

## Who's afraid of social media? A normative approach to corporate discourse on the Web

Gisela Gonçalves

*Labcom, University of Beira Interior, Portugal*

**Abstract:** The main objective of this article is to analyse the communication of companies through a theoretical model that reveals discursive elements inherent to the creation of corporate legitimacy. A Habermasian approach to corporate communication and public relations on social networks is at the centre of this reflection. The article starts by presenting a brief review of public relations and communication management studies encompassed by the paradigm of Habermas's *Discourse Ethics and Theory of Communicative Action*. Following that, a recent Portuguese case study, the Ensitel Case, is presented as an example of the loss of corporate legitimacy on the Web. The importance of a dialogic approach to corporate communication and public relations in order to maintain corporate legitimacy is underlined.

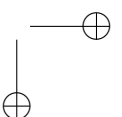
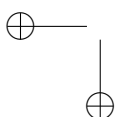
**Keywords:** Habermas, Legitimacy, Ethics, Dialogue, Ensitel.

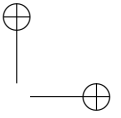
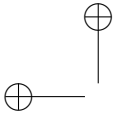
In recent decades, the corporate world has become public enemy number one due to financial scandals, environmental disasters, human rights violations, etc. Inevitably, the public's trust with regard to decisions made by companies is reduced and corporate activities are increasingly scrutinised by activist groups and NGOs and magnified by news coverage, in real time, by new online means (Waddock, 2000; Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003).

Today, corporations are facing a legitimacy problem. Organisational legitimacy can be understood as the congruence between public expectations and organisational actions and values (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). Legitimation is therefore an essential process for all organisations, even to such a degree that it forms the core of all strategic communication practice (Metzler, 2001). The role communication and public relations play in the management of organisational legitimacy is not consensual, especially within conflict or crisis contexts. Public relations is viewed with suspicion, that is, as a *strategic approach* to instrumentally manipulate and deploy evocative symbols in order to garner social support (Suchmann, 1995: 572).

The main objective of this article is to analyse the communication of companies through a theoretical model that allows observing discursive elements

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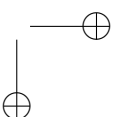
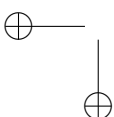
inherent to the creation of corporate legitimacy. A Habermasian approach to corporate legitimacy as it pertains to the intercomprehension between organisations and their public in social media is at the centre of this reflection. Furthermore, this proposal is based on the participatory character of the Internet as a new arena for public opinion (Debatim, 2008; Smith et al., 2009) and on the idea that the Internet presupposes the conditions for the existence of a media-focused public sphere characterized by disregard of status, a domain of common concern, and inclusivity (Crossley & Roberts, 2004).

The analysis is structured in two main parts. The article starts by presenting a brief theoretical review of public relations and communication management studies encompassed by the Habermasian paradigm of *Discourse Ethics and Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1962, 1981). Following that, a recent Portuguese case, the Ensitel Case, is featured as an example of the loss of corporate legitimacy in social networks. In the end, we intend to offer a path for further investigation in the organisational legitimacy and public relations field through a discursive and normative analysis of companies' communication.

### Public Relations and Habermas's Theory

In spite of some criticism of the application of Habermas to public relations theory (Holmström, 1997; Benson, 2008), the fact is that Habermas's *Discourse Ethics* has come to occupy a central position in public relations and organisational communication studies (Pearson, 1989, 1989a; Leeper, 1996; Burkart, 2004, 2009; Meisenbach, 2006; Meisenbach & Feldner, 2009). In this article, we have chosen to focus on Ron Pearson and Roland Burkart's theoretical approach, not only because of their pioneerism and consistency with regard to public relations as founded on the *Discourse Ethics and Theory of Communicative Action*, but also for their suitability to the study of discursive interaction in situations of conflict and the consequent problem of loss of organisational legitimacy.

The Canadian Ron Pearson (1989, 1989a, 1989b) was the first author to present a public relations theory inspired by Habermas's *Discourse Ethics*. It can be said that the ethical investigation for Habermas is associated with a communicative reason, concretised in a discussion open to the plurality of the members of an ideal argumentation community. The discussion is ethical if





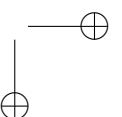
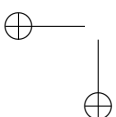
its object is problems based on standards and practical principles, and if it is purely rational. That is, if it occurs without domination, it will lead to a *consensual* solution of the problems. According to Habermas, the conditions under which consensus justification may occur are marked by the symmetrical opportunity of participants assuming dialogue positions in various types of *speech acts*. Those conditions constitute the 'ideal speech situation': 1) No relevant argument can be suppressed or excluded; 2) No force except that of the better argument is exerted; Everybody must have access to the public debate; 4) Everybody can express her needs and desires.

Pearson suggests that an 'ideal public relations (PR) situation' would be one in which organisations and the public interact, that is, a space (the public sphere) where the speaker (or the organisation) and the listener (or the public) communicate. This situation would be a precondition for the practice of public relations ethics that allow intercomprehension between the organisation and its public and minimise the unbalance between them (Pearson, 1989: 241). Also, the ideal speech situation would invoke a presupposition of all *speech acts*, facilitating the dialogue between the organisation and its public. This parallelism would have consequences on the four kinds of *speech acts*, as theorized in Habermas's *Universal Pragmatic*:<sup>1</sup>

- *Communicatives* are speech acts that open lines of communication. As such, they should be *intelligible* to the person to whom they are directed. The communicator should clarify, offer synonyms, make whatever repetitions are necessary so that a hearer understands, and select channels of communication that increase the likelihood of understanding (Pearson, 1989 *apud* Grunig & White, 1992: 58).
- *Constatives* are speech acts that assert, report, explain, predict, deny, object, or estimate. They make an implicit claim to truth, and the communicator should support that claim to truth by providing grounds or reasons (*ibid.*: 59).

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<sup>1</sup>In the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987) Habermas is based on the theories of Austin and Searle, which have the central idea of the dual structure of the discourse: the contents of a speech act (locutionary) and how it is presented (illocutionary). Who speaks not only says something, but also does something. This allows that the language be strategically used to obtain an effect in the listener.

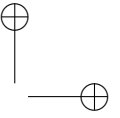


- *Representatives* are expressive speech acts that reveal how a speaker feels. In making such statements, a communicator should *be sincere and show trustworthiness* by behaviour, that matches his or her expressed intention (ibid.).
- *Regulatives* include orders, commands, requests, admonitions, promises, agreements, and refusals. In making them, the communicator claims that they are *based on valid norms* or on his or her authority and responsibility. The communicator, therefore, must justify these claims by explaining the norms that give the speaker the conviction that he or she is right. If the hearer disagrees, the claim should be debated (ibid.).

Roland Burkart (2009: 144) extended Pearson's approach to public relations ethics to suggest a *Consensus-oriented public relations model* to legitimate corporate actions in situations in which the public questions the organisation's messages and does not believe in the underlying validity claims (for example, in situations related to environmental disasters). This is a model that allows the organisation and its publics to achieve understanding and, as a result, consensus, which is especially useful in conflict or crisis situations.

Following Habermas, Burkart (2007, 2009) asserts three types of validity claims that are judged by participants in the communicative process: truth, rightness, and sincerity. These validity claims must exist in order for the ideal speech situation to be realized. In order to develop a communicational act in view of consensus, organisations must notice which validity claims are in dispute and need to be validated through discursive debate:

- In case of doubts regarding the *truth* of the company's statements the discourse should be based on scientific or technical evidence (for example, reports, audits);
- In case the doubts are regarding the *rightness* of the project, the object of the discourse will be the justification of interests, objectives and decisions;
- *Sincerity* is the only validity claim that cannot be the object of discourse as the speaker will only be able to prove their sincerity through subsequent actions and not through arguments.



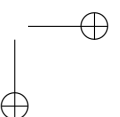
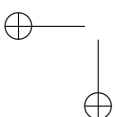
In short, in this model, intercomprehension plays an important role in the management of public relations' process because organisations are forced to present good arguments when communicating their interests; in Burkart's words, they must make the public *understand* their actions (2007: 250).

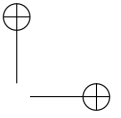
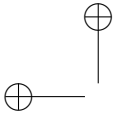
A Habermasian framework can also be seen in the well-known model of public relations, the *two-way symmetrical model*, which emphasizes mutual understanding as the purpose of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 22).<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the public relations models which intend to persuade or manipulate their publics, the two-way symmetrical model consists more of a dialogue than a monologue (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 23), as the organisation is as likely to be influenced by the receiver's communication as vice-versa. Hence, the practice of symmetrical public relations involves the use of bargaining, negotiating, and strategies of conflict resolution to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviours of both the organisation and its publics (Grunig, 1989: 29). Furthermore, Grunig and Grunig (1992) have argued that this model is the most ethical approach to public relations and that ethical public relations is the model most effective in meeting organisational goals:

The two-way symmetrical model avoids the problem of ethical relativism because it defines ethics as a process of public relations rather than an outcome. Symmetrical public relations provides a forum for dialogue, discussion, and discourse on issues for which people with different values generally come to different conclusions. As long as the dialogue is structured

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<sup>2</sup>The *two-way symmetrical model* is one of the four-model framework introduced by James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984: *press agentry*, *public information*, *two-way asymmetrical*, and *two-way symmetrical*. Public relations based on the *press agentry* model serves a propaganda function as it is concerned with the one-way communication of often incomplete, distorted, or false information to persuade or manipulate the organisation's publics. The *public information* model also focuses on one-way communication or dissemination of information, but manipulation or persuasion is not intended (even though it often ends up achieving those effects). In both models, the receiver does not have the opportunity to provide feedback to, or influence the source. Thus, communication in both models is viewed as telling, not listening (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 23). In the *two-way asymmetrical model*, communication flows two ways: from source to receiver and from receiver to source. Nonetheless, organizations and individuals who practice two-way asymmetrical public relations also have the intention of manipulating their publics. Thus, contrary to the symmetrical public relations model, the effects of asymmetrical public relations are unilateral, that is, the source aims to change the receiver's attitudes and behavior while maintaining his own status quo.





according to ethical rules, the outcome should be ethical (Grunig & Grunig, 1992: 308).

Despite the fact that Grunig just considers Habermas's theories by quoting Pearson's texts, it can be argued that Habermas's ideal speech situation and validity claims are reflected in the symmetrical model. More specifically, this model, like Burkart's *Consensus-oriented public relations* model, is intended to be a tool in PR's service to increase the likelihood of solving conflicts through dialogue and generating acceptance of organisations within society. However, there are no magic recipes; such acceptance may only arise amongst people involved if the intercomprehension process has worked successfully.

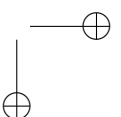
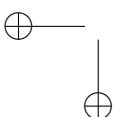
The prerequisite for this success is that the public's need for dialogue is taken seriously by the organisations themselves, especially when they feel threatened by company actions. This is the main problem identified in the Ensitel Case shown below - this company did not take into consideration the public's need for dialogue within the social networks world, with visible consequences to its reputation.

### **A Discursive Analysis of the Ensitel Case**

Ensitel is a French company specializing in telecommunications equipment that operates in Portugal in over 60 stores. The following is an outline of the case that became known as 'The Ensitel Case'.

At the end of 2010, a wave of negativity against Ensitel was triggered on social networks. In less than 24 hours, more than 200 bloggers gave their opinions on the brand's attitude and the customer's position, thousands of negative comments were posted on the brand's Facebook page, and hundreds of thousands of tweets, where Ensitel was the most used hashtag in Portugal for 24 hours non-stop, could be read. Some Internet users swore to boycott the company, which they accused of trying to prevent their freedom of speech; some even wanted to protest in front of the shops. Meanwhile, Ensitel systematically deleted many of these negative comments.

By this time, the negative wave was unstoppable: the creation of a hate page on Facebook that in a few hours attracted thousands of fans, a page on Wikipedia, films on YouTube, and even bad tips on Foursquare. Simultaneously, a solidarity movement was created to help the customer pay the



<i>February 2009</i>
A customer purchases a mobile device at an Ensitel shop; she complains that the device does not work and tries to change it, as it is still within the guarantee period. The entire process is told in detail on her personal blog: details of the fault, steps taken to complain and contradictory responses by company employees.
<i>March 2009</i>
Customer's personal blog appears on the first page of the search engines with the search for the word Ensitel, emphasising a very negative image of the company.
<i>April 2009</i>
Presentation of the complainant's case at the Lisbon Consumer Conflict Arbitration Centre.
<i>May 2009</i>
Sentence is in favour of Ensitel, recommending the client send the mobile device for repair. The client follows the recommendation, despite disagreeing.
<i>27 December 2010</i>
The case is reopened 7 months later when the client posts on her personal blog that she has received a summons demanding that she delete the posts about the company.

incurred legal costs. Finally, the Ensitel Case went mainstream - it reached the traditional news media (RTP1, RTP2, SIC, TVI, JN, Journal I)

Facing this wave of negative comments, Ensitel decided to post the following declaration in their Facebook page, on 28 December (post 1):

Ensitel, Lojas de Comunicações, S.A. is being confronted with a series of statements published through social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, and has therefore decided to present the following brief clarification: Ensitel does not refute any type or form of freedom of speech; however, it does repudiate, reject, and does not accept being the target of a completely defamatory campaign, based on absolutely false facts whose sole purpose is to defame the image and good reputation that Ensitel has built over 21 years, only because the customer did not agree with a judicial decision which was unfavourable to them.

The Management

Nonetheless, this post was counterproductive, provoking more negative comments about Ensitel's position. Facing the public's negative reaction, Ensitel adopted another posture, as posted on 31 December (post 2).

From this description, we can now briefly exemplify how a Habermasian perspective offers a strong and unique conceptual framework to understanding communication distortions and for improving practice. Particular attention will be paid to the official communication of Ensitel on the Facebook mural

In the last few days we have listened to your opinions.

It was never our intention to oppose freedom of speech, only to defend our brand. We now perceive that our attitude was not the most appropriate and **thus, we will immediately withdraw the court case.**

We also intend, in the future, to pay more attention to our customers' online comments, in a way that we can ensure that your dealings with Ensitel shall be as positive as possible. With this in mind, we are installing new means of communication for you to contact us whenever you have a problem in one of our shops or with our products.

Pedro Machado

Head of Sales and Customer Service

since it is an example of corporate communication using social media in a crisis situation.

The first post published by Ensitel on Facebook generated three different types of validity claims:

1. That it was **true** that Ensitel was suffering defamation and that it respected the right of freedom of speech. The fact that the comments on Facebook against Ensitel had been deleted led readers to doubt the **truth** of the statement, as it was clearly an act of censure as various people commented online. With this post, Ensitel showed a lack of interest in dialogue engagement.
2. That it was **right** to file a legal suit against the customer, forcing her to delete the posts on her Blog. They assume the fact that they won the legal case would also invalidate user's comments. Most of the users of social networks consider that they have the right to write whatever they think without any sort of constraint. They would not consider any type of censure of freedom of speech. Thus, the lack of acknowledgement of the interests of the public shows the inappropriateness of Ensitel's communication.
3. That Ensitel was being **sincere** regarding the statement contained in the document. Therefore, the choice to not debate with their public on social networks and their authoritarian communication showed lack of sincerity in the statement.

According to Habermas, rational action is the result of communicative action, that is, when actors do not violate any of the validity claims in their



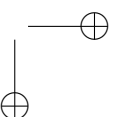
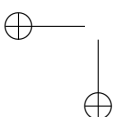


speech acts. The validity claims must exist in order for the ideal speech situation (or ideal PR situation) to be realized. In the case analysed here, by violating the validity claims, Ensitel caused misrepresentation, dissent, and illegitimacy. That is why a wave of negative comments assaulted the company Facebook page.

We can argue that in handling the social media situation, Ensitel failed to meet the ethical requirement that inheres in discourse ethics. Only when Ensitel adopted a dialogue posture with the second post and made a call for communicative action that it finally managed to produce some kind of comprehension, trust, and consent. In fact, after publication of the second post on Facebook and sending an apology request by email to the customer, the comments on the case dissipated. In this sense, we can claim that the end of the crisis situation was determined by a symmetrical approach to communication in the social media sphere. Therefore, the symmetrical public relations model that privileges dialogue can be considered an efficient and ethical way for organisations to communicate with their publics in the social network and maintain corporate legitimacy. That is to say, like Pearson, that the transference of the ideal type conditions of the dialogue to the public relations process is an ethical imperative for PR (1989b: 127).

We may conclude that Habermas's theory provides a dialogic and content-based means by which legitimacy claims are assessed and explains why some claims are more successful than others. Some critics may argue that the reliance on validity claims does not allow for a consideration of power relations embedded within practice. However, Habermas aimed for a discursive space in which power relations were equal, though he did recognize that that equality did not typically exist in society. The ideal speech situation is, therefore, an ideal toward which individuals and organisations may strive. This idea is very similar to Grunig's ideal of two-way symmetrical public relations practice and Pearson's ideal public relations situation.

According to Habermas, all speech acts have an inherent *telos* - the goal of mutual understanding, with human beings possessing the communication competence to bring about such understanding. Despite charges of idealism, the provision of validity claims addressing truth, right, and sincerity provides a useful and dialogic avenue for considering how and why publics respond as they do to legitimacy claims. Suchman (1995) recommends that companies can build a legitimacy reservoir through frequent and intense communication



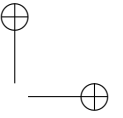
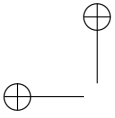
with the organisation's social surroundings. We may argue that a more normative approach to those efforts may help communication actors to see conflict situations in a different light and reconsider possible and more adequate discursive options.

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