

Chapter 13

Actor–Network–Theory in Medical E–Communication: The Role of Websites in Creating and Maintaining Healthcare Corporate Online Identity

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ABSTRACT

In this article, an attempt will be made to discuss how websites create and maintain the online identity of medical care providers. To discuss this issue in greater detail, the author has chosen Actor-Network-Theory since an ANT approach makes it possible to study the role of living and nonliving entities in shaping the online identity of healthcare suppliers and to concentrate on the networks and systems within e-healthcare as well as the flows and interrelations constituting it. The primary aim of this research is to show the communicative aspect of healthcare corporate websites by using the selected notions of ANT methodology and their potential implications for corporate identity creation and maintenance.

INTRODUCTION

Modern reality is shaped by some complicated nets built of various entities and ties (Blommaert, 2010) and it is determined by the dependence on other human beings (Laszlo, 2001). Thus, the modern world is a networked entity (e.g., Castells, 2009; Corallo, 2007; Hardt & Negri, 2004) and its interconnectedness is represented in various domains of life, including the networked

economy (Aurik, Jonk, & Willen, 2003). For example, modern business, with its grids and lattices, can be observed on the organizational level. Since modern companies do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather connected with other entities on an everyday basis, the organization and its relations can be viewed through the prism of networks and ecosystems (Andrew & Sirkin, 2006; Davenport, Leibold, & Voelpel, 2006). The multispectral character of corporations is also reflected in their identities which are constituted of multiple personalities (e.g., Bergen & Braith-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2166-4.ch013

waite, 2009), of both individual and social types. Among various factors shaping the networked organizational identity it is technology which is the most important one (e.g., Carr, 2004; Fernandez, 2004; O'Kane, Hargie, & Tourish, 2004). The revolution in communication and technological achievements have changed the way companies function and communicate, with technologically sophisticated codes, wires and pulsations being an important part of modern corporate life (Birkets, 2010). The coexistence of technology with other aspects of corporate reality makes it difficult to establish the demarcation line between the human and the technological world (Bukatman, 2002). Some go even further and state that information technologies are starting to become part of our bodies and function as prosthetic technologies that take over or augment biological functions, turning humans into cyborgs, and thereby altering human nature (Brey & Søraker, 2009, p. 1388). Human and nonhuman entities mutually contribute e.g. to information networks (e.g., Masuda, 1983) such as the ones available on the Internet. Since they are online everywhere and anywhere (Richardson, 2005, p. 272), the same applies to the activities related to healthcare which will be discussed in the coming sections. The Internet determines the patient-doctor relation in a number of ways, being a source of information, a community creator, a communication tool and a new technology facilitator, introducing e.g. telemedicine (McLellan, 2004). Since one of the most popular levels of analyzing health discourse is mass communication (Schulz, 2006), in this research an attempt will be made to show that websites are not only the places of putting information on the services offered by the healthcare company and the instruments of health information and disease prevention for many patients, but they also determine personalities of those interested in health issues. At the same time, e-patients (Akerkar & Bichile, 2004) influence the corporate online identity of healthcare providers.

E-HEALTHCARE

All people, whether in good or bad condition, have to conduct health-related activities in their adult life (Nielsen-Bohlman & Panzer, 2004). With the increasing role of technology in the twenty first century, the issues connected with well-being and health management also take place online. As has been proved by some studies, those looking for health-related information rely on the Internet since 4.5% of all the Internet searches concern health topics (Morahan-Martin, 2004). Some authors even state that health is the second most often searched topic on the Internet (Roberts and Copeland, 2001). Since national and professional barriers are of secondary importance on the Internet (Roberts & Copeland, 2001) and most people are into "e", and if they are not, they plan to be (Goldstein, 2000, p. 6), the health system is also heavily determined by the web. It is especially popular among Digital Natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), those born after 1980, to rely on online health information and favor e-healthcare, with the latest being defined as goods and services provided by healthcare professionals or organizations to patients/customers/end-users via the Internet or other telecommunication pipelines (Pańkowska, 2004, p. 3).

There are different reasons for the popularity of technology, especially the Internet, in healthcare. First of all, the health system has changed significantly, especially in the industrialized countries. The cost policy makes health providers compete for patients since the latter can choose the doctor or health service they want. Additionally, many medical treatments are not covered by the national health service and they have to be reimbursed by patients themselves. Consequently, those interested in health services look for competitive possibilities and cost-saving offers. The other issues are related to demographic factors, such as aging societies, with older people being the growing group which relies heavily on

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