



The delights of disconnection . . . residents of the Umbrian city of Orvieto prefer a slower, gentler kind of interface Alamy

# Social networking Italian style

Unlike the rest of Europe, 'il bel paese' remains happily unwired, says *Michael Fitzpatrick*

**W**here in the world does the average citizen spend just two hours a week online? An isolated backwater, perhaps? Well, close. This bastion of digital indifference is Italy, a wealthy and developed nation and homeland to the inventors of the telephone and radio.

Some think this technophobia is a good thing, preserving the Italy of laid-back "click with friends and family, not a mouse" yore. Tourists for one find the low-tech lifestyle enchanting. Others feel it has put the country at a huge disadvantage, on the wrong side of the digital divide, and Italy will, in economic terms at least, continue to languish as the ageing, increasingly impoverished sick man of Europe.

And if moribund economies are measured by a lack of IT skills and e-commerce, then Italy is very sick indeed. The median amount of time Italian internet users spend online decreased between 2007 and 2008, according to tech trend specialist Jupiter Research. Interestingly, what its survey suggests is that while there is more internet connectivity than ever in Italy, residents are spurning the net.

Could it be that Italians have better things to do? Face-to-face networking, old-fashioned chats and time to share news and gossip over a game of cards in the shade of a village piazza, perhaps – the same things that draw thousands weary of net-driven modern life to Italy every year?

Information technology definitely presents a dilemma for many Italians, says Paolo Di Croce, the secretary of Slow Food International, who advocates

a little less rush in all our busy lives. He believes technology has its place but should not overshadow, for example, the emphasis placed on real-time relationships or physical communities.

"The personal element in Italian life is something that will not be excoriated. So we have to find the right balance. Just as with the Slow Food movement and its globalisation, the web and email have become our major tools. Without internet we are not possible, but we must use them wisely," he says. "If you can't survive without sending 50 emails a day, without becoming a slave to the BlackBerry – this goes against our philosophy."

That Italy produced the Slow Food movement in the first place indicates that there was always going to be some resistance to demands for instant results, efficiency, 24/7 and convenience. Seeing how the use of IT has often increased our workload and complicated daily life, some are casting envious eyes over Italy's less digitised, less demanding work practices. Such practices may, in the long run, even be good for business.

Italy claims, for instance, that its banks are now in better shape because their less tech-savvy institutions do things the old way. "America and the UK used to say the Italian banks were backwards, but it turns out we now have the soundest banks in Europe," said Italy's finance minister, Giulio Tremonti, following the global financial crisis.

The country may suffer in other ways – creaking

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bureaucracy, protectionism, inefficiency and low growth – but it shows less of the malaise that comes with overexposure to modern digital lifestyles and the unregulated internet use that the rest of the west is suffering from.

Italy's half-hearted adoption of the internet and the older generation's failure to grasp the importance of IT to a future economy has frustrated many youngsters so much that they simply give up and go abroad, says Bernhard Warner, who runs a tech consultancy in Rome. "But," adds the American expatriate, who swears by his high-speed web connection, "there are certainly things to be learned from the Italian way of doing things. I can't see myself living anywhere else. Here, you can walk beyond your desk and realise there is more to life than tech things. Being surrounded by such art and history keeps your perspective fresh. I'm pleased by the Italian sensibility."

Even in the cities, he points out, where there may be broadband, the cost makes it a luxury for most Italians, who have lower disposable incomes than many other parts of Europe. "The preferred way to contact is the mobile for most. So far the net has been a tool for better-paid young professionals," says Warner.

It's a far cry from internet being as available as "air and water", which is how the EU recently referred to its policy on broadband adoption.

Italy's new government under Silvio Berlusconi is probably not helping. The last election was about halting globalisation, protecting an inward-looking Italy, largely arguing against free trade and the opening of international markets – the internet being a large part of that.

Many who disagree with those policies have abandoned the country, leaving *il bel paese* – the beautiful country – to decide if it really does prefer life in the past – unhurried, and happily unwired.