

» The post-Gutenberg Agora in the field of crisis management

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The space created by the Gutenberg parenthesis entailed, as pointed out by Thomas Pettitt, “the original, individual, autonomous, stable and canonical composition”. The return to the oral narrative that has been part of our existence since the very beginning translates into the creation of a shared story on the reality of the facts which is not based on a previously-structured discourse, on a prepared composition that has been professionally corroborated by completely controlled information distribution channels.

In the public Agora of social networks the original story transforms due to the co-creations of each and every one of the players that are part of this sphere. This is what Thomas Pettitt calls “Quilting” –completing the quilt by combining multiple pieces-. That is, each of the members involved in its production contribute by creating a fragment. No one knows with certainty which of them fits the actual facts. But all of them are part of the storytelling. The author is blurred. The authorship is now the result of the joint contributions. In fact, it does not matter who the author is. Nor if the pieces that are part of it are taken out of context. What matters is the story as a whole and the impact it has on the Agora.

The effects of this phenomenon in crisis management are relevant. A new factor can influence the communicative control of a story whose actors and performances were predictable until recently: the multiplicity of authors who are part of it and modify the original composition.

The debate revolves around conversation threads whose origin is impossible to determine. The more negative and controversial the conversation, the larger the thread, as evidenced in the study carried out by the Carlos III University on the conversations generated by the 15M.

The case of Guillermo Zapata, Councilman of *Ahora Madrid*, clearly illustrates this thesis. The controversy was caused by a tweet published in 2011 –four years before entering the political arena-. Once it became viral, the message was extracted from its thread and thus, suddenly appeared in many different contexts, open to multiple interpretations about the true intentions of the author behind the 140 characters of his tweet. A composition of signs which, out of context, gives room to multiple interpretations and leaves the author at the mercy of the readers. It should be noted that Zapata published the tweet in the context of a debate on the limits of black comedy which was generated due to two controversial tweets written by Nacho Vigalondo. Two provoking messages that ultimately backfired.

This does not seem to matter. The only truly relevant point is that the joke was offensive and came from a newborn politician from an emerging political party.

The media and political experts do not devote enough time to analyze the context of the message and whether the latter could have been conveyed in specific circumstances that could explain the reasons behind its publication. In Twitter, several politicians, including Esperanza Aguirre, were already asking Zapata to resign.

The outcome is known by all. The Mayor decided that the Councilman had to resign as the Head of Culture in Madrid. As a result, two further members of *Ahora Madrid* and two of *Podemos* decided to erase a large number of tweets from their accounts. Out-of-context tweets became a spreading concern.

This case shows that the configuration of the social debate is based, as I argue, on the disordered aggregation of inputs from multiple stakeholders; interrelated nodes. The original information that explains the intermediate data, in this case the tweet of Zapata, fades and almost even disappears, buried under the avalanche of memes which set the trend in the traditional media. The latter takes advantage of the troubled waters to create a politically or commercially interesting story.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES?

Until the emergence of what Manuel Castells calls “self-communication” –nowadays, social networks-, the structure of news was based on a sequential logic: an incident takes place; a source close to the media issues the first information; the media gathers information; a news is produced and published.



THE ARRIVAL OF SOCIAL NETWORKS CHANGE THE PROCESS

An incident takes place. The latter could take place seconds before it is published on the network or be an event from the past. The information almost goes through a space-time hole to revive stronger thanks to the Lazarus effect. The source that collects the information also shares it –let us ignore whether this source has a specific intentionality–. The fact is that, thanks to its connections on the network, the information is virally shared and commented, which in turn entails multiple informative aggregations in relation to its interpretation which end up blurring the meaning of the tweet. In fact, only through a detailed analysis and explanation of the context can it be understood. However, this is contrary to the very nature of news channels, which favor the immediacy in the provision of information and not reflections and analyses.

ONLINE REACTION AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES

In this context, any online risks prevention strategy should include a detailed analysis of the digital fingerprint of the person, brand or

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organization. Clearly identifying the risks and defining the proper containment strategy is essential. It should be assessed whether or not to delete specific tweets. This strategy should be avoided in cases where the known as “Streisand effect” could take place.

If the harm has already been done trying to explain the context of a reprehensible tweet can be a daunting task. The most likely outcome and only option, as occurred in the case of Councilman Zapata, will be to apologize and repair the damage. However, there are no universal guidelines. Each case must be analyzed individually.

A particularly interesting element of the preventive strategy will be the analysis of the communities which discuss issues related to the person, brand or organization.

This will enable us to identify not only the areas of discussion to introduce our context, but the most influential nodes as regards notability and fame. Once identified, a relationship plan should be implemented to forge alliances with these groups in order to promote a joint growth and reciprocal protection: a true protective shield. In short, a real digital airbag to have the greatest chance of surviving the conversational Agora.



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