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≫ Towards the Digital Transformation of Communication

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In the late 1960s, one of the intellectual creators of the Internet, J.C.R. Licklider, imagined a perfect symbiosis between man and computer oriented towards facilitating communication between people. His ideas propelled the project ARPANET, a precursor of the network of all networks.

In Licklider's vision, people would form communities "not based on a common location, but on common interests," sometimes working "in small groups" and others "independently," but in both cases, the group of communities would be as big as the interactions they would be able to support ("field-oriented programs and data")[1]:

"[…] *What will on-line interactive communities be like? In most fields they will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually. They will be communities not of common location, but of common interest. In each field, the overall community of interest will be large enough to support a comprehensive system of field-oriented programs and data* […]"[2].

Half a century later, that vision has transformed the way humans relate to one another across the entire planet. From the web to social networks, mobile applications, the Internet of Things and virtual realities, changes in the world of business, politics and culture are accelerating.

The so-called "digital transformation" affects everyone, including us, communication, marketing and public affairs professionals. It is clear that, in order to help our organizations earn the favor of their stakeholders, we can no longer use the same old practices and work tools. It is crucial to understand the challenges we face and find the solutions that will allow us to achieve our goals. This is the question we address in this article.

This article is a shared effort by two distinct voices, Sergio Cortés, founder of Cink, an expert in innovation and digital transformation; and Iván Pino, head of the Digital Area at LLORENTE & CUENCA. They discuss the three greatest challenges that, in their opinion, communication currently faces.

AMID AN EXCESS OF CHANNELS, THE CHALLENGE OF GAINING ATTENTION THROUGH BRANDED CONTENT

Iván Pino: TWe still remember those years when audiences followed massive routines when consuming media content. We listened to the early morning radio, read the newspaper while drinking coffee, watched the newscast at noon and a movie or quiz show in the evening… those were the times of the big celebrities, star journalists and anchors that attracted the attention of millions of people. But what remains of those times following the introduction of cell phones, tablets, smart tvs, and the digital explosion of the Internet and social media? Little, very little.

Now our attention is divided among a variety of channels, saturated with thousands of messages from

different sources, some valuable, others not so much so. We watch TV while chatting with our friends on our cell phone or watching something else on our tablet, meanwhile somewhat responding to conversations at home, commenting on a picture on Facebook and downloading something on our laptops. What do we actually pay attention to? What do we remember and to what do we react?

Back in those candid times, it was enough for us communicators to "place" our messages in the mass media, send out press releases or manage inserts, assuming, maybe too much so, that they will certainly reach our target audience. Currently, this assumption is simply ridiculous. The competition for our "audiences"´ attention span is tougher than ever. If we kid ourselves into thinking we can conquer them using the same methods we used to adopt, we are mistaken.

The infoxication due to the increase in channels and the saturation caused by noise pushes us towards a digital transformation of platforms and content formats used to deliver our messages to stakeholders.

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[1] *"In Memoriam: J.C.R Licklider (1915-1990)"* (http://web.stanford.edu/dept/SUL/library/extra4/sloan/mousesite/Secondary/Licklider.pdf)

[2] *"[…] las comunidades de intereses en línea serán comunidades que reposen no sobre una localización común sino sobre un interés común […] aquellos con quienes interactúen más fuertemente habrán escogido según sus intereses y sus objetivos comunes, más bien que en función de azares de la proximidad geográfica. De inmediato, la comunicación será más efectiva y productiva, y en consecuencia, más agradable […]"*
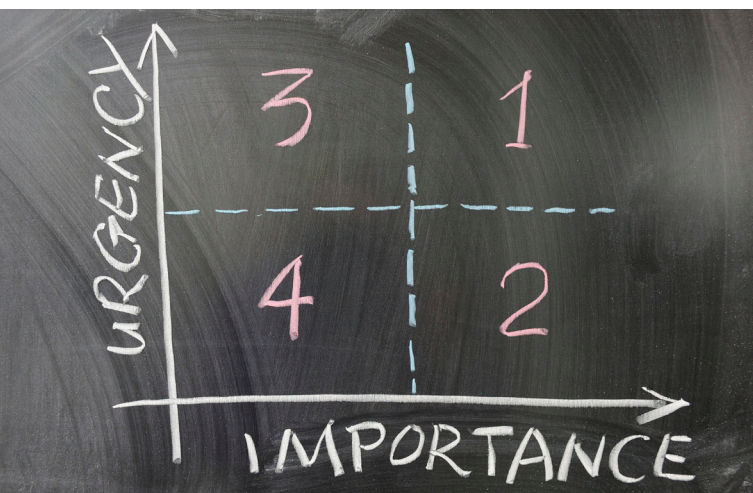
What is the use of motionless web sites, disconnected from networks, designed exclusively for ourselves, without relevant content for others? What are those conscientious financial and sustainability memories worth if no one reads them? How do press releases filled with data and facts that have been traced after other data and facts help us? And those Q&A's for crisis situations designed to respond to a reporter, how do they help us contain the influx of questions and opinions on social media?

Brand journalism platforms, branded entertainment projects and all the new narrative and interactive transmedia formats are essential to fulfill our current function. They all help us capture attention in today's digital ecosystem, led by social media. However, before we know it, the Internet of Things (IoT), will once again revolutionize communication channels. And what will become of our press releases then?

Sergio Cortés: Effectively, innovation in communication also presents us with a good number of omnichannel opportunities. Access to relevant and personalized branded content, in dynamic formats and from a storytelling approach is crucial. But technology moves fast, and its users, even faster. For this reason, we need to deeply reflect on the instruments we use. For example, mobility is not only a strategy we are bound to follow, but a genuine reality.

It is not enough to design channels that are adapted to or visible on the phone. It is not enough to say that we have a mobile strategy because we have proved that our website is "responsive." We need to assume not only "mobile first" concepts, but, in some cases, "mobile only". The process of communication conceived originally from a mobile device that generates a personal bond with the receiver, accompanying him 24 hours a day at an arm's length away. Few companies are pioneers in defining communication formats that are specific for this omnichannel reality.

This is not all. A true revolution of connected devices (Internet of Things) or virtual reality technologies presents us with a real opportunity to reach out to the public in the "here" and "now".

FACED WITH MASS CUSTOMIZATION, THE CHALLENGE OF GETTING RECOMMENDATIONS WITH OUR DIGITAL IDENTITY

Iván Pino: The digital economy is more human than ever before. What a paradox! But yes, humans rely on the recommendations of others when making purchasing or contracting decisions. It has always been like this.

We used to rely on the opinion of friends, colleagues, family and closest neighbors, along with experts that we followed on the media. We now have access to the opinion of strangers as well as many other people who share their experiences and knowledge on social media.

Now think about the business models that keep revolutionizing one industry after another every single day. Take for example Amazon in distribution; Uber in the transport industry; Airbnb in hospitality… You will notice that all of them are based on interpersonal recommendations via digital platforms.

Think now about how these recommendations are transmitted from one person to another through media and social networks. In effect, through people who deserve our consideration. The Internet has empowered each and every one of us, providing us with a means of public expression, independent from the mass media.

How are we managing this relationship within corporate communication? In most cases, we are reproducing the guidelines of mass communication: creating simple corporate or brand channels to disseminate promotional contents, and best case scenario, to systematically communicate with the client through a system similar to that of the telephone system.

Humanizing communication is more urgent than ever. Personalizing content and the channels we use to engage with

> **"Humanizing communication is more urgent than ever"**

stakeholders. Developing the digital identity of business professionals; transforming employees and collaborators into ambassadors of the brand in social media. All of this is possible through the proliferation of mobile devices that transform each one of us into hubs and influencers, beyond our immediate, temporal and spatial environment.

What will become of mobile devices in a few years? What can we presume of technologies such as wearables that enable our entire bodies to become emissaries of information? How will this expanded virtual reality affect our relationships with others?

Sergio Cortés: Communication between users atop of the communication between brands. This is the reality that we face. Wearables allow the maximum level of linkage between the sender and the receiver. Their intimacy level is difficult to surpass in the communication process and promotes a disruptive innovation in the relationship that the client develops with the message.

From this point of view, the opportunities are huge. In the near future, the communication experience will undergo an enriching evolution through the virtualization of personal environments. There will be no need for Internet channels, outlets or customer service to reach the user, and we will be able to create genuine virtual communication environments. The digital transformation also involves new business models surrounding transactionality and product purchases. We are not only referring to communication processes.

FACED WITH SOCIAL HYPER TRANSPARENCY, THE CHALLENGE OF PROTECTING REPUTATION THROUGH SMART LISTENING

Iván Pino: There was a time when reputation was managed by hiding the sins and exhibiting the virtues of the organization and its people. That is how it used to be when the only way of making corporate behavior public was through mass media: television, press and radio. Now that we can all become accidental journalists through the use of our mobile phones, that way of managing corporate reputation is not only questionable but useless.

Through media and social networks, anything, even the most private information, can be published by anyone almost immediately and with a global reach. Never before in the history of mankind had public information had such an incredible latitudinal and longitudinal scope. Hyper transparency forces organizations to act and communicate in a responsible manner, whether they want to or not.

"Responsible" - originating from "responding" - in their relationship with their stakeholders: clients, employees, activists, providers… "Respond to" their actions with transparency, participating in open conversations on social media. And "respond to" the expectations of those who make their sustainability possible, listening with intelligence to transform their words into shared value actions.

In this context of hyper transparency, digital transformation affects not only the way in which we listen to communicators, but the way in which we make use of obtained information.

On one side, we are urged to abandon the "clipping" mode when listening to our environment, reading information only in terms of "impact" and with no other perspective than that of our own "brand." We have at our disposal an enormous amount of conversations in the networks, where stakeholders are in charge of sharing valuable information, openly, voluntarily, and spontaneously. All we have to do is learn how to listen, filtering noise and intentional distortions in order to prevent threats and take note of opportunities. We must evolve from merely monitoring intelligence so that we may understand how influential communities relate to one another in a particular area of communication.

On the other hand, we need to make this information valuable within our organizations. In this hyper transparent world, evasive

or remedial responses are not valid. We demand effective reactions in real time. The substantial difference between communication and reputation is being constantly put to the test; the same goes from mere statements to actual commitments, from words to actions.

The market of monitoring tools that combine semantic intelligence with the use of large data keeps evolving in a competitive manner, offering us increasingly reliable and operational performances. But the "**big data**" universe advances much further and faster than we can imagine. How can it help us listen and make the expectations of our stakeholders count?

Sergio Cortés: The digital transformation of communication is the art of data processing. The data on everything. Technological innovation allows us to explore options previously thought unimaginable in communication. Conducting a more intelligent and personalized communication is not only an option but a necessity. That is why the new digital revolution offers us exciting tools and concepts such as the ability to better identify conversations, categorize them, understand them and extract relevant information from them and their publics. Tracking information models complemented with a new generation of predictive models opens up a whole world of possibilities. Connecting worlds of semantic analysis with new trends of "Machine Learning" or with virtual assistants' products benefits communication, becoming highly valued areas of engagement with our stakeholders. Brands are now capable of responding and addressing their customer's needs in a fast, flexible and personal manner, deeply improving customer satisfaction rates.

The challenge not only lies in the access to data, but in effectively knowing what to do with it from an improved communications perspective. Therein lies the great challenge organizations face.

Let us not forget that ultimately everything is confined to the cultural transformation of the company. Without the human factor, nothing is possible in digital transformation. We must be willing to take on new challenges, risks, be flexible, explore, and endure trial and error. These are concepts we can incorporate to our digital agenda.

Without a doubt, an adventure worth embarking on.

Sergio Cortés is partner of LLORENTE & CUENCA and founder and chairman of CINK. One of the main entrepreneurs in the technology industry, he is an expert in digital innovation, prototyping, and digital transformation. He also develops and manages projects of a high strategic impact for organisations through technical assistance and implementation in the field of innovation and communications, bringing the innovation model applied by the leading start-ups in the market to large companies. He also currently works as an advisor to various organisations, including banks, governments, and charities. He is an industrial engineer and has studied at ESADE. He also took up the Executive Program for Growing Companies at Stanford University in California, and holds a diploma from the MIT Entrepreneurship Center (Massachusetts).

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