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Introduction

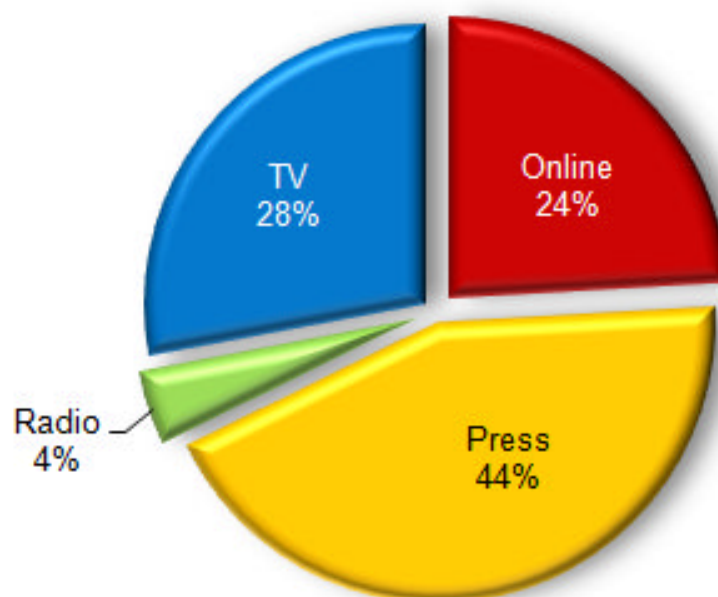
A recent survey by the [Council for Public Relations Firms](#) identified that PR practitioners need to become more adept at business strategy and become more quantitative and measurement-orientated. This strategy means PRO's needs to account for their time in the same way that many other business services have to. To do this measurement metrics need to become more sophisticated and critical.

“Chief information officers are paying datacenter and hosting providers on the basis of uptime and petabytes of data storage. Jet engine manufacturers are selling operating hours, not jet engines, to the airlines. It’s only a matter of time before clients expect the same from their communications’ providers.” Barbara Bates from Eastwick Communications.

The client-side pressures are mounting for accurate accountable metrics which present true worth; increasingly to the point of impacting on PRO remuneration. Similarly demanding is the media environment where online capabilities has increased news transit speeds, creating multiple niche operators, in which every move is recorded with an indelible data trail.

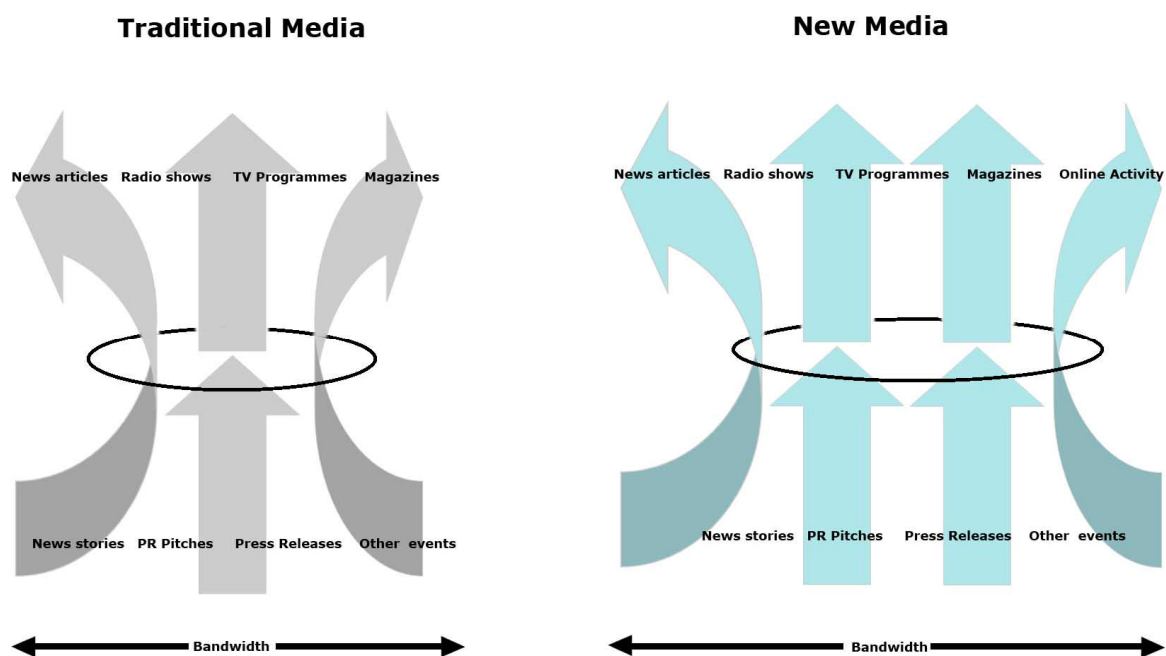
Contrasting traditional and online media

It is important to understand what is currently meant by the term ‘the media’? Twenty years ago this was just about encapsulated by the printed press, plus radio and TV broadcasters. Much has now changed and while offline sources still exist (and have even expanded in number), there is now what is termed new or online media. Undoubtedly the story of last ten years has been the rise of online, but what is its importance? Research by [eMarketeer](#), covering the first half of 2008 for the UK, took advertising spend to calculate the relative importance of these media groups:



While traditional media, composing press, radio and TV, still account for over three-quarters of the media, online is growing and will in time become the dominant medium. However, there is a need to appreciate that these groups are not mutually 'exclusive'. The above pie-chart suggests water tight boundaries between the mediums - something which is inaccurate. Most radio stations, press publications and TV stations are available online in some form. Therefore the reality is more of a media collision, as the world moves from the media 'push' model to that where the user 'pulls'.

Before the early 90's, measuring the media space was easier because of the inherent physical restriction in the number of press titles and broadcasters. It was possible to ring fence the media's impact, making for a more sanitised measurement process. Contrast this with the online environment whose potentially unlimited bandwidth has 'infected' the measurement process introducing massive amounts of additional exposure.



The left-hand diagram above indicates the relative constriction imposed on the traditional media model (represented by the black ring). The right-hand diagram illustrates the far boarder channel now available resulting from the massive bandwidth available online. This recent quote by Tim Johns, VP Corporate Communications at Unilever (*PR Week* 19 September 2008) elaborates on what he believes are the implications for PR:

“We don’t have to rely on the media to reach consumers and stakeholders anymore. This presents the industry with an ideal opportunity to use social media to reclaim the dialogue with the audience”

The challenge for measurement is to find a way of capturing the value of this additional bandwidth. The metrics used in measuring traditional media do not work so well online so it is necessary to think imaginatively to find results which work together, both on and off line. So the metrics need to be

carefully considered, but what of the techniques of measurement – they must also be quite different.

Well, that might be a view on first inspection, but the truth is that the measurement process for online coverage is similar to traditional media but with the additional necessity to consider influence. For example, is it an effective use of resources for a PRO to spend the same amount time dealing with a well-read blog like TechCrunch, as opposed to a small blog with few postings and commentators?

The importance of online influence

Measuring online influence is turning out to be one of the most difficult things to do. The problem is every person or organisation has its own sphere of media influence.... it's multi-dimensional and ever changing. Current thinking is that you might want to substitute the word *influence* for *popularity*; in which case you are in luck and solutions exist: using things like search engine ranking, incoming links, Google Page Rank and Technorati.

The [Arthur W Page Society](#) in a recent report revealed that the lack of an adequate method of measuring ROI was one of the four key reasons preventing budget holders from increasing their commitment to PR activity involving new media. This was supported by the Society for New Communications Research (SNCR) who in their influential White Paper [New Media, New Influencers and Implications for Public Relations](#) found that organisations were measuring themselves through standard internet measures like search engine ranking and web site traffic rather than via audience awareness or impact on bottom-line. The report states that there is the view that awareness is difficult to measure and slow to respond to PR activity compared to the other measures like search engine ranking.

The SNCR report goes on to reveal that there is undoubtedly the view that the lack of industry consensus on standards has forced PRO's to fall back on the metrics which have been seen to work in the past. The study says that the most valued forms of measurement are those that value any enhancement of relationships with key audiences. PRO's also valued any enhancement of reputation, customer awareness programs and comments/posts relevant to the organisations products or services.

Key to the online measurement debate is finding a way of accurately capturing influence. The SNCR report makes it apparent that from a sample of almost 300 PR professionals there was very little consensus on the best criteria for determining influence. Among the wide range of factors cited were quality of content and page views. Factors specific to the blogosphere include relevance of content to the organisations and search engine rank. The top criteria for evaluating a person's influence in online communities and social networks are participation level, frequency of activity and prominence in the market or community. Curiously, measures to account for online engagement were among the least important.

The influence factor was of little relevance a couple of decades ago and it is really only in the last couple of years that it has become such an issue. My view is that it is still very new for PR and the media to understand its real meaning, plus there is the logistical challenge of how to measure it.

Progress will happen only after our leading researchers have submitted their ideas, supported by case studies, leading to some form of consensus on the strategy, tools and the metrics which can be employed. And, just as important, is the need for education for the PR and the greater marketing and media community. They need to appreciate the importance of influence and what can be done to track it, as well as their limitations.

Automated evaluation of social media

Presently it seems like there is seldom a week passing without a new automated evaluation product launching. Many of these services concentrate on the quantitative measures which allow users to archive their online coverage, filter by date, segment the coverage in generic media groups and even establish some measure of audience impact. Where I am most uncomfortable is when it comes to these services trying to assign favourability.

Anecdotally, I recently took a trial of one of these services (best left unnamed!) and called up a series of online newspaper articles on the giant US insurer AIG who recently got a multi-billion dollar Government handout to stay in business. On balance none of the articles were favourable towards the organisation but half were deemed neutral or favourable by the online system. I also called up an article with the headline “Experts conclude Pfizer manipulated studies”. The system deemed the article neutral about Pfizer. The way these systems work is they look for certain emotive verbs within the same sentence as the organisation name appears. It looks for words like *disaster* or *bad* or *agreeable* or *successful*, assigning a favourability score on this basis. Of course this is a simplification of the truth and as their ‘sophisticated algorithms’ are developed I am sure they will increase their accuracy.

An opportunity for semantic analysis

Over the past year I have become a big fan of anyone prepared to try and take semantic technology mainstream. One such organisation is the [Open Calais](#) initiative from Thomson Reuters. Technology which does RDF tagging is not the most engaging of subjects but their series of tools allow even the layman to appreciate its potential. Although it is still early days, undoubtedly semantic analysis is the future of automated evaluation.

It is probably easier to explain what semantic analysis is with an example. Let’s take the organisation Saga, who provide financial and travel services to the over 50’s. Online monitoring for their coverage is fraught because the word *saga* appears in so many irrelevant contexts, like ‘the credit crunch saga’, for example. What an RDF filter does is have a directory of names and organisation and business phrases pre-installed along with an indication of context. Importantly, this centrally located repository of *contexts* is not only being added to all the time, but the system is learning more about the contexts in which these things are being referred to.

The screen grab below is from a page featuring an article in the *Financial Times* which features references to Saga underlined in red (denoting the reference has been tagged as an organisation).

The screenshot shows a web interface for semantic analysis. At the top left is the 'calais' logo with 'Powered by Reuters' underneath. Below the logo are two buttons: 'Show RDF' and 'Entry Page'. On the left side, there are two panels: 'Entities' and 'Events & Facts'. The 'Entities' panel has a list of categories: Company, Country, Industry Term, and Person, each with a plus sign and a checkmark. The 'Events & Facts' panel has a list: Merger, Person Professional, and Quotation, each with a plus sign and a checkmark. The main content area on the right displays an article snippet. The title is 'The Financial Times Limited 2008'. The date is '2008-07-17'. The body text starts with 'Merged Saga and AA benefits from 'grey pound' resilience'. Below this, it says 'By Pan Kwan Yuk' and 'Published: July 9 2008 03:00 | Last updated: July 9 2008 03:00'. The article text continues: 'Acromas, the specialist in insurance and holidays for the over-50s, gave proof yesterday that for all the econ... Turnover at the privately held company, which was formed from last year's merger of Saga and AA, rose 4.1... Andrew Goodsell, chief executive, said the company had seen little impact from the credit crunch, with trad...

I strongly believe that this style of semantic analysis will be applicable far beyond making monitoring better. I hope we may get to the point where it will be able to accurately understand context references, assign better favourability scores and even spot for the presence of organisational key messages.

Concluding thoughts

The [SNCR](#) report found that over half of the PRO's questioned currently measure the effects of their social media initiatives. There is an ongoing debate about the applicability of conventional metrics to new media and the lack of a clearly defined best practice for the measurement of social media is a cause for concern. And finally, the current lack of standards will remain until such times as some form of international industry wide consensus develops.

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