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# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FORMATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION<sup>1</sup>**

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# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FORMATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION**

## **ABSTRACT**

The rise of social media is changing how evaluative judgments about organizations are produced and disseminated in the public domain. In this article, we discuss how these changes question traditional assumptions that research on media reputation rests upon, and we offer an alternative framework that begins to account for how the more active role of audiences, the changing ways in which they express their evaluations, and the increasing heterogeneity and dynamism that characterizes media reputation influence the formation of organizational reputations.

**KEYWORDS:** Social media, reputation formation, news media, media reputation, organizational reputation

In April of 2017, three security guards dragged a random passenger against his will through the corridor of an overbooked United aircraft and threw him violently off the airplane. Two passengers filmed the short incident with their mobile phones and instantly uploaded the videos to the social media platform YouTube, from which the vivid videos spread through social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Immediately, thousands of social media users publicly criticized United Airlines with harsh and angry online comments, added their own experiences with United's poor customer service, and mocked the airline with sarcastic slogans ("Our prices cannot be beaten – our customers can"). Eventually, major news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and *The Guardian* picked up the story and amplified its reach. As a consequence, the organization lost 800 million dollars in market value within a day and was eventually forced to introduce costly policies in order to avoid further reputational loss and a decrease in bookings (Lazo, 2017).

The United case exemplifies how social media—new information and communication technologies that enable their users to connect and publicly exchange experiences, opinions, and views on the Internet (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)—are changing how evaluations of the quality, competence, or character of organizations are produced, disseminated, and accessed in the public domain. These changes, we argue, have important consequences for the formation of organizational reputation, understood as the prominence of an organization in the public's mind and collective perceptions about its "quality and performance characteristics" as well as its "goals, preferences, and organizational values" (Mishina, Block, & Manor, 2012: 459-460; see also Love & Kraatz, 2009; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005).

One of the core tenets of this research area is that publicly available evaluations disseminated by the media—or media reputation (Deephouse, 2000)—crucially influence collective reputational judgments by shaping the informational content about organizations to

which the public is exposed (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Deephouse, 2000). While, at such a level of abstraction, this idea still applies to the mutating media landscape, the more specific assumptions about how new digital media do so appear less and less suited to directing the examination of a changing phenomenon.

Current assumptions about how the media shape the reputation of organizations are largely based on an understanding of the media landscape before the rise of social media, when public awareness of incidents like the United case heavily relied on a journalist who somehow got to know about the incident and found a way to collect sufficient information. The incident would eventually become public if the journalist decided that it was newsworthy and if the editor-in-chief concluded that a publication would not cause retaliation that could harm the news organization (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011). The article would likely describe the incident in relatively neutral language and give the organization the opportunity to express its view (Chen & Meindl, 1991; Zavyalova et al., 2016). The story would have been broadcasted to audiences that had little opportunity to add their own experiences or mobilize others against the organization without major organizing efforts and the support of the media (King, 2008).

While these assumptions still have explanatory value regarding traditional news media, they seem less able to account for the substantive changes that social media have introduced in the production, dissemination, and consumption of publicly available evaluations. As the United incident illustrates, social media now give voice to actors who previously had limited access to the public domain, and it enables them to bypass the gatekeeping function of traditional news media and reach wide audiences connected through online social networks (Castells, 2011; Papacharissi, 2009). Emotionally charged and often biased content may now rapidly diffuse (Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012) and become part of online threads and hypertextual webs as other users comment on, forward, alter, or add to the original content

(Albu & Etter, 2016; Barros, 2014; Jenkins, 2006). These interactions potentially expose audiences to complex and evolving communication exchanges reflecting a multiplicity of views, experiences, and opinions (Castello, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013; Castells, 2011). At the same time, feeding algorithms and the selection of preferential sources increasingly work in the opposite direction, exposing users only to circumscribed exchanges while reinforcing partial views (Pariser, 2011; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2017).

In this paper, we discuss how social media—and the new forms of interaction that they enable—challenge consolidated assumptions about media reputation, and we offer a theoretical framework that, while not denying the persisting influence of traditional news media and corporate communication, begins to account for how social media are shifting the dynamics through which publicly available evaluations are shaping collective reputational judgments.

The framework that we propose questions current assumptions about the monolithic and relatively inert nature of media reputation and the passive engagement of organizational audiences. It highlights how social media enable the co-existence of multiple evaluations—often critical, at times subversive—that are actively co-produced by heterogeneous sources on an ongoing basis and largely outside the control of organizations. It argues that the increasing fragmentation of media—combined with the, often unwitting, selective exposure to preferred sources—has the potential to segment the public sphere into multiple, only loosely interconnected venues where evaluations diffuse and impact reputational judgments by resonating with pre-existing frames and beliefs. As a result, we argue, we can no longer take the relative alignment between the content of news media and collective judgments for granted, as the relationship between media reputation and organizational reputation may now be more fragmented, recursive and dynamic than previously assumed.

The changing nature of the format and content of evaluations about organizations disseminated in the public domain through social media, we argue, also questions the idea that the conceptual domain of reputation is limited to an analytical assessment of the character and qualities of an organization based on the processing of available information. In contrast to past research, which saw no role for emotions in the formation of reputation, we argue that positive and negative emotional responses play an important role in the production and diffusion of evaluations on social media. Assuming that emotional responses to organizations are limited to organizational celebrity (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006) and stigma (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009), therefore, may underestimate the emotional charge that may influence how individuals form and/or publicly express their evaluations of organizations, even in less extreme cases.

Recognizing the more heterogeneous, co-produced, potentially contested, occasionally subversive, often emotionally charged nature of evaluative accounts disseminated through social media has also important implications for how we study reputation. It encourages us to reconsider current methodological conventions and to explore new tools that may better capture the increased fragmentation, dynamism, and multimodality that characterizes the formation of reputation(s) on social media.

### **CURRENT THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MEDIA REPUTATION**

Scholars explain the formation of organizational reputation as based on the processing and interpretation of information cues (Bitektine, 2011; Sjovald & Talk, 2004) to form analytical evaluative judgment about, for instance, the quality or trustworthiness of an organization (Highhouse, Brooks, & Gregarus, 2011; Mishina et al., 2012). Organizations disseminate some of these cues themselves when they strategically project positive images of themselves through corporate communication or symbolic action (Petkova, Rindova, & Gupta, 2013;



Rindova & Fombrun, 1999). Other cues derive from direct exposure to the products, services, or more general actions of an organization. Other still are produced by other actors, such as the news media (Deephouse, 2000; Pollock & Rindova, 2003), who scrutinize organizational actions and disseminate evaluations that influence the perceptions of stakeholders (Rindova, 1997).

News media are believed to play a central role in the formation of organizational reputation because they “control both the technology that disseminates information about firms to large audiences and the content of the information disseminated” (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006: 56). News media direct public attention to the organizations they cover, and they influence stakeholders’ evaluations of organizations by selectively presenting and framing information about them (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Pollock & Rindova, 2003). Accordingly, scholars have introduced the term “media reputation” to refer to the “overall evaluation of a firm in the media” (Deephouse, 2000: 1091), and they have widely investigated how media reputation contributes to the formation of collective reputational judgments. Based on these studies, scholars have argued that, while not being the only source of influence on reputational judgments, news media importantly affect how individuals evaluate organizations, especially when they have no direct exposure to their products or services (Carroll, 2010). Even when their judgments differ from the accounts offered by the news media, individuals may be reluctant to contradict these authoritative “evaluators” publicly, implicitly acquiescing to the validity of their assessments (Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

Research on media reputation generally focuses on the coverage of a few identifiable news outlets, selected based on “authority” and “circulation” (Deephouse, 2000; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, & Reger, 2012), under the assumption that the evaluations adequately capture the informational content made available to the public. While few

scholars explicitly claim that news media exert an overwhelming influence on collective judgments, the assumption of a “close alignment between news media content and public opinion” (Deephouse & Carter, 2005: 339) is so widely accepted that the coverage by prominent news media is often used as a proxy for measuring organizational reputation (e.g., King, 2008; Rindova, Petkova, & Kotha, 2007; Zavyalova, et al., 2012).

Such an approach has the undeniable benefit of simplicity. It is also justified by a set of assumptions about the news media and how they influence collective judgments (see Figure 1) that were not unreasonable in a pre-social media era, when it was not an excessive oversimplification, for instance, to assume that relatively few authoritative sources broadcasted largely homogenous content to relatively passive audiences. In this section, we briefly outline these assumptions. In the following section, we discuss how the rise of social media is challenging them, and we offer an alternative framework to examine the formation of reputation in settings where these new technologies heavily shape how actors produce, disseminate, and access evaluations about organizations<sup>2</sup>.

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Insert Figure 1 here  
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### **Top-Down Communication: The Gatekeeping Role and Influence of News Media**

Current theories of media reputation generally conceptualize the dissemination of media evaluations as a top-down process enacted through a broadcasting mode of diffusion (one-to-

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<sup>2</sup>To some extent, current assumptions about the production and dissemination of evaluations by the news media do represent an oversimplification, even without considering the rise of social media (see also Roulet & Clemente, forthcoming). The new information and communication technologies, however, have introduced changes in how information is made publicly available, and by whom, that make this oversimplification increasingly problematic.

many) whereby relatively few media outlets spread evaluations about organizations among a broad audience (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Rindova et al., 2005). This assumption is consistent with the idea that news media enjoy exclusive formal and informal access to elite sources (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011) and act as gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1950) by filtering information that they consider newsworthy and disseminating it to the general public (Brosius & Weimann, 1996; Katz, 1957). In this respect, the extant literature assumes a structural distinction between a privileged source of evaluations (the news media) and an audience who receives and processes them (the public).

Scholars typically assume that, in the absence of direct exposure to an organization, its products, or its services, individuals look to the evaluative content of news media to form their judgments because they perceive journalists as “authoritative sources” (Rindova et al., 2006: 33) and attribute to them “superiority in evaluating firms” (Rindova et al., 2005: 1034). Scholars also attribute “wide-ranging influence” (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011: 1080) to news media because established and capillary distribution channels confer on them a “structural position” (Rindova et al., 2005: 1034) that enables them to reach audiences “at large scale” (Rindova et al., 2006: 33; see also Deephouse, 2000).

### **Relative Homogeneity of Sources, Content, and Style of News Media Evaluations**

Scholars have long argued that news organizations “reinforce [the] uniformity and consistency” of publicly available evaluations of organization (Chen & Meindl, 1991: 527). This assumption justifies the treatment of media reputation as a rather monolithic entity with strong and direct influence on collective judgments; if we assume that news media not only enjoy the privilege to diffuse of information to wide audiences, but that they also tend to disseminate converging evaluations, then we may safely assume that these evaluations

strongly shape collective judgments (Carroll & McCombs, 2003), as no alternative accounts are available in the public domain.

Again, this assumption is not unreasonable if we consider the isomorphic pressures, professional routines, and informal and formal control mechanisms that characterize the field of news production (Deuze, 2005; Schudson, 2001) and that lead to the fairly uniform content and style of the evaluations disseminated by the news media (Chen & Meindl, 1991). Socialization in the news room, training and apprenticeship, professional codes of conduct, and peer control all contribute to reinforcing journalistic norms, practices, and routines (Tuchman, 1978, 2002; Cotter, 2010) and induce journalists to follow similar heuristics to decide what is “newsworthy” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

In fact, journalists not only tend to have similar selection criteria, but they also tend to have access to and use a similar set of sources for their stories (Schudson, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). By reducing the time available to report, research, write, and reflect on stories (Klinenberg, 2005), cost-cutting measures in newsrooms over the last decades have fostered a higher reliance on news agencies and a broader use of pre-packaged public relations material (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Zavyalova et al., 2012). As a result, news media often offer representations that largely draw upon—or “refract” (Rindova, 1997)—images projected by the organizations themselves.

Finally, institutionalized professional practices and perceived expectations of peers and editors-in-chief (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Tuchman, 2001) lead journalists to write in an often impersonal and unemotional style, using a vocabulary and tone that reflects a “journalistic genre” (Cotter, 2010; Deuze, 2005). Even though digitalization has led news organizations to experiment with innovative styles and formats (Nee, 2015), established routines, the control of supervisors, guidelines, and short deadlines tend to undermine creativity in the production of news media narratives (Malmelin & Virta, 2016).

It can be objected that this assumption of homogeneity offered an oversimplified portrayal of news production and its outcomes (Benson, 2006; see also Roulet & Clemente, forthcoming). However, research has shown that news media tend to follow similar topics (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Golan, 2006) and that news content tends to converge over time through cross-referencing and confirmation from similar others (Pollock & Rindova, 2003). It has also shown that while some news workers may pursue opinionated, political agendas (Schudson, 2001), Western journalists generally strive to fulfill their professional roles of objective and impartial observers (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). These studies, then, have offered some support to the assumptions that justified the treatment of the news media (and the evaluations they offered) as a relatively monolithic entity.

### **The Influence of Organizations over the Media**

Finally, scholars not only assume that news media exert considerable influence on collective judgments, but also that media are themselves strongly influenced, directly or indirectly, by the organizations that they cover (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011; Zayvalova et al., 2012) and that the content they disseminate draws heavily on corporate communication, rarely deviating much from it (Chen & Meindl, 1991; Kioussis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007). This assumption is supported by research suggesting that news media may be reluctant to disseminate negative evaluation of organization for fear of losing preferential access to information, concerns of legal actions, and economic dependence on them (McManus, 1995; Westphal & Deephouse, 2011).

Indeed, news media need access to corporate information to feed their articles (Reich, 2009; Schudson, 1996; Sigal, 1986). Because journalists face knowledge asymmetries vis-à-vis organizations and have significant constraints on the time they can devote to any one story (Tuchman, 2002), they regard senior managers' communications as particularly useful,

and they may refrain from publishing content that may endanger privileged relationships with management (Shani & Westphal, 2016; Westphal & Deephouse, 2011).

Publishers and editors-in-chiefs may also be reluctant to publicize content that may trigger legal action (Picard, 2004) or cause the loss of advertising revenue (Rinallo & Basuroy, 2009) and, therewith, undermine the economic viability of the organization (Epstein, 1973). While news media may also produce content that casts an organization in a negative light, they tend to do so only when events are already in the public domain—such as in the case of disasters or criminal investigations—and usually offer organizational spokespersons an opportunity to comment on the event.

### **THE FORMATION OF REPUTATION IN THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

Based on the assumptions that we have outlined in the previous section, it was not unreasonable for past research to conceptualize—more or less explicitly—the influence of traditional news media on collective judgments as a unidirectional process, wherein the evaluations made available to individuals by these media converged, rarely questioned images projected by organizations, and largely shaped the collective perceptions of audiences that generally assumed the neutrality, facticity, and credibility of the representations that they were offered (see Figure 1). In fact, many of these assumptions were supported by empirical evidence.

In this section, we argue that the rise of social media, and of digital media technologies more generally, is increasingly challenging the capacity of these assumptions to fully account for how evaluations of organizations are now made public, disseminated, and received in the changing media landscape (see Table 1).

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Insert table 1 here  
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In doing so, we do not deny that the assumptions we have discussed earlier may still apply, to a degree, to traditional news media, as well as to social media actors, such as online bloggers or social media influencers (Macquarrie et al., 2013), who occupy prominent structural positions and/or are similarly subjected to the influence of organizations. We argue, however, that social media are shifting the dynamics of media reputation in significant ways, and we offer an alternative explanatory framework (portrayed in Figure 2<sup>3</sup>) that foregrounds the technological features (indicated in the figure with an asterisk) and social dynamics that, in the mutated media landscape, characterize the dissemination of evaluations through social media. This framework, we argue, encourages us to revisit and re-discuss extant assumptions about the interrelations between organizations and the media system and about how media reputation influences reputational judgments.

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### **From Vertical Broadcasting to Horizontal Information Flows and Co-Production**

Social media offer alternative ways to disseminate evaluations about organizations in the public domain through the vertical, top-down, one-to-many diffusions that characterized traditional news media. Blogs and discussion forums enable users to draw public attention to organizational actions and to comment on them (Brodie et al., 2013), while virtual social networks allow users to exchange information, views, experiences and to coalesce around

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<sup>3</sup> The purpose of Figure 2 is not to fully capture the complexity of the interrelations between news media, social media, organizations, and their audiences, but to foreground the role of social media in the formation of organizational reputation. Because of this reason, and for the sake of simplicity, the Figure acknowledges that news media and organizations also influence collective judgments – both directly and indirectly through social media – but omits other interrelations between these actors, such as the influence of corporate communication and social media content on news media coverage.

topics through thousands of direct and indirect contacts (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). On bottom-up organized co-production sites, users expose and discuss corporate actions, such as wrong-doing, even decades after their occurrence (Etter & Nielsen, 2015). Review sites enable individual assessments of products, services, and jobs to reach and possibly influence the perceptions of thousands of visitors who are potential customers and employees (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). Collectively, posts, tweets, reviews, etc. contribute to a process through which millions of individuals are exposed to evaluations produced by their peers and other actors.

***Status and structural position vs. sharing.*** A first important implication of this change is that individual evaluations may now reach wide attention regardless of the status and structural position of the sender. Past studies of media reputation assumed that the impact of evaluations disseminated by news media depended on the relative authoritativeness of the sender and was proportional to its reach (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Rindova et al., 2005). To some extent, this is still the case in the mutated landscape. While some social media users do enjoy structural positions analogous to the most prominent news media because of the enormous amount of “followers” who routinely receive information from them (Gillin, 2009; Macquarrie et al., 2013), a large majority of the content disseminated by other users directly reaches only a few proximal peers (Cha et al., 2010).

Social media, however, now enable users to play a more active role in the diffusion of evaluations by directly forwarding the evaluative content they have produced, encountered, or received to the attention of other users through posting, tweeting, forwarding, etc. activities that are subsumed under the term *sharing* (Benkler, 2006). Even before social media, audiences drew one another’s attention to pieces of news, shared them, commented on them, etc. These responses, however, remained localized; therefore, for the most part, they were treated as negligible (Barnett & Pollock, 2012). In the new media landscape, instead, as



the United incident indicates, these responses are what allow content produced by users without status and structural position comparable to traditional news media to gain large-scale attention (Castells, 2011; Papacharissi, 2009), with important implications—as we discuss later—on the content made available in the public domain.

***Co-production and networked narratives.*** A second important implication is that social media now enable vast audiences to serve as both senders and receivers of evaluations and to collectively engage in the *co-production* of these evaluations.

Past studies assumed media to broadcast information vertically, with limited opportunities for audiences to respond. Consistent with this idea, past research had little concern for how audiences would react to, question, or discuss the content to which they were exposed (Barnett & Pollock, 2012) because their reactions had limited opportunities to reach a wide audience. In contrast, social media enable information to flow horizontally through large-scale networks of interconnected social relations (Castells, 2011; Elisson & Boyd, 2013). In these networks, every point can contribute to the creation and rapid diffusion of content, as users freely and easily share information across and between different platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Even news media now offer readers the opportunity to voice their immediate reactions to their content online, interact, and share their views with one another (Lewis, 2012). By doing so, they effectively involve users in the co-production of publicly available evaluations, as other readers are simultaneously exposed to the original evaluations and the responses of the audience. In fact, news media increasingly rely on social media users as sources, using information circulated through social media channels for their reporting, which is then picked up by social media users (Hermida, 2012; Pfeffer et al., 2014).

This change is important, theoretically, because it means that assuming a structural distinction between the senders (the media) and receivers (the audience) of evaluations offers an increasingly unrealistic portrayal of how information is disseminated in the media

landscape, where stakeholders can no longer be assumed to be mere receivers of information. Social media, in this respect, have made the distinction between sender and receiver situational rather than structural because, in a given communicative exchange, any member of the audience is also a potential sender of content, and vice versa (Castells, 2011).

On social media, information about organizations often comes in the form of “networked narratives” (Kozinets et al., 2010), which are threads of posts, discussion forums, etc. where users comment on, add to, link, and/or “mash up” the content of existing narratives (Jackson, 2009: 730), thereby challenging, reinforcing, or elaborating on the original evaluations (Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz & Feldhaus, 2015; Kozinets et al., 2010). The content of these narratives, therefore, becomes “re-sequenced, altered, customized or re-narrated” (Cover, 2006: 141) as it propagates, blurring the distinction between author and audience while multiple actors engage in its co-production.

New digital technologies facilitate the process of co-production through hypertextual links that enable direct access to other content available online (Albu & Etter, 2016; Barros, 2014). In contrast to the linear engagement of audiences with news media articles before the advent of the Internet, the engagement with hypertexts occurs within a nonlinear space of interrelated textual nodes (Manovich, 2001) that also includes access to the archives of news media outlets and hyperlinks in or to online news media articles. As these links are constantly made and modified, the networks are open to an unlimited number of additions from multiple sources, and their content and configurations can evolve in unpredictable ways (Albu & Etter, 2016; Landow, 1997).

For instance, in January of 2012, when McDonalds launched a Twitter campaign with the hashtag #McDStories to generate supportive accounts from its customers, thousands of users from different parts of the world publicly expressed their memorable negative experiences with the fast-food chain. The content of their tweets ranged from criticizing the taste of the

products, to the chemical ingredients in food production, unacceptable hygiene-standards in restaurants, and accusations of causing obesity. Electronic links to blogs, websites, photos, videos, and other social media sites vividly enriched this evolving networked narrative, which eventually found its way into traditional newspapers and magazines (Hill, 2012) and is still accessible years after the initial event.

### **From Homogeneity to Heterogeneity of Publicly Available Evaluations**

Earlier in this paper, we discussed how scholars have generally treated media reputation as a relatively monolithic entity. In contrast, as the McDonald's incident exemplifies, social media have opened up alternative channels for the horizontal dissemination of information that enable audience members to publicly question the content of news media and corporate communications and to offer alternative evaluations (Albu & Etter, 2016).

Over two billion actors now use various platforms, such as virtual social networks (e.g., Facebook), blogs (e.g., Wordpress), micro blogs (e.g., Twitter), video- (e.g., Youtube), photo- (e.g., Instagram), rating-platforms (e.g., Tripadvisor), forums (e.g., Redit), and the comment functions of news media (e.g., *The New York Times*) to discuss and evaluate organizations, their actions, their products, and their services. While these platforms are used by most organizations as additional channels for corporate communication, they also enable the evaluations of a broad range of actors—including consumers, politicians, celebrities, citizens, activists, indie- and alternative media, and NGOs—to access the public domain directly (Castells, 2011). Because of the varied sources of information on which they draw, the motives that drive them, and the constraints that they experience, these users may offer quite diverse evaluations of organizations and their actions. Combined with the diminishing influence of organizations over the production and dissemination of information—which is no longer centralized in few outlets partly dependent on organizations for their revenues and

access to information—this diversity is increasing the likelihood that audiences are exposed to evaluations that diverge from official corporate communication (MacKay & Munro, 2012) and news media reports (Dahlberg, 2007; Etter & Vestergaard, 2015).

***Heterogeneity of sources of information.*** Social media make a plurality of experiences, opinions, and topics visible and potentially heard (Castello et al., 2013; Castells, 2011), and the broad range of conversations that they host are not necessarily shaped by commercial news criteria and pre-packaged information received by the organizations themselves.

Much of the content shared by a multitude of social media users, for instance, draws on personal experiences—such as shock at a cell phone catching fire, or being appalled at a fellow passenger being forcefully removed from his seat before take-off—that may not otherwise reach the attention of the public (or not in such a vivid manner). Social media have been described as an enormous electronic “word-of-mouth” outlet (Mangold & Faulds, 2009: 358) that enable individual users to publicly share their experiences by posting comments on review sites (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014), reporting them on their blogs, disseminating them through social networks (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015), or even creating groups in support or in opposition to organizations (Coombs & Halloday, 2012; Papacharissi, 2009). Before social media, these responses would have been confined to a few personal relations; social media now enable them to reach the public domain, where they may become highly influential.

Indeed, social media users tend to perceive other users who disseminate content associated with personal experiences as reliable sources of information about organizations and their products (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) because of their “experiential credibility” (Hussain et al., 2016)—that is, their first-hand experience with a topic or situation (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013). While bloggers' and other celebrities' support for organizations may be questioned as

insincere, ordinary users are perceived as more trustworthy because they are independent from “corporate interests” (Johnson & Kaye, 2004: 625).

The perceived trustworthiness of the content disseminated through social networks is also enhanced by the particular relationship between the sender and the receiver, because homophily—the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with individuals who are similar to themselves (Pariser, 2011; Stroud, 2010)—may increase the credibility of evaluations received from proximal ties who are perceived as members of the same social group (Sunstein, 2017) or as sharing similar interests, opinions, and socio-economic backgrounds (Stroud, 2010).

***Heterogeneity of motives.*** A second source of heterogeneity in publicly available evaluations of organizations is the broader range of motives that drive their production and dissemination on social media, besides conventional assessments of newsworthiness. Social media are not only used to report positive or negative experiences of organizational products or services; they are also used to express and enact individual, social, and organizational identities through individuals highlighting and/or commenting on organizational events and actions that resonate with or violate their personal values and beliefs (Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2012).

Frequently, individual users of social media are driven by a need for social validation and relationship development, which are satisfied through acts of self-expression (Hollenbaugh, 2010; Papacharissi, 2012). For these users, content production depends on their “ego involvement” in a topic (Park, Oh, & Kang, 2012), understood as “the extent to which their self-concept, or identity, is connected with their position on a particular issue and forms an integral part of how they define themselves” (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005: 136). Social media enable these users to stage an “online performance” (Papacharissi, 2012) through which they attempt to express, construct, and enact personal or social identities (Marwick & Boyd, 2010)

and manage bonds among members of social groups (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 2000)<sup>4</sup>. Users do so through the choice of what they talk about (or do not talk about), how they talk about it, and the positions that they take (Elisson & Boyd, 2013; Kim, 2014; Papacharissi, 2012).

Similarly, NGOs and activists use social media to build or reinforce a distinctive image—frequently built in opposition to corporate practices (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012)—by supporting or stigmatizing actions that are congruent or incongruent with the social values that they advocate. Engagement with social media helps these actors to fulfill their mission, by drawing other users’ attention to social issues, often mobilizing them against organizations (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The evaluations that they diffuse, therefore, are often critical of the conventional representation of organizations in the news media and question the images strategically projected by the organizations that they target (Albu & Etter, 2016; Etter & Vestergaard, 2015).

***Heterogeneity of constraints.*** The heterogeneity of evaluations of organizations made available on social media is further increased by the fact that many users are neither restricted by professional norms that recommend fact-checking and the verification of sources nor afraid of losing privileged access to information or being held legally responsible for diffusing and sharing inaccurate information. In fact, while lawsuits against social media users are possible, they are not always advisable for corporations, as they tend to provoke heated reactions from other social media users and eventually cause additional reputational damage (Coombs & Halloday, 2012).

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, consumer research shows that sharing one’s experiences and evaluations through word of mouth is also associated with the motivation to establish one’s status and identity as an expert (Arndt, 1967).

Users who are free from these constraints frequently disseminate content lacking substantial factual basis (Flanagin, 2017; Veil et al., 2012) as long as it is instrumental to the expression of a desired personal or social identity or to the strengthening of social bonds.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, activists and NGOs may offer one-sided representations of organizations and events in order to achieve their goals and mobilize other audiences against their targets (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

Many actors in social media also enjoy fewer restrictions than journalists regarding the format and style in which they are allowed to express their evaluations. Breaking conventional formats and experimenting in flexible multimodal combinations of text, images, audio, and video (Jackson, 2009; Jenkins, 2006), such as Internet-memes (Guadagno et al., 2013), is seen as instrumental to promoting users' creative self (Papacharissi, 2012), and it is encouraged by the observation that original, creative content is more likely to be attended to, liked, and forwarded on social media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

The discovery of horse meat in Findus processed beef products in April of 2013, for instance, triggered a flood of highly emotional, often humorous posts and messages in social media depicting the organization and its meat products as contaminated with horse meat in pictures, logos, and texts, regardless of copyrights and detailed accurate evidence ("Findus lasagne - with real Trojan beef"; "Let's hide here, they won't Findus"). This content spread rapidly over digital networks and exposed the food safety issue of an organization and the industry to hundreds of thousands of social media users; this eventually urged the

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<sup>5</sup> For example, over the last decade, social media users have repeatedly voiced their discontent with racist comments (wrongly) attributed to fashion brand CEO Tommy Hilfiger; they set aside checks of factual accuracy to satisfy their need to express their identity through public outcry, contributing to the viral propagation of the incorrect information of this hoax (Joeseeph, 2016).

organization to undergo a costly rebranding three years later, as its reputation had not recovered since (Hartley-Parkinson, 2016).

*Humour, cultural jamming and the subversion of organizational images.* As the Findus incident illustrates, content diffused on social media often uses humor to express evaluations of organizations and/or their products (Kumar & Combe, 2015). Humor is believed to fulfill a social need to connect by helping to convey emotions and knowledge, sealing bonds between people (Martin, 2010). On social media, users may use humor to increase their visibility and popularity within an online community (Zappavigna, 2012). In fact, the creative use of humor has been shown to provoke emotional responses that stimulate seeking, discussing, and sharing information (Martin, 2010), that motivate individuals to pass along this content online (Guadagno et al., 2013 Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Newstead, 2013), and that spur its diffusion over social networks (Dobele et al., 2007).

On social media, humorous remarks often take the form of cultural jamming (Carducci, 2006; Guadagno et al., 2013), manifested, for example, in the creative alteration of corporate material (logos, slogans, ads, etc.) to express criticism of corporate policies or decisions by highlighting contradictions between the images they project and the reality of their actions. In the aftermath of the Deep Water Horizon oil spill, for instance, social media were flooded with retouched versions of the logo of oil company BP with the yellow-green sun tainted with black oil, dying sea birds, etc. Several years after the scandal, searching “BP logo” on Google still produced these jammed images as a perpetual denunciation of insincerity and irresponsibility.

Cultural jamming exemplifies the subversion of images that social media enable and reward, as opposed to the refraction process (Rindova, 1997) that is central to current conceptualizations of media reputation. This is not to say that humor as a form of expression or critique is not available to news media. Some journalists make of humor a trademark of



personal columns, and news media may occasionally engage in cultural jamming, although this material is usually relegated to satirical cartoons. In fact, these cartoons often find wide diffusion in social media as well (Leskovec, Backstrom, & Kleinberg, 2009).

In this section, we have argued that, in the new media landscape—because of the increasing heterogeneity of sources of information, motives, and constraints—neutral and factual evaluations co-exist with less balanced, factually incorrect, deliberately mobilizing evaluations, often expressed through unconventional styles and humor. While past research assumed that the facticity and neutrality of the content were important for evaluations offered by the news media to influence collective judgments (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; King & Soule, 2007), lack of balance or accuracy does not seem to prevent the diffusion and impact of social media. On the contrary, unbalanced and inaccurate accounts may receive more attention and diffuse to vast audiences (Kwon et al., 2013) when they are expressed creatively or humorously (Blommaert & Varis, 2017), or—as we discuss next—when they stir strong emotions (Guadagno et al., 2013) or resonate with pre-existing views (Sunstein, 2017).

### **From Informational to Emotional Content**

Current research on media reputation tends to focus on the informational content of traditional media coverage, under the assumption that “media reputation reflects more deliberate and analytical judgments” about an organization’s quality, competence, trustworthiness, etc. (Zavyalova et al., 2016: 7), and scholars tend to regard affect as irrelevant for reputational judgment formation (e.g., Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). This assumption is consistent with the idea that professional identity, norms, and routines induce journalists to offer factual and balanced accounts of events (Deephouse, 2000). In fact, scholars assume that it is exactly because audiences believe news media to “accurately cover hard news and facts” (King & Soule, 2007: 424) that media reputation influences collective

judgments. Even though scholars recognize that, at times, news media dramatize events (Gamson, 1994), they tend to relegate emotional responses to dramatized coverage of organizational actions to the domain of celebrity (Rindova et al., 2006).

An important implication of the heterogeneity that we have described in the previous section, however, is the increasing emotional charge of evaluations about the quality or character of organizations available in the public domain. The expression of evaluations and their subsequent diffusion in social media is often triggered by strong emotions, such as anger and frustration (Pfeffer et al., 2014; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016), surprise and excitement (Berger & Milkman, 2012), shock and disgust (Veil et al., 2012), or joy (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). These emotions motivate users to share their experiences with an organization's products or services (Wang et al., 2010) or to publicly voice their views about organizational actions that uphold or contradict their values (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2016). They often transpire in the content of evaluations—vividly conveyed not only in words, but also in graphic signs, images, and videos—complementing the informational content that they carry (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015) without necessarily turning these organizations into celebrities or branding them with a social stigma.

This emotional content has important implications for their impact on collective judgments. First, emotionally charged content is preferentially processed (attended to or avoided and remembered) in comparison to content that is not affectively charged (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Lang, Dhillon, & Dong, 1995), eventually leading to the selective attention and accessibility of information (Nabi, 2007). Affectively-charged content also influences reasoning, logical inferences, and the use of heuristics (Blanchette & Richards, 2000), and it induces further information seeking and the more systematic processing of information, eventually shaping positive or negative cognitive responses towards organizational actions (Nabi, 2002, 2003). Even if factually inaccurate or incomplete, evaluations that appeal to

emotions can prove more persuasive and influential on people's attitudes and judgments than analytical evaluations that appeal to reason (Nabi, 2007).

Second, the emotional content of evaluations increases the likelihood that they will be shared and disseminated further (Berger & Milkman, 2012). In part, this phenomenon can be explained by the selective attention and processing discussed above. In part, content that evokes strong emotions, such as amusement, happiness, anger, fear, disgust, or surprise, is shared more often than less arousing content, both online and offline (Dobele et al., 2007; Heath, Bell, & Sternberg, 2001; Rime, 2009) because emotional arousal mobilizes an excitatory state (Heilman, 1997) that pushes individuals to share news or information with others (Berger, 2011).

On the receiver's side, emotional content may propagate rapidly in social networks through "emotional contagion," a term that refers to the convergence of one's emotional state with the emotional states of those whom one is observing or interacting with (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). This phenomenon manifests when emotionally charged information is shared by an original sender (such as an eyewitness of the United incident) with his or her links, and from these receivers to their own links (Guadagno et al., 2013), rapidly branching out in multiple directions, indirectly reaching and possibly mobilizing a vast audience (Bakshy et al., 2012).

### **Selective Exposure and Audience Fragmentation**

Finally, social media are changing the ways that media reputations are shaping collective judgments by facilitating the more or less conscious selective exposure of users to sources of evaluations.

Research on media reputation tends to conceptualize receivers of evaluations as relatively undifferentiated entities, either as part of homogenous stakeholder groups or the more general

public. Hence, current theories do not consider the possibility of intra-audience differences, as they assume, more or less implicitly, that members of a “stakeholder group (e.g., consumers of a particular organization) notice similar types of cues, react in a similar manner toward those cues, and hence arrive at a similar conclusion” (Mishina et al., 2012: 460).

While past research would not deny that audience members can select preferential sources of information (for instance, by purchasing a certain newspaper or watching certain TV news), other assumptions about the media system we discussed earlier, such as the relatively few outlets available (Zavyalova et al., 2012), the relative homogeneity of content (Deephouse, 2000), and the influence of organizations over news media (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011), make these choices of little consequence over the evaluations to which one is exposed. Media and communication scholars, however, have observed that social media and Internet technologies are “increasingly giving users the ability to ‘filter’ information and interactions and so ‘self-select’ what they wish to be exposed to” (Dahlberg, 2007: 829).

*Selective exposure and frame resonance.* Confronted with a staggering increase in potential sources of information and heterogeneity of content, audiences pre-select a number of sources that they automatically receive information from in the form of tweets, news, etc. (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2017), use bookmarks to routinely return to preferred sites, or customize the news they receive (Dahlberg, 2007; Thurman, 2011). In light of the increasing heterogeneity of sources and content, these choices may be highly consequential for the evaluations they are exposed to (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) and, hence, for the formation of their reputational judgments.

Individuals naturally tend to seek information that confirms prior beliefs and to ignore disconfirming information (Nickerson, 1989; Wason, 1960). When confronted with events open to multiple interpretations, individuals tend to select the one that allows them to

preserve a “consistent, positive self-conception” (Weick, 1995: 23). For these reasons, users may rather selectively expose themselves to sources and evaluations that are likely to “resonate” with their views and help them preserve the integrity of their self-concept (Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2017). They may disregard concerns with accuracy and facticity as long as the content they receive can be used, as discussed earlier, to express personal identities or to strengthen social bonds (Papacharissi, 2012).

Selective exposure, in this respect, intensifies the influence on collective judgments of a phenomenon known as “frame resonance,” which refers to the degree to which the content of communication is perceived as “believable and compelling” among a particular audience because it is aligned with the particular beliefs—“frames”—that they use to interpret information (Snow et al., 1986: 477). Frame resonance, then, explains why certain content is more or less likely to be accepted by an audience and influence collective judgements (Snow & Benford, 1988). Selective exposure intensifies this effect to the extent that various technological features enable users to maximize exposure to frame resonant content and, conversely, to minimize exposure to content that may challenge current frames (e.g., one’s views or sense of self) (Pariser, 2011).

***Fragment audiences and echo chambers.*** Recent developments in the media landscape are intensifying selective exposure and its influence on the formation of reputational judgments. On the one hand, the development of feeding algorithms is strengthening selective exposure by automatically channeling information to users based on their preferences, past choices, and/or social connections (Pariser, 2011). As these algorithms often operate automatically, users may be unaware that the information they receive has been pre-selected for them, paradoxically giving them the illusion of choice, while really being exposed only to a partial and preferential representation of reality. On the other hand, indie-media, alternative media, and traditional news media are increasingly customizing their content to compete for

the attention of niche audiences (Doyle, 2013). By doing so, they offer their audience increasingly narrow, partial, and pre-selected information.

The combined effect of these two trends is the increasing exposure of audiences to “preferred” evaluations and their diminishing exposure to content that may challenge their views. The decreasing overlap in the information and representations of reality that different users are exposed to is, potentially, leading to the increasing fragmentation of audiences (Stroud, 2010; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). An extreme manifestation of this fragmentation are so-called echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017): online spaces, such as fan-forums or online activists communities, that host exchanges among like-minded individuals who sheltered from opposing views. Echo chambers are the result of the tendency of individuals to create homogeneous groups and to affiliate with individuals that share their views (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Stroud, 2010). In these online spaces, selective attention to frame resonant information may reinforce commonly held views, and people may experience discomfort at encountering views that diverge from what appears to be the dominant opinion (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Clemente & Roulet, 2015). As a result of these dynamics, partial and possibly inaccurate information may “echo” within the group, leading members to overstate the prominence of an issue or the extent to which their evaluations are shared by a broader public (Sunstein, 2017)<sup>6</sup>.

An important consequence of the dynamics described in this section is that they eventually result in the formation of separate venues for the co-production of networked narratives, as

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<sup>6</sup> In the political sphere, these dynamics have led to the rising phenomenon of so-called “fake news” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) – factually incorrect or entirely unsubstantiated reports presented as solid news and diffused as such. The popularity and lingering influence of fake news shows how factual inaccuracy does not necessarily impede the propagation of information to the extent that it resonates with the views of a particular audience that receives information mainly from preferential sources.

audience members gradually join online groups and interactions that resonate with their views and abandon those that do not. These dynamics will eventually result in the co-existence in the public domain of multiple, diverging media reputations. For example, while the hashtag #mcdstories originally attracted evaluations by both supporters and critics of the fast-food chain, over time, negative sentiments took over. Supporters gradually left the interactive arena and began to express their views instead in other separated forums, such as the official Facebook page of McDonalds (Albu & Etter, 2016).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Extant research on the interrelations between organizations and the media system, and about how the latter influences the formation of organizational reputation, is based on assumptions developed when most publicly available evaluations of organizations were produced and disseminated by traditional news media (or the organizations themselves). In this paper, we have argued that these assumptions have become less accurate and/or productive in a modified media landscape, where social media and digital technologies are changing how information about organizations is produced and disseminated in the public domain, even by traditional news media.

By saying so, we do not mean to question the validity of findings of research conducted before the rise of social media or the general idea that the media influence the formation of collective reputational judgments. Also, by no means do we deny that the assumptions that guided prior research still have value for the examination of sources, even among social media, that arguably have strong structural positions, wide reach, are regarded as authoritative sources, and may be subject to strong influence by corporations. We propose, however, that the widespread use of social media to support the production, dissemination, and consumption of information in the public domain, as well as the social dynamics that

unfold around them, are crucially changing how publicly available evaluations influence collective reputational judgments. These changes (summarized in Table 1), we argue, have important implications for how we conceive, study, and manage media reputation.

### **Implications for Theory**

The mutating media landscape requires us to think in a new way about how increasingly diverse media evaluations, co-produced by multiple actors and disseminated through multiple channels, influence the formation of organizational reputation. The alternative framework that we offer (see Figure 2), in this respect, invites us to acknowledge the more active and interactive role of organizational audiences, and to explore its implications for the increasing plurality and dynamism that characterizes media reputation. It also encourages us to revisit our theories of organizational reputation by recognizing the affective component of reputational judgments and the influence of emotional responses on the production and disseminations of publicly available evaluations of organizations.

*From one media reputation to multiple interaction arenas.* Current theories in organization and management studies generally assume that news media offer relatively homogenous evaluative representations of organizations and that, in the absence of alternatives in the public domain, these representations influence collective judgements, so that organizational reputation comes to be closely aligned to media reputation, which, in turn, is largely based on pre-packaged information supplied by organizations.

The changes that social media introduced in how evaluations are made available and disseminated in the public domain, however, question these assumptions and the idea of media reputation as a monolithic entity reflecting relatively homogenous evaluations. They encourage us, instead, to refine our understanding of media reputation in ways that explicitly acknowledge the plurality of evaluations potentially co-existing at a given point in time, and



they support the investigation of the sources and implications of pluralism in media reputations.

Current theories do not deny that multiple actors may produce evaluative representations of organizations and/or their products by publicly talking about them, distributing leaflets, sending personal letters, etc. However, they assume that news media possess a superior credibility and reach because of their status and structural position, and that they are, therefore, far more influential on the formation of collective judgments than other actors, who, for the most part, need to attract the attention of the news media to gain access to wide audiences. As a result, past research has generally overlooked the possible influence of members of organizational audiences on reputation (Barnett & Pollock, 2012).

In contrast to this view, the framework we have proposed begins to account for the active role of these audiences in shaping the content of publicly available evaluations as well as the paths and patterns of their diffusions. Our framework draws attention to how social media now enable these audiences to independently exchange and disseminate evaluations in the public domain, reaching vast audiences without necessarily relying on the gatekeeping role of news media. By doing so, organizational audiences are now able to publicly challenge evaluations offered by the media, or even to subvert images projected by organizations themselves to highlight contradictions between communication and action. These changes suggest that future research should pay more attention to the active and direct engagement of audiences, rather than assuming that audiences influence reputation mainly when the news media pay attention to their actions (e.g., King, 2011).

Our framework also highlights how social media have amplified the possibility of organizational audiences to expose themselves to different partial and possibly inaccurate representations and to propagate these representations selectively to restricted groups that insulate themselves from alternative and opposing views. Current theories tend to consider

the public sphere as a large venue where news media mediate most efforts to disseminate or dispute evaluations in the public domain. In the new media landscape, instead, the fragmentation of media and audiences and the selective exposure to and propagation of heterogeneous information are increasingly segmenting the public sphere into multiple “interaction arenas” (Bromberg & Fine, 2002).

Sociological research introduced this notion to refer to disputes over the memory and reputation of individuals, as multiple actors such as historians, journalists, and academics add to, elaborate upon, or challenge one another’s accounts (Bromberg & Fine, 2002). This term, we argue, may be fruitfully applied to describe how, because of the more active role of audiences described above, reputational dynamics now play out in multiple, partly interconnected venues. Some of these arenas may host ongoing interactions among multiple actors, including organizations themselves (Aula & Mantere, 2013); others may form around events or issues that attract the attention and/or concern of interested stakeholders for a limited amount of time (Whelan et al., 2013). In some of these arenas, like-minded actors (re)produce uncontested, if partial, representations of organizations (Albu & Etter, 2016); in others, multiple evaluations co-exist in nuanced networked narratives (Barros, 2014).

These observations are theoretically relevant because they problematize the assumption that organizational audiences are relatively homogenous (at least within each stakeholder group) and that their judgements reflect a homogenous media reputation. They point to how, by enabling the co-existence of multiple evaluations in the public domain and, at the same time, selective self-exposure to preferential ones, new technologies simultaneously expand and restrict diversity in the evaluations that audiences are potentially exposed to. This recognition invites us to explore how reputational arenas dynamically emerge and evolve and how audience-specific characteristics and actions trace and retrace boundaries around the influence of media evaluations on collective, yet fragmented, reputational judgments.

In fact, an important implication of the ideas that frame resonance influences the diffusion of evaluations and that selective exposure tends to create echo chambers that reinforce previously held evaluations is the recognition that, just as media reputation has the potential to shape individual judgments, so their judgments may shape the media content that audiences are exposed to by their selectively filtering the information they attend to and re-direct. These ideas, then, challenge the assumption that media reputation exerts a unidirectional influence on organizational reputation, suggesting, instead, a more dynamic and recursive relationship between these two constructs than currently assumed.

***From a static to a dynamic view of media reputation.*** The framework we have developed in this paper is also important because it suggests that the current assumptions and operationalizations of media reputation—as the average favourability of media coverage (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Zavyalova et al., 2012)—may fail to capture its more fluid and contested nature in the new media landscape. Recognizing that media reputations are continuously produced and re-produced through multiple acts of communication in a network of communicative actors (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011) encourages us to shift attention from the correlates of media reputation as a “thing” to the effect of communication exchanges and information technologies that shape how public evaluations are produced, disseminated, and disputed on an ongoing basis.

Implicit in current research is the relatively inert nature of media reputation, such that it is methodologically acceptable to produce synthetic reputation scores that summarize media coverage over relatively long periods of time, usually a year. The co-production process that we described earlier, however, directly exposes the representations of organizations offered by the news media or other sources to real time contestations, additions, and elaborations from audience members. In this respect, the reputation of an organization can be considered as always potentially in a state of “becoming” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), continuously and

publicly re-produced by multiple actors through the production and dissemination of evaluative representations.

In a specific interaction arena, then, convergence among these evaluations may only be situational, temporary, and emerging from the interactions of communicative actors rather than being fixed or objectified. While it is certainly possible that all evaluations produced about an organization in a period of time could temporarily converge, this condition may not last for long, as new evaluations can call into question the “dominant” evaluations. The relative stability of these evaluations, then, becomes an empirical, rather than a definitional, issue, and the study of whether and how changing media representations really influence collective reputational judgements opens an interesting avenue for future research. It may as well be, for instance, that so-called social media firestorms (Pfeffer et al., 2014) are just short-term flares, emotional outbursts, and public blaming that, in the end, leave collective judgments fundamentally unaltered. As the cases of United and Findus illustrate, however, these flares may be highly consequential, if they do not subside until the organization in question announces drastic actions, and they are, therefore, reputational events worthy of additional investigations.

***The nature of reputation: Analytical and affective evaluations.*** Finally, the framework we have offered invites us to reconceptualise reputational judgments in order to acknowledge explicitly their cognitive and affective components and to begin to explore the influence of affect and emotions on how individuals relate to organizations.

In the new media landscape, individuals are increasingly exposed to a mix of informational and emotional content regarding the organization and its products. The former prevails, for instance, in the content disseminated by news media or in analytical assessments in product reviews, while the latter found more frequently in narrative content disseminated by individual users or the textual comments that accompany analytical assessments. Affect

and emotions, importantly, are not restricted to a few “celebrity organizations” (Rindova et al., 2006), but, as the opening vignette illustrates, may be triggered by events that are relevant to collective perceptions of the qualities and character of an organization—that is, of its organizational reputation.

This observation is important because it suggests that properly accounting for reputational dynamics in the new media landscape requires us to rebalance current emphases on information processing with increased attention to the emotional content of evaluations. While some reputation scholars occasionally hinted at the possibility that reputational judgments may have both a cognitive and an affective component (Fombrun, 1996; Ponzi, Fombrun, & Gardberg, 2011), current theories mainly understand the formation of organizational reputations—that is, the construction and revision of evaluative judgments—in cognitive, analytical terms (e.g., Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Highhouse et al., 2009; Mishina et al., 2012).

Changes in the media landscape, however, encourage us to reconsider this position and incorporate affect more explicitly into our understanding of reputation because they highlight the mediating role of emotional responses in the influence of media evaluations on judgments formation. If we accept the well-established idea that emotions “affect the way in which information is gathered, stored, recalled, and used to make particular attributions or judgments” (Nabi, 2003: 227), then we should remain open to the possibility that emotional responses may also shape the processing and dissemination of information that current theories consider central to the formation of collective reputational judgments.

In the past, these responses were largely invisible to researchers, which made it reasonable for scholars to theorize the process purely in cognitive terms, often by drawing on micro-economic models (Weigelt & Camerer, 1989). Social media, however, have significantly increased the amount of emotionally charged evaluations available in the public domain, as

well as offering insight in the emotional responses to content disseminated by news media. Under these circumstances, we argue—again—whether reputational judgments manifest in more analytical or emotional terms (or both) becomes an empirical, rather than a definitional, issues.

### **Implications for Research**

The reconceptualization of media reputation that we advanced in this paper also has important consequences for how we conduct research on media reputation.

*From calculating aggregate scores to tracking multiple networked narratives.* Extant studies measure media reputation as an aggregate score, reflecting the average favorability in the coverage of a few prominent media outlets, such as *The Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and, more recently, elite blogs (Zayalova et al., 2012). They do so under the assumption that these outlets are representative of the overall evaluation offered by the media and that their authoritativeness and reach will ensure their influence on collective judgments. As social media become increasingly relevant to the dissemination of information in the public domain, however, exploring alternative methods may be crucial to capturing the more complex dynamics described in this paper.

First, an exclusive focus on a few, high-status news media outlets may offer an increasingly partial and incomplete representation of how organizations are portrayed in public domains and obscure the potential plurality of views expressed in multiple interaction arenas. This issue may become more pressing to the extent that large parts of society increasingly access information from sources alternative to the traditional news media (Pew Research, 2014), and their evaluative judgments reflect this information.

It could be objected that, to the extent that particular content reaches an unusually vast and rapid diffusion on social media, it will eventually be picked up by traditional news media

(Pfeffer et al., 2014). Once the corresponding articles are processed numerically and become but one of the observations that contribute to the measurement of an aggregate media coverage, however, precious information will be lost by weighing news that points to massive support or discontent among online audiences equally with other news about corporate events, the coverage of which is assumed to influence reputational judgments, but that may well remain unnoticed by the general public. While the aggregation of content may still be acceptable, perhaps inevitable, in large-scale studies that explore correlations between these average scores and other quantitative variables, a restrictive conceptualization of media reputation may prevent more in-depth, fine-grained, case-based analyses of how reputational dynamics playing out in the media really influence the formation, contestation, and modification of reputational judgments.

Second, expressing media reputation as an aggregate score may fail to capture the more nuanced exchanges that organizational audiences can be exposed to. As the content of news media is made available online, it may become part of co-produced networked narratives, as it is forwarded, commented on, or hyperlinked to. Restricting the analysis of media reputation to original articles, therefore, may miss part of the content that viewers are exposed to as they access these articles, as well as evidence of the extent to which audiences accept or challenge the evaluations that news media offer.

In the past, scholars were unable to gauge the response of organizational audiences to media coverage. Social media now enable us to build approximate measures of the attention that a piece of news receives (for instance, by tracking the number of times it was shared) or the relative acceptance or contestation of the evaluations it implies (by content analysis of posts and forums). Indirect measures of personal approval or disapproval (likes, re-tweets, etc.) may also give an indication of the extent to which the most vocal responses reflect the views of audiences.

Finally, future studies may explore the use of qualitative methods to examine in more depth how multiple actors advance, dispute, or negotiate evaluative judgments about an organization or its products on social media. Consumer researchers, for instance, have developed an online observational method called netnography (Kozinets, 2010) to track how consumers construct meanings through symbols and language when they publicly discuss organizations and jointly evaluate their products and services in online interaction arenas. By aiming to offer a “realistic comprehension of online communication” (Kozinets, 2010: 34) and paying attention to the cultural context within which exchanges occur, netnography may help reputation scholars to account for the more nuanced particular uses of humor, slang, and multimodality that frequently characterize content diffused on social media as opposed to the more sober, information-focused content of news media.

*From yearly averages to temporal dynamics.* Past studies have generally measured media reputation as yearly averages. In the changing reputational landscape, this methodological choice may fail to capture the increased dynamism that social media have introduced to the production and dissemination of public information about organizations.

First, this methodological choice may obscure the peculiar temporal patterns that characterize the diffusion of evaluations in social media. On the one hand, as we discussed previously, social media enable the rapid and unpredictable diffusion of evaluations on a global scale (Castells, 2011). While yearly tracking of average coverage may capture the general stance of the media under normal circumstances, it prevents us from monitoring more closely the changing amount of attention that a particular organization receives within or across reputational arenas, as well as the changing valence of reputational evaluations. Yearly averages are also unable to reveal whether and how representations abruptly change or contradict one another, and with what effect. In fact, even daily tracking of news media



coverage may not be sufficient to capture the intense interactions between multiple actors that characterize the development of reputational incidents on social media.

On the other hand, information exchanges on the Internet tend to remain available and easily retrievable for a long time after their initial diffusion, and they may, therefore, have a long-lasting influence on the reputation of an organization. Rumors and hoaxes can re-surface periodically, even years after their initial creation (Veil et al., 2012). While the production of content over a given period of time may attest to the level of attention that an organization is receiving, it may capture only in part representations available in a public domain<sup>7</sup>. Exploring reputational dynamics on social media, thus, requires methodologies that are sensitive to both the flow of information made public over a given period of time and the cumulated stock of information resulting from previous posts and exchanges.

In order to account for this dynamism, future research on media reputation may combine traditional methods to analyze news media with methods that can track more precisely the content and diffusion of evaluations within and across different forms of media and reputational arenas. While the inclusion of elite blogs in measures of organizational reputation (Zavyalova et al., 2012) begins to offer a more accurate portrayal of public evaluations of organizations, capturing the often dispersed and unpredictable creation and fast diffusion of evaluations across social media requires more time-sensitive measurements that account for possible previously-unknown sources.

For instance, increasingly sophisticated techniques for automated sentiment analysis (Cambria et al., 2013; Etter et al., 2017) and social network analysis (Aggarwal, 2011) may

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<sup>7</sup> Years ago, for instance, one of us was deterred from purchasing tickets from Continental Airlines after an Internet search led him to the [www.donotflycontinentalairlines.com](http://www.donotflycontinentalairlines.com). This site, set up by disgruntled customers, no longer reflected the quality of service of the company, which had improved considerably since then, but it still featured prominently in the results of the most common browsers.

help researchers to track the content and diffusion of evaluations in social media in order to examine how interactions unfold within interaction arenas (or create them in the first place) or how they shape the content of evaluations as they diffuse. Combined with survey-based measures of actual perceptions in the general public, these efforts could begin to tease out the differential impact of different actors on organizational reputation.

*Exploring the emotional component of reputational judgments.* Acknowledging that emotions in expressed evaluations play a role in the formation of media reputation and collective judgments encourages us to move beyond a coefficient based on a generic assessment of positive, negative, and neutral tone, and to instead apply methods that account for the expression of a more nuanced range of emotions. Evaluations, for instance, could be content analyzed for the emotional tone and the level of arousal that they imply (e.g., Reeves et al., 1985), and this more fine-grained assessment could be used to examine how informational content about organizations impacts judgment formation.

Finally, extant studies have generally limited their analyses to written texts (Deephouse, 2000; Deephouse & Carter, 2005), thereby side-lining the increased use of multimodal media formats, such as videos, images, and creative mash-ups, to construct meaning and stimulate emotional responses. While popular on social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), these formats also feature, to varying degrees, in traditional news media. Future research, therefore, may also explore methods that can capture multimodality (Margolis & Pauwles, 2011; Meyer et al., 2013).

Recognizing that images, videos, and other visual artifacts are not just add-ons to verbal texts, but are an elementary mode for the construction, maintenance, and transformation of meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Raab, 2008), for instance, may encourage future researchers to analyze the differential impact of subverted images and informational content on collective reputational judgments and to examine in more detail whether and how user-

generated content poses a reputational threat or, vice-versa, how organizations can leverage multi-modal communication to influence collective judgments.

### **Implications for Practice**

Understanding media reputation as co-produced in multiple, partly interconnected interaction arenas may sensitize managers to the importance of influencing, or at least monitoring, the various venues within which evaluations are produced, distributed, and consumed. Tactics that have enabled organizations to control traditional reputational arenas may be less appropriate to engaging with online communities to influence collective interactions and avoid the uncontrolled diffusion and consolidation of unfavorable networked narratives (Castello et al., 2016).

Success in new arenas, for instance, requires organizations to relinquish intimidation and traditional public relations and to embrace the same creative style of expression favored by their audiences, to offer venues to facilitate interaction among supportive audiences, and to nurture the diffusion of content that resonates with local frames rather than imposing preferred corporate messages. Following the unfortunate experience described earlier, for instance, McDonalds has built direct access to 71.5 million consumers who have chosen to “like” and “follow” the organizations on its Facebook page and represent a receptive audience that can be reached out to and mobilized horizontally—rather than in a hierarchical top-down process—to stimulate the co-production of favorable content that boosts the reputation of the company.

We suspect, however, that when it comes to understanding and managing social media, while still struggling with the affordances of these new technologies (Albu & Etter, 2016), practice may be far ahead than academia. Management scholars have just started to investigate how web-technologies affect the formation of reputation (e.g. Orlikowski & Scott,

2014; Barros, 2014) and how organizations address potential reputational threats on social media (e.g., Wang et al., 2015; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). We hope that the ideas we have presented in this paper will encourage scholars to intensifying the investigation of reputational dynamics in these new interaction arenas, and offer them useful conceptual tools to do so.

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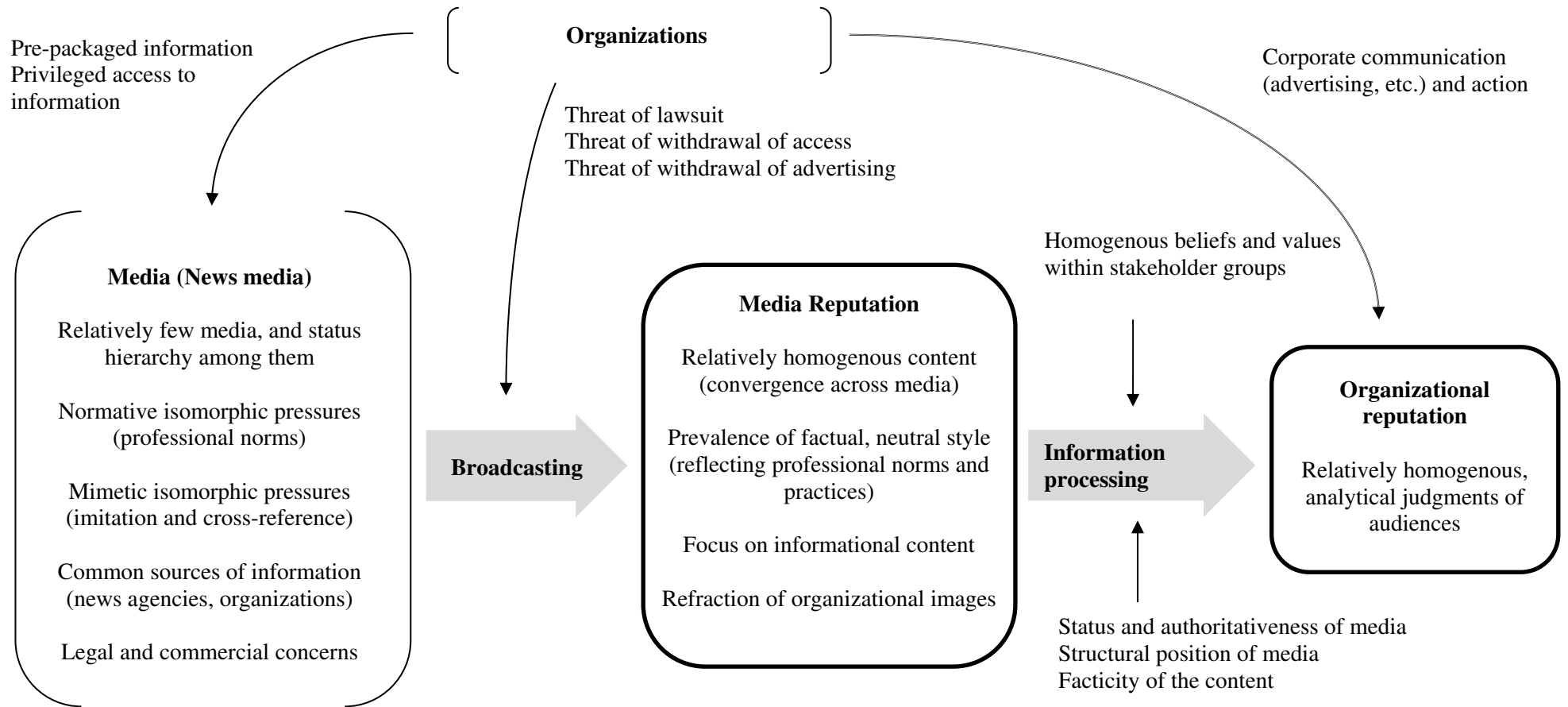
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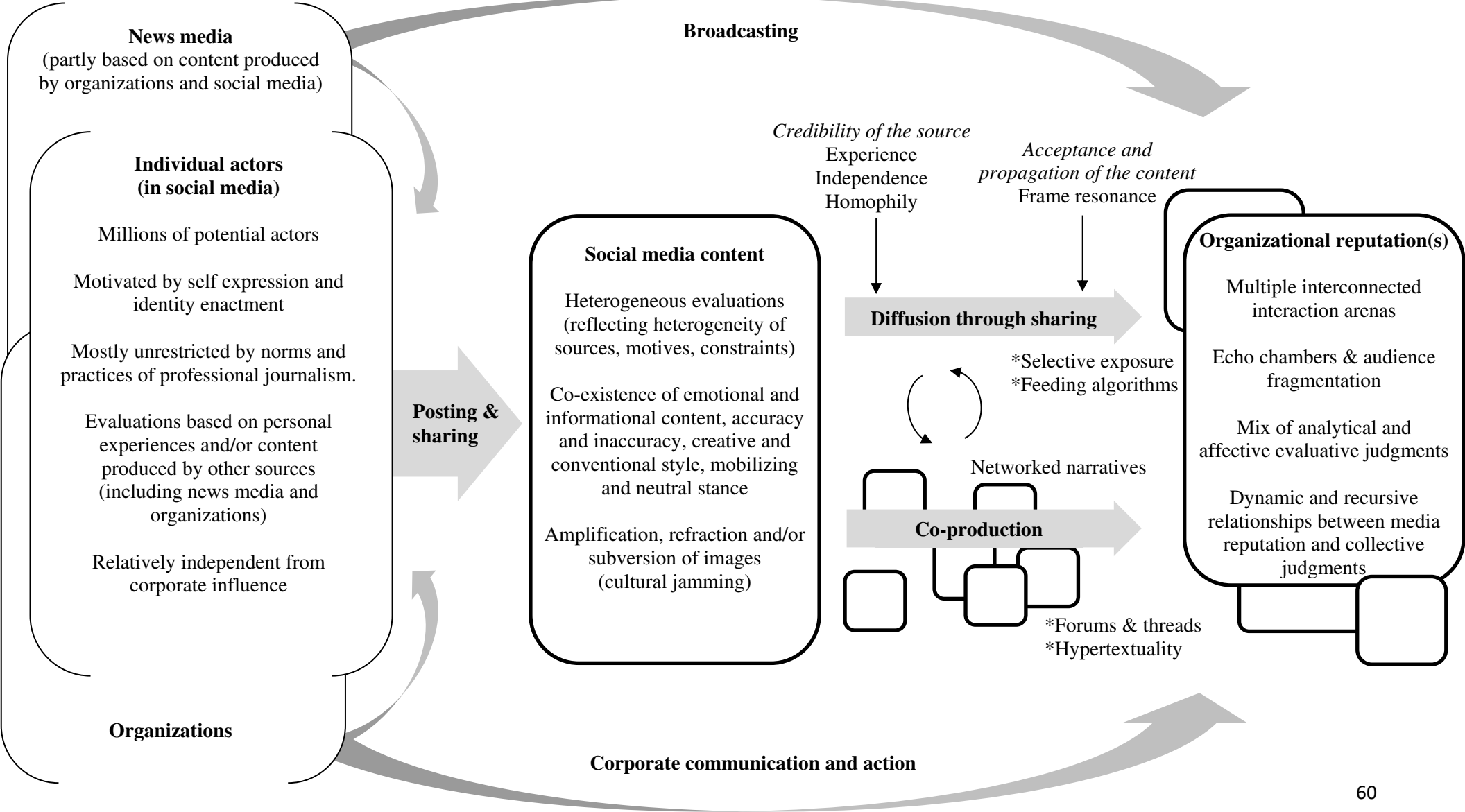
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**Figure 1. Current assumptions about media reputation and its influence on collective judgments**



**Figure 2. The formation of reputation in a new media landscape**



**Table 1.**  
**How social media challenge current assumptions about media reputation**

<b>Current assumptions about media reputation</b>	<b>How the rise of social media challenges these assumptions</b>
<p><b><i>Vertical top-down dissemination:</i></b> News media disseminate evaluations through one-way communication (<i>broadcasting</i>). Audiences are presumed to passively process the information they receive, and have limited opportunities to voice their responses and to interact with one another. Distinction between sources and audience is structural.</p>	<p><b><i>Horizontal networked dissemination:</i></b> Social media allow evaluations to be produced and disseminated by any member of a social network. Audiences actively produce, disseminate, combine, dispute, enrich and elaborate evaluations (<i>co-production</i>). Distinction between source and audience is situational.</p>
<p><b><i>Relative homogeneity of sources and content:</i></b> Institutionalized professional norms, and structural and procedural isomorphism shape news production, leading to relatively homogenous content of news media.</p>	<p><b><i>Heterogeneity of sources and content:</i></b> Social media users are a multitude of actors, whose motivations, sources of information, and constraints are comparatively more diverse. Co-existence of multiple evaluations in the public domain.</p>
<p><b><i>Credibility of evaluations depends on status of the source:</i></b> News media and journalists are perceived as having superior ability to evaluate organizations; high status outlet influence the content of lower status ones.</p>	<p><b><i>Expertise, independence and/or homophily compensate absence of low status:</i></b> First-hand experience, independence from corporate interests, and shared traits or affiliation confer credibility to evaluations diffused on social media, even by non-professional sources.</p>
<p><b><i>Reach of evaluations determined by structural position of source:</i></b> The potential audience reached by evaluations depends on established distribution channels of a source.</p>	<p><b><i>Reach of evaluations strongly influenced by content:</i></b> Depending on its content and style, content may reach a vast audience through sharing and forwarding, even if the structural position of the original source is weak.</p>
<p><b><i>Reluctance of news media to offer negative coverage:</i></b> Fear of lawsuits or losing privileged access to information or advertising revenues reduces the likelihood that organizations diffuse evaluations that may diverge from the official corporate communication.</p>	<p><b><i>Higher independence of sources from organizations:</i></b> Most social media users have little concern for lawsuits, which tend to backfire, or fear of losing privileged social or economic relationships for disseminative negative evaluations.</p>
<p><b><i>Emphasis on facticity:</i></b> Professional norms encourage news media to report news in a detached way, accurately check facts and offer multiple perspectives (journalism as a genre). Perception of facticity increases impact of evaluations.</p>	<p><b><i>Lower concerns for balance and accuracy:</i></b> Social media users are more likely to disseminate evaluations reflecting partial views and inaccurate facts. Inaccuracy and bias do not necessarily prevent the diffusion of content.</p>

***Refraction of organizational images.*** News media base their coverage to a large degree on information received or disseminated by organizations themselves through public relations, corporate communication, etc.

***Emphasis on informational content.*** Focus on the informational content of media coverage, under the assumption that reputation rests on analytical comparative judgments.

***Homogenous audience:*** News media audiences understood as a monolithic entity (the “public”) exposed to converging evaluations of a core set of news media, or as homogenous stakeholder groups that use the same sources.

***Subversion of organizational images.*** On social media, users frequently express their emotional response or creative self through the humorous alteration of images projected by organizations (logos, slogans, ads, etc.) to highlight contradictions between claims and actions.

***Emphasis on emotional content.*** Content diffused on social media is often emotionally charged. Emotional responses increase the likelihood that this content is diffused and influences judgments.

***Fragmented audiences:*** Combined with heterogeneity of source and content, selective exposure to preferential sources based on frame resonance create multiple loci of intense interaction characterized by insulation from alternative evaluations (*echo chambers*).

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