

>> **Digital identity: Becoming
a leader in the Internet Agora**

Mexico >> 04 >> 2014

At the turn of the 19th century Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset proclaimed: "I am I and my circumstances". This line of thought is more valid than ever in a world where the Internet empowers people. This tool amplifies their voices, increasing their activity radius and facilitating constant interaction with people and environments, or circumstances, which are being changed in a continuous and massive manner. It also enables people to obtain feedback and evolve at an astonishing speed. The Internet has become an Agora in its own right, an open space, heart of global trade, culture, politics and social life¹, where millions of people interconnect playing different social roles, including Network rejects that, despite showing apathy or refusal to take part, become actors through the content they create in their environment. Nowadays, very few people, even those without social media profiles, do not have any kind of digital trace.

In this immense gathering place of knowledge, each social role is marked by the reputation of the people that meet and interact within the digital Agora. This reputation does not depend entirely on the aforementioned individuals, but on the perception that others have of them and which, as occurred in ancient Greece, is transmitted by word of mouth, one by one, at a great speed through social networks. Unlike what

happens with words, this huge conversation is not ephemeral, but persists and remains traceable thanks to search engines, true time machines that offer people the opportunity to look through past conversations or references. A good reputation is built or destroyed much more rapidly than in ancient Greece; everything we have done or said in the past will be saved and can work for or against us in the future.

"NOWADAYS, READING A NEWSPAPER IS THE MOST UNCOOL THING EVER"

Thanks to the Internet, word of mouth is more relevant than ever. Social leaders are growing in detriment of the media, which had become the major catalyst of the schools of thought since the times of Gutenberg. The media used to interpret subjectively "what people wanted to know" and published it in a one-way communicational process which, only at the end of the 20th century, thanks to audience measurements and market or opinion researches due to the arrival of the advertising industry, started showing some signs of bidirectionality. Tom Wolfe, known as the father of the so called New Journalism, declared in an interview with the newspaper El Mundo on December 10, 2013: "Journalism is having a really tough time. We have returned to tribal communication. People trust gossip, what is being said, more than what is being published. They believe that newspapers lie, but trust blogs. Nowadays, reading a newspaper is the most uncool thing ever".

In this new environment, individuals have more power than ever before. By nature, people trust more what they can see and touch, that is, they trust other people over businesses or institutions, as they are ethereal and intangible. Social networks allow people to follow the leaders, often journalists and columnists who become media themselves. This is the case of Roger Ebert, the first film critic to obtain a Pulitzer Prize and, according to many rankings, the world's most influential online journalist with over 115,000 likes on Facebook, 825,000 followers on Twitter and his website, rogerebert.com as a global reference in the film industry. A similar case is that of Bill Simmons, with around 2.4 million followers on Twitter and 500,000 likes on Facebook.

Being a journalist is not a requirement in order to become an opinion leader, although this is often the case because of their proximity and ease of access to information. Pete Cashmore, who

¹Wikipedia definition.



Tom Wolfe, father of New Journalism.

founded the blog Mashable in 2005, is a good example. On his personal accounts, he has nearly 60,000 followers on Twitter and over 800,000 likes on Facebook, while his blog is the current worldwide technological leader in the digital media world, with several channels on social networks and over 3.5 million followers on Twitter and 1.5 million likes on Facebook. Thus, both the CEO and the media are two of the most important global leaders in the technological world and they fulfill two complementary roles.

SEGMENTATION: LEADERS OF WHAT?

As happened in the Greek Agora, according to their needs, people will seek the knowledge of the most popular and well-respected persons — notoriety and notability— to discuss a particular topic. Currently, individuals are the ones who decide what information they want to consume and which sources they consider to be more reliable in order to satisfy their needs for knowledge. It is clear that Roger Ebert, Bill Simmons and Pete Cashmore are leaders in their respective fields of specialization, but they are not absolute leaders. As happens in Long Tail Business Models, everybody will have a specific concern and will look for the pertinent opinion leader, the influencer, able to solve it and who might not be a great personality from an online reputation point of view.

Being an Internet opinion leader or a digital influencer does not imply having many followers, but being recognized as an authority on a topic, just like in the real world, since the Internet is a mere channel that expands the scope and facilitates the search.

INFLUENCE AND PERSUASION: ATTRACTIVENESS, CREDIBILITY AND DIGITAL POWER

Reputation leads to influence and influence to persuasion, which is built on three bases: attractiveness, credibility and power, according to the most relevant persuasion approaches in social psychology². If these three bases are classified into different factors extrapolated to the online environment, it can be concluded that an identity strategy should promote:

Attractiveness which can be broken down into 5 different factors:

- **Similarity**, the Internet is a great tool to bring people closer to their audience; Barack Obama uploading family pictures is not coincidental, it is a way to make him look more familiar.
- **Familiarity**, the Internet allows people to be in touch with much more people and in a much faster way, thus promoting occasional contact with audiences.
- **Praise**, based on appreciation of third parties, for which the “Like” button on Facebook, “Recommend” on LinkedIn and “Favorite” on Twitter and all the resting options of other social networks are great examples.
- **Physical Attractiveness**, focused on the physical attractiveness of leaders. In the digital world, it implies having a graphical identity and design. Just like a young attractive

“Being an Internet opinion leader or a digital influencer does not imply having many followers, but being recognized as an authority on a topic, just like in the real world”

politician or businessman can be more persuasive, good web programming and design also have positive effects on audiences.

- **Fame**, because popularity, recognition, having more or less followers, although not essential in order to define whether someone is a leader in the Internet, clearly influence the perspective of people. For example, if we found two specialists in a particular subject and one had more followers than the other, under similar conditions, we would probably lean towards the one with the largest number of supporters. Recognition is key in building a good reputation.

Credibility, based on two factors:

- **Proficiency**, it should be clearly stated that the digital influencer has the pertinent experience or capability to be considered an authority on a topic. It is important to highlight the training or experience that support what is being published because in the Internet sometimes it is more important *who* is saying something rather than *what* is being said.
- **Reliability and Honesty**, directly influenced by the opinions of others. It is important to be consistent with a model or way of thinking, since search engines will make sure that nothing said on Internet gets lost.

Power: Power generates power, yet it should not lead to pride or arrogance. In order to display power, thus being more persuasive, sanctioning is an option, but time has shown that praising or rewarding yield better results in the long term, as sanctioning others to display power is usually received with suspicion by audiences.

THE REPUTATION “MARKET”

In this context, it should be noted that reputation, influence and persuasion capabilities of people are not constant, but fluctuate depending on the context, circumstances, topic and time. Thus, for example, following the aftermath of a natural disaster or a serious train or plain accident, expert opinions shared in the media about the event will be especially relevant to a much more open, interested and sensitive audience. Gradually, people’s attention will diminish and the experts will be, once again, merely influent in their environment and, probably, in other topics regarding their field of knowledge.

It should also be noted that the Internet amplifies and promotes word of mouth, therefore making consumption of digital content much more fleeting: The Harlem Shake dance, one of the most successful viral videos of 2013 on YouTube, was an actual topic of discussion for a month; thousands of people made their parodies worldwide and a few weeks later the dance was already outdated.

² Yale University Research Group, the Cognitive Response Approach, the Heuristic-Systematic Model and the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion, as established in “Psicología Social”. Morales, J. F, Huici, C. (2000).

THE THOUSAND FACES OF INFLUENCERS: MUTATION

Until the social networking revolution took place, the main communications means were traditional media, where journalists always played a single, professional role in compliance with the editorial policies established by the media, codes of conduct or other guidelines governing their activities. Nowadays, social networks have made it almost impossible to draw a line between professional and personal life.

People have relatives, friends, coworkers, bosses, suppliers, acquaintances, fans... as contacts in their social networks. Therefore, they mutate depending on the role they are currently playing. After work, a journalist becomes an ordinary citizen, a client, an NGO activist... but he does not change his communication channel, he still uses the same Twitter channel where he previously published his column or daily story and in which he will talk of any relevant first-hand experience that he considers interesting for his audience, not necessarily news. When a celebrity complains about the service or a product of a brand, he does so as a client, not as a journalist, although the impact of his actions will be much more significant, therefore receiving a more special, closer and personalized treatment than if he were a regular customer, since his complain poses a reputational risk; he is not just a regular consumer.

“BEING DIGITAL IS AN ATTITUDE, NOT A MATTER OF AGE OR GENERATION”

The great Internet Agora, with over 2.5 billion people interconnected throughout the world, would be impracticable without the two main access paths for people: search engines, mostly Google in the Western world, and social networks. Google itself registers over a billion name searches every day and the trend appears to be growing. According to the search engine, 81% of young people admit that they look for online information of the other person before going out on a date.

In this great conversational space, to which we are connected 24 hours a day, especially thanks to mobile technology, the most common digital profiles we can find are those of political, business, cultural and civil leaders, who first face an uncertain

environment due to the youth of the new digital platforms, but share an inevitable fate: Being digital. The Y Generation or Millennial Generation, successor to the X Generation, is the first one not delimited by time of birth and context, but through its capability to adapt to the context, that is, being digital is being Millennial, regardless of age or being born in the eighties or nineties; it is a form to connect with the world and to understand it. Being digital is an attitude, not a matter of age or generation.

DEFINING A DIGITAL STRATEGY

1 Objectives: The initial step that must be considered before creating a digital identity is defining objectives. What personal or professional objectives does the interested party have and in which way can social networks help? This question will shape the storytelling, the assets and contents that will need to be developed. The objectives of the strategy should be achieved through the aforementioned points.

In the digital universe, strategy should not always be based on active positioning and proactivity, it can also be merely defensive; what matters is that there is a strategy. The case of Mexican businessman Carlos Slim is quite noteworthy, one of the richest men in the world, with thousands of followers on Twitter and who has never published anything on social networks, yet he owns the channel and has a whole network of assets that allow him to express himself, his messages, to people that want to know more about him. Warren Buffet is another interesting case; he has tweeted in five occasions and grabbed the attention of networks and traditional media every single time.

On the other hand, we can find completely proactive politicians, businessmen, professionals, celebrities, artists, intellectuals or just people that have gained their influence and reputation in Internet thanks to a positioning strategy in their areas of influence, which raises their profile and notoriety and, therefore, their reputation.

2 Assets: Where are the audiences or stakeholders? Depending on the target audience the interested party wants to reach, different channels or platforms should be used in order to plan a strategy. What should be used? Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, a blog... or all of them? Which one suits whom? Pinterest is the perfect channel for women, Instagram for young people and LinkedIn for professionals. In Twitter 3 different accounts might be needed, in Facebook 2, LinkedIn requires an overall strategy and several minor ones..

3 Participation and Segmentation: Once the channels and objectives have been defined, it is time to start generating contents. It is important to take into account that each content must be published in the adequate channel in an appropriate manner for each audience. In the Internet, more than ever, a picture or a video, meme, media room, infographic... is worth a thousand words, well accompanied by 140 characters or a small introductory post.

It is often said that content is the king on the Internet, but it should also be added that segmentation is the Queen. It is essential that each piece of content really reaches the appropriate stakeholder, saying and repeating the same to everyone is simply not enough; people have different conversations depending on the person they are addressing in their daily lives, the same is not said to everyone or, at least, not in the same manner. Therefore, it is important to have a PR 2.0 strategy, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) or even, not saying a word and merely doing things



People mutate throughout the day.

that generate conversation of other people over oneself, for example, with offline meetings. Every time Apple launched a new product they implemented scarcity marketing strategies, i.e., deliberately distributing a reduced number of their devices to form queues in front of their stores, for example in New York, which translated into positive feedback from the media and social networks commenting the revolution that each launch entailed.

4 Active listening: To have a dialogue, it is not enough to speak or generate contents, it is also necessary to consider the context, the situation, the circumstances, for which it is essential to listen and know the position one wants to take, who is taking part, who is not, what is being said about oneself, what are the trendy topics within the group we wish to support, what are the thought of other leaders, what risks pose the conversation, what opportunities does it offer, what are our opponents saying... as Plutarch once said: "Know how to listen and you will profit even from those who talk badly".

5 Measurements and Indicators: In order to grow and apply a successful strategy, it is important to have a reference that shows the achieved progress. The Internet offers many measuring tools that allow us to quantify what has been achieved in terms of digital notability and notoriety, which promotes a good reputation and, in turn, must be reflected in the achievement of objectives. If a politician develops a digital identity strategy, his main success or failure indicator depends more on achieved fundraising and vote intention increases than on popularity improvements.

THE MOST INFLUENT DIGITAL PROFILES

Just like in society, the most noteworthy people in the fields of economy, culture, entertainment and politics are the most

influential in the digital realm and those who can benefit the most from the breadth and scope that the Internet offers, although they do not always know how to plan their digital strategy, whether out of fear or ignorance:

- **Business leaders:** According to an IBM study, only 16% of CEOs in the world use social networks in the interest of their companies, even though a vast majority considers it to be essential and believe that their companies need to adapt and take advantage of the options that the Internet offers. The objective is to assist in adding value for their business, protecting its reputation and positioning the enterprise as a leader in an attractive, credible and powerful manner.
- **Celebrities or offline influencers:** Someone who is already influential outside the digital realm will increase his reputation, attractiveness, credibility and power once he enters the online world. Internet amplifies the scope and presence of celebrities, multiplying the opportunities for a person to be renowned for his position, performance or work as a leader, whether it is in the field of science, culture, entertainment...
- **Politicians:** They are the main drivers of digital identity implementation. The Obama 2.0 model was the forerunner of political communication strategies, based more than any other institution on the leaders' personal side. Nowadays, every single politician has a digital strategy, not only regarding self-promotion and campaign within social networks, blogs, 2.0 channels, apps... but even as the cornerstone of their proposals or initiatives: The Open Government Model, Big Data Management or Citizen Service 2.0 are now part of the governments, which find in the Internet a platform to open themselves, interact and democratize information and dialogue, giving even more power to the citizen, who knows and looks for the responsible person behind each initiative.



>> **Juan Arteaga** is the Online Communication Director for Latin America. He holds a degree in Information Science, has 15 years of experience and specialized in the field of Online Communication. Prior to joining LLORENTE & CUENCA, he worked as a journalist in newspapers, TV and radio and directed the magazine *Marejada* in Santander, Spain. In Mexico he worked in the field of corporate communications for the Spanish Embassy, the Basque Government, the Xunta of Galicia, the Government of Cantabria, the Ministry of Health of the Government of Mexico and several Spanish multinational companies, such as Telecom & Novatecno, Fagor Industria or Leche Kaiku. In Llorente & Cuenca he has collaborated with Coca Cola, Kellogg's, Starbucks, GE and AXA Insurance among others. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal Reforma*, *Gadgets* section and a speaker at events such as the *Campus Party*, *SME Week*, the *Community Manager Summit* and the *International Symposium on Communication of the TEC in Monterrey*, among others.

d+i LLORENTE & CUENCA

d+i is the LLORENTE & CUENCA Ideas, Analysis and Trends Centre.

Because we have a new macroeconomic and social script. And communication is not lagging behind. It is progressing.

d+i is a global combination of relations and exchange of knowledge that identifies, focuses and transmits new communication patterns from an independent position.

d+i is a constant flow of ideas moving ahead of new trends in information and business management.

d+i LLORENTE & CUENCA exists because reality is not black or white.

www.dmasillorenteycuenca.com