

## >> **Early identification of social media opinion trends is crucial in crisis management**

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One of the main challenges currently faced by communication professionals is the growing difficulty of managing corporate reputation crises. The digital media and the social media are mainly responsible for this change, given that they have exponentially increased the visibility of an organisation's risk, while amplifying the extent of any incident, and can thus make a corporate reputation that it has taken years to build wobble in a matter of minutes. Let us take a look at a practical example.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED IN RECENT YEARS?

The year is 2000. There are no Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn yet. A crisis breaks out. A trade union accuses a company, during a press conference, or carrying out the concealed lay-off of hundreds of employees. All the communication protocols are activated. After the relevant explanations, only a few media spread the news, with minimal news time or space, and always including the company version. No significant impact. The crisis is defused.

**The year is 2014.** Millions of people all over the world interact on Facebook (+1,150), Twitter (+500) and LinkedIn (+238). A risk is identified. Month after month, critical comments against labour conditions in the company spread in the social media. They are not a majority, but they are gradually becoming influential.

**Incident.** One day, the leader of a workers' association shares this message on his Twitter profile: #HiddenDismiss-

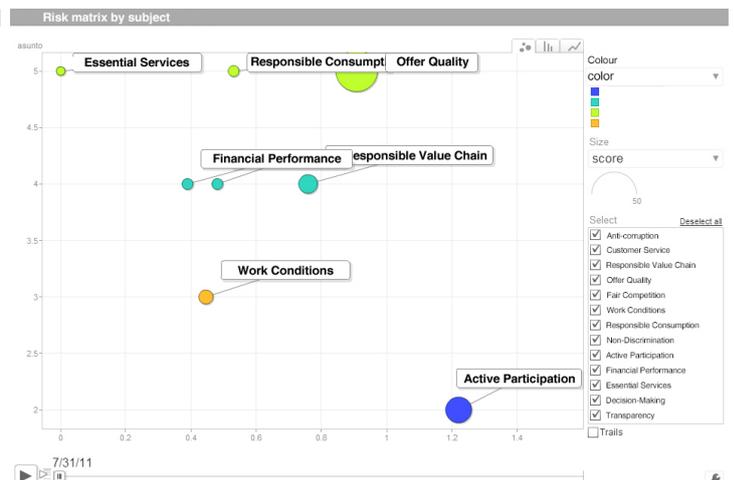
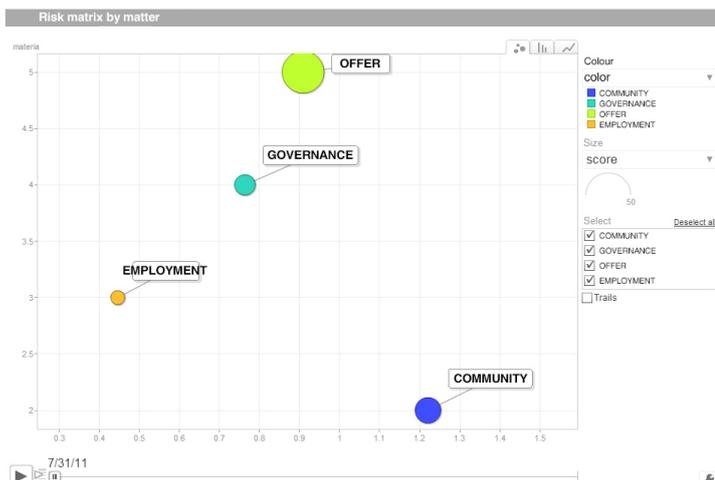
al. New layoffs in the Company. 500 so far this year. No more job destruction. (Original tweet in Spanish: #EREencubierto Nuevo despido en la Compañía, y ya van 500 este año.)

**Warning.** Hundreds of his thousands of followers start to answer and retweet his comment. Influential journalists and activists engage in the conversation. Some link news published years ago to strengthen their arguments. And some people even try to involve politicians with an online presence in the polemic.

The warning lasts several hours, but does not grow beyond that. In the same way as it appeared, it disappears. It leaves no trace in the news or posts about the matter. There was no need to intervene, beyond answering some users on the company channels by means of a generic message of trust, linking to the labour policies posted on the website. Just one more warning.

**Crisis.** That weekend, a newspaper publishes a report on work conditions in the Company. The crisis protocol is activated. Requests for answers from the media, organisations, and private citizens pour in. On the phone, by email... and through social media. It never rains but it pours..

**Lesson learnt:** social media can be an excellent tool to monitor reputational risks, which, if correctly used, can help us to prevent and prepare for potential communication crises.



**NEW ENVIRONMENT, DIFFERENT FEATURES, NEW CHALLENGES**

In the last 14 years, a significant technological change has taken place which will continue to grow in coming years, driven by the expansion of mobile technologies. This new outlook is transforming the social communication model. Luckily, over the last few years we have learnt to distinguish the main features of this new environment:

- **The boom of online and social media has increased companies' reputational risks, as well as the difficulty of managing communication crises.**

What networks mainly do is amplify the extent of crises by making the public's reactions visible to journalists, politicians, and other opinion makers. What used to be restricted to private conversation has now taken on a public dimension. What used to be restricted, at the very most, to occasionally appearing in a newspaper or the TV news – a topic which was forgotten the following day – now remains visible for a longer time thanks to the digital versions of the media, which all enable their readers to share their contents on social media, making them viral.

Moreover, the impact of search engines (Google, Yahoo, etc.) should also be taken into account, as they make it possible for any individual to find information of any kind just by clicking. This is what is known as the "digital footprint", which has particular impact on online communication crises. The traces of past news or events remain accessible through search engines, and can be used as arguments by hostile users. For this reason, once a crisis is over, contents should be generated to counter this negative footprint.

- **Social media have also become an excellent early-warning monitoring system: crises do not break out unexpectedly on the Internet.**

Not everything is negative. Contrary to popular belief, most crises do not break out unexpectedly on the Internet. Qualified listening to online conversations frequently identifies incidents or warnings that help communication managers to perform prevention work (arguments, specific contents, etc.) which would otherwise be impossible.

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- **We have gone from "mass communication" to the "communicating mass". Individuals are not the main agent in public communication thanks to online social media.**

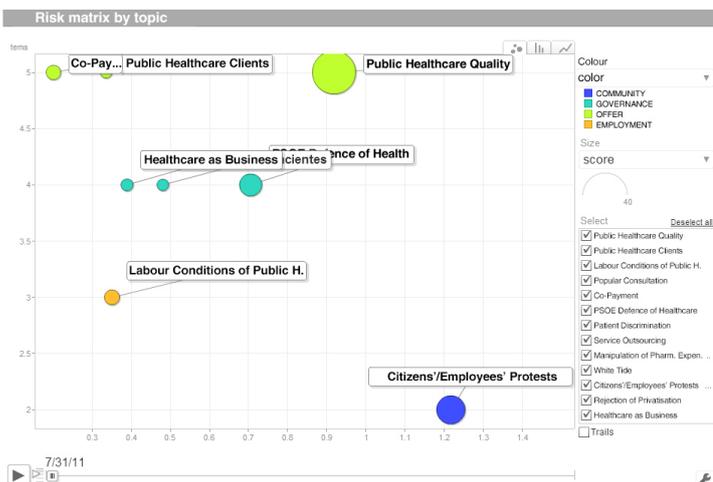
Individuals have never had such a capacity for virtual and real influence, and they can interact with opinion makers on the Internet. From the point of view of crisis communication, this change in the communication paradigm entails every company's need to listen to individuals' voices, as they are becoming, more strongly than

ever before, the main audience to take into account when managing an organisation's corporate reputation. Inasmuch as individuals freely express themselves through social media, it is necessary to listen to them and even interact with them. In this way, social media, as well as a very efficient monitoring tool, are also a thermometer to measure our reputation.

- **Experience has taught us that there is no mathematical formula to calculate a crisis, and that the best way to prevent or minimise a crisis is risk prevention.**

To evaluate if we really are facing a crisis an exhaustive monitoring in real time of each of the incidents and warnings found would be required, with historical information that provides relevant references.

Incidents are identified every day; some of these incidents, very few, really become warnings; and even fewer of these warnings become crises. There are, however, two factors that really indicate that we are facing a crisis. Firstly, the persistence over time of the critical conversation in social media, with notoriety levels above the usual average, regarding a brand, company, institution, etc. Secondly, the transfer of that conversation from one online community to other ones, through influential people that act as "connectors" between different stakeholders. Put otherwise, when the conversation volume about a topic is higher than usual for a long time and when the people who are sharing contents belong to different stakeholder communities (environment and economy, or labour activists and clients, for example), it can be said that there is a crisis.



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The best way to minimise or counter an online communication crisis is to work on prevention. The first step consists in previously having contents with a human aspect, real, believable stories, and visible data that generate at least the benefit of the doubt for the company. The best solution is multimedia formats and sharing information through the company’s corporate channels. Previous work towards governance and information transparency, creating and improving the online assets available to the company in order to turn them into the basis support for contents will be very useful to manage a communication crisis if it does break out.

“The most advanced organisations start to become aware of the potential of tools that identify risk trends on the Internet, and how they can help company managers to prioritise resources for prevention and preparation as regards potential communication crises”

Why Twitter? The answer is simple:

- **Due to its accessibility.** It is an open source that provides access to the historical archive of tweets published all over the world by its thousands of millions of users through qualified providers that also provide relevance and influence indices.
- **Due to its influence.** This is the main social network in which the agents that we regard as influential in public communication tend to take part.
- **Due to its topicality.** Twitter is the real-time social network par excellence, where the most information (events) regarding companies’ behaviour tends to be shared.

- **Due to its connectivity.** Due to the 140-character limit, Twitter encourages linking to other contents (news in the media, posts in blogs, etc.), becoming a genuine Internet hub.

### A QUALITATIVE LEAP IN EARLY DETECTION OF WARNING: FROM ACTIVE LISTENING TO TREND LISTENING

Of all that we have learnt in this new environment, what is possibly most important is the fact that most crises do not break out unexpectedly on the Internet. Thus, in order to prevent them or at least minimise their impact, it is important that companies have a monitoring system that is able to detect any potential risks that might have an impact on their reputation.

Active listening to social media is a widespread practice among leading companies that are already aware of the risks entailed by the Web and the need to monitor it. But experience tells us that, for stronger control of the warnings that involve risks, it is necessary to go beyond traditional listening to create a monitoring tool to identify risk trends. The purpose of a good online risk monitoring tool is to classify and arrange the corporate behaviours (milestones) that are most likely to generate favourable impacts, which would be known as opportunities, or unfavourable impacts, which would be the threats to the company’s reputation. This makes it possible to be aware of a company’s reputational status at one glance. But it goes further: an online risk monitoring tool must offer, as a real added value, detection and analysis of the evolution of those risks and opportunities over time, enabling the prevention of communication risks inasmuch as it makes it possible to identify trends.

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### FEATURES THAT A GOOD ONLINE RISK MONITORING TOOL SHOULD HAVE

The analysis that an online risk monitoring tool should perform is based on the concept of “reputational risk” through the statements published in Twitter (tweets) about a certain company or manager during a specific period of time and in a specific geographical location. A tweet is seen as a statement about a company’s corporate business by the company’s stakeholders, who convey impacts for or against the company.

Analysis of the information compiled in Twitter should be performed by means of a methodology that includes at least these three main steps:

**1 Classification.** Twitter mentions should be analysed by hand –hundreds of tweets– and classified into categories according to the corporate behaviours to which they refer; and also to the shareholder groups that share them. International standards and guidelines such as ISO 26000 and GRI 4 are suitable to define the categories that constitute the basis for the analysis.

For example, in the case taken as an example in this paper, the category would be ‘Work’; the corporate behaviour might be ‘Layoffs’ or ‘Labour conditions’; and the stakeholder would be ‘Activist’.

**2 Metrics.** To measure the favourable or unfavourable impact of the expressions under analysis, a threat or opportunity probability index should be created on the basis of the following dimensions:

- Valence: negative, positive, or indefinite meaning of the expression;
- Notoriety: level of centrality of a certain event or milestone in the conversation;
- Influence: degree of participation of influential users;
- Groups: degree of engagement of different stakeholders;
- Persistence: continuity of the expressions about a specific event during a period of time

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**3 Ordering.** As a reference to evaluate the expressions in terms of reputation, a relevance index to apply to

event categories should also be defined, on the basis of materiality matrices, risk maps, and other evaluation tools provided by companies.

As a conclusion, it is clear that communication crises have always existed, exist, and will always exist. What changes is the communication environment. In this new context, digital media and social networks play the main roles because many of the

crises emerge in them, and when they break out, the difficulty in managing those increases. But networks also serve as a great ally for early detection. In fact, the Web has currently become the best ally to prevent crises. For this reason, a good online risk monitoring tool makes it possible to analyse conversations in order to identify risk trends, placing the focus of attention in the most concerning ones, which helps to decrease the impact on a company's reputation if a crisis breaks out.



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