

DIGITAL REPUTATION MANAGEMENT. RELAPSES OF THE SEMIOTICS IN SOCIAL PERCEPTION

Alberto FORNASARI

Department of Educational Sciences, Psychology, Communication, 'Aldo Moro' University, Bari, Italy

Abstract: *The management reputation has never been so important not only for a company or a public administration but also for groups of people, minority groups and individuals. The beginning of new technologies, the Internet and social networks as cultural mediation instruments, raise important questions towards the traditional dynamics of reality seen as social construction. The traditional way of socially perceiving others is generated by new media and the on-line and off-line reputation of individuals and groups uses the same methods of the "Brand marketing", so typical of economics. The digital world collapses time and space, the rate of spread of the criticism threatens to cancel any defense, the clumsy response to a crisis can be extremely expensive, not only in economics field but also in sociological field. To have an effective on-line reputation is not enough to know and use technical solutions of SEO, SEM or Social CRM; is required an overall and aware communication strategy, starting from semiotic processes involved in reputation. In this paper, we will deepen the topic of reputation as a permanent strategy, borrowed from marketing, of the relationship between reputation and digital world, and of what skills should own a digital reputation manager in a global world where intercultural competence and digital competence are essential. We will closely examine instruments such as Sentiment Analysis, Data and Opinion Mining, evaluation of Influencers and of processes of Social Intelligence, as well as instruments for the Census of Reputation Risks.*

Keywords: *reputation; new technology; digital; semiotics; economy; social perception*

1. INTRODUCTION

*We are not what we say we are
the credit other give us
Jose Saramago (2012)*

One of the main tests for the process of integration between cultures is the mass media system and the representation (Taguieff, 1994) they give of different ethnic groups: how difficult will the social growth path of an immigrant be in a country where television, web and press always and solely give an image of immigrants linked to misery, marginality and crime? This raises two different categories of problems that other countries had already to deal with for a long time: the need to ensure a representation of immigrants (Allport, 2002) in the traditional and new media that avoids all forms of discrimination; the need to promote the access of ethnic minorities to the media industry (Cipollini 2002). Even in European country studies on mass media representation (Gallini, 1996) of reality are now acquiring the status of valuable tools of collective critical awareness. In fact, this approach has a broad

acknowledgement amongst the most reliable reflections, which are developing at international level, inside one of the most interesting records of the sociology of cultural processes. It is the study of mass media influence on the formation of opinions, perceptions and collective emotions about phenomena, facts and social subjects. The main thing to emphasize concerns the particular influence that media have in shaping collective perceptions of various social actors, and where elderly, women, men and immigrants are "socially drawn" from television shows, newspaper articles, web, social network and advertising. Still, it clearly appears a "disorder" in the communication: the immigrant and a lot of other minority group is predominantly associated with episodes of crime, deviance and anomie, while the everyday dimension of integration processes does not normally appears in communication products. Therefore, what digital reputation do these social categories enjoy? What are the processes that determine the construction and management of digital reputation? Starting from theoretical conditions of socio-anthropological type, the reflections of this article are interwoven with

economic conditions (Sennet, 2006) of the marketing and with those of semiotics of new media. We live in a world that sees us at the same time as actors and spectators, producers and consumers (so-called prosumer), observed and observers, judged and judges. But, above all, we live in space-time different from the past and the visibility of our behaviors acquired gigantic size and timing: the network is a kind of eternal world square and whatever we do, say, publish in Internet can potentially be viewed or heard by billions of people and especially never forgotten: is forever! That is exactly why the reputation today acquires a deeper value and requires from all of us a greater awareness (Peverini, 2014). Today it is no longer enough to tell. The story must be credible as well as the brand. Because we are what the search engines say that we are. Therefore, the definition of one's own strategy of brand reputation becomes a thorough job, not left to chance, and that requires an adequate and rigorous scientific professionalism able to ensure a shift from Risk Assessment to Risk Management (Giorgino, 2015). The Digital Reputation Manager so represents that specific professional figure, which, in a liquid and digital society like the contemporary one, cannot be improvised but must know very clearly the domain of its intervention.

A document to keep always in mind should be the Weputation Manifest that defines in ten points and very clearly, what we should and could expect today about our reputation in the net.

According to the document cited above, socially, we are what others say about us; what people say about us and what we really are not always coincide; what does not coincide, is not what we should socially take care of. What we need to take care of can follow two directions: to look like what we want to be or to look like what the society says or thinks of us (Landowsky, 1991).

The society does not know our being, but only our doing; our do is social projection; the social is an arena where interests, which are not neutral but ideological, meet and clash. The ideology is one of the products of a specific culture: the culture is the place where the individual develops from childhood; the individual left alone in the social clash succumbs.

2. REPUTATION AS A PERMANENT MARKETING STRATEGY

The shift of advertising from the products to the respective brands has attenuated only in part the problem of measuring the Return of

Investment, but did not fix it (Blanchard, 2012). The passage from promoting the product to that of the brand, brought up a new problem: how many times we can change the style of a brand, its story and its values (Lampigano, 2016).

Changing the perception given to a single product does not change the perception of the brand, while changing the perception of the brand means to change the perception of all the products related to it. The hierarchy between the brand and its products is not a matter of communication, but is a specific economic and productive fact. Whether it relates to the product or the brand, eventually this form of direct marketing faces a huge problem: that of creativity. The amount of advertising in the world is just so high that it is unavoidable to fall into the already seen. The time acts as a container of billions of words and images of *headlines* and *body copies* and of all the cultural kit necessary to advertising. Certainly, sometimes emerges something new, but it has a minimum weight compared to the worldwide investment in advertising.

These problems were not so evident until the TV and radio channels multiplied, on one hand and on the other hand, until the advent of Internet. In the first case, the limits of creativity emerged because it cannot be infinite; in the second case the web has changed the basic paradigms of communication. There is no longer an issuer who speaks to thousands of passive recipients, but a new "many-to-many" model, braided, exciting but also dangerous for the brands (European Digital Behaviour Study, 2013).

The "make do" or "make believe" of traditional marketing does not work anymore because technology makes comparisons easy; the abuse of advertising in every segment of life, puts into the recipient a strong feeling of distrust. And the motto into vogue during the 80's and the 90's "as long as they speak of it", today is no longer allowed.

Today it is good "as long as they speak well of it", otherwise it is the disaster of the reputation, triggering a domino effect that can be extremely harmful for brands (see the recent case of the Moncler, a company that produced duvet jackets and clothing with a turnover of 93 million Euros in 2013, which was denounced by an Italian TV program for the fierce and illegal practice of plucking, having serious repercussions on its brand (Repubblica, 2014).

From Floch onward, advertising has tried to engage in the use of semiotics to represent advertising models and consumers' attitudes. In

Semiotics Marketing and Communication Floch represents different forms of advertising communication (Floch,1990) taking as examples the work and recommendation of some leading experts of this field: David MacKenzie, Ogilvy, Jaquès Sèguèla, Jean Feldman, Philippe Michel.

The shift from the product to the brand did not cover only the advertising phenomenon but all corporate organizations of producers, the entire value chain, anyone who came into contact with it. The companies' staff had to behave in a certain way, executives were to appear according to precise directives, messages had to tell the magic worlds of the brand. After NO LOGO (Klein, 2013) everything changes. Successful stories implode under the weight of journalistic investigation that reveals unedifying successes. Some brands must take action to protect themselves, Nike first.

Big headlines and shining concepts, to cover disreputable behaviors. The reputation of big brands is there at the click of a mouse, under the eyes of all. (In 1997, the Nike CEO, Paul Knoght, was received by Stanford's students with these words: "Ehi, Phil, get off the stage. Pay your workers a wage that allows them to live!"). Therefore, it strongly emerges a dichotomy between what advertising conveys and the behavior of the one conveying the message. Just to tell a story is no longer enough: the story must be credible as well as the brand. The marketing should take care of reputation because a progressive mistrust is spreading toward the brand and action must be taken before it becomes complete distrust.

Just think of the Merkel case, in 2015, connected to the auto show in Frankfurt. The German reputation is at the top of its expansion. Whatever is German wins: rules, transparency, efficiency. After a few days, the catastrophe: Volkswagen is in the storm for providing false data about the exhaust gas. The title slumps on the stock exchange (Repubblica, 2015). The new Western audience of consumers is more attentive to messages, to products, to ethical processes of production, to the relationship between companies and the ecology of the planet. A new form of ethical consumer's attention is taking shape in the global market.

3. REPUTATION AND DIGITAL MARKETING

For many years, and for subsequent simplifications, the digital reputation has been

linked to some aspects of the digital marketing. This is an absolutely complex world, whose ramifications are heading toward every corner of the activities of new media.

In the past and with the building of technological fads, it has been taken for granted that SEO, SEM, E-mail, Marketing and Social CRM, constituted the central nervous system of the reputation.

For a long time, in digital marketing, notoriety was confused with reputation; this, based on the cheap communication principle "as long as they speak of it", which sounds like "as long as they find it first". At the origin, there is the power of search engines and their linked acronym: SERP. Technically, it means Search Engine Results Page and represents the list of objects found by a search engine, starting from a sequence of terms for the research itself. Therefore, much of the work is directed to place the web resources in the first few pages, so that they may be the most visited (see SEO e SEM). The census of users with whom entertaining a relationship, is placed in a complex technological environment called Social CRM (Customer Relationship Management). These Digital Marketing paths, are involved with different modalities in the management of the reputation although they are not individually crucial for it (Di Fraia, 2011). Imagine a cultural association that for many years has helped the spread of civilized correct behaviors. It has been working on the web, posting on websites, blogs and social networks. It has reached a strategic visibility on the SERP; has a very high number of visitors and loyal users (lead, reach, engagement). At a certain point, the President of the Association becomes responsible for non-ethical behavior and it turns out that much of the collected resources have been diverted for personal gain in favor of the members of the Association. We clearly understand that the reputation does not depend on reached notoriety (Fumo, 2012).

4. THE SEMIOMATIC OF THE REPUTATION

The semiomatic is born from the encounter between semiotics and information technology for all activities involving computerizes support. To understand its utility simply imagine what it could mean, without a suitable software, to analyze hundreds of thousands of texts obtained from a web search engine; the clash between quantitative and qualitative analysis strategies would be challenging (Cosenza, 2014).

Thus, the semiomatic is at the same time both a proposal for applied research and a set of analytical models that assume the use of technology in quality and especially quantitative investigations. Specifically, semiomatic of the reputation is the set of semiotic-informatics activities that lead to the identification of reputational information, their organization, to drafting models of analysis and identify analytical procedures. To have a synthetic overview of the entire cognitive and operational universe connected to investigations on reputation, it may be useful to outline and describe some macro components such as *storytelling*, *intelligence overview*, *management life cycle*, *social intelligence* and *sentiment analysis*.

There are two reputational regimes: the generic reputation and the specific reputation. The first relates to the lifestyle of a human being, of a company, an institution, a political party, an association. Its evaluation is based on conformity or non-conformity of social behaviors (which vary from culture to culture) considered conventionally correct. The second refers to the social projection of behaviors related to a specific profession, mission, activity, social role (Barthes, 1951). To build the reputation of a subject (individual or collective) means to enhance its reliability and credibility in the public narrative (Centenaro, Sorchiotti, 2013). It organizes the narrative of acting (doing) and being in a consistent and likely way. Consistency focuses on action toward what has been, while verisimilitude focuses on what we are now and the plausibility of the causes that determined this.

We should analyze these characteristic in terms of compatibility with the specific culture of reference (Greinas, 1995) (for example, in some cultures the frequent change of work activities is a positive thing, while others consider it a problem). Each level of perception that we have is the intersection of these two dimensions. In this respect and in view of what explained so far, the process of *Digital Reputation Management* is essential, understood in a top down sense, which we call *reputation intelligence overview* (Collins, 2016). The main process classes are *social intelligence*, *social CRM*, and *Company Admin*. In the first find their place listening and comprehension of digital phenomena; in the second, those relating to structured interaction with users and, the third, outlines some administrative and business processes involved.

Within the social intelligence class, there are processes of listening divided by analysis characteristic: *sentiment*, *opinion mining*, and

passion. For all these processes there should be an alerting function toward the personnel, which may authorize and implement a prompt defense after a public attack (Ceron Curini, Iacus, 2013).

The sentiment analysis clearly shows the polarity of the analyzed text in terms of positivity, neutrality and negativity. The opinion mining, possible with the use of quite expensive platforms, is able to carry out evaluations on the text, highlighting reviews and evaluations. It is widely used in some English-speaking countries by large corporations and political market. Study is under way about passion analysis, and many believe it to be the most effective marketing support.

With this survey methodology, which uses powerful algorithms of learning machines and ample reference textbooks, it is possible to detect the degree of anger or wrath of the users, their empathy, and their frustration. The Social Analytic measures quantities, indicators of access, usage, period, frequency, timing of permanence, places of origin of access and eventual information on the target (Sponder, 2013). This information is important to understand the level of diffusion of resources available on the web. It is thus possible to build an historical archive to analyze the trend of usage, so to be able to prepare analytical reports in support of the return of investment. The Social CRM segment deals with the multidirectional relationship with customers. The social caring is useful to assist consumers, clients, simple observers and followers. It is not just a matter of responding to requests for help, but also of being proactive, that is, to anticipate based on information providing a signal, questions and problems.

4. CONCLUSION

Today, more than ever, we can therefore say how important has been for a company the reputation management: the digital world collapses time and space, the speed of spreading of the criticism threatens to cancel any defense, the clumsy response to a crisis can be extremely expensive. A good public projection produces a competitive, solid and long-lasting advantage. For an effective reputation management, is not enough to know and use technical solutions such as SEO, SEM, or Social CRM; it requires an overall and aware communication strategy. Starting from semiotic processes involved in reputation, only through the *Digital Reputation Management* we can arrange those activities and skills required for the construction and defense of the public perception.

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