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Which media set the news agenda: Mass media or/and social media?

An independent research report sponsored by iSentia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

Media provide a megaphone for the voice of individuals and organisations and mass media – press, radio and television – have been the dominant channels of public communication for the past century.

However, the collapse of traditional media business models, which has triggered what many media academics and practitioners are calling a ‘crisis in journalism’¹, and the rapid growth of social media use, is substantially changing practices such as journalism, public relations and corporate and marketing communication.

The popularity of social media and networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest and Instagram is spurring the growth of ‘owned media’ and potentially allowing corporations and organisations to set the news agenda – both directly and through intermediation and remediation (i.e., mass media sourcing leads and republishing content from social media).

On the other hand, some claim that social media are largely ‘parasitic’, deriving much or most of their information and topics from mass media.

THE MILLION DOLLAR RESEARCH QUESTION:

Which media primarily set the news agenda today?

A major question with relevance for governments, corporations and organisations today is **which media primarily set the news agenda today?** The answer to this question significantly informs media and communication strategy.

iSentia commissioned an independent review of research literature worldwide to examine the latest data on news sources and the relationship between mass media (also referred to as mainstream and traditional media) and social media (also referred to as new media).

Findings of this research are summarised in Part 1 of this report.

Secondly, iSentia analysed mass media and social media reporting and discussion of three major news events to identify the timing and focus of information distributed. Findings of this analysis are summarised in Part 2 of this report.

KEY FINDINGS

The 24 hour news cycle is an illusion – there is no news ‘cycle’ – today we live in an age of **ambient news**. News and information criss-cross, intersect, collide, conflict, and coalesce online and offline with no single originating point.

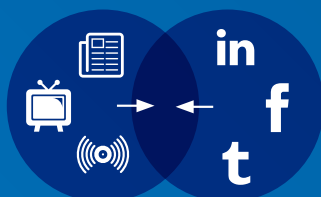


The news breaking potential of traditional vs social media varies according to:

- The scale of news – major events are well covered by traditional media, although disasters will often be first reported through social media
- Relationship to officialdom – government and corporate stories are “spoon fed” to journalists
- Geography – traditional media focus on city centre news while social media often break other news
- Community issues – ‘sleeper’ local issues often bubble through social channels before gaining traditional media prominence.



Content should no longer be categorised **by platform or traditional labels**. Content creators increasingly work across all platforms. A more useful approach is to identify content as professional or citizen produced.



IT IS SIMPLISTIC TO VIEW MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS OPPOSITIONAL – THESE FORMS OF MEDIA ARE INCREASINGLY INTERCONNECTED AND INTERRELATED.

Individual social media audiences are overwhelmingly very small (97% of Twitter accounts have less than 100 followers), **so the volume of items, and even who breaks news first, are not the main considerations; audience reach and credibility are more important factors in analysing impact.**

1

SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY GOVERNMENTS, CORPORATIONS AND ORGANISATIONS AS WELL AS INDIVIDUALS IS GROWING RAPIDLY AND IS BECOMING COMMON PRACTICE. FOR EXAMPLE:

A recent McKinsey survey of 3,542 executives globally found that **83% of companies use at least one social media technology**. According to McKinsey, companies extensively use online video conferencing (60%), social networks (53%), blogs (43%), video sharing (41%), wikis (26%), microblogging (25%) and podcasts (25%)².

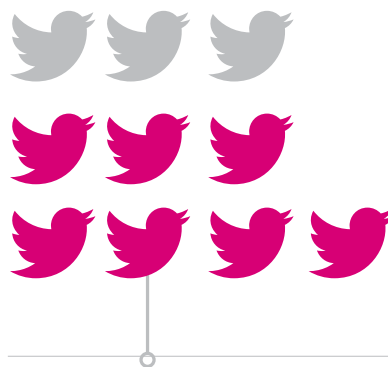
Academic research into social media adoption by Fortune 500 companies conducted by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research each year since 2008 reported that, in 2012, 73% of Fortune 500 companies had a Twitter account and had tweeted in the previous 30 days, 66% had a Facebook community page, 62% had a corporate YouTube account, and 28% had a corporate blog³.

In 2011, IBM declared itself a “social business” in a white paper titled The Social Business: Advent of a New Age⁴.

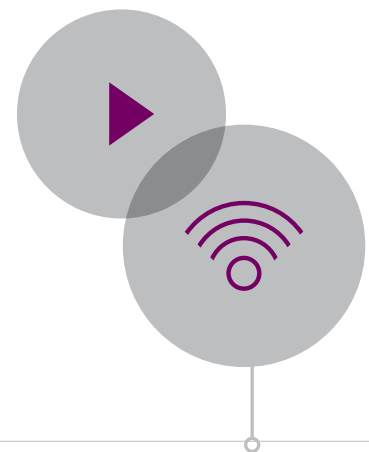
Also in 2011, Gartner Inc. published a book titled The Social Organisation: How to Use Social Media to Tap the Collective Genius of Your Customers and Employees⁵.



83% OF COMPANIES USE AT LEAST ONE SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGY²



73% OF FORTUNE 500 COMPANIES HAD A TWITTER ACCOUNT AND HAD TWEETED IN THE PREVIOUS 30 DAYS



62% OF FORTUNE 500 COMPANIES HAD A CORPORATE YOUTUBE ACCOUNT, AND 28% HAD A CORPORATE BLOG

2

SOCIAL MEDIA ARE HAVING SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON NEWS AGENDAS AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION, AS SHOWN BY NUMEROUS MUCH-PUBLICISED EXAMPLES. FOR INSTANCE:

When **US Airways Flight 1549** was forced to crash-land in the Hudson River in 2009, it was photos taken by ferry passenger Janis Krums on a mobile phone and posted on Twitpic that provided the mass media and the world with the first images and record of the event⁶.

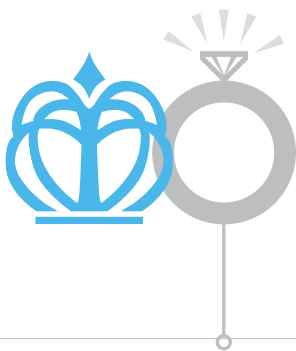
Despite the vast 'army' of entertainment reporters based in Los Angeles, the news of **Michael Jackson's death** in June 2009 came from the social news Web site, TMZ and was passed on to millions of people around the world via Twitter and other social media⁷.

News of the death of **Osama Bin Laden** in 2011 was broken on Twitter when a neighbour tweeted complaining about the noise next door when US security forces attacked Bin Laden's hiding place⁸.

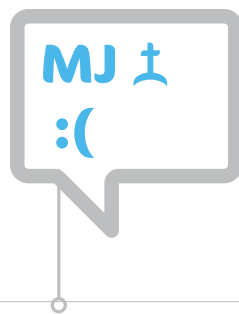
Twenty-seven minutes before mainstream media broke the news of singer-actor **Whitney Houston's death** in 2012, the story was on Twitter, reported by a man who tweeted the news to his 14 followers⁹.

When Clarence House (@ClarenceHouse) announced the engagement of **Prince William to Catherine (Kate) Middleton** on 16 November 2010, the Royal Family 'tweeted' the announcement, as well as releasing an official statement¹⁰.

The success of democracy movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Iran and Syria referred to as **the 'Arab Spring'** has been attributed in significant part to social media. Wael Ghonim, former marketing manager for Google who created the Facebook page that helped organise the uprising in Egypt, said in an interview on CNN "I want to meet Mark Zuckerberg one day and thank him...if you want to liberate a society just give them the internet"¹¹.



THE ROYAL FAMILY 'TWEETED'
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THE NEWS OF MICHAEL
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3

RESEARCH BY PEW RESEARCH CENTER INDICATES THAT NEWS CONSUMPTION AND AGENDA SETTING REMAINS LARGELY FOCUSED ON MASS MEDIA, BUT IS ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE.

For example, in its 2012 State of the News Media report, which presented 2011 data, the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism noted that **television continued to dominate as a source of news** for most people and that the majority of internet users most often went directly to a news media organisation Web site (36%), used key word search for news (32%), or went to a news aggregation site (29%) when seeking news online. Only a relatively small percentage used Facebook or Twitter to find news (9%)¹².

However, in its 2013 State of the News Media report, the Pew Research Center found a shift, reporting that a significant percentage of people have noticed a decline in quantity and quality of news reported by mass media because of cutbacks in journalistic staff and have "stopped reading, watching or listening to a news source because of it". Almost one-third **[31%] of Americans say that they have deserted a mass media news outlet because it no longer provides the news and information that they were accustomed to and need**¹³.

Significantly, this trend is most pronounced among **higher educated and more highly paid/wealthier citizens** – a noteworthy trend for businesses and organisations.

Also, as widely reported, the shift to online – and to social media in particular – is most pronounced amongst **younger demographics**.

In its latest study of News Media Consumption in the US, the Pew Research Center reported that **online news consumption rose sharply between 2011 and 2012**, with 50% of people obtaining their news online – slightly less than television, but well ahead of newspapers (29%) and radio (33%). This study found that **19% of respondents gained news and information from social media** and networks such as blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter) and Facebook. Another 8% said they had listened to a podcast to access news and information¹⁴.



ONE-THIRD OF AMERICANS SAY THAT THEY HAVE DESERTED A MASS MEDIA NEWS OUTLET¹³



BETWEEN 2011 AND 2012... 50% OF PEOPLE OBTAINED THEIR NEWS ONLINE



THE SHIFT TO ONLINE – AND TO SOCIAL MEDIA IN PARTICULAR – IS MOST PRONOUNCED AMONGST YOUNGER DEMOGRAPHICS

3

RESEARCH BY PEW RESEARCH CENTER INDICATES THAT NEWS CONSUMPTION AND AGENDA SETTING REMAINS LARGELY FOCUSED ON MASS MEDIA, BUT IS ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE.

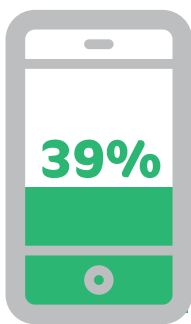
In the UK, a 2011 report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford concluded that “social media are beginning to rival search as a way of discovering news content in the UK”¹⁵.

An important trend that is driving the shift to digital media, including social media, is the **growth of mobile devices**. In 2012, 39% of Americans obtained news from a mobile device – up from 34% in 2010.

While noting that the number of people relying primarily or substantially on social media for news is still relatively small, the Pew Research Center also noted that, even when people use mass media as their primary site for sourcing news, **sharing of news** (a ‘pass along’ effect) through social media substantially increases distribution and audiences¹⁶.

The 2011 report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford also drew attention to the importance of **referrals** from social media to mass media through the posting of comments and links. The Reuters Institute reported that “the average [mass media] news site receives 7.5% of traffic from Facebook alone”¹⁷.

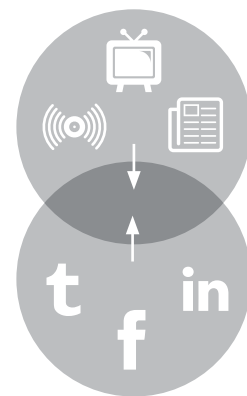
The growing roles of social media as a direct source of news, as well as for sharing news and providing referrals to mass media, indicates that it is simplistic to view mass media and social media as oppositional – these forms of media are increasingly interconnected and interrelated.



IN 2012, 39% OF AMERICANS OBTAINED NEWS FROM A MOBILE DEVICE



SHARING OF NEWS...THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASES DISTRIBUTION AND AUDIENCES¹⁶



IT IS SIMPLISTIC TO VIEW MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS OPPOSITIONAL – THESE FORMS OF MEDIA ARE INCREASINGLY INTERCONNECTED AND INTERRELATED

4

A NUMBER OF STUDIES SHOW THAT SOCIAL MEDIA ARE LARGELY DERIVATIVE AND PARASITIC – I.E., THEY FOLLOW TOPICS REPORTED IN MASS MEDIA AND EVEN SOURCE CONTENT FROM MASS MEDIA.

This has been anecdotally claimed by a number of editors and journalists – e.g., Oliver Kamm in The Guardian.

A 2008 study by academic Alvin Goldman reported that blogging in particular is reliant on mass media for content¹⁸.

Similarly, a 2009 academic study of traditional media and blogs reported that “traditional media entities still account for the lion’s share of blog links, with only four of the top 20 sites representing citizen media” – i.e., bloggers mainly link to major mass media¹⁹.

More recently, a 2011 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report stated that “mainstream media content is the lifeblood of topical social media conversations in the UK – providing the vast majority of news links that are shared.” Furthermore, the Reuters Institute noted that even when social media do not directly follow mass media coverage, they are influenced by mass media coverage²⁰.

One of the most extensive quantitative studies of the news cycle examined memes (themes, key concepts and phrases) on 1.6 million mass media Web pages and independent blogs over a three-month period in 2009, tracking a total of 90 million articles. This found that memes first appear in mass media in most cases and then diffuse to the blogosphere. In only 3.5% of cases did stories appear first in blogs and subsequently appear in mainstream media²¹. However, the study also found that **mass media are slower to take up an issue than social media, and quicker to drop it. Social media (blogs in particular were examined in this study), quickly take up memes and discuss them for much longer.** This illustrates a ‘long tail’ of social media discussion, which should be noted by organisations and businesses.



MAINSTREAM MEDIA
CONTENT IS THE LIFE BLOOD
OF TOPICAL SOCIAL MEDIA
CONVERSATIONS IN THE UK



IN ONLY 3.5% OF CASES
DID STORIES APPEAR FIRST
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APPEAR IN MAINSTREAM
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MASS MEDIA ARE SLOWER
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5

MORE RECENT RESEARCH SHOWS THAT SOCIAL MEDIA SET THEIR OWN AGENDA AND THAT THEY ARE INCREASINGLY BEING USED AS A SOURCE OF LEADS AND NEWS BY MASS MEDIA.

The examples cited under Finding 2 amply illustrate this on a national and even global scale.

Research undertaken for a PhD by former journalist now Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina, Brendan Watson, and presented in a paper to the 2012 Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication (AEJMC) conference in the US concluded: *"This study of 100 blogs found that contrary to media assertions and prior research, local public affairs bloggers do not rely on newspapers for a majority of their sources. Bloggers in this study were more likely to use original sources and original reporting than rely on media sources, particularly when writing about local topics [that] the news media frequently ignore."*²²

A 2010 Pew Research Center study found that "the stories and issues that gain traction in social media differ substantially from those that lead in the mainstream press"²³.

In his 2010 book *Insidious Competition: The Battle for Meaning and the Corporate Image*, Richard Telofski said "social media are the birthplace of many stories that make their way into the mainstream media"²⁴. Telofski's warning that **social media are particularly well-suited to 'underdogs' such as activist organisations** should be noted by governments and businesses, and is further discussed in Finding 7.

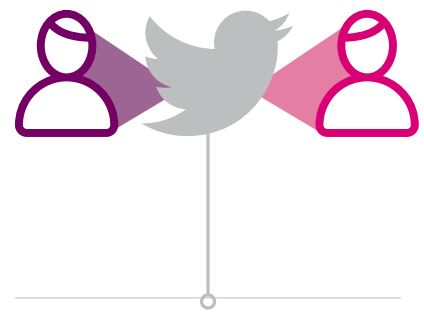
A 2013 academic analysis of reporting on the 2011 London riots by Farida Vis serves as an illustration of a new hybrid model of news that is emerging. Vis reported that journalists extensively used Twitter during the riots to find out about developments, exchange information with citizens, ask questions and check facts by following the Twitter stream through key hashtags such as #ukriots, #tottenham and #tottenhamriots. They also used images and video recorded by citizens on camera phones²⁵. (See Finding 6.)



CONTRARY TO MEDIA
ASSERTIONS AND PRIOR
RESEARCH, LOCAL PUBLIC
AFFAIRS BLOGGERS DO
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SOCIAL MEDIA ARE
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JOURNALISTS EXTENSIVELY
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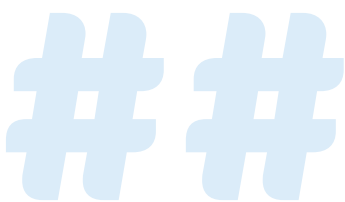
6

INCREASINGLY, MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA ARE INTERDEPENDENT AND NEWS AGENDAS ARE MUTUALLY CONSTITUTIVE. AS JOHN CLARE WROTE IN A 2012 BOOK, "MAINSTREAM MEDIA FEED OFF SOCIAL MEDIA WHICH IN TURN REPACKAGES, RECYCLES AND COMMENTS IN ARTICLES IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA."²⁶

7

IN TERMS OF CORPORATE AND ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS, SOCIAL MEDIA SET OR INFLUENCE THE NEWS AGENDA IN THREE WAYS. THESE COULD BE DESCRIBED AS:

1. **Consumer initiated** – companies and organisations can find themselves criticised or discussed in social media in the way that **McDonalds Restaurants** and **Qantas** (#QantasLuxury) have when consumers responded negatively to corporate tweets and promotions. Also, consumers increasingly post complaints in social media. These may be picked up by mass media.
2. **Employee initiated** (unauthorised) – even with social media governance in place, employees can intentionally or inadvertently post comment in social media that impact the organisation. For example, in 2012, a **Vodafone** employee in Australia working on the telecommunications company's 'Ambassador' program derided customers on Twitter, calling them "mentally retarded" and threatening them with a "pimp slap backhand"²⁷.

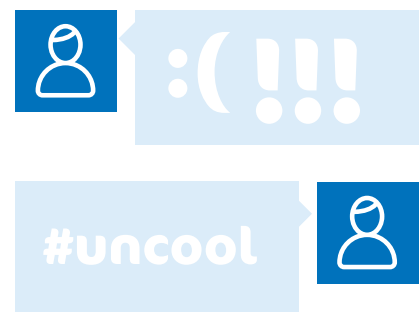


Mc-not-lovin-it
McFail
Mc-UN-happymeal

ORGANISATIONS CAN FIND THEMSELVES CRITICISED OR DISCUSSED IN SOCIAL MEDIA



CONSUMERS INCREASINGLY POST COMPLAINTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA. THESE MAY BE PICKED UP BY MASS MEDIA.

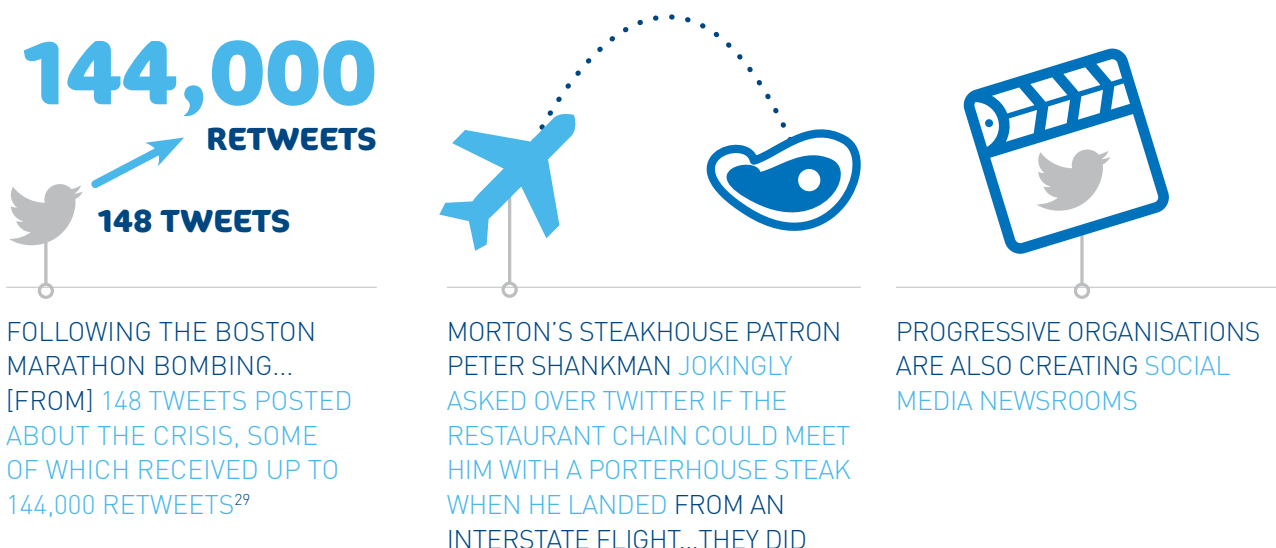


EMPLOYEES CAN INTENTIONALLY OR INADVERTENTLY POST COMMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA THAT IMPACT THE ORGANISATION

3. **Organisation initiated** (official) – increasingly and ideally, organisations are proactively using social media to distribute news and information. For example:
- Following the **Boston Marathon bombing** in 2013, the Boston Police Department turned to social media because of the speed of communication required as information came to hand and events unfolded²⁸. Most news was released by the Boston Police Department on its Website and on social media such as Twitter, with 148 tweets posted about the crisis, some of which received up to 144,000 retweets²⁹.
 - Effective use of social media can also help organisations avoid a crisis. In 2009, when two employees of **Domino's Pizza chain** in Conover, North Carolina, uploaded a video of themselves contaminating food with human excrement, attracting one million views in two days, Domino's Pizza president Patrick Doyle went on YouTube explaining the company actions and saved the company's reputation³⁰.
 - Organisations can also use social media for customer relations and marketing. For example, in 2011 regular **Morton's Steakhouse** patron Peter Shankman jokingly asked over Twitter if the restaurant chain could meet him with a porterhouse steak when he landed from an interstate flight. They did. Not only did this initiative gain wide discussion in social media, but it was picked up by mass media, gaining substantial positive publicity.

A major trend in the second decade of the 21st century is the rapid growth of owned media, particularly owned social media sites. This is leading to an expansion of what it termed **brand or corporate journalism**, as organisations employ specialist content producers to create appealing, interesting sites and increase their efforts to set the agenda of news and public communication.³²

Progressive organisations are also creating **social media newsrooms** which, instead of textual content such as 'news releases', contain rich multimedia content such as videos, images and podcasts (e.g., of speeches) as well as links to documents such as reports, archives and the Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media sites of the organisation³¹.



Mass (traditional/'mainstream') media remain key communication channels because of:

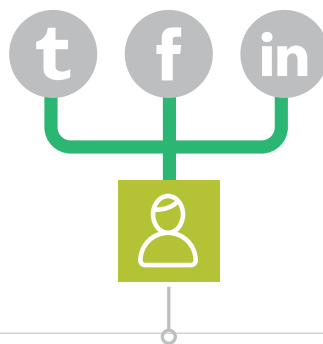
1. The continuing **dominance of TV** as a mass news source overall;
2. The **'newspaper of record' role of leading newspapers**, particularly long-established national and metropolitan dailies and specialist business and financial press, which are seen as authoritative even if their circulation is small and/or declining³³;
3. The **influence of mass media, particularly 'newspapers of record' and television on politicians, policy makers and government** (which is often disproportionate to their actual audience)³⁴;
4. Their **reach into older demographics**.

Social media have become beneficial and increasingly essential communication channels because of:

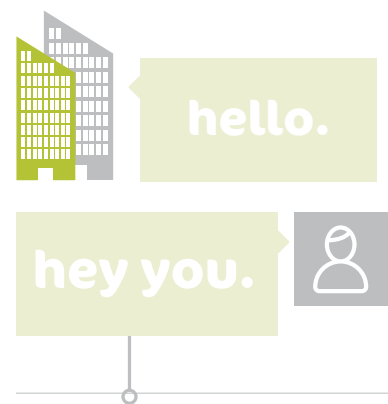
5. The **increasing use of social media as sites of news and information** among an increasing percentage of people;
6. The **heavy use and reliance on social media among young demographics** in particular;
7. The extensive **sharing of news and information** that occurs through social media and social networks, extending the audience of mass media;
8. **Referrals** to major news sites that frequently come through social media (e.g., in online conversations and posting links);
9. The **growing use of social media for customer, employee and citizen initiated public communication**, including comments about brands, products and services.



CONTINUING DOMINANCE OF TV AS A MASS NEWS SOURCE



SHARING OF NEWS AND INFORMATION THAT OCCURS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS



GROWING USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CUSTOMER, EMPLOYEE AND CITIZEN INITIATED PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

1. In addition to the traditional news cycle being obsolete, **the 24-hour news cycle is also an illusion. Today there is no news 'cycle'** – a notion that implies there is a single originating point for stories and that news travels in a pattern with intervals between stages in the cycle.
 - Today, we live in an age of **ambient news**. Stories and commentary can emerge from anyone, anytime, anywhere. News and information criss-cross, intersect, collide, conflict, and coalesce online and offline. Professional content creators draw information from citizens, and citizens redistribute professional content. Mass media organisations use social media and social media use mass media. Professional content producers use social, and non-professionals (amateurs or citizens) use social.

2. **The predominance and news breaking potential of mass media and social media vary according to a number of factors including:**

- The **scale** of news – i.e., big news stories such as resignations of political leaders and catastrophes are typically well-resourced by mass media and a focus of attention (= high mass media coverage);
- Relationship to **officialdom** – i.e., stories originated by government, institutions and corporations such as announcements, appointments, etc. are usually 'spoon-fed' to mass media (= high mass media coverage);
- The **proximity** of news events to mass media centres and 'rounds' (i.e., specialist reporters such as business, finance, IT, etc.) (= high mass media coverage);
- The degree of **direct impact on citizens** (= high social media comment);
- **'Sleeper' issues** that do not have a specific news 'event', such as rising concern about coal seam gas extraction, environmental issues, emergent trends, etc. (= low mass media coverage until an event occurs such as a protest or a high profile spokesperson emerges; can = high use of social media).

The final point above requires further research, but there are strong indications that, while mass media continue to dominate most news breaking overall, social media reflect a range of concerns and views that are not considered 'newsworthy' by mass media until they escalate or erupt. In short, mass media and social might be effective at telling different kinds of stories in different contexts.

3. The preceding conclusions suggest that it is **no longer productive to categorise content by platform or traditional labels**. Content producers increasingly work across platforms and so-called 'mass', 'mainstream' and 'traditional' media producers also use social media to source and distribute their content. These are no longer discrete media spaces. A more useful approach is to identify content as professional or citizen produced (the term 'user' is not of much use either as everyone is a user of media and information). Media are becoming **increasingly hybridised and integrated**. Does it matter where someone speaks – i.e., which platform, which channel, on which technology? It seems more valuable to know who speaks and what they have to say, subjected to protocols to test authority and credibility.

4. A further factor for careful consideration in relation to social media is audience – both size and relevance. While extensive data are available on the audience of mass media (e.g., audited circulation statistics and broadcast program ratings), the size of social media audiences is often small compared with mass media – e.g., 97 per cent of Twitter users had fewer than 200 followers in 2012 and the average Facebook user had 200 friends in 2014. So **the volume of items, and even who is first, are not the main considerations; audience reach and credibility are more important factors in analysing the impact of media content**. This, combined with the previous point, indicate that **source, message and audience analysis are key metrics**, rather than being first and volume of items.

FOOTNOTES

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