

PR's future looks increasingly mobile, social

Mobile consumption of information, our shift from newspapers to tablets and smartphones, were a final tipping point in the scales of print and online, old and new media. This evolution has provoked vast changes to consumers' reading habits and the overall media landscape, and will pose challenges in how communicators serve clients and engage the public.

By Matt Zachowski

There's long been an unwritten rule on any train that leaves Connecticut on New Haven's Metro-North line before 8 a.m.: no talking. Instead, people sleep, or — in the case of perhaps two-thirds of the commuters on any given morning — they read the newspaper.

If were you to step into the typical New Haven line railroad car back in early 2010, you would've been greeted by the sight of sleep-deprived passengers grappling with ungainly print newspapers, hands covered in newsprint, carefully trying to spread the pages without smacking the adjacent passenger in the face.

Fast forward to 2015. On the same Metro-North train some five years later, print newspapers have pretty much gone the way of the Bar Car, replaced with tablets and smartphones. The latter can pretty much do anything a tablet can do, if you like looking at typeface the size of a speck and scrolling until your thumb falls off. This is something many people — particularly younger people — apparently enjoy, because smartphones seem to outnumber tablets on the train these days by two-to-one.

Of course, the changes in behavior evident by commuters on the New Haven line mirror changes our society as a whole has undergone over the past five years. Gartner Group forecasts that tablets will outsell PCs in 2015, joining smartphones, which long ago passed PCs. Almost 1.5 billion smartphones will be sold worldwide in 2015, as opposed to some 300 million PCs. This shift to mobile consumption of data and information has been the tipping point in a parallel shift from print to online media, and from "old" to "new" media.

Consider this: roughly two-thirds of the subscribers to the *Financial Times* today are online rather than print. It's a sea change from 2010, when three-quarters of the FT's audience was made up of print subscribers. The *Wall Street Journal* has had a similar experience. In 2010, 20% of WSJ subscribers were online; today the figure is roughly 40%.

We all know that the Internet was not invented in 2010; *Financial Times* and the

Wall Street Journal had websites back then that updated the news throughout the day, just like today. It was the boom in mobile devices — itself made possible by the build-out of Wi-Fi networks — that marked the beginning of the end for print.

But, as the saying goes, it gets worse. The move to mobile also spawned the so-called "app economy." And just like that, mobile applications like Google News and social media sites like Twitter, Linked-In and even Facebook became "legitimate" rivals to long-established brands as sources for news, particularly among younger, digital-oriented consumers of information.

My kids, now both in their 20s, almost never pick up a print publication. They get their news directly from digital sources or aggregators like Google News. As Baby Boomers move into retirement and Millennials dominate the work force, this trend will dramatically accelerate.

And why not? After all, reading the print edition of the morning paper is, in fact, reading yesterday's news. Relying on print media for your news today puts you "out of the loop," like someone without a television in the 1950s. Back then, not knowing what Sid Caesar did on "Your Show of Shows" was like not knowing today that the U.S. and Iran reached a nuclear agreement overnight.

Print media today represents "old news." Events that shape the world today are seeded in digital and social arenas. If I were running the *Wall Street Journal* or *USA Today* right now, I would be aggressively planning for a media landscape that did not include print.

Certainly, they are already experimenting with new forms of content, responding creatively as their business is transformed. Even the *New York Times* in August launched a program incorporating so-called "paid posts" into its editorial pages — thinly disguised advertising that was once anathema to any respectable news outlet. But the ability to creatively incorporate paid content and advertising will likely be critical to surviving the changes over the next decade. Successful newcomers haven't had to make this transition. For

them, Web 2.0 is part of their DNA.

The rapid shift from print to mobile over the past five years has spawned pushback. Many financial industry firms — arguably, a somewhat conservative lot — continue to value print coverage over online coverage. Somehow print coverage seems more tangible; you can hold it in your hands, even smudge the newsprint if you like.

Academics have also weighed in on this issue. Andrew Piper of McGill University argued that online reading "isn't reading" because of the loss of the tactile experience inherent in a book or a newspaper. "The touch of the page brings us into the world," he said, "while the screen keeps us out." In a *New Yorker* article last fall, Maria Konnarkova claimed that we tend to skim more and retain less reading online than on paper. Whether or not this represents the last gasp of the bourgeoisie, I'm not certain, but it is hard to miss that sweeping change in the media landscape is on the near horizon.

The challenges facing PR firms as a consequence of this are numerous. Traditional media will still exist a decade from now but will be transformed. As social media matures, there will be more "citizen journalists." These individuals will both cover the news and serve as opinion makers.

Companies will likely use social media to release news directly to their constituents and "followers." Partly as a result, media of every type will be forced to adopt the AP's longstanding motto: "A deadline every minute." Meanwhile, journalists will likely distinguish themselves more on the basis of their news focus than on the publication for which they write. Freelancing will become a profession, not just expediency.

Amidst this transformation, the basic focus of PR will remain the same. Its role will always be to create messages, shape narratives and deliver content to targeted audiences through the media in whatever forms it may exist. But the landscape will be different and the challenges will be significant.

Successful PR firms will need to be more flexible, more creative, and more focused on the present than ever before.

Matt Zachowski is Executive Chairman at Intermarket Communications. ○



Matt Zachowski