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MEMORIES IN TIME OF CRISIS

Mapping Diversity

The Memory Street Names Celebrate

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Social Design, Gender Gap, Toponymy, Interaction Design, Data Storytelling.

Abstract

In his book *Digital Methods*, Richard Rogers enshrines the end of the “virtual” by pointing out how the online and physical worlds are intrinsically linked (2015). Indeed, 4.5 billion people tap into and pour their data into the Web daily, giving rise to a recursive system in which online and offline mutually reverberate and influence each other; the boundary between the two worlds has never been so blurred. After more than 30 years, the Web may also be likened to an extensive database, a memory that keeps track of the users’ actions and behaviour, a hyperobject to which we contribute and whose effects we experience (Morton, 2013). In this light, the Web evolved from a communication tool to a potential social research tool (Rogers, 2015).

In this context, the present paper introduces and analyses the case study *Mapping Diversity* (n.d.), a project that questions the gender gap in the toponymy of Italian cities. Toponymic issues are intrinsically linked to the values and memory celebrated by dedicating a street to a specific person. *Mapping Diversity* questions the memory that goes into celebrating toponymy, drawing on the memory made available by the Web in open data. It is, in turn, a digital commons that also contributes to the debate on the role of design in the social and digital spheres. It can support greater civic awareness and a better-informed discussion on complex and multifaceted issues toward a more inclusive and diverse society.

1. The Social Web

“The Internet is the single biggest creator of ignorance mankind has ever created, as well as the single biggest eliminator of that ignorance” (Johnson, 2012, p. 93). However obvious and seemingly simple, Clay Johnson’s statement reflects the fallout and responsibility that digital actions have, not only online. Indeed, the technology is not neutral, much less so when it is democratised (Strate, 2012).

An example might come from the advent of Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2009), which enabled any citizen with an Internet connection to produce online content: a process accelerated by the appearance of blogs, especially social networks. An epochal turning point that significantly impacts society and its defining phenomena is still in progress. For example, the movement that gave birth to the *Arab Spring* was strongly supported by social networks (Howard et al., 2011; Khondker, 2011).

Activists adopted Twitter, in particular, to coordinate and take collective actions and denounce abuses and crimes committed by the government. Analogously, the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal reveals how Facebook has been employed to manipulate American voters’ perceptions and subsequent electoral behaviours (Risso, 2018). The examples represent the two sides of the same coin. While they highlight how the fallout from the revolution introduced by Web 2.0 is not limited only to the digital world, they also point to the importance of widespread user awareness and civic consciousness.

Consciously mastering the technologies, one interacts with daily helps prevent persuasive or manipulative actions, which may have dangerous social consequences.

In light of this, we can say that the Internet is no longer a digital reverberation of one part of society; it is society itself if we consider that about 4.5 billion users interact online daily. Moreover, it is a constantly growing number, with much of the world's adult population producing and consuming data that impacts the world, sometimes even those who are not online. From this perspective, the Web evolved from a communication tool to a potential social research tool (Rogers, 2015) that might be assimilated into an extensive database, a memory that keeps track of the users' actions and behaviour, a *hyper-object* to which we contribute and whose effects we experience (Morton, 2013).

Not surprisingly, Sir Berners-Lee, founder of the Internet, returns to talk about his invention thirty years later: "We have to make sure that the web is serving humanity. Not just by keeping it free and open but making sure that the things people build in this permissionless space are helping democracy" (Berners-Lee, 2019). A warning, shared and growing, addressed to all who design on the Web, which we find in the words of Clay Johnson, as well as in those of so many other designers who call for greater responsibility and consciousness on the part of those who design online content (Montero, 2019; Lupton et al., 2021; Pater, 2016, 2021; D'ignazio & Klein, 2020; Cairo, 2019).

The need to realign the Web back to its original idea (Berners-Lee, 1992) by populating it with content to support collective growth, whether social, intellectual, or cultural, has never been more insistent. A call to which the project presented below goes to answer.

2. Digital Commons

If, as emerges from the previous section, we can consider the Web as part of society and no longer merely a repercussion of it, it follows that social issues, controversies and phenomena are also part of it. Just think, for example, of the phenomenon of *Digital Commons* (Dulong de Rosnay, & Stalder, 2020), derived from traditional *commons*: common goods available to a community that takes care of their maintenance (De Angelis, 2017). The digital version refers to those digital data or services that are available to a broad, no longer localized audience, which similarly cares for them, actively participating in their maintenance, creating new forms of reuse, or literacy and engagement of a broader audience (Dulong de Rosnay & Stalder, 2020). Wikipedia, the various forms of open source or open data, constitute contemporary examples of digital commons. Their role and policy have never been more central than in the last two years.

Indeed, the phenomenon of the digital commons represents one of the positive effects that Web 2.0 has introduced.

Thanks to shared and co-maintained nature, new forms of knowledge and awareness are originating, moving one more step toward the Web's original dream. Let us consider, for example, *Open Street Map* (OSM), an open and collaborative project to create geographic maps. Public and open data served as the starting point for projects such as *Sidewalks Width NYC*,¹ for instance, during the pandemic. The project is an online map of the width of New York City sidewalks to help citizens maintain proper physical spacing during their

1 <https://www.sidewalkwidths.nyc/>.

urban journeys. It has been published in an open-source format, allowing other forms of adoption and reuse, as in the case of the Italian version of *Sidewalk Widths Italy*² published by Napolitano, civic hacker, and coordinator of the *Digital Commons Lab* at the *Bruno Kessler Foundation* in Trento.

The case highlights the importance of open data and forms of open-source software within the Web 2.0 paradigm, digital commons that constitute the enzymes supporting active citizenship and a more democratic Web. At the same time, there also emerges the need to design forms of translation to enable a broader and often unknowledgeable audience to grasp the potential of the growing amount of open data at their disposal.

3. Designing Digital Commons

Designing digital commons means trying to extract meaningful sense out of the enormous amount of data produced daily by the behaviours of 4.5 billion online users. It also means contributing to ongoing debates and supporting forms of active citizenship by offering knowledge-based access points or tools to approach complex and multifaceted issues or take collective actions (Latour & Weibel, 2005). It is not only a matter of making geographic, quantitative, and qualitative data available to anyone for any use but, more importantly, of designing forms of translation that allow a broader and not specifically knowledgeable audience to take advantage of the data available to them.

2 <http://straba.us/sidewalkwidths/#8/41.458/12.706>.

Despite the increasing amount of open data available, there is also evidence that a large part of the European population has serious difficulties understanding statistics and graphic-visual information (Kankaraš et al., 2016; The Council of the European Union, 2020). Thus, a space opens where design can become an interpreter, transforming open data into digital commons, accessible forms of knowledge and memory. Hence, a context in which the case study presented below comes to life.

4. Toponymy as an Indicator of Social Inclusion

Among the various forms of memory that open data makes available, the case study presented in this contribution focuses on the street names of Italy's regional capitals made available by OSM.

Street names are not neutral: they do not merely describe the characters to whom the streets are dedicated but also the connected memory and values that a specific municipality goes to celebrate. From the 2021 Black Lives Matter protests (Atuire, 2020) to the South Tyrolean streets renaming operated by the fascist regime (Fait & Fattor, 2010; Lucarno, 2005), recent history is littered with episodes in which toponymy has been the subject of identity and ethnic tensions and clashes (Cohen & Kliot, 1992; Guyot & Seethal, 2007; Azaryahu & Kook, 2002; Mitchell & Alderman, 2014). In fact, values and memory infused in toponymy impact its citizens' perceptions and feelings of inclusion.

Among the various disputes related to toponymy, the ones connected to the gender gap are probably the most recent and cross-cutting among the various instances that animate the debate. Compared to colonial or historical legacies tied to

specific contexts or places, the gender gap resonates in all the cities where street names are dedicated to people. However, despite its broad diffusion, the projects tackling gender in toponymy are a few due to the recent sensitivities and care that impacted the debate only recently.

In Italy, for instance, only *Toponomastica Femminile*³ existed. Born on Facebook in January 2012, it was founded as an association in 2014 to restore voice and visibility to women who have contributed, in all fields, to improving society. By design, it presents itself as a website that makes available to readers lists of female characters to whom Italian streets are dedicated. However, no form of geolocation or interaction with visitors is provided.

Looking at the European landscape, we find *EqualStreetNames*⁴ which covers several streets in 47 cities, while *Las Calles de las Mujeres* (n.d.) by Geochicas focuses on Spain and Latin America. Finally, *Stretonomics* (n.d.) is the result of academic research by the *Bell Labs Social Dynamics*. The latter offers a comparative analysis of the cities of Paris, Vienna, London, and New York, visualizing occupation, gender, country of origin, and the historical period in which the protagonists to whom the streets are named lived (Fig. 1). Although the projects above make the gender gap in the toponymy immediately visible to an expert, they present a lack of contextual information describing the context or enabling readers to understand values and issues raised by what they are approaching.

3 <http://www.toponomasticafemminile.com>.

4 <https://equalstreetnames.org/>.

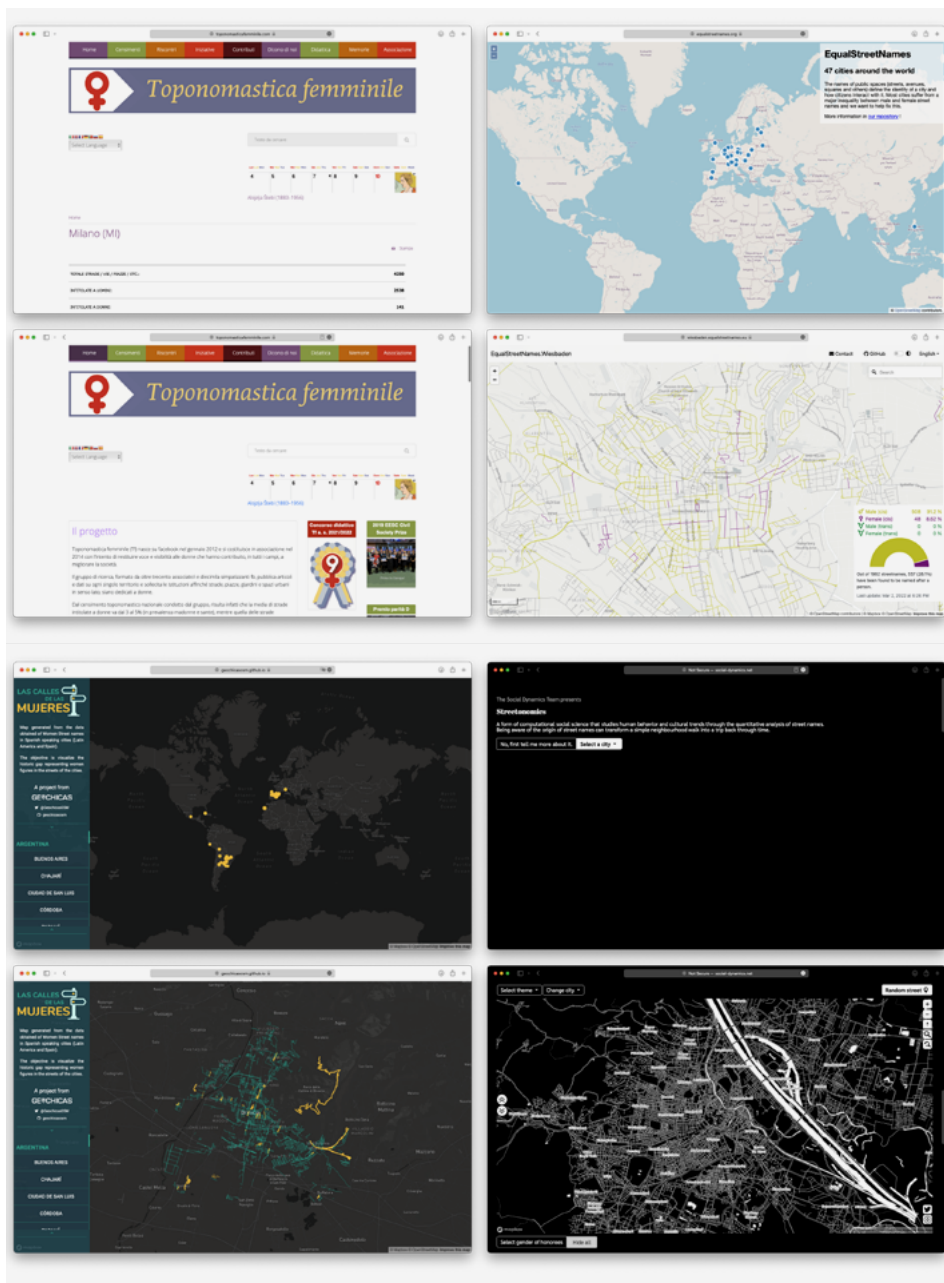


Figure 1. Toponomastica femminile, EqualStreetNames, Las Calles de las Mujeres, Streetonomics.

The impression is that most projects stop at mere data visualization, as opposed to the possibility of enhancing competencies and the consequent level of debate among a broader audience, also offering entry points and forms of visual and verbal translation about the gender gap within our cities.

5. Mapping Diversity

On the reflections arising from the analysis of the case studies above, *Mapping Diversity* a project of OBC Transeuropa (Caucaso, n.d.) and Sheldon.studio,⁵ in which the author of this paper also took part, came to life. The project was born with the specific goal of broadening the debate on the gender gap to all those concerned citizens in Italy. At the same time, it is an actual digital common to allow mayors, councillors, and citizens to look at their toponymy through a gender perspective, ultimately informing the processes of creating or renaming new streets.

For these reasons, the project consists of two sections: the first describes the phenomenon by visualizing and analysing data on the gender gap in toponymy in the 21 main regional capitals; the second focuses on the individual capitals, supporting visitors in understanding the infographic map related to the selected city.

6. The Methodology

The methodology adopted for the data collection focuses on the geographic location of streets and their type (course, ave-

⁵ <https://sheldon.studio>.

nue, etc.) provided by OSM, crossed with the data to which it is named (person, place, event, etc.) and the personal name if it is a person, provided by *WikiData*,⁶ the platform that shares all the information on *Wikipedia*.

This methodology presents some limitations due to the crowdsourced nature of *OSM* and *Wikidata*. For example, it may happen that not all streets have been reported on *OSM* or that the historical figure to whom the street is dedicated does not find correspondence in *Wikidata* because nobody has taken care of its online entry. For these reasons, the choice of cities analysed in the project limits to regional capitals precisely due to their greater data accuracy.

The methodology also includes the possibility of correcting errors or integrating new information from the project visitors. They can actively contribute to improving and maintaining the database. It happened, for instance, in the city of Bolzano, the Italian regional capital with the highest percentage of streets named after female figures (13.5%). Streets named after women turned out to be 23 and not 26, as revealed by the contributions of Bolzano citizens who contacted the working group to report discrepancies. As the example shows, in some specific cases, the support of the visitors was crucial in correcting some inaccuracies caused by the limitations of the methodology – the possibility of maintaining and taking care of the information frame of the project as a true digital common.

6 https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Wikidata:Main_Page.

7. Narrative Strategy

Due to the complexity of the topics and the willingness to engage visitors in the debate, the project unfolds in two sections. The former, shaped as a long-form article, introduces the current discussion on the gender gap in the toponymy (Fig. 2). Then, it provides an overview across all the 21 Italian cities, together with some intersectional insights, allowing readers to discover who is the most diffused name in the Italian cities' streets, as well as their occupations. Finally, the page leads to the 21 city maps that open a new page.



Figure 2. Sheldon.studio and OBCT, Mappingdiversity.eu, the homepage, 2021.

The latter, shaped as a *data-scrollytelling* page (Seyser & Zeiller, 2018), presents the single cities' gender gap maps. The data are not just visualized: each city map narration relies on the so-called *Reverse Martini glass* story model. It is a narrative structure that opens with an initial author-driven part, which explains the data across the map and then allows exploring the data autonomously (Segel & Heer, 2010). The author-driven part accompanies visitors by enabling their understanding through a narrative guided by scrolling. While the city map sticks in the centre of the screen, the scrolling activity triggers the appearance of a series of visual and textual information that progressively support readers to understand the visualised data (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Sheldon.studio and OBCT, Mappingdiversity.eu, some scrollytelling screenshots from the Bolzano city map, 2021.

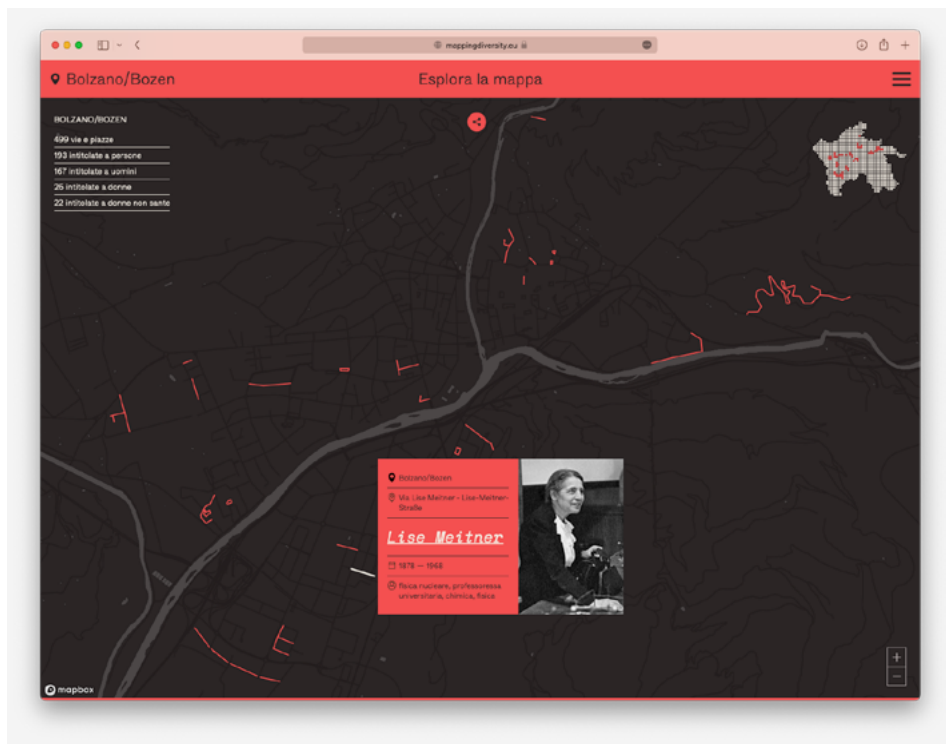


Figure 4. Sheldon.studio and OBCT, Mappingdiversity.eu, some scrollytelling screenshots from the Bolzano city map, 2021.

Indeed, each city's data-storytelling follows the same data storytelling pattern:

- “In <city name> there are <data> streets and squares”;
- “<data> of them are dedicated to people”;
- “<data> streets, so the <percentage> are dedicated to men”;
- “While only <data> are dedicated to women”;
- “Which shrink to <data> if we exclude religious people”;
- “Who were those women? Explore the map and share it!”

As previously mentioned, once the storytelling part ends, readers can explore the map hovering over the streets dedicated to women to discover who they were, how they looked, when they lived and their occupations. *Mapping Diversity* combines quantitative and qualitative data to return the human side behind the numbers toward a broader depiction of the complexity embedded in the issue (Fig. 4).

After the experience, visitors could share the toponymy gender gap of the city they are exploring on their social networks. Twenty-one informative thumbnails were generated showing names, maps, and data available to anyone, to pro-

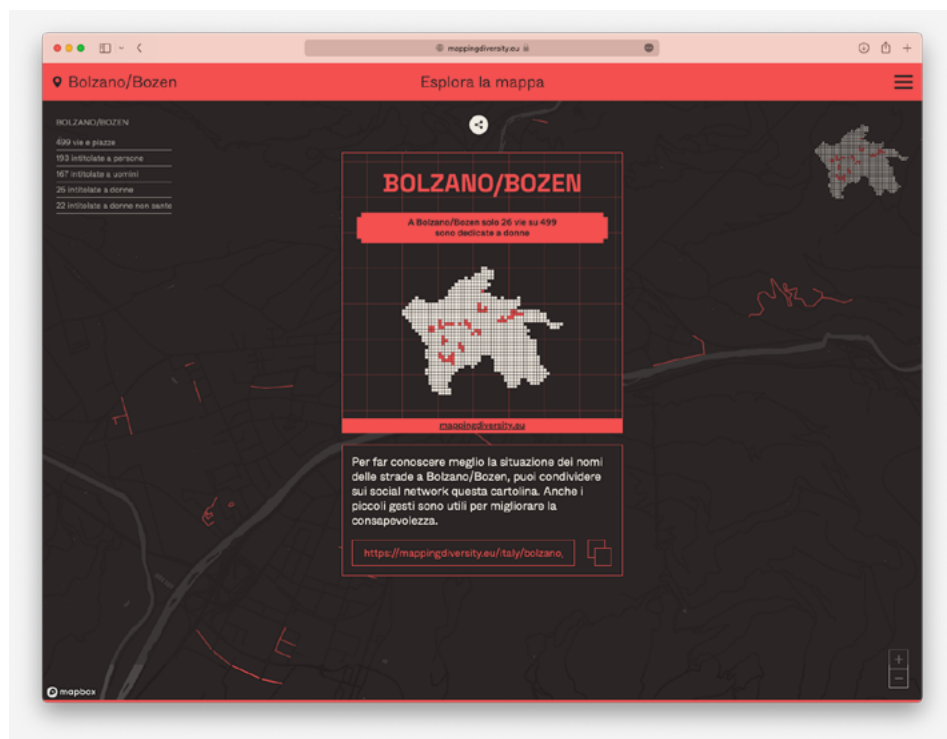


Figure 5. Sheldon.studio and OBCT, Mappingdiversity.eu, some scrollytelling screenshots from the Bolzano city map, 2021.

mote greater awareness of the gender gap and more inclusive development of cities through toponymy (Fig. 5).

8. Conclusion and Future Steps

Published in July 2021, the project has received significant media coverage. Three articles in national media (Infodata, 2021; *Quante sono le strade intitolate a donne in Italia*, 2021; Nicolosi, 2021) were published online, plus a printed front-page article on August 26, 2021, published in the edition of *La Repubblica*. The project also caught the interest of small, concerned communities, such as the feminist Instagram page *Le Flair* (2021) or the online design show *Caffe Design* (Caffè Design, 2021). At the same time, *Mapping Diversity* has been presented at several conferences and talks, including the closing plenary speech at the *EU open data days 2021* (EU Open Data Days - Publications Office of the EU, 2021) and rewarded with the *Glocal Data Journalism prize* (Saporiti, 2022). Thanks to the national mainstream media coverage, the project served accurate data to support local newspapers and online activist groups to promote their activity and raise greater awareness. Indeed, it was visited by about 26000 people from 100 different countries, despite the project's Italian language and national focus. Moreover, among the several spontaneous publications, it is interesting to notice that the project inspired new local projects such as *Barcelona no es un nombre de mujer* (Galeano, 2022).

Currently, the workgroup is scaling up *Mapping Diversity* to the European version, extending the same methodology to more than 70 cities and municipalities.

The process will completely redesign the website to offer more direct access to the cities maps. Furthermore, it implies that the current Italian long form will be moved to a country-related section. At the same time, the homepage will present a general introduction to the topic and an overview of the data on the European gender gap in toponymy, followed by links to the country-related maps. Design issues apart, the workgroup collaborates with European newsrooms to organize a networked media coverage to publish the new European-wide version. The strategy relies on cross-linking European cities maps to the local articles to foster a more granular and localized debate and to provide European citizens, journalists and newsrooms with an accurate digital common to support a greater awareness of more inclusive European cities.

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His design research projects, presented in many academic conferences and events such as TEDx and Visualized.io received the Data Journalism Award 2015, the European Design Award 2016 and 2017.

Moretti has also been a jury member at the World Press Photo 2017-18 (Immersive journalism category) and one of the 100 ambassadors of Italian design in the world 2018, named by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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She is co-founder of Studio Taller, a graphic and communication design studio based in Rimini. Since 2018 she has been collaborating as a volunteer and professional consultant for "Il Palloncino Rosso", a social promotion association with which she works on projects for social innovation and cultural promotion, creating exhibitions of regional interest, publications and participatory projects related to the conscious reuse of abandoned buildings.

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After graduating from Sapienza University of Rome with a thesis on the clandestine presses of the Italian Resistance, and after a study period at ENSAD in Paris, he graduated from ISIA in Urbino with a thesis on the historiography of graphic design. He is in the final year of his PhD in Design at Sapienza University of Rome: his research consists of a survey on primary sources for the study of the history of wooden typefaces in Italy.

He teaches Graphic design and History of printing and publishing at Rufa. He works as a graphic designer with archives and associations and is the co-founder of Slab, a letterpress studio in Rome. Slab is a workshop where teaching and research are carried out to safeguard Italian typographic culture, and where workshops, exhibitions and conferences are held. Andrea Vendetti has been an AIAP national councillor since 2022.

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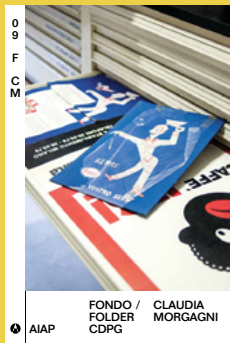
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