Media**

The emergence and long-term operation of alternative media platforms is often contingent on the prominence of certain issues and debates in dominant discourses and practices (Deuze 2006). As it can be observed from Figure 1, since 2015, on average only one intercultural media website per year was launched. In terms of lifespan of the sites, there is great variation across the platforms (as table in Appendix 1 and Gantt chart in Appendix 2 show) with an average lifespan of five years ranging from one year to ten years.

Different entwined factors might have contributed to the precarious landscape and decline of intercultural digital media initiatives. Firstly, intercultural projects have been popularised by public debates on citizenship rights equality as a collective intercultural civic goal across members of the national community. This means that when the public, media and political focus moved elsewhere, so did funding availability, interest and opportunities on behalf of public institutions and stakeholders. Overshadowed by the ‘more pressing’ issue of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ dominating the mainstream media and government agenda in recent years (Musarò and Parmiggiani 2017), the collective demands of residents of immigrant background have struggled to secure consistent public attention since the peak of attention in 2013.

Secondly, despite the intent and potential to engage a broader audience beyond the particularistic interests of specific communities, intercultural digital media have encountered similar challenges of financial, structural and operational precariousness to ‘ethnic minority media’ and other forms of alternative media more generally (for example, Cottle 2000; Bailey et al. 2007; Georgiou 2003). This suggests that while there is still the urgency to practice and construct intercultural media spaces for inclusive media practices and representations, the infrastructure of alternative digital media has struggled to secure the means through which to consistently pursue intercultural objectives.

However, this does not mean that the practice of interculturalism through the setting up of more inclusive and pluralistic media practices have exhausted their goals or disappeared from the Italian (alternative) media-scape. To date, November 2020, 10 projects remain active and three have been launched in the last five years (see Appendix 1). Despite the relatively small number of active initiatives compared to 2008–2013, the concerns, interests and demands of residents of immigrant background are still relevant and urgent today. Ongoing forms of civic activism campaigning for a reform of the national citizenship law have largely moved to the social media arena resorting to new forms of communication and inter-cultural aggregation. In particular, the Black Lives Matters protests reignited debates on the urgency of citizenship rights equality with the grassroots movement '*Italiani senza cittadinanza*' ('Italians without citizenship') organising mobilisations and awareness-raising initiatives promoted through social media (see Wallis 2020).

As (digital) media platforms and communication modes continue to evolve, the articulation of discourses and collective tactics of mobilisation is shaped by the infrastructures that most effectively enable visibility, access, and engagement with audiences (see Fairclough 1995). This study opens directions for future research exploring the ongoing transformation of inter-cultural tactics of mobilisation and self-representation.

## Conclusion

Italy's intercultural digital media offered an original and significant case study through which to examine the practiced possibilities of setting up alternative media spaces grounded on the principle of inter-cultural relations across people sharing a sense of membership to the national community 'of settlement'. In this, this study contributes to and expands the scope of existing scholarship in the field of alternative and 'ethnic minority media' (for example, Matsaganis et al. 2011; Husband 2005; Yu 2017) introducing an under-researched media form with the potential to challenge the minority-majority dichotomy informing 'ethnic media' studies. By assigning scholarly importance to Italy's intercultural media, this study contributes to a greater understanding of the common information and civic needs, demands, interests and goals of increasingly diverse audiences and communities in contemporary societies.

Methodologically, the study contributes to set a framework for mapping and examining novel and/or under-researched media realities. The mapping exercise provided a

comprehensive overview and critical examination of the digital landscape of intercultural media. It illustrated that it is the national context of settlement whereby calls for legal-institutional recognition and inclusion of people of immigrant background as ‘citizens’ are articulated to be prominent at the level of the agenda-setting and overall inter-cultural politics of the sites. In this, a range of social actors interested in promoting an agenda of civic and representational inclusion such as local institutions and media organisations are instrumental to the very existence and operation of the platforms (see Boucher and Maclure 2018).

The examination of the different facets of intercultural digital media informed a discussion on the potential as well as limitations of the establishment of alternative intercultural models of media practice. The analysis revealed that, despite the potential to reach out to a broad national audience and secure wider funding opportunities, intercultural media have struggled to represent a long-term media reality. The full realisation of an ‘inter-cultural’ agenda channelled into a common civic project of citizenship acquisition might be limited by the topicality of public and political debates catalysing public and institutional support for the reform. Furthermore, the practice of an inter-cultural politics of negotiation whereby ‘difference’ is carefully integrated within a model of national identification might exclude or underplay certain discourses, voices, interests, practices, and audiences who might not subscribe to a citizenship-centric model of membership or belonging.

Although specific to the context of Italy, a country with restrictive access to citizenship for the resident population of immigrant background, the critical examination of alternative media can advance our understanding of the ways people construct, communicate, and perform alter-hegemonic strategies geared towards the advancement of progressive politics, rights equality and social change. Therefore, the study can represent the basis of

an informed understanding of the interests, demands, and discursive practices articulated by residents of immigrant background in other European or international contexts.

Finally, without dismissing the importance of the ‘particularistic interests’ of ‘minority groups’, it is imperative that further research consider and investigate the existence of a wider range of interests, initiatives and demands beyond ‘ethnic minority politics’ that might also include an emphasis on national belonging and formal citizenship as an inter-cultural civic tactic for pursuing the construction of a more democratic, pluralist, and equal society.

## Notes

1. *Media & Multiculturalità* (www.mmc2000.net) was a website founded in 2000 by COSPE (Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries). It included a section hosting a database of media initiatives concerned with immigration and cultural diversity. Yet, the data-base did not distinguish platforms produced by culturally diverse teams of contributors, individual or collective initiatives. After 2013, the site was closed due to lack of funding.
2. Via Google Italy using keywords such as ‘notizie’ OR ‘news’ OR ‘storie’, AND ‘intercultura\*’ OR ‘multicultura\*’, OR ‘immigra\*’ OR ‘nuovi italiani’, OR ‘nuovi cittadini’ OR ‘secondo generazioni’; OR ‘riforma cittadinanza’). A few further initiatives were identified from cross-references on other platforms.
3. For instance, if the section *Società* (‘society’) largely hosts stories about the diverse personal experiences of residents of immigrant background in Italy, the category ‘Stories of new citizens’ was chosen.

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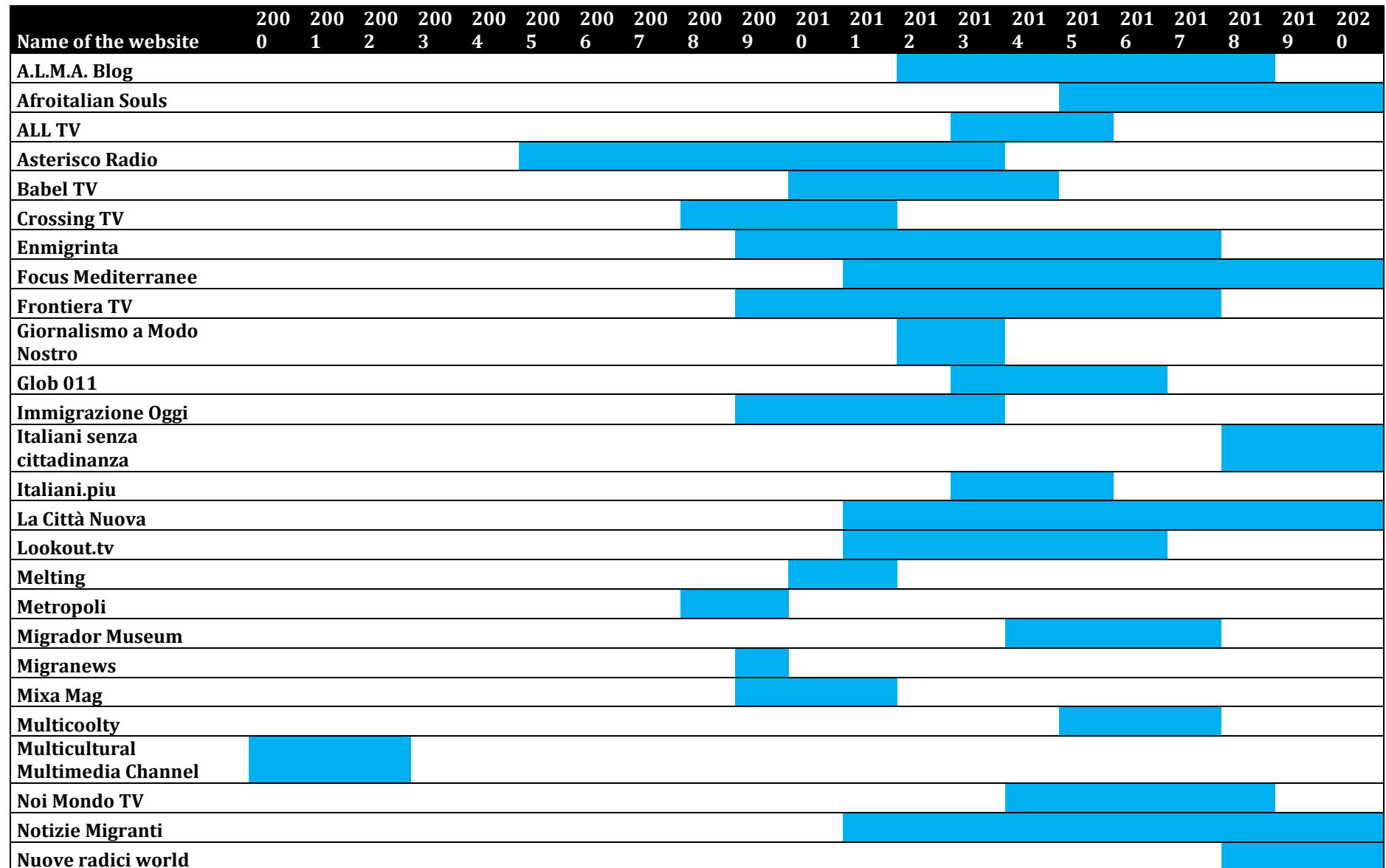
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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Intercultural platforms (name, web address, self-description, launch and termination date/status as of November 2020)

Name	Web address	Self-description	Launch	Termination/status
A.L.M.A. Blog	<a href="http://collettivoalma.wordpress.com">http://collettivoalma.wordpress.com</a>	Collective blog of immigrant writers	2012	2018
Afroitalian Souls	<a href="http://www.afroitaliansouls.it/">http://www.afroitaliansouls.it/</a>	Digital platform dedicated to the Italians of African descent	2015	Active
All TV	<a href="http://www.all-tv.tv">www.all-tv.tv</a>	Web TV for communal citizenship and intercultural dialogue	2013	2015
Asterisco Radio	<a href="http://www.asteriscoradio.com">www.asteriscoradio.com</a>	Intercultural web radio: the voice of the new citizens	2005	2013
Babel TV	<a href="http://www.babel.tv">www.babel.tv</a>	Web community for the new Italians	2010	2014
Crossing TV	<a href="http://www.crossingtv.it">www.crossingtv.it</a>	Web TV for the second generations	2008	2011
Enmigrinta	<a href="http://enmigrinta.oneminutesite.it/index.html">http://enmigrinta.oneminutesite.it/index.html</a>	Anti-discrimination news site	2009	2017
Focus Mediterranee	<a href="https://www.focusmediterranee.com/">https://www.focusmediterranee.com/</a>	Independent online magazine	2011	Active
Frontiera TV	<a href="http://www.frontieratv.it">www.frontieratv.it</a>	Web TV for learning about other viewpoints and cultures	2009	2017
Giornalismo a Modo Nostro	<a href="http://giornalismo2012.wordpress.com">http://giornalismo2012.wordpress.com</a>	Collective news-site and blog	2012	2013
Glob 011	<a href="http://www.glob011.com">www.glob011.com</a>	Laboratory of G-Local news	2013	2016
Immigrazione Oggi	<a href="http://www.immigrazioneoggi.it">www.immigrazioneoggi.it</a>	News on immigration, asylum, citizenship, and EU mobility	2009	2013
Italiani senza cittadinanza	<a href="http://www.italianisenzacittadinanza.it">www.italianisenzacittadinanza.it</a>	Community movement for the right to citizenship	2018	2020
Italiani.piu	<a href="http://www.italianipiu.it">www.italianipiu.it</a>	Web portal for the new Italians	2013	2015
La Città Nuova	<a href="http://lacittanuova.milano.corriere.it">http://lacittanuova.milano.corriere.it</a>	Blog for the citizens of the new city	2011	Active
Lookout.tv	<a href="http://www.lookout-tv.eu">www.lookout-tv.eu</a>	Web TV produced by immigrant youth	2011	2016
Melting	<a href="https://meltingweb.wordpress.com">https://meltingweb.wordpress.com</a>	Magazine of the new Italians	2010	2011
Metropoli	<a href="http://temi.repubblica.it/metropoli-online">http://temi.repubblica.it/metropoli-online</a>	Online newspaper for multiethnic Italy	2008	2009
Migrador Museum	<a href="http://www.migradormuseum.it">www.migradormuseum.it</a>	Virtual museum of immigration	2014	2017
Migranews	<a href="http://www.archivioimmigrazione.org/migranews">www.archivioimmigrazione.org/migranews</a>	Immigrant news agency	2009	2009
Mixa Mag	<a href="http://www.mixamag.it">www.mixamag.it</a>	Web magazine on multiethnic Italy	2009	2011
Multicoolty	<a href="http://multicoolty.com/">http://multicoolty.com/</a>	Story-telling web portal	2015	2017
Multicultural Multimedia Channel	<a href="http://www.mmc2000.net">www.mmc2000.net</a>	Multicultural web radio	2000	2002
Noi Mondo TV	<a href="http://www.noimondotv.eu">www.noimondotv.eu</a>	Web tv that speaks your language	2014	2018
Notizie Migranti	<a href="http://www.notiziemigranti.it">www.notiziemigranti.it</a>	Laboratory of intercultural journalism	2011	Active
Nuove radici world	<a href="https://www.nuoveradici.world/chi-siamo/">https://www.nuoveradici.world/chi-siamo/</a>	A project for a correct narration of immigration in Italy	2018	Active
Nuovi Cittadini TV	<a href="http://www.nuovicittadini.tv">www.nuovicittadini.tv</a>	Web tv for telling the success stories of new citizens	2010	2013
Nuovi Italiani	<a href="http://nuoviitaliani.blog.unita.it">http://nuoviitaliani.blog.unita.it</a>	New Italians' blog	2010	2012
Occhioimedia	<a href="http://www.occhioimedia.org">www.occhioimedia.org</a>	Anti-racism watchdog	2008	Active
Piu Culture	<a href="http://www.piuculture.it">www.piuculture.it</a>	Intercultural newspaper	2010	Active
Prospettive Altre	<a href="http://www.prospettivealtre.info">www.prospettivealtre.info</a>	News, reports, and debates on pluralist Italy	2012	2016
Rete G2	<a href="http://www.secondegenerazioni.it">www.secondegenerazioni.it</a>	The second-generations' network	2006	Active
Second Generations	<a href="https://secondgenerations.home.blog/">https://secondgenerations.home.blog/</a>	A blog for and by the second generations	2019	Active
Yalla Italia	<a href="http://www.yallaitalia.it">www.yallaitalia.it</a>	Collective blog for the second-generations	2011	2015

**Appendix 2:** Visualisation of life span of the platforms (Gantt chart) as of November 2020)



Nuovi Cittadini TV		
Nuovi Italiani		
Occhioaimedia		
Piu Culture		
Prospettive Altre		
Rete G2		
Second Generations		
Yalla Italia		