

SCIENCE

**COMPUTER SCIENCE**

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# **Digital Presences of Organizations**

**Coordinated by  
Nathalie Pinède  
Luc Massou  
Patrick Mpondo-Dicka**

**ISTE**

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## Digital Presences of Organizations





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First published 2024 in Great Britain and the United States by ISTE Ltd and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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John Wiley & Sons, Inc.  
111 River Street  
Hoboken, NJ 07030  
USA

[www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com)

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2023938465

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
ISBN 978-1-78945-104-7

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ERC code:

PE6 Computer Science and Informatics

*PE6\_10 Web and information systems, database systems, information retrieval and digital libraries, data fusion*

SH3 The Social World, Diversity, Population

*SH3\_13 Digital social research*

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> . . . . .	xiii
Peter STOCKINGER	
<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	xvii
Nathalie PINÈDE, Luc MASSOU and Patrick MPONDO-DICKA	
<b>Part 1. Websites and Organizational Strategies</b> . . . . .	1
<b>Chapter 1. Websites and the Agency of Circulating Entities</b> . . . . .	3
Mariannig LE BÉCHEC	
1.1. Introduction. . . . .	3
1.2. From website analysis to website network analysis . . . . .	4
1.2.1. The website as a defined and static semiotic entity . . . . .	4
1.2.2. A dynamic analysis of the arrangement of digital identities . . . . .	5
1.2.3. The hybridization of semiotic analysis and website networks . . . . .	6
1.3. The concept of digital territories of brands . . . . .	7
1.3.1. A conceptual framework to support hybrid analyses of websites. . . . .	7
1.3.2. Are entities circulating on the Web always tied to a territory? . . . . .	9
1.3.3. The agency of signs as an object of digital study . . . . .	12

1.3.4. Signs essential to the social world and variable significance on the Web. . . . .	13
1.3.5. The notion of digital territories of brands as a framework for a hybrid analysis of circulating entities on an “affective Web”. . . .	14
1.3.6. Signs linked to brands . . . . .	15
1.4. Conclusion . . . . .	16
1.5. References . . . . .	16

**Chapter 2. Danone’s “Did You Know?”: Narrative Strategy and Identity Dialogue. . . . .** 21  
Stela RAYTCHEVA, Thierry CÔME and Gilles ROUET

2.1. Introduction. . . . .	21
2.2. Culture, strategy and narratives . . . . .	23
2.2.1. Corporate cultures and management. . . . .	23
2.2.2. Narratives and strategies. . . . .	25
2.2.3. Media and content . . . . .	27
2.2.4. Discourse and storytelling. . . . .	28
2.3. Danone: storytelling of a culture . . . . .	29
2.3.1. The history of Danone on its institutional website: textual analysis. . . . .	30
2.3.2. Analysis of the key narrative of the Danone story. . . . .	32
2.3.3. Analysis of the videos available on the institutional website . . . .	35
2.3.4. Analysis of key dates. . . . .	37
2.4. Danone’s history and the use of the “Did you know?” insets on Facebook . . . . .	41
2.4.1. From February 7 to April 18, 2019. . . . .	42
2.4.2. From April 26 to May 8, 2019 . . . . .	43
2.4.3. From May 9 to May 25, 2019. . . . .	43
2.4.4. From August 12 to September 2, 2019 . . . . .	44
2.4.5. From December 20 to December 30, 2019 . . . . .	45
2.5. A coherent communication strategy . . . . .	45
2.6. Conclusion . . . . .	47
2.7. References . . . . .	49

**Chapter 3. Website and Media Ethos: A Case Study of Photographic Equipment Manufacturers . . . . .** 51  
Marion ROLLANDIN

3.1. Introduction. . . . .	51
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3.2. The communication situation induced by a photographic equipment manufacturer’s website . . . . .	53
3.2.1. The website’s promise and commitment . . . . .	54
3.2.2. Organizations’ constructed and perceived media ethos. . . . .	56
3.2.3. Visitors with varying interpretative skills. . . . .	58
3.3. Initiating the photographic equipment manufacturer’s media ethos. . . . .	59
3.3.1. An organization with a pre-digital existence . . . . .	60
3.3.2. First impressions of navigation . . . . .	60
3.3.3. Space for explaining values . . . . .	62
3.4. Media ethos and discursive strategy . . . . .	63
3.4.1. Carefully presented products . . . . .	63
3.4.2. Controlled instrumentalized work and discourses . . . . .	65
3.4.3. Potentially beneficial autonomous speeches . . . . .	71
3.5. Media ethos and audience segmentation. . . . .	73
3.5.1. Willingness to provide support as part of the package . . . . .	73
3.5.2. Representations of practices and audiences. . . . .	75
3.5.3. The professional, a figure with sought-after skills. . . . .	79
3.6. Conclusion . . . . .	80
3.7. References . . . . .	82

**Chapter 4. Analyses of Digital Communication Strategies for Family Caregivers . . . . .**

Sébastien ROUQUETTE and Christelle CHAUZAL-LARGUIER	83
4.1. Introduction. . . . .	83
4.2. Methodology . . . . .	85
4.3. Analytical corpus . . . . .	87
4.4. The central position of websites in digital communication strategies . . . . .	90
4.4.1. Digital communication pre-adapted to its target audiences . . . . .	90
4.4.2. Social media comparatively disadvantageous to associations . . . . .	91
4.4.3. Association websites with greater visibility than those of profit-making organizations . . . . .	92
4.5. Websites: advantages for associative actors. . . . .	94
4.5.1. Content focused on caregivers’ expectations, the main strength of associations’ websites . . . . .	94
4.5.2. Well-pitched websites to interest the target group. . . . .	100
4.5.3. Level of updates: a non-prohibitive weakness of associative websites . . . . .	103

4.5.4. The interactional limits of associative sites . . . . .	105
4.6 Conclusion. . . . .	105
4.7. Appendix . . . . .	107
4.8. References . . . . .	109
<b>Chapter 5. Associations' Online Communication and Discursive Strategies: A Case Study. . . . .</b>	<b>111</b>
Marcy Delsione OVOUNDAGA	
5.1. Introduction. . . . .	111
5.2. Theoretical framework . . . . .	113
5.3. Methodological approach . . . . .	114
5.3.1. Justification for the choice of corpus . . . . .	115
5.3.2. Presentation of the corpus and analysis protocol. . . . .	115
5.4. Digital social media at the heart of organizations' new communication strategy . . . . .	118
5.4.1. Changes in communication strategies in the associative environment: the appropriation of digital social media. . . . .	119
5.4.2. The associations' Facebook pages . . . . .	120
5.5. Online discursive strategies at the heart of associations' social marketing. . . . .	122
5.5.1. Viral social media marketing on Facebook. . . . .	123
5.5.2. Interaction at the heart of the discursive strategy . . . . .	126
5.5.3. Discursive models at work . . . . .	128
5.5.4. Semio-discursive signs. . . . .	131
5.6. Conclusion . . . . .	135
5.7. References . . . . .	136
<b>Part 2. Websites and Cultural Dynamics . . . . .</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>Chapter 6. Website Localization and the Cultural Dimension: Professional Skills . . . . .</b>	<b>141</b>
Alexander FRAME and Will NOONAN	
6.1. Introduction. . . . .	141
6.2. Field-testing cultural localization: from words to action . . . . .	143
6.2.1. The "cultural" skills of the localizer . . . . .	143
6.2.2. Culture, culture and training of translators . . . . .	144
6.2.3. The range of cultural localization services . . . . .	146

6.3. From (intercultural) communication to localization services . . . . .	151
6.3.1. Three scientific approaches to cultural localization . . . . .	151
6.3.2. A necessary consideration of complexity in Web communication . . . . .	153
6.4. Attempts and experiments for a complex, non-essentialist approach to cultural localization . . . . .	155
6.4.1. Intercultural studies and translator training . . . . .	156
6.4.2. From translation to intercultural expertise . . . . .	157
6.4.3. From localization to transcreation . . . . .	158
6.4.4. Toward a liquid approach to localization . . . . .	159
6.4.5. Teaching vocational skills for cultural localization . . . . .	161
6.5. Conclusion . . . . .	163
6.6. References . . . . .	165

## **Chapter 7. Representativity of Indigenous Minorities and Cultural Identity on the Web . . . . .**

Cécile-Marie MARTIN

7.1. Introduction . . . . .	171
7.2. “Indigenous minorities”, a terminology to designate without discriminating . . . . .	172
7.2.1. Minority and indigenusness: from self-determination to the recognition of rights . . . . .	172
7.2.2. Communities within a society . . . . .	175
7.3. Web access routes for indigenous minorities . . . . .	178
7.3.1. The Internet, a network of networks . . . . .	178
7.3.2. Individual and collective equipment . . . . .	180
7.3.3. Web technologies, a Western heritage . . . . .	181
7.3.4. Governance and democracy . . . . .	183
7.4. Access strategies, from consultation to contribution . . . . .	186
7.4.1. Google, openness to languages as an economic lever . . . . .	186
7.4.2. The role of social media in the formation of language communities on the Web . . . . .	188
7.4.3. Hypertext as an interlingual and intercultural gateway . . . . .	189
7.4.4. Computer code, a key to Web access . . . . .	190
7.4.5. “Never again without us”, systems designed by indigenous minorities . . . . .	192
7.5. Conclusion . . . . .	193
7.6. References . . . . .	193

<b>Chapter 8. Cultural and Political Anchors of Environmental Communication on the Web</b> . . . . .	199
Sandra MELLOTT, Anh Ngoc HOANG, Magali PRODHOMME and Anaïs THEVIOT	
8.1. Introduction . . . . .	199
8.2. Methodological approach: analysis of the ecological ethos in a digital regime . . . . .	202
8.3. Ethos of action (Greenpeace) . . . . .	208
8.3.1. Passage to action . . . . .	208
8.3.2. Climbing body: a courageous corporeality for an ethos of action . . . . .	210
8.4. Ethos of the will (WWF) . . . . .	211
8.4.1. Celebrating nature . . . . .	211
8.4.2. Exhibited and exhibiting body in WWF’s “#Pasledernier”: voluntary corporeality for an ethos of the will. . . . .	213
8.5. Ethos of justice (L’Affaire du Siècle) . . . . .	214
8.5.1. Make some noise . . . . .	214
8.5.2. Demonstrative body in L’Affaire du Siècle: an epideictic corporeality for an ethos of justice. . . . .	216
8.6. Ethos of belief . . . . .	218
8.6.1. Renew (On est Prêt, Réveillons-nous, Pensée Sauvage) . . . . .	218
8.6.2. Double body speaking and dancing in “Réveillons-nous”: a professing corporeality for an ethos of belief . . . . .	221
8.7. Structuring an ecological <i>homonoia</i> on the Web: emergency, praise and blame . . . . .	223
8.8. Conclusion . . . . .	227
8.9. References . . . . .	228
<b>Chapter 9. Covid-19 and Digital Fundraising: Actors, Strategies and Perspectives</b> . . . . .	231
Géraud AHOUANJINOU, Ornheilila ZOUNON, Agnès BADOU and Ismène KPÉDJO	
9.1. Introduction. . . . .	231
9.2. Theoretical and methodological framework. . . . .	233
9.2.1. Theoretical bases of the positioning and scriptwriting of fundraising communication . . . . .	233
9.2.2. Methodology. . . . .	236
9.3. Results and discussion . . . . .	246
9.3.1. Typology of actors and media coverage. . . . .	246



9.3.2. Editorial positioning . . . . .	247
9.3.3. Interaction with the donor audience . . . . .	249
9.3.4. On the question of the perception of fundraising appeals for Africa. . . . .	251
9.3.5. On the question of international solidarity . . . . .	253
9.3.6. Typology of aid for Africa. . . . .	256
9.4. Conclusion . . . . .	257
9.5. References . . . . .	258

**Part 3. Communication of Organizations and Online Narrative . . . 261**

**Chapter 10. Communicating through Narrative: Organizations  
Facing the Challenge of their Collective Dimension? . . . . . 263**

Julien FALGAS

10.1. Introduction . . . . .	263
10.2. Defining the act of narrating by the storytelling, narration and story triad. . . . .	264
10.3. Application to the Web page analysis: the analysis framework of the manufacturing of representations. . . . .	269
10.4. From the manufacturing of the narration to a critique of the narrative communication of organizations on digital social networking sites. . . . .	280
10.5. Conclusion . . . . .	283
10.6. References. . . . .	285

**Chapter 11. Transmedia and Online Storytelling: From  
Ephemeral Universes to Archives . . . . . 289**

Mélanie BOURDAA

11.1. Introduction . . . . .	289
11.2. New term, old creations: a quick historical overview . . . . .	291
11.3. Evolutionary transmedia websites: a progression of and in storytelling . . . . .	293
11.3.1. Case study: The Hunger Games. . . . .	293
11.3.2. Case study: Westworld. . . . .	297
11.4. Apps and social media: an engaging transmedia strategy . . . . .	299
11.4.1. Case study: Mr. Robot . . . . .	299
11.4.2. Case study: 13 Reasons Why . . . . .	300

11.5. Fans’ archives: preserving ephemeral devices. . . . . 303  
 11.6. Conclusion . . . . . 305  
 11.7. References. . . . . 306

**Chapter 12. Augmented Storytelling and Netflix Series  
 Promotion Strategy** . . . . . 309  
 Frédéric AUBRUN and Thomas BIHAY

12.1. Introduction . . . . . 309  
 12.2. Augmented storytelling from explicit, implicit and zero  
 textures . . . . . 312  
     12.2.1. The implicit texture in the promotion of 13 Reasons Why . . . . . 313  
     12.2.2. The upside down, or the epicenter of the Stranger Things  
     story. . . . . 314  
     12.2.3. Co-creation as a process of immersion in the fiction . . . . . 315  
 12.3. Unadvertization of promotional discourse of series . . . . . 316  
     12.3.1. Gamification as a media and cultural showcase . . . . . 317  
     12.3.2. “Media recycling” at the heart of the promotional  
     process . . . . . 318  
     12.3.3. Beyond the reasons: a device in pedagogical form. . . . . 320  
 12.4. Conclusion . . . . . 322  
 12.5. References. . . . . 325

**List of Authors** . . . . . 327

**Index** . . . . . 331

# Foreword

**Peter STOCKINGER**

*INALCO, Plidam, Paris, France*

It gives me particular pleasure to introduce this collection of texts entitled *Digital Presences of Organizations*. As its scientific publishers, Nathalie Pinède, Luc Massou and Patrick Mpondo-Dicka rightly point out the digital challenge is without a doubt one of the major issues in the communication of today's organizations.

We should bear in mind that one of the distinctive elements of the communication of organizations – compared to other communication ecosystems – is the fact that it is built around an institutional actor called an “organization” which, in order to deliver on its missions, has to build and maintain (beneficial) relationships with a greater or lesser diversity of collective and individual actors. The social organization in the sense of a collective institutional actor constitutes a very particular kind of social actor. This type of social actor is characterized by the coming together of a group of individuals who occupy specific functions in order to achieve common (and pre-defined) objectives. Typical examples of an institutional actor are companies, local authorities, associations and NGOs (non-governmental organizations), political organizations, educational and research establishments or heritage institutions such as museums, archives and libraries.

A social organization is an actor in its own right whose voice cannot be reduced either to the voice of one individual actor who is a member of it or to all the combined voices of the actors who constitute it. As an actor in its own right, a social organization finds itself faced with missions and tasks that it must or is supposed to fulfill in a given social environment in which it spreads and evolves.

*Digital Presences of Organizations,*

coordinated by Nathalie PINÈDE, Luc MASSOU and Patrick MPONDO-DICKA. © ISTE Ltd 2024.

One of the main issues which is revisited on a regular basis by almost all the experts in this field of specialized communication is that of creating, then maintaining and furthering, through the widest possible variety of activities and communication campaigns, a certain vision of a social organization (such as a company or a university), of its missions and activities, its service and products, the communities of actors with whom it maintains a relationship. In other words, the issue here is to maintain and (above all) to gain acceptance of a world of images that is used as a theatrical stage, as a simulation space for the world of life (personal, everyday, professional, etc.) in which the diversity of actors evolves and shapes itself into a community of stakeholders (agonistic or antagonistic) around a social organization.

This world of images (or of the imagination) can be closer to or further from the world of life, the world as it is lived by the actors involved; it can also break away from it and offer a more or less probable fictitious world. Nevertheless, this world of images (or of the imagination) is a world that offers a certain meaning, whose interest, so to speak, lies in the fact of being potentially able to serve as a benchmark for the diversity of actors involved in the maneuverings and service delivery of an organization (such as a company, a university or an association). To “make sense” actually means to have a value, a quality that responds to a need, an interest or a wish of the actors concerned. This is how we assess the intellectual, emotional, practical and utilitarian or even moral value of an object, a person, an activity, a place, etc.

As a shared meaning, the world of images (or of the imagination) that is built, disseminated and which gradually gains acceptance (with a greater or lesser number of clashes) through an organization’s diverse activities and communication campaigns, becomes a *topos*, a common place that is shared by the diversity of actors with whom the social organization forms a community.

To become an epistemic landmark – and thus also to become a kind of norm, a maxim – it is not enough for the imaginary world constructed by and disseminated through the diverse activities and communication campaigns to be known and understood by the diversities of the actors concerned. It must also be accepted and thus (tacitly or explicitly) adopted by the actors concerned. Thus, the world of images or the imagination that the organization’s communication activities are supposed to produce and maintain claims the status of a standard, the status of a culture, of a cultural framework offering a greater or smaller population of individuals an identity, values and also resources (cognitive and practical). Reference to a cultural framework such as this not only provides an identity (a “social face”, as Erving Goffman says) to an individual (precisely by assigning them

an actor's role) but also allows them to respond to a set of problems (which they can regard as having greater or lesser significance) that they encounter in their world of life.

“Claim” means in fact that the status of standard is not already established. It has to be acquired, often in the face of a diversity of voices that are pursuing objectives different from those that define the communication activities of an organization. It must also be acted upon by the interested parties themselves, in other words, by the actors who are the stakeholders. Sometimes these are the potential beneficiaries of a service announced by an organization, sometimes they are partners, sometimes they are groups of actors who can influence the very destiny of an organization, sometimes again there is a whole panoply of actors who wish to compete with the maneuverings of an organization or who, in one way or another, quite simply wish for its demise.

Finding a way through this diversity and this cacophony of voices, each having its own weight, its own audience, in order to win acceptance of a certain vision as a standard, as a cultural reference, is, as we know, a very arduous and difficult task. In any case, this is the great challenge of what in English we call *branding*, in the sense of a technique, or rather, a whole diversity of (communication) techniques for creating, for gaining acceptance of and maintaining – through the creation of many messages about an object, a particular field of expertise – an imaginary world in which, as we might say, the various actors involved gather together, “see each other”, for the widest possible variety of reasons.

The process of creating these messages consists of various steps, among which we include those of their localization (in a given environment), their conceptual design, their expression and embodiment in the diverse formats, instruments and media devices, their dissemination and circulation, their appropriation and exploitation and, finally, their actual evaluation. The overall objective of all these steps is to produce important information, information that has a value for the actor or the community of actors concerned in the form of varied and multimodal messages, messages that can be appreciated, experienced and exploited using very diverse media techniques.

Understood as one of the constituent media of the communication ecosystem of organizations, the website in particular and the digital medium in general play here, of course, an absolutely decisive role. The contributions in this collection offer us a very rich panorama of this.



# Introduction

**Nathalie PINÈDE<sup>1</sup>, Luc MASSOU<sup>2</sup> and Patrick MPONDO-DICKA<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> MICA, Université Bordeaux Montaigne, Pessac, France

<sup>2</sup> Crem, Université de Lorraine, Metz, France

<sup>3</sup> LERASS, Université Toulouse 2 – Jean-Jaurès, France

## 1.1. Websites and digital presences of organizations

This book concludes a trilogy devoted to the study of websites<sup>1</sup> and more generally of digital info-communicational devices from a number of perspectives (epistemological, methodological and pedagogical, in particular). This book is a result of a cycle of study days, initiated in 2015 by Patrick Mpondo-Dicka at the University of Toulouse 2 – Jean-Jaurès, around a somewhat provocative question: Is website analysis still relevant from an info-communicational point of view? The debates from this study day had then been considered sufficiently fascinating, relevant and topical for a small group of researchers (Luc Massou, Patrick Mpondo-Dicka, Nathalie Pinède, Sébastien Rouquette and Peter Stockinger) to take up this issue and give it life through a series of study days dedicated to the subject. Thus, four other days were organized between 2017 and 2021, each presenting one particular angle of questioning arising from this website “object”: the websites of organizations at the heart of plural digital dynamics (Bordeaux Montaigne University, 2017), the website in the new ecosystems of multi-cultural and intercultural communication (National Institute of Oriental Languages and

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<sup>1</sup> A first collective book, *Site internet : audit et strategie* (edited by Sébastien Rouquette), was published by Boeck in 2017. A second collective book, entitled *Analyzing Websites* (edited by Luc Massou, Patrick Mpondo-Dicka and Nathalie Pinède) was published by ISTE – Wiley in January 2024.

Civilizations, 2018), audience representations and the practices of Internet users (Clermont Auvergne University, 2019) and finally the communication of organizations and online storytelling (University of Lorraine, 2021).

This book, prefaced by Peter Stockinger, thus completes the showcasing of the main contributions that emerged from this cycle of five study days, and brings together 23 authors around one main hub, that of the communication of organizations (companies, communities, NGOs, etc.), in the light of websites and, more broadly, digital ecosystems orchestrating differentiated strategies, themselves inscribed in a heterogeneous and complex multicultural space.

The concept of “digital presence” for organizations, chosen as the generic title of this book, testifies to the extension of our consideration of organizational communication in digital environments. Merzeau (2014) emphasizes the intrinsically temporal character of online presence, as a “form of existence in a space”. To this temporal dimension must be added a mode of existence, between representation and intervention (Rieder 2010). The digital presence of an organization is not confined to what it produces and controls in terms of discourse, rhetoric and narrative. By revealing a certain representation of its identity on the Web, it offers this up to be read but also to be rewritten, whether by its users, customers or by forms of algorithmic calculations of the traces produced by and around the organization. Therefore, if “institutions and organizations try to define themselves as stable entities with boundaries permitting a certain control of their image” (Le Béhec and Alloing 2016), this perimeter is constantly pushed back, redefined, its contours evolving all the time, the conditions of digital presence being constantly subjected to reinterpretation. Pélissier (2018) suggests defining the digital presence of an organization “as a system introduced into digital devices, formed from the traces of interactions between identity construction and reputation processing. [...] The digital presence of an organization is thus evolutive, changing, corresponds to voluntary or involuntary traces and can be observed at least in part” (p. 112). We find in this definition the ingredients of the digital presence mentioned above, between dynamics, the construction of a mediated ethos and the unpredictable reuse of an interweaving of ephemeral and shifting traces. As a result, we cannot capture the totality of this digital presence and we are condemned to grasp only fragments, incomplete snapshots, inscribed in a given space-time.

If we return to our main topic, namely the role and legitimacy of websites through the prism of the digital presence of organizations, the website embodies one of the facets of the organization’s online presence, relatively stable in the register of inscription, but also a springboard to other spaces and always (re)negotiable when put into operation and calculated. The various contributions in this book propose,



although with no claims to be exhaustive or able to explore every dimension, various levels of reading of this digital presence of organizations, for example, by updating the links that are forged between anchorage and flow or between representation and intervention, mobilizing and re-examining the concept of media ethos, analyzing the narrative logics and the reappropriations that are made of them, etc. The whole thus contributes to setting out a multifaceted and multi-strategic vision of the digital presences of organizations.

This work is structured on three major thematic axes built around 12 chapters. In the first part, we will look at the different strategies (content, services, territorialization) identified in various organizational contexts with various audiences. In the second part, the focus will be more specifically on the cultural dimension of websites, raising the issue of a digital organizational communication that oscillates between local and global. Finally, in the third part, we will pay particular attention to the role of storytelling and narratives in organizations' online communication strategies.

## **1.2. Websites and organizational strategies**

Between stability and dynamics, websites enroll organizations in a complex digital environment where their presence and their identity are constantly redrawn, according to practices, from being put into symbolic circulation but also from the logics of economic and technical development of the Web. This is highlighted by Mariannig Le Béhec through the concept of circulating entities, the symbolic signs transmitted by websites and put into circulation in a changing digital environment. This dynamic of transposition of signs, which the author describes as "agency", thus contributes to modeling digital territories, in which the major challenge faced by organizations will be to control the circulation of their brands.

This link that is forged between statics and dynamics around websites is also highlighted by Stela Raytcheva, Thierry Côme and Gilles Rouet, who apply it through their approach to strategies for stabilizing a company culture. They use a processual reading of corporate culture through discursive strategies that can be identified in the communication narratives produced by an organization (in this case Danone) on its institutional website and Facebook pages. This discursive analysis thus operates at two levels: identifying the company's values in the communication texts produced (static level) and analyzing the discursive sequencing and interweaving of the texts produced by the organization on social media (dynamic level). By adopting a dual perspective, semiotic and material, the communicational texts are analyzed in themselves but also at the heart of a set of interrelated texts

from which a corporate culture is co-constructed in a performative and meaningful way.

Marion Rollandin for her part focuses on the representations made by companies on their websites, using the example of six manufacturers of photographic equipment. To do this, she mobilizes a semio-pragmatic analysis and the concept of media ethos to update the relationship between, on the one hand, media ethos and product promotion strategies and, on the other hand, media ethos and typology of target audiences, as read through websites. Although the organizations studied seek to produce a very positive media ethos while using the ploy of differentiation from their competitors, two factors of uncertainty remain: the risk of a mismatch between user perception of content and the communication's intentions, and the difficulty of mastering and controlling a media ethos subject to change, whether by the company itself or by forms of reappropriation and reinterpretation of this ethos in digital spaces such as social media, which brings us back to this question of the circulation of signs, mentioned previously by Mariannig Le Béchec.

Christelle Larguier and Sébastien Rouquette examined the role of websites (belonging to associations and profit-making organizations) aimed at caregivers, in particular reviewing in this context the initial question that led to the cycle of events about websites: Are they still relevant in terms of digital communication strategies relayed by social media? To answer this question, they use a mixed methodological framework (comparative analyses of traces of activity on websites and social media sites, and in-depth interviews), which reveals that websites offer communicational advantages for which social networks are no substitute.

Marcy Delsione Ovoundaga extends the study initiated by Christelle Larguier and Sébastien Rouquette by focusing on the communication of associations based on their discursive online strategies. The author draws on the example of two associations, La Chaîne de l'Espoir and Action Contre la Faim, and on the analysis of a corpus of Facebook posts and comments. His study highlights the use of these socio-digital platforms as a renewed space of expression for associations, in which social marketing strategies emerge, themselves drawing upon discursive online strategies highlighting the argumentative and empathic dimensions.

### **1.3. Websites and cultural dynamics**

The second part of our book puts a particular focus on the cultural development of websites and the differentiated strategies that can be associated with them. For this, Alexander Frame and Will Noonan propose to revisit the concept of website localization, through the prism of the cultural dimension. Based on a review of the

scientific and professional literature on the subject as well as discourses by professionals and practitioners in the sector, they give a critical reading of a certain number of approaches giving prominence to national cultures to foster an apprehension and implementation of localization as a communicational activity based on a “liquid” approach to cultures and identities and inscribed in a trans-creational paradigm. In this perspective, they open up three pedagogical axes to train specialists in cultural localization.

Cécile-Marie Martin explores the place of indigenous minorities on the Web, this being understood as a political, material, technological and cultural system largely dominated by representations, operationalization and governance by Western states. Having identified these barriers to access and to representation of minority indigenous communities on a Web space that is less open and universal than is portrayed in discourses, the author suggests a number of concrete paths that would lead to a better appropriation of Web as well as a reaffirmed digital presence of these communities.

Sandra Mellot, Thomas Hoang and Anaïs Theviot decode the cultural, political and rhetorical dimensions anchoring the online environmental communication of non-governmental organizations and new collectives. By deploying a multimodal semiotic analysis of a corpus of websites and video clips arising from the concept of ethos, the authors highlight registers of differentiated ethos (ethos of action, of will, of justice, of belief) and also the emergence of a new ecological homonoïa, marked with the stamp of urgency, between praise and blame. Websites and other media productions such as video clips provide here a form of stabilization of this collective positioning.

Finally, Géraud Ahouandjinou, Ornheilia Zounon, Agnès Badou and Ismène Kpédjo explore e-fundraising strategies in a context of pandemic emergency (Covid-19) as they were deployed in France between March and May 2020. To complete this study, conducted on the basis of a content analysis of fundraising campaigns collected from a corpus of NGO Web pages and Facebook, an exploratory questionnaire survey was conducted among Beninese representatives in order to collect the perceptions, sometimes ambivalent, of this fundraising for Africa in the context of COVID.

#### **1.4. Communication of organizations and online storytelling**

In the third part, we focus on the issue of storytelling in digital media and transmedia environments, particularly in relation to communication dynamics in organizations. Julien Falgas sets out to discuss and differentiate the three elements –

storytelling, narration and stories, a triad within which storytelling is situated as an act of communication. Based on this notional positioning, he mobilizes an approach inspired by Howard S. Becker breaking down the communication process into four stages constituting the “manufacturing of representations” to analyze Web pages published by a banking organization. Through this example, he shows the analytical potential of this approach to reveal the fabric of storytelling.

The last two chapters of this section focus on online storytelling in connection with TV series. Using a diachronic approach to emblematic media productions, Mélanie Bourdaa explores the development and diversification of narrative, transmedia (websites, apps, social media) and audience strategies through multiple entertainment experiences, whose nature in the context of targeted marketing campaigns can be ephemeral. The fan audience thus has to take on another role, that of preserving traces and records of these strategies and labile digital universes.

Frédéric Aubrun and Thomas Bihay, for their part, look at the series produced by the Netflix platform and examine how the fictional universe of these series is extended, reused in promotional strategies and diffracted on different media platforms. Using a reading grid inspired by three types of textures (explicit, implicit, zero) of fictional worlds, the authors analyze two Netflix series and show the reuse made of narrative sources in promotion strategies where the brand seems to be effaced in a logic of de-advertising that masks hyper-advertising where Netflix adopts a role of social influencer.

## **1.5. What next?**

So here we are at the end of a cycle of events and questioning around a study object that is somewhat neglected today, the website. From these 7 years of reflections, what has emerged for us is that the website is still a living and legitimate object. But its place and role must now be debated, thought about and analyzed within complex digital ecosystems, oscillating between visibility and invisibility, articulated to intersecting communication issues related to the current (and future) socio-economic and socio-political challenges of organizations. This is what we will set out to do in a future cycle of scientific meetings and discussions on these objects.

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## **PART 1**

# **Websites and Organizational Strategies**





# 1

## Websites and the Agency of Circulating Entities

**Mariannig LE BÉCHEC**

*ELICO, Université Claude-Bernard Lyon 1, France*

### 1.1. Introduction

Our everyday environment is made up of digital objects, and we frequently hear the expressions “digital environments” and “digital ecosystems” (Agostinelli and Koulayan 2016). These are linked to the issue of the digital transformation of organizations. Websites, on account of their potential to showcase the organization and its digital transformation, have been studied since the 2000s as markers of the digital transformation of organizations.

A website, from its namespace in the Web browser to the hyperlinks that point to or come from its online environment, provides a stage-set. The focus of our analysis in this chapter is on the possible links between websites and the elements that can circulate on them. How can a set of websites constitute a brand’s digital territory (Le Béchech and Alloing 2016)? Beyond the interface accessible to Internet users or the notion of qualcalulation (Callon and Law 2005) available to the Web designer through audience analysis tools, we will focus here on brands in the symbolic sense that circulate between groups of websites.

In this chapter, the website is analyzed according to the organizational communication concept of symbolic processes that are interpreted as “info-communicational phenomena” (Bouillon et al. 2007) pertaining to the compositions of organizational digital identities.

*Digital Presences of Organizations,*

coordinated by Nathalie PINÈDE, Luc MASSOU and Patrick MPONDO-DICKA. © ISTE Ltd 2024.

In a digital environment, the study of websites characterizes the symbolic processes operating on the Web according to a number of methods of analysis. The term “website” can refer to a static analysis method, often represented in semiotic analyses of websites. However, the Web’s technical properties have created a dynamic environment according to network science. The collective work of Newman et al., *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks* (2006), and more specifically a chapter by Jon M. Kleinberg on navigation in small worlds enables us to think beyond a situated analysis in an inter-connected space. These methods will be included within the field of information and communication sciences through Web analysis manuals (for instance, Barats 2013).

In the course of our studies of websites, let us add that analyzing the signs found on websites also takes account of so-called propagation, imitation phenomena (Tarde 2001). Symbolic processes are replaced by symbolic dynamics that have changed in line with the evolution of digital ecosystems and their arrangement of digital content circulation.

The purpose of our analyses is therefore not to think without categories, obtaining responses in the collected data and their visualization in the form of website networks, but to question the strategies of the actors in the field, that is, the organizations, institutions, and so on that have a presence in a digital environment via their website. In this chapter, we will define circulating entities. They play a part in the symbolic dynamics and the info-communicational phenomena of organizational digital identities. But beyond the website from which they were sent, their circulation between websites allows us to qualify them as symbolic processes. According to our analyses and in a semio-pragmatic perspective, these circulating entities are signs, which we call transposable because they have the potential to represent a territory, a culture. They have the potential to become a brand on the Web and to aggregate websites, giving them a collective dynamic. We will therefore examine the topological analyses of the Web, which can help us to summarize the dynamics of these circulating entities (signs in a digital environment) and how their transposition, circulation and potential for action that we call agency enable us to define digital territories on the Web.

## **1.2. From website analysis to website network analysis**

### **1.2.1. *The website as a defined and static semiotic entity***

The analysis of the composition of organizational digital identities works for limited bodies of websites with monographic analyses (Stockinger 2005; Rouquette 2009, 2017). The methods developed in monographic analyses describe a website as