

>> Deconstructing Communication

Speech of José Antonio Llorente, Founding Partner and Chairman of LLORENTE & CUENCA, in the Plenary Session "Deconstructing Communication" of the World Public Relations Forum 2014

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It is a great honour and a huge satisfaction for me to take part with you in this opening session of the World Public Relations Forum organised by the Global Alliance and the Spanish Association of Communication Directors.

And not only because it is being held in Madrid but also because, thanks to the Spanish and Latin American experiences accumulated by LLORENTE & CUENCA, the company I chair, that have shaped both the company's development and my own, I believe we can share our understanding of **professional communication management** and achieve a truly global picture of the current status of communication management at a time when the "green shoots" of recovery are starting to appear in Europe.

I mention Europe in particular because I would like to stress how the Latin America I know for professional reasons represents, today, a source of modernity, of vitality, regeneration, dynamism and hope. There are still difficulties but the broad variables of development in the region's countries are strongly positive and promise an essentially bright future.

The **American continent** as a whole has become the planet's core region because the Atlantic has been counterbalanced,

in terms of influence, by the Pacific with the subsequent appearance of the "emerging countries", which are emerging not only in economic but also in social and cultural terms. Here the development of communication management, the construction of political, corporate and other types of reputations, represents a promising new horizon containing a wealth of possibilities and opportunities.

At present, any **diagnosis** of communication and its professional management, insofar as the critical aspects are concerned, necessarily requires us to refer back to the great recession that began between 2007 and 2008, a recession that started in the United States but developed most virulently in the countries of the Old Continent.

During those two years, great business realities collapsed almost overnight and, lying injured under the rubble was the **narrative** that had supported the business and social development of both emblematic corporations and organisations.

The great recession therefore also brought about another **crisis** that has been, and is still being felt today; namely the reliability of the communication being sent out to the markets and stakeholders by organisations that vanished into thin air or were at least seriously damaged by the recession.

As a result of the tough economic crisis and its repercussions, western society as a whole has become much more sceptical about and can even react negatively to the content being transmitted by firms, organisations and other social entities, about themselves and about their performance.

In other words: we are now faced with a society that understandably **mistrusts** those corporate and social spheres and organisations that have played a vital part in these years of crisis, be it directly or indirectly.

Our first challenge is to assume that we must restore trust and credibility and carry out the difficult task of managing communication in the face of a mistrustful, cautious and now much more demanding social audience than a few years ago. An audience that is also much more autonomous in terms of how it handles its information sources, more empowered with instruments for interaction, more capable of collective pressure and with a greater awareness of its rights and powers.

The crisis and its consequences, especially political, have reformulated what citizenry means. **Citizenry** has become a less social and more political concept because citizens are



no longer merely the members of a group but, as a whole, constitute an emerging autonomous power that expresses itself and its demands not only before public authorities but also private and cultural bodies and, in general, before all those with the power to affect collectives and communities.

Essentially, what citizens are demanding is **transparency**, another of the mega-concepts of our time. And it is not enough for public authorities to implement legal mechanisms so that citizens can judge their work. This demand is also aimed at social spheres which, until now, had been exempt from such requirements.

This challenge of delivering transparency is a great new **opportunity** because it will serve, and is already doing so, for us to re-examine our professional procedures and models, to redefine and improve them. And also to set new goals that perhaps were not even considered previously.

This far-reaching shift in the communication **paradigm** is not only related to the mass emergence of new technologies and specifically social networks; neither is it merely the rough patch the more conventional media are going through.

These two issues are having an incredibly direct effect on us because both the Internet and the media are going through a crisis, albeit for different reasons.

The **Internet** because it has deconstructed the management of the boundaries of information-communication circulating on the Internet into a range of formats, while the conventional media, plunged into a severe and sustained recession in terms of audience, reach and earnings, are now debating their editorial and business model.

Both the Internet and the **media** are being affected, albeit in differing ways, by the lack of trust and reliability affecting communication in general. And this is generating a highly interesting debate which we must get involved in. Precisely because we cannot ignore the great issue of our time, we must express the belief that democracy is still alive and kicking, not only because elections are held, but also because the prevailing rights and freedoms of speech and information are still valid.

To be effective, both rights and freedoms require media that provide good quality content with added value. A democratic system is inconceivable without **independent, critical media**. At this time of crisis we should remember the former President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, who said "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter". And without forgetting Winston Churchill who stated, in one of his memorable quotes, that "A free press is the unsleeping guardian of every other right that free men prize".

Above all, this new paradigm means that communication must provide added value in terms not just of notoriety but also **noteworthiness**; in other words, a positive perception achieved by constructing a renewed concept of reputation, and doing so through the many different channels available to reach predetermined audiences and stakeholders. What is essential is not the knowledge of a reality but the fact that this is conveyed positively and matches the actual situation. We must therefore take on board the fact that **truthfulness**, as a feature of our work, now forms part of the hard core of our professional services.

Because reputation perceived as the positive, credible impression attributed by society and stakeholders to the organisation or figure doing the communicating is precisely what has been destroyed. Now reputation must be supported by real solvency, by **checkable data**, by true facts. Our challenge is to make sure

our work once again calls upon those attributes that cultivate society's trust

Our function must therefore be to transform the negative attributes assigned to our clients and to create aspects of their identity that are attractive to and compatible with the new social values of today, namely transparency (which I have already mentioned and which has now become an inalienable civil virtue), efficacy, solvency and **responsibility**.

To be blunt: we are required to manage communication that is profoundly ethical in substance. And, in this case, ethical substance means communicating the facts, the reality, and not merely a slogan or euphemism. No longer can politics or business endure the old habits of a banal propaganda that fails to convey the trust and truths on which reputation is founded and without which any leadership is misleading and therefore fleeting and fickle.

This **ethical** mandate is not limited to our industry: it is widespread and particularly affects politics, whose most traditional criteria and approaches are also going through a crisis because of the inescapable demands now being made by citizens.

Let us therefore put aside anything may be seen as a trick, a half-truth or cover up. Because reputation is no longer compatible with the practices associated with that unfortunate time when the potential for manipulation was tempting because society and citizens weren't aware, unlike now, of their power, of the radical role they can play.

A **moral approach** to communication is one of the core elements in the new paradigm of relations between business, society, politics, culture and also citizens.

And this is the case not only because of the need for ethics but also because society has discovered and optimised new ways and methods to interact without resorting to intermediaries, both between citizens themselves and between citizens and the powers that be.

That is the role played by **social networks**, in which communication professionals must work at a variety of levels, from listening to learn and spot new trends to playing an informative role in constructing the communication narrative and therefore reputation.

I would like to stress just how important the **digital fingerprint** is; a mark that might be indelible if we cannot stop the digital memory from becoming a permanent stigma when this doesn't match the reality which, unfortunately, happens all too often on a network that, due to its very nature, is reluctant to accept rules of engagement and codes of behaviour.

We must also remember that, now, there is no such thing as "public opinion" (a vast and imprecise concept) but rather public opinions, sectors, segments and stakeholders; all of which means that a communication deluge must be replaced by a selective sprinkle of messages.

Globalisation means that the narrative within communication now has varying speeds but it also specifies niches of interest. Our work must therefore include sociology and other disciplines to assess our communication and ensure it's effective.

Consequently, our relationship with the traditional media, which is still important, must be redefined because they have gone from being an almost unique stakeholder to becoming just one more, albeit a substantial one, as I have already said; the media now form part of a wider range of **stakeholders** with vital persuasive powers.

I would like to point out three aspects which I believe are fundamental to this new paradigm..

Firstly, the need for our management and actions not to occur subsequent to the facts that are going to constitute the narrative: we must be present in those decisions that determine the communication, albeit in our corresponding area.

We therefore advocate, or at least we should, that communication should become a **strategic lever** for added value in managing the interests of the corporate, social or political organisation or figure we are serving.

The second aspect of this new paradigm lies in the need for the communication **narrative to be accepted as a key management discipline** *per se* and consequently, once launched, our clients should be motivated, internally and at all levels, to ensure it is as effective as possible.

The communication variable thereby **adds value** and becomes an integral part of our clients' overall strategy for action.

From this standpoint we come to the inevitable conclusion that communication must include aspects that had previously been excluded from its scope. And one aspect more than any other: namely that communication forms part of the corporate intelligence of firms and organisations and is therefore **multidisciplinary**, because it affects a **"conversation society"** with ever-expanding interaction and areas of interest.

The third aspect of the new communication paradigm that I would like to highlight is the concept of "grassroots" or **close contact with citizens**.

As pointed out by numerous surveys and opinion polls, those companies and other kinds of organisation that are closest to citizens achieve the greatest credibility, trust and empathy in society. It's therefore important to work on the concept of

virtual close contact, created by knowing how to manage a digital technology that's advancing at breakneck speed.

At the same time, the recipient impacted by the knowledge we are working with (because communication is the **management of knowledge**) is no mere anonymous abstraction. This recipient must be defined, take shape and be appreciated. We must target a specific citizen, not an amorphous, depersonalised mass. Within the general socialisation of our time, the individual is asserted just as strongly as the group.

I am now coming to the end of my presentation of some ideas whose aim, as I mentioned at the beginning, is to encourage reflection at this World Public Relations Forum which I am sure is going to be of huge significance, and which I would like to finish with a thought regarding our professional function.

Milestones such as this Forum must surely help to spread the belief, which is not as widespread as it should be, that managing communication at any level is a professional activity that has acquired, in its practices, an increasingly more **sophisticated approach** and, in its professionals, **high academic qualifications** and, of course, great know-how.

Consequently, we should, as in other professions, prepare ourselves for **encroachment** and establish mechanisms that uphold our **professional ethics**.

I should like to finish by **thanking you for your attention** and by saying that this World Public Relations Forum will undoubtedly be an unprecedented success at this crucial watershed in communications, something which we are all aware of. And because we realise this, sharing our experiences, methodologies, procedures and protocols will strengthen our profession and turn this great event into what was predicted by the Chairman of the Spanish Association of Communication Directors, Jose Manuel de Velasco: the Olympic Games of communication.



>> **José Antonio Llorente**. Founding Partner and Chairman of LLORENTE & CUENCA. He is a specialist in Corporate and Financial Communication, with over twenty-five years of experience. He currently sits on the Board of Trustees of the Euroamérica Foundation, the Advisory Council of CEOE International and the Steering Committee of the Spanish Association of Minority Shareholders of Listed Companies. He is also a member of the Advisory Council to SMEs of the Spanish Confederation of Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises, the Steering Committee of the Agencies of Spain Association and the Advisory Council of Executive MBA in the Management of Professional Services Organisations. He received the SABRE Award for Outstanding Individual Achievement and the award to Outstanding Partner of the Year from the National Federation of Consultancy, Services and Office Associations (Spanish acronym: FENAC).

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