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ExWeb interview with Sara at Montagna.org: "We have to be curious, fast and good journalists"

You see it all the time at ExplorersWeb: "Courtesy of RussianClimb.com"; "according to Iran Mountainzone"; "reported Montagna.org". The network spans every corner of the globe. But who are the people behind this new media? Turns out they are journalists with unusual insight in their field, burning with passion for their work and changing the world one story at a time.

Heading the 14x8000ers summiteers national rank and featuring genuine climbers and explorers such as Walter Bonatti and Simone Moro, Italy always held a major position in mountaineering History.

Born a stone's throw from Ricardo Cassin's house in Lecco, Sara Sottocornola never could escape the call of adventure. Dumping an early career in fashionable Milan for a comeback to the mountains, she joined a start-up company, Montagna.org, that soon grew into Italy's leading online mountaineering news service.

In this chat with ExplorersWeb, Sara talks about the present and future of climbing, the relationship between exploration and media, and what she enthusiastically describes as her "dream job".

ExplorersWeb: *Tell us how Montagna.org started?*

Sara: It was 2002, the International Year of Mountains, and Montagna.org was launched by the EvK2Cnr Committee, a world-renowned Italian organization dealing with high altitude research and climate monitoring on the mountains. (Ed note: Everest climbers will know the organization from the "Italian pyramid" made of solar panels a day's hike from BC.)

Montagna.org had a boom in 2004, reporting news about the "K2 2004 – 50 years later" expedition. The following year gave birth to Montagna.tv, a daily online newscast with mountaineering stories from all over the world aiming to become a mountain-dedicated web-tv.

ExplorersWeb: *How many people are working on Montagna.org? Are you guys climbers yourselves?*

Sara: The core team is myself and Valentina d'Angella. Then there's Wainer Preda, our newspaper director, and Nicoletta Favaron plus Raffaele Parma for shooting video and editing. None of us are climbers, although we love to ski, trek and climb as a hobby.

The thing is: Montagna.tv and Montagna.org don't want to be technical newspapers for climbers only. There are plenty of such blogs in Italy and abroad. We have to be curious, fast, and good journalists. The reason is, by giving real-time news from mountain sports and events, we want to tell mountain stories to the most widespread audience: regular people who either love the mountains or live in them.

ExplorersWeb: *How long have you been working for Montagna.org - and how does it feel? What do you like most and least about your job?*

Sara: I've been working here since 2004. I really love it, it's almost a dream come true. I was born in Lecco, Ragni's town, and always spent my holidays in the Alps, trekking or skiing.

I love ski-mountaineering and occasional rock-climbing. I trekked to Everest Base Camp last year but I'm not a climber, just a mountain fan. I knew the 8000ers and many famous climbers when I started working here, and step by step I entered their world, becoming a specialized journalist.

The thing I like most is dealing with people who share my love for the mountains: climbers and readers both. What I don't like very much... to drive 50 minutes every morning to get to the office!!!

ExplorersWeb: *Montagna is a multidisciplinary website, providing a wide range of stories, from Himalayan climbing to mountain culture and local news. How do you think the variety of contents is working?*

Sara: The diversity works magnificently. In a few years, our daily unique visitors grew from a dozen of hundreds to dozens of thousands. We are now the most widespread mountain website in Italy. The variety is also good for us journalists, because beyond climbing, we face political, legal, environmental and tourism issues allowing us to know the mountains from different points of view.

ExplorersWeb: *What kind of readers do you reckon you have: professional climbers, mountaineers, nature buffs, or inspired couch-potatoes?*

Sara: We have them all. The greatest part of the audience are the regular mountain lovers, 25-45 years old. Almost 45% are women.

ExplorersWeb: *Italy is the only nation with 3 14x8000ers climbers (Messner, Martini, Mondinelli); it is also homeland to great climbers such as Bonatti, Cassin, Ferrari, Lecco's Ragni, etc. Beside the fact that there are plenty of peaks in Italy - do you think there is another reason? Do Italians have a "mountain-gene" of sorts?*

Sara: Italy has always been a nation of explorers in all fields: science, geography, and of course sports. The climbers you quote have not only extraordinary physical and technical skills but also, and more importantly, a visionary mind paired with relentless persistence.

And maybe some good Italian cooking also helps in building strong physiques ;)

ExplorersWeb: *As for female high-altitude climbers: Nives Meroi is an outstanding woman. However, she seems to pass rather un-noticed in Italian media. Do you agree?*

Sara: Of course Nives is an outstanding climber. But I don't think she is ignored. She is one of the few climbers featured not only in technical but also mainstream media, all well aware of her challenges. Her expeditions haven't been very lucky in later years unfortunately, but she is still much loved both by the people and the reporters.

ExplorersWeb: *Some climbers say mountaineering is regressing due to commercialization and lack of genuine, new ascents. What's your take?*

Sara: I think mountaineering is simply developing, which is positive in any case. Growing up is never easy and nobody can control the whole process, so it's important to fix the key values.

I think there are many climbers with good ethics, following alpine style and exploration. But to retrace the pioneers' steps can also be a way to increase the worth of mountaineering... I think that honesty, fair play and respect for life should be above any other value.

I saw too many deaths in recent years, and I still see people overestimating their skills and being arrogant or telling lies only to become famous: I hope they will decrease. Commercialization is not pure mountaineering, it's a different thing. It has negative effects, like the crowds causing dangerous situations on Everest, but it also boosts tourism and local economies. It has to be regulated as it's different from professional and explorative mountaineering.

ExplorersWeb: *How do you foresee the future of climbing?*

Sara: I think nobody can really tell, less even myself. I can see an increasing number of people falling in love with the mountains, so I'm sure that mountaineering and mountain sports will have a future.

Locally, I hope that Italian TV, magazines and newspapers will increase their coverage of mountains and climbers, the way USA or Spain already do. In spite of our big, big climbing tradition, media seems to underestimate the power of mountain stories. Media attention is precious in order to further climbing and to give mountaineers more opportunities.

ExplorersWeb: If you had to choose - favorite climbers?

Sara: Cassin of course, if we talk about the pioneers. I grew up with his legend in Lecco, and my home was near his.

As for today's mountaineers, it's difficult to choose because every climber is special for one thing or the other. Silvio Mondinelli is an example for climbers as one you can always trust: strong, generous, determined, never irresponsible, driven by strong ethics and with great technical skills. He has made an amazing number of rescues at 8000m in the Himalayas.

Daniele Bernasconi is in my (and many others) opinion one of the strongest climbers in the world, always calm and excellent on every kind of terrain. Simone Moro, beyond his great climbs and explorations, is giving a great hand to young climbers.

I'd like to say a word for him and for other climbers such as Reinhold Messner or Agostino da Polenza, sometimes criticized for their media efforts by "radical-chic climbers". Instead of accusing, denouncers should assume the importance of media for the development of climbing and for the modern society in general. Only through a mutual effort shared by media and climbers, will the world actually understand this beautiful (but complicated) world of mountaineering and separate good climbs from fairy tales.

As for women: besides Nives, Gerlinde Kaltenbrunner is the one I like the most. Strong, simple and always smiling. A rare person.

Born in Lecco, Italy, Sara Sottocornola, 32, graduated Public Relations in 2001 and worked in Milan as business economy teacher and researcher for three years. Missing the lake and the mountains, she returned home after three years landing an executive job with Montagna.tv. "My greatest hobby – in addition to mountain sports – is oil painting," she told ExWeb. "I have painted many portraits of climbers and hope to organize an exhibit soon. I also really like cooking!"

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