CAN FAKE NEWS DESTROY BRAND REPUTATION? THE ‘ANTI-CULT CULT’ AND THE ‘GENIO NET / GENIUS IN 21 DAYS’ CASE



The original article in Italian is available [at this link]

Following the success of our recent nationwide investigation into BioOn, the green start-up for biodegradable plastic that once reached a market capitalization of over one billion euros on the Milan Stock Exchange, only to be destroyed by malicious financial speculation—including a fake news video designed to incite market panic and profit from the stock’s collapse—and our investigation into the clash between the Milan Prosecutor’s Office and the Milan City Council over urban regeneration projects, where hundreds of works were halted and billions in damages occurred due to the false and debunked news of unclear relationships between public administrators

and builders, we now turn our attention to this new analysis—broadening the focus on the topic of misinformation—**to the issue of corporate reputation being jeopardized by fake news and Black PR campaigns**. We will specifically examine—among other cases—the situation of the multinational learning company, Genio Net, the well-known training enterprise whose business continuity has been seriously compromised due to a campaign of defamation and online hate. However, as we will see, this matter is part of a broader and, in certain aspects, more disturbing phenomenon.

Are fake news related to functional illiteracy?

According to many studies, the answer to this question is YES, but let's break it down and first define the profile of a functional illiterate: while a completely illiterate person is unable to read or write, a person affected by functional illiteracy, on the other hand, has a basic level of literacy (they can read and write, express themselves with varying degrees of grammatical and stylistic correctness, and perform simple arithmetic calculations). In short, they can understand the meaning of individual words but struggle to achieve an adequate level of comprehension and analysis, and cannot connect or correctly interpret content within the context of a more complex discourse. What does this have to do with fake news?

According to the Ital Communications-Censis report "Misinformation and Fake News in Italy: The 2023 Information System Put to the Test by Artificial Intelligence," 20.2% of Italians believe they lack the skills to recognize fake news, while 61.1% think they only partially have these skills. Even more concerning is the fact that 29.7% deny the existence of fake news altogether and believe that we shouldn't even talk about it, instead—often with a barely concealed tone of conspiracy—suggesting that we should talk about "true news

that is deliberately censored by the media" (!). This means that nearly 1 in 3 Italians not only doesn't know how to protect themselves from the problem but isn't even aware that it exists.

In practice, what can happen is that an unverified piece of news is circulated by someone who hasn't been responsible enough to check their sources. This news is then not critically evaluated by the reader, who, in most cases with good intentions, further spreads the false information.

The proof? How many times have we heard the phrase, "I shared it just in case; you can decide if it's true"?

Moreover, the phenomenon of fake news has been causing significant turbulence in the business world for some time now. "Fake news besieges brands and puts their reputation at risk," headlined the renowned **Giampaolo Colletti** in *Il Sole 24 Ore* recently. Just a few months ago, shares of the pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly dropped a significant 4.37% after a fake Twitter account impersonating the company, which operates in the insulin business for diabetics, spread the news that the product would be distributed for free by the government. Starbucks, on the other hand, found itself in the middle of an online hate storm after some fake accounts circulated on social media the news that the company would distribute free frappuccinos to undocumented immigrants.

Sometimes, therefore, fake news "benefits" someone: they are deliberately constructed and can even take the form of well-organized defamation campaigns.

What is a "black propaganda" campaign?

The mechanism described above is often fueled unconsciously. However, there are rarer cases where someone might benefit from the spread of fake news.

Luca Poma, a respected author in our editorial team and

Professor of Reputation Management at LUMSA University in Rome and the University of the Republic of San Marino, who has recently been closely involved with the case study we are about to discuss, described a “black PR” campaign, or black propaganda, in one of his analyses as follows:

- a hidden source spreads defamatory news and lies about a certain organization among the public;
- this news may be entirely fabricated, but very often it will be exaggerations of true events or artificially distorted conclusions that, although based on a few true facts, are tendentiously exaggerated to paint an overall non-existent scenario;
- the campaign puts the organization under severe stress, as it not only fails to understand where/who the source of the attack is but also cannot comprehend the reasons behind it. Such a campaign ultimately undermines the business continuity and reduces the organization’s ability to generate revenue and create value;
- since the campaign is often based on a small portion of true facts, it causes the organization to “withdraw,” becoming a victim—acting in good faith—of its own feelings of guilt (“We know we’ve made some mistakes, but could they have been this serious?”). The organization then, incredibly, reduces its own license to operate, its scope of action, and its influence in the market (…)

In short, by decontextualizing reality or taking real events and exaggerating them, any person or company could become a victim of such attacks: normal errors in customer management can be turned into “fraud”; the dissatisfaction of a former employee, perhaps who has moved to a competitor, becomes “exploitation of people”; a former employee dismissed for valid reasons becomes a “victim of a toxic system,” and so on.

A typical case of a "black PR campaign," which has been written about and even discussed in a university thesis, is that of the company Genio Net, which markets the training course for students called Genius in 21 days. Let's briefly review what happened.

The "Genius in 21 days" Case

Genio Net is an Italian company operating in six countries (Italy, Spain, Switzerland, England, the USA, and Ghana) that offers training courses to accelerate learning for both students and professionals. The most well-known of these courses is called "Genius in 21 days," a name chosen for marketing reasons, as it is also the title of a best-seller written by two of the company's founders and published in 2012 by Sperling & Kupfer (Mondadori Group).

The company is a partner of TuttoScuola, the leading magazine in the sector in Italy, where it offers free training to teachers and school administrators to help them pass competitive exams. Additionally, it collaborates with the magazine on projects aimed at combating school dropout rates.

Genio Net has been collaborating for years with a team of researchers from the CNR – Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (National Research Council), who train the company's own instructors (here is a report from the RAI scientific news program "Leonardo" that explains the purpose of this collaboration). The company also offers courses to the State Police Union and the Italian Finance Police, with whom they have agreements.

The scientific coordinator of Genio Net is Emilia Costa, former head of the 1st Chair of Psychiatry at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" (here is her resume) and author of numerous scientific publications. The company itself has conducted various studies on the effectiveness of its "personalized study method," which have been presented at

several conferences of AIRIPA—the Italian Association for Research and Intervention in Learning Psychopathology.

In 2019, Genio Net also established an external and independent Ethics Committee, composed of experts and specialists and coordinated by a notary. This committee has the authority to inspect the company's customer service practices and ensures that any customer complaints regarding potential non-compliance are addressed and resolved by the company in a timely and appropriate manner. The Ethics Committee publishes its own report online every six months.

So, what could a company like this, which has also enjoyed favorable national press coverage, have to do with a "*dangerous psycho-cult*"?

In theory, nothing. However, this company has been the target of a rather curious attack: someone—whom we will identify during this investigation—has accused it of being nothing less than a cult: gurus, brainwashed followers, estrangement from families, and abusive cult practices. These are not only defamatory and offensive labels for anyone but are also capable of seriously undermining the business continuity of any economic organization.

But let's take it step by step and understand how such accusations—no matter how fanciful—can turn into a devastating prejudice for an entire business organization. We asked Germano Milite, the founder of Italy's most important and visible "anti-scam" community, for his insights.

The Perspective of the "Anti-Fake-Guru" Community and Digital Reputation Experts

Germano Milite is a journalist and one of Italy's most influential experts in the fight against scams and "fake gurus," a term popularized by the community he created, Fufflix. The ecosystem coordinated by Milite—carrying out a

vital social utility role—relies primarily on the participation of approximately 60,000 people in its digital community on YouTube, Twitch, and Facebook. These members, when necessary, report possible misleading advertisements, unfair commercial practices, Ponzi schemes, or outright scams, with a focus on protecting the interests of citizens. The reporting system is filtered by the editorial team, which decides which posts to approve, thereby facilitating debate and commentary on the various social pages. From these posts, editorials, investigations, interviews, and testimonials emerge, which also serve a deterrent function: being called out by Fufflix often means "not having acted correctly," according to the founder's words. Fufflix is also an active protection system: the platform has secured hundreds of thousands of euros in refunds from alleged "gurus," extrajudicially, thanks in part to collaboration with qualified lawyers.

Milite explains how these tools work:

"Fuffapedia.com and Fufflix have a search engine where you can enter the name of the trainer or service provider you want to check, and you'll receive results from verified sources, not from Google, where the presence of paid advertorials on the one hand, or unsupported accusations on the other, can unfortunately distort the perception of the scenario related to any interlocutor."

However, Fufflix is also a useful indicator for reflecting on the opposite scenario, that is, on those who impulsively label practically any training offer as a "scam."

"It is inherent in human nature," Milite stated, "to be impulsive in words and reactions. So, even out of ignorance, terms like 'scam' or 'scammer' or similar may be used inappropriately and lightly, without realizing that in theory, and also in practice, such terms should not be used unless a person has been convicted with a final sentence. You should be

precise and say, 'Germano was convicted of that crime ten years ago.' This logic, in my view, is absolutely correct, also because if Germano was convicted ten years ago, but has served his sentence, repented, and rehabilitated, and has not reoffended, it is not fair to label him negatively 'for life.' We are emotional beings, and we often speak from the gut, not from the head."

Milite also addresses the issue of social platforms that exacerbate this phenomenon of easy labeling, which can sometimes defame business operators for any reason that draws the attention of their community:

"If I have to accuse someone face to face, it's harder to do; saying certain things to someone's face carries weight, and maybe we think twice. Online, however, in thirty seconds I can write the worst things under any advertisement, underestimating the impact that comment—which could be read by thousands of people—might have. We feel the need to 'give our opinion,' sometimes overstepping the bounds of moderation. This is a typical mechanism of social networks: we don't realize the damage we can cause."

On the generalization and populism that often characterize certain online debates, Milite is clear:

"Maximalism never brings anything good because if we want to sensibly fight specific phenomena, we need to be precise and concrete. There's a lot of trash online, and the temptation to label everything as a scam is strong, I understand that, but we need to learn to distinguish between aggressive advertising for a service that has content and that which is truly deceptive or sells worthless products at high prices."

Matteo Flora, a well-known professional and influencer in the Italian digital world, recently interviewed by our outlet, responds to Milite:

"The problem is that the gatekeeper is dead," says Flora.

"Gatekeepers have traditionally been those entities responsible for standing between the user who consumes news and the news itself: generally, in the past, these were journalists. This role prevented just anything from reaching the newspapers and ensured that only selected content, also based on the quality of the news, was given space. With social media, this no longer happens. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but one negative consequence is defamatory attacks, black PR, and media lynching. In reality, today, anyone can, with very little effort, publish content or—anonymously or falsely—claim: 'I am the most famous psychotherapist in the world, and I tell you…', and it's also become easy to buy exposure on thousands of different blogs, whether it's 'CookingwithFriends.com' or 'FinanceandHorses,' and gain visibility. The problem is that as gatekeepers 'died' or lost importance, users have become unaccustomed to seeking quality sources. The result is that 'The Dashing Reporter,' or 'Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow with Rabbits,' and 'The Funny Gazette,' in people's minds, have the same validity, making it much easier to push the circulation of a news story. Perhaps a false one."

Can this affect a company's reputation, damaging it? Flora has no doubts:

"Yes, because reality is a 'socially negotiable' subject. There is no single concept of reality, but rather what a large number of people describe as 'reality.' And if you manage to convince a sufficiently large number of people within a specific group, within a certain interest group, that things are a certain way, you are effectively creating a parallel reality, which may become 'the reality' for many."

Kenan Malik shares this view, recently noting in the prestigious Guardian that *"in the past, only governments and the powerful could manipulate public opinion by presenting lies as truths. Today, anyone with access to the internet can do it, because the very notion of truth has fragmented."* Malik

also recalls the first known case of institutional intervention against fake news: in the 17th century, panic gripped the English royal household because coffee houses had become hotbeds of political dissent, fabricating, among other things, scandalous and false news about the Crown. Charles II then issued a decree to curb the spread of false news, marking the first recorded intervention against fake news.

Colletti in *Il Sole 24 Ore* also references the Financial Times, which recently launched the *Fake Hits* campaign, symbolized by the shattered logos of the most well-known social networks, under the headline *"Companies struggle to combat fake news."* Colletti also points out that the International Communication Consultancy Organisation (ICCO), a network that brings together 3,000 PR companies across 70 countries, has initiated incisive actions against fake news, even when it harms brands: *"In recent years, misinformation has become a threat not only to companies but also to individuals, because in America, 77% of users aged 18 to 25 get their news from social media,"* said Massimo Moriconi, President of ICCO Europe.

Up to this point, we have highlighted, through the voices of three key figures in the national and international debate on these issues, the risks of the "drift" from the legitimate debate against scams and frauds, and how reality can be exaggerated and manipulated to generate "hype" or even as a form of personal venting online.

But there is more because some defamation campaigns can—and this is disturbing—also be meticulously planned, as we will soon discover. But first, we need to clarify a key concept in this scenario: what is a "*cult*"?

What does the cult expert say?

The phenomenon of so-called "cults," or more generally manipulation for profit or the construction of absolute

leadership, is a very serious issue. Dr. **Raffaella Di Marzio**, president of the LIREC Study Center, is one of the most recognized experts in Italy in this field, both academically and beyond. We asked the doctor what dangers someone faces when they are recruited by a genuine cult group.

"Providing a precise definition of a 'cult group' is impossible because the types of groups, let's call them sectarian, in the sense that they have characteristics of isolation from the outside world and very authoritarian authority, vary greatly. These groups manage to manipulate the people who are part of them in various ways: some of these groups are inspired by some form of religion, while others are secular, where God has nothing to do with it. In these latter groups, the authority leading the group may not even believe in God. However, a common feature of all these groups is the conviction that those inside are right, in the perfection of truth, while those outside are in falsehood and evil. So, in these sectarian and closed groups, those inside are good, and those outside are evil. This creates a 'inside-outside' opposition that can be dangerous."

But the doctor also warns us about a very similar phenomenon but with an opposite sign: the maximalism of those—sometimes for personal interest, other times for a distorted view of reality—who claim to fight against cult movements, possibly without any specific academic expertise, and end up adopting the same manipulative languages and methods.

"I have been dealing with these issues for almost 30 years, and I confirm that, increasingly in recent years, so-called experts on cult phenomena have intensified their activities to denounce 'cults everywhere': it's a form of alarmism that creates a moral panic in society, meaning it generates fear of a very serious phenomenon that does not actually exist. Not because there are no problems related to cult groups, of course there are, but because it does not exist to the extent propagated by individuals truly possessed by the 'fever' of

denouncing the existence of manipulations, even where none exist. Often these people aim at the wrong target. In a fairly recent publication, a couple of journalists wrote that there are five million Italians 'in the cult network'. If we consider that, according to reliable data, there are approximately two and a half million people in Italy who are not Catholic but belong to the Muslim, Protestant, Buddhist world, and various new age groups, distributed across about 860 groups in total, saying that there are five million Italians in cults is an absolute statistical nonsense, without any sense. It's a total invention that, however, is continuously reported by the press."

Dr. Di Marzio continues:

"Unfortunately, this invention is also propagated within public institutions, where these so-called experts are credited, stimulating parliamentary inquiries and requests for investigations. Those among the parliamentarians, almost always in good faith, who take this data and request, for example, the creation of an inquiry commission on the phenomenon, often do not consider the problem of verifying 'the source' of this data. Thus, those who read online the request for an inquiry commission believe that the problem really exists. Serious and adequate verifications are not conducted because if the true source were sought, groups and individuals focused on the 'war against cults' at all costs would be found."

And if someone were to ask these subjects for confirmation of a source or academic certainty supporting their claims, what would happen?

"In these cases," continues Di Marzio, "systematic actions are taken to undermine the credibility of the person who has expressed a different opinion or raised doubts, which is contrary to pluralism and scientific spirit."

Could we define these characters as part of an “anti-cult cult”?

“Yes, because within them manifest the same psychological dynamics they attribute to cults: they manipulate information and people to try to prove the validity of their approach, they spread misinformation online, and they violently accuse anyone who thinks differently from them. Paradoxically, they use cult-like methods without realizing the damage they cause to people and sometimes to economic organizations.”

About a month and a half ago, Dr. Di Marzio continues, *“I received a call from someone who wanted to share their experience with me. This person had been part of a religious group that, according to them, had sectarian characteristics. At a certain point, disagreeing with certain doctrines, they left and found an anti-cult group where they sought support and help. After about six months within this anti-cult group, during which they gave several interviews sharing their previous negative experience, they received some criticism about the behavior of people in the group. At that moment, they experienced the same type of actions and pressures within the anti-cult group. They contacted me to say, ‘I found in the anti-cult group the same dynamics that I had in the cult I left, so I left there too.’”*

It should be noted, concludes the specialist, *“that the scientific preparation generally found in those who fight this singular and dangerous ‘anti-cult’ activity is rarely adequate. Some of these people have psychological training and are psychologists or psychotherapists; they deal—often for a fee—with treating people who leave these groups and may be experiencing psychological difficulties. However, at the level of scientific production, field studies, and academic debate, we are at ground zero. They base their theories solely on cases of people who have been ill or suffered abuses (real or alleged), and build their anti-cult theory only on these experiences, prisoners of an enormous self-confirmation bias.*

Thus, they are not doing science but propaganda. And these anti-scientific approaches can have serious consequences in a democratic country."

Finally, we asked the doctor what the consequences might be—if any—for those who are incorrectly labeled as "members of a cult group":

"Those accused of being part of such a group automatically lose the right to be considered credible people. It is assumed that they are brainwashed, and as a result, everything they say loses its value. Even their own experience, which may not be sectarian at all, cannot be referenced because 'they are manipulated anyway,' so the 'cult' thesis cannot be refuted because any differing element that disproves the accusation is never considered. These easy-accusing individuals feed on their own convictions and deductions, which they are never willing to question, and anyone who says something different from them is labeled as someone who 'sides with the cults': which is obviously the maximalist attitude that cults have towards the outside."

"Let alone the emotional damage suffered by individual people, or the financial and reputational damage when the unfounded accusation is directed at an economic organization like a company. When someone looks for information about a group and finds labels like 'cult' or other scientifically nonexistent terms like 'psycho-cults,' they are obviously frightened and distance themselves. Moreover, those who initially know little about the organization and see these labels might decide to distance themselves to avoid problems. Leaders who have perhaps worked in the sector for years and achieved positive results see their reputation and work destroyed, and even if they conduct self-analysis and improve their organization, they receive no responses from those who criticize them because the goal of these groups is not to help or improve the situation but, on the contrary, to amplify problems for media resonance."

If what the doctor says is true—and given her preparation and reputation in the scientific and academic field in this sector, we have no reason to doubt it—here you have, no less than the 'perfect reputational crime.'

Genio Net's "Counterintuitive" Reaction to the Attacks: Allowing Internal Scrutiny

The first reaction, well-known and described both in studies and in professional practice, by individuals and organizations targeted by black PR campaigns, is almost always to "retreat," adopting a defensive stance and often engaging in a somewhat unproductive "tit-for-tat" approach.

When Genio Net was bizarrely but destructively accused online of being a "manipulative group" and a "psychocult," it chose a different approach, perhaps influenced by a "culture of error" that we will discuss further in this investigation: in response to the accusations, the company contacted one of Europe's leading experts on sectarian movements and abusive groups (both religious and non-religious), **Dr. Pepe Rodríguez**, Scientific Director of the EMAAPS study center in Barcelona. **Genio Net** voluntarily underwent a rigorous examination, lasting several months, to objectively and independently assess the nature, goals, and operational modalities of the organization and its branches. The result of the audit, reported in a detailed written report available online for anyone to review, states that any association between **Genio Net's** activities and those of sectarian and manipulative movements "represents an accusation that is completely unfounded and entirely false." Rodríguez's position is summarized in a phrase he repeated several times in the extensive final audit report, a phrase that seems to leave no room for ambiguity:

> *"It can be categorically stated that the company behind*

> *Genius in 21 days (Genio Net, editor's note) does not fit at all, not even slightly, any of the criteria defining the parameters of a cult."*
>
> *Dr. Pepe Rodríguez*

Rodríguez also suggested that Genio Net take legal action against anyone who improperly uses that defamatory label to the detriment of the company.

And so Genio Net did—but with some surprises.

The "source" behind the accusations against Genius in 21 days

Who is the one who initially promoted the accusation against Genius in 21 days, which led to the rumor that humiliated and distressed the company's employees and their families, and put an entire business organization at risk of collapse and destruction?

The words of lawyer **Massimo Bajma Picit**, who has handled this case and sent our editorial office a written testimony, are enlightening in addressing this question:

"The company Genio Net and its representatives and collaborators have been subjected to attacks through multiple media channels, both traditional (press, television) and new media (internet, email, social networks), which, with their uncontrollable dissemination capacity in spreading defamatory messages, potentially capable of damaging the company's value, have made it absolutely necessary to undertake a vigorous response and prepare a plan to suppress, counter, and prevent these illegal attacks, comparable to a true 'mud machine'. It is interesting to note how investigations by the National Police have revealed that several aliases attacking and criticizing the company online, through social media posts, comments in various forums, email bombing, etc., were linked

to false identities provided by the same Swiss provider, which offers the possibility of creating fictitious identities while protecting the user's anonymity."

It is worth asking, why this persecution and what benefits do these individuals or groups gain by labeling many groups as "sectarian" when they are not? On this point, Dr. Di Marzio responds again:

"Often alarms are created when there are personal or group interests at stake: if someone has created an organization to combat cults, the cults must exist, because if they no longer exist, that organization has no reason to be, cannot continue to ask for funds, and cannot continue its activities. So, there are organizational and economic interests involved. This broad circle of experts and consultants thrives on the economic impact created over the years around their activity, and primarily gains personal image returns. These people are perceived by some as saints, as those who 'save people from cults', or as victims of cults, something for which there has never been any proof."

In fact, all these accusations – hostile online threads against Genio Net and its employees and collaborators, blog articles, etc. – seem to have taken the first steps, surprisingly, starting from the declarations – later artfully amplified – of a psychologist, self-styled "expert in sectarian movements": self-proclaimed as such, since – unlike the learning strategy trainers of Genio Net – she has never published a single scientific study on the subject on which she presents herself as an "expert" (impact index of her name on the main databases: simply zero). The inconsistency of the presumed expert's CV has already been written about online, in a hilarious piece of work that generated so much irritation in her that it pushed her to complain about it through the courts (but her complaints were archived, complete with a pronouncement by a Judge who did not consider there was anything defamatory in those pages). Net of her utterances on

her blog, the only popular work ever published by this alleged expert is a book entitled *"Sette e manipolazione mentale" (*Sects and mental manipulation"), harshly panned by Prof. Luigi Berzano, member of CESNUR, one of the most famous Italian study centers on the topic of new religious movements: *"the structure of the book is devoid of any logical foundation (…) and is vitiated by the total absence of adequate references to the sources (…) while the reconstructions* (reported in the book, ed.) *are peppered with numerous and serious inconsistencies, partial truths and omissions".*

For the purposes of our analysis, it is sufficient to highlight that there is no evidence that she is a member of the Italian Society of Psychology of Religions (SIPR), which is the national association of psychologists and specialists dealing with sectarian phenomena. She has neither presented any research at the numerous conferences organized by the association nor published any work in scientific journals, peer-reviewed magazines, etc. She claims to hold *"numerous non-compliance reports"* against the company from former clients of Genio Net (although she has never disclosed any…); on the contrary, she has been reported not only by the company to the Public Prosecutor's Office, as confirmed by this pro-veritate report, but also, following investigations by the magistrates, she has been prosecuted as a result of other complaints filed by other individuals related to her defamatory campaign (the criminal trial is ongoing as of the publication of this investigation).

Recently, the Italian Parliament has also addressed the issue of sectarianism: a parliamentary interpellation was presented in which a deputy asked the government if it should do more against this phenomenon, surprisingly including Genio Net among the potential "psychocults" (!). Incidentally, the deputy in question was found to be in direct, and perhaps not coincidental, contact with the supposed expert on sectarian movements mentioned earlier.

This individual has also been discussed—sometimes negatively—by the already cited Fufflix community, wich dedicated a specific "Live" session to it as well as a detailed investigation, commenting negatively on its maximalist approach to the theme of sects and its ability to accuse groups of manipulative behavior that do not meet those requirements in the slightest, Live and investigation which we recommend consulting to anyone who wishes to form their own opinion and "weigh" the profile of the public accusers of Genio Net

Furthermore, the President of the Italian Society of Psychology of Religion himself spoke out about this supposed movement of "anti-cult" experts, describing them as *"…groups that—proclaiming themselves as 'anti-cult"—present themselves as champions of institutional religion and defenders of individuals who have been manipulated and their families," but are in reality "…completely unknown in the international scientific debate, often revolving around the mania of self-promotion by supposed researchers, facilitators, and consultants."*

Thus, these inconsistent attacks, promoted by individuals without any demonstrable academic expertise in the specific field of protection against sectarian groups, have paradoxically also spurred some changes. Let's examine which ones.

The Crisis: From Danger to Opportunity — What Has Changed Within Genio Net?

As any good crisis management manual teaches, a crisis can also turn out to be an opportunity. This is confirmed by Mirko Romano, who, among his roles at the company, is responsible for customer service—the department that manages client relations and satisfaction levels.

"Since our company had never received any complaints or

reports of any kind, initially, when we read the defamatory statements and online accusations, we wondered: 'Are we really making so many mistakes?' Of course, every company has a percentage of former clients or employees who are dissatisfied for various reasons, but painting us as a 'dangerous psycho-cult' seemed absurd. The truth is that these fierce criticisms and attacks have greatly motivated us; they almost forced us to 'look inward,' and this process of self-analysis has been very fruitful. For example, it led us to extensively review and enrich the educational content of our courses, grounding it even more in scientific evidence. But that's not all. We started a project called 'Genius at Work,' meaning that instead of creating an ethical code imposed from above, we conducted extensive group work, asking everyone—regardless of their position in the hierarchy—to contribute to drafting a truly shared values statement, which was ideally applied more effectively because it wasn't 'imposed from above.' Additionally, we established a customer service office to handle any complaints of non-compliance from the outside, and an HR team to analyze those that might come from within the company's employees. We created an independent Ethical Committee that monitors how the company responds to each complaint and produces a report every six months, which we publish on our website with complete transparency. In summary, the negative external pressure has actually stimulated a significant improvement in how we interact with all our stakeholders," says Romano.

In seeking confirmation on the issues discussed in our investigation, we contacted the Chair of Genio Net's Ethical Committee, Notary **Alessandra Coscia**, for an interview.

Doctor, you have been collaborating on the Genio Net Ethical Committee as an independent professional for several years, along with other qualified colleagues who have alternated in this crucial role for the company. You are responsible, in summary, for monitoring the standard of the customer service,

that is, how the company responds to possible complaints or non-compliance reports from clients and former clients, including the timing and satisfaction levels for those who submit the complaints. My first question is: I assume that to avoid conflicts of interest, your work is pro bono; so what motivates you to do it, given that it's not money?

"I confirm the absolute independence and gratuitousness of my service; I consider it part of those pro bono activities where, as a professional, I can gladly contribute my expertise and the balance and neutrality typical of my notarial profession to serve the students of a company (who are also contractually considered 'weaker' by normative definition)."

Each semester, you prepare a report which the company must then publish transparently and accessibly on its website. Approximately, how many registered complaints are sent to your attention every six months, compared to the roughly 2,800 students that Genius in 21 days trains each semester?

"Complaints are generally between 10 and 15 per semester. Of these, around 60% are requests to terminate the contract from people who change their minds and no longer want to complete the training course, for various reasons. The rest are for minor issues."

Companies are not perfect, but they can improve. Over the years, what is your impression of this company's willingness to handle complaints of non-compliance and strive to resolve them?

"The company's willingness to resolve both initial and existing conflicts is usually very high. And—considering the business attention— as an Ethical Committee, we encourage clients and/or potential clients and/or former clients to promptly raise any perceived non-compliance complaints, recommending that they clearly and directly detail what happened, as the Ethical Committee cannot handle anonymous

complaints or those made on behalf of others. In any case, our experience confirms that every time there is a complaint, there is also a concrete response from the company to resolve it."

One last question: not many SMEs have tools like this, an independent Ethical Committee with oversight functions. Do you think the reason might be a reluctance to 'look inside' and expose themselves to potential public criticism (or other reasons you consider relevant)? Conversely, could we consider this practice of transparency a 'best practice' to be more widely adopted to increase the competitiveness of Italian companies, thanks to strengthening the trust relationship between companies and their stakeholders?

"Any tool aimed at ensuring transparency in the relationship between a company and its clients, which demonstrates attention and willingness to constructively address criticisms or complaints from its users, is worth encouraging. The establishment of an Ethical Committee is undeniably important for an SME, especially when the product offered by the company is not 'measurable' in strictly 'quantitative' terms and refers to areas such as, in this case, study methods, memorization techniques, or the development of transversal skills and soft skills. Proposals that are aimed at a young audience, precisely because they target teenagers and young adults, require constant attention to ensure that any divergence from corporate Codes of Ethics and practices is quickly addressed, even at the expense of purely economic interests, considering that a good reputation is an irreplaceable business asset."

Mirko Romano from customer service wants to clarify: "*Like any company, we don't claim to be perfect; we are a group of human beings and we also make mistakes.*"

Have you faced criticism in the past?

“Yes,” Romano says, *“and the reason is quite simple—and evident to anyone acting in good faith: the people who got passionate about the Genius in 21 days project and the topic of learning, about rekindling people’s love for studying, and who formed the initial core of the company, were talented but very young. The most ‘mature’ among them weren’t even 30 years old, and none of them had experience in a large, structured company at that time. Additionally, the project took off rapidly, in several countries, starting in Italy and then expanding to Spain, Switzerland, the U.S., Great Britain, and now also in Africa, in Ghana to be precise. At that time, these individuals compensated for obvious structural and management shortcomings—many of which they had inherited from those who taught them the trade in previous companies, shortly after completing their training—with enthusiasm. And it’s clear that enthusiasm alone is sometimes not enough.*

Over time, we reached a real professional maturity, initiated intensive and challenging training programs, established agreements with top scientific institutions, and in summary, filled various gaps, focusing on many areas that now make the company, in my opinion, excellent in many aspects. I should also mention that the choice to involve renowned professionals with national and international-level resumes to guide the company through this long and challenging process of change management had a great impact. This included asking ourselves: ‘How can we improve? And who could help us improve in this specific area?’

Can you provide some practical examples?

“At first, the company had an unbalanced and wobbly organizational structure, with the best workers mainly taking on two roles: the instructor, who was responsible for the teaching at the site, or the customer service manager. Additionally, the instructor, being responsible for all the teaching, was clearly the most visible figure, the one ‘on stage’. It’s not surprising that a twenty-year-old enthusiast

would wonder how to do that job exactly, ask for training to do that and nothing else. This obviously created a strong organizational imbalance, which took years to correct. Moreover, some bad-mouthed critics claimed that the company somehow promoted a sort of 'idolization of the instructor'. In reality, even though thousands of young people passed through the offices, an instructor was appointed every 2 years, and each year there were about ten people in training to become one. Therefore, the malicious narrative of the instructor on a pedestal as a semi-god is refuted by the facts and numbers. But, as we know, those who want to think and speak badly rarely look at the numbers.

A colossal mistake—fortunately later resolved—was also not measuring the results of students one or two years after completing the course. For structured companies, this is routine, but initially, it wasn't for us. Today, we measure the persistence of results and whether students continue—if they wish—to apply the study method in their work and life after 3 months, 6 months, 1 year, etc. And it was good that we started this project because in the first round of measurement, we realized there was high satisfaction in the months following the course but decreasing satisfaction in the subsequent two years. This criticism led us to better structure the tutoring service and the training of tutors, which is now handled by internal teachers and external professionals, and goes through our 'Tutors' School,' a training program to become a tutor—and continue being one—with classes, teaching materials, and a final exam. This choice has led to a notable improvement in this statistic, as documented in a study we have published.

Another notable mistake—Romano continues—*was undoubtedly poor online communication: we started with the assumption that, since in the vast majority of cases the course had remarkable results, that should be enough. A big mistake, because we know how much 'perception' matters. For too long, online spaces*

were not managed by the company: this created a 'communication void,' which anyone filled as they saw fit, not always in a positive manner, even leaving space for quite 'creative' fantasies about the company's actual activities. It is known: what is not well explained can seem 'mysterious,' and 'mysterious' things potentially inspire distrust. An enormous unintentional misunderstanding that we have, I believe, well corrected in recent years, with testimonials from our students and their parents, interviews with our team of instructors, external collaborators, and also with the production of some documentaries that explain what happens in our courses, both those strictly related to learning and the more motivational ones, like the Eagle."

"Another aspect that has generated many misunderstandings—and initially wasn't on our radar—relates to a seemingly amusing issue due to how it was misinterpreted: the language. In our locations, terms like 'PAV', 'loci', 'maps', 'potentials', and 'cartelinos' were used. Semiotics is a huge topic, and it also touches on everyday communication: the terms I mentioned are absolutely routine for anyone who has attended a course of this type or who has a basic understanding of strategic learning, but they are difficult for many others to understand. Every group that frequents regularly adopts its own language or jargon—whether it's a group of friends, CrossFit enthusiasts, scouts, or any company in the world. Just think of a conversation between IT experts and nerds, and you'll get a headache; it's a completely incomprehensible language. However, some ill-intentioned observers immediately labeled our 'language for insiders' in their fanciful online accusations: being a dangerous cult dedicated to animal sacrifices in front of our offices, we obviously had to have a cryptic language… Joking aside, it's funny when said like this, but each of these ingenuities has fueled a toxic narrative that we honestly didn't deserve at all."

Is there anything else you regret?

“Yes, there is something that particularly matters to me, and I want to say it if you allow me. Imagine a young teacher of twenty-five or a bit older, freshly graduated, joking at the end of a course with students who are nineteen or twenty years old. It’s easy to imagine how many ‘misinterpreted phrases’ might have been uttered in the early years of the company, phrases that surely could have hurt—understandably—the sensitivity of some individuals, and I think the company must unconditionally apologize to those people, and indeed has done so sincerely to anyone who had the strength and frankness to point out this possible non-compliance. What I want to say is that what for some of our very young employees was an innocent joke, might have offended a client in the past, and members of our staff, who were willing to help other young people struggling with their studies, just a little younger than themselves, have also had conversations that bordered on the private or excessively informal, risking turning a professional relationship into a ‘friendship,’ something that can lead to misunderstandings and is neither correct nor functional for effectively providing training where the teacher-student relationship should be free of any suspicion of excessive ‘familiarity’. Over time, this aspect has been corrected with proper training: I’m not saying that a teacher can’t go out for a beer with students after the course, but the boundaries of these professional relationships need to be clear and well-defined, precisely to avoid misunderstandings. In any case, the company’s management and the entire team have grown, matured, and become aware of these issues, but not only that: criticism has also been a starting point for improvement.

For example, I remember well when one of our students reported hearing from another staff member sometimes vulgar phrases, accompanied by attitudes that could denote prejudice—this was our colleague’s perception—toward the LGBTQ+ community. We became aware of this and asked the team to reflect on it, and our company Code of Ethics now includes—something obvious, but

not ‘codified’ before those events—the need to firmly respect those identities and sensitivities. Subsequently, the company organized and funded a DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) course for all employees to deepen the team’s awareness of this issue. I liked this a lot: it confirms that we are not perfect, but we are improvable, and that the company is an entity in continuous—and I hope positive—change.”

Do you think there is still room for improvement?

“I believe that when there is no longer room for improvement, the company will be dead. It will always exist, very simply. Once the guidelines are established, it is necessary to ensure that everyone knows them, respects them, and that when this doesn’t happen for any reason, action is taken promptly and everything possible is done to train and educate people and optimize systems and procedures. But I think these processes affect any human group, and I remain convinced that this willingness to look inward, to let others look inside, to admit our shortcomings, and to act concretely to resolve them, is a demonstration, if I may say so, of good faith: for this reason, I have found some of the accusations we’ve received online humiliating, disingenuous, and frankly unjust. But we look forward with optimism: we have over 50 active locations in 6 countries, and I believe this project is just beginning.”

The “Head” of Genio Net: The Executive Perspective and the Culture of Error

Massimo De Donno, President of Genio Net, is also one of Europe’s most renowned experts in learning strategies and a bestselling author with Mondadori. He does not mince words when describing what has happened: *“Anti-cult groups and individuals seem to want to ‘save the world’ with their crusade against sectarian movements, but in reality, they have a merely destructive attitude, and their propaganda, especially online, blends with the desire for gossip and*

unfounded accusations, without any verification, typical of social networks, which are digital ecosystems of 'easy lynching'."

However, De Donno adopts a positive attitude, emphasizing how the events have been useful in consolidating what he defines as the "culture of error" within the company:

"Every entrepreneur knows that the most important aspect of their company is human capital: companies can truly become productive when the people working in them are enthusiastic and convinced about spending part of their time exchanging value with clients. Creating an environment where people feel they can fully develop their talent and creativity, where they are eager to achieve something worth striving for, is not easy, but it is very important. And it is something that other entrepreneurs often recognize when they meet a Genius in 21 days employee, an instructor, a personal coach—they find exceptional human beings who have a clear understanding of our business mission, which is, as we write and say everywhere, to rekindle people's love for studying. It is said that 'one learns from mistakes,' and error is part of the natural learning process, in any field. So, error itself is not a problem: making mistakes is absolutely normal; those who never make mistakes are simply not doing anything.

For us—continues De Donno—it has been crucial to convey this 'culture of error' to the entire team, showing those who make mistakes that there is never a judgment or criticism of the error itself. Judgment or criticism are directed at how one reacts to that error, at worst by hiding it, not taking responsibility, or acting as if nothing happened. If, on the other hand, the person facing the error understands and accepts that they made it, becomes aware, takes responsibility, and begins to ask how and what they can learn from that mistake to prevent it from happening again, this is fantastic: that's a person who has moved beyond the need to prove they are perfect."

For this reason, in recent years—2022, 2023, and 2024—we have initiated and conducted several surveys, some with the support of external verification entities, to monitor the quality of the internal climate among our employees, the level of customer satisfaction with Genio Net's activities in general, and also more specifically the opinions of students who have participated in our demanding and challenging motivational course 'Eagle'. The results have been published online, accessible to everyone, and the feedback has been very useful in further improving our training offerings.

In my opinion, the success of Genio Net's proposals is also rooted in this open attitude towards criticism, which serves as a powerful engine for change. This is reflected in the atmosphere you feel when entering any of our locations: people are happy to be there, are not afraid to face new challenges, are enthusiastic about what they do, and are members of a team that, although they teach, also loves to learn. They have come to terms with the fact that they are not perfect and do not need to prove anything in that regard. When we make mistakes, we have the ability to apologize because we genuinely regret not meeting someone's expectations, but this always drives us to ask how we can do better, to improve further. This is what has happened to the entire business organization: the Genio Net of today bears no resemblance to the company from 10 years ago, or even just 5 years ago. The process of change has been continuous and is still ongoing, because a company, like a person, is a living organism in constant change.

"One last thing," De Donno concludes, *"I would like to add: precisely because we have been victims of misinformation campaigns that have exploited the superficial and suspicious attitudes and the inability to 'distinguish' of some segments of the population, all typical indicators of functional illiteracy, after these events, I feel that our business mission has, paradoxically, been strengthened. Our goal is to 'rekindle people's intelligence' through projects that*

rediscover the extraordinary pleasure of learning. We have been committed for years to making students more capable, productive, and equipped with a personalized study method, but today we are even more motivated to counter the devastating effects of fake news campaigns that rely on mechanisms designed to make readers ignorant, fearful, and lacking genuine critical judgment."

In conclusion: What does science say about Genio Net?

No research of merit would be complete without turning to science, as this is precisely what we are discussing when we enter the fascinating world of learning, cognitive styles, and brain performance.

The scientific bibliography used by Genio Net's trainers is impressive, and the research published and presented with AIRIPA, the Italian Association for Research and Intervention in Learning Psychopathology, is also notable. However, perhaps the most interesting aspect to highlight is that for years Genio Net has been collaborating with a research team coordinated by Dr. **Massimo Arattano**, the leading researcher at the CNR in Turin. The CNR is Italy's most prestigious scientific institution and, according to the scientific journal Nature, ranked 10th in 2018 among the most innovative public research entities worldwide based on the number of scientific articles published.

Genio Net's instructors delve deeply into research and follow courses from CNR researchers to learn firsthand and adopt the "fundamentals of learning," as defined by Arattano. These are cognitive gestures that, when repeated by each of us, can determine success in studying. This allows them to offer participants in their courses the utmost support in this regard.

"The results obtained are extraordinary," Arattano said in a

recent interview. "In a video interview conducted with Vittorio Bartolini, the instructor responsible for the Genio Net office in Brescia, we documented an example of the profound change that the Fundamentals of Learning can bring to an individual. This change can completely transform one's attitude toward studying and enable the acquisition of extraordinary comprehension and learning abilities. If a girl with severe initial difficulties, as described in the interview, has managed to overcome them completely in a few months of study thanks to the use of these fundamentals, truly everyone can achieve this. She used this approach to pass the entrance exam for nursing degree programs, ranking among the top 200 candidates out of 3000 participants, and then achieved an average of 28 out of 30 in her first year of studies."

It is impossible to conclude the analysis of a case study as intriguing as that of Genio Net and the black PR campaign it has had to manage without reading some of the many online testimonials from students, certified by a consumer association, verifying the identity documents and university records of those who provided them, as well as from teachers or members of institutions. However, our focus has particularly been on the perspective of the parents who have chosen to speak out, with a mature approach typical of their age and experience, regarding the company itself and the contents of the courses their children have participated in, confirming that the organization is far from being a *"money-making machine manipulating naive young people."*

Roberta Balduzzi: *"Having learned this approach to studying, [my daughter] has certainly gained time for her relationships and activities. Consequently, she has also improved in other areas beyond academics. I've seen her with more time for herself and for the family, so when there's something to be done, she's present, less stressed, and less tense."*

Lilly Giglia: *"The results that my husband and I saw just from observing the study sessions and webinars were incredible. We were very, very impressed, especially by a change in the approach to studying, particularly for one of our two [daughters] who had a somewhat negative attitude toward the amount and difficulty of homework. This also led to family stress, obviously, because it's known that parents who worry about their children's academic performance are affected by their children's attitude toward studying. There were moments of tension […]. To our great surprise, through these study sessions and webinars, we saw truly excellent results, which led us to decide to invest the money for her to attend the course […]. As far as I'm concerned, I think the best thing we can do as parents is to invest in her future."*

Patrizia, mother of two daughters who participated in Genius in 21 days: *"[My daughters] have had many fewer problems not only in their studies but also in their exams, including their interactions with the teachers. One of the two girls became interested in the environment and wanted to continue with the Soft Skills Academy as well, and I've noticed very positive personal changes in her. Very important ones too! It's definitely been much easier for her to go to exams, and at the family level, she is much more open."*

Massimiliana, mother of a student who participated in Genius in 21 days: *"My daughter was a very reserved and introverted young girl. She never spoke to anyone and had a very closed attitude. Since she started attending Genio and the SSA, she has blossomed. In her relationships, she has become wonderful. This has brought great satisfaction to her and to us, her family. Obviously, now we are very calm because we see her like this, and above all, we are reassured by the environment in which she is growing."*

Ultimately—aside from the glaring and bewildering manipulations of reality documented in this investigation—this is the voice that matters most, the opinion of the Genius in

21 days students who have been in those classrooms, and especially that of their parents: little could weigh more than this when determining with intellectual honesty the ethical profile of an organization.