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Between Strategic and Tactical Online Narratives: The Daily Life of Brands

Abstract: My paper focuses on the online narratives that brands create in order to coagulate their identity and communicate with their target audience. Thus, the strategic communication of the company meets the new media strategies and tactics, in order to better tell its story. For Michel de Certeau (1984), strategies are systems or plans of action created by institutions in order to guide human beings, while tactics are produced by individuals in order to deal with this strategic management. Strategic communication is seen as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al. 2007), whereas tactical communication is rather operational, concerning the actual practices of communication. In spite of theories, online communication blurred these fixed delimitations, and many times the perceptions of strategies and tactics do not correspond with what the literature review depicts as being strategies and tactics (Plowman and Wilson 2018). In this respect, my example is Airbnb, a brand that instead of narrating the company's story (one of the powerful strategic narratives), persuades its customers to unfold their own stories. Thus, the customer *is* the brand that is constructed on customers' online narratives. Moreover, the strategic narrative for this brand is, as a matter of fact, a puzzle of tactical individual narratives, which transformed consumers into producers and moved the brand away from the business of rooms to the business of home.

Keywords: strategic narratives, tactical narratives, online communication, brand, storytelling

1. Tactics and strategies – some accents

According to Michel de Certeau (1984), strategies are plans of action, systems, narratives, constructed by different powerful agents in order to guide human society. A strategy represents "the calculus of force-relationships" (de Certeau 1984, xix), with a certain empowered actors such as a scientific institution, a proprietor, an institution or an enterprise. The scientific, political or economic rationality is based on this specific pattern. De Certeau often used the illustration of the city for a strategic scheme, with its complex networks of designs, rules and activities.

On the contrary, a tactic always depends on opportunities, on the right move for a specific context, on the propitious moment in time. It supposes a constant manipulation of events in order to become favourable. De Certeau considered that many everyday practices such as shopping, cooking or talking are tactical. In other words, if institutions set up the game strategically, individuals try to handle it with adequate tactics: "In short, a tactic is an art of the weak" (de Certeau 1984, 37). Strategies are related to the concept of place; they postulate a delineation between the "own" locus and exteriority formed by targets and also threats (objectives, research topics, competitors, audience etc.). By contrast with a strategy, a tactic represents "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (de Certeau 1984, 37). That is why tactics are considered as cunning maneuvers lacking the possibility of planning or designing the big picture. Tactics are rather isolated actions that bet on contextual opportunities, being related with the concept of time.

De Certeau has emphasised two tactics: *bricolage* and *la perruque*, as "operational models of popular culture" (1984, 25). Bricolage represents the acts of "making-do", using the creativity in order to remix different "ingredients" for a specific goal. In our digital times, it deeply resonates with the participative culture formed around prosumers that select, use and also create new content. The wig represents a tactic arising from the workplace and supposes the personal use of surplus material and appropriating time. It also involves a kind of delectation as an effect of doing something for its own sake. Maybe the actual using of social

networking sites during work is a suggestive tactic that exemplifies the wig. As Kimball (2006, 72) noticed,

> "these dynamic acts of cultural appropriation, consumption, and production, of making something new out of old materials or using old techniques in new settings, finds many expressions in today's world: artists who engage in collage with found objects, musicians who sample old songs to make new ones, Web designers who appropriate the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) <table> tagset to use for page layout, and hobbyists who hack the firmware of their cars for greater efficiency or performance. Bricolage and la perruque become important ways of making do in a postindustrial world".

These tactics have a large applicability, a fact that could explain the use of de Certeau's ideas in various fields. They operate not only in very concrete, material situations, but also in linguistic or rhetorical terms. Strategies are correlated with the rules of logic, whereas tactics are associated with persuasion or even sophisms.

2. Strategies and tactics in communication

Simon Møberg Torp (2015) noticed that the "communicative turn" has been supplemented by a "strategic turn" because communication is now perceived as having strategic intent. Thus, "in terms of communication theory, the strategic turn need not necessarily be synonymous with the conviction that all communication is basically strategic. It can also be seen as the expression of the attempt or effort to make all—or much—communication strategic" (Møberg Torp 2015, 44). If during the twentieth century almost everything was interpreted as communication, now almost everything is seen as strategic communication.

There is a large literature dedicated to strategic and tactic communication (Hallahan et al. 2007, Holtzhausen and Zerfass 2015, Botan 2006, Downs and Adrian 2012, Plowman 2016 etc.). For instance, in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Hallahan et al. defined strategic communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission" (2007, 3). They also depict four reasons for the study of strategic communication: problems in dissociating among traditional communication activities; changes in technology and media economics that also make difficult the differentiation among diverse forms of

communication; increasing of methods organizations used to communicate in a direct way to stakeholders; the fact that purposeful communication remains the fundamental goal of organizations. Shannon and Weaver's transmission model and Carey's ritualistic model of communication are analysed in order to emphasise the importance of meaning and influence for the strategic communication. Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass stressed the qualities of constitutive communication in comparison with the transmission model: the role of the strategic communicator is not to send information using the optimal channel, but, more importantly, this role is "to send information that can act as the point of departure for meaning creation between a communicative entity and its stakeholders, which can actually lead to social change and social action" (Holtzhausen and Zerfass 2015, 8). Strategic communication focuses on the process of communication, which might be extended long time after a specific message has been transmitted. In this way, the emphasis is no longer on the very process of transmitting information, exceeding the presupposition that "one can control communication so transmitted" (Holtzhausen and Zerfass 2015, 8).

Taking that definition further, Plowman and Wilson think that "strategic communication means that deliberate messages are delivered through the most suitable media channels to designated key publics at the appropriate time to achieve the desired effects" (2018, 127). The activities must be strategic, not unintentional or random communications; they need a rational plan in order to fulfil the goals of the respective organization. In this respect, six disciplines are relevant for the implementation and development of communication by different organizations: management, marketing, public relations, technical communication, political communication, and information/social marketing campaigns. Hallahan and his collaborators insisted on a broader examination of the strategic communication as a "rich, multidimensional concept" (2007, 25).

In their re-reading of Clausewitz, Nothhaft and Schölzel observed that the most cited strategy definition belongs to *Vom Kriege [On War]*. The military roots of strategy and tactics are known, but also avoided in communication sciences, because conflict and force are too prevalent in its military understanding while communication seems to be the opposite of the warfare. Anyhow, surprisingly or not,

> "the strategic communication community can learn a great deal from Clausewitz and from current attempts in military theory to make sense from what is currently happening in strategic communication. We refer, here, to current trends that have changed the rules: trends such as genuine

grassroots campaigning, autonomously organized social movements, and diverse forms of 'irregular' communication practices like counter-public-activity, guerrilla-marketing, hacking-activities or 'irregularities' in political communication, the growing number of filibusters in the U.S. Senate, for example" (Nothhaft and Schölzel 2015, 24).

His understanding of strategy was the general use of his time and Clausewitz also admitted that the distinction between tactics and strategy is somehow insufficient developed, being rather self-implied than profoundly thought and theorized: "this distinction between tactics and strategy is now almost universal, and everyone knows fairly well where each particular factor belongs without clearly understanding why. Whenever such categories are blindly used, there must be a deep-seated reason for it" (Clausewitz, *apud* Nothhaft and Schölzel 2015, 21). Consequently, strategy may be just a buzzword, but also it may become a relevant concept. Anyhow, the strategic process – the depiction of how goals will be reached by different means through formulation and implementation (Freedman 2013) – was many times criticised because it is attaching an enormous importance to the ideas of control, rationality or choices (Mintzberg 1994, Liedtka 2000). Day by day activities showed that, in fact, many situations fall outside the realm of predictions or pure rationality, involving hazard, accidents, crises or creativity matters. The recent analysis on strategic communication done by Zerfass et al. has revealed three sources of confusion when we are dealing with the definition of strategic communication: its widespread colloquial use, its tie with the prestige of practitioners and the overlapping between subject and object of research (2018, 492). The first source of confusion contains even the very well established dichotomy between strategic communication on the one hand and tactical or operational communication on the other hand: "The key problem with the seminal definition of strategic communication (Hallahan et al. 2007) is that tactical and operational communication are also purposeful; even 'routine' communication is purposeful. The routine announcement of a flight by an airline also serves the airline's mission" (Zerfass et al. 2018, 492). In this respect, the definition became more inclusive (evidently, with the underlying problems that come with this extension of the term): an issue is strategic when "it becomes substantial or significant for an organization's or other entity's development, growth, identity, or survival" (Zerfass et al. 2018, 493).

The question is how is the relationship between strategy and tactics seen in communication studies? Have digital media disturbed this relationship?

The vast majority of researchers preserve the distinctions between communication strategies and tactics (Botan 2006, Plowman 2016): a strategy takes place at the planning level, while a tactic takes place at the operational level. A strategy supposes arguments, ideas, a general perspective and also an accurate division of stages and activities. A tactic is correlated with the implementation phase, involving products and concrete practices and being subordinated to a strategic scheme. According to Botan, the concept "strategic" includes two overlapping terms: grand strategy that refers to "the policy-level decisions an organization makes about goals, alignments, ethics, and relationship with publics and other forces in its environment" (2006, 225) and strategy that refers to "the campaign-level decision making involving maneuvering and arranging resources and arguments to carry out organizational grand strategies" (2006, 226), and tactics to "the specific activities and outputs through which strategies are implemented—the doing or technical aspect of public relations" (2006, 226). What is important to be stressed is the fact that the effectiveness of the strategic communication depends on the involvement of practitioners on both grand strategy and strategy. In other words, the role of "technicians" which deal with tactics do not have to be extended too much, even if the experience showed us many examples that contravene to this rule. Many communication fields are lead by tacticians not by strategists.

The rapid development of new media has put things further, because an entire universe of tools, platforms and soft had to be tamed. Macnamara noticed that people involved in PR industry is rather centred on tactics than on correlated strategies and research, a situation that creates a "fork in the road of communication theory and practice":

> "the primary focus is how to produce Web sites, produce blogs, produce podcasts. Yet more outputs; more focus on process and practice. It is comparatively rare to find practitioners monitoring and analyzing the use, impact and effects of blogs, for instance, and it is rare to find them at the forefront of policy making and planning, advising their organizations on the implications of new media" (2006, 6).

Also, White and Raman noticed that most websites studied were constructed "by trial and error based on subjective knowledge and intuition, with little or no formal research and evaluation" (2000, 405).

Thus, communication seems to be predominantly intuitive and focused on outputs than following the scientific prerogatives; also, research that came from industry has shown that social media practices do not necessarily integrated the strategic principles or the border between social media strategy and social media tactics is not drawn very well (Breakenridge 2013). Planning and evaluation are less taken into account in some phases and tactical activities and strategic plans are not very well delineated in practice. This situation represents an interesting frame for an essential interogation: „where do practitioners draw the line between social media strategy and tactics?" In this respect, the study done by Plowman and Wilson in 2018 has showed that the way in which practitioners depict social media strategies and tactics do not correspond entirely to what the academic literature defines as being strategies and tactics, even if practitioners have acknowledged the role of strategic planning process, of research and also social media analytics. As examples,

> "aspects of strategic planning that are more operational in nature, according to theory, including focusing content on specific themes, engaging influencers, and selecting specific social media channels, were seen as strategic by practitioners. Moreover, tactical approaches to social media engagement that are related to strategy, based on theory, such as long-term relationships and building community, were seen by practitioners as tactical" (Plowman and Wilson 2018, 140-141).

As Plowman and Wilson noticed, maybe the classic approaches of strategies and tactics have to be rethought and reconfigured for new media actual settings. Also, maybe the familiarization with a continuously evolving media needs time for companies and brands in order to have an accurate overview of what tool or platform should be used and with what function. What is important and represents another finding of their study is the general idea of using social media with the purpose of creating and maintaining conversations with their publics. As Quesenberry (2015, 66) also stated, social media strategy "is about creating relationships with consumers, not creating ads". Of course, a liaison may be created through ads, but social media have many others features to be used by brand in order to keep in touch with their audiences.

3. Strategic brand narratives

Continuing the previous section, our interrogation is related to the integration of strategies and tactics in branding, in the actual frame of

online media. As we all know, brands result from the planned summation of various brand elements (logo, symbols, slogans, colours, packaging, and anything else that contribute to the brand architecture). In the last decade, an alternative approach to branding has been gaining increasing relevance within the *socio-cultural branding literature* (Holt 2004, Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006). The brand culture perspective acknowledges that brands "are not only mediators of cultural meaning – brands themselves have become ideological referents that shape cultural rituals, economic activities, and social norms. For example, strong brands constantly develop prescriptive models for the way we talk, the way we think, and the way we behave – our goals, thoughts, and desires" (Schroeder 2009, 124). For Schroeder, brands have a powerful cultural resonance transmitted through different cultural codes, such as images, history, myths. Thus, brand culture could be considered "the third dimension for brand research – in conjunction with traditional research areas of *brand identity* and *brand image*" (Schroeder 2009, 124, author's emphasis), occupying, in fact, this specific "space" between these two concepts, in order to shed light on "the gap often seen between managerial intention and market response, in other words between strategic goals and consumer perceptions" (Schroeder 2009, 124). As Holt notices, iconic brands use media to weave their stories into the society, communications being the centre of cultural branding. Moreover, "the product is simply a conduit through which customers can experience the stories that the brand tells" (Holt 2004, 36). In this way, people also consume the identity myths of the respective brand. For this kind of brand, the storytelling represents the core of its strategy; its outcome is not just a simple product, but a storied product. To a considerable extent, the product per se became marginal in comparison to the experiences, values and stories that a brand brings with it. Thus, the differences among various kind of branding are the following:

> "In mind-share and emotional branding, storytelling is left to creatives as an executional issue. In viral branding, influential customers are charged with telling the brand's stories. In cultural branding, the story itself must be the center of strategy, because the quality of the myth, not some set of abstractions, drives the brand's identity value. For the brand strategy to influence market results, it must direct what kind of story the brand will tell and how that brand tells it" (Holt 2004, 63).

Also, a cultural branding strategy is concentrated around the "myth" that the specific brand incorporates; this strategy contains targeting the most

appropriating myth, composing its identity and then extending and reinventing the identity myth (Holt 2004, 218).

The organicistic perspective on brands has been challenged when brands are conceived as "cultural narrators" (Visconti 2010, 234). Cayla and Arnould also stated the narrative essence of brands, observing that talking of brands as cultural forms means "to acknowledge that branding is a specific form of communication, which tells stories" (2008, 86). Even if they are authentic brand narratives (Visconti 2010) or just fauxthentic (Gilmore and Pine 2007), they are both part of a constructivist process of branding.

4. Brand narratives in social media

The branding literature has recognized constantly the role played by stories and strategies in the development of a brand. The question is now: the emergence of new media has changed something in the construction of a strategic narrative today?

Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide (2015) had depicted the participatory communication through social media, emphasizing the change of models from push culture to pull culture: the "centralized" control over messages has decreased, the border between internal and external communication is unclear, and the shared information, reviews and comments could have a major impact on brand reputation. The companies that have online brands or just manage their image using online platforms and tools had to change the traditional picture. Thus, "brands engage customers and companies in an ongoing dialogical exchange, in which the company only partially controls the narrative while co-construction dynamics are welcomed. Thus, brand managers have to be part of a 'multilogue'" (Visconti 2010, 234). At the same time, the role of consumer in storytelling has changed, being more active involved in the co-creation of relevant story for the brand. In social media age, the brand manager does not have anymore the final word, because the user-generated brand content became also important and it is spread fast. Furthermore, the brand owner "has to navigate its brand content through the consumer-generated content to ensure that consumer's brand stories remain as close as possible to the brand owner's story" (Singh and Sonnenburg 2012, 190). We are now in the era of "mass self-communication" as Manuel Castells coined it, a situation that changed how power and communication flow. The circulation of competing narratives necessitates a deep knowledge of issues involved and a good

selection among them. Audiences are not "a blank slate for narratives to be projected onto, and skilful practitioners of strategic narratives must take into account the media literacies of their target audiences if they are to create a convincing narrative (Miskimmon et al. 2014, 12).

A strategic narrative gives meaning to brand, embodies its culture, and attracts customers and influencers; it is not just a simple story, but one that defines and consolidates the brand values. Moreover, the general manner to communicate with brands is a personal, anthropomorphic one. The brands are humanized and, most of the times, we treat them as people, not as objects, products or services (Malone and Fiske 2013). In this context, brands have to harmonize their own strategic stories with the conversations that customers and communities create around them.

In this repect, Airbnb's business model is a "disruptive" innovation example (Guttentag 2015, Guttentag and Smith 2017, Zach, Nicolau, and Sharma 2020) which is built around new media opportunities. It is also an example of "user-generated branding" that refers to "the strategic and operative management of brand related user-generated content to achieve brand goals" (Burmann & Arnhold 2009, 66). It supposes a new lifestyle based on collaboration, peer-to-peer sharing economy and the creation of a community that reviews and talk about apartments, local experiences, food and leisure. The co-creation of value, as we discussed above, is central for this brand. Also, it exemplifies the trust mechanism that combines the sincerity of online reviews with the verification of real conditions offered by a host. The review narrative feature constructs the reputation that, in turn, is the key for online business. The brand manages the site, its blog ("Belong Anywhere") and all the social media platforms. Also, they launched a print magazine – *Airbnbmag* – in order to strengthen the idea that Airbnb offers more than private homes, they offer experiences. The use of images, videos and text constructs a multimedia story that tries to provide authenticity and to create ties. According with the general mode of visual consumption, the story created by using trustworthy photos has as result higher prices, as a clue for the guaranteed quality (Ert et al. 2016).

Taking into considerations de Certeau's ideas, we observe that Airbnb, as a brand literally constructed on the power of storytelling, seems to let a lot of its strategic plan to be practically built by its public. The control is no longer on the brand owner, but it is shared with multiple and various kind of tactics made by unknown people when they decide about their holydays or travels. Airbnb is a brand that instead of telling the company story (one of the powerful strategic mechanism), persuades

its customers to tell their stories. Also, in a curious manner, the customer becomes the brand itself, Airbnb rather providing the "space" for talking and promoting properties.

As Plowman and Wilson (2018) have analysed, social media strategy, that contains the study of publics, the determination of appropriate messages, the monitoring of the environment, building communities etc., is sometimes overlapping with social media tactics, such as focusing on relevant content, engaging influencers, emotional connections, engaging in conversation, enabling public to create content. Airbnb maximally uses the participatory model of brand, destabilizing the classical dichotomy between strategy and tactics. Moreover, the strategic narrative for this brand is, as a matter of fact, a puzzle of tactical individual narratives, which transformed consumers into producers and moved the brand away from the business of rooms to the business of home, activating its underlined supposition of belonging.

5. Final remarks

Strategic thinking represents a key asset for every brand and company, irrespective of various changes that technology, society or trends could provoke. To have an adequate plan, to see the next "moves" for your brand and to implement them correctly are necessary steps in brand management. Strategic thinking does not equate with inflexibility just like tactics do no not mean the lack of purposeful thinking. Strategies and tactics are complex concepts, and the abundant literature proves that. Also, the last studies still make an appeal to deepest theoretical disambiguation and various applied analyses. The profound insertion of social media in our lives remodels almost everything, including the ways in which people interact with brands and the modalities in which brands are created, maintained and developed. Narratives also found online a fertile ground where feedback could be obtained rapidly, only this time they are co-created with customers in a participatory and collaborative manner. Fandom took this situation further: fans weave the story of brands in many different ways, forming relevant brand cultures. In this respect, strategic brand narratives, even they are proposed by the brand manager, could record different evolutions and interpretations. Some brands chose to transform their audience in important brand storytellers while others are still exploring the new media settings. Both practitioners and researchers still have much to clarify in this domain.

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