

## Online brands: Branding, possible worlds, and interactive grammars

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### *Abstract*

*This paper proposes to reflect from a semiotic perspective on the transformation that brands have undergone since the rise of the Internet. After a brief theoretical introduction to digital communication and the semiotics of brands, the case of the Google brand is analyzed by applying concepts of generative and interpretive semiotics. The paper holds that the iconic and linguistic enunciations are secondary with respect to interaction. In digital media interaction — the interactive experience that the Internet user lives — is a fundamental component of the hypermedia cocktail and occupies a central position in the brand building process. The article concludes with some of the questions and special characteristics raised by so-called eBranding.*

*Keywords:* branding; eBranding; possible worlds; interactive narrative; semiotics; Internet.

A specter is haunting the capitalist economy — the spectre of dematerialization. To the growing independence of financial capitals — those which, as some Latin American societies know well, can determine the growth or bankruptcy of an economic system — we add the relocation of the communication processes within the economy. In this phase of the world economy, communications — and symbolic exchanges in general, such as those that stimulate the financial markets — acquire a fundamental importance.

The advertising discourses have not stayed on the margins of these mutations of the relationships between economy and communication. The old idea of ‘communicating’ the good qualities of a product in order to ‘persuade’ the possible buyers has stayed anchored in the past. Economic subjects no longer try to sell a product or service by means of persuasive

advertising. Now the objectives are much more ambitious, they aim to create a symbolic universe endowed with meaning: brands.<sup>1</sup>

The brand — understood as a semiotic device able to produce a discourse, give it meaning, and communicate this to the addressees — expresses values and is presented as an ‘interpretative contract’ between the companies and the consumers: the brand proposes a series of values and the consumers accept (or not) to become part of this world. Therefore, brands appear as ‘possible worlds’ (Eco 1979) since they constitute complex discourse universes with a strong narrative imprint (Semprini 1996; Semprini and Musso 2000).<sup>2</sup>

The narrative character that brands have progressively taken on means that we must broaden our analytical tools and the theories used to bring into focus the forms that institutional communication in general and advertising in particular take on. In our case, we will go back to certain works published in the area of semiotics (Codeluppi 2000, 2001; Ferraro 1999, 2000; Semprini 1990, 1996; Semprini and Musso 2000; Marrone 2007) and extend them to certain situations of corporate communication in digital media.

Before concluding this introduction, we must mention some characteristics of the new communication forms. Digitalization of communication is an accelerated process of technological transformation that, since the 1980s, has promoted a rapid reconfiguration of the media and cultural systems of our societies. Some of the coordinates of this change are:

- Reduction of all the cultural products to ‘masses of bits’ that can be manipulated, reproduced, transmitted, reused, etc., to taste.
- Transformation of the cultural production processes (network production, open-source movement, etc.).
- Easy distribution of any cultural goods (mailing lists, newsgroups, weblogs, peer-to-peer networks, etc.).
- Consolidation of a world network that links and reconfigures the media and the traditional languages of communication (convergence, hypermediality, etc.).
- Dissolving the traditional spatial-temporal categories and the appearance of new experiences (such as the concept of ‘real time’).

Brands have not stayed on the edge of these transformations in the technocultural ecosystem either. We can say that brands feel comfortable in a virtual environment crossed by information flows: brands themselves are nothing more than a handful of values that circulate in the imagination of a society, small bouquets of bits that construct a meaning when they propose a difference.

## 1. The semiotics of brands: Theoretical-methodological notes

From a semiotic perspective, the ‘brand’ can be defined as:

... a vector of meaning, a value, and a contract. The identity of the brand is the result of these three operations. From this definition, brands are created each time a certain system of offers [products or services] manages to channel a meaning, make it inseparable from the values and obtain recognition for it from other actors implicated in the process, and in particular from the consumer. (Semprini 1996: 112, my translation)

A semiotic interpretation of brands that includes their narrative character means that we must go beyond the semiological readings that marked the first phase of research into myth in the 1960s (based on the concept of the sign and on the opposition denotation/connotation). If semiotics has shown anything in these last four decades it is the complexity that hides behind the processes of constructing meaning and interpretation. As an example of this complexity, we can mention the fact that brands combine ‘distinctive values’ (which differentiate them and separate them from other brands) and ‘associative values’ (which construct and regroup families of products under a single value system):

This process ... contributes to making us live in a world that we perceive as ordered, categorized and endowed with meaning. The brand takes on in this context an important role, as a device that distributes values of common images of a range of products, controls their strength, constructs lines of connection and lines of separation between various entities. (Ferraro 2000: 173, my translation)

How is meaning constructed? From a generative perspective (Greimas and Courtes 1979; Floch 1993) we can recognize three levels:

- Deep level (or axiological): space where a few abstract elements relate and oppose each other (freedom/repression, urban/rural, man/woman, individual/society, pleasure/displeasure, life/death, work/entertainment, etc.). These elements often do not appear on the surface of the brands’ discourses: they stay in the nucleus of their universe of meaning and guarantee the coherency of the discourse over time.
- Semio-narrative level: the basic elements are narrativized, they are organized into action sequences and outline certain fundamental characteristics (the Subjects and Objects of the narration). During this process the Subject (the tale’s ‘hero’) has to manipulate a series of

‘instruments’ (a magic sword) and pass a series of tests — which qualify him as a ‘competent subject’ — and allow him to overcome the obstacles (kill the dragon) before reaching the desired Object (rescue the Princess and make her his wife).

- Discursive level: in this level the narrative sequences are thematized, they are defined in detail and take on a particular specific character. The existence of basic narrative structures allow different ‘versions’ to be created working at the discursive level and periodically renovating the communicational production without affecting the constitutive values (which reside in the deep level).

Let us see how this path is presented in a traditional advertising product. The classic Marlboro campaigns submerge us in a world that is founded on a series of abstract elements (freedom, man, pleasure, rural, work, etc.) that differentiate it from other narrative worlds (for example, other brands of cigarettes oppose this universe and emphasize urban values or free time and entertainment). At the semio-narrative level we find the ‘self-made cowboy’ who works hard on rural activities and during a break he smokes a Marlboro.<sup>3</sup> At a discursive level, these narrative structures are expressed in different communication products (spots, photographs, slogans, etc.). It can even happen that the fundamental values of the Marlboro world do not appear in the iconic message or in the linguistic message: often these values are incorporated in the plastic signs (the frame, point of view, colors, sizes, etc.) or in visual or verbal rhetorical figures that generate complicity with the readers (Joly 1999).

From the point of view of the theory of ‘possible worlds’ (Eco 1979), the construction of meaning is presented as a ‘contractual process’ in which the ‘strategy of the author’ confronts the ‘strategies of the readers.’ Beginning from the elements displayed by the enunciator in the text, the reader contributes to the production of meaning by adding their experiences and applying their interpretive competencies.

Brands are not foreign to this interpretive dynamic and the game that is set up between author and reader:

A brand never enunciates its own values directly, they are included within more or less structured narrations, inside which the values can become activated and develop all their meanings . . . A brand doesn’t enunciate its values, it tells a story . . . [and] by telling stories constructs possible worlds and claims a territory, substance and content for its values. (Semprini 1996: 135–137, my translation)

These worlds contain characters that are subjected to the dynamic satisfaction/desire, stories that attract the readers and feed their

imaginary. Sometimes one simple image is enough — the cowboy smoking while he looks towards the Grand Canyon silhouetted on the horizon — to open the doors to a universe populated by meanings and values. Moreover, possible worlds are always incomplete: the enunciator *cannot say everything nor tell the whole story*. The reader supplies the rest thanks to their textual competencies and life experience. However, the possible worlds should be coherent to a certain degree: with a little effort we could imagine the Marlboro cowboy spurring on the livestock with a motorbike or driving through the prairie in a 4-wheel drive, but we never see him dressed in a jacket and tie.

In summary, the production of meaning is a complex process that demands theoretical tools and sophisticated explicative models. From a semiotic perspective, the brand is presented as a vector of meaning that contains a set of values and at the same time proposes a contract to its consumers/readers. We would like to highlight two elements: brands surround the consumer/reader in a discursive universe that gives shape to a possible world with its own values and rules. However, the narrative nature that these possible worlds take on allows us to describe the production of meaning by means of a journey that starts from the fundamental and abstract oppositions, crosses the semio-narrative level, and manifests itself in the discursive level.

## 2. Online brands: The case of Google

The configuration of a new communication space founded on digital networks, multimediality, and interactivity modifies the theoretical panorama defined thus far. Now brands are not created by simply manipulating iconic or linguistic enunciations: the ‘interactive experience’ is also converted into a fundamental element of the brand building process.

Sooner or later, all traditional brands have ended up on the Internet. If, in the beginning, the companies limited themselves to *transferring* their communicational products designed for other media to the web (for example, disseminating their brochures in PDF format), they soon started to translate these materials into a multimedia language characterized by an ‘interaction grammar’ (Scolari 2004). The digital media imposed its specificity and illustrated, by making mistakes, the need to look for an independent language.<sup>4</sup>

On this new horizon, among the most interesting phenomena of digital communication are the brands born on the web: we are referring to the ‘dot-com’ companies created in the heat of the ‘new economy’ that have renewed the brand-building processes (and have indirectly made

it necessary to update the explanatory theoretical models). Experiences such as Amazon and Google now form a part of the new branding manuals.

A study based on 1,300 users carried out by Interbrand's BrandChannel.com confirmed Google as the brand of the year in 2002, displacing other brands such as Apple, Coca Cola, and Starbucks. In 2003, this result was reconfirmed — Google is one of the strongest brands in the digital territory. In 2004, Apple, thanks to the iPod phenomenon, climbed positions and left Google in second place. If we compare it with other search engines, Google 'conducts more than 200 million searches a day and leads the world for search engine usage with 57 percent of the current market, followed by Yahoo at 21 percent and MSN at just 9 percent' (Rusch 2005). When most of the 'dot-com' projects fail and only Amazon and a few other experiences (such as eBay) seem to survive with dignity, the omnipresence of Google on the world's computer screens raises some interest.

Let's see how this story begins. At the end of the 1990s, search engines, with the help of Nasdaq, were one of the stars of the digital heavens. Altavista, Yahoo!, Excite, and Lycos were some of the names that shone intensely. At the beginning of 1998, Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page — two young researchers from Stanford University who worked on algorithms for information searches — published a paper in which they presented Google as 'a prototype of a large-scale search engine that makes heavy use of the structure present in hypertext. Google is designed to crawl and index the Web efficiently and produce much more satisfying search results than existing systems' (Brin and Page 1998). A few months later, the system was patented and made available for Internet users (the beta version was put on the Internet a few months earlier). It did not take long for Internet users to find out about the speed and effectiveness of the search engine: the rise in the number of users that chose Google to make their searches was unstoppable.

The algorithm that makes this search engine work is called 'PageRank,' a system by which the most visited pages appear in the first positions of the search. Without disregarding other parameters — such as the number of times a word appears or the relevance of the general contents of the page — PageRank is a democratic system that favors the websites (links) the users 'vote' for most. Google explains it in this way:

PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives;

it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves 'important' weigh more heavily and help to make other pages 'important' ...<sup>5</sup>

PageRank combines sophisticated text search techniques to find pages that are important and at the same time relevant for the user's query. Google not only takes into account the number of times a term appears on a page, its engine also examines all the aspects of the page's contents (and the contents of the linked pages) to determine if they coincide well with the query being carried out. However, more than one user has asked: Is it possible to manipulate the data?

Google's complex, automated methods make human tampering with our results extremely difficult. And though we do run relevant ads above and next to our results, Google does not sell placement within the results themselves (i.e., no one can buy a higher PageRank). A Google search is an easy, honest and objective way to find high-quality websites with information relevant to your search.<sup>6</sup>

We can consider this democratization of the information hierarchies as an example of co-branding: if a computer company such as Compaq bolsters its credibility by joining Intel and Microsoft, Google makes co-branding by involving its users in the quality of the final product. Presenting Google as a noble altruistic organization, only interested in honesty and the integrity of the World Wide Web, is not any old branding technique. Until now, search engines have built their reputations on the precision of their search results. Google's brand strategy is different: this search engine is morally superior to its competitors.

This participation by the users in defining the service Google provides relates it to other successful initiatives on the Web. We are referring specifically to Amazon, an online shopping system in which the evaluations and commentaries about the products are in the users' hands. The company in these cases withdraws, creates an interaction space for the users but renounces having the final word, reducing its role to being a simple manager of this virtual exchange site. The brand is constituted by an interactive space more than by the contents.

Besides the search engine's name<sup>7</sup> and logo, which are easily recognizable and difficult to forget, the speed of the search system and the usability of its interface have contributed to consolidating its image. Google has an index of more than one billion URL addresses. According to the Brand Keys' Index, Google is also one of the online brands with most 'brand loyalty' (Saunders 2002).



Figure 1. Yahoo! (1996)

Google has arrived at this hegemonic position — displacing very successful services in their time such as Yahoo! and Altavista — through ‘word-of-mouth marketing,’ without investing in television spots or advertisements in the traditional media. In the age of ‘viral marketing’ a satisfied user that ‘passes on the information’ to a friend or workmate is worth more than an advertising spot. Word-of-mouth will do the rest.<sup>8</sup>

Where is Google going? Until now, this search engine has avoided following in the footsteps of the other search engines such as Yahoo! and Altavista, which have ended up becoming ‘portals’ with hundreds of services, links, and information (see figures 1–4). Although Google has incorporated various services (image searches, a chat forum index in Usenet, organizing pages by categories, a news section, translation tools, etc.), these functions do not all appear on the homepage, which continues to maintain its original simplicity. These spaces are found ‘within the site’ in Google’s inside pages, and therefore they never interfere with Google’s primary service. In becoming ‘portals,’ the other search engines have





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Figure 2. Yahoo! (2006)



Figure 3. Google (1998)



Figure 4. Google (2006)

become so complex that they detract from their initial objective: to allow the user to search for information and browse the contents quickly and easily.

Next we analyze some of the services Google proposes to its users. Google's news section is clearly different from its competitors (such as Yahoo!), who offer similar services, not only because the links that lead to the news items do not appear on the homepage, but also due to the different way in which the news items are incorporated within the structure of the site. Yahoo! keeps its interface and includes the news items — that come from various sources (for example news agencies) — within a graphic space that acts as a container (see figure 5). In contrast, the links that appear in Google's news section resend the user directly to the newspaper and news agency web sites (therefore any reference to the Google interface on the screen disappears). The user uses Google as a thoroughfare: it is a point where Internet browsing is redirected to other territories in cyberspace. Google does not offer contents nor try to 'trap' its users: its function is limited to organizing information and facilitating Internet surfing.

Google has also incorporated keyword-targeted 'AdWords,' paid advertisements clearly differentiated in a column on the right of the screen. The system applies the same computing principle as the search engine. The advertiser indicates to Google how much they want to invest and then chooses which words they want to 'buy.' When a user searches for one of these words, a link to the advertising company appears on the screen, which is differentiated from the rest of the search engine's results under the title 'Sponsored Links.' Each time the user clicks on one of these advertisements, Google charges the account of the advertiser the so-called 'cost-per-click.' When the account is empty, Google's computer system automatically cancels the advertisement from its pages. According to some studies, the click rate of these advertisements is ten times higher than traditional banners (McHugh 2004). The essential element of this advertising system resides in that, according to Google, 'AdWords' do not affect the result of the search and enrich the information available to the users.

In 2003, Google made another step towards diversifying its functions: at the beginning of this year, Google bought Pyra Labs, the company that owns 'Blogger' (one of the most important tools for creating weblogs) and 'Blogspot' (a hosting provider for weblogs). Google's eruption onto the blog universe opened up new perspectives both at the level of information searches (weblogs are an inexhaustible source of information and Pyra Labs had a million registered users at that time) and business (inserting advertisements in weblogs), as well as the value of its



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2 de diciembre de 2006, 17h06

## La ausencia de Castro en un desfile aumenta dudas sobre su salud



Foto ampliada

LA HABANA (Reuters) - El convaleciente líder cubano, Fidel Castro, estuvo ausente el sábado de un desfile militar para conmemorar su 80 cumpleaños, aumentando entre muchos cubanos las dudas sobre su estado de salud y la impresión de que no retornará al poder.

Su lugar en la Plaza de la Revolución de La Habana fue ocupado por su hermano Raúl, un general de 75 años que gobierna la isla caribeña de forma provisional desde el 31 de julio, cuando Castro anunció que cedía el poder por primera vez en casi 50 años a raíz de una enfermedad no revelada.

Raúl Castro criticó en su discurso a Estados Unidos, el enemigo jurado de Cuba desde el triunfo de la revolución en 1959, aunque al mismo tiempo pareció tenderle una mano.

"Sirva la oportunidad para, nuevamente, declarar nuestra disposición de resolver en la mesa de negociaciones el prolongado diferendo entre Estados Unidos y Cuba", dijo, siempre que Washington acepte la independencia y soberanía de Cuba.

"Con independencia de ello, proseguiremos consolidando la invulnerabilidad militar de la nación. Preservaremos, al precio que sea necesario, la libertad del pueblo y la independencia y soberanía de la patria", dijo Raúl.

El desfile militar, el primero en una década, era aguardado en busca de indicios sobre la salud del hombre que ha gobernado Cuba durante casi medio siglo.

Figure 5. A news item in Yahoo! (2006). In this case, the Reuters news item appears framed within the portal's display space.

information (blogs usually have high-level contents that often outstrip the information agencies in speed of diffusion) (Sullivan 2003; Sherman 2003).

The launch of a mail service for its users — Google Mail (GMail) — in 2004 not only placed Google on the paths already explored by Yahoo!, but also placed it in a direct confrontation strategy with large companies such as Microsoft.<sup>9</sup> The service proposed by Google offers a free one gigabyte e-mail account — that is, with a storage capacity between 200 and 500 times larger than the most well-known web-based mail e-mail services — and a powerful selective search engine inside its mail boxes.

The diversification of Google seems to have no limits: in ‘Google Labs,’ the company makes a series of ideas and projects available to the public so they can ‘play with these prototypes’ and send in their comments. Among the services in the experimental phase is the ‘Personalized Web Search,’ a system that allows the user to create a personal profile to facilitate their information searches. Another service called ‘Web Alerts’ informs the user by e-mail each time new pages appear on a topic that interests them. The service ‘Froogle’ is presented as a version of Google for cellular telephones that allows the user to compare prices and shop online.

As we mentioned earlier, all of these functions and services have not affected the Google interface, which continues to be practically the same as the beta version proposed in 1998 by Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page.

Before concluding this section, it is important to mention the huge virtual community born around this brand. One of the facts that stands out most about the Google world is without doubt the appearance of a network of sites and weblogs dedicated to the most famous search engine. Some of these — such as [google.dirson.com](http://google.dirson.com) — resemble ‘fan clubs’ that provide up to date information about Google or techniques to optimize searches. Other sites have a much more critical focus, among which [google-watch.org](http://google-watch.org) stands out. This is a website dedicated to denouncing the privacy violation that the PageRank system and what its authors consider to be the company’s monopolistic strategies. Within this debate the official voice of Google can be heard in their weblog.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. The semiotics of the search engine**

As we can see, Google has broken the mould that has been valid in the brand-building process until now. More than concentrating its efforts on enunciative aspects (graphic or verbal) Google has concentrated its work on ‘its users’ experience.’ A satisfied ‘user’ comes back to Google as a ‘client.’<sup>11</sup>

In the ‘real world,’ many products are promoted even though they do not have any important characteristics or functions that differentiate them from the rest of their competitors. This type of marketing does not work on the Internet — a space where users do not take long to find out about a service or product’s lack of substance. McGovern holds that on the Internet brands are related to their capacity to help people do things: ‘every time a reader succeeds in carrying out a task on the website, the brand’s reputation is enhanced. Every time a reader is frustrated by the website, the brand’s reputation is diminished’ (McGovern 2003). Google has focused precisely on the *substance*: the search engine carries out its task perfectly and the users cannot help but recommend it so that it slowly displaces its competitors.

More than building a brand by manipulating iconic or verbal enunciations, Google has been centered on the users’ experience. It is an experience that is — according to its maintainers’ own words — ‘easy, honest, and objective.’ In an online world, branding has more to do with the experience lived in front of the screen than with iconic or verbal enunciations. In digital media *interaction* — *the interactive experience that the Internet user lives* — *is a fundamental component of the hypermedia cocktail* (Scolari 2004) *and occupies a central position in the brand-building process*.

From the point of view of its semiotic functioning, the Google brand is presented as a meaning process that starts from a series of basic oppositions, crosses a narrative set-up phase, and ends up expressing itself as an interactive experience.

- Deep level: Google’s deep level of meaning — characterized by a series of fundamental oppositions — is based on only a few elements: simplicity, speed, and usability are its basic values. The simplicity/complexity opposition differentiates Google from other search engines that have become information portals (Yahoo!, Altavista, etc.). The refusal to become a portal — with large amounts of information, services, and links that obstruct the primary objective — distances Google from other search engines that offer more services at the cost of making the browsing devices more complex.

Besides simplicity/complexity, we can include other oppositions in our analysis: those which differentiate ‘centrifugal’ webs from ‘centripetal’ webs (Ferraro 2000). The first kind is characterized by opening its doors to its users and sending them to other sites: this is the classic function of search engines, which end up becoming a thoroughfare for Internet users. A centripetal web tries to ‘trap’ the user by offering the largest amount of information and services possible to stop the user from ‘running

away' to other sites. Company websites or digital newspapers usually belong to this type.

While other search engines have become centripetal webs that offer increasing amounts of information and services to their visitors (who find the contents framed within the portal's display space), Google has remained loyal to the centrifugal model: the users are catapulted from its pages to other websites.

- Semio-narrative level: In terms of the semio-narrative level, we saw how the companies of the 'real world' propose narrations by means of their advertising enunciations (like the interminable saga of the Marlboro cowboy). Digital interaction processes can also be analyzed from a narrative perspective (Scolari 2004): the user (Subject) needs to carry out a task — for example, search for information on the Internet, compose text using a word-processor, or transform an image with graphics software — and for this they need to manipulate a series of tools (the interface), which allows them to achieve the objective result (Object). In other words, digital interactions also follow the model of the functions proposed in 1928 by Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*.

Online brands organize their narrative paths by placing the client in the centre of the interaction process: *the user is the hero of the folktale*. In the specific case of Google, the site proposes a very specific narrative path: the user (Subject) searches for an item of information (Object) and a quick and simple interface (Helper/Magic Instrument) allows them to reach their searched for object in a short amount of time and without many complications. This displacement from listening to (or seeing) a story in the media to experiencing it in first person follows the same course as other narrative experiences that have been digitalized: before children could only read stories or listen to the narrations, now they can *live* them by playing with the computer or videogames.

- Discursive level: Finally, in the discursive level of the Google brand we find a 'minimal' interface and a clearly identifiable logo. However, the difference from other brands in this case is that the graphic elements hold a secondary position: no expert in branding would dream of modifying the Coca Cola logo but Google can do it without any fear of destroying its accumulated prestige. Google's symbolic capital is in the simplicity of its interface, the speed of its search system and the 'democratic' hierarchization of its results. In fact, Google often plays with its logo and changes it for a day to commemorate an event or pay homage to a famous person (see figure 6).



Figure 6. *Google and Alfred Hitchcock*

In synthesis: what the users *see* of Google is not as important as what they *feel*, this ‘easy, honest, and objective’ experience of searching for information in real time that enriches their knowledge.

Before concluding this section, we would like to point out two aspects that seem to us to be suggestive from a semiotic point of view. First, the existence of Google’s narrative world is confirmed by the appearance of its own semantic universe: Google users have developed a ‘googlossary’ for specialists that include terms such as ‘googlopoly’ (the attempt to dominate the information search market on the Internet), the ‘kilogoogle’ (unit of measure corresponding to 1,000 Google hits), the ‘Google Dance’ (upgrade of the Google index every 20 or 30 days), the ‘Google Doodle’ (transformations of the original logotype to commemorate events), etc. Shouldn’t the value of a brand be related to the extension of the semantic universe that it manages to generate? Each narrative world has its own dictionary: the universe that gives us words such as ‘hyper-space,’ ‘teletransporter,’ and ‘replicant’ is evidently not the same as the one that gives us concepts such as ‘jihad,’ ‘Baghdad,’ or ‘terrorist attack.’ A brand that ends up on the tip of its users’ tongues — often in a creative way, as we have seen in the case of the ‘googlossary’ — and becomes part of their everyday language can be considered to be a successful brand.

Second, the large quantity of sites and blogs dedicated to the Google world also deserve a semiotic interpretation. It does not matter if these network spaces are for or against Google; the important thing is they *talk about Google* and stick to it like ‘paratextual parasites’ (Genette 1997). To a certain degree, this network of sites and blogs participates and collaborates in producing Google’s narrative world. As we mentioned before, possible worlds are always incomplete (because the enunciator *can’t say everything or tell the whole story*): the rest is supplied by the users, who have their part in building this huge universe of meaning that is the Google brand.



At this point, we can also ask if the value of the brand in the digital age can be measured by the paratextual sites and blogs that appear in its orbit. Other phenomena of the 1990s — such as the television series ‘X-Files’ and the movie ‘Matrix’ — also promoted the birth of virtual communities of loyal followers, which has also happens with many famous artists. Is it a simple coincidence or the definitive triumph of an online branding policy?

#### 4. Conclusions

Guy Debord, the most relevant theorist of the Situationist movement and author of the celebrated *The Society of the Spectacle*, has perhaps distilled the most devastating and forceful criticism of the capitalist rationality. In his work written in 1971, Debord holds that ‘the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images’ (1988: 97). The idea is very suggestive and anticipates by almost a decade the lucubrations on post-modernism by Baudrillard and other members of the French ‘school of disenchantment.’ Beyond the discussions about a world that seemed solid and ended up melting into the air, if anything has become clear it is that capitalism’s loss of materiality has stopped being a theoretic possibility and become a ‘concrete’ fact of our reality.

In an economy that tends to dematerialize itself and in which the capital is concentrated until it becomes an image, brands are increasingly more important. Either by organizing narrative paths or proposing possible worlds that invite us to enter and share their values, brands constitute a basic component of our social and cognitive landscape. Brands — like their close relatives financial capital — are not material, they are pure meaning that develops and grows as the brand is spread and circulated. If capital stops circulating, it does not make a profit — it dies. The same happens with branding: if nobody ‘talks’ about it — nobody enters and inhabits its narrative world — the brand disappears.

Digital technologies and new experiences of life online have generated changes in the brand-building processes and in the theories that explain how they work. If the brands of the ‘real world’ are constructed through a complex network of enunciations (spots, posters, events, advertising in magazines, etc.), the essential element of the building process of the brands that live and develop on the web is interactivity. Instead of a ‘making-knowing’ articulated by a set of enunciations the brands of the digital world are orientated towards a ‘making-doing.’ The user’s interactive experience (searching for information, being informed in real time, being able to choose between millions of books, manage a bank account

with the mouse, etc.) is a fundamental component of the narrative world of the digital brand.

In the specific case of Google, we can see how from some basic values (simplicity, quickness, centrifugation of users, etc.) this search engine proposes an 'easy, honest, and objective' narration to its visitors in which the user is the hero of the folktale. Finally, these values are updated in an interface that respects the principles of usability (Nielsen 2000) and promotes an interactive experience that fully satisfies the needs of a user that is searching for information in real time. In this case we can also say that the *iconic and linguistic enunciations are secondary with respect to interaction*.

Unlike other search engines such as Yahoo! and Excite, which continue to offer more and more services and complicate their interfaces — betraying the basic values on which they were based, i.e., ease of use, speed, and centrifugation of users towards other webs — Google has remained loyal to its fundamental principles. Although Google continues to incorporate new services, these appear in secondary pages, and have never been used to enrich the homepage to the point of becoming a portal. The coherence between the deep values, an interactive narrative experience and a usable interface — that allows you to find the desired information in a short time — guarantees Google the high levels of satisfaction, loyalty, and visibility that it enjoys within the digital universe.

## Notes

1. Lombardi describes this evolution as the development from the functional brand (in which the product was the 'hero') to the total brand. In this phase 'the brand should offer a representation of values with a qualitative continuum of various products and services. The consumer will respond with confidence and loyalty, not only with an isolated purchase' (Lombardi 2000: 33, my translation). If we apply this reading to a brand recognized world wide such as Barilla, we can see that the important thing for the client is not buying 500 grams of spaghetti but 'living a part of the world that Barilla represents, to which they will want to return' (2000: 39, my translation).
2. Codeluppi has questioned the 'possible world' concept applied to brands, which would be limited when representing the richness and communicational potential of current brands. This researcher proposes the concept of 'imaginary' to replace it (Codeluppi 2000).
3. This journey, expressed in terms of generative semiotics, takes on the following form: 'the performant subject, the Marlboro cowboy, carries out a series of programs of use in which it acquires the "power" necessary to pass the final test and obtain the valuable object (the cigarette) ...' (Montes 1998: 151, my translation).
4. According to Ferraro the relationship between brands and the web has not been easy. It has been shown that in many cases it was 'the strongest brands best placed in the traditional media that had the most difficulties in the search for an adequate position

on the web. This has led some observers to think that the new media has modes that favor the newcomers over the leaders' (Ferraro 2000: 169, my translation).

5. <http://www.google.com/technology>.
6. <http://www.google.com/technology>.
7. According to the company, '... "Googol" is the mathematical term for a 1 followed by 100 zeros. The term was coined by Milton Sirotta, nephew of American mathematician Edward Kasner, and was popularized in the book, *Mathematics and the Imagination* by Kasner and James Newman. Google's play on the term reflects the company's mission to organize the immense amount of information available on the web' (<http://www.google.com/corporate>).
8. The online brands' rejection of traditional advertising is also found in other eBranding experiences. Recently Amazon decided to cancel its television advertisements and offer free delivery to its clients instead (Morrisey 2003).
9. Google's entrance into the stock market (April 2004) by means of a public offer for sale should be read in the context of the fight for commercial and technological hegemony in the world of information searches.
10. <http://www.google.com/googleblog>.
11. The same can be said of other companies in the dot-com universe. For example, Amazon has also built its fortune based on a shopping experience in an almost infinite bookshop in which we can obtain added information value about the books we wish to buy.

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