Control Freaks: How User-Generated Content is Managed in Advertising Campaigns. The Romanian Perspective

Rodica SĂVULESCU

College of Communication and Public Relations
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania
6 Povernei St., Sector 1, Bucharest, Romania, 010643
rodica.savulescu@comunicare.ro

Abstract: *The advent of Web 2.0 has brought about a paradigm shift in communication: from an informational Web to an editable one. Consequently, the "one-to-many" communication model of the mass media industry has been replaced by one that involves "many-to-many". Web 2.0 enables those who were formerly conceptualized as audiences/consumers to be part of an open-source movement that means participating into the production of brands and their meanings. It is an era of convergence, of overlapping roles between producers and users/ consumers – in short, of "produsage", "prosumption" and "user-generated content" (UGC). This article investigates how this new paradigm influences marketing communication by addressing the specific case of the Romanian advertising industry. By using in depth-interviews with 20 advertising professionals, it points out to the fact that in communication campaigns with user-generated content there is still a high degree of control from the brand management and agency teams that cannot quite grasp the concept of brand communication democratization.*

Keywords: *advertising, brand communication democratization, produsers, prosumers, user-generated content, Romania.*

Introduction

The 90's: With the Web providing so much information at such low cost, this period seemed to be the answer to every marketer's dream of large-scale brands delivery to consumers through a global network with only "peanuts" to pay. Compared to traditional media which required many intermediaries, was expensive and had already become obsolete, the Web looked like a serious business. Of course, what marketers thought of the Web did not actually happen, especially when it became Web 2.0. The change could be taken as a rebranding initiative, but it was much more. It reflected a change not necessarily in technology, but in the way people started to use the Web – to partici-

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pate, to create, to collaborate. At first, no one was afraid of what would later become "the big bad Web". Things marketers said and done offline and online just seemed to be a little more discussed by consumers (which was still a good thing, as marketers thought "there is no such thing as bad publicity"), but then advertisements started to get mocked, then they were recreated according to consumers' opinions of the brands, which were never as good as the advertisers thought they would be. It then became clear that users online had the knowledge, the tools and the motivation to become creators of meaning themselves, and for brands this was a completely new take on the "passive" consumer notion. This article presents the way in which marketing communication has changed in the view of a more active consumer and the content s/he can create online. Starting from the open-source movement and the active participation of consumers into the creation of brands and meanings, the paper will focus on the recent practice of inviting users to create content in advertising campaigns. We need to explore if this practice really supports an open communication, a participatory culture and a type of user generated content that is free from any constraints regarding brand ideology.

1, 2…Web

In today's "network society" (Castells, 1996/2010) and "information economy", the advent of the Web 2.0 has brought about a paradigm shift in communication. The second version of the World Wide Web is considered a revolutionary stage (Cook, 2008; Lih, 2009) and a transition from the "informational Web" (Booth, 2010) to the "read-write Web" (Gillmor, 2004). This new syntagm is used in order to express the new realities: *Web 2.0* means that the Web started to become more of a platform that encourages richer user experiences, participation, instead of publication, perpetual beta software, hackability and remixability (O'Reilly, 2006). The potential for public participation is one of the most heated subjects on the research agenda, with talks of a new online public sphere (Barlow, 2008) and the rise of a new cyber-democracy (Creeber, 2009). The new communication technologies – with a special focus on the elements that constitute Web 2.0 (such as blogs, social networks, and wikis) – create a more egalitarian universe, in which individuals can express themselves in ways that have not been available before (Barlow, 2008). The shift has been forwarded by the democratization of technology, providing an infrastructure for a "many-to-many communication" model, the opposite of the "one-to-many communication" system that was characteristic of traditional mass-media. Although this new public sphere does not reside in the

Web 2.0 itself, it is thought that the social and collaborative elements of this version of the Web facilitate participation for those who were formerly conceptualized as "audiences" (Gillmor, 2004).

No more "couch potatoes", but "produsers"?

The discussion about Web 2.0 clearly revolves around the age-old questions about the role that media play in society – and, consequently, about the status of individuals employing them in their everyday activities. Therefore, there has been a clear shift from the "effects" paradigm found in the works of The Frankfurt School, to a more "relaxed" conceptualization of the media (Creeber, 2009, p.17), starting with the British Cultural Studies tradition. This difference has become apparent when Stuart Hall's (1980) "encoding/decoding" model introduced the concept of the active audience by pointing out the fact that the viewers of a television programme can have distinct positions, such as accepting the dominant/hegemonic code, negotiating the meaning or even resisting it by generating an oppositional reading. In media studies, McLuhan's work goes even further into anticipating the future of audience reception and response, as Levinson (2001) suggests, by mentioning the fact that the role of the public changed from voyeurism to participation. Livingstone and Das (2013, p.107) argue that nowadays, the Web clearly makes visible the practices of interpretation among audiences and "their role in the production of meaning by searching, clicking, typing, moving, and merging text". On the same note, studies have shown that consumers do not represent victims of advertisers, as portrayed for a long time – but empowered individuals that play with marketers' brands, communication initiatives and minds. One of the theories concerning this topic is that of the "postmodern consumer" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Brown, 2006; Simmons, 2008; Cova & White, 2010), seen as fickle, individualist and chameleonic. For Gabriel and Lang (2006), the consumer becomes "unmanageable".

The second stream of research concerning consumer empowerment tackles an approach that uses semiotics as the source of power and rebellion against domination. Fiske (1989) proposes a view on consumers that do not accept what the culture industries offer them as such, but the act of consumption involves their active engagement with these productions – and, sometimes, their attempts to subvert them and read their own meanings in them. Michel de Certeau (1984) uses the term "bricolage" to express the tactics that consumers employ in order to transform commodities into something that serves

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their own interests and follows their own rules. For Jenkins (1992, p.3), it is all about "poaching", reminding us of "conflicting interests of producers and consumers" – in this specific case, when it comes to television fans.

Another source of consumer empowerment can be found in studies that emphasize the fact that differences between producers and consumers are diminishing, especially due to technology. Shipman (2001) shows that firms do not rely on a "supply chain" anymore, but on a "demand chain" that changes the "product push" paradigm into a "consumption pull" one, in which consumers expect better deals. For Labrecque et al. (2013), the transformations of the Web have offered consumers four sources of power: demand, information, network and crowd-based. The empowerment of consumers has also been suggested by Toffler (1980/2001) in his conceptualization of future "prosumers" of the Third Wave, who would be in search for more individualized and customized products. Leadbeater and Miller (2004) propose the term "Pan-Am", describing those amateurs with professional working standards. Bruns (2006, 2007) introduces a new concept, that of "produsers", in order to present those individuals that assume a somehow hybrid role of user-producer. Bechmann and Lomborg (2012, p.767) present the three main characteristics of social media: a decentralized structure, a consumer that is a producer at the same time and a more symmetrical type of communication.

The focus has gradually changed from conceptualizing audiences as passive and inert while in front of the television set to understanding their involvement in producing meaning – at first – and even producing and publishing content of their own. In this regard, several studies (Macnamara, 2010; Napoli, 2011) show the impact of Web 2.0 on media and communication practices such as journalism and PR or advertising. Web 2.0 has enabled consumers to get involved in the participatory culture and therefore conventional media and cultural practices have been reconfigured, especially due to the phenomena of user-generated content.

User-generated content and the participatory culture

One of the earliest and most cited definitions of user-generated content is that of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development: "*i)* content made publicly available over the Internet, *ii)* which reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and *iii)* which is created outside of professional routines and practices" (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007, p.4). It is thought that user-gen-

erated content represents a consequence of Web 2.0, making it possible even for users with low levels of technological literacy to create and distribute their own opinions and creative materials (Harrison & Barthel, 2009). User-generated content is viewed as characteristic of a "participative Web" (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007, p.4) and a "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006).

This emphasis on participation intends to describe the current social and economic contexts as more open than ever. Several alternative terms have been used in order to express the characteristics of this participatory culture: "remix and share culture" (Castells, 2009, p.102), "cut-and-paste culture" (Keen, 2007, p.199), "free culture" (Lessig, 2004). No matter if the connotations of these terms are positive or negative (as it is the case with Keen's study), the common idea is that of ordinary people's involvement in creating and distributing content. Participation is closely linked to the concept of open-source software/platforms (such as Linux and, more recently, Wikipedia), which for the first time shifted focus from consumers to producers and accepted the idea of the "perpetual beta" (O'Reilly, 2005), meaning that a product is never finite, but open to modifications by its users. Obviously, the point in permanent openness is constant improvement in a cooperative manner.

Jenkins et al. (2009, p. 6) define participatory culture as one with "1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, 2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others, 3. Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices, 4. Members who believe that their contributions matter and 5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created)". These characteristics are important if we take into consideration what Jenkins (2006, p.4) says about this participatory culture: that "it is starting to change the ways religion, education, law, politics, advertising and even the military operate". Discussions about the participatory culture are linked with those of a more transparent culture and a high degree of democratization (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012), although this "demotic turn" (Turner, 2010) is not a concept that is received with optimism in unanimity. For example, there are also those who are not convinced that these new opportunities of access in the media and participation constitute a form of democratization (Turner, 2010; Carpentier, Dahlgren & Pasquali, 2013).

But even if researchers agree with the idea of a participatory culture or not, the people are already joining in, as several examples show us. Jenkins (2006) uses

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fan subcultures as case studies for participation in the media, pointing out the fact that nowadays, these amateur producers get involved in cultural practices, working together or against companies in movie-making endeavours, in writing new versions of their favorite novels or in making political statements through Photoshop-altered images. Cova and White (2010) also provide examples of such participatory actions in a gamer community in France and in a travel community, Couchsurfing. In the first case, the Warhammer gamer community decided to create a similar game when the company started to charge them more money for acquiring game components. This is a counter-brand community. Couchsurfing is a different type of community in which people online gather and interact, offering their couch to those who visit their country. The authors consider this to be an alter-brand community, as it can compete with other firms in the travel business. Their approach is useful because of the term open-source brands, stating that consumers increasingly regard brands as common property, therefore they feel like they partially own them and they can reflect this ownership in their behavior (Cova & White, 2010). This is a subject that will be discussed next, in relation to Web 2.0.

Web 2.0 brands

Users as produsers in Web 2.0 have obviously gotten involved in creating brand-related content, as well as they created news (Wardle & Williams, 2010) or entertainment (Jenkins, 2006). While in the beginning of this phenomenon the possibility of users creating content was regarded as a benefit for brands, it soon started to raise questions when marketers realized that consumers are not similar to their passive, manipulative representations, with parrot-like discourses on brands. As Xia (2013, p.73) points out, "consumers now create new meanings and values about products and brands in social media that are beyond the control of companies". Tuten (2008, p.115) shares a similar opinion when she proposes the idea that user-generated content is a means for consumer opinions to enter the public discourse on a brand. We all agree on the fact that brands do not exist on a material level, but only on a symbolic, representational one. In this regard, they rely on the interpretations consumers attribute them, but traditionally, these interpretations are carefully constructed by marketers. As Christodoulides (2009, p.142) shows, prior to this democratization, branding was an activity reserved for brand managers: "the exercise of a narcissist (…) who was preoccupied with creating a specific image for the brand, primarily through corporate communications shouting out how wonderful the brand is, then passing on the desired image to consumers.

Any voices diverging from this image had to be suppressed". A brand is given certain values and a philosophy that permeate every communication material that is directed to its consumers, in order to enforce these symbols. This can be simply called a "brand ideology", which is "a set of ideas, beliefs, and moral values" (Massa & Testa, 2012, p.111).

For a long time, modern marketers have been relying on the "Holy Trinity" of media: TV, radio and print to communicate the brand ideology. In the 90's, the *dotcom* revolution made them take the Internet into consideration as a means of communicating with larger groups of people, and the new medium soon started to be considered the perfect choice in terms of cost-efficiency (Kirtiş & Karahan, 2011) and behavioral targeting. But advertisers could not grasp the changes that the Web brought, even if they took into account consumers' need of interactivity (Bezjian-Avery, Calder & Iacobucci, 1998) and two-way communication. At that time, the realm of online ads was limited to developing banners and creating static websites for companies and products. Fast forward ten years later, and Web 2.0, with its claims of encouraging user participation and shifting power away from media institutions and other commercial or public companies into the hands of consumers, is not a medium that lets advertisers soak in one-way communication strategies. By looking at the characteristics of this "new attitude" (O'Reilly, 2006) towards technology, we notice that *Web 1.0* was centered around commerce, while the new paradigm moved the focus on people. As Chaney (2009, p.27) points out: "I don't know when it started (...) but at some point consumers decided they were no longer going to put up with corporate lies, shoddy products, inept customer service, or overblown advertising, and they began to fight back using the internet as their weapon of choice".

If we think about brands as semiotic systems (Scolari, 2008; Danesi, 2013), it becomes clear that a participatory culture, in which everyone has the possibility to create and distribute content, represents a new environment for brands. This new environment is not as stable as the previous one, although, mainly because anyone – not only marketers – gets to have a say in how brands are created and perceived. Two main issues arise, in this regard: that of alternate visions on brands and that of a possible attack on their image. Alternate visions do not represent necessarily a negative frame, but they can be in conflict with the "dominant", corporate-established one, the brand ideology in which time and money have been invested – and that can be easily diluted if several competing visions travel on the Web and in the minds of consumers, at very little cost for their creators (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011, p.106).

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Brand vulnerability seems to be the norm in Web 2.0 (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011; Xia, 2013). Before, every brand was carefully managed as to only present an ideal version of itself, and even though Xia (2013, p. 75) mentions the fact that brands are not designed to have weaknesses and especially do not want them to be public, social media is all about exposure. And empowered consumers have been waiting for a long time to be able to voice their complaints, to tell others about their brand experiences, to exchange information and to even mock brands to their own pleasure. In this regard, participatory culture is mostly characterized by parodic expressions, due to the availability of remixing technology and cultural material to "borrow" and re-use (Jenkins, 2006). Amateur productions tend to ridicule official advertising messages and they are either imitations of ads (called "spoofs") or they present counter-visions that target a brand's reputation and can be really harmful (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). This is especially true because in this participatory, peer-to-peer culture, amateur work is highly credible (Allen, Fournier & Miller, 2008; Ertimur & Gilly, 2012), while traditional advertising has lost its credibility for a long time (De Pelsmacker & Neijens, 2009).

A very important point to make here is that online, users are mostly engaged in negative reactions, especially towards brands, as the potential for anonymity provided by technology facilitates hostility and aggression – called flaming (Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2008). The phenomenon is discussed by several researchers and it is called brand terrorism (Tuten, 2008, p.120), trolling (Jacobs, 2012, p.569), antibrand discourse (Katyal, 2010, pp.797-798) or brand jacking (Ramsey, 2010; Milne, 2013). There are obviously several distinctions to be made between these, but their common denominator is the power to alter dominant brand discourses and images.

One would think the bigger the brand, the harder it is to attack it – as the rule of traditional marketing has proven so many times. But in the age of Web 2.0, especially these brands have come under scrutiny and are "magnetic targets" in the words of Fournier & Avery (2011, p.203). Not just brands themselves are influencing factors, but also the characteristics of the consumers count. For instance, the so-called Generation Y consumers behave differently from other generations when they meet brands, either online or offline (Pînzaru & Mitan, 2012; Dumitrescu, 2013).

When brands are in the hands of their consumers, it becomes necessary to understand what strategies companies can use in order to be able to attain their goals. In this participatory culture, both brand management and marketing

communication are in need of a reconfiguration (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This is the topic of the next section.

Advertising with user-generated content

If brands are vulnerable online and they cannot escape from this context, they might as well embrace it, as the recent practice of integrating user-generated content in communication materials proves. The old broadcast communication paradigm had served advertisers well in a time when consumers were not empowered and active on the Web 2.0 platforms. They had to listen to the monologue of marketers, with only a few means of escape, if we think of zapping to ignore TV commercials or banner blindness to navigate through Internet ads (Janoschka, 2004). But not in the Web 2.0 era, when consumers reject their roles as spectators or hunters (for ads created by agencies, in which users control the interactivity), as Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden (2011) point out. They ask for much more, which is real involvement in co-creating marketing content and real engagement.

Several researchers have already pointed out the implications of user-generated content over brand management and marketing communication (Platteel, 2003; Christodoulides, 2009; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Quinton, 2013). Christodoulides (2009, p.142) suggests that "post-internet branding is about facilitating conversations around the brand", not controlling it. Conversations are what Fournier & Avery (2011) suggest as well, as brands are "uninvited" in Web 2.0 and consumers are eager to show them that they do not appreciate being disrupted and patronized any longer. The same idea is expressed by Quinton (2013, p.915), when she proposes that brand management should embrace co-creation, as "consumers appear to enjoy being acknowledged (…) as having value to add to a brand via their suggestions for ideas for product innovation, communications messages, or witty reinterpretations of promotion campaigns". For Asmussen et al. (2013), co-creation is also very important, but it represents both company-initiated and sponsored activities and stakeholder-initiated ones, in multi-layered brand democratization. By placing more power into the hands of consumers (Allen, Fournier & Miller, 2008; Burmann, 2010; Fournier & Avery, 2011), researchers consider that brands will start to be more intensely shaped by people outside the company. Burmann (2010, p.2) even proposes the concept of "user-generated branding" in a realistic approach to the phenomenon, as he takes into consideration the need to manage this content in order to achieve brand goals, although even in this

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case, there is a high degree of democratization: "user contributions might be canalized but not controlled". User-generated advertising reflects this democratization of brand communication, for Tuten (2008), who differentiates between several types of content that relates to brands. An important distinction here can be made between the organic content and the one that is solicited by brands. Tuten (2008, p.103) refers to this second variant as "consumer-solicited media" or "incentivized consumer-generated media", the distinction between the two being the fact that the first is non-incentivized, while the other is encouraged by the sponsor under the form of money or the chance for the winning entry to be broadcast on television, for example, in the brand communication campaign.

There are several examples of user-generated advertising campaigns, some pertaining to the "best practices" category, while others being considered eligible candidates for the "fail" one. A well-received user-generated commercial is the recent Coca-Cola's "This is AHH", comprised entirely of video-clips made by fans (Nudd, 2014). Other best practices include Burberry's classic "Art of the Trench", Chobani yogurt's "Real Love" campaign or "The Best Job in the World" campaign that intended to promote the Great Barrier Reef. On a different note, there are those user-generated campaigns that did not meet marketers' expectations, such as the Twitter-based "#McDStories", in which the fast food company solicited stories from users, but saw the campaign getting hijacked when consumers started to complain online about the quality of the food or the service (Roberts, 2012). They were using the hashtag provided by the company, but not to express their good thoughts, but the opposite. Heinz and Chevy Tahoe are other two brands that have understood the power of consumer parody the hard way, through public humiliation (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Even if we acknowledge the fact that there is a degree of openness in these manifestations, we must understand how they shape the current brand management and communication activities.

Although Bechmann and Lomborg (2012) suggest the fact that Web 2.0 and social media have certain characteristics that allow a more symmetrical relationship between users and companies, they also advise somehow against celebrating this fact. As they point out, "because the companies facilitating the "produsage" through specific services have the power to structure the possibilities and patterns of communication in specific ways, different degrees of asymmetric power structures emerge" (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012, p.767).

It is the same with the study in which Asmussen et al. (2013, p.1478) advise that "democratization does not mean democracy in terms of equal distribution of power – or attention. Social divides might thus still be observed in many cases despite an overall transition from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing".

In this paper, the focus is on user-generated content as a potential for brand communication democratization (Tuten, 2008; Xia, 2013). If users can openly discuss brands and create their own meanings about them, we are definitely entering an era where control and power seems to shift from traditional gatekeepers to the general public, therefore it is important to understand if marketers embrace this democratization of brand communication or not.

Methodology

This research sets out to discover how Romanian advertising agencies employ user-generated content in their communication campaigns. Moreover, the central focus of this study is to observe if the current development of the Internet and the so-called Web 2.0 actually enable the phenomena of brand democratization – a context in which consumers can voice out their opinions on brands, whether these are congruent with the official brand ideology or not. The purpose of this research is to put under scrutiny the assumption that the inclusion of user-generated content in advertising campaigns represents a democratization of brand communication, especially if we take into account the possibility of creating incongruent messages. Therefore, I propose the following research questions:

RQ1: Which are the specific practices of integrating user-generated content in Romanian advertising campaigns?
RQ2: Do advertising campaigns with user-generated content promote a democratization of brand communication?

This research is based on a set of semi-structured interviews with advertising professionals from 20 Romanian advertising agencies. The interviewees were chosen by the following criteria: they had to be in a senior position in the advertising agency and to have been involved in creating at least one campaign that included user-generated content. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, their length varying from 40 minutes to 1hour, 30 minutes.

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Results and discussion

First of all, we note that almost all interviewees mentioned soliciting user-generated content in an advertising campaign as part of a new paradigm based on conversation and bidirectional communication. They recognize the fact that brands need to interact with their consumers as much as consumers need to be in touch – or in closer touch – with brands. But users do not want to put too much effort into this participation. Advertisers point out the fact that, in order to obtain user-generated content, the campaign mechanism has to be simple and entries should not require a complex admission process, because it makes consumers give up their intention to participate. In the words of a respondent: "If you have to enter your personal number of identification and your cat's name…big mistake".

Most user-generated advertising campaigns take place on a branded micro-site, with only a few happening on free platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. The explanation seems to be simple – the fact that receiving content on an owned platform is easier to monitor and control. Another reason is that the open platforms – Facebook, especially – can change their policy from one day to another, thus making advertisers change their initiatives, too, even if they have already implemented their campaign. This uncertainty regarding the terms of use on free platforms makes them unappealing for marketers, as some have mentioned the fact that they have encountered such problems with some of their campaigns.

Most UGC campaigns are created for the fast moving consumer goods market, as some of the respondents do not believe that this type of advertising campaign can be suitable for luxury products. One of the respondents states that "there are brands that consumers want to listen to, not talk to", referring especially to brands that create appealing content for its consumers to watch. Therefore, most UGC is found in campaigns for products such as chocolate bars, alcoholic (beer, vodka) and soft drinks, cleaning products, pastry products, dairy, baby products, and coffee.

There although there are also a few UGC campaigns for the tertiary sector of economy – the interviewees offered examples such as telecommunication, insurance companies or retail services (supermarkets and do-it-yourself stores). An interesting example that does not fit in these general rules was offered by

a respondent that worked for a political communication campaign in which the agency solicited UGC. But UGC is not restricted to commercial advertising, even though it is mostly used in this area: the present study showed that social campaigns also capitalize on this phenomenon, as it is the case with "The Good Dog-catcher" (a campaign aiming at rescuing a stray dog in order to make it a companion for a person with special needs) and "Why Don't You Come Over?" (a reactive image campaign for Romania, generated by a British anti-Romanian communication initiative that was based on the opening of the borders for immigrant workers).

Content generated by users is mainly considered to be credible and authentic by advertisers, but in terms of quality, their opinions are not that favorable. For some, the quality is poor because the content simply builds on existing content, without bringing anything new; others place a lot of importance on the execution quality of the material, which they compare to that of professional-made advertisements, even though the main purpose of UGC is to look natural. Then, there are just a few advertising people that consider homemade content to be even better than the professional one in terms of ideas. In the words of the interviewees:

"If you ask them to create a commercial, they will make one that's full of clichés from other commercials (…) And you don't need that."

"When a brand asks for UGC, just a small portion of it is of good quality, the rest is garbage."

When talking about a Doritos do-it-yourself advertising campaign, one of the respondents said that "all the entries were crap and 80-90% of the actual winning material was created by the agency".

In close connection to this remark, an interesting subject appeared in the interviews: that of astroturfing, which means creating and distributing messages that support a specific idea, while creating the appearance that they were sourced by an independent entity (Zhang, Carpenter & Co, 2013). Almost every user-generated advertising campaign benefits from this practice, but the motives are diverse: it is either used to "populate the space" when a campaign is launched, because "when you see an empty site, you don't want to be the first there", or to offer an example of how the content should look: "leading by example…you tell them «this is how you should do it»". Astroturfing is also used when participation is not as high as the agency thought it would be, therefore

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additional materials are created by professionals in a home-made style, in order to show the client that "it worked". But the deceptive frame is not accepted by all advertisers, as some specifically point out the fact that they do create materials that have to serve as examples, but they emphasize their true nature: "a user is created, with the brand name". Another interviewee mentioned the fact that it is not the agency that creates fake consumer content, but admitted that everyone involved in the campaign "sends it to their friends and asks them to post…if they do, they do, if not, you can't force them".

Advertising professionals consider that user-generated content includes materials from bloggers, as well. They obviously make the distinction between ordinary consumers and bloggers – who are seen as influencers and opinion leaders. But they still seem to have more credibility than firms communicating messages about brands.

When it comes to types of user-generated content in Romanian advertising campaigns, we can clearly distinguish between organic and solicited content. The first is less used by companies, especially because it does not always follow the brand ideology and it does not respond to marketing objectives (as it is, obviously, created in a spontaneous fashion by consumers). When it is brand favorable, advertisers applaud it, without using it for a specific purpose. When it is disadvantageous, they pretend to not have seen it and they do not think it can reach enough people to be meaningful. Solicited content is something almost every brand can include in its portfolio. Following Tuten's (2008, p. 103) distinction between solicited content and incentivized content, we notice that Romanian advertising campaigns mostly rely on incentives to obtain user materials. As most respondents state, users need to be motivated, otherwise they do not participate in such campaigns. "What's in it for me?" is the first question a user asks when solicited to provide content, advertisers admit. This type of exchange has brought a type of consumer that advertisers seem to despise, yet they encourage by offering incentives: the "prize-hunter" or "contest-finder", as they call it. For marketers, this appeared to be an important aspect of user-generated content campaigns, as they say they have started to recognize those who participate in every campaign, no matter the topic or the brand, just for the prize. There are also online groups that advertisers monitor, where these consumers talk about the current campaigns and plan their actions as to win the prizes available.

Incentivized campaigns aside, there is also a smaller fraction of communication activities that does not "pay" consumers in any way other than by symbol-

ic means for their participation. Such a campaign is that of McCann Erickson for the ROM chocolate bar. This brand is connected to Romanian patriotic values and has had several user-generated components in recent campaigns. In its "Romanians are smart" initiative, the brand proposed changing Google suggestions that denigrated Romanians and asked for user-generated contributions for the gallery that included smart Romanians from various domains of activity. While being a hit both in terms of user participation and content distribution, the campaign did not offer any other incentive but a patriotic feeling.

Democratization of brand communication?

From the interviews it appeared clear that advertisers engage in a heavy management of user-generated content. There is a clear conclusion in the interviews: "everything is moderated". It is important to mention the fact that sometimes, advertising specialists do not appear to view content moderation as a way of engaging consumers in conversation, but they blame the client for putting pressure and asking for control. They do agree that it is a normal reaction, as one respondent states: "I cannot tell them «give them prizes for saying bad things about you»". The advertising agency behaves like a gatekeeper on behalf of the company's marketing team or together with it, by filtering the solicited content, deciding what suits the brand and what doesn't and even altering it, if necessary.

This research points to three ways of managing user-generated content, pertaining to different campaign moments:
1. Setting the rules for content;
2. Filtering content;
3. Altering content.

All these will be discussed as follows. Firstly, in the beginning of a campaign, marketers create a set of rules that are meant to offer them the possibility of choosing among the content bits they receive. Most interviewees mentioned the "Rules" of the promotional campaigns as essential for the next step, which is moderation, because they allow them to declare content as being against them, and therefore not accepted on the branded site.

There is another way in which the rules are set – that being, as presented above, astroturfing. Communication specialists create seemingly consumer-

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generated materials in order to set the tone of the campaign and create an example for consumers. In its less-deceptive variant, this practice is not hidden from users, but actually presented as such, offering them a version of how their own work is expected to be. Even more control is obtained by the brand when users are offered predefined elements to use when generating content – this practice is considered useful by advertisers, as it helps people create materials easier, but it is at the same time limiting their options. An example would be a campaign for Mega Image, a retail chain that initiated a campaign in which users had different products among which to choose in order to create their own personalized shopping basket.

While setting the rules of the conversation, it is important to notice that marketers consider that open platforms such as social media sites are not always a good choice for user-generated content campaigns, therefore they create their own micro-sites where they can feel even more in control. There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as campaigns that used hashtags in social media, but they rely on the fact that hashtags are not that well indexed on Facebook and that potentially harmful content will not be visible to many consumers. An example in this category is that of a pastry shop that solicited content from consumers under the form of photographs with macarons, one of their products. The campaign had a dedicated site that collected all the entries that used the specified hashtag, but consumers could post their pictures on any social media venue, especially Facebook and Instagram.

Secondly, after the rules are set and users start creating and sending content to the brand, another type of control sets in: that of the content received. Filtering this content is mandatory, as advertising professionals show, although sometimes there are a few of them who question the nature of conversation in this regard. As one of the respondents said: "I wish I would see a courageous brand saying «I'm the X waffle and I want to know what people think of me when they eat this product» and showing you the real answers people offer, good and bad. And when someone comes over and says something that's not so nice, they address that and, I don't know, give them a different product or something. I don't think any brand would do that. It would be interesting to see. It would be an honest campaign, and advertising isn't honest".

Moderation is the result of marketers being afraid that content related to brands will not meet their expectations. There are a few different reasons for moderation, one of them being the rejection of offensive language or images such as swear words, pornography etc. But consumers not respecting common

sense are not the biggest concern for brand managers and communication specialists. Rather, it is that of consumers not respecting the brand ideology and attacking it. Their interest in controlling this content is visible even when a respondent defines "free content": "when you don't give them predefined options, you let them post anything". By "anything" she means anything that the moderators approve of.

Even though some respondents agree to the fact that they accept alternate visions on the brand ideology, their answers do not point to that: "the effort in handling these types of campaigns is great (…). You need to moderate the content so you don't get a photo with Coca-Cola next to a cigarette, because you can't afford that".

Marketers accept moderation as such, in a love-hate relationship, because they understand that the rules have changed and they cannot reject consumer opinions anymore. Content that is not positive about the brands is not allowed on micro-sites, as one respondent shows: "No, never, it doesn't pass through moderation. Although things have changed a little with social media – brands there have recognized the need to be more transparent, they can't cut anything they don't like (…). In social media, brands accept negative commentaries". But this takes us back to the fact that most user-generated campaigns are not created for social media. As the interviews point out, Facebook is used mostly to promote the campaign, but users are asked to participate on a branded site. This is explained by the fact that a branded site is controllable:

"Every time we think of an user-generated campaign, our friend, moderation, appears".
"We only let the safe things pass. And everybody understands safe in their own way: it can mean no swearing or things like that or it can mean only the things we like, the good opinions".
"You cannot afford to publish on a branded site content that you haven't seen before, as it needs to be compliant (…), meaning common sense or brand restrictions such as age (…) or associations with other brands".

Furthermore, advertisers also use bloggers to send their messages, because they are considered to be impartial, without any connection to the firm. In this way, bloggers can generate content that expresses their own view on the brands, although too often they are paid for this service and they even receive certain guidelines in order to create company-approved content.

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The third way in which content is managed can be found in the altering of content that marketers receive. As an obsession brand managers have with the "perfect" image of the brand, they try to control every piece of content they receive from users. Besides not letting alternate visions on the brand or its values pass, when content is uploaded on a company micro-site – and obviously, moderated – they even ask the agencies to correct grammar mistakes before letting the content pass on the site, as one advertising professional mentioned. This happens because, in the opinion of brand managers, everything that is linked to the brand has to be polished, just like traditional advertising messages used to. But in the age of constant change and swiftness, when we acknowledge the fact that the Web is very similar to oral conversations, full of abbreviations, spatial and personal deixis or prosodic elements (Janoschka, 2004, p. 104), one can wonder if erasing the true nature of these pieces of content can fit in the concept of achieving the much-sought authenticity and credibility. It seems like doing just the opposite: user-generated campaigns are created to achieve the real-life, user truths, but they are controlled to change them into fabricated ones.

This research shows that Romanian advertising professionals employ user generated content in a manner that is specific to the Web 1.0 era, rather to that of Web 2.0. Communication is still restricted, limited, censored and conducted in a unidirectional manner with only an appearance of bidirectionality.

Conclusion

User-generated content is serious business for companies, and they manage it accordingly. Even though most studies point out the bidirectionality of online communication these days, brands and their custodians are still caught up in the "push" style of communication that is characteristic of a broadcast paradigm. Although consumers are called to co-create with brands or to express their ideas on them, their power remains in the hands of marketers, acting as master puppeteers that invite users to create content, but according to their rules. The rules of Web 2.0 (Gillmor, 2004; O'Reilly, 2006) are not respected, and user-generated content in advertising campaigns does not promote freedom of speech, but is just a way of incorporating this fashionable element, but in a controlled medium.

One of the respondents shows how the request to have user-generated content in a campaign appeared, as the client said: "people don't say nice things about our brand; we want to have some good reviews". This is an obvious at-

tempt to control the content that is created by users, as the objective that is set from the start is that of having only "good" brand related content. In these campaigns, polyphony (the expression of many voices) is accepted and even encouraged, but as long as all these different voices sing the same tune. We can call it guided polyphony.

The results of this research point into the direction of a false democratization of brand communication through user-generated content, as brand managers and advertising professionals are not prepared to give up control over the communication process and users are not yet aware of their possibilities to negotiate meanings or resist dominant brand ideologies through the content they produce online.

Users are not so eager to participate into such campaigns that solicit content from them, advertisers complain. This finding appears to contradict a stream of literature that presents consumers as eager to shape brands and their meanings and to take part in the process of communicating them (Platteel, 2003; Christodoulides, 2009; Fournier & Avery, 2011). On a second thought, we can find a reason for this attitude in the tightly controlled process of these campaigns. It would be interesting if further research would demonstrate that such a process does not appeal to consumers that might otherwise find a certain appeal in co-creating and offering their visions on the brand. As long as they do not perceive these actions as sincere and really open, they choose not to participate.

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