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## How it's Done: the Internet as a Mechanism for a Changed Relationship between PR and Journalism

### Pressure, power, and the new PR

Both PR and journalism are currently in a transition phase. Most key decision-makers at large media and PR firms are still pre-digital: they began their careers in an age of fax machines and first-generation PCs, and many find it hard to update. For them, the internet is still territory to explore, rather than to live in.

They are probing the medium from widely different perspectives. The media have approached digital distribution from a largely defensive stance, seeking to protect an economic model and experimenting with a variety of subscription or ad-funded revenue streams. For the media, especially print media, digital is hugely disruptive, forcing them to shift from paper-based or analogue-carried output into digital channels while continuing to safeguard what they can of the previous system which still enjoys demand, and meeting much greater competition while doing so.

For PR agents, digital is an exploratory opportunity: about new routes to market, new ways to manage and place content. It creates multiple platforms on which to push a message, often without the editorial checks and balances typical of the analogue-media age. Journalism, because of the much greater fixed costs in printing and broadcasting equipment and the power of the traditional media, has been slower to adapt to the digital revolution and it has also taken considerable time to adopt new methods of communication.

PR has taken a more savvy approach: an agile discipline, it has been quicker to recognise the value and challenges presented by the internet and the advent of social media. The new media world also presents opportunities for digital innovators and the market has become more competitive, with

online marketing and media agencies offering new services that impact the remit of PR: these include online reputation management, search engine optimisation and content creation (including web design). New roles have also been created – such as head of digital, social media manager, and others – working alongside traditional PR personnel.

Journalism is now competing in a much broader market than before, where new publications such as the Huffington Post, and the many new specialist news and comment sites, can gain momentum and achieve influence that can rival the traditional and more established outlets. Social media are largely responsible for enabling greater access to readers, increased engagement levels, and wider reach. Perhaps most significantly, they also facilitate a two-way conversation between media and readers or brands and consumers.

There is an explosion of content. Newspapers, especially national papers, are under growing pressure to present information on multimedia platforms: in doing so, they increasingly provide video coverage, merging print and broadcast journalism. As they are presented with a greater number of options in output, consumers are becoming more demanding about the formats they require, which means multimedia journalism is growing in popularity. A combination of fast-moving lifestyles and developments in technology, such as the smartphone and its rapidly evolving apps, enables users to consume up-to-date information at the click of a finger: the market pressure privileges content which is concise and quick to digest.

With so much choice in the type of news and information provided, the reader has more power, while publishers are increasingly able to adapt content to suit user requirements through the use of analytical programmes available to digital media platforms producing detailed analyses of consumption habits (see below). This feeds through into content production, and gives much more accurate information to advertisers and public relations teams, providing technological insight into the influential publications. This assists with supporting the focus of the output by understanding the reach and value of content, maximising its commercial value.

Data brings journalists much closer to the market – a relationship which, in the past, they had been able to avoid, even to scorn. No longer. To enter the Telegraph Group newsroom is to be confronted with a large interactive board which relays instant web analytics to journalists, including the most popular story of the moment. This drives competition among staff journalists – and provides readership insight and highlights commercial opportunities.

There is pressure for the traditional mainstream titles to maintain leadership in the market, uphold influence, and stand out in a space that has become crowded and overloaded with information. However, rather than digital opposing traditional, the two are intrinsically dependent upon each other. The traditional press relies on the resources of digital to extend its reach and to make the transition, which all now believe inevitable, from print to the internet; while the success of digital remains reliant upon the influence and long-standing reputation of traditional media.

Paul Blanchard, Managing Director of Right Angles PR and Vice President of the Media Society, says:

*We are seeing situations where the traditional press includes comments from Twitter in news articles as first-hand sources. This gives credit to the Twitter user, or in some cases the blogger, and helps them to become an authoritative source. There is a reciprocal relationship between the social commentator and the national newspapers. The former welcomes the credibility to help them stand out in a crowded space and the latter is dependent on this type of news media or commentary to give additional and instant insight into certain news stories or events.*

Social media have empowered journalism and reporting. Twitter lends itself well to news reporting by functioning as an early warning system – usually earlier than the news wires – and also by providing quotes. The character limit for tweets of 140 is further reduced with the addition of an image or link, which means that concise updates are required: the brevity of the messages means they can be retweeted and spread around the world within moments.

Twitter gives journalists, brands, and the public a voice, even if a brief one. Meanwhile, filtering messages through sorting mechanisms such as hashtags allows trending topics to be identified. For example, conversation about live football matches, a sudden natural disaster, or an election campaign can be grouped according to subject. Conversation can be streamed and influential figures are easily followed, providing the reader with direct access to a greater range of sources. Technology makes it easier to organise information, though this prompts the charge that it is, at the same time, dumbing it down.

Digital media have played an increasingly prominent role in breaking major news stories, while social media empower witnesses to key events to be reactive with comments that are published in the public domain.

Research by Osborne and Dredze concurs, ‘Twitter has a reputation for being the first place to report on certain kinds of events, such as earthquakes or sports events. Out of the three main social media, it consistently carries news before either Facebook or Google Plus.’<sup>1</sup>

Twitter provides second-by-second accounts of news stories with real-time quotes, adding further verification to stories. Eyewitnesses to a large chalet fire in Val d’Isère in February 2014 recorded the incident on their iPhone and submitted the coverage to the BBC, which used it as their source whilst reporting the event in the main news bulletin. Thus the media have access to many more ‘journalists’, or at least contributors, in the form of a news-reporting public – the citizen journalists.

Publications that have traditionally led the way on breaking news are forced to adapt to suit the digital landscape; however, they are still maintaining a lead. According to the results of the Osborne and Dredze research, ‘all public posts in social media streams carry similar events to each other. Yet Twitter dominates other social media in providing timely news. Still, Twitter lags newswire, which remains the best source for breaking news.’

Twitter is more reactive than some press agencies, but it does not have equal credibility: errors spread as speedily as fact. Errors can, of course, appear in press agencies’ copy and in other legacy media, and the social media give these errors worldwide wings. In 2012, the wrong brother (Ryan Lanza) was named by press agencies and American media as the gunman responsible for the Sandy Hook massacre, in which a gunman opened fire in a school in Newtown, Connecticut killing six staff and 20 children. The misinformation spread rapidly via online media and through social media and became difficult to correct. The difference is that the legacy media have, or should have, a culture of checking and correction: none exists for Twitter.

The fact that paper-based media are out of date as soon as they are published in the traditional format means that they increasingly concentrate on setting the agenda and providing complex analysis and comment. Although the number of people who can publish stories through blogs and other online platforms has dramatically increased, the quality of journalists and commentary remains an important focus for the traditional newspapers and it remains, still, a unique selling point.

The first newspaper websites began as streamlined versions of the newspaper, a mere reflection of the print output. However, as the digital era progressed, online content took on a life of its own, which more closely resembled a 24-hour wire service than a traditional newspaper, in updating

news and breaking stories. It also quickly realised it had to be different to its print equivalent. In an increasingly aggressive battle to win readership in a competitive market, traditional publications are pressured into producing a high volume of articles that are optimised for search engine results pages and appear highly in the rankings of certain search engines, chiefly Google (see below). This has caused them to leverage PR-generated content in some cases.

Technical strategies and information science aspects have become more important. Search engine optimisation and reputation management have been pushed to the fore. The 2014 Edelman Trust Barometer highlighted:

*When it comes to first sources of information, respondents rated online, newspapers and television relatively evenly for both general business information and breaking news about business. The tables turn for breaking news, where television leads newspapers by five points, while newspapers lead television slightly for general information. Online is most trusted for both types of information.*

Furthermore, the Barometer revealed that online is now surpassing other media for trust in several aspects: 'Perhaps more revealing than level of trust in sources for first finding information is level of trust in sources for confirming or validating information about business. On this question, respondents rated online search significantly higher than television and newspapers.'

As online information becomes more powerful, it is important to acknowledge the new gatekeepers when seeking news content. One new gatekeeper is the search engine and the fight to own the top positions of the search engine results pages has become more important and relevant to both media and PR strategies.

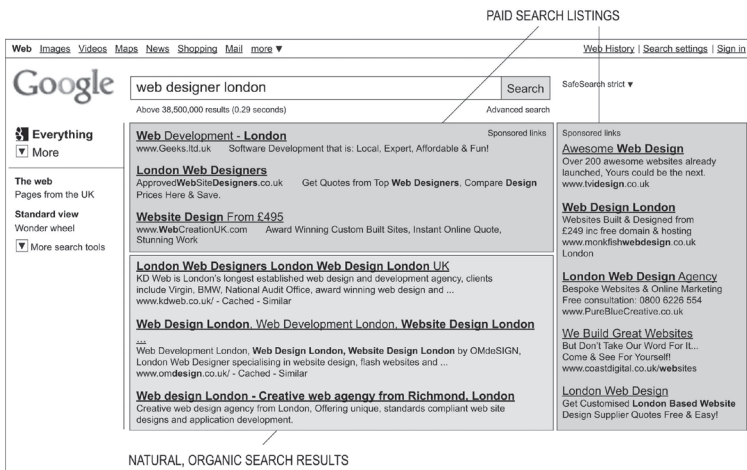
## **Making a success of online journalism**

Newspaper strategies at present split between offering all or most of their content free, and protecting it with a pay wall, allowing only subscribers to access the material. Of the very few which have no pay wall, and make a profit, the Mail Online stands out as the most popular English-language website in the world. It turned a profit for the first time in 2012:<sup>2</sup> but even

huge audiences do not guarantee commercial revenues. In spite of its reach, the newspaper’s web-based platform generates only a fraction of the advertising income that is delivered by the newspaper.

Rather than simply producing high-value content for readers in the new media world, newspapers need to consider the search engine algorithms. Search engine algorithms reward technical aspects, such as the optimisation of a website; they also reward websites that produce significant amount of fresh news or articles, in a format of over 300 words, with varied keywords that are not hidden behind a pay wall. A brief technical analysis of the Mail Online website indicates that search engine optimisation (SEO) is clearly an important element of their strategy.

### Technical dynamics of the new media world



**Diagram 4.1.** An example of a Google search page (<http://www.searchcatalyst.co.uk>).

**NATURAL, ORGANIC RESULTS:** Organic search results are listings on search engine results pages that appear because of their relevance to the search terms, as opposed to their being advertisements. In contrast, non-organic search results may include pay per click advertising.

**PAID SEARCH LISTINGS:** The Pay Per Click (PPC) advertising model is used for the top section of the search engine results pages. This features above the organic search results. The PPC model is a

method of directing internet browsers to certain websites and is a way for advertisers to pay a publisher when the ad is clicked. Many brands will bid on certain keywords and phrases that are commonly entered into the query box, in an attempt to feature at the top of the listing for their target market and attract a potential customer to click through to their website.

The science of search engine optimisation has existed for many years. Although it has evolved to incorporate a number of factors, the chief focus concerns the process of manipulating the visibility of a website or a web page in the organic search results that appear in a search engine. The organic results are those achieved without commissioning a specific listing. An SEO company will be paid to implement the manipulation and this involves taking advantage of Google's algorithm to improve the authority of a company's web pages.

Although SEO practitioners influence the results of search engines like Google and Bing, the activity is acknowledged as an important element of any digital strategy. It is a practice that is accepted by search engines; however, there are certain guidelines in place to encourage, though not always achieve, an ethical approach.

The amount of traffic a news or consumer website receives is a crucial factor for e-commerce as each hit has the potential to convert to a purchase. Traffic is also important for determining the advertising reach of publications. A simple example of the deployment of SEO: during a heat wave, there is likely to be an increase in the amount of people looking to buy a cool box. Major supermarkets may begin to bid on the search term 'where to buy a cool box' using pay per click (PPC) to secure the top space of Google's paid-for listings. This will encourage users to click on to the supermarket to buy their item.

The supermarket may also begin a wider marketing campaign that will help their website to rank more highly in the organic search results. Activity that suits the search engine guidelines includes the generation of high-quality content and also engaging social media activity. Therefore, the supermarket will aim to be part of the conversation and a strong provider of editorial content. While coverage in media outlets is helpful, the chief focus is a much broader proliferation of the brand message that reaches beyond traditional media. This involves creating effective social media campaigns by leveraging Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, in order to extend the reach of the product message. It also includes encouraging relevant bloggers to write high-quality content. Google's guidelines are intended to assist with the

ethical generation of information and to deter spam. With this in mind, companies creating spam content may be penalised by losing their high-ranking positions. An intelligent content outreach strategy is required, focusing on quality content.

Google is presently the unchallenged king of search engines, though it has a propensity to change its policies and algorithms regularly to capitalise on commercial opportunities. One SEO expert, who preferred not to be named, explained the history of changes that specifically relate to SEO and PPC:

*About a decade ago it was possible for brands to bid on competitive terms. For example, major supermarkets would be able to outbid each other in regard to their own names. Google was writing its own cheques, with huge corporates stuck in fierce bidding wars. Hypothetically, you could have a situation whereby Tesco pays to rank for the search term Morrisons and vice versa. However, Google decided to ban this from happening – but not for long! Although there was a period of time whereby you could not bid on competitive terms, this is now possible again to some degree, netting Google a large sum of money, again.*

Bidding wars meant that major businesses were bidding against each other for their own brand to seize the first spot of the PPC rankings in Google, with brands needing to spend money on certain search terms, including their own name. One marketing manager at a global fashion brand explains:

*If we want to ensure our brand features at the top of the page on Google, we have to bid on our own brand name as a search term. Whoever is willing to pay the most money per potential click [this fluctuates greatly for many different reasons but can be anything from 10p to 70p for 'brand'] will come out on top. There are now some factors such as the relevance of the site that help to prevent bidding wars with rival brands from escalating as the content of the site also helps you reach top spot. However, this is not always effective at preventing competitors from outranking you.*

While tweaks to the algorithm provide some respite for brands, Google is still cashing in on the competitive retail market. Some companies feel



forced into a situation whereby they have to pay money for their own name to appear at the top of the paid search. The source continues:

*If we do not bid on our own brand name, we leave ourselves exposed to a rival brand ranking ahead of ours when users are searching for us. We become very vulnerable. Google is laughing; although we see return on owning the first position, our outgoing spend can be as much as £4,000 per week to occupy this space.*

Other brands will be paying similar fees, if not substantially more, and Google has control over the marketplace, with no other search engine currently rivalling its monopoly.

While there is a high spend allocated by many brands to online marketing and PR, there is no doubt that it brings a strong return. The intricate level of analytical data is responsible for positioning this new form of advertising ahead of traditional PR strategies. Brands can track the amount of conversions they receive from bidding on certain key words and banner advertising. 'Above the line' marketing (such as an advert on a bus) is difficult to value, whereas the analytical data that is available from online methods mean that marketing strategies can be tailored and the success of the outgoing spend is traceable.

Google is providing an attractive alternative to traditional PR, which is at times preferable. The source comments:

*I would much rather have our fashion brand permanently appearing at the top of Google for a search term such as 'black dress' than have a one-off double-page spread in the Sunday Times. We have an almost 30% annual growth in the online side of the business and bidding on key search terms – such as 'black dress' – is an important part of that growth.*

Publications with progressive websites, such as the Mail Online, have been clever in capitalising on online sales, particularly in fashion. Recent developments to their website allow users to read an article about Kate Moss and then view a selection of the items that she is wearing. If the reader follows through and purchases from the recommended brands, an affiliate marketing fee (a percentage of the product sale) can be received.

Search engines want to encourage PPC as a good way of generating revenue. Questions are sometimes raised as a result of the technical

updates made to the algorithms, which some argue appear to favour those brands that are paying search engines for PPC. The SEO expert commented on the roll-out of one such update: ‘There have been observations within the SEO community that the update favoured big brands, which means that smaller brands are pushed into paying for PPC to secure visibility.’ So it seems that the organic listings may not be so organic.

However, Google has implemented certain guidelines to encourage the declaration of sponsored content and this is designed to help prevent paid content from influencing the rankings in the organic search results section. The algorithms used by search engines are becoming more sophisticated; however, this is a work in progress and there are still loopholes.

SEO experts will normally wish to leverage social media, since a website gains additional authority through including a large amount of social sharing, indicating as it does to a search engine that the material is popular, relevant, and positively consumed. This activity can become relevant to news websites: while social shares are expected for news articles, an SEO-aware publication may consider massaging the popularity of certain stories as part of their marketing strategy to ensure their coverage ranks at the top of the page. In such an instance, computer-generated social media accounts will be instructed to distribute the content to make it appear more popular and to help it gain higher authority.

Search engines are trying to incorporate social signals into their algorithms. Although these signals impact the results on a relatively small scale, in time it will become more important to run a sophisticated social media project in line with an SEO project to maximise results.

Where SEO is used on media websites that are looking to increase their readership, articles are often written in web-optimised versions and contain trending keywords that drive current traffic to the website through search. A high volume of articles are published throughout the day to attract return visitors. This could be seen during coverage of the 2014 royal tour of Australia and New Zealand by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, when multiple articles were created about the same topic, which would have suited trending keywords on search engines. Although Mail Online clearly uses SEO in its internet approach, it is also widely noted that it has recorded such significant traffic due to a focus on celebrity stories, high picture content, and a growing appeal to an American audience. These factors have become as important as the news agenda.

Furthermore, Mail Online appears to utilise the increase in content that is delivered directly to news desks by PR agencies (see below): in particular, consumer-focused content. Press releases – albeit with modifications – can be used as a basis for some of the articles, obviating updates from journalists, and placing the content more firmly in the PR camp.

### *Making the model pay*

Mail Online can command relatively high advertising fees from brands seeking a presence on its website, attracted by the high number of daily visits. Yet making the free-content model pay is not easy: a problem felt by the *Guardian*, which has also championed free content accessible to all.

In contrast to the Mail Online, the *Guardian* is less inclined to overtly leverage the content provided directly by PR; however, there are indications of a change. One well-positioned PR source in a leading firm has cited the direct placement of a story in the *Guardian* and also admitted that this would not have been possible several years ago.

While some publications opt for paid content, the *Guardian* prioritises access as this remains important for readers. Simon McCall is Director of Boxwood's Technology, Media and Telecoms sector and played a role in advising how the *Guardian* should amend its business model. He highlights one of the new methods that can assist with commercialising the free-access model which the *Guardian* has retained: 'Advertising, sponsorship, branded applications and leveraging the brand is now more important.'

This means there is growing convergence between the commercial needs of online media and the appetite of businesses – and their PR counsel – to place sponsored content online. Working with PR is vital for the success of online journalism and has become more powerful in the digital age. This has consequences for the differentiation between editorial and advertorial.

While emerging publications can provide valuable commentary, the influence of traditional publications and the value of their journalists are crucial for maintaining authority. However, publications like the *Guardian* cannot rely on reputation alone for brand protection and need to consider data. Google Analytics and Omniture (now owned by Adobe) are examples of tools that allow detailed data to be collected from most web browsers. While it is possible to adjust privacy settings and browse websites

anonymously, many users are oblivious to such controls, or simply do not care about their data being collected. This means that online publications can become more informed about their audience.

Demographic data that can be retrieved from a single visit to a website include the age, gender, interests, language, and location of the visitor. Such data can be collected over a sustained period and can be viewed in real time; they can prove helpful when monitoring popular interest in certain breaking news stories, as in the *Telegraph* offices. It is also possible to organise filters according to keywords, IP addresses, and to map user behaviour by understanding the pattern of a visitor. This empowers online publishing platforms with the ability to manipulate certain attributes of their website to maximise readership or sale conversion. For example, the style of the landing page, positioning of certain links or articles, and focus of specific content can all attribute to a growth in readership or sales.

While the mass-market approach that involves attracting high readership statistics, free content, and a plethora of expansion opportunities is championed by some, the pay wall model is growing and provides a space for targeted publications to flourish. It has also become important for PR companies to place content in both volume media reaching mass audiences and niche high-value outlets, which claim to reach more select opinion-formers.

Gosia Brzezinska works as an account manager across a number of political accounts at Portland Communications and describes this type of coverage as ‘posh coverage’. She says that ‘it’s seen as posh coverage because it is not available to everyone; publications such as *Foreign Affairs* are perceived to have an elite audience’.

The pay wall approach mirrors the traditional forms of media more closely and requires paying a subscription fee to access articles in preferred publications, which is similar to purchasing a hard copy of the newspaper. It creates a sense of elitism in the digital media world.

Even online subscriptions do not guarantee revenues to match the traditional mix of cover price and print advertising. There remains a question over whether the growth in online subscribers and related advertising will be fast enough to compensate for the rate of decline in circulation and print-ad sales. Jeff Zucker, President of CNN, has described the dilemma as ‘trading analogue dollars for digital dimes’.

There is still confusion in the digital media industry as to which approach works best. Regardless of which model is championed, online

journalism does expect a different output: it is an arts profession (journalism) merging with a scientific profession (computer science). PR also plays a crucial role in this relationship and the all-encompassing digital strategy is now becoming an essential offering.

### *A blur between advertorial and editorial*

The mass-market approach has opened a whole new world of opportunity from a commercial perspective and this challenges the relationship between journalism and PR, as the lines between editorial and advertorial become blurred. As McCall highlights:

*In a world that is swamped by advertising how can we know what is real? That is where the intelligence of the major brands comes into play and where journalists play an important role. As more content becomes PR-driven and hidden advertising is occurring, journalists have a role to play in telling the truth and revealing the raw stories to readers. Quality journalism and brand values are therefore very important. This is crucial to the survival of journalism.*

However, the digital era is changing the way editorial and advertorial is structured. As we have seen, the *New York Times* sparked controversy early in 2014 by unveiling a new advertising model that allows sponsored posts to sit alongside editorial. Ideally the distinction between paid and unpaid content should be clear: that, though, is not always the case; sponsored features is one way that PR is approaching the digital media world to secure coverage.

Disguising paid content is not uncommon. One highly regarded fashion PR explained that certain publications will accept previews of new collections from a fashion house or department store on the basis that the brands pay a placement fee. The reader is not always made aware of the advertorial relationship.

A documentary by Channel 4's investigative current affairs programme, *Dispatches*, highlighted the growing trend of PR agencies gifting celebrities with products in exchange for an endorsement via social media.<sup>3</sup> PR executives were recorded specifically asking celebrities to tweet in exchange for certain products.

Several articles<sup>4</sup> have addressed the issue of suspicious-looking tweets that have been released by celebrity icons in America, such as Kim

Kardashian and Justin Bieber. Kardashian has over 20 million followers and Bieber has over 50 million followers. Particular examples include the former tweeting about a lip balm from a cosmetics company during her pregnancy and the latter recommending a flower company on Mother's Day to his followers – neither declared the tweets as advertisements. These celebrities have used social media to escalate their profile and have a huge following on Twitter, with a high engagement level. Consumer PRs acknowledge the influence of such reach and attempt to negotiate access to the audience. The Federal Trade Commission maintains that the responsibility lies with the brand to ensure their influencers use the appropriate language when endorsing products.

In the UK, Wayne Rooney and Nike became the subject of such a controversy in 2012. The footballer released tweets from his account with a Nike marketing hashtag and a link to the brand's website. Complaints were received by the Advertising Standards Authority; the Authority commented:

*We considered there was nothing obvious in the tweets to indicate they were Nike marketing communications. In the absence of such an indication, for example #ad, we considered the tweets were not obviously identifiable as Nike marketing communications and therefore concluded they breached the code.<sup>5</sup>*

The inclusion of hashtags such as #ad or #sponsored to indicate paid content is difficult to police and the responsibility lies with the brand, rather than the influencer. Brands do not always communicate the requirement for a hashtag to those endorsing products.

While there is no open agreement and the suggestion of guaranteeing press coverage is rarely directly posed to a journalist, gifting products is considered a key way of increasing the chance of coverage. The blogging sector in particular involves many individuals writing as a hobby and receiving reward for their work through gifting; this acts as an incentive to write about a brand. Many bloggers claim that reviewing consumer products is essential for writing a balanced and informative feature and in no way secures preferential coverage or coverage at all. The author of the popular lifestyle blog The Londoner is a full-time blogger and makes money from her blog. Although she welcomes items being sent, she also makes clear that 'I'm afraid I obviously can't promise to write about it on the blog.'

A similar situation occurs in retail, where gifting celebrities is a common yet canny PR strategy. Major fashion brands will gift celebrities in order to achieve the widespread coverage of an ‘influencer’. If a celebrity wears an item of clothing, they are likely to put a picture on their social media accounts and also get ‘papped’ for the traditional media. As one well-placed source (who chose to remain anonymous) explains, ‘This doesn’t get classed as bribery as there is no suggestion made to the celebrity that they should wear the clothing. However, if you gift someone a number of items, there is high chance they will end up wearing the product, get photographed and provide us with great coverage.’

Paul Blanchard explained that it is not unusual for journalists to benefit financially from a PR arrangement. In such an instance, a PR representative will suggest that a company commissions a journalist or an editor to write a feature. The journalist will then submit the same feature for publication and is paid by both parties. This is most common with specialist publications that relate to certain industries. The journalist is never asked to submit the piece and never asked to provide positive coverage – in many cases it may not result in an entirely positive piece – and, therefore, does not consider it a breach of ethics. Journalists are becoming wiser about a PR-led market in which they can earn additional fees.

## **The impact of the internet on public relations**

PR is faced with a challenging landscape for clients – but also many more commercial opportunities. As a junior PR professional, James Thomlinson recognised the need for a dedicated digital team at Bell Pottinger. After eight years of working in traditional PR within the company, he was asked to evaluate their digital strategy. This was ultimately driven by a need from clients for a multifaceted approach to communications, covering a broad stream of content and not just traditional print media. Thomlinson pitched the formation of Bell Pottinger Wired to the Board, and the digital arm of the company was duly formed. He is now Managing Director of Bell Pottinger Wired and, although there is much collaboration across the group, it remains a segregated unit.

Thomlinson says that ‘More of our clients understand the pressure of the internet better. It is no longer just about a PR brief but a communications brief, where all areas are covered. This can include events, lobbying and

digital content such as videos, website creation and apps. The market has begun to consolidate.’

Bell Pottinger Wired assists with the digital needs of clients; however, during recent years, the approach has become more integrated across a vast array of campaigns. From web-content creation to SEO, those instructing public relations companies have begun to request much broader services than those which are centred on press exposure and managing a media profile, especially in crisis management and risk mitigation.

One of the most notable areas of growth is reputation management. Fresh eyes have been cast over reputation in the last year, driven partly by the risks associated with a fast-moving digital media world. There are dedicated technical companies that support this area of internet communication (see below) and reputation is moving towards the top of the agenda.

The nature of online communication is the main reason that reputation has resurfaced as a prominent issue. News is breaking more quickly than ever before and this can impact the reputation of a company in many ways. A negative impression can escalate through social media via the power of rapid distribution. Many public companies and newsworthy individuals are now placed in a vulnerable position with regards to crisis management and reaction time.

A discussion with Mark Bolland, former private secretary to the Prince of Wales, highlights the importance of time management. He points out that while there used to be a period of time – often days – where people could wait before responding to a crisis situation, this has now been dramatically reduced and there is less opportunity for those in senior communications positions to assume there is time to plan an elaborate response. The right reaction needs to happen and it needs to happen quickly. Most interestingly of all, with the advent of a 24/7 media, there *needs* to be a reaction; avoidance is no longer considered acceptable.

Twitter, like all social media, can rebound on its users. In 2013, JP Morgan attempted to use Twitter to encourage the community to ask direct questions of the company. The strategy involved using the hashtag #AskJPM, which was unique to the exercise and highlighted the conversation to the public. The #AskJPM hashtag spread rapidly and attracted wider press attention as thousands of Twitter users sent tweets with negative responses and used the hashtag to make the conversation as visible as possible. These included insults, reference to corporate



responsibility and the banking crisis, as well as JP Morgan's legal issues. Spokesman Brian Marchiony later commented, 'Bad idea! Back to the drawing board.'

In the service industry Twitter requires monitoring and management; however, in the corporate environment, the company can simply refuse to use it, or discourage a specific topic of conversation. Allan Biggar, former Chairman of Burson-Marsteller and now a partner at Jericho Chambers, believes, however, that it is better to take part than not:

*Technology has allowed people to ask and talk directly to a company or CEO and they should respond. This is why there needs to be an authentic approach to PR and communications. The world is highly transparent and the barrier has been removed. You need to teach and train people how to communicate. It is important to help them spread the message and get involved.*

At Portland, Brzezinska concludes that technology has caused a blur between corporate and personal reputation:

*Technology enables access at all levels and this means there is a need to care for the corporate reputation and personal reputation. Companies are becoming much more accessible by opening their communication channels and it is not just the PR team that is controlling the message. There is a much wider level of communication in relation to outward interaction.*

Individuals and organisations are regularly bombarded with negative commentary; they can, however, avoid the worst by learning how best to use social media. Timing is crucial; if you comment using a popular generic hashtag, the backlash is likely to be less visible than when using a unique hashtag. For example, if David Cameron comments on an issue relating to the UK budget and uses the general #budget hashtag, his comments are likely to become hidden among a sea of other activity surrounding this topic. However, if Cameron was to create his own hashtag, for example #CameronsBudgetViews, any negativity would be much more prominent. If a negative theme develops (which is common with 'Twitter Trolling'), it can snowball and attract significant attention.

Hashtags can also be hijacked. One such incident occurred on the day preceding the European Elections in May. UKIP created the hashtag #WhyImVotingUkip for party members to express their reasons for voting

and also encourage the conversation to trend. The conversation became a trending topic after the hashtag was hijacked and Twitter users began to use it to poke fun at the party. Examples included:

*#WhyImVotingUkip: because, like the leader @Nigel\_Farage, I get a bit racist when I'm tired too.*

*#WhyImVotingUkip Because the weather's really starting to pick up, and I don't want it ruined by gays.*

The latter was retweeted nearly 3,000 times.

British Gas experienced a negative issue when they used the #AskBG hashtag shortly after an increase in energy prices was announced. The idea was to engage with customers and allow them to ask questions about any concerns they had. A Twitter storm followed and thousands abused the company with negative tweets and caused the issue to feature as a trending topic in the news media.

Engaging in a live Twitter discussion using such an openly accessible platform requires careful consideration. Mistakes are sorely punished and there is a substantial risk of a PR disaster occurring.

Yet Biggar is right: abstaining from social media activity can prove detrimental in a crisis situation. BP was heavily criticised for its lack of engagement via Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and blogging channels. Instead, the company spent large amounts of money on an SEO strategy and standard marketing practice.

By contrast, fashion brand DKNY excelled when handling a difficult situation in 2013. A popular blog accused DKNY of using copyrighted photos without prior permission. 'DKNY PR Girl' ran the account (which now has a following of over 400,000) and gained a reputation for excelling in Twitter responses with her natural and reactive manner. She showed her strengths when addressing the situation directly as anger began to flare up and gather momentum. Admitting DKNY were at fault, apologising, and then announcing a substantial donation to the Brooklyn YMCA, they reversed the tone of the crisis within moments. What was originally considered threatening to the brand's reputation actually triggered widespread recognition: the example is regularly used as a positive case study.

Roland Rudd, founder of Finsbury, says that time pressure can impact fluidity. It certainly forces greater transparency and a refined communication strategy, which encompasses risk prevention and risk mitigation. This need is fundamentally driven by the heightened dangers

of transparent communication and the exposure that technology brings. The digital landscape plays into the hands of the PR industry.

Biggar at Jericho Chambers says that a multi-resourced and trusted team is part of the new PR model that is emerging:

*Twenty years ago the media world was very different and it used to be about the PR and journalist only. Now there is an opportunity to get the CEO and Board of Directors talking directly. We consider this as a huge opportunity to engage directly with the stakeholders rather than producing an over-packaged product. Shareholders want to hear directly from the company and offering an integrated PR approach is vital.*

## **The emergence of brand journalism and recreational journalism**

The focus and expectations of both PR and journalism are changing in the digital era. PR companies are required to offer broader services and journalists are expected to provide a greater variety of content. It is also now common for corporations to provide their own digital channels and this often involves appointing internal communications teams. The internal communications team traditionally includes PR and marketing personnel; however, journalists are now also incorporated into the structure: 'brand journalism' is becoming more widespread.

This trend of communication is most common with major consumer brands. Brand journalism allows the company to tell a story and to distribute the story directly to consumers via multimedia channels. While most consumers recognise the story is not always objective, both PR professionals and journalists who are looking to capitalise on the financial gain of working for a large corporate are maximising the value of such an opportunity. As trust in the media declines, this direct method of communication provides an acceptable alternative approach for many companies.

Red Bull is one example of a brand that merges PR, online communications, and journalism as part of a powerful, independent strategy. Their collaboration with extreme sports enables a unique level of passive engagement with readers. The Red Bull website offers informative articles about Formula One; they maximise the commercial collaboration with certain sports by creating news portals that offer features and

commentary about racing. This further engages readers and the additional coverage adds more value for the sports fan; however, this coverage is supported and hosted by a brand, rather than a media publication.

The clothing company Burberry became the most talked-about brand on Twitter during London Fashion Week in 2013 as it pioneered a new approach to coverage. Those following the brand on Twitter were offered exclusive content, such as behind-the-scenes photos of each look, moments before it was presented to the audience on the catwalk – even before the press. For the Womenswear S/S14, Burberry used a Twitter Card to livestream the show, backed by Promoted Tweets and Promoted Accounts, to increase its follower base.

Aside from innovative social-media messaging that is driven directly by fashion brands, these companies also leverage social media use via influencers. For example, British model Cara Delevingne's rapid rise in the fashion industry has been largely attributed to her social media activity and following. *British Vogue* tagged her as 'the model who was *liked* into superstardom' on their January 2014 cover, which was a nod towards her Instagram following where fans can *like* her images (her followers currently stand at an impressive 5,012,436). She also has over 1.61 million followers on Twitter and when she collaborates with big brands, such as Chanel, Mulberry, or Burberry, the model tweets behind-the-scenes footage from the photo-shoots or catwalks to all of her fans and also distributes this via Instagram.

More and more brands understand that they can tell their stories as their own stories, whether this is directly via corporate channels or through a selected spokesperson. James Thomlinson of Bell Pottinger Wired argues that the media can become redundant in specialised areas with a clever PR strategy that utilises journalism traits: 'With a focused audience you don't necessarily need media.'

PR and journalism are both poised between the old world and the new – with some claiming that digital has or will soon take over, others pointing to the still important role mainstream media play. Thomlinson continues: 'You will always need the media because people want news. Third-party news and opinion is important. If a journalist writes about a story then this acts as an endorsement.' Paul Blanchard agrees:

*There is a symbiotic relationship between the traditional media and social media and both are dependent upon each other. Journalists are now sourcing stories from the likes of Twitter and also using it as a source for quotes. Equally, there is so much information on social media, including*

*Twitter. For a user to stand out from the crowd, the reply or the endorsement of traditional media is required. The traditional media can give significant power to a social media campaign, but the traditional media also find it a beneficial source.*

Blanchard gives an example of mutual dependence from his own campaign – to ban foie gras, a pâté produced by force-feeding geese until their livers burst. He began spreading the word via social media and gained sufficient traction for a small campaign. However, once the traditional media picked up on the story, the campaign grew and delivered more users towards Twitter, who then spread the word even further through retweeting the handle and site links. Social media can gain significant traction alone, but once it is recorded in the traditional media, Blanchard explains, the scope and power will dramatically increase. The influence of newspapers and publications still offers value and credibility, thus remaining a crucial element of PR strategies.

Although the concept of brand journalism is becoming an increasingly popular and successful way of reaching the target audience in consumer PR, companies continue to seek neutral endorsement. Thomlinson cited a meeting with Huffington Post as one example where they discussed a partnership with a travel company. The travel company wanted to access a new market and was in need of quality content – which the Huffington Post could provide. Orchestrating collaboration between the two meant there would be a more powerful combined communications strategy to achieve greater leverage.

Brands value strong editorial, so journalists are attracted to the new medium – the more so as traditional media work becomes scarcer and less well paid. Social media assist with the facilitation of brand journalism and enable readers to follow a journalist, rather than a publication. This gives greater power to the journalist and personal branding is now playing an important role. Just as Cara Delevingne can empower a fashion brand, a journalist can empower a publication.

An example: author and columnist Caitlin Moran has over 491,000 followers on Twitter (April 2014), which exceeds both *The Times* (over 182,000) and the *Sunday Times* (over 193,000) combined. Those with a substantial following on Twitter and high engagement levels with their audience are now worth more to publications. Journalists are naturally strong communicators and therefore have the ability to leverage Twitter and use it to create conversation, spread their message, and ignite debate.

Journalists have an innate ability to react to the environment in order to best communicate with an audience. They also have access to verified news sources and an established network.

The issue of who owns the brand, however, is a live one for the BBC. Journalists are expected to tweet in a professional capacity for the Corporation, but with an individual profile as it enables a more streamlined feed (for example, certain correspondents can comment on relevant issues). One former BBC correspondent – who chose to be unnamed – explained that the BBC requested that all journalists have a Twitter account that is associated with the BBC: once they leave the Corporation, they are no longer allowed to use the account and, if they wish to continue tweeting, must launch a new one. While the digital society has enabled individual journalists to gain more traction and independent sway, they are considered credible in the first instance due to the endorsement of the media outlet, such as the BBC.

The media still maintain an important role in validating and approving information from other sources and reinforce influence by giving such sources credibility. How long this remains the case is questionable. The internet presents the opportunity for a journalist to break away from the umbrella of a publication and launch their own commercial venture and in turn presents a risk to the long-term survival of media publications.

Twitter users can often be more interested in following the journalist than the actual publication. Twitter rewards dynamic tweets and this can be easier to achieve when tweeting as a person rather than a company – this is relevant for both journalists and PR advisers. Blanchard elaborates, ‘No one wants to follow the corporate machine and personality is important on Twitter – the person needs to be interesting.’ Such parameters suit media individuals and certain sectors; however, engaging on Twitter can prove more challenging for those in the financial industry and many shy away from tweeting because of the potential risks involved.

Tweeting risks proliferate. Blanchard referred to a Twitter account that has been created to automatically detect deleted tweets by MPs: the account will immediately retweet the content to ensure it receives exposure. This means mistakes are highlighted and it becomes impossible to completely retract a statement. The riskiness of the medium means that Twitter accounts of CEOs, politicians, and others in public life are often controlled by a PR representative with expertise in this area who masquerades as the individual.

Individual influence is highly valued in consumer PR. Max Dundas formerly worked with Freud Communications before setting up his own boutique consultancy, specialising in brand, media, and celebrity PR. Over the years, he noticed that certain celebrities and public figures now have a greater pull than some of the leading traditional media outlets. Dundas Communications now places value on social media statistics for both a high-profile individual and also a publication. If a celebrity has a significant following (hundreds of thousands), they may have a greater influence in some capacities than some of the traditional leaders in the tabloid market, such as the *Sun* or *Mirror*. This directly impacts the type of coverage and impact of a PR strategy. For example, in some cases, a sponsorship deal or collaboration with an individual may reach an audience that is preferred to coverage in a newspaper.

Twitter is presently the hottest of social media: though other online networks have proven to be influential – such as Facebook and Instagram – Twitter remains more highly valued by most PRs, especially financial PRs. This is largely due to its format, which focuses on outgoing statements, with a lower level of social networking than Facebook. Rudd comments, ‘Twitter is the biggest thing to come from social media: everything is always on Twitter first.’

Twitter has so far been able to escape the pitfall of overkill on advertising: Facebook, by contrast, has experienced problems with trying to charge businesses for exposure by changing its algorithm. Whereas a business page would historically have a high reach potential for fans, with updates appearing in newsfeeds of those who like the page, Facebook is now encouraging businesses to pay for their content to feature in the newsfeeds of fans. This has prompted grumbling: higher value is seen in Twitter, which does not yet penalise unsponsored content.

The advent of social media has enabled ‘recreational journalism’ by allowing anyone to publish material, gain a following, and become influential in a certain area. As Biggar comments, ‘The media world has changed. Newspapers were a rich man’s game but now anyone can stick on a laptop and create a news channel.’ This has led to a new landscape of blogs and websites that are not run by professional journalists but still have influence in some markets. Certain feature blogs play a significant role in the approach to PR and communications for some clients.

The digital space is increasing the amount of content that is available and it is also enabling highly specialised content to emerge. Such new arenas need careful consideration. Thomlinson says, ‘The media are

typically very generalist whereas bloggers are very specialist. It depends how many people you want to reach and in what area, but sometimes the new and specialist writers are more valuable.’ This means that PR representatives are now engaging with a wider audience of gatekeepers and these range from celebrity figures with a significant online following to recreational blogs that attract an audience in a particular area. Brzezinska of Portland comments, ‘The free option is always favourable as the client is already paying us a retainer.’

## **Are search and online reputation taking over?**

As we saw, the 2014 Edelman Trust Barometer highlighted that online information is highly trusted by consumers. As part of the 2014 Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute,<sup>6</sup> data was collected about the most popular news brands – traditional and online. The work on brands found that ‘audiences consume the majority of their online news from familiar and trusted brands’. However, there was an acknowledgement of the growing influence of search engines and ‘increasingly varied ways to find that content’ and the role of Google, Facebook, and other social media as ‘intermediaries for a large proportion of news journeys online’.

One impact of the rise in popularity of search is the development of specialist online reputation management companies. Reputation management firms have been developed to assist with the growing reputation needs in the digital sphere. There has been a significant change in the way people consume information and there is a vital requirement by many companies and individuals to protect their reputation, specifically, their online reputation. Online reputation management is involved with how individuals are portrayed in the digital space and largely concerns the profile of an individual or company on search engines, such as Google. It differs to traditional reputation management because strategies have a significant technical component.

There is an increased awareness about the value of search engine results pages because they now play an important role in defining reputation. Individuals and companies are more conscious of their online profile and there is a merger of two different areas of expertise for a combined PR approach to the modern media world.

The need for reputation management can stem from negative news coverage, which now has greater longevity in the digital area. For example,



a negative article about a historical incident may rank at the top of the first page of Google because the search engine's algorithm determines that it possesses a high degree of authority. It may be considered credible in the eyes of the search engine due to technical factors that mean it is highly optimised: yet algorithms can present a manipulated view of an individual or company. One key concern regards the accuracy of such content. For example, if the journalist made an error in the article or there is a certain agenda, the article may not be a fair reflection of the brand or individual, yet it still sits at the top of Google.

Search engines play a crucial role in defining reputation as a result of their search algorithms. There are often mistakes in these sources and these can cause irreparable damage. The case of Christopher Jefferies in the UK is an instructive example. He was suspected and arrested by the police investigating the murder in Bristol of Joanna Yeates in 2010, and vilified by the press. Despite being awarded significant compensation, his online profile is still littered with tabloid front pages and commentary associating him with the murder. The internet does not forget.

The idea that a search engine provides a profile of individuals that includes out-of-date, irrelevant, and inaccurate information has always been a concern for privacy issues. A landmark ruling in May 2014 saw the European Court back the 'right to be forgotten' in a case relating to a Spanish man who complained that Google's links to an auction notice for his repossessed home infringed his privacy. The ruling has opened a can of worms; it has been reported that a convicted paedophile and a politician were among those who subsequently asked to 'be forgotten'. Discussions have also revolved around censorship, matters of public interest, and the challenges of evaluating requests. However, the ruling is symbolic of a move to protect the privacy of private individuals.

One of the reasons that online reputation has become so important is because there is an increased volume of consumers using search as their first port of call when looking for information. Furthermore, many internet users do not venture further than the first page of results.

Search engine optimisation challenges algorithms in place and ORM also uses similar techniques. While there are exceptions to the rule, in most instances it is not possible to guarantee that a search engine is portraying a fair and balanced view without additional support. Individuals often need advice on the types of online assets they require and how best to position these assets. For example, an individual may need a company website, personal website, and additional social media assets.

Wikipedia can also be a concern. Wikipedia is a source of information that can be changed by anyone and also has certain requirements as to which type of sources can be used to support the profile.

News stories are considered an important source of validation for statements on Wikipedia. Wikipedia assumes that news articles are fair and accurate; it therefore allows these to be used as an endorsement of certain facts. However, varying agendas of publications and/or mistakes in news reporting can pose problems. It also does not advocate paid edits and a proposal earlier this year to facilitate the acceptance of such changes was rejected by Wikipedia on the grounds that it would not follow their principles.

Yet it is not uncommon for inaccurate information to be documented in Wikipedia and for it to be given a high priority in a company or individual search profile. The same issue occurs in relation to the priority of news articles. Some will rank well for certain keywords but not necessarily portray a balanced or fair view of the individual or company. In extreme cases, this can be highly damaging.

There are instances whereby this biased portrayal can snowball. Journalists sourcing information for an article will Google certain search terms and often incorporate the resulting information into their articles. A permanent depiction of an individual is then created as the false stories escalate.

Is reputation now much more important than before – as many in public relations claim? Dave King, CEO of Digitalis Reputation, argues there has not been an increase in awareness. He thinks instead that technology merely emphasises its importance.

*Organisations and individuals have less control and this is the main reason that reputation has become high on the agenda. The internet has empowered peer-reviewed content and this has changed the dynamics of trust. There is less trust in the media and there has never been much trust in PR. However, the internet acts as a platform that can showcase peer-reviewed content and this is becoming the most trusted of all.*

Peer-reviewed content is most common when websites and newspapers enable live comments to be left underneath articles, creating a two-way information feed. Social media also enable peer-reviewed material, probably one of the most influential aspects of all. Articles, features, and reviews are now endorsed and shared among a much wider

audience. This has an impact on the authority of media outlets and gives influence to those which were not originally considered to be powerful. Social sharing and peer-reviewed content has enabled new media brands to develop, such as the Huffington Post – the American news aggregator and blog was acquired by AOL in 2011 for \$315m.

Says King:

*Peer-reviewed content has very high levels of trust and that is why we have seen such growth in websites like Mumsnet. We are seeing the opportunity for specialist media to develop, which is driven by the readership and trust opportunities that can be found from trusted sources in a similar demographic, especially when it comes to considering the product service. Social media endorsement is also highly valued and the purchase cycle has been extended so that reviews form an important part of purchases.*

This is one aspect that PRs cannot influence. While they may have the ability to react and set certain news agendas, PR cannot interfere with the genuine customer response to a product – and consumers are wise to this fact. However, PRs can and do act to encourage and influence the conversation.

## In sum

Public relations had a much easier landscape to tackle before the digital revolution, with the traditional press the main target. Although headlines could be powerful, their impact on reputation was typically briefer.

To use the parlance favoured by UK commentators: ‘Today’s news is tomorrow’s chip wrapping’ no longer works as a comfort to those ‘monstered’ by a tabloid, leaving reputation more fragile than ever before. This is partly due to news coverage and online reports providing broader and more sustained coverage. PR professionals have a varied landscape to tackle and more information to manage. There are also more voices to address and a larger amount of influencers.

This new landscape means that it is much harder to cover up stories, difficult to spin stories, and almost impossible to deter negative press. On the other hand, the communications industry – stretching from PR to brand marketing – now has many more routes to the end-consumer of its messaging.

In turn, this is leading to a more transparent approach to communications and demands a high level of strategic input, as well as a multifaceted approach. Although a more authentic approach is championed for corporate reputation, PR teams are also exploring new opportunities to gain press coverage for their clients; as we have seen, these methods are not always ethical.

With a revenue model that is probably more secure than media reliance on advertising or subscribers, PR is the sector with better near-term survival prospects. But that survival depends on being part of a food chain in which the media is a vital, if increasingly malnourished, component.

PR may therefore appear a more dynamic industry than the media on which it has long relied. We have emphasised the part that transparency plays, and it is a reasonable argument that PR professionals have simply become acutely aware of the new landscape that is emerging and have adapted behaviour to fit its demands. PR professionals have seen that they are unable to hide beneath the radar or manipulate stories and therefore advise clients to be more open and responsive than before. In doing so, they have turned the new order to their advantage – claiming that this means there is a vital need for PR to advise and consult on the communications approach, since mistakes in the exposed environment are more aggressively punished than ever before. PR came into being, in part, as a mechanism of defence: as in the sphere of national defence, when weapons of attack modernise, so do the weapons which defend.

This is leading to a new ecosystem in which companies, celebrities, politicians, brands, and campaigners are experimenting with new information tools. The old media hierarchy – literally intermediating between information and audiences – has been disrupted. Even in an analogue world, as we have shown, the ‘wages of spin’ were deployed aggressively to secure certain favourable message outcomes, particularly in politics. But in the analogue era, real impact still depended on PR ability to secure favourable coverage in different types of media, which was often disinclined to be fed pre-baked versions of events.

Today, the media and PR machines in our society are recalibrating their relationships. They are learning to coexist in a new disintermediated environment. Neither side can exercise power as they did in the past. Both communities – for so long interdependent – are competing on a much more crowded playing field. On this new field, it is not yet clear who will emerge on the winning side.