Part I

The Future of Public Relations
The distinction between digital and “mainstream” or “conventional” channels is at best unhelpful. The term “new media” is archaic and the line between new and old is impossible to draw.

Audiences are changing: every graduate entering the workplace now and forever was born after the arrival of the web. Print won’t disappear in a single generation, whilst there is an aging population more at home with dead wood and ink, but it will be consumed by an ever decreasing demographic. The binary idea that something is digital or not is no longer very useful. Are radio and TV digital or analogue? The answer is that they are both, or possibly neither.

It appears likely that social networks passed the 50% adoption threshold in the middle of 2011. They are no longer niche channels accessed primarily by young people. According to website monitoring company Pingdom, the average age of Facebook users is now over forty.

It is often argued by those that decry social networks that they are somehow marginal channels simply because they don’t like them or manage perfectly well without them. Universal adoption is seldom achieved by any technology. It doesn’t matter that some people, perhaps even a significant proportion, will never use Twitter; some people don’t own a television. The fact is that social channels now play a significant part in communications and for many they have become their first preference for news consumption. We must call time on the notion that digital or online PR is somehow a specialization or a separate discipline. Digital PR is dead.
The continuing evolution of the media

There was a time, not so very long ago, when our concept of the media was a simple one. Printed newspapers were divided neatly into national, regional and local. There were trade and consumer magazines. We had national and local radio stations and television channels that you could count using your fingers. There was also a time, a bit further back, when we just had cave paintings.

Newspapers have re-invented themselves as multi-platform media brands operating across lots of different delivery systems. Print newspapers exist primarily for the convenience of their older readers. Never mind the quality of the papers, feel the width. Not quite as bulky as they used to be are they? Every print newspaper has an online edition and for most there are apps for phones and tablets. We now expect online newspapers to carry video.

Recognizing the trend towards tablet computers, the Financial Times launched a promotion at the end of 2012 offering a Google Nexus 7 tablet free to any subscriber in the US taking out a one-year subscription to the digital edition. That’s more than just a promotion given that the Nexus 7 retails at $199, which is almost half the value of an annual subscription. Barnes & Noble have also heavily discounted the Nook Colour tablet along with a yearly digital subscription to the New York Times.

The way we watch television has changed. Sky+, BBC iPlayer, YouView and a plethora of other systems have handed the schedule to the viewer. Commuters watch their favourite programmes on their phones on the way to work. Content from broadcasters and from other sources including brands is converging. Does it matter whether we listen to radio on a dedicated box in the car or kitchen or through the headphones of a laptop? The line between digital and analogue has faded to the point where it is barely identifiable.

The blurring of channels

Is the Huffington Post a newspaper? The title undoubtedly owes something to the history of print. Most of the content, however, is produced by non journalists. That is not intended to be pejorative. It is a simple fact that the majority of contributors do not meet the commonly understood definition of journal-
ism as a paid job or profession. The other obvious observation is that the Huffington Post isn’t printed on paper.

If you listen to both BBC Radio 4’s media show and the Guardian’s Media Talk on your iPod, is one a radio show and the other a podcast?

If you compare the websites of USA Today – the biggest selling newspaper in America – and CNN – the main all news channel on US television – they are pretty similar. In fact the video content is more prominent on the newspaper site than on the TV site. Google has been a news aggregator for more than a decade and Twitter now links to news stories via its “top news” feature.

Talking to friends and colleagues, most of us often don’t register where we get our breaking news; it may be via a link on Twitter or the car radio. What really matters is the story.

The impact of social media and networks

Social networks at their inception didn’t have much to do with news. As the name implies they were largely social, helping us to connect with old or current school friends. Now many of these social channels are at the core of both the gathering and dissemination of news.

The world woke up to Twitter’s capacity to deliver news almost instantly, during the Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 2008. Since then its role has become far more pervasive. Twitter delivers news but it can also influence the agenda. Debates often take place in the social space before they are elevated to the pages of newspapers or broadcast channels. Journalists recognize the importance of building their follower numbers in order to promote traffic to their stories.

In 2012 Google made some significant changes to its news search which included greater integration with Google+. Google+ comments appear on news search pages and in real-time coverage pages. Google+ members are also able to see comments from people in their circles on the news pages. Scott Zuccarino, the Google News product manager, said at launch: “many news stories inspire vibrant discussions on Google+, and today we’re starting to add this content to both the news homepage and the real-time coverage pages.”
The growth of social media adoption

In recent years delivering communications programmes using social networks as delivery channels was a specialist activity. When the networks were new, adoption was low and they were niche channels. Social networks are now a mainstream phenomenon. Facebook claimed in October 2012 that it had passed the billion user mark with more than 50% of the US population signed up, and Australasia, Latin America and Europe all have similar adoption levels.¹

NM Incite, a joint venture between research firm Nielsen and management consultants McKinsey, took a comprehensive look at social media adoption in 2012. They found that the total time spent on PCs and mobile devices grew by 21% over the previous year, with time spent on mobile apps more than doubling.²

According to a Pew report published in December 2012 people in developing countries are joining social networks at a higher rate than the populations of Europe, North America and Australasia. The global report looked at 21 nations and found that the majority of internet users in Brazil, Mexico, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, India and Russia use social media.³

The report also indicates that the adoption of mobile phones has led growth. In fact the way people access the internet is perhaps a more important question for PR people than whether they access the news via digital or analogue platforms.

Digital is part of every programme

The most powerful argument for the absence of a division between traditional and digital PR is that it is difficult to conceive of a PR campaign that is entirely without a digital dimension.

¹Report: Social network demographics in 2012: http://cipr.co/Wsb2vE
³Social Networking Popular Across Globe: http://cipr.co/WrWaPH
Print publications without any form of digital outlet are a rarity, so even if you think you are sending a press release to a print title you are putting it online too. That alone makes it essential for a PR person to understand the dynamics of the web.

Many journalists were amongst the earliest adopters on Twitter. Many appear to be more inclined to respond to an engaging tweet than they are to a phone call or email. If it is possible to build a relationship with a journalist via that route why would any PR person choose not to do so?

Evolution and the opportunity for PR

I believe that the discipline of PR is in a process of rapid evolution, where the knowledge, skills and practice of public relations are changing. It would be complacent to say that this doesn’t present us with some real challenges. It also provides the PR function with some real opportunities.

The evolution of the media and communications in general is reshaping the nature and the relationships between different types of marketing communications operations. PR people face increased competition from advertising agencies, search engine optimization (SEO) specialists, digital agencies and others. However, public relations practitioners are uniquely placed to take advantage of a world where conversation and dialogue have largely supplanted top-down, one-way messaging. Our skills are firmly rooted in debate, discussion and the art of persuasion. We have always operated through intermediaries when delivering news and information. The intermediaries may have changed and broadened but those skills are as valuable as ever.

There are new skills to learn too, many of them were covered in Share This. Share This Too explores the knowledge and skills base still further.

One of these skills is the ability to read and interpret web analytics. I’ve encountered PR people who visibly freeze when the subject of analytics is raised and yet we’ve always used analytics. Combined circulation figures, key message scores and the discredited practice of advertising value equivalents were all analytics. The data may be more complex – “getting information off the Internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant” said Mitchell Kapor, pioneer of the PC industry – but it’s increasingly easy to access and gain
insight from. Many web services and social networks have easy-to-use built-in analytics. Every PR person should have at least a working knowledge of how to gather insight and information this way.

Opportunities we should seize

The socialization and democratization of the web have redrawn communications and in doing so they have blurred boundaries. With the challenges this brings there are also new opportunities.

Video content

Video content will become increasingly evident in PR campaigns. The growth in video consumption is astronomical. YouTube statistics are eye-watering. Psy’s Gangnam Style has racked up a billion views and on YouTube as a whole there are approaching 5 billion views a day. Platforms like Apple TV are bringing down the walls between web TV and current broadcast platforms. Cost of production is in freefall. Producing engaging video content should become a serious consideration for many PR campaigns.

PR-led SEO

“Google is not a search engine. Google is a reputation-management system . . . online, your rep is quantifiable, findable, and totally unavoidable. In other words, radical transparency is a double-edged sword, but once you know the new rules, you can use it to control your image in ways you never could before.”

Clive Thompson said this in Wired in 2007. PR has always been about reputation management and a key determinant of reputation is the content on page one of a Google Search. The most important tool that search engine optimization specialists have at their disposal is now the “press release”. If

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4 Wired: http://cipr.co/WXwpmN
we educate ourselves about the value of good editorial combined with link strategies as part of PR, we can greatly elevate the power of PR. The search engine companies are actually working in our favour, since they are engaged in a constant struggle to promote natural search elevating real news and information. This is where the enlightened PR person comes in.

**Redefining our relationships with journalists**

The hugely insightful journalist and blogger Tom Foremski has said “PR people . . . are pitching stories to journalists who have very much smaller pageviews on the stories they write, and far smaller Twitter/Facebook communities to which to distribute their stories, than the PR people.” PR people need to build their own communities both to deliver news directly but also so that we are able to direct a relevant audience to stories that have been written with the independent perspectives of journalists.

Digital PR is dead because all PR is digital.

**Biography**

Rob Brown (@robbrown) has worked in PR for over 20 years and for over 15 years held senior PR positions within three major global advertising networks: Euro RSCG, McCann Erickson and TBWA. He launched his own business “Rule 5” in MediaCityUK, Manchester in November 2012. Rob is the author of *Public Relations and the Social Web* (2009), blogs for *The Huffington Post* and has written chapters for *Public Relations Cases: International Perspectives* (2010), *Public Relations: A Managerial Perspective* (2011) and *Share This: The Social Media Handbook for PR Professionals* (2012). He is founding chair of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations Social Media Panel.