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ARTICLE

STORYTELLING VS. STORYDOING: HOW TO REGAIN CITIZEN TRUST

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In our era of fake news, deepfakes, bots, farms and other “Goebbelsian” methodologies, manipulators will not hesitate to repeat lies until they sound true, all while using big data to tell their audiences whatever they want to hear. In this contentious environment, why do we put facts before words?

As a result of the digital revolution, communication and marketing professionals (ourselves included) have begun focusing on companies’ storymaking, putting storytelling on the backburner. Both ethics and aesthetics are in a constant battle for consumer trust. For this, we must ask: Are facts more powerful than words, or does reality follow perception? To use a Mexican saying: Is it a matter of laying an egg, or merely crowing?

The Netflix documentary *The Great Hack* explains the role Cambridge Analytica (now known as Emerdata) played in the most recent U.S. presidential elections, as well as the ongoing Brexit referendum. It is clear to see that we are currently living in an age of misrepresentation via data manipulation. It would seem that technology ultimately feeds the conspiracy theories that the world is being controlled by big data corporations at the behest of global powers. Are we as citizens

really better informed because of the internet, or are we actually more misinformed? Are we the victims of new technologies, only seeing what we want to see and having our positions reaffirmed and radicalized? Jehane Noujaim¹, the documentary’s co-director, says “data has now become the most valuable asset in the world, more than oil.”

In 2018, the prestigious journal *Science*² published a study by MIT specialists Sinan Aral, Soroush Vosoughi and Deb Roy. Analyzing over 4.5 million messages from roughly 3 million people between 2006 and 2017, they estimated there are 48 million bots on Twitter and 60 million on Facebook, though their numbers are increasing exponentially. A major conclusion of the study was that untruthful content travels further and faster, moving more deeply and broadly than true content. This is especially true when the misinformation is related to urban legends, terrorism, natural disasters, science or finance. “Fake news has a 70 percent chance of being replicated... while the truth is rarely shared with over 1,000 people, 1 percent of the most viral fake news is routinely shared with 1,000 to 100,000 people,” said the study’s authors.

¹ BBC News, July 26, 2019: Cambridge Analytica: how Netflix portrays the biggest privacy scandal on social media in *The Great Hack*

² D. Lazer at Northeastern University in Boston, MA et al., “The science of fake news,” *Science* (2018).

WHY IS THIS?

According to the same study, bots do not distinguish between real and fake news; they disseminate all information similarly. As such, the biggest perpetrators of misinformation are, in fact, people. Human beings are more likely to share fake stories that induce intense anger, distress or fear than they are to share true news, which often spark sadness, apprehension or trust. These latter emotions do not spur us to action in the same way, instead leading us to interact with this information more passively.

“The key to rebuilding this trust is transparent and proactive communication”

As such, it appears as if there is much cause to be pessimistic. Modern society is falling victim to a veritable tsunami of campaigns to manipulate and poison information. To make matters worse, rather than fighting this phenomenon, it is we the public who appear to be fake news' greatest ally, letting ourselves be driven by our knee jerk reactions instead of reason.

DO WE BELIEVE THE LIES?

According to a July 2019 study by the Pew Research Center³, Americans distrust the media, but consider government figures and political leaders even less trustworthy. Nearly 69 percent of U.S. citizens believe the federal government intentionally hides important information from the public, while 61 percent believe the same of the media. Almost two thirds of respondents believe it is difficult to ascertain the truth from what elected officials say, and almost half feel the same way regarding information on social

media. This study underscores Americans' growing distrust in institutions and public officials, circumstances which could make finding solutions to social and political problems even more difficult.

This phenomenon is not limited to the United States. According to the “Latin American Economic Outlook 2019” study, carried out by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)⁴, around 64 percent of Latin Americans distrust their national governments.

A good example of this distrust was seen in Mexico after the Sept. 19, 2017, earthquake, which measured over 7 on the Richter scale, leaving dozens dead and thousands affected. The hashtag #verificado19S (“19Sverified”) spontaneously went viral, completely independently of the media and the government. Meanwhile, the government and media were heavily criticized and accused of capitalizing on the disaster to curry political favor. The hashtag helped prevent the dissemination of rumors and fake news, while itself disseminating actual resources for victims. Google Maps was used to chart building collapses, shelters and collection centers, and rescue teams were mobilized to save those trapped. As the www.verificado19s.org⁵ website explains, the hashtag enabled resource needs to be met in real time, as they were detected. The public became significantly more aware, and any fake news was quickly detected and debunked, with the source then pressured to delete it.

This presents a paradox: The rise of online falsehoods that do not gain credibility, but in fact create a lasting state of skepticism. In extreme cases, such as the aftermath of the Mexican earthquake, this skepticism can even give way to dissident activity by the public. Today, the administration, congress, armed forces, police and church, as well as corporate figures, companies and brands, all face heavy scrutiny. This leads us to infer that the role of fake news is not to misinform, but to erode trust and indiscriminately destroy the bonds of trust. That said, misinformation campaigns are becoming

³ S. Vosoughi et al., “The spread of true and false news online,” Science (2018).

⁴ El Universo, July 3, 2019. “Estadounidenses “desconfían” del gobierno y los medios, según una encuesta del Pew Research Center.”

⁵ “Perspectivas Económicas en América Latina 2019: Desarrollo en transición.” OECD.

increasingly common, both in the business world, where companies and brands must contend with attacks from competitors and governments, and in the public sphere, where bots and farms take point on persuading an increasingly distrustful and skeptical populace.

Many communication professionals believe the key to rebuilding this trust is transparent and proactive communication. However, it is important to consider that we live in an age of information overload, and a story that does not immediately grab the reader's attention will not reach people's hearts, regardless of how well-executed it may be.

RATIONAL VS. EMOTIONAL

The digital revolution is far from over; in fact, what we are seeing is only the beginning. Ten years have passed since smartphones and social media became commonplace, and still technology continues to transform global society every day. Regulation and self-regulation on digital platforms, supported by technology such as blockchain, will certainly help regain trust through transparency, but the influential power of communication should not be overlooked. We must consider not only the rational aspects of messaging, but also the emotional, which play a large role in guiding human behavior.

We as people are moved by feelings, and more specifically, by expectations born of prior knowledge or experience. Trust comes when there is a connection along these channels.

"When we think quickly, we often don't do it right," says Daniel Kahneman⁶, a cognitive psychologist and winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics despite not being an economist by trade. "And the reasons we don't are simple: Because we don't feel good, or because we're not in the right mood. Ultimately, we as people cannot choose the way we feel, and when more complex emotions take control, reality becomes more complicated."

⁶ "La heurística de la afectividad: como sentimos es como pensamos," Feb. 10, 2019.

Prestigious neurologist Antonio Damasio explored this idea further, claiming that the world we live in is too fast-paced to allow for proper reflection, so affectivity becomes the heuristic on which we base our decisions⁷. “What makes humans different from animals is that we make use of fundamental regulatory processes, including things like emotion and feelings, but we also connect them with intellectual processes in such a way that we create a whole new world around us.”

The test of time is slowly but steadily showing us that storytelling and storymaking are no longer at odds, and in fact must exist in tandem, feeding off of each other. One must lay an egg, but the other must then crow to share the news. Successful communication strategies work on both fronts, on both doing (including efforts to meet shareholder expectations) and telling (creating an emotional experience and connections).

This is the only way to win back trust and let people believe in us. This leads to a co-created, cooperative structure, requiring closeness with shareholders to both understand their feelings and to include them in developing solutions. This, in turn, bolsters company strengths and creates opportunities. The institutions, organizations, people and brands that achieve this—using big data to their advantage, understanding stakeholders’ thoughts and feelings and giving a coherent response through their actions—will surely find success and transcend the current business environment. Those unable to meet these demands will likely be condemned as irrelevant or outdated, as ethics and aesthetics are indeed becoming one and the same. A picture may be worth 1,000 words, but as Solon of Athens said, speech is the mirror of action. Solon was one of the Seven Sages of Greece, so he surely had more experience managing a volatile citizenry than any of us.

⁷ MIT Technology Review: “The Importance of Feelings,” June 23, 2014.

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Rogelio Blanco. Managing Director at LLYC in México. Rogelio Blanco has a 15 year long career in the sector and has accumulated experience in countries as diverse as Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Holland. In Mexico, he has worked for important firms in the communication industry, and has held roles with the most utmost responsibility for various years. Rogelio is an expert in corporate communication, reputation management and crisis management. For the past three years he has successfully led the transformation and strengthening process of the area of Corporate Communication here at LLYC. He has collaborated with the management of key projects both for national and international clients, which awarded him various prizes for the excellence and innovation of the implemented strategies.



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Juan Arteaga. Managing Director at LLYC in México. He holds a degree in Information Sciences from the University of the Basque Country in Spain, and he completed an AD-1 program in Business Management at the Instituto Panamericano de Alta Dirección de Empresa (IPADE). He has 20 years of professional experience, 8 in Spain and 12 in Mexico and Latin America. Passionate about the digital world, he offers holistic strategic consulting regarding reputation management, communications and public affairs. This includes both storytelling and storydoing for organizations, always incorporating the latest communication and marketing trends. He enjoys combining his professional work with innovation and teaching, serving as a lecturer on reputation management, new communication trends and digital transformation. He began his career at LLYC in 2008 as a senior consultant, where he pioneered the creation of the Digital Communications area. He initially led this new area for Mexico, and from 2013 on, he began doing so for the rest of Latin America as well. Since 2017, he has been the general manager of LLYC Mexico, leveraging his experience with more than 200 clients and projects in Spain, Mexico and the rest of Latin America to help lead the country office. In Mexico, magazine Merca 2.0 named him one of “50 Marketing Leaders” in 2019, and magazine Expansión named him one of the “30 promesas de los negocios” ranking, honoring younger talent in the business world.

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