



## *Sharing Knowledge on LinkedIn Groups: Focus on Legal Practitioners<sup>1</sup>*

by Giuliana Elena Garzone

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1996, at a time when it was a prevalent opinion that the main use of the Internet was to become an “information superhighway” and social media were still a long way off, in his book *Being Digital* Nicholas Negroponte expressed the view that in time the Internet’s real impact would be that of “creating a totally new, global social fabric” (Negroponte 1996: 183). Today, online social media are actually creating a global social fabric, opening up new public spaces that make a variety of interactions among users possible, from “one to one” in emails and private messages on social media to “one to many” in blogs and Social Networking Sites, and “many to many” on forums and community web pages.

An interesting aspect of this development is that, in spite of the complex multimodal affordances of web-mediated communication, most interactions in these social spaces rely on the written medium: the world of online communication is to a great extent a “textually-mediated social world” (Bartlett and Lee 2013: 27). Since the initial stages of research on online communication this fact has fostered investigations

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on the transformation of language in the shift from orality to literacy in computer-mediated interactions (cf. e.g. Ferrara, Brunner and Whittemore 1991). In spite of the increasing availability of multimodal affordances, many complex behaviours that people perform online are entirely constituted “through and by means of discourse”, as Herring (2004: 338) points out, a fact that makes discourse analysis all the more relevant to the investigation of online interactions.

Today among the options offered by computer-mediated communication, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are among the most popular and pervasive, and have now become an integral part of people’s daily routines. They have created new virtual spaces where users can interact, exchange information and discuss issues, with the additional option of constructing an identity for themselves irrespective of their “real” demographic profile and social situation. This emerges clearly from boyd and Ellison’s definition of SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and Ellison 2007: 211).

By supporting existing social ties and creating new ones SNSs enable users to enter an extended network of relations and interact with them. But they also offer interesting opportunities for professionals, who create and maintain profiles on them and become members of thematic groups in order to keep in touch and share views with their colleagues, peers and alumni, promote personal or business branding, enhance their professional reputation and connect with customers.

In this respect, LinkedIn (LI) Groups are the most popular option, because LI, founded in 2003 (cf. boyd and Ellison 2007: 212), is inherently professionally oriented. It belongs to the category that Thelwall and Stuart (2010) call “networking SNSs” as they “support non-social interpersonal communication” (265-266).<sup>2</sup> It is tailored to the workplace environment, offering the opportunity to connect with other professional people, publish posts and participate in discussions. In addition, it features a jobs section which gives access to a wide range of job announcements, but also automatically selects the offers that potentially fit each user’s profile.

LI Groups are dedicated spaces to connect with specific sets of people (colleagues, former students, schoolmates, etc.) that are used by professionals to keep in touch with their peers, share information, and debate topical issues. On the LI websites they are introduced as follows:

LinkedIn Groups provide a place for professionals in the same industry or with similar interests to share content, find answers, post and view jobs, make business contacts, and establish themselves as industry experts. [...]

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<sup>2</sup> Thelwall and Stuart’s (2010) classification includes two other categories: *socializing SNSs*, which “support informal social interaction between members”, exemplified by Facebook, and (*social*) *navigation SNSs*, which “support finding resources via interpersonal connections” (e.g. *Flickr* and *YouTube*) (265-266).



As a LinkedIn Groups member, you're able to join like-minded members in conversations, find answers and post and view jobs in industries you're interested in.

(<https://www.linkedin.com/help/linkedin/answer/1164/linkedin-groups-overview?lang=en>)<sup>3</sup>

As specified in this overview, in broad terms the Directory of LI Groups includes mainly two types of Groups, those comprising "professionals in the same industry" and those comprising professionals "with similar interests", in other words Groups consisting of people working in the same profession or industry (e.g. Consultants Network, Oil and Gas People, Medical Devices, Social Media Today, Applied Linguistics), and Groups comprising people who share interests that cut across professional domains (e.g. Green, Professional Women's Network, Intercultural Intelligence). In actual fact, in theory there exist more than 2 million Groups, but many of them are only "ghost towns" (Gershbein 2016), i.e. they were started and then discontinued but not cancelled, and as yet others have a negligible membership (in the order of a few dozens); therefore the real number is far lower. But in spite of the inactivity of some of them, LI Groups are an important outlet for users to build an online presence, and many are very active, mostly averaging a few thousand members, and in some cases – the so-called "featured groups" – including up to half a million or more participants (e.g. Marketing Communication, 696,833; Digital Marketing, 1,118,384; Retail Industry Professional Group, 517,414).

This article will focus on professional Groups, i.e. those whose members work within the same professional area, and in particular on four Groups of legal practitioners, lawyers and arbitrators and mediators, which have been selected as representative samples, each having a slightly different focus. In a not too distant past, for these practitioners, and especially for those operating internationally, opportunities for exchange of information, views and opinions were virtually limited to institutional occasions and events, and international conferences, while today social media offer them a convenient and constantly available opportunity to keep in touch, circulate information and debate topical issues and problems that emerge in their practices.

Access to the Groups is not open, but gated. It can be gained by invitation from a Group member or manager, or by request to be admitted, subject to Group owners' and managers' approval. This contributes to keeping the Groups cohesive and highly focused.

In a previous research (Garzone 2016) I showed that it would be problematic to classify LI Groups as *virtual communities* as such (Rheingold 1993/2000; Herring 2008), while – given their purely professional character – a more suitable notion could be that of "virtual 'Community of Practice'" (CoP) (Wenger 1998), as LI Groups meet the

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all websites were last accessed on 10/06/2018.



requisites or “essential traits” defined by Murillo (2008) by applying Wenger’s (1998) theory to Internet-based collectives (cf. Garzone 2016).

This study will analyse conversations on LI Groups with the aim to explore how participants use language to discuss professional issues and manage interactions with other Group members, positioning themselves within the virtual CoP, and to define the social practices they engage in. This can be achieved by focusing on the rhetorical strategies deployed in negotiating/communicating professional knowledge in Group conversations. Special attention will be given to how participants discursively construct their own image of authoritativeness in the process of disseminating and negotiating professional knowledge. Another aspect to be evaluated is the impact of the architecture of the SNS and the affordances it makes available on the actual organisation and dynamics of Group interaction.

## 2. AIMS, MATERIALS AND METHOD

The four professional LI Groups chosen as representative of different aspects of legal practice are listed here below, with an indication of their membership, accompanied by the short introductory texts displayed on their LI homepages:

### **Leadership for Lawyers (LL) (68,306 members)**

Leadership for Lawyers is a legal networking forum. If you are interested in the latest trends, best practices, technology advancements, innovation in the law and leadership, then we invite you to join this group.

### **Legal IT & Innovation Network (LI&IN) (77,715 members)**

Legal IT & Innovation Network is the global virtual community for people working in the legal technology industry like law firm IT staff, legal software vendors, legal IT consultants, but also paralegals, knowledge management specialists, and lawyers interested in the technology that facilitates their work. [...]

### **Mediation Discussion Group (MDG) (7,792 members)**

This group is designed to provide a discussion forum for mediators around mediation issues and issues of professional practice.

### **International Arbitration (IA) (29,124 members)**

This group is a network database of professionals working in the legal field of international arbitration, including commercial and investment-state arbitration in a wide range of industry sectors, including but not limited to aviation, aerospace, chemicals, construction, communications, oil & gas.

The four Groups have different sizes, also on account of the substantiality of the professional collectivity involved, as arbitrators and mediators are only a segment of



the legal professional community. Nevertheless, all four Groups analysed are reasonably active, with at least 2 postings a day on each of them or more. For each of the Groups, online exchanges were collected for a whole month from early May to early June 2018, including both posts and comments. Table 1 shows the number of exchanges included in the corpus, which totals 557:

Group	Members	Exchanges in month considered
Leadership for Lawyers	68,312	198
Legal IT Network	77,714	186
International Arbitration Group,	29,124	98
Mediation Discussion Group	7,792	75

Table 1. Details of Groups examined.

The methodological approach adopted in this study is Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring 2004), a broad conceptualization which envisages the application of methods adapted from any of the language-focused disciplines to the analysis of online discourse. Herring defines it as “language-focused content analysis” (341), and describes it as a toolkit from which every researcher can choose the instruments that are most suitable to explore the case at hand, keeping in mind the distinctive features of Computer Mediated Discourse.

Against this backdrop, this study, which has its starting point in the analysis of texts exchanged in interactions (Herring’s “logs of verbal interaction”; 2004: 339) within the LI Groups considered, is set in a discourse analytical framework (cf. e.g. Brown and Yule 1983; Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2001; Blommaert 2005), and at the same time it takes account of the inherent properties of computer-mediated communication and its semiotic and contextual coordinates. In particular, it relies on a view of discourse as socially-situated “language-in-action” (Blommaert 2005: 2), which not only reflects reality, but also contributes to categorizing and constructing it, and to shaping associated social practices.

Within this context, an especially useful concept relied on in the analysis is that of *proximity*, which can be borrowed from the literature on scientific communication (Hyland 2010) and transferred to the context of LI Groups. It refers to “a writer’s control of rhetorical features which display authority as an expert and a personal position towards issues in an unfolding text” (117). The criteria outlined by Hyland are useful for the analysis of web-mediated communication among professionals on account of their flexibility and multidimensionality: *Organisation* includes all aspects of text design and presentation, and is therefore suited also to the description of the online environment; *(Argument) Structure* looks at the focus and framing of knowledge exposition, also considering the syntactic resources deployed (e.g. linguistic devices contributing to agentivity and impersonality); *Stance* regards expression of personal attitude, including evaluation and metadiscourse; *Reader engagement*, i.e. linguistic





devices encoding the presence of the addressee in the text (especially reader pronouns and questions); *Credibility* regards the reliability of sources of knowledge, which online is often realized by means of hyperlinks redirecting to authoritative sources. By applying these categories it is possible to shed light on how Group members present themselves and manage their interactions with other members of the CoP.

Pragmatic notions drawing on genre analysis are also used for the purpose of identifying actions performed in online discourse (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993, 2004), starting from the assumption that LI Group conversations constitute a genre – a notion which I am aware some authors would question (e.g. Miller and Shepherd 2009)<sup>4</sup> – and a reconfigured genre rather than an emergent one (cf. Herring 2013: 14) for the fact of being conversational and monomodal, rather than collaborative and multimodal.

Although not applied systematically, this complex of analytical tools makes it possible to identify the positioning of each participant within the relevant Group and the discursive devices used to introduce and present professional knowledge, updates and information.

A background to Computer-Mediated communication is provided by general studies of linguistic communication in web-mediated environments (e.g. Herring 1996; Garzone, Catenaccio and Poncini 2007; Baron 2008), and on Web 2.0 (cf., among others, Lemke 2005; Herring 2008; Miller and Shepherd 2009; Campagna et al. 2012; Pérez-Sabater 2012; Tannen and Trester 2013; Seargeant and Tagg 2014; Garzone 2015; Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2016). Obviously, reference is also be made to research on SNSs, mostly produced within communication, information and media studies (e.g. boyd and Ellison 2007; Papacharissi 2009, 2011), although LI discourse has been given very limited attention. To my knowledge, the only linguistic studies to explore it have been Papacharissi (2009) comparing Facebook, LinkedIn and AsmallWorld, and Garzone (2016) on Facebook and LI Groups.

### 3. LI GROUP POSTS: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

As in other SNSs (e.g. Facebook), on LI Groups conversations are organised in posts and comments, with peripheral features similar to those of posts on Facebook, blogs and other social media (cf. Myers 2010): a picture of the writer in the upper left corner of the relevant section, accompanied by a caption introducing her/him, with name and/or job description, or the specification of some personal traits embedded in the initial phrase of the personal profile (e.g. “Property lawyer”; “Humourist, (aka humourist) author and speaker”), but sometimes also “promotional” phrases like “Legal Translations performed ONLY by Lawyer-Translators”, “Helping people resolve

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<sup>4</sup> Miller and Shepherd’s (2009) objection that blogs cannot be considered a genre, but only a medium can obviously also be applied to SNS Group conversations. I have questioned this objection in Garzone (2012).



conflict”, “Looking for the right mediator? Look here: [link]”. This is in spite of the fact the “Rules” of most Groups include a “No advertising of services” prescription.

A feature that distinguishes LI Groups from Facebook groups and makes its layout more similar to that of “standard” blogs and online newspapers is that every post has a headline, a title that anticipates its content. Figure 1 shows the standard layout of a post:

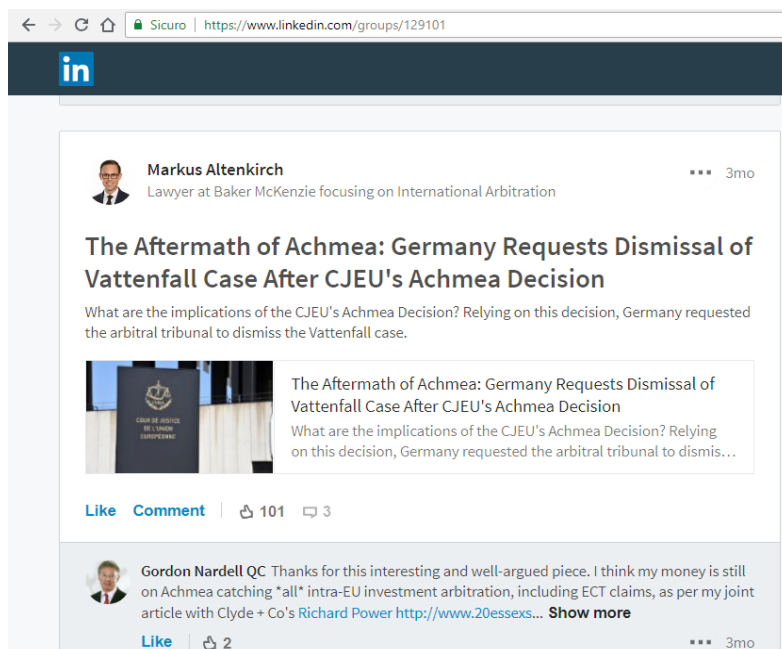


Figure 1. Layout of a LI Group post (IA Group).

The headline “The Aftermath of Achmea: Germany Requests Dismissal of Vattenfall Case after CJEU’s Achmea Decision” is followed by a brief text:

What are the implications of the CJEU’s Achmea Decision? Relying on this decision, Germany requested the arbitral tribunal to dismiss the Vattenfall case.

The text is very short and in practice rephrases exactly the content of the headline switching to a verbal style from the typically nominal structure of the title and inserting a question, which activates reader-engagement. Post texts tend to be always short, because – as will be seen shortly – the reader can either expand them or choose to be redirected to a longer, more complete version posted elsewhere. In the post above, in the lower part of the tab there is a link preview, also featuring a small picture of the cornerstone at the entrance of the European Court of Justice with its denomination and logo. Underneath the link preview Comments (if any) are displayed.

A look at the headlines of the posts included in the corpus can provide an idea of the topic and the rhetorical purpose of each post, i.e. in generic terms (cf. Swales 1990;



Bhatia 1993), of the move that the post intends to accomplish. In keeping with the description and aim of the Groups, in many cases the posts propose a topic or an issue for discussion, e.g.

"Peer mediation?" (MDG)

"Whether dispute between non-signatories to arbitration agreement can be referred to arbitration in domestic arbitration?" (IA)

"Corporate governance and sustainable development" (LL)

"What does GDPR mean for an organization's hybrid IT strategy?" (LI&IN)

Other recurrent moves are:

- communicating a new development in the profession and its areas of activity (a new statute, a decision taken by a court or a tribunal, an award issued, etc.), e.g.

"Property rights of women in India!" (LL)

"New UAE Arbitration Law issued" (IA)

- giving tips and suggestions for practice, e.g.

"Don't become collateral damage" (LL)

"Five ways to make your days better" (LL)

"Negotiating via e-mail: challenges and tactics" (IA)

- announcing events and conferences, e.g.

"Free Webinar: 15 ways to market your training programme and learning tech" (LI&IN)

"Arbitration Conference London 15 June 2018" (IA)

- announcing reports, publications or projects, e.g.

"Research Project: The mediation process for handling disputes in inter-firm strategic alliances" (MDG)

"LCIA publishes its facts and figures: The 2017 Casework Report" (IA)

"Introducing the Global Risk Series – Book 1 Risk Management how tos" (LL)

- asking for help or assistance (usually by novices or students), e.g.:

"Seeking Examples for a book... Do you have one to contribute?" (MDG)

"Do you start with joint sessions in your construction mediations?" (IA)

"Attending Legal Sec? Want to talk about CLE tracking?" (LI&IN)

It can be noted that, on account of their attention-catching function, many of the headlines tend to be highly interpersonal, addressing the reader directly with





questions, imperatives and/or second person pronouns, while others are more clearly ideational, generally consisting of one or more nominal structures.

In more general terms, as regards the purpose of LI Group conversations, the analysis of headlines seems to suggest that professionals' participation in LI Groups is aimed at three main functions: sharing knowledge, finding and giving updates and information, and participating in discussions. However, this inference needs to be confirmed in light of the analysis of the actual posts.

### 3.1. POSTS: DISCURSIVE ASPECTS

In the next section, the analysis of the linguistic and discursive aspects of posts and comments will make it possible to identify the rhetorical strategies Group members deploy to disseminate expert knowledge, construct their arguments and display their virtual identity.

As pointed out above, the text in posts tends to be either very short or totally absent, leaving the headline only, because in terms of organisation (in Hyland's 2010 sense) LI shares with other SNSs the peculiarity that in each case only two or three introductory lines (often no more than 50 words) are displayed by default, as the complete text can be reached only either by using the *Show more* link or a hyperlink leading to a different web page or site.

For illustrative purposes some representative examples of texts will now be examined as they appear by default on the LI Group page, exemplifying the different discursive approaches that characterise them.

#### **"Charlie's Law"**

Charlie's parents want a 'Charlie's Law' to prevent cases like these whereby an "independent mediator" is used to come to an agreement between hospitals and families. (MDG)

#### **Avoiding Risks with Document Management Systems**

Many organizations have started to realize that document management systems can not only keep better track of all sensitive information and records but it's als...*Show more* (LI)

These posts start with statements dealing with current questions and have a prevalently informative and argumentative focus, each of them introducing a topical issue and discussing it, deploying linguistic structures that present the relevant topic rather impersonally. In the first example reference is made to a highly controversial case of general interest, Baby Charlie's case, and the burning issue of mediation between hospitals and families in similarly problematic cases is raised, while in the second post, the focus is on a problem that is specific to law firms, i.e. the risks involved in the use of Document Management Systems.



Although informing and debating are important elements on the discussion groups examined, most of the posts exhibit a highly interpersonal, reader-engaging structure.

**How to Transform Yourself from an Operational manager to a Strategic Leader**

Learn what it takes to transform yourself to become a Strategic Leader. (LL)

**So You Want to Hold a Contest (and Not Go to Jail)?**

Have a marketing department that loves contests and sweepstakes? Find out the basics of what in-house legal teams need to know. (LL)

These texts address readers directly in the second person, asking questions and exhorting them to perform actions. Their textual organization is characterised by an opening question, and the suggestion – expressed by means of an imperative – that the answer to that question can be found by performing a certain action. Thus the text is characterised by a high level of reader engagement.

In some cases the two typologies of posts analysed so far are combined, with the text starting with an apparently informative statement, which however is followed by a question:

**The Prague Rules - Inquisitorial Rules on the Taking of Evidence in International Arbitration**

Will the so-called “Prague Rules” help to reduce the time and costs of arbitration proceedings as promised by the Working Group? We compare the Prague Rules with the IBA Rules on the Taking of Evidence. (IA)

Here it is interesting that the answer to the question comes in a sentence (“We compare...”) in which the writer presents him/herself as part of a professional group capable of discussing the issue competently. In general, in posts recourse to the first person plural pronoun is rather rare, while less rare is recourse to first person singular, appearing in about one post out of 10, as in the following examples:

**This week I look at some of the legal aspects of aircraft management agreements. Please click on the link below. (MDG)**

**Free Webinars about Learning Technology - Topics You'd Like to See?**

I'll be delivering free webinars related to learning technology starting in mid July. They will be open to everyone. Are there any learning management system topics you want to explore? Selection, implementation, general administration? Maybe somethi ... *Show more* (LI&IN)



In both examples the focus is on a contingent event being presented and promoted. While in the first case, there is only the main headline with the indication of the topic dealt with in the article being announced, followed by an imperative, the second example invites users to a webinar ("Free Webinars about Learning Technology") in highly interpersonal terms, with self-mention used in combination with the second person pronoun, as can be seen in the two questions appearing respectively in the headline and in the body text.

But the analysis of posts is complete only if their full text is considered. As anticipated, in many cases the full text is made available by clicking on the *Show more* link.

For instance, in a post titled *Messaging Security: Need to Protect the Confidential Information*, signed by Sneha Patil, Technology Executive | security specialist, published on the LI&IN Group, by default the following lines are displayed:

As the frequency of security breaches has increased over the past 5 years, organizations have increased their IT security investments to protect against advanced messaging threats. The constant pressure of managing sensitive data of consumers while t .. *Show more*

A click on *Show more* will expand the text to 258 words, starting with a general statement which contextualizes the issue:

The constant pressure of managing sensitive data of consumers while transmission, along with the need to manage stringent compliances, has led enterprises of all sizes to adopt messaging security solutions for critical information protection.

Evidently here an effort is made to maintain a specialist register, which on the one hand is necessary to deal with the topic adequately, but in actual fact seems to be aimed at constructing an image of expertise for the person responsible for the post. The tone is typically impersonal, but in the following paragraph a question re-activates reader-engagement:

Why Enterprises are adopting Messaging Security?

- Messaging security solution helps organizations protect their communications and comply with stringent regulatory compliance. [...]

In the two subsequent paragraphs the text goes on to illustrate in detail the need for security in cloud messaging as well as in email messaging in a competent technical tone, with inanimate subjects, use of acronyms (CAGR, PCI DSS, etc.) and even recourse to a formal *where*-word (*wherein*):



Cloud messaging security solutions are available according to customer's demand, *wherein* a customer can start or stop any service, at will.  
(emphasis added)

Overall the post offers an informative overview of problems connected with companies' messaging security and the possible solutions, with no reference to any specific producer (McAfee, Cisco, Symantec, Microsoft and Google are all mentioned). At the same time recourse to a specialized register can be seen as aimed at a display of competence.

In other cases, the technical information given is put to use to promote something, as is the case with the following post by Christina Gruen, Head of Partner and Industry Solutions Marketing, titled "Growth Through Innovation: 7 Ways to Leverage Mobile Expense Management and Drive Profitability". The post opens as follows (with the lines displayed by default highlighted in italics):

*Market benchmarks indicate that Travel & Entertainment (T&E) expenses are a firm's #2 indirect cost with a run rate of 1-12% of annual revenues. Many firms struggle with disjointed processes for capturing, tracking and reconciling client billable T&E* and that leads to highly inefficient workflows that add significant additional hidden costs.

I invite you to join our thought leadership webinar on Tuesday, June 12th at 11:00am Pacific/2:00pm Eastern when we'll discuss:

- How to achieve almost instant ROI from standardizing key spend management processes across your firm and organization [...]

Even if you can't make the date/time for the webinar, please register today and receive the recorded webinar to view at your convenience:

[www.chr.om/ExpenseManagementBestPractices](http://www.chr.om/ExpenseManagementBestPractices)

Hope to see you online! (LI&IN)

The initial lines function as a teaser for potential readers, using impersonal and technical terms to pose a serious problem most companies have to deal with. When expanded by clicking on *Show more*, these lines turn out to be the introduction to a text promoting a webinar on the topic. Thus the initial apparently knowledge-focused approach leaves way to a definitely promotional tone. It is interesting that the author refers to herself in the first person, as the subject who invites users to the webinar, while all the rest of the text is reader-oriented addressing the reader in the second person, with even an imperative ("please register"). The only exception is one occurrence of we ("we'll discuss") in its inclusive meaning obviously aimed at getting potential participants involved directly as members of professional ingroups. The tone is technical throughout, with recourse to domain-specific terms (run rate, annual revenues, client billable T&E, workflows ROI key spend management processes). Thus the author constructs a highly professional identity for herself and the organization that offers the webinar, relying on specialised language to boost her credibility.



But in the overwhelming majority of cases, the two or three lines displayed are all the text actually contained in the post, and serve as a trailer for a longer excerpt that is posted elsewhere online – on LinkedIn Pulse, on a blog or a website maintained by the author of the post or his/her organization – or an online magazine article (e.g. Forbes), occasionally even a TED talk, a podcast or a video. The link to this external text (or multimodal resource) is featured in a box in the lower part of the tab in the form of a link preview, usually consisting of its title and initial lines, sometimes also featuring a small picture (as in Figure 1 above).

For instance in the following post on IA, signed by Tim Dr. Meyer-Dulheuer, Patent Attorney at Dr. Meyer-Dulheuer & Partners LLP, Patent Attorneys, there appears the following text (with the lines displayed by default highlighted in italics):

**Data protection: many products on online trading platforms concerned**

*A few weeks ago, a German District Court prohibited a pharmacist from selling pharmacy-only medicines via the Amazon trading platform.*

*This is a far-reaching ruling on data protection, especially concerning all sensitive data.*

*Explosive: it implies that every competitor has the right to sue as soon as he would discover an infringement of a product on an online trading platform such as Amazon that may be associated with sensitive data – much more than just the customer data of pharmacies.*

*<http://ow.ly/fIQd30kfCw>*

These lines inform the user about a German district court's final decision and its implications.<sup>5</sup> Although the wording is impersonal, the author's obvious purpose is to express his stance, highlighting the importance of the ruling which is presented as "far-reaching" and "explosive", and its implications are described as amounting to "much more" than the contingent case. It is followed by a box with the link preview consisting of the title and the first few lines of a detailed report (a blog post) on the case:

*Data protection for sensitive data: Pharmacist may not sell drugs via Amazon*

*An important and very far-reaching ruling on data protection has already been reached before the entry into force of the basic...*

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<sup>5</sup> The landmark judgment in question was delivered by the German District Court of Dessau-Roßlau which declared sale of drugs via Amazon illegal on account of data protection for sensitive data as provided for by the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in force since 25 May 2018.





These lines are in actual fact a hyperlink redirecting the user to a 832-word text published on the website of the author's law firm, in the Blog section (incidentally, bilingual: German and US English), and has the form of a "technical" summary of the landmark ruling.

Thus the LI post sets forth an evaluation of the significance of the court decision, conveying the author's stance and at the same time establishing his competence and authority to judge the weight and consequences of a judgment, while it redirects the user to read a more detailed specialist account of the issues at stake.

### 3.2. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF LI GROUP POSTS: DISCUSSION

In light of the foregoing, it can be stated that the organisation (in Hyland's 2010 sense) of Group conversations is strongly conditioned by the hypermedia environment where it is set. Text is not used as a single and continuous entity, but rather as an assembly of parts that can be shown only partially, or retrieved at a different URL thanks to the navigating mode (Askehave and Ellerup Nielsen 2004). Furthermore, many of the posts are not self-standing, but rather depend on the connection with the main text published on another page or website. This means that the LI Group conversation is a genre that is not complete in itself, being symbiotic with other genres to which it is linked hypertextually.

As far as posts' authors are concerned, the hypertextual character of LI makes more information available on them than can be inferred from the texts they post. By clicking on the author's name the user can gain access to her/his personal Profile, which provides exhaustive information about a person's professional status, a complete resumé of education and career, and current professional activity, and even non-professional interests and hobbies. Other useful elements are the list of the Groups of which s/he is a member, and the skills presented on her/his Profile, which in some cases are also confirmed by the Endorsements of other professionals that vouch that they are actually true.

Thus thanks to the affordances of the LI environment the identity of people publishing posts in Group conversations is constructed not only on the basis of elements that are "given off" (Goffman 1959), i.e. leaking through more or less unintentionally from users' linguistic and discursive behaviour in their contributions to the discussion, but also by means of elements that are "given" (Goffman 1959), i.e. deliberately provided, and accessible by clicking on the author's name. If a user showcases her/his expertise by publishing interesting and competent posts, the accessibility of the Profile in a way guarantees her/his authoritativeness. The credibility of the contents posted is not based only on the reliability of the sources to which reference is made, but also on the "reputation" of the author which in case of doubt can be verified by looking at the hard facts set forth in the Profile. It can be argued that for a professional the fact of joining a Group and participating in its conversations can be highly beneficial in terms of personal branding, an activity advertised among the



main options offered by LI, which is especially important given that LI is specialized in the offer of careers content and has recruitment as one of its most important functions.

But in many cases participation in LI Groups is motivated by more explicit forms of promotion for goods and services, which has an impact on the micro-linguistic characteristics of discourse, i.e. on the way knowledge is presented, with strong reader-engagement being a recurrent feature of promotional discourse.

As pointed out above, most headlines are by definition strongly reader-oriented, and often so is the short segment of text that is immediately visible, especially if it is meant to attract the reader's attention in order to redirect it to a text posted elsewhere. See the following examples:

Want to improve your knowledge and join the discussion on procedural and technical innovations to reduce time and cost in #arbitration? (IA)

Legal marketing has become more competitive. Lawyers need every advantage to attract new clients. Today, everyone is searching online. You may already have a website, but if you aren't deploying a full array of marketing tactics, your phone won't be ringing. (LL)

In these examples, reader-engagement is realized by means of a question and by addressing recipients directly as *you*.

As regards the articles to which the user is redirected, it is difficult to generalise, but it can be stated that texts whose real purpose is to advance knowledge in some respect, either practical or theoretical, tend to display the features of specialist communication, giving preference to impersonal traits and specific lexicon. For instance in a post published on the LI&IN Group titled "Law's unique take on 'Time is Money' and why it must change" the headline itself is a link redirecting the reader to a Forbes article on how to expand access, and improve and accelerate the delivery of legal services. The article deals with the issue under a professional perspective, using all sorts of impersonal linguistic resources, from nominalisations to passives, from inanimate subjects to anticipatory *it*, with the obvious effect of conferring a typically specialised tone on discourse. This is an instance of a domain-specific approach to the transmission of professional knowledge where the author has no ulterior motive (apart from showcasing his competence).

But in many other cases, the author of a post has an agenda that goes beyond the sharing of information. A case in point is a post similar to the one discussed above, published on the LI&IN Group, "Time for the way attorneys look at time entry to change" (posted by John Blake, Regional Director of Sales at Bellefield Systems), where time is also the main topic, the focus being on how time and services are billed to clients by law firms. Although this post and the article it re-directs to ("[Case study]



How to achieve a timekeeping implementation that makes other firms jealous”<sup>6</sup>) may seem reasonably informative, it emerges that their ultimate purpose is to promote the *iTimeKeep* solution, an app to be used on computers or mobile devices.

This is true of many of the posts. Their declared purpose is to analyse a recurrent issue or discuss solutions to a problem, but in actual fact they have a promotional aim which overrides all other objectives and, in textual terms, determines the reader-engagement typical of promotional discourse.

#### 4. COMMENTS

After discussing in depth posts’ characteristics, attention will now be addressed to comments. Although the topics they deal with can be of great interest for legal practitioners, the posts discussed as examples so far have attracted very few comments, if any, in the month after their publication. This is a constant trait of these legal professional Groups: on the IA Group only one in three posts attracts a comment, less than one in five on MDG, about one in ten in LL and one in fifteen in LI&IN.

When there actually are comments, they are isolated, and in most cases contingently evaluative, being as short as “Such a beneficial topic for all firms !!!!”, or slightly more elaborate, with only a small addition by the commenter, e.g. “A wonderful storyline about conviction as a leadership quality to which could be added: passion.”

Sometimes, the comment is more complex. For instance, only one comment has been attracted by a post on the LL Group titled “Emotional intelligence training, meaningful work, and legal leadership” redirecting to an article of the same author published on a blog he maintains (“Psycholawlogy”):

*Dina Eisenberg Esq* This is a well-timed discussion as the profession transforms itself. We need to understand the idea of meaningfulness at work for our own happiness and to better service clients. All lawyers should take EQ training at some point.

This comment is highly evaluative and clearly aimed at stance-taking, defining the post as “well-timed”, and sets forth other considerations in the first person plural, referring to the legal profession with inclusive “we”.

An interesting fact in terms of organization is that the comments, posted as they are on the Group website, nevertheless refer to the full article which is published on another website.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://blog.bellefield.com/case-study-how-to-achieve-a-timekeeping-implementation-that-makes-other-firms-jealous>.



As far as the degree of interaction is concerned, in only few cases do posts actually spark a real debate, attracting several comments. One of such cases is the post significantly entitled "How to resolve your workplace conflict peacefully?" (see Figure 2) which will be discussed as an example. As in most other posts, only a couple of lines appear on LI (41 words), identical to those appearing in the link preview, and the user is redirected to a blog, the *MediatorSelect Blog*, where the complete article appears, comprising 2,198 words. In the month following its publication (7 May 2018), the post attracted nine comments of variable length – from 10 to 185 words – posted on the LI Group page (while there were no comments at all to the original blog post on the relevant website).

The post deals with workplace conflicts and argues in favour of mediation as an effective solution. The author's interest in the topic seems to be genuine, although the caption accompanying his name ("Looking for the Right Mediator? I help connect Hiring Parties with ...", circled in Figure 2 below) proves that he is engaging in this conversation with the ultimate aim to promote his own services as a mediator.

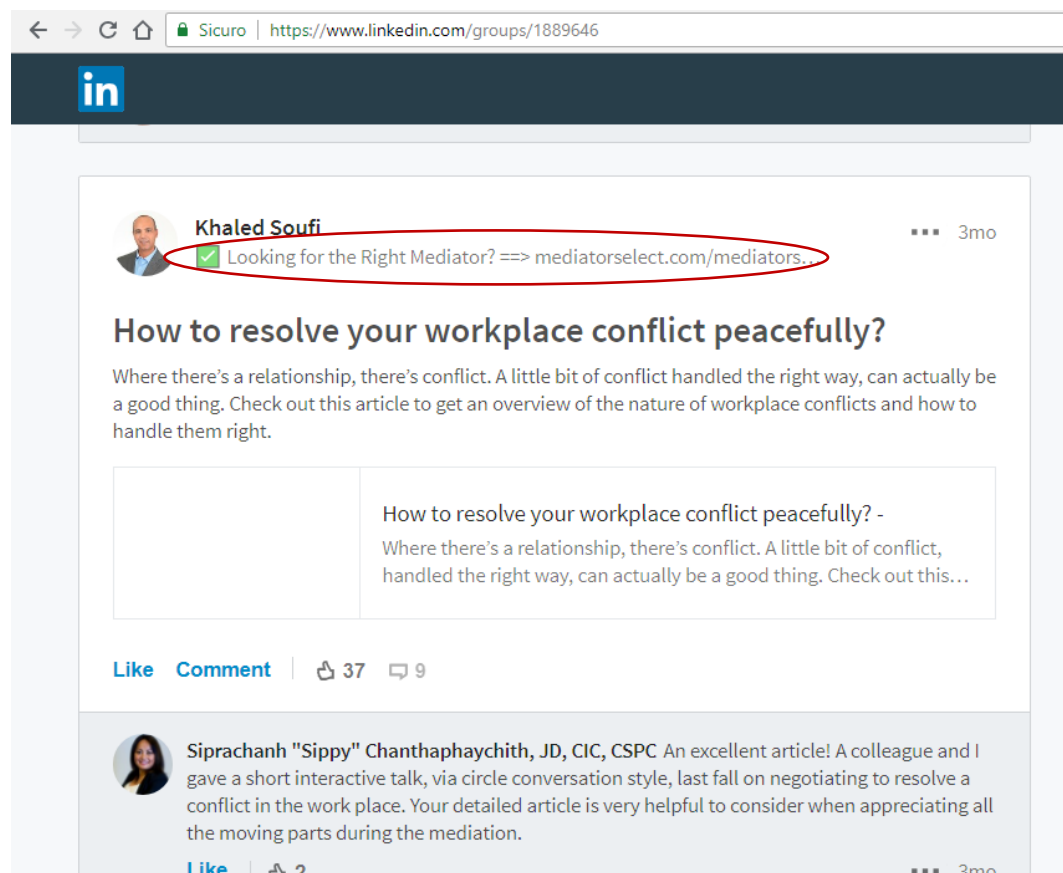


Figure 2. Post and comments from MDG.



The first three short comments on this post focus on the content of the article and give rise to a self-contained three-part exchange (Tsui 1989), i.e. an adjacency pair plus a follow-up move:

**Siprachanh "Sippy" Chanthaphaychith** "An excellent article! [...]",  
**Khaled Soufi** "Thank you, Siprachanh, we appreciate your feedback :)"  
**Khaled Soufi** "It's my [sic] pleasure and gratitude to be able to read your work, Khaled Soufi".

But after this initial stage characterized by polite exchanges, a more meaningful and longer comment (142 words) triggers a discussion on the possible solutions to conflict in the workplace, with ideas negotiated among four commenters:

**Julie Mayer** Great article and absolutely correct... however there is another dynamic to remember in workplace conflict ... no employer pays an employee to come to work for a relationship. Workplace mediation needs to separate the conflict from the emotion and build a workplace agreement that can be managed... [...]

It is interesting that in this comment the appreciation for the article is followed by an objection introduced by "however" to the effect that in the workplace personal emotions must be put aside in favour of efficiency and productivity. In the following comment John (Nerval) Settle applies the same, essentially concessive, discursive mechanism, starting with a statement of agreement, and going on with a new critical observation ("a piece that's missing") aimed at adding to the contents of the article. This comment and those that follow refer to Mayer's and other participants' comments rather than to the main article:

**John (Norval) Settle** I agree with you in principle, Julia. Also, a piece that's missing here is recognition that mediation is "second best" -- the "best" solution lies in developing leaders who understand the human and practical dynamics of anticipating and managing conflict. [...]

**Paul Rajkowski** And just where are those leaders who understand the human and practical dynamics of anticipating and managing conflict coming from? In the moment decision making is needed and that usually is a mediation session between the conflictors. [...]

**Julie Mayer** I thoroughly agree with both of you that leadership needs to include having courageous conversations ... the right conversation at the right time with the right people. Many times the leaders will notice and talk about behaviours but not with the staff. I was called to do a mediation between two very senior staff who had not spoken to each other for two years [...]

**Khaled Soufi** Agree with you mediation is not meant to be the first way to resolve the workplace conflicts ... actually in the article in the paragraph





"6. How to resolve conflict in the workplace?" mediation is the last one.  
Mediation could be used when other tools didn't work. [...]

Here commenters identify shortcomings in the article under discussion and add new ideas to its content to make up for such shortcomings. Each participant expresses a slightly different position and offers a contribution that is accepted and built on by the other interlocutors. But after three turns the person who published the post in the first place, Khaled Soufi, intervenes in the discussion observing that in actual fact those ideas were already set out in the original article. In this way he re-asserts his superior expertise in the topic and re-affirms his status as the initiator and moderator of the debate, confirming with his behaviour that one of the aims of participation in discussion is display of competence. All discussants express their agreement in the first person singular ("I agree"), an element that marks a stark difference in terms of structure with the language used in the posts and in the articles/posts to which they are linked: in the comments there are contractions, a direct form of address (Julia), a rather loose syntax mimicking oral language, the insertion of a personal narrative sequence in Mayer's last turn, and even recourse to an emoticon. This shows very well that comments are perceived by participants as a different contribution to the genre, where interpersonal professional exchanges take an informal approach and are genuinely interactive and argumentative, as proved by recourse to various concessive and adversative devices (*however, but, surely*).

Unfortunately these complex and genuinely interactive conversation threads are very rare on LI Groups. The dearth of comments provides evidence that the desire to *debate* problems is certainly not the real motivation moving people to participate in a Group, in spite of the declarations set out in Groups' introductory texts. Sharing knowledge, pointing out problems to the attention of other professionals, giving and getting updates on the profession are much more plausible motives. Another important motive, possible overriding other reasons, is personal branding, i.e. the effort to establish an authoritative and competent image of oneself for professional and career purposes, often by means of a display of competence.

But for many users the main intent seems to be of a promotional kind and derives from their need or desire to advertise goods or services. The genre of Group conversations is thus bent (Bhatia 2004) to the personal agenda of its members and used as a promotional instrument.

## 5. FINAL REMARKS

The analysis of a corpus of 557 posts published on LI Groups of legal practitioners has made it possible to describe how LI Group users textually construct their online identity and negotiate (virtual) social relationships within the relevant virtual Communities of Practice.



The investigation provides evidence that of the three main aims identified through the analysis of headlines, sharing knowledge, finding and giving updates and information, and participating in discussions, only the first two are confirmed unconditionally, while only rarely do participants seem to have any real desire to debate professional issues with other Group members. Although members' activities within LI Groups are generally called "conversations" or "interactions", in light of the results of the analysis it must be kept in mind that these denominations are essentially conventional as in most cases they do not comply with the broad definition of online conversations given by Herring (2010) as "any exchange of messages between two or more participants, where the messages that follow bear at least minimal relevance to those that preceded or are otherwise intended as responses." Further research is needed to verify if the relative scarcity of comments is a peculiarity of legal practitioners' Groups or is a general characteristic of LI Groups.

But there are further aims pursued by active LI Group members, first and foremost personal branding. Publishing posts and participating in discussions where they can showcase their expertise can contribute to enhancing their professional reputation, positioning them within a CoP and emphasising the sense of affiliation to it. But even more frequently their main purpose is that of promoting goods (e.g. software solutions) or services, which is done more or less openly in spite of the fact that in the Rules of three out of four Groups examined there is an explicit provision stating that no promotion/marketing of commercial products and services is allowed. That is possibly why the advertising activities are concealed as tips for professional improvement or solutions for recurrent problems. This is an obvious case of genre bending (Bhatia 2004), typically turning a professional genre into a promotional one.

Another interesting aspect that has emerged from the analysis regards post organisation (in Hyland's 2010 sense), which in many cases are not self-standing, but rather symbiotic with other texts (e.g. articles, blog posts) or resources published on other websites. In this respect, the affordances of the medium are used to enact forms of meaning-making that cross genre boundaries. This can be effectively described by recourse to Lemke's notion of *traversals* (2005: 46) which refers to "temporal-experiential linkings, sequences, and catenations of meaningful elements that deliberately or accidentally, but radically, cross genre boundaries", in contrast with the well-defined and rigid boundaries of standardised "traditional" genres. The new media enable the use of "more resources for hybridization". Indeed, in the case at hand, this generates what could be defined a "symbiosis" of genres. In LI Group posts and comments, meaning is negotiated along traversals that cross genre boundaries.

These developments open up new perspectives, also in terms of linguistic and discursive analysis. They also bring up new problems for the analyst. For instance, when collecting corpora and having to decide what to include the question is: only the part of the post published on the Group site, or the whole post retrieved from a blog, a website, a TED talk? only posts or also comments? in two separate corpora or in one corpus, without distinction? All these issues which now seem problematic will likely be solved as web-mediated communication becomes the rule, rather than the exception, in professional interaction, and research develops adequate analytical tools.



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**Giuliana Elena Garzone** is Full Professor of English, Linguistics and Translation at Università IULM – International University of Languages and Media, Milan, where she directs the MA in Specialised Translation and Conference Interpreting. In her research she has focused mainly on the textual and pragmatic aspects of specialised discourse, and in particular legal, scientific and corporate discourse, and on translation and interpreting. She has co-ordinated several research projects and is editor-in-chief of the journal *Languages Cultures Mediation* and of the associated series. She sits on the Advisory Board of various international journals (*Text & Talk*, *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, *Lingue e Linguaggi* and *Euroamerican Journal of Applied Linguistics and Languages*).

[giuliana.garzone@iulm.it](mailto:giuliana.garzone@iulm.it)