

Language and the Internet

Topics on the tone used in
computer mediated communication
for individuals and brands

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*O*nline markets will talk about companies whether they like it or not. People will say whatever they like, without caring whether they are overheard or quoted - in fact, having one's views passed along is usually the whole point. Companies can't stop customers from speaking up, and can't stop employees from talking to customers – and empowering them to act on what they hear.

Rick Levine, The Cluetrain Manifesto
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cluetrain_Manifesto

Abstract

This paper explores briefly the tone of language in computer mediated communication. The reigning discourse online is *social*, it emerges from the interaction of people due to the democratization of publishing tools, the possibility of participation and the use from widespread user generated content. Brands participating in this conversation have a role that differs completely from how they structure and produce their content offline. The inference that derives from different studies is that successful cases are the result of clear rules of participation and human-like interesting discourses for both individuals and brands. Some examples of poor execution exhibit obscure or unclear objectives, lack of a description of the participation process and weak incentives that results in very low audiences. Legally speaking there are two aspects to take into consideration: intellectual property of the content and the possibility of an illicit public offense.

Introduction

Scholars have actively explored how identity and language are manifested in online interactions. Current research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) has revealed interesting trends in the way individual identity is presented, language is used, and interactions have transpired (Calvert, 2002; Crystal, 2001; Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003; Herring, 2000; Turkle, 1995).

Gendered language use in CMC contexts is not very different from that in face-to-face interactions and includes similar features of "verbosity, assertiveness, use of profanity, politeness (and rudeness), typed representations of smiling and laughter, and degree of interactive engagement" (Herring, 2000). There are, however, differences in the modes of CMC, which may have consequences for language use or social interactions. For instance, online chatting differs from the turn-taking patterns of face-to-face or telephone conversation because online posts appear out of sequence, thereby impacting language coherence (Herring, 1999; Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003).¹

Context

In order to analyze language tone, three determining factors of the present state of Internet must be taken into account:

a. Democratization of discourse

The general evolution of the Internet has gradually moved from an initial stage of "translation from the traditional media" to a more democratic model in which any user is able to produce and publish content at no cost and compete with any other large media website.

The first consequence of this transition is the fragmentation of sources: messages are now produced by an unlimited number of sources and can be reached at thousands of millions of interconnected weblogs, videocasts, podcasts, wikis where people find a space to express themselves in the way they choose.

The notion of democracy as it emerges through these claims has two essential components: access to a means of communication, and the right to communicate equally, free from status constraints. These components are inherent in the formal "rules of reason" proposed by the German philosopher Habermas as criteria which must be observed in order for a discourse to be truly democratic:

¹ Gender, Identity and Language use in Teenage Blogs, David A. Huffaker & Sandra L. Calvert, Children's Digital Media Center, Georgetown University

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in the discourse.
- 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
- 2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
- 2c. Everyone is allowed to express his [sic] attitudes, desires, and needs.
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his [sic] rights as laid down in (1) and (2). (1983, p.89)²

This democratization imposes an ethic of absolute truth onto the audience, the brands, and the media: people must be allowed to express themselves like they normally do. This tacit agreement benefits brands built in a close proximity to the public, among other brands of the same segment.

Paul Beelen (Director of “El Cielo” agency, in Chile) states this clearly:

*“There is no significant role for marketing in this scenario unless advertising adapts and changes its language. Customers will want to talk with companies; they will no longer just want to be talked to”.*³

b. User comments

Participation is one of the factors that radicalize the audience of websites. It is nevertheless very difficult to control and it has, in fact, proved to be counterproductive. Such is the case for personal blogs and big audiences, being Julian Gallo’s blog a clear example of it. When he decided to insert an advertising slot in his blog, hundreds of users complained about it and said this could compromise the content’s objectivity and independence. However, his decision of not eliminating these negative comments positively affected his credibility; while erasing them would have probably make his audience diminish considerably.

A growing trend amongst the newspapers most willing to relax their editorial policy is to accept user comments in news articles. In Argentina, for instance, Infobae (www.infobae.com) and Minutouno (www.minutouno.com) display open and moderate comments from users. This serves as a source of traffic because it enlarges the information that is offered of the news coverage, shoots discussions and users get to know not only how the news evolves but also what other people think about the comments they have posted.

According to a thorough study led by Jaime Arguello, words expressing positive or negative emotions are more likely to get a reply and so, they foster the evolution and success of the online community.⁴

b. Emerging use of Internet 2.0

² GENDER AND DEMOCRACY IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION, Susan C. Herring, University of Texas at Arlington

³ <http://www.paulbeelen.com/blog/>

⁴ Talk to me: Foundations for successful Individual-Group Interactions in Online Communities, Jaime Arguello et al., Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburg, USA.

“Online communities are neither built nor do they just emerge, they evolve organically and change over time. Developers cannot control online community development but they can influence it”.

Dr. Jennifer Preece, Social considerations in online communities:
Usability, Sociability and Success Factors
http://www.ifsm.umbc.edu/~preece/paper/8%20herre_chapter.pdf

The interconnection of actors in web 2.0 has helped communities develop a self-regulation logic or shared etiquette in each virtual space. This is a shared asset between the users of the site, who are respectful of the language imposed by the community. In our experience, it is significantly smaller the quantity of users that try "to break" or "to vandalize" the spaces oriented to the participation. The worst thing users can do is not to insult; but to ignore them.

There is also the importance of the production context of each participation is usually intimate. People access these public site from a private space (own home, cubicle in a cyber café) where there is little perception of the potential audience, so users tend to make their discourse more radical. Their language also changes, they write like they speak, with little grammar, using emotional references with short sentences rather than long paragraphs.

From a social perspective, while a community produces data together with accepted community norms, it is not only to encourage community's self-policing behavior but also to increase social consequences like community building, integrating various ideas as well as providing participants with a means for self-representation (Pain, 2004).

At the same time, user-generated content helps reduce administrative time and costs (Kelly, Sung and Farnham, 2002), and with the non-centralized editorial publishing characteristics, the collaboration of distributed user-generated information also has been marked as a democratization of information effect. (Wallace and Van Fleet, 2005)⁵

Successful Examples

Whether it is with integrated campaigns or massive social networks different approaches regarding the allowed tone of conversation have been taken. Several companies have tried to broaden the tone they use to address their potential customers, using colloquial language or conventions far beyond the accepted limits of traditional ATL, with huge success.

⁵ Culture Atlas Infrastructure: A Participatory and Collaborative Perspective, Andrea Wei-Ching Huang and Tyng-Ruey Chuang, Institute of Information Science, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

Case Studies

My Space. Participation and Tone

<http://www.myspace.com>

Youth-orientated social network sites like MySpace are important venues for socializing and identity expression. In a research undertaken by the University of Wolverhampton, MySpace member home pages were used to analyze swearing in the U.S. and the U.K. The results indicate that almost all young MySpaces and about half of middle-aged MySpaces contain some swearing, for both males and females.

“It seems likely that the vocabulary of MySpace is often not too far divorced from that of informal offline communication in mixed gender groups in the extent to which swearing is considered acceptable, if not in the frequency and linguistic forms used. MySpace use is an important part of many people’s lives, particularly for younger people, and so it seems likely that differences broadly reflect wider language use. In particular, it seems that the set of swear words used in MySpace would reflect those considered acceptable in informal conversations with offline friends⁶”.

Marc Ecko: Still Free

<http://www.stillfree.com>



For the “Still Free” brand a campaign was designed with one clear objective: go viral. For that, Marc Ecko resorted to an almost criminal tone. An airplane was rented and painted as AirForceOne, and a home video was taped showing someone leaving graffiti on it. The website that hosted the video clip received millions of visits and motivated the government to investigate if the act had really taken place.

Smirnoff: “Tea Party”

<http://www.teaparty.com>

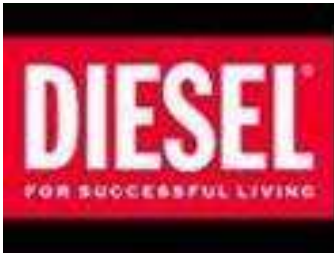
⁶ Cursing and gender in MySpace, Mike Thelwall, School of Computing and Information Technology, University of Wolverhampton, UK



Smirnoff developed a campaign launch for “Smirnoff Raw Tea” which strategy was based on the irony of presenting traditional white millionaires of the East coast rapping against the rich boys of Beverly Hills. The whole campaign is themed by the semantic universe of rap music, but personified by "Prepsta Unit" vs. "Boyz in the Hills". The videos had approximately 7 million views in Youtube.

Diesel: “The Heidis”

<http://www.diesel.com/lockin/splash.php>



A premium brand like DIESEL created a campaign that was based on two characters, female models, that abducted the brand’s official site and “sensually tortured” an employee to force the company into renaming the underwear collection after them: "Heidis". The campaign is over but the website continues online. It has won the GranPrix of the Cyberlions in Cannes with its irreverent language.

Reebok’s “Terry Tate: Office Linebreaker”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzToNo7A-94>



Terry Tate: Office Linebreaker was a series of short comedy TV commercials created for Reebok. The short films feature Lester Speight as "Terrible" Terry Tate, an American Football linebacker who "gives out the pain" to those in the office who are not obeying company policies. The taglines include "The pain train's comin'", "You kill the joe, you make some mo'", "Cu'z when its game time, it's pain time!", "Don't bring that weak ass

stuff up in this humpty-bumpy". After tackling a worker, Terry usually leaves him with a "WOOH!" While the first episode of the series implies that hiring an office linebacker is - as it would be in reality - a highly unorthodox practice (one described as "thinking outside the box"), future episodes depict office linebackers as a common occurrence. Only in Youtube, Terry Tate has been viewed by over 1, 5 million internet users.

Quicksilver: Dynamite Surfing

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JR_naKxLEPc



This campaign was developed by Quicksilver for Scandinavia and Eastern Europe and, although it is still not clear if this was truly done with dynamite, it has now been seen more than 3 million times in Youtube.

Knorr's "Office stories"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMZU7K-vyF0>



Unilever decided to extend to the Internet the successful "animal office workers" series, the graphic animated campaign which acquired high popularity. The reason why they extended this campaign to the digital world was that it was the ideal media to target "the office workers" while they could also allow the characters to say more daring things. In the short videos, two of the characters are "the bribing rooster" and "the metrosexual rhino".

Ford Sports Ka: "The evil twin"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dzi_8Rscfs



This commercial first appeared online in Ireland, and it is the first one of a series of three that Ford still does not officially recognize as their own. Supposedly, these are exercises that an agency did and that should not have reached the public, but it was in line with all of its actual marketing campaign. It generated a massive viral repercussion.

What makes online marketing campaigns fail?

Many online marketing campaigns that base their success on the users participation may fail for a number of factors, some of them, related to the website itself: unclear instructions/task descriptions, confusing website design, lack of process description and poor usability, among others.

Isenbeck “Rugby”

www.isenbeck.com.ar



Isenbeck, a main beer producer in Argentina, developed a campaign based on Rugby, one of their primary communication lines. In its website, the brand invites the public to

invent “a rugby manual” of their own, but the guidelines are not clear enough for the users to understand exactly what they are expected to do, or even what a Rugby Manual is. Although the website has an attractive design with illustrations and decent positioning on the homepage, there are only 14 posts made by users.

Pepsi “Dejá tu foto”

www.pepsi.com.ar



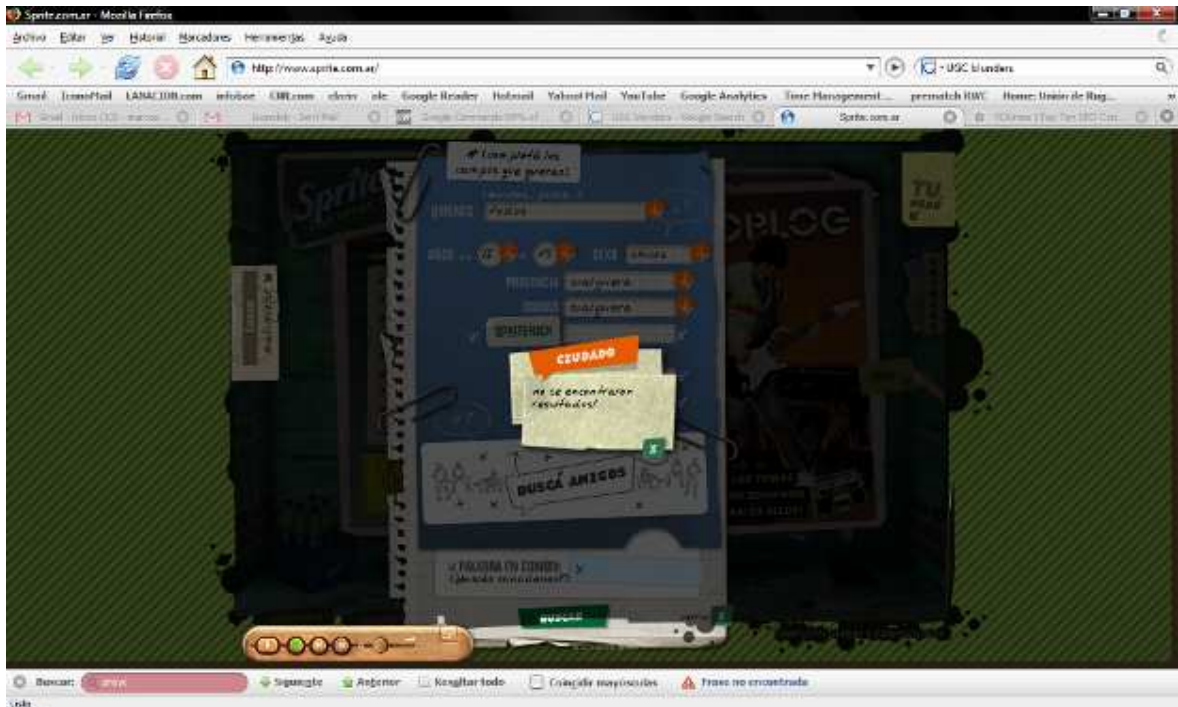
In this case, Pepsi’s website presents only one way for the users to participate and generate content: they can upload a picture of themselves that will supposedly appear on the animated home page. However, when trying to upload a picture file, no information is given to the user whether the file has actually been received and when it will be displayed on the home page. Besides, it is not clear the purpose of this participation and the experience tends to be unsatisfactory.

The design and functionality do not help either, since the user finds it impossible to find the pictures uploaded by other users (if it tries to do so) and will be disappointed when his participation has no immediate output in the website.

Sprite “Busca amigos”

Sprite’s website features a number of applications that invite the user to participate and become part of the Sprite community. However, Internet users have already signed up to more flexible and efficient web services (MSN, facebook) that provide the same tools with a better quality and with a huge number of users. For example, when searching for friends with the Sprite website application, zero results were found, with the widest parameters. It’s useful to quote Metcalfe's law. “The value of a telecommunications

network is proportional to the square of the number of users of the system (n^2).”
Without registered users this portion of the site is hopeless.



Some legal considerations⁷

(This legal commentary is provided as a guideline in terms of Copyright Infringement and/or other illicit acts that could result from audience interaction. It does not address corporate affairs or regulatory requirements)

The well known P2P video portal YouTube (www.youtube.com) is facing several law suits by companies who own the copyrights of many of the videos that have been uploaded by Youtube users without permission or license. Although this it is not the adequate environment to summarize the different jurisdictional decisions that have been emitted on the matter in the world, we can say that it does not exist judicial unanimity regarding the responsibility of the owner of a website on the infractions that their users could commit through systems of P2P. We have no information whether these cases have already got to the court in Argentina, but it is probable that they will arrive at any time, considering the abundant economic losses that the film, records and software industry are supposedly suffering.

It has to be emphasized that Argentina does not hold a law on this matter like the American DMCA, and that the only regulation that can be applied is the 11.723 Law and the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, which punishes the offender that participated actively in the commission of the illicit act, was negligent in avoiding its commission, or took no action when having knowledge of the act. Also in this line, the National Law of Telecommunications (Law 19.798) clearly establishes in its Article 31 that "The regular user of a service of telecommunications is responsible for its use" and so no responsibility would correspond to those who provide the service (of added value) of telecommunications when reasonable and diligent measures are taken to avoid these illicit acts.

Some measures can be taken to help avoid these illicit acts. Pre or Post moderation can be carried out during the publication of the user-generated content by applying filters and "dictionaries of blacklists" of words. Although these tools reduce the moderators' workload, they are not as effective and trustworthy as the human eye.

A characteristic of the communities P2P is its capacity of self-regulation which facilitates the task of control if the adequate tools are established, so that the same users report the contents that can be considered illegal or that can wound third party rights (an example of it can be seen in www.youtube.com).

It is advisable to include visible links and easy procedures so that the same users report the publication of Illicit Content so that it can be immediately withdrawn from the website. This could be done, for example, by including the legend "click {link} here {/link} if by any reason you consider this content is inappropriate and should be removed". That link will shoot an alarm to the moderator referring to the content in supposed infraction or directly "Report to the Moderator". This Content will ideally remain "suspended" until a moderator can assess it.

⁷ Okecki & Peña Attorneys, Memo.

Conclusion

The study of this topic is extensive and this paper is part of ongoing research, nevertheless we can confirm that the irreverent tone and of honest appearance is a decisive factor in the success of a participatory initiative such as this one. Internet users are used to not having barriers when participating with clear rules, while the opposite only distorts, confuses and generates automatic contempt.

Clay Shirky (2002) stresses the nature of the Web itself might offer the solution and we should focus on the logic that “participation matters more than quality” because “there are people who are always worth reading, and people who are usually worth ignoring”. Shirky’s argument specifies that the Web is powerfully edited by itself; however the editorial function is applied at the edges after the piece of information published. The Web serves as an editing mechanism with the character of “publishing first, editing later” model, which has offered the key to unlock the door to the problems discussed above.⁸

In our opinion, the interest in this case will be to see how consumers interpret the campaign and how they use the website. The parameter of success will be in line with the volume of traffic and the depth of the content generated by the community.

Our recommendations for the website to have this type of success are:

*Participation must be as open as possible within the website’s framework.

*A colloquial discourse must be allowed, within the legal and corporate framework, to foster a conversational tone that a young adult would normally have with his friends. This would include both topics and vocabulary, with the need to eliminate comments that are openly and directly discriminatory, offensive against individuals or groups, or contrary to the business which provides the aforementioned service.

⁸ Culture Atlas Infrastructure: A Participatory and Collaborative Perspective, Andrea Wei-Ching Huang and Tyng-Ruey Chuang, Institute of Information Science, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan