

Internet cleansing and its limits

“Every minute, approximately 350,000 tweets, 15-million texts and 200-million emails are sent globally. At the same time, tens of hours of videos are uploaded to YouTube, hundreds of thousands of new files are archived on Facebook servers” (1). As a consequence of social networking and mobile internet ubiquity, the task of deleting and keeping track of information with negative connotation for an organization (or its leaders), seems unrealistic.

In recent years, however, companies offering ‘Internet cleansing’ services have flourished. The goal is to delete or drown out undesirable content through technical or legal actions. Results can be visible, sometimes immediately, but more often than not, they are tedious processes with minimal effect.

Assuming that these services should be accompanied by proactive actions of influence, the potential exists for interests and reputation to be durably preserved.

Threats on the Internet

The number of threats against people or organisations on the Internet is significant. In its report “Organisations’ e-reputation and digital identity”, the GFII (Groupement Français de l’Industrie de l’Information or French Association of Information Industry) reviews the threats and classifies them as follows:

- Negative consumers’ opinions posted on blogs or forums;
- Dissemination of false information, rumours or denigration on the Internet;
- Logo misappropriation, identity theft;
- Phishing, smishing or vishing (3);
- Usurpation, brand infringement, counterfeiting;
- Website hacking;
- Flogs (fake blogs), splogs (spam blogs), cybergripping, cybersquatting (4);

All these threats can harm or even destroy a company’s reputation or that of its leaders. As a consequence, it can be very damaging for the future of the organisation. With the widespread use of the Internet, particularly social networking, corporate branding has also grown in importance, becoming a valuable asset to be protected. Indeed, many agree that reputation is an essential determinant of a company’s value. A recent study by Deloitte quotes the World Economic Forum’s estimating that, on average, 25% of a company’s value is directly related on its reputation (5).

Yet in 1999, the Erika disaster made us aware of this new paradigm, when the Internet was still in its nascent stages. Indeed, civil society stakeholders, such as Greenpeace, or political organisations (i.e. the Greens) were soon publishing images with intent to modify oil company Total’s advertisements, in order to condemn its environmental irresponsibility. Similarly in 2001, following speculative layoffs announcements by

Danone, the NGO Réseau Voltaire relayed the union's claims. It launched, with tremendous success, a Website with images mimicking Danone's brand logo and calling for a boycott.

Internet democratisation, technical access facilities improvement (i.e. wi-fi, high-speed, tablets and smartphone development...) combined with the growth of social networks, create an effective quantitative and qualitative leap. Thus, any individual, wishing to be heard, can effectively use available digital tools to defend his/her interests and positions, without third-party intervention. For example, the Canadian singer Dave Caroll who, after having collected his guitar broken after a flight with United Airlines and, after several unsuccessful applications for refund, decided to use his creative talents to defend himself. He presented his story in a music video broadcasted to YouTube (6) in July 2009. The success was huge as more than 3,5 million people watched the video within three weeks. United Airlines, victim to this bad publicity, resolved to refund Dave Caroll for his guitar. But the following month, the company had to face more than 14,000 new complaints from customers, showing clear evidence of its weak customer service. At the same time, its share price dropped by 10% and United Airlines' reputation was durably deteriorated.

This type of misfortune is not specifically limited to peculiar sectors or big companies. Indeed, during several months in 2008-2010, a former spiteful employee of GECI International (French aeronautics company) posted nearly every day on the Boursorama Forum (7), detailed criticisms with regard to the company's internal operating system and official decisions adopted by its leaders. Without any means or special skills, thanks to his tenacity only, he successfully destabilized a company, already weakened due to a risky development strategy (Skylander airplane). Proportionally, as the quantity of comments posted increased on the forum, which was a popular resource for stock market investors, the more negative repercussions it had on the company's stock market value and reputation, despite many denials and responses from its leaders.

A coalition of several non-coordinated players can also lastingly destabilise a company and its stakeholders. For instance, the illustrator Pénélope Bagieu (being in favour of NGO Bloom's arguments against deep-water trawling (8) and not asked to act as follow) decided to feature the subject in her online comic book. In November 2013, the NGO's dying petition for the ban of this fishing practice achieved a successful viral publicity, thanks to the comic book. This publicity generated a huge number of signatures in only a few days. This popularity led to a negative reputation for the sector's main stakeholders, in particular Scapêche (mass retail group Intermarché), which decided to severely moderate its activity.

According to those few examples, the most efficient and simple solution would be to delete those misappropriated logos, the singer's video, the former employee comments or the petition... Unfortunately, the viral characteristic of those daily posted messages and comments make compulsory that the cleansing, to be efficient, should be done everywhere on the Internet and all the time. But this solution seems to be impossible if some of the key players are famous or popular (at least on the Internet). Moreover, deleting the tracks doesn't prevent the author from trying again. The action of cleansing can be useful, if malicious attacks on reputation are clearly identified, limited and

confined. Thus, generally, information cleansing proves to be only partially effective and ultimately, unpredictable.

The internet cleansing: an incomplete response, even dangerous

In 2013, the company Findus was seriously accused in the “Horsegate” case (the lasagna, which was found to be made with horse meat). In order to minimize the “bad buzz”, the company, with the help of an ‘Internet cleansing’ services provider, threatened social network users, in particular Twitter users, that they would take legal actions if some of them didn’t withdraw their posts about the case (mainly threatening brand infringement lawsuits). If some tweets or posts were deleted, those requests and attempts to clean up the Internet, notably amongst journalists, were quickly detected and broadcasted (9). Thus, Findus, not only had to deal with the crisis concerning its products but also with the fact that the case was perceived as a censorship attempt. Its reputation was even more deteriorated and the company had to redefine a new communication strategy.

Alternate to a direct attempt at simply deleting negative posts, technical and legal solutions can also be part of the management of online reputation.

Unpredictable legal actions

Even if the realisation is long and unpredictable, the total removal of malicious content from the Internet can be obtained through legal and administrative methods. To do so, the company must appear before a judge, with the assistance of a lawyer, and must formerly request the removal of incriminating evidence. This process has to be conducted within three-months after the first online posting. The motives can be the following: excessive use of freedom of expression, unfair competition, intellectual property rights or publicity and privacy rights infringement. Nevertheless, judges can be particularly strict regarding liberty of speech protection and freedom of the press. The results are thus uncertain. Moreover, the Internet is a network without borders and its contents can be hosted overseas. In that case, international initiated procedures can be burdensome, expensive and unpredictable.

Only for a natural person, (companies’ leaders for example), a complaint to the French Information Commissioner's Office (Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés or CNIL) can be submitted. The Commission then submits a subpoena to the hosting service provider, which has the legal obligation to explain its choice to remove or not remove the litigious content.

Moreover, those approaches can generate a storm of negative publicity. This phenomenon is known on the Internet as the “Streisand effect”. In 2003, the famous singer brought legal proceedings in order to have her Californian villa aerial picture, posted among thousands, removed from a poorly visited website. The publicity caused by her legal action created a record number of site visitors, who replicated the content millions of times and widely disseminated the information.

Just like in 2012, when Stéphane Lhomme accused Areva of corrupting the Nigerian State. In February 2014, by suing the anti-nuclear activist (10) for defamation, Areva

actually gave a broader audience to its allegations that are still online (11). These legal actions were indeed counterproductive for Areva as the judge's decision had been relayed in the media.

Partial technical actions

Another method sometimes used is to flood negative results, namely pushing them back further in the search engine results rank. For that, Internet cleansing relies upon the SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) or natural referencng. The purpose is to optimise web pages (structure, keywords) or to develop hypertext links between positive supports for the company or its manager. As a matter of fact, a larger quantity of content can be posted online, preferably on a platform that is well indexed on search engines (participative media, blogs, social network profiles...).

Another way to modify search engine results is to call for the "right to be Forgotten", ensued from a recent decision from the European Court of Justice (12). It allows anyone to ask search engines to de-index embarrassing information. However, fields and conditions of this jurisdiction remain confused and depend on search engines policies, as shown by usual Google practice (13).

Thus, by hiding negative content or using the "right to be Forgotten", embarrassing information can disappear or be hidden; but the information can only be hidden for a while. Indeed, those methods don't have any influence on the context and the origin of the information. Resultantly, it's easy for detractors to open new online spaces and/or to use different wording in order to make the information prominently reappear on the Internet.

Hence, legal or technical actions do not retain lasting effects. They have to be completed – even replaced – by actions of influence, more efficient in the medium or long-term and above all, a proactive approach is paramount.

Beyond cleansing: Influence

The challenge on the Internet is to protect and defend its reputation in an open-space, where infringement can happen any time. Cleansing the Internet, which is a way of resolving crisis occasionally and defensively, is not effective.

In order to protect a company or its leaders, it is necessary to adopt a proactive and anticipative stance. Otherwise, the available online room can easily be occupied by detractors. To do so, it is essential to identify stakeholders and the public. Moreover, knowing potential weaknesses and fragilities of its company/leaders, that can be used by the opponents, through an information audit, is necessary. Based on this knowledge, building its image and reputation becomes a controlled strategy and not only a response to detractors' actions.

Within this framework, beyond typical messages (publicity, marketing, corporate communication...), practices of influence enable new relationships with key stakeholders. It's not only about defending one's self against image or reputation infringement. The goal is to be lastingly recognised as a legitimate and credible

protagonist. It involves regular production of relevant messages and contents via more efficient vectors (website, social network, forums...) according to each respective public expectation and perception.

RTE (Réseau de Transport d'Électricité), EDF branch in charge of electric power transmission, implemented a novel approach to durably withstand destabilization conducted by opponents to high-voltage power line projects. Those communities, toyed with emotions based on health issues, not officially recognized by the scientific community, pertaining to the negative health effects of electromagnetic waves, succeeded in imposing their position on the Internet and in public debates. They could indeed block RTE's projects. In response, the company set up two blogs with interactive and educational contents: "Au-delà des lignes" and "La clef des champs". The first one is a non-specialized blog about electricity, posting an average of three articles a week and including a section "health and fitness". It enhanced participative actions with citizens on this topic and allowed Internet users to post their opinion. The second one, dedicated to electromagnetic fields issues, proposed scientific and educational contents, as little content is present elsewhere on the web. Those initiatives enabled to find a better balance and to encourage more rationality in the debate.

Another example: Areva actively contributes to its Wikipedia pages. This participation has open admission and doesn't aim to remove any negative comments. Alternatively, it attempts to put them into a realistic perspective. Areva can, in this way, add context and further responses, which tends to give a more neutral corporate outlook. There is no content suppression, but a better balance of perspective.

Finally, it's no longer uncommon to see corporate leaders addressing the public directly. Michel-Edouard Leclerc was a precursor by writing a blog (14), allowing him to deliver directly his analysis and opinions on various topics to his readers. From that moment onward, using Twitter or Facebook, even if communication advisors control them, has become compulsory for establishing contact with the real world and broadening the available audience.

Such continuous and interactive actions of influence allow a favourable ecosystem to emerge, being ambassador of its interests and defender of its reputation against potential detractors.

Such a strategy has been implemented by the pharmaceutical company "Laboratoires Expanscience", regarding osteoarthritis. Following the decrease of one of its medication treatment pathology refund subsidies, the company was not only contented itself to defend its arguments on the Internet. It also was required to change its role with all of their stakeholders (patients, practitioners, associations...), providing them with reference material (most notably on the website Arthrolink.com) and by establishing a dialogue on Stop-arthrose.org. By doing so, the pharmaceutical company managed to reinforce ongoing relations with the various existing stakeholders. This series of actions allowed it to anticipate potential harm to its reputation and to directly address each issues in a dedicated space where the pharmaceutical company have a pre-established relationship of trust.



Conclusion

Reputation issues regarding companies and their leaders shouldn't be solely considered with a defensive posture. Selectively covering specific information tracks judged as negative has unpredictable effects, that can often be counterproductive. Above all, this approach doesn't ensure any conservation of reputation in the future. A viable alternative approach should rather lean towards action and anticipation. Indeed, in order to protect and defend an organization or individual's Internet reputation, it's necessary to be present and to maintain a continuous influence over respective stakeholders, while being clearly aware of potential weaknesses.

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Notes and sources

(1) Gabriel Siméon, « Données le vertige », *Libération*, 3rd December 2012: http://www.liberation.fr/economie/2012/12/03/donnees-le-vertige_864585

(2) Groupement Français de l'Industrie de l'Information, *E-réputation et identité numérique des organisations*, white book, 15th April 2010, 68 pages. <http://www.gfii.fr/fr/document/e-reputation-et-identite-numerique-des-organisations>

(3) Phishing is used by fraudsters in order to obtain personal information (passwords, credit card number, etc.), by making the victim believe he/she addresses to a trusted third-party (bank, administration...). Phishing is uses via email, smishing through text messages and vishing via VoIP technology.

(4) Cybergripping is to register and use a domain name reproducing part or all of a brand or celebrity name and matching it with a pejorative term. Cybersquatting is to appropriate a company's domain names prior to its purchases.

(5) Deloitte, *2014 global survey on reputation risk*, October 2014.

(6) Dave Caroll, *United Breaks Guitars*, online the 6th July 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>

(7) See contents via the profile « Silander » on Boursorama: <http://www.boursorama.com/monboursor/membre/silander.html>

(8) Le Figaro, *Quand une simple BD mobilise contre la pêche en eau profonde*, 20 November 2013.

(9) Europe 1, *Findus veut nettoyer le Web*, 20th February 2013: <http://www.europe1.fr/high-tech/findus-veut-nettoyer-le-web-1422103>

(10) Founder of l'Observatoire du nucléaire (Nuclear Observatory): <http://observ.nucleaire.free.fr>

(11) Stéphane Lhomme appealed against his judgement, the pronouncement had been suspended. He then didn't have to remove litigious contents before the Court decision. In January 2015, Areva were finally dismissed.

(12) European Union Court of Justice, *press release n° 70/14*, the 13th May 2014: <http://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2014-05/cp140070fr.pdf>

(13) Le Figaro, *Google refuse plus de la moitié des demandes de droit à l'oubli*, 22nd september 2014.

(14) Michel-Edouard Leclerc, *De quoi je me M.E.L*: <http://www.michel-edouard-leclerc.com/>