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White paper

Interactive Media: Is the Tail Wagging the Dog?

Introduction

If I were an editor of a national newspaper, I wouldn't be surprised if I was regularly visited by a recurring nightmare. I would see myself fearfully running across an open field grasping my freshly printed newspaper in hand, pursued by a huge throng of thousands of readers trying to catch up with me.

This wide-eyed mob would be shouting all manner of opinions and comments, and waving pictures and documents and CD recordings and DVDs at me. Just before they trample me and my newspaper into the sodden earth, I would wake up sweating profusely, relieved that a 'normal' day at the office beckoned.

Fortunately, most editors feel a little more secure than such a dream sequence suggests, but there is little doubt that it crudely reflects a collective anxiety about the future of mainstream media. With online news and comment constantly rivalling and out-performing print media, the 'normal' day at the office disappeared a long time ago.

The language we use to describe the media has changed to reflect this. We no longer simply talk of publications and broadcasters, but of two different media camps: mass media and social or interactive media.

We all recognise mass media when we see it: local papers, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, the list goes on. But when it comes to social media we are faced with a less familiar beast.

First, the easy bit. Social media is all about blogs, podcasts and vodcasts. Second, the tricky bit. It's also about wikis (online discussion), RSS (online feeds), aggregation, citizen journalism and online 'conversations' in the 'blogosphere'.



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Confused? Yes, most people are.

The simpler way to look at all this is that the web is flowering into a many-headed communications monster. New technologies mean that anyone can be a 'producer' of editorial content, and increasingly anyone can be directly involved with these new forms of content via comment options or online forums.

Meanwhile, aggregation and RSS feeds mean that as readers, we increasingly elect to receive tiny chunks of media from a range of sources rather than taking regular doses of one publication or broadcast source.

It is not hard to find those that predict a revolutionary impact of new media. US Media academic Paul Gillen says:

This will be nothing less than the complete rebirth of journalism around the concept that information is plentiful and cheap. Instead of 1500 print newspapers, there will be perhaps 5-10 national 'super papers' and many thousands of regional and special interest community news sites. The process

of getting there will be wrenching and controversial, but the new model will create a more dynamic and diverse information landscape than we have ever known.

The age of infinite media choices has arrived. But how is social media influencing the media mix? And how does that affect communications strategy?

What happened to mass media?

To develop a strategy, you first need a deeper understanding of the fault lines that have appeared within the media.

Arguably the most insightful explanation of the changing nature of media is that put forward by Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief, *Wired* magazine, and author of *The Long Tail*.

His Long Tail 'theory' is all about what happens when the barriers to supply and demand are removed. More specifically, he tracks how the Internet is allowing almost infinite consumer demand to be satisfied when the 'product' can be reduced to digital form.

In the case of mass media, the Internet allows many hundreds if not thousands of media 'producers' to bloom alongside the traditional mass media offerings. These smaller, less powerful outlets make up the 'Long Tail'.

As a result company messages are now mediated by a few powerful media at the top of this demand curve, and literally thousands further down in the 'Long Tail'. What is most significant is that the sheer size of the tail means that the sum influence of the tail is equal to that of the leading media sources.

But perhaps even more concerning is that some of these new outlets – hugely popular blogs and independent web sites – have succeeded in moving up the tail and are as influential as more traditional sources of news and opinion. We are also seeing the arrival of 'commercial blogging' – publishing firms that solely employ bloggers.

So if the tail is as important as the head it is not outlandish to suggest that it has an equal level of influence, and merits the same amount of resources allocated to it.

Yet most firms and most PRs are only scratching the surface of influencing the 'Long Tail'.

Traditional communications techniques work reasonably well when these blogs and independent sources respond like journalists, but what about when these sites and services are more concerned with group opinion?

Thanks to the web, old fashioned peer group opinion is becoming increasingly important. James Surowiecki, author of the hugely influential *The Wisdom of Crowds*, points out that the consensus of large groups of people is often more insightful than that of supposed experts.

The compelling nature of this philosophy is everywhere to be seen on the Internet: huge numbers of people read and contribute to comment sections and newsgroups; thousands of people collectively contribute to the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*; new bands are increasingly promoted to stardom as a result of thousands of like-minded people recommending their music in online social networks like *MySpace*.

New channels, new influence?

Can bloggers be influenced? Can the online 'conversation' be controlled? The jury is out on both subjects.

Most bloggers are fiercely independent and guard their freedom and integrity with steely resolution. The most influential bloggers are often also part of online peer groups that vigilantly watch for any watering down of the blogging ethic of honesty, transparency, and collective debate.

In that respect they are no different from a good editor, but due to the fact they were historically shunned

by big business and communications professionals, and that they believe they are at the forefront of new journalism, there is something of a missionary zeal about a journalist/expert turned blogger.

Consequently, bloggers can afford to set the agenda. In a sentence, it is this: treat me like a mainstream journalist and show me that you understand blogging by doing it yourself and getting your clients to do it. Become part of the conversation.

Robert Scoble, a leading US blogger, is convinced that companies need to join the blogging revolution to be joined with this new conversation. In his book, *Naked Conversations*, co-authored with Shel Isreal, he points out that blogging is having a huge impact because it's easy to do, easy to find, social, viral, syndicable, and linkable.

My own personal view (as a blogger/podcaster/vodcaster) is that such words have a habit of washing over you until you do it yourself.

Like many bloggers, my life changed when I started a blog (in my case about mobile technology and lifestyle). I saw in a small amount of time that stories have a different life online. They are read, re-read, and read again months later. They are commented on, they are linked to, and before long your blog becomes part of an interconnected community, continuously feeding off and contributing to the ideas of others.

Only by blogging myself could I appreciate the transforming impact that social media has. By reading blogs written by PR professionals, and by those in the firms they represent, I can also see that 'seeing is believing' for many of the professionals that I turn to for stories and comment.

Podcasts and vodcasts follow the same principles, but are at a far earlier stage. Only vodcasts that are placed on *YouTube* and podcasts on Apple's *iTunes* are showing all these interactive and viral tendencies so far. But the trend looks set to grow as podcasts and vodcasts gain a deeper social context.

Touching the void

Social media represents a slew of new channels for the PR industry. Reaching mass media is a well-worn route, but reaching these new channels is largely uncharted territory. As is measuring their influence and the effectiveness of targeting them.

But what is also clear is that independent bloggers, podcasters and vodcasters are also adding to the mix. Their impact is complicated by the fact that mass media is also adopting these media forms, often by teaming with media broadcasters to deliver competition for the independents as well as to provide richer media forms on their ever-expanding web sites.

The further complication is that mass media is adapting at different speeds to its new channels. But the trends are clear. If we look at newspapers like *The Guardian* and the recently invigorated *Telegraph* we can see the gradual merging of print and online journalism and the creation of multimedia journalists trained to think in terms of communicating a story via a range of media channels. Whatever is appropriate.

Don't be fooled by the bland social media

Though many will deny it, mass media is involved in trench warfare with the world of social media. Fighting for its survival, it is doing what most of us do against a strong rival – stealing its best ideas.



Not surprisingly this means mass media attempts at social media don't link much, don't encourage much reader comment, and are not part of the conversation



So mass media has suddenly fallen for blogging, podcasting, and video on the web in a big way. 'What's not to like?' I hear you say. Well, if you look carefully, you will find that, in many cases, there is something of a 'dumbing down' of social media going on.

Mass media is the reluctant bride when it comes to its marriage with social media. The reason? On the whole it likes to retain its ivory tower approach to communication: We – big media. You – the reader. If you really want to understand a mainstream publisher, ask them what their policy is on hyperlinking outside their own website.

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But that is set to change.

It is increasingly becoming evident from the work of search engine optimisation specialists that if you want to succeed in online publishing you have to embrace social media with a vengeance: do it, do lots of it, and welcome the barbarians at the gate is their mantra to mass media.

In other words, social media is about to get a whole lot more social, a whole lot more interactive, a whole lot more difficult to control.

Take for example the *New York Times*. It is a pioneer of videocasting with its superb short videos by reporters in all areas. Up until now these videos only existed in the walled garden that is the *New York Times* website. But someone

has seen the light and decided to put their tech' news videos onto *YouTube* as well as on their site. They know full well that this opens them up to critical (and sometimes rude) feedback, but they are prepared to take the flack in return for perhaps millions more page views. It is a trend that many will follow.

Responding to the challenge

The communications industry faces a huge challenge in dealing with these new media forms. In most cases, neither they nor their clients have the internal culture that allows them to be open to social media opportunities. But largely speaking, traditional analytical techniques can be applied to social media to draw up a target list of opinion formers. In terms of targeting, firms need to map for each client:

- Top ten blogging sites; estimates of unique users/page impressions
- Top five podcasts; estimates of audience reach
- Top five videocasts or videobloggers; estimates of audience reach

Once the social media landscape has been mapped, it is important to develop a plan to be able to deliver content and content opportunities that will allow messaging to be spread across these channels.

Journalists or other 'producers' of these media have traditional requirements and new requirements, such as:

Bloggers are huge consumers of product photography, most of which they currently generate themselves.

Podcasters have a need for sound clips of note. PRs need to consider recording interviews and even soundbites by their clients and making them readily available online. Podcasters also like to record interviews over the phone or using IP telephony like Skype.

The same is true for vodcasts. PRs need to provide pre-recorded clips and video releases in a form that can be edited for re-use. They also need to train their clients to be comfortable doing short or long filmed interviews at short notice or even over a webcam.

Going native

A common occurrence is to set up a group blog. Not only does this allow members of a PR firm to experience the trials and tribulations of being a blogger (how much disclosure is good, for example), but it also allows the company to be part of the blogosphere, part of the conversation.

As a blogger myself, I take firms more seriously the minute I hear they have a blog. I take them even more seriously if I find they really know what they are talking about. And if I really like a post on their blog, I link to it – hey, presto they are part of the conversation, and my readers are being influenced by their content as well as mine.

Conclusion

Mass communications is in a state of flux as the 'Long Tail' of the new social media develops and strengthens, and as mass media takes new ideas on board.

In its attempt to counter a 'clear and present danger', mass media is adopting the techniques of social media – if not the whole philosophy. In so doing, it is changing what it means to be a journalist and changing the demands of journalists. Meanwhile – ever ahead on this steep learning curve – pure social media is raising the question: who is a journalist anyway? This is stimulating the use of editorial material from citizen journalists – a group that by its nature is almost impossible to track or manage.

The best way for communications professionals to respond to this is to become immersed in social media and to communicate with target journalists and 'producers' as they demand. Traditional journalists will be requiring more multimedia content and want your clients to be comfortable delivering such content live or pre-packaged.

Meanwhile the more cutting-edge producers and bloggers want to be treated like mass media journalists, but also want you and your clients to be part of the conversation and to understand and contribute to their world.

PR firms and their clients have an opportunity to display their industry knowledge through their own blogs, podcasts and vodcasts. At the very least, they provide a unique insight for the media as well as interested consumers. At the very best, they become part of a wider conversation in the areas in which they wish to have influence.

But social media is just as great a watershed for the communications industry as it is for mass media.

PRs and their clients are being forced to become more visible, more transparent, more opinionated and more part of a conversation with this emerging new media. The process is not simple and the roadmap remains unclear, but in a world which increasingly places trust on those who dare to take such a route, the potential rewards are huge for those who master the art.

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