

The Semiotics of Buzz

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Last year, at London Semiofest 2012, I was asked to participate in a roundtable on “How to Become a Semiotician”. Still partially jet-lagged from an overhaul flight, I sat in a Kensington Mexican restaurant during the coffee break before the roundtable, and jotted a Decalogue about “How to Become a Semiotician” on the receipt of my *orchata*.

To my utmost surprise, that piece became one of the most successful texts I have ever written. Saluted by rumbling applause the first time it was read, the Decalogue then became a hit on semiotics forums, generating cascades of comments and enflamed controversies that I followed with bemusement. When, encouraged by its success, I uploaded the text on my website, I soon realized, with oxymoronic proud disappointment, that it was downloaded more than any of the three hundred publications available, including scholarly essays built on rigorous research and multi-volume books whose writing had consumed my energies for years.

At some stage in life a man accepts that he is going to be remembered not for what he wants to be remembered for, but for what society mysteriously decides to remember him. Only in few cases of bliss the two mnemonic ambitions coincide. Nevertheless, as a semiotician obsessed with the laws of signification, I started wondering about the reasons for the success of the Decalogue. Some of them could be easily accounted for with reference to traditional marketing semiotics. First, my Decalogue went moderately viral because it parasitized the rhetorical form of a previous, tremendously viral text. Second, the semiotic Decalogue was short, easy to read, and relatively witty; roundtables about “How to Become Something” usually generate boring sermons on what one should or should not do; people were therefore refreshed by the unexpected parody. Third, the Decalogue took peremptory stances on some controversial issues in semiotics, such as its status among the humanities and the hard sciences; it therefore spurred debate. Fourth, the semiotic Commandments fulfilled a need: despite the publication of handbooks and the offering of courses around the world, many anxiously feel that “becoming a semiotician” is still something as exoteric as achieving liberation from karma.

Nevertheless, I was not completely satisfied with these reasons. Taking a more general perspective on the phenomenon, I started inquiring about what marketing experts define “buzz”.

Buzz is the contagious excitement that precedes and accompanies the launch of a new product. People start talking about it, sharing information, opinions, and enthusiasm even before the new product is available, on the basis of hearsay that provides only fragmentary knowledge of what the novelty is about. Marketing experts have found that controlling buzz, through techniques that are meant to initiate, promote, and monitor it, can substantially enhance the commercialization of a product. 2.0 communication, which is reintroducing a sort of secondary orality in mass communication, offers new opportunities to control what before seemed a random phenomenon. Research and literature on buzz is therefore growing, with several articles and even a book being written specifically on the subject.

Semiotics can give a fundamental contribution to the study of this phenomenon. First, in understanding the causes of it. Why do people give and take pleasure in sharing excitement about a new product they have consumed or are about to consume? Second, in analyzing the forms of signification and communication through which buzz takes place. Third, and fundamentally, in pinpointing the mysterious dynamics of influence: why does buzz come about in certain circumstances, while in other contexts does not arise? And can this process be fostered, supervised, and controlled through hard-edged semiotic techniques?

But, vice versa, the study of commercial buzz can be crucial for theoretical semiotics as well. Privileging the textual frame and the synchronic approach, semiotics, above all the structural trend, has cultivated an idea of meaning as something emerging from a comprehensive pattern, offering its unabridged fullness to the perception and interpretation of the receiver. This idea though, based on the stereotypical scenario of the 20th-century reading of a book, corresponds less and less to the way in which consumers of texts access meaning in their everyday life.

Think about a classical object of buzz marketing, a book. Well before they hold the volume in their hands, readers have absorbed glimpses of its narrative, context, and meaning from websites, blogs, social networks, conversation with friends; they have actually started talking about the new book well before they acquire it, sometimes as if they had read it. Even prior to publishing house printing the volume, entire groups of people have had time to grow expectations about it, in both cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic terms, exchanging bits of anticipations and enthusiasm, declaring plans of purchase.

Then, when the book is in print, its meaning will keep arising not only from traditional reading, but also from the aura that the book will continue emanating in micro-communities. A successful book will be talked about much more than read, and its social meaning constructed through hearsay as well as through exchange among readers. Even those who will

have purchased and read the book will retain only partial recollection of it, more and more subjective as the time goes, and these fragmentary meaning will add to the already piecemeal social conversation that bears on the book. In the end, only hard-core structural semioticians and few other text specialists will conceive of the meaning of the book as emerging from its integrity. For the rest of us, the book, as well as any other cultural artifact, will signify like an almost imperceptible melody surrounded by deafening buzz.

Marketers have realized that, under many circumstances, buzz is more important than melody. To continue with the musical metaphor, they have found that melody should not be preceded by absolute silence, so that the first note comes as utmost surprise to everyone. Instead, increasing buzz should pave the way for the musical piece, starting with a timid humming few privileged forerunners murmur before the product is out, thickening as the date of release approaches, exploding in thunderous drone once the product is available, and not subsiding at all after consumers purchase it, but rather accompanying its entire commercial existence.

Several reasons might account for the success of this marketing technique: researchers have pointed out that in a cultural climate where the authority of establishment messages is systematically disputed, viral advertising that relies on personal connections emanates an aura of trustworthiness. I'm able to sense the body that is transmitting its enthusiasm to me, therefore I can not only trust its message, but also fall under the spell of its excitement. In a way, buzz marketing exploits for commercial purposes the natural human inclination for empathy, which is also one of the controversial traits of this advertising technique.

Going back to the example of the book, major US publishers nowadays do not simply acquire the manuscript, edit it, copyedit it, commission a cover, obtain a blurb from a prestigious author, and launch the new title in the market. They rather start creating buzz since the very beginning of the book's life, since the acquisition of the manuscript. Buzz is generated through personal connections, face-to-face interactions that are nevertheless mostly simulated, staged in a way for the purpose of viral diffusion. Advanced reading copies of the book, a concept still largely unknown in continental European publishing, are given to key readers around the country, who are known to be in a position to influence other people into reading the same book. However, it is increasingly the case that particularly influential advanced readers, such as owners of distribution chains, indie bookshops, or managers of large reading clubs, are not simply mailed the forthcoming book. Rather, an employee of the publishing house dispatches the book to them personally, so as to entice the key-reader into the viral network that creates buzz before the diffusion of the book. In some special cases, even informal meetings with the

author will be organized, so that key advanced readers are involved in the mission in the most personal way.

“Missionary marketing”, indeed, could be a general label encompassing several techniques of viral and buzz propaganda. Indeed, the disestablishment of corporate communication in this époque of generalized institutional crisis cannot be the only explanation for the ease by which enthusiasm for the launch of a new product is produced and produces, in its turn, buzz. A fundamental motivation for the efficacy of buzz is that we are witnessing, in this first quarter of the new millennium, not only the emergence of *prosumerism*, a more and more active participation of consumers in the shaping and choice of their elected products, but also in what could be called, with a neologism, *provertising*, a tendency in which consumers want to have a say, and an emotional rewarding, also in the advertisement and diffusion of the product. If in the first stage of interactivity consumers were given the opportunity to influence the fabrication of products, in the current stage they are granted a chance to embark in a mission for its diffusion. This passage can be effectively accounted for in narrative, Greimasian terms.

In classic advertising, the consumer was a subject upon which commercial communication would bestow the desire of acquiring a certain object. In prosumeristic advertising, the consumer was somehow invited to participate in the process that shapes the product as an object of value. In *provertising*, finally, subjects are freed from their transactional role in the sense that they are invited to play the part of what Greimas calls the addresser, that is, the actant whose narrative function is not that of acquiring an object, but to instill in others the desire to do so. Anthropological motivations for which this mechanism works virally are manifold, but some of them deserve special consideration. First, *provertisers* do not acquire value only by coming into possession of an object, in a classical pattern of consumption; instead, buzz victims find their identity by creating other subjects, that is, by showing other subjects where value is, and by inducing them to acquire it.

Narrative semiotics has traditionally focused on the subject and its passions, but has neglected the addresser, this agency that seems to stay out of the narrative frame and that nevertheless is fundamental for its constitution. Creating desire according to our own desire means bringing into being a relation of power between the buzz enhancer and the buzz receiver, in a chain that is potentially endless and turns around the inexhaustible resource of personal enthusiasm.

Depending on its context of application, the semiotic perspective on buzz can be paradoxically double. On the one hand, no discipline better than the science of signification can develop

models for the creation, enhancement, maintaining, and monitoring of buzz. This entails abstract narrative models such as the one exposed above, as well as micro-analyses with a more specific focus. Given a certain product, what is its ideal buzz community? What actions can be taken so that buzz is created before the launch of the product? Using what channels and forms of old and new orality? How to synchronize the rhythm of buzz with the biography of the product, so that its melody is enhanced by the continuous drone preceding and surrounding it? Most importantly, how to make sure that buzz generates the narrative circle of influence described above? Semiotics, tapping into all the branches and hybridizations of the discipline, can answer these questions more convincingly than any other science. On the other hand, in its pedagogic version, semiotics cannot give up the critical stand, wondering about pluses and minuses of the cultures of buzz. Communities that rediscover the pleasure and value of personal communication, of empathically sharing inclinations and enthusiasm, must certainly be saluted with hopefulness, in an epoch where all intimacy seemed lost to the pervasiveness of mediation and simulation. At the same time, as commercialization appropriates and standardizes the new ways of tribal signification, one may wonder whether buzz is nothing but a new trap, one in which consumers are left with the empty enthusiasm for an object which does not exist yet, as they were left before, in classical consumerism, with the empty object for which enthusiasm did not exist anymore. Semioticians will better occupy the two positions, that of the marketer, and that of the skeptical observer, so as to play both roles more effectively.