Participatory Design for Public Services. Innovation in Public Administration

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Published online: 06 Sep 2017.

Participatory Design for Public Services.
Innovation in Public Administration

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Abstract: The recent development of digital services for citizens has been the opportunity, in several countries, to rethink and simplify the processes on which the public administration is based. A new approach based on innovative methods, such as agile and lean startup, together with the construction of a coherent national identity system, has led to the development of meaningful experiences such as those of the Government Digital Service in Great Britain and dell'United States Digital Service. The Italia Login project seeks to introduce for the first time programmatically within the Italian public administration the experience of Design Thinking and Design Service. The open source and collaborative models are an opportunity for rethinking public service communication in a context that offers a renewed sharing of intent between public administrators and designers for public benefit.

Keywords: Italia Login, Design for Government, Open Source, Public Utility, Digital Service, Service Design, Design Thinking

1. A problem of identity

The daily relationship between citizens and the public administration, in Italy, is often marred by a lack of communication and by the convoluted bureaucratic language that often makes it hard to get and to understand information.

Even in the case of communication campaigns on specific themes, the language of the public administration seems to tend towards a pathological bipolar condition that shifts constantly between the two extremes of verbose "Bureaucratese" and the unconditional acceptance of an extremely simplified advertising language. The results are at best ineffectual, and at worst disastrous. Cases in point are the recent campaign by the Health Ministry, on a theme as sensitive as the promotion of Fertility Day (Testa, 2016), which monopolized the sarcasm and irony of the social networks for weeks, or earlier still the launch of the misguided web portal Very Bello on the occasion of the Expo in Milan (Finizio, 2015a).

Naturally the outcome of these campaigns may not be ascribed exclusively to the quality of their realization, but depends rather on the unfamiliarity of public clients with communication design. On the other hand, the very concept of "corporate identity", while over a century old, has never sparked particular interest within the public administration.

Since its very foundation, the Italian Republic has never been capable of presenting an image or an iconographic repertoire in any way representative of its citizens in a unitary and convincing form. Two elements in particular distinguished the official visual identity of the pre-digital State. The "Star", the emblem of the Republic, and the calligraphic Italics of the letterhead (ministries, parliament, courts). Both elements seem more of an imposition than the result of a well-pondered choice.

The first, the emblem, was voted as the symbol of the Republic in 1948, during the final session of the Constituent assembly, half-heartedly selected by the assembly as testimony to the substantial failure of the two competitions that had occupied the members for over a year and a half (Galasso, 2005; Ricci, 2003; Serio, 1987). The complex emblem - the Star of Italy, placed over a cogged wheel and surrounded by a garland of olive and oak leaves tied by a ribbon – was combined with the typeface used before the institutional change. An "English", or more precisely a Spencerian italic calligraphy, an extremely compressed typeface, with lots of curlicues, that does indeed convey authority, but also suggests the bureaucratic distance that has often been the characteristic of public power in Italy. The shortcomings of the nation's visual identity, assembled in such a haphazard manner, came definitively to a head in the 1990s, when communication started to shift from printed to digital media and more specifically to web pages.

On the one hand the technical challenge of reproducing the two identifying elements – the painterly origin of the emblem makes it totally incompatible with a low-resolution reproduction on the screen, and the italics have no corresponding digital typeface –, while on the other hand, the quintessentially Italian characteristic of considering each Ministry or public entity as a sort of independent enclave has led to complete anarchy in institutional communication. A quick survey of the websites of the different ministries or government agencies – there are approximately 240 websites that refer to the national government (Finizio, 2015b) – shows that the identifying elements were used without any notion of system (colour, black and white or monochrome emblems; different typefaces), and sometimes even replaced by a series of logos created independently, as if each Ministry was its own brand and not an integral part of a unitary state. This is the case, for example, with the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of the Cultural Heritage and, until 2016, the Ministry of Transportation.

This is an approach that completely subordinates the value of coordinated communication to the primacy of an extemporaneous logo, as if the mere graphic ornament carried with it an intrinsic communication value. This approach is tainted with the same original sin as the aborted attempts to provide a logo for the communication of tourism in Italy. In the case of both "It", Mr Prodi government in 2007, and "Magic Italy", Mr Berlusconi government in 2009, the creation of a logo was considered to be the easiest solution to the far more complex problem of institutional communication. Unfortunately, when the problem regards identities as complex as a national identity, a mere graphic expedient is insufficient to circumvent the main problem, which is essentially political: to promote substantial change in the modalities that determine the relationship between institution and citizen. Simon Anholt, the father of the idea of nation brand, summarizes this concept in an effective formula: "creating a competitive identity for a country, a region or a city is 80 per cent innovation, 15 per cent coordination and 5 per cent communication" (Anholt, 2007). In other words, if there is no real process of change, sustained with authority at the political level, which can

profoundly modify the bureaucratic apparatus, any attempt to simply repaint the façade is irremediably destined to fail.

Figure 1. National identity system for German Government (1996), Dutch Government (2006) and United Kingdom Government (2012).

Naturally the problem is greater than just Italy. The many experiences in recent years that have sought to design, or redesign, the identity of a nation – not counting the projects for communicating tourism or nation branding, prevalently addressed to an international audience –, make it clear that the most lasting and significant results were achieved by projects in which the graphic redesign was part of a longer process, generally lasting years, to restructure the identity system as a whole.

In 1990, the reunification of Germany provided the perfect opportunity to rethink a coherent image of the new nation. A nation that was finally reunited after over forty years of forced separation could certainly not present itself without an equally unitary identity. The competition held in 1996 led to the selection of a project designed by two students which they then developed at the Metadesign studio in Berlin. The salient features of the new image were the eagle, the colours of the German flag and the Univers typeface. Based on a coordinated system of logos for the government and ministries,

as simple and functional as one would expect from a German project, the new identity was officially adopted in 1999[1].

The situation of the government identity in Holland in 2006 was not unlike the situation in Italy today, with over 200 different logos for the ministries and government agencies. In this case the idea of unifying the nation's identity was an integral part of the Mr Balkenende government's programme, which aimed to cut public spending and improve the productivity of the administration. Thus the "1 logo" initiative was launched in 2006 with the purpose of bringing uniformity to communication at every citizen touch point: from the offices to the signage, from the printed documents to the websites. The 2008 competition, by invitation only, was won by the Dumbar studio in Rotterdam, which proposed a stylized version of the complex coat-of-arms of the Dutch royal family, laid out eccentrically in a blue rectangle. A typeface designed for the occasion, Rijksoverheid Serif and Sans, completes the identity of a project that is much greater than a simple logo, as Joris Demmink, head of the scientific committee, explains: "For all the government agencies involved, the new visual identity is a continuous reminder that we all belong to a single National Government, and that we should at least try to present ourselves to the public in a similar way" (Molenkamp & Versteegh, 2010, p. 147). The application of the project guidelines was completed in 2011[2].

In 2012, the United Kingdom began to develop a coherent identity system for Her Majesty's government in a process that was completed in 2015. In this case too, the royal coat-of-arms was the central element, with the names of the Ministries composed in Helvetica, combined with a colour code based on the institutional colours of each government entity rather than on the national colours.

Apart from issues of pure graphic design, the significance of the English project lies in having connected the unitary visual identity to a far more profound process of innovation which in 2011, under the name of "Digital by default", began to redesign the online communication and, in perspective, digital public services in their entirety. An exemplary project, as innovative as it is seminal, which we will come back to later.

In all the projects we have examined to date, along with those for the Catalan and Flemish governments, it is interesting to note how the graphic choice for the redesign has always preferred a new symbol-logo that would give contemporary form to the traditional heraldic image or, in other words, create a dialogue between high culture and low culture (Gimeno-Martìnez, 2016, pp. 112-132).

And finally, we can see how the search for a coherent national identity becomes a priority for all governments that consider it important to make their communication with citizens more effective. The question of identity thus becomes a critical issue when it begins to address the modalities for providing online services, a strategic phase in the future evolution of the relationship between the state and the citizen.

2. "Public utility" online

With an estimated one hundred thousand services available online, the Italian public administration demonstrates attention to the digitalization process equal to that of other European countries

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1 https://styleguide.bundesregierung.de/Webs/SG/DE/Homepage/home_node.html?__site=SG

2 http://www.rijkshuisstijl.nl/

(European Commission, 2014). However, they are little used by citizens. In a study conducted in 2015 by Confartigianato, Italy was ranked among the lowest of all European countries, with only 36 citizens out of one hundred using Internet to get information from the government (compared to a European average of 59%) and a meagre 18% using it to fill out and send documentation (European average 33%). The percentage rises when considering businesses, which average respectively 85% and 58%, figures that are significantly lower however than those in other European countries (Ufficio Studi Confartigianato, 2015, pp. 19-20).

The use of public administration services are further hindered, understandably, by the limited use that Italians make of Internet (Istat, 2015), and the narrow bandwidth that characterizes our national infrastructure. But even those who use the web every day encounter significant problems in taking advantage of the many public services available online. Users express a sense of profound dissatisfaction (31%) for the quality of the services, based on four parameters: how easy it is to get information, how useful the information is, what information is available on the status of one's paperwork, and how easy it is to use the online services (Ufficio Studi Confartigianato, 2015, p. 21).

The reasons for this dissatisfaction are the language, the technology and the browsing experience, which in most cases is quite distant from what each citizen experiences daily. The result is an arduous immersion into a parallel universe of elaborate and counterintuitive rules, which must be deciphered before one can achieve one's goal, no matter how modest, be it paying the automobile registration fee, registering a child for high school or university, gaining access to public libraries, or to a lesser degree, applying for personal documents and certificates (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2015, p.16).

From the point of view of national distribution, the services provided by the central government (health, education, justice, public records, payments) appear more structured and efficient, like in the rest of Europe, whereas at the local level the services lag behind: though almost all Municipalities now have their own website (over 99%), less than 20% provide services online (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2015, pp. 26-27).

It therefore appears clear that only a comprehensive strategy that can rethink the design of digital public services and considerably increase their usership, eliminating the limitations in design, technology and infrastructure, has any possibility of modifying the current state of affairs.

In 2010, the English government commissioned Digital Champion Martha Lane Fox, the once co-founder of a successful website such as Lastminute.com, to help improve the interaction with citizens on the government website Directgov. Her analysis[3] concluded that a radical change in perspective was required, starting with the development of contents and services. The contents were developed by the various departments with lengthy procedures and sequential authorizations, based on a "waterfall" model; the websites were commissioned to independent firms and did not go online until they were completed, only to remain carved in stone. These working methods had become totally unfit for the needs of today. The Government Digital Service (GDS)[4] was therefore founded as a response to the need to reformulate the processes of building services for citizens, with the intent to apply an *agile* methodology and the principles of Service Design to the public administration for the first time ever (Downe, 2016). In both cases, the respective approaches

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[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/directgov-2010-and-beyond-revolution-not-evolution-a-report-by-martha-lane-fox

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-digital-service

completely revolutionized the processes used traditionally by the public administration. To be succinct, the difference may be summarized in the opportunity offered by the *agile* method to develop a project non-sequentially, but on several levels at the same time without having to wait until it is fully completed, proceeding in an iterative manner with prototypes and tests[5].

This was the perspective that spawned the new government website Gov.uk, which has been online permanently since 2013: it merged the contents of 25 different ministries and 331 public agencies and is constantly being expanded and integrated, coherently with the *agile* premises. The rigorously minimalist choices of Gov.uk have made it a reference for similar international experiences in user interface projects (Hobson, 2013), and earned it the prestigious acknowledgment as Design of the Year 2013.
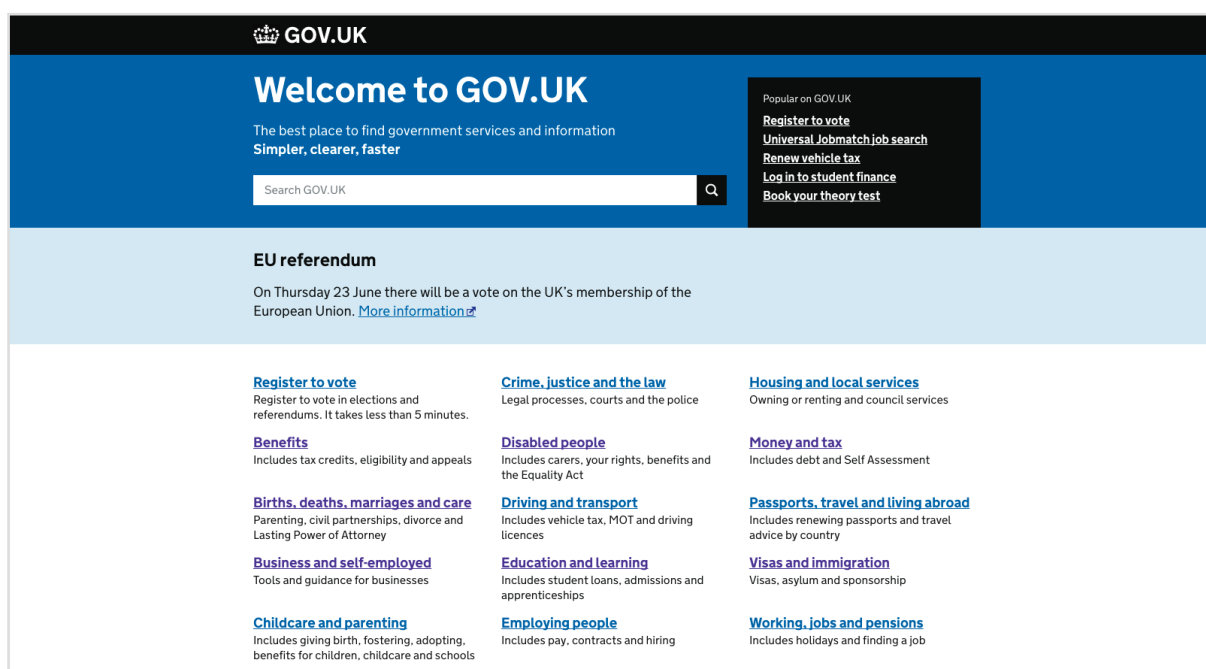

Figure 2. Home page of gov.uk website, (www.gov.uk).

The construction of the single government website, as we have seen, also meant defining a coherent visual identity for all the English central administrations, an identity that did not exist up to that time (Lloyd, 2009). The immense effort undertaken by GDS to rationalize the system of web contents was however only the first step in a far more ambitious project that is preparing, like many other countries, to address the issue of redesigning services to citizens. The "Government as a Platform" programme has therefore developed a whole new series of "components", the only way to guarantee that the principles of Service Design be correctly applied – Gov.uk Pay for payments, Gov.uk Notify for notices, Gov.uk Verify to check identities[6] - to be used by all government services across the board.

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[5] https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/agile-delivery/agile-government-services-introduction

[6] https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/technology/using-common-components.

In the United States, in recent years, the United States Digital Service (USDS)[7] which depends directly on the Executive Office of the President, has begun to focus its attention on redesigning some of the most sensitive and urgent online services, such as the services to veterans and those concerning citizenship and immigration, applying the *agile* iterative process. "Understand what people need" is the first commandment in the Digital Services Playbook recently published by the USDS[8]. The US government's efforts to develop services to citizens also relies in parallel on 18F[9], another digital development agency, which works on the redesign of strategic services, such as health care and the electoral system, applying the method "lean startup", which consists in the rapid release of usable functionality (Minimum Viable Product), and then proceed subsequent improvements. In 2015, 18F published the first version of the guidelines for the design of American public administration websites titled US Web Design Standards[10].

In 2015, the Digital Transformation Agency (DTA)[11] of the Australian government began its work: its Digital Service Standard[12] looks explicitly to the English GDS experience for its premises and methods. So far, an alpha version of the new government website has been put online[13].

3. Italia Login as an opportunity

Italy suffers a chronic underdevelopment at the digital level and the reticence or incapacity of politicians to address the bureaucratic obstacles to innovation, a widely shared problem that makes it extremely difficult to develop a government website in every part of the world (Lu, 2016).

Though it is still in its embryonic phase, Italia Login was launched in 2015 by the Italian government as the primary project, within the Digital Agenda, to finally make digital services efficient and usable for citizens. This is a significant step forward in confuting the widespread misconception that the digitalization of the Public Administration consists simply in transferring current processes to computerized systems; it is also a valuable opportunity to reconsider the role and contribution of design to public service communication, to which it can bring the experience and practices of Design Thinking and Service Design, with an approach that is clearly oriented towards a design mode (Manzini, 2015, p. 31-32).

The vision behind Italia Login represents a substantial change in the paradigm of the relationship between administration and citizen: it is no longer the citizen's responsibility to seek information, it is the administration that must communicate what is necessary in his digital "home" (Barberis, 2015). A single touch point, with a single credential (the SPID digital identity), will provide access to an integrated system – an "eco-system" – where each citizen can manage his own applications for the

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[7] https://www.usds.gov/

[8] https://playbook.cio.gov/

[9] https://18f.gsa.gov/

[10] https://standards.usa.gov/

[11] https://www.dta.gov.au/

[12] https://www.dta.gov.au/standard/

[13] https://www.gov.au/alpha/

services (technically web apps), receive the notices that concern him and directly pay what is due (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2015, pp. 101-106). The goal of Italia Login is therefore to unify and create a satisfactory user experience for these services, making them simpler to use with a coherent and functional browsing experience and interface. This is an innovative project based on the same perspective as the experiences developed in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Making the citizen's user experience coherent means first and foremost to gather the random identities that distinguish public websites today under a single common denominator, to build a national visual identity.

In doing so, it is important to ask a few preliminary questions about what it means to design a territorial, and in particular a government identity today (Baur & Thiéry, 2010; Bonini Lessing, 2011; Rauch & Sinni, 2009), at a time when a wealth of examples and references are indeed available, as we have seen, but the approach known as "nation branding" has often sidetracked objectives and working methods (Aronczyk, 2013; Jugovac, 2010).

The traditional approach to the design of an identity involves a combination of logo and style guide to develop the corporate identity inflexibly for all its applications. In recent years however, many new research perspectives have sought to allay the rigidity of this type of approach, which is particularly penalizing for public or cultural institutions, by exploring the construction of a dynamic or generative identity which, rather than imposing standards, might define parameters for variability (Felsing, 2009). Similarly, we have shown that for the design of public services, innovation does not lie in the simple digitalization of existing administrative processes, but in an in-depth redesign of these processes, as taught by the Service Design approach (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). The open source and collaborative models, as well as the *agile* and *lean startup* processes, are methods for rethinking public service communication in a context that offers a renewed sharing of intent between public administrators and designers. This is a development process that questions many of the traditional design practices to explore the unbeaten paths of participated design, shared results and the constant revision of outcomes. What emerges from this approach is a new professional figure that we might describe, to paraphrase Carlo Ratti, as a "choral designer", in the sense of a multidisciplinary guide (Ratti, 2014, p.118). A designer who must weave an alliance between all those who, each in his own way, contribute to the project: public administrators, designers, developers, editors, universities, research centres, associations, and last but not least, the citizens themselves. In this new type of co-design process, each actor brings his own specific agenda – standards, technology, experiences, etc. – which can only be satisfied with a holistic vision (Manzini, 2015, pp. 47-50).

The role of the designer, in his relationship with the public client, goes beyond that of a simple problem-solver: he becomes, to embrace Ezio Manzini's fitting definition, a *sense maker*, someone who collaborates socially to building meaning in order to bring sense to a project (Manzini, 2015, p.35).

It is therefore worth noting that the first step in the Italia Login project was to define an "open" system of identity, based on a limited number of elements, that could be extensively shared in all the required applications. The elements of visual identity are reduced to a minimum – a colour palette (blue #0066CC), a typeface (Titillium Web), a page layout (based on the Bootstrap framework); with the help of sections on accessibility, usability, info-architecture and content editing, they constitute the basis for the Alpha version of the "Design guidelines for the web services of the Public Administration". To complete the "Guidelines", the design.italia.it community was activated on the GitHub open source platform – a first for the Italian public administration – dedicated to sharing

software components and discussing best practices. The release in the "Guidelines" of a number of open source html components, such as the header and footer of the web pages, is the first step in this direction. An approach that, from the very start, is distinguished by a programmatically open-ended process that keeps it constantly up-to-date (Manzini, 2015, p. 52).

This is a method of operation based on open source and participation, the only possible method for a project that must reconvert the usability of the contents and user experience of that galaxy of thousands of websites operated by the public administrations. The process of conforming to the "Guidelines" began from the top down in November 2015, when the websites of the Government and several Ministries applied the unitary identity created for the central administration. At the same time, the Italia Login project maintains customizable spaces that, within a perspective of voluntary participation, are often perceived as a crucial element in which local administrations can represent their own identity.

Figure 3. Home page of Design Guidelines website (design.italia.it)

Today, the most critical issue for Italia Login is the lack of adequate governance, due primarily to the failure to constitute, from the very beginning, a dedicated team funded with adequate resources, unlike the previously mentioned experiences in England and in the United States. Currently entrusted for its development to Agid, Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale, Italia Login is now the responsibility of the newly instituted Special Commissioner for the Digital Agenda (the Digital Team). The risk naturally lies in overlapping responsibilities, or to include the same Italia Login among the topics of political struggle as demonstrated by the heated debate soon after the fall of the Mr Renzi government, but a graver danger is that faced with delays and the inevitable difficulties, the usual bureaucratic attitude to the task might prevail, dilapidating this new opportunity to successfully borrow the strategies of

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Design Thinking and Service Design and apply them to the processes of the Italian Public Administration as a real "operating system of the country" (Piacentini, 2016).

In fact, it appears clearer than ever that the digitalization of the administration and citizen access to efficient services transcends mere technological issues to become a fundamental social demand: democracy is a design problem. To train "citizen designers" (Resnick, 2016, pp. 12-13) who can design *with* the citizen and not just *for* the citizen – a sort of "public utility" communication updated in the spirit of 2.0 – is therefore a challenge that design education must rise too, to fill the need for all those figures of designers who can manage participatory and open-source projects for public administrations and communities.
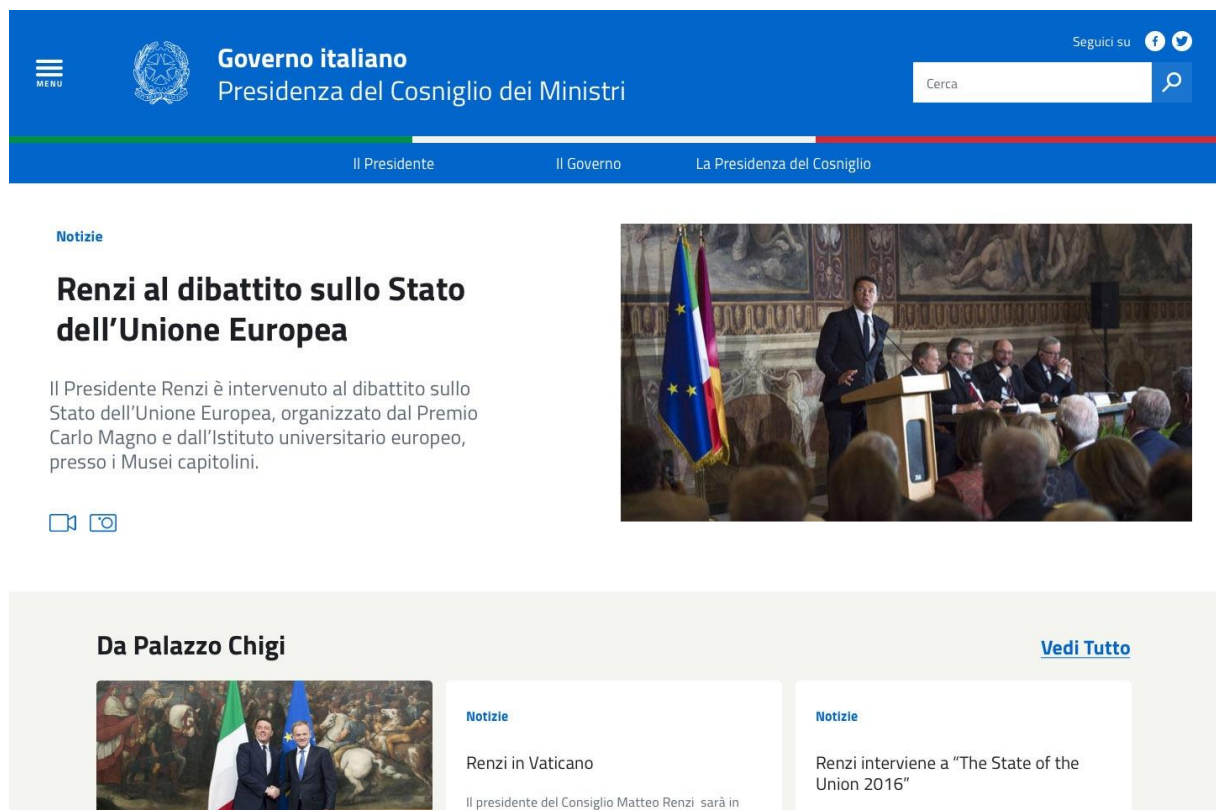

Figure 4. Home page of Italian Government website redesigned on the basis of the Design Guidelines (www.gov.it).

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