

Empowering the bottom, up.

Exploring the links between a grassroots movement, social entrepreneurship,
journalism and identity building: the Italian experiment of VITA non profit magazine

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Introduction/Methodology

As a practitioner presenting in a predominantly academic context, my plan is to present the experiment of VITA to an academic non Italian audience. I will outline its story and experience as a best practice from Italy which can be debated as a case study where a local successful model of journalism tied to a social venture could possibly be transposed to a higher level – in this case, a European one.

My initial step will therefore be a descriptive one of story telling, tracing VITA back to its beginning, deconstructing its impact through a highlighting of events, structure and origin. Integrated within this are the views of many relevant authoritative voices surrounding the Italian third sector.

My second step will be to open up the question of communicating European citizenship itself. I will explore the possible parallels between the VITA experiment in Italy and the challenge of attaining the communication of an abstract reality in a European context. I will also present an overview of a few internal spin-offs and give particular attention to one, VitaEurope.org, taking the opportunity to explore the intuitive steps from which it was born.

Challenges and obstacles VITA faced will be set into a wider context and an opportunity will be presented: I will ask whether this unique model could be used in a broader context than that of Italy. I will ask whether taking on much bigger stories than those of 1994 would be an impossible challenge, or whether this bottom-up approach is precisely what is needed.

What is VITA?

“VITA is also the name of our objective: to make the problems, the causes and the hopes of our ordinary everyday life burst onto the political and social scene.”

Riccardo Bonacina, journalist, founder and head of VITA.

VITA is the Italian weekly newspaper for the Italian third sector. On average, around 10,000 copies are sold a week with ten times as many individual hits on its website, www.vita.it, a month. Its outreach is wider still, however, as many subscribers are organisations and the weekly has, over the years, become a reference point for Italian civil society as well as a symbol of Italian civil society's actual existence and identity.

To understand what VITA is, however, one needs to go back to its origins, put it back into its historical context, understand what its emergence meant in Italy, understand its structure and take a look at its journey and the impact it is managing to have within a particular reality of Italian life, previously undefined.

Birth of VITA

VITA was born in 1994: a key year for the Italian non profit world. That year in Italy many organisations and people came together in a fight to define a previously undefined concept, often referred to as “societa’ di mezzo” (an in between or go between society) or “voci intermedi” (intermediary voices). The use of these terms is crucial to understanding the position of non profit and charitable organisations at that time which, although often effective in their own right, had no overall voice. In an effort to attain some kind of empowerment, three important entities were created that year. The first was the Forum Terzo Settore, which gave them institutional representation and a platform for dialogue with governing bodies; the second was the Banca Etica, an ethical bank which could operate and have an impact in the private sector; and the third was VITA, a newspaper which aimed to give voice to this ill-defined sector from the bottom up.

The particularity of VITA is that it was born from a grassroots initiative which mirrored the reality it wanted to illustrate. The tale of VITA is first and foremost one of grassroots journalism.

The story starts with a small group of journalists, headed by Riccardo Bonacina, who remains president of VITA to this day. A journalist, Bonacina emerged onto the television scene in the early 90s with a programme – aired on RAI3 – dedicated to and framed around social issues affecting Italy at the time. “Il Coraggio di Vivere”

(the courage to live) was the first in its genre. Through the uncovering of these every day stories of battle and struggle, which revealed a hidden world of their own, Bonacina realised that the need for this kind of news reporting and story telling was huge. Joining up with a handful of colleagues who shared his vision, the group managed to convince a dozen associations from the world they wanted to document to back their initiative to start a newspaper aimed at and for the not-for-profit sector.

The purpose of their endeavour was to fight to give voice and identity to this segment of Italian society that had remained marginal in its representation. From the very beginning, VITA's aim went beyond just reporting on non profit activities. Its mission was to give importance through the simple act of independent journalism to an aspect of everyday life where people were fighting different battles on the ground.

VITA's Content

“Every day, our work must tap into the place where our editorial adventure begins, that is into the world of civil society, our inspiration. [...] We must always remember to search among the forgotten corners of all the big news organisations and national and international press agencies. Their scraps are our best pieces of information.”

Extract from the VITA ethical guidelines.

“Within the context of confusion of values in which we live, the main obstacle of journalism in reference to civil society can be found within journalism itself and in its incapacity to represent facts with completeness and objectivity. VITA today is the only entity capable of representing the fragmentation of civil society at its best – offering help and solutions to urgent social problems for which public welfare no longer has the strength or the competency to resolve.”

Enzo Manes, Italian entrepreneur and philanthropist, founder of Dynamo foundation

The aim of VITA as a content company, ever since its launch, has been to document those stories and events that are ignored by or unknown to the mainstream press. This means that whereas non-profit organisations, social enterprises and cooperatives are a source of inspiration and information, it is the stories behind them, the causes and the

concrete meanings of these struggles that are investigated. Reporting stories that are often positive examples and best practices, asking the opinions of people working on the ground, who are the best individuals to turn to grasp a given situation, means that VITA is constantly seeking to add value to everyday experiences.

VITA: A Unique Model in Social Venture

“Our newspaper has been set up as a place of freedom where everyone has the right to express themselves and to be represented [...] VITA has been built as a platform for everyone who does not already have a voice, and thus VITA has become a showcase for all the different kinds of causes that have a message to convey and need a place for comparison and debate.”

Extract from the VITA ethical guidelines.

VITA’s structure is an intrinsic part of what it is and what it stands for.

Starting with twelve in 1994, today, 64 non profit power houses sit on its editorial board and meet with the members of the editorial team four times a year, giving both parties an opportunity to exchange information from the ground and enabling the process of news making to be a participatory one.

Moreover, 50.2% of VITA’s shareholders are from the non profit sector, a symbolic move which leaves the newspaper’s origins engrained deep in its DNA. Stipulated within VITA’s charter is the fact that shareholders, both individuals¹ and companies, do not receive the fruits of any profit.

This choice is part of a larger one in structure and social mission.

¹ The estate of Carlo Caracciolo (deceased in 2008), who was the founder and editor of La Repubblica – the centre-left leaning Italian daily with the second largest circulation in Italy - owns 5% of the shares.

Because of the Italian law on this matter², VITA is not officially a social enterprise. Nevertheless, following the characteristics of what is widely seen as a social entrepreneurial venture³, one can affirm that VITA belongs to the world of social enterprise despite its lack of recognition within the Italian legal framework. As such, let us have another look at VITA, paying particular attention to the entrepreneurial, innovative and social change model.

- VITA, from the start, has positioned itself as a market subject with the objective of gaining financial independence. The development of VITA has happened with no input from local authorities or from the state.
- VITA applies the principle of non distribution of profits, whilst trying to involve, as much as possible within the decision making process, the people being referred to – i.e. the third sector. The approach of *stakeholder engagement*, especially when it comes to dealing with non profit organisations, is fundamental to the approach of the activities and the setting-out of group strategies.
- VITA fosters internal social venture, creating a fertile environment for innovation. Its backbone is the combination of knowledge, experience and innovation.

VITA: A Success Story?

“VITA has managed to introduce to a wider culture the theme of social engagement as something that is part of our daily life and that can be used as a topic for discussion and debate.”

² The March 24 2006 law n155 in Italy excludes news and services exchanged within the editorial sector from being included amongst goods and services deemed socially useful.

³ Following the guidelines offered in the first chapter of ‘Social Entrepreneurship, imprese innovative per il cambiamento sociale’ Perrini F., Milan, 2007

Claudia Fiaschi, President of the CGM cooperative group, Italy

“The main challenge is to be able to seize the complexity of this world and to manage to add value to all the characteristics that define it. VITA has succeeded here, becoming a reference point, especially because of its ability to represent the third sector in all its various forms and to interpret its richness.”

Lorenzo Malagola, Ministero del Lavoro

a) What makes a venture a success story?

In the case of VITA, you could say that its success is found in its very survival and the continued support of its public. You could also say that it is the constant state of accomplishing what it set out to do in the first place.

By and large over the years, VITA has managed to become a reference for Italian civil society. It is credited, not only with the definition of an identity which was previously abstract, but also as having become one of the pillars of the third sector. This has meant that VITA has become not only its voice but also a platform from which it can be heard.

Since its establishment, it has headed many campaigns to sensitise citizens as well as governmental bodies with varying degrees of success. The most famous campaign is perhaps the one called ‘piu’ dai meno versi’ (the more you give the less you pay), which was effectively transformed into a law in 2005. As a nod to its origin, the name of the law was given the same as that of the campaign. A widely recognised ongoing effort has also been that of the “cinque per mille” (five for one thousand).

b) Third sector vs civil society

“The third sector is one of the most powerful expressions of civil society itself.”

Lorenzo Malagola, Ministero del Lavoro

One of the subjects being debated within this sector is that surrounding the choice of words and expressions. Although ‘the non profit sector’, ‘the third sector’ and ‘civil society’ can officially be used interchangeably – indeed this has more or less been the case throughout this paper – their use do carry connotations. Lately, ‘civil society’ has been put forward by many as the phrase of choice as it is considered all inclusive, of broader reach and a more positive term. The first two terms, being defined by what they are not, are considered limited, or certainly limiting. Throughout the interviews I conducted for the writing of this paper, it became apparent that some felt that VITA was in danger of reporting on the institutional third sector, at the price of not reaching out enough to all the individual citizens within civil society. This is by no means a common view, and is firmly counteracted by VITA’s mission and continuous effort to give voice to those groups and individuals who are not being listened to.

VITA Fosters Innovation from Within: The Spin-Offs

“I think that empowering civil society can happen by insisting on all the positive, beautiful and important things that our sector manages to do day after day. Find a way to involve people. Come to a consensus that we are all involved, all supportive of this.”

Rossano Bartoli segretario generale Lega del Filo d’Oro

Many projects have sprung from VITA, each an effort to answer a particular social, ideological or ethical need stemming from a certain aspect of civil society. The following are the three main examples which could be considered of international relevance.

Yalla Italia

Yalla is a monthly publication and insert which appears in VITA once a month. The idea behind it is to give voice to second generation Italians. It is almost entirely written by them, many of whom are Muslims struggling in Italy to find a platform to express themselves and address the everyday problems they face, especially within the context of the multiple identities they are trying to assimilate.

Afronline.org

Afronline.org is an English language news portal about Africa. Its aim is to encourage the development of cultural relations between Africa and Europe, particularly Italy. Its aim is to diffuse, through the offer of quality news, a better knowledge of social conditions on the African continent. It does this through a network of media partners in Africa, favouring the reporting of civil society on the ground with news that goes beyond the usual diffusion of emergency aid, development, disaster relief and epidemics.

VitaEurope.org

VitaEurope.org is the online news portal for European civil society. Its mission is to give voice to civil society around Europe by highlighting its stories, protagonists and best practices. The only one of its kind, VitaEurope.org's initial approach is journalistic, although it is strongly influenced by its European identity and mission to document an ignored reality.

Vita in Europe, or VitaEurope.org

“The bravest kind of journalism today is that which is the most courageous in telling the stories of well executed operations by good people who are acting in the interest of the common good.”

Enzo Manes, Italian entrepreneur and philanthropist, founder of Dynamo foundation

VitaEurope.org was born in 2006 from the idea of a few of VITA's staff members that what VITA had done in Italy in terms of identity building, empowerment and affirmation of active citizenship, was something that also needed to be done in Europe.

Its initial objective was to give voice to the people working on the ground around Europe, to understand and discover their passions, battles and daily challenges.

Although it is first and foremost a journalistic venture, VitaEurope.org has sought to encourage an active and deep understanding of European civil society with the development of a Non Profit Atlas on top of the in-depth weekly reporting, blogs, a YouTube channel and a civil society agenda.

As it stands, VitaEurope.org is still a small editorial product contained within the walls of VITA. Its potential is huge. The following is its vision, which dictates the editorial line. The fundamental aspect is that normal people all around Europe are the agents of change and that it is Europeans, not Europe, who are to be thrust forward as the new source for idealism.

The Vision:

The urgency to act

We believe that the culture and identity that stem from civil society in Europe is perhaps the continent's most precious resource. Yet, up until now, it has largely gone untapped.

The diversity within civil society reflects that of the continent. One with its battles for the environment, equality, social progress, justice and the other with its different languages, cultures, ethnicities and history.

History has brought us to a meeting, where the goals and values of one directly meet those of the other and where politicians are at last waking up to the possibilities and importance of civil society, thrusting those once regarded as marginal activists into the mainstream.

Civil society rocks

By uniting and confronting the plethora of inspiring stories that need to be told, in addition to showing a wider picture of the whole, we are not only creating the fabric of an incredibly stimulating European civil society, but also recapturing the European idealist dream that seems to have disappeared from popular discourse of late.

Our aim is for Vita Europe to become a meeting point for this multicoloured

European civil society and to act as a testament to its own force as well as to that of the continent in which it is.

Vita Europe - we give voice to European civil society.

Conclusion

What I have put forward in this paper is the potential that the Italian experiment of VITA can give to an identity which is ill-defined. The key to its success has been a very particular type of bottom-up social venture which uses journalism as a tool to bring about a public awareness, to build an identity, and to act as an incentive as well as an example for active citizenship.

The question that should be asked is whether this Italian model could be applied on a European level as a means of empowering and forming the idea of citizenship which remains as yet almost inexistent. Is this model perhaps only armed to deal with the European third sector as opposed to European civil society? Through the brief overview of VitaEurope.org, a suggestion was given as to the potential power of such a project. However, VitaEurope.org has, for the moment, remained a small spin-off, which means that its impact has not yet been widely felt.

If the model is deemed suitable for European civil society, the question of interpretation and practical meaning of civil society and social and active citizenship arise too. Are all citizens part of civil society or do they need to be activists to be included?

And finally, how does grassroots translate politically? Does the construction and identification of active citizenship on the ground constitute the basis for political involvement and impact?

