

Gatekeepers No More: Redefining the Roles of Journalism and PR  
in the Age of Digital Media and Content Marketing

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Communication

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## Acknowledgements

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When I first began my part-time master's program at the University of Ottawa in September 2011, I had no intention to pursue a thesis. It's not that I didn't see the value in doing a dissertation of this magnitude – I actually had completed an MBA thesis two years prior – it just wasn't an experience I thought I had the ability or stamina to repeat. I was working in the Communications Directorate at uOttawa and was looking for a challenge and an opportunity to gain more knowledge about my field. And so, I applied for a course-based Master of Communication and began my studies.

In summer 2012, I walked into my third M.Comm course, led by Professor Pierre C. Bélanger, ready to learn more about the ecology of connective digital media. Little did I know that my conviction not to pursue an MA thesis would be shattered that day. I sat through the class as Professor Bélanger outlined what we would be learning, the projects and the expectations. I could tell right away – I was going to love this class! At the end of the first lecture I introduced myself to Professor Bélanger. He asked about my job at the University and about the program of study I was pursuing. I told him that I was working as a media relations officer in the Communications Directorate and that I was doing a course-based M.Comm. He shook his head and said, "You should do an MA thesis". My first reaction was "Oohhhhhhhh no, this simply is not going to happen." He proceeded to ask me more about my work. I explained that one of my main responsibilities was to pitch uOttawa stories and research to journalists. Well, one thing led to another, and I was soon talking his ear off about how the traditional media landscape is changing, and that this is affecting the way media relations professionals work and collaborate with journalists. Well, that was it. Within half an hour Professor Bélanger convinced me that somewhere during that conversation I had some great ideas for a thesis, that I should go for it, and that he would be my supervisor. I walked out of that classroom with my head in a fog, and thought, "Why not?"

Since that day, this experience has been a whirlwind of learning, challenges, deep-thinking, questions, answers, emails, calls, meetings and the occasional much-needed pep-talk. This project has not only allowed me to become much more knowledgeable about my topic of study, but has also enabled me to gain a deeper appreciation for scholarly research, and the courage to embrace new and unexpected challenges. I would like to thank Professor Bélanger for being there every step of the way and guiding me to produce a dissertation that I am really proud of. I could not have asked for a better supervisor.

My passion for the fields of communication, marketing and PR has been nurtured by some great colleagues and supervisors throughout the years. However, I would like to give a special thanks to two mentors in particular, who not only contributed to my professional growth and development, but also provided me with a great deal of inspiration. Thank you to Chiara and Drew for always challenging me and encouraging me, and especially for pushing me that little bit harder.

I would also like to recognize the friends and family who have cheered me on along the way. Mom, papa, Sina & Zio Tony thank you for always giving me the confidence to take the road less travelled, to embrace uncertainty and to be a "samurai" of sorts. To my dear friends Maja, Olivia, Sabrina and Jovan – you have each helped me to see the world differently and become a better and stronger person – thanks for all your support throughout the past few years.

Last but not least, I would like to dedicate an ENORMOUS thanks to my husband, Paolo: for always supporting me, understanding me and making me laugh – no matter what. I am so lucky to have you by my side. Ti amo!

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## Abstract

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The digital media landscape has fundamentally changed the way audiences consume and share content, creating many opportunities and challenges for news companies and organizations of all types (private, public and non-profit). This research investigates how the latter have gained the ability to produce and distribute journalistic-like content through their owned channels, thus circumventing journalists and engaging with their audiences directly. It shows how digital media have altered the manner in which news about organizations is disseminated, and, subsequently, the roles of PR practitioners and journalists. Through a series of interviews with seasoned experts in these two competing and collaborating fields, this project provides insights regarding the erosion of journalists' gatekeeping role and the advent of PR practitioners as content creators. It supports prior research regarding the value of reciprocity between journalists and PR practitioners and offers orientations as to the future of these two professions in the context of the digital media landscape.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

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## 1.1 The Issue: Overview and Background

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Digital technology has transformed the way information is produced, consumed, stored and shared (Scott, 2005; McDowell, 2011), giving rise to a new media landscape filled with opportunities and challenges. Traditional news companies have faced a decrease in ad revenues and subscriptions, causing them to re-examine their business models, scale back their operations and do more with less (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012). They are also adapting their structures and content to favour an environment which is participatory, mobile, and increasingly personalized (Ingram, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Purcell, 2011; Lavrusik, 2010).

Journalists are feeling the pressure to produce content for multiple platforms, and find ways to operationalize one of the leading dogmas of the digital age: produce once, distribute many times. They must also interact with their audiences despite less time and resources. This stems from a shift in consumer preferences: audiences are increasingly looking to social media feeds, blogs and niche sites for unique content (Lavrusik, 2010), and want to be engaged (Capozzi & Zipfel, 2012). News no longer follows the unidirectional “we write, you read” model (Karlsson, 2011). Moreover, it takes the form of two-way and often multidirectional interactions (Sheeba, 2011). Digital media have given individuals and organizations the ability to become publishers in their own right (Berlin, Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011). The latter use their owned media platforms to create and disseminate valuable content for their target audiences, which can be used to stimulate user-generated content (Brugn et al., 2012) as well as social media

conversations. As such, digital media is reshaping journalists' gatekeeping role (Fletcher et al., 2012, Avery et al. 2010).

Although earned media<sup>1</sup> continues to be a priority (Cision, 2011), content marketing<sup>2</sup> or brand journalism by way of organizations' owned media<sup>3</sup> channels is becoming increasingly prevalent to reach and interact with consumers. These trends have also had an impact on paid media (advertising), which no longer carries the same weight since it involves direct promotion in a world where audiences are looking for storytelling and engagement (Corcoran, 2009). Trends in paid media will not be touched upon in this research, as the focus is on content marketing and the roles and relationships of PR and journalism.

Content marketing via owned media channels provides audiences with unique, multimedia content that they can share with their networks (Bonn, 2012). Public relations practitioners within private, public and non-profit organizations are taking on a content-producing and disseminating role, resembling that of journalists. This development raises several questions regarding the roles and relationships of journalists and PR practitioners and the extent to which organizations are likely to seek earned media coverage.

PR practitioners and journalists have always had a complex but symbiotic relationship (Macnamara, 2009; Turner, 2011; Kintzler, 2012), which has been a topic of research for over 80 years (Macnamara, 2009). With the rise of digital media, their roles and relationships have

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<sup>1</sup> **Earned media:** media coverage on others' properties including mainstream (news) media and social media channels without payment or control (Menayan, 2013). PR professionals often pitch their stories to journalists to obtain earned media coverage in mainstream or niche news outlets.

<sup>2</sup> **Content marketing/brand journalism:** a marketing technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action (Content Marketing Institute Website, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> **Owned media:** content on an organization's own properties that they have complete control over, but that is limited to the reach of their properties' viewership (Forrester, 2009).

become more intricate than ever. This has prompted the disintermediation of journalists, as PR practitioners now have the ability to bypass traditional media and reach their target audiences directly, with journalistic-like content via their owned channels (Avery et al., 2010). Meanwhile, journalists have greater access to information, but are faced with having to multitask in an increasingly competitive environment. As the roles of journalists and PR practitioners progressively converge (Reich, 2010), there is much discussion with regards to how these roles will be recast and what the optimal relationship between these two professions in the digital era should look like.

This research endeavors to study the digital media landscape, the power it has given organizations to communicate directly with their audiences, and the impact this has had on the roles and relationships of journalists and PR practitioners.

## **1.2 Theoretical underpinnings**

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Although the trend of content marketing and the use of owned media has only become prevalent in the past couple of years, some of the theories that relate to journalism and PR can be applied to the changing dynamics that digital media has brought to these two trades. For example, Grunig and Hunt's *Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations (2009)* is well-suited to represent the methods being used by PR practitioners in the digital era, since they are taking on an increasingly transparent, dialogical and audience-focussed approach. PR practitioners are engaging directly with their audiences, and using inclusive and discursive tactics as opposed to the unidirectional, persuasive ones this discipline was previously associated with (Turney, 1998). This shift was prompted by the advent of social media, since it has given

consumers and audiences the power to filter their content and decide what they need and want to know, often based on their preferences and on social recommendations (Fletcher et al, 2012).

Digital media has given individuals and organizations the ability to exert an influence on audiences that was not previously possible. This has, to some extent, lessened journalists' gatekeeping role (Fletcher et al, 2012), since anyone can essentially be a publisher. Of course, not every individual or organization who publishes can or will gain a following. However, those who already have a certain amount of credibility and expertise now have platforms through which they can share with their audiences. This relates to the *Agenda Setting Theory* (1968), whose main tenet was that the media decide the relative importance of news, causing audiences to assign more weight to certain topics, depending on how they are covered (Riaz, 2008). Although research has shown that PR practitioners have always had a significant impact on setting the agenda (Morton, Tindall & Waters, 2010), because they provide journalists with content, their influence is now heightened since they have the ability to reach their target audience without necessarily going through journalists.

Castells (2007) describes how digital and connective media have disrupted the "single axis" system that traditionally gave the media power to act as gatekeepers, creating a "multi-axiality" of power whereby individuals and organizations can bypass the media and benefit from the rise of mass self-communication by directly reaching their audiences.

The research question and methodology of this study were formed taking into consideration these theoretical contexts and relating back to them. The following section describes the main research question and the methodology used to address it.

### **1.3 Central Research Question and Summary of the Methodology**

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This research study aims to answer the following question: ***In what ways have new digital media altered the manner in which news about organizations is disseminated, and, subsequently, the roles of PR practitioners and journalists?***

In order to address this question, two sets of interview protocol were developed based on a thorough literature review. The first set of protocol was used to interview five PR practitioners with diverse backgrounds on both the agency and client side. The second set of protocol was used to interview five journalists, who all had experience with major Canadian news organizations.

The interviews took place in July 2013 and consisted of one sixty-minute session with each participant. Each session was recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The data was then manually organized, categorized and coded for analysis. Please refer to Chapter 3 for a full description of the methodology.

### **1.4 Structure of this Thesis**

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This research study consists of six chapters. Chapter two covers a comprehensive review of the literature on the new media landscape; the digital news consumer and how digital media are changing the way news companies and journalists operate. It then goes on to describe the impact digital media have had on organizations of all types and how they have given rise to the trend of content marketing through owned media channels. This chapter subsequently looks at the role of the PR practitioner in modern organizations and the dynamics of the relationship

between journalists and PR practitioners in the digital era. Finally, chapter two describes the conceptual framework and rationale for this study.

Chapter three elaborates the methodology used to conduct the empirical research. It consists of an overview and justification of the process, followed by a description of the data collection and data analysis stages. The chapter concludes with a critical perspective of the study, which outlines the methodological challenges that were encountered and the considerations for future research in this area.

Chapter four presents the results of the interviews and analyses the data collected. As for chapter five, it provides an in-depth discussion which compares the research collected in the literature review to the findings that resulted from the interviews.

Finally, chapter six presents the main conclusions and recommendations regarding the future of the journalist-PR practitioner dynamic. Suggestions regarding possibilities for future research are also brought forth.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

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### **2.1 The New Media Landscape: How Digital Technology has Changed News and Media**

The new media landscape is characterized by multi-way communication, information sharing, personalized service, rapidity, collaborative work and metrics (Sheeba, 2011). News organizations of all sizes are faced with several challenges including a decrease in revenues and human resources, greater time constraints and competition. (Kintzler, 2012; McDowell, 2011). As the saying goes, they are continuously having to “do more with less” (Odden, 2011). Digital technologies have disrupted how news content is gathered, created, disseminated, consumed and shared (McDowell, 2011), and media convergence has given consumers the ability to access content through a variety of platforms based on their needs (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.342). In fact, “most audiences and advertisers regard news as a common commodity that can be acquired from a number of acceptable sources, often for free” (McDowell, 2011, p. 38). This has left media organizations scrambling to find alternative models to disseminate news and remain profitable as circulation and ad revenues continue to decline (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012). Experimentation with paywalls, micropayments and user-generated content to make news more “collaborative, open-ended, inclusive, and self-generating” (McDowell, 2011) is commonplace and often a matter of survival amongst modern news companies. In fact, in 2011 many outlets took on new initiatives to monetize the web: the Associated Press partnered with over two dozen news companies to license its content and 10% of U.S. dailies have launched digital subscriptions or pay walls (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012). In 2012 additional news outlets have turned to digital subscriptions in order to maintain their readership and survive (Mitchell &

Rosentiel, 2012). Research shows, however, that getting consumers to pay for digital-only content remains a challenge (Gardner, 2012).

According to a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, 92% of American adults get their news from a blend of on- and offline platforms on a daily basis. What's more, the majority of online news consumers do not express loyalties to a specific news source – in fact, 65% say that they do not have a preferred website. News is increasingly social, mobile and personalized (Ingram, 2012; Gardner, 2012, Purcell, 2011; Lavrusik, 2010). As a result, journalism is produced to favour more fast-paced, instantaneous, mobile consumption (Peters, 2012, p.699).

Technology has reduced barriers to entry for content creation and diffusion, by making high quality tools widely available and often exceptionally inexpensive when they are not simply free of charge. “The result has been that many amateur creations look amazingly professional” (McDowell, 2011, p.44). Audiences are now an integral part of the news process by engaging with journalists and other news consumers, sharing or contributing content. They are increasingly involved in a process that was previously reserved for journalists (Karlsson, 2011, p. 279). This has raised the question of whether user-generated content decreases the value of professional, paid journalism (McDowell, 2011, p.44), and how it fits into existing newsroom logistics (Jönsson & Örenbring, 2011, p.128).

News aggregators, RSS feeds and search engines (McDowell, 2011), as well as social media applications like Flipboard and Paper.li that allow audiences to tailor the type of news they receive and essentially create their own news feeds (Ingram, 2011) have also challenged the role of traditional news sites. According to a 2010 study on news and information consumption, the most popular features on news sites are those that allow users to interact with, share and

customize news (Purcell, 2011). It's no wonder that news organizations such as Reuters, The Washington Post and The Guardian are partnering with major technology players such as Facebook and YouTube as a means to make their content more social (Mitchell & Rosentiel, 2012). Finding ways to monetize interactivity, user-generated content and online communities has also become a concern (Jönsson & Örenbring, 2011, p.127).

## **2.2 The Digital Consumer**

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### **2.2.1 Consumers want to be engaged**

CScape's (2009) Customer Engagement Report found that "engaged customers will recommend a company's brand, convert more readily and purchase more often. Furthermore, the study revealed that 75 percent of companies agree that the importance they attach to online customer engagement has increased in the last 12 months" (Capozzi & Zipfel, 2012, p.338).

Consumers' relationship to news is also changing as a result of the Internet and mobile technologies (Mitchell et al., 2010). A 2010 study from the Pew Research Centre on the participatory news consumer reveals that news is becoming portable, personalized and participatory (Mitchell et al., 2010). Nowadays, consumers of news prefer "short form, media-rich experiences" (Kintzsler, 2012) and social media is the perfect tool to deliver these bites of information. A study on the social media news consumer in Canada showed that two-fifths of social media consumers said they receive news from people they follow on networks like Facebook, and one fifth received news from journalists and media they follow (Fletcher et al, 2012, p. 815). Consumers have also demonstrated a preference for aggregators, which offer little nuggets of everything without going into too much depth.

Social media is also taking on an important role in shaping consumers' purchasing behaviours by significantly augmenting the impact of word-of-mouth marketing (Earnst & Young, 2012), allowing organizations to reach global audiences and engage with them in dialogic communication (Avery et al., 2010, p.189). Organizations use social media to interact with consumers and other stakeholders and build conversations around their products and services (Earnst & Young, 2012). A recent survey by UK agency, Content+, found that 60% of consumers feel more positive about an organization after reading custom content on its site (Webber, 2012).

### ***2.2.2 Consumers want unique content from the media and organizations***

McDowell emphasizes that while journalists still believe in McLuhan's time-tested adage that the medium is the message, the more progressive, brand-conscious ones suggest that though technology is necessary, it is not enough to give a media the sustainable edge it needs. Unique content, on the other hand, can be more brand-exclusive, and consequently, harder to replicate by competitors (McDowell, 2011, p.46). This is why compelling journalism from reputed news companies is still important, as it is the type of news people seek to share.

Consumers increasingly follow organizations and brands on owned<sup>4</sup> blogs and social media platforms, and look to these organizations for original and stimulating content. In addition, content created by private, public and non-profit organizations can be utilized to stimulate user-

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<sup>4</sup> **Owned media** refers to media channels that an organization or brand controls (i.e. company website, blog, social media channels (Corcoran, 2009).

generated content on their digital platforms (Bruhn et al., 2012, p. 782). This is why many organizations are using their owned media channels to produce unique content for their target audiences. The trend of content marketing and the use of owned media by organizations to communicate directly with their key publics will be investigated in subsequent sections.

### ***2.2.3 Consumers want to share in online communities***

Now more than ever, audiences have a desire to communicate their interests, passions and opinions to their peers. Online communities and the growth of mobile devices and networks have amplified this trend. “If searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next” (Christian et al., 2012). Consumers who share their opinions online tend to make use of various forums in five ways (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, cited by Jin & Liu, 2010):

- 1. Topic-related utility:** utility derived from consumers when they make a contribution that provides value to others.
- 2. Consumption utility:** occurs when consumers benefit from the contributions that others have made to the community.
- 3. Approval utility:** consists of the satisfaction that is felt by consumers when they are praised by others.
- 4. Moderator-related utility:** takes place when a third party assists a community member to make a complaint.
- 5. Homeostasis utility:** based on the yearning individuals have for balance in their lives.

Over the last decade, news consumption has shifted from traditional media and websites transmitting the news to consumers, to audiences having the news shared with them by their social network of friends (Lavrusik, 2010). In fact, Mitchell et al. contend that 75% of news that

is viewed online has been shared from social media or email (2010). Readers crave news that is customized to fit their preferences. Lavrusik states that “the shift toward personalization of news is in many ways a response to the problem of noise, but also a shift from trust in news organizations to the individual people you know who now often act as curators” (2010). The Pew Centre’s Annual Report on American journalism found that social media has not replaced other methods of getting news; moreover it is a supplemental path to news (Christian et al., 2012). Social media is reshaping the news industry’s relationship with the consumer, challenging journalists’ traditional “gate-keeping” role and allowing the public to decide what is the most valuable news (Fletcher et al., 2012, p.817).

## **2.3 Web 2.0: Changing the Way the Media and Journalists Operate**

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### ***2.3.1 The crucial, but changing role of journalism in society***

Journalism is important for a free and democratic society. As described in the The Pew Research Journalism project, democracy is contingent on “citizens having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context” (Journalism Project, 1999). The project elaborates on journalism’s commitment to the truth, to citizens and to the verification of information. In addition, it contends that “journalism should present a representative picture of all constituent groups in society” and that its practitioners must “maintain an independence from those they cover” and have a “personal sense of ethics” (Journalism Project, 1999). It is important that it provide a forum for public criticism and compromise. The following description from the Project encompasses the essence of journalism:

*Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. It should do more than gather an audience or catalogue the important. For its own survival, it must balance what readers know they want with what they cannot anticipate but need. In short, it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. The effectiveness of a piece of journalism is measured both by how much a work engages its audience and enlightens it. This means journalists must continually ask what information has most value to citizens and in what form.*

The project also emphasizes that journalism should incorporate news from all communities, not just certain demographics. Finally, journalists should be empowered to voice differences with their colleagues and news organizations should foster this type of independence in order to benefit from the diversity it brings. Journalism is needed for a third party, unbiased take and to keep organizations and governments honest.

With newsrooms continuously having to do as much, if not more, despite decreasing resources and ad revenues, some are reshaping the role of their journalists, having them take on a more “curatorial” approach. A journalist who curates can help provide a mix of what is meaningful and what is entertaining. He/she can help parse down the news and give the audience a bit of everything, while still highlighting relevant things that audiences should know (Friedman, 2012). According to Friedman, some media companies such as The Huffington Post and The Atlantic are thriving because they are striking a balance between original reporting and curation. In a Columbia Journalism Review article, Friedman describes this emerging concept:

*Not all curators are journalists, but all successful journalists are curators: We pull together relevant material from a variety of sources. The difference is that journalists are also creating new material. We're picking up the phone to interview experts, making photographs, documenting events, spending hours with interesting people who don't have Twitter accounts. And yeah, sometimes we use information or quotes that originally appeared in other sources (with proper credit, of course).*

News companies are reviewing their models, recognizing the role journalists play in society, but trying to find the best way to remodel these roles to better fit the demands of the digital media landscape.

### **2.3.2 Media companies: adapting to survive and prosper**

News companies need to revisit their strategies and structures to survive and remain profitable. “In order to evolve and prosper, media companies must revisit the foundations of their business, ensure they are providing the central value that customers want, and provide their products/services in a unique or different way from other media firms” (McDowell, 2011, p.40). Although many media outlets are finding it challenging to thrive in today’s competitive media landscape, the most well-established “legacy” media brands (*CNN, BBC World, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Globe and Mail, Time, and The Economist*), took advantage of their brand heritage to reach the online news consumer. Mark Tungate (2005) discovered that most of the executives he interviewed in these organizations believed that “audiences or readers did not buy their products as mere sources of information, but as lifestyle statements” (McDowell, 2011, p.42). Research from the Pew Research Center (2010) confirmed that 80% of content linked to in blogs was derived from these afore-mentioned “legacy” outlets. Many smaller news organizations however are suffering as they are finding it difficult to survive on advertising and subscription revenues. User fees consistently reduce web traffic, which subsequently has a negative effect on advertising rates, “because audience levels are far lower than when the content was offered for free” (McDowell, 2011, p.43).

The traditional, mass-media, one-way, “we write, you read” model of communication no longer works in today’s digital media landscape where openness, transparency, and user

participation are increasingly valued components (Karlsson, 2011). Deuze puts forth the term *dialogical journalism*, which is “intended to promote public debate and to include local residents in the production of news stories” (2003, p.207). Including participants both inside and external to the news organization to monitor, criticize, and intervene in the journalistic process establishes the connection between transparency and user participation (Deuze, 2005, p. 455). Interactivity presumes that the news stories that are told can be challenged and debated, and that different voices from opposing sides can be expressed (Karlson, 2011, p.286). User-generated content can contribute diverse perspectives that strengthen a news outlet’s brand, make users more loyal and attract news readers (Jönsson & Örenbring, 2011, p.129).

Although some scholarly research shows that user participation is viewed as positive, others see it as undesirable (Karlson, 2011, p.286). “Encouraging user-generated, amateur content and giving away for free, valuable, self-generated content to parasitic aggregators diminishes a firm’s perceived exclusivity and value” (McDowell, 2011, p.48). Still, the general tendency indicates that the role of news consumers as “co-creators” is rather strong and will continue to grow (Karlson, 2011, p.286). Karlsson states that though many journalists understand the importance of “immediacy” in today’s media landscape, they feel it compromises the quality of journalism (Karlsson, 2011, p.286). He emphasizes however, that users rated “continuous updating as the most important feature of online news” (Bergström 2008; Chung and Yoo, 2008; cited by Karlsson, 2011, p.287). When established news sites encourage user participation and publish unique points of view, whether they realize it or not, they are actually moving towards a more transparent method of creating and disseminating truth, which resembles the reality of bloggers (Karlsson, 2011, p.292).

### **2.3.3 *Citizen journalism and bloggers***

For the most part, citizen participation in the journalistic process allows users to influence only certain stages of news production, while other stages are reserved for journalists (Jönsson & Örenbring, 2011, p.128). However, citizens need not wait to have their comments approved on a traditional news site to voice their opinions. As Twitter and other social media platforms become ubiquitous, the lines between professional journalists and amateur bloggers become more blurred (Segwick, 2012). The latter often have no ties to the traditional news organization and are often thought of as the “public’s journalism” (Ashley et al., 2012, p.853). Blogs can often provide a greater diversity of opinions, views and stories than traditional media, and can be used by journalists to find new stories (Campbell et al., 2009, p.186). Many scholars, medical experts and professionals take to blogging as a part of their work. Bloggers can also offer “crisis-related information that can be useful for journalists working with traditional media” (Jin & Liu, 2010, p.439). The democratization of information has allowed individuals to take the media into their own hands (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.341) and has significantly changed the way information is produced, consumed and shared (Scott, 2005, p.92).

### **2.3.4 *Journalists adapt to a new reality***

Research conducted by Text100 UK shows that journalists look at an average of 2.6 social media channels for each article they research (Text100 Survey, 2012). Reporters are using social media to investigate stories, report/broadcast their news items and engage in conversations with their readers (Looney, 2012). However, they remain conscious of quality: many journalists emphasize the importance of continuing to apply merits of good journalism to social media, including checking facts and ensuring source reliability (Schabel, 2012).

Like many other spheres of activity, social media has transformed journalism. Paul Lewis, special projects officer from The Guardian identifies ways that it has changed for the better. Lewis emphasizes that social media has made it easier to find people through crowdsourcing. It has given a voice to activists, bloggers and those who may not have had one in the past. That has allowed the world to follow big events, and reporters to chase down stories (Sawers, 2012). He comments on how one small tweet containing significant information can create a ripple effect (Sawers, 2012).

According to a 2009 US national survey by Cision and George Washington University, 89% of North American journalists surveyed said they look to blogs for story research, while 65% depend on social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, and 52% turn to microblogging sites like Twitter (Social Media and Online Usage Study, 2010). A similar study in the UK revealed that Twitter is the “de facto social network for the UK media industry” (Phys.org news release, 2011). A follow up to this study uncovered that 90% of UK journalists use social media tools more now compared to three years ago and that though different social media are used, the most popular are microblogs (like Twitter), which are employed by 70% of respondents (Phys.org news release, 2011).

The Oriella Journalism Study revealed a diminishing preference for press releases as a “first port of call for story research (Oriellia Study, 2012; Millar, 2012). The use of press releases fell from 22 percent in 2011, when it was the “most preferred starting point” to 11 percent in 2012. The previously mentioned survey by Cision and George Washington University also found that journalists continue to depend on PR professionals for “primary research and context.” Editors and journalists surveyed said they look to PR pros for “interviews and access to sources”

(44%), “answers to questions and targeted information” (23%), and “perspective, information in context, and background information” (17%) (Social Media and Online usage study, 2010).

## **2.4 Organizational PR, Digital Media and Content Marketing**

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### **2.4.1 Now trending: #BrandsAsPublishers**

The line between journalism and marketing communication is fading as brands are progressively appearing in the mainstream media in “non-advertising formats” (Baerug & Harro-Loit, 2012, p.172). In a 2010 article on Mashable.com, renowned author and social media expert Brian Solis predicted that “in the near future, brands and organizations will create new or augment existing roles for editors and publishers to create timely, relevant and captivating content on all social media channels” (Solis, 2010). Solis’ prediction has proved to be true, as all types of organizations including Cisco, Burberry, conEdison, Amazon, IBM, and a host of others are becoming media outlets in their own right. According to an article by Fast Company, the brands that will triumph in 2013 are those who can tell the best brand story to the most people via the greatest number of media platforms. These organizations use a combination of audio, video, images, text and social content to influence, inspire and stimulate their communities (Solis, 2010).

Red Bull is one organization that has truly become a publisher in its own right with *Red Bull Media House*: it has filmed movies, partnered with NBC for a show, developed its own web and mobile outlets, partnered with YouTube to publish owned content and amplified its magazine, *Red Bulletin* (Iezzi, 2012). Werner Brell, director of Red Bull Media House emphasizes that telling stories has become a part of their DNA. “The brand has engaged its core

male 18-to-34 demo and a broader mainstream audience through diverse platforms, third-party media, and, perhaps most important, its own channels” (Iezzi, 2012).

“Trends in media consumption point to the convergence of savvy marketing tactics combined with a real-time newsroom approach for brands to be seen and heard in a collectively social, digital and mobile world” (Armano, 2012). According to Edelman PR’s David Armano organizations and brands must become the media and tell their own stories. Although these strategies will take time to become widespread, as not all organizations have the resources to implement them immediately, Armano is confident that they will become increasingly prevalent with time. An article in The Guardian asserts that as the trend of “brands as publishers” gains momentum, content will continue to play a greater role in stimulating social media conversations and driving search engine optimization (Bonn, 2012).

Brian Solis cites former FT journalist and PR Watch blogger Tom Foremski: “we have the ability to earn noteworthy, equal, and in some cases, greater influence than those authorities whom we’ve relied on over the years to help us reach greater audiences and communities” (Solis, 2010). Foremski contends that as influence becomes increasingly equalized, organizations have the ability to program, manage and engage in multiple forms of media.

Social media can be used by organizations to reach their target audience and “humanize” their brands if it is employed with authenticity, transparency and believability (Berlin Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.338). It can also be used to engage in conversation with consumers, and give them as much information as possible in order to cultivate trust (Berlin Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.340).

### **2.4.2 Owned media and content marketing**

Today's successful brands and organizations are realizing the value owned media provides. The content they drive through owned channels, such as their website, Facebook page and other social media allows them to "stay relevant to their millions of customers" (Bonn, 2012). According to a 2012 study by the Customer Content Council and ContentWise, companies' online content marketing expenditures totalled approximately \$16.6 billion in 2011 in the US alone. Cision's 2011 annual report emphasizes that traditional paid media or advertising campaigns are more than ever being integrated with organizations' owned media channels including websites, corporate blogs, and social networks. Earned media coverage continues to be a priority, but user-generated content powered by social media channels is essential, as it determines how content ranks in search engines, and therefore affects the traffic it produces for an organization's website (Cision, 2011).

In an interview with Business Week, Alexander Jutkowitz, the managing partner of Group SJR, a digital firm which helps run content sites for GE, Credit Suisse, Target, and Barneys, says that the best way to score a better search-engine optimization is to create excellent content (In Nisen, 2012). He discusses how organizations like GE produce YouTube videos that tell interesting stories that get viewed by hundreds of thousands of people and are picked up by mainstream media outlets such as *Wired* and *Gizmodo* because they are simply great stories. He emphasizes that this content attracts the organization's core audience, but also "an attentive public that might care about a specific nugget of knowledge" (Nisen, 2012).

### **2.4.3 What is content marketing?**

According to the Content Marketing Institute, “Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action” (Content Marketing Institute Website, 2007). “When brands skip the middleman and publish their own media, it’s called content marketing. It’s also sometimes referred to as brand journalism or custom content” (Snow, 2012). Snow uses Vogue as an example, stating that editorial content is paid for essentially by the advertisements that appear amongst the content. She goes on to state that “now more than ever, brands that once advertised in Vogue are creating their own fashion magazines, writing the stories themselves and owning all the ads” (Snow, 2012). Content marketing or brand journalism essentially entails consistently delivering quality information to consumers, often using storytelling rather than pitching (Content Marketing Institute Website, 2007), providing audiences with content they actually enjoy consuming.

Content marketing agencies assist brands and organizations to build and put into place strategies for their owned media channels, which can include journalism, web, email, mobile, social, video and apps, for an integrated customer experience (Bonn, 2012). The media landscape has changed such that paid media is often simply the trailer for “a richer, longer term engagement through owned and earned channels” where recommendations take on a prominent role in driving search engines (Bonn, 2012). In a Forbes article, author Michael Brenner discusses whether content marketing is the new advertising: “great content and engaging stories help your company’s content get found and get shared. When great content is shared, commented on or liked, it is no longer your content alone. It is *their* content. And user-generated content is

trusted more than advertising or promotion” (Brenner, 2012). As such, many organizations are refocusing their efforts on storytelling and producing content that audiences want to share – not ignore.

Paul Polman, chief executive of Unilever states “[we are] reallocating budgets to enable us to make content in an always-on world” (In AdWeek, 2012). Indeed, Unilever is moving its budget away from advertising to owned media (Bonn, 2012) in order to better reflect consumer demand for unique content. Consulting firm McKinsey confirms that “retailers, banks, airlines are rapidly recognising the importance of content to their brands. It's a new publishing model and one that brands may be heading towards even faster than traditional media companies” (Bonn, 2012).

Recent research from Ecoconsultancy found that 38% of brands have a content marketing strategy in place, 55% of clients surveyed are planning one, almost 90% said that content marketing would “become more important over the next 12 months” and 73% agree that “brands are becoming publishers” (Charlton, 2012). Many organizations are becoming branded “hubs” of content focused on the consumer, and transforming static corporate websites (Brenner, 2012) in favour of dynamic, multimedia storytelling models.

#### ***2.4.4 The many faces of PR***

PR is often described as an “emerging” discipline that is still defining itself (Lages & Simkin, 2000; Berger & Reber, 2006). In 2011, the Public Relations Society of America led an international campaign to update the definition of public relations. Through crowdsourcing and public voting, a consensus was reached to define PR as “a strategic communication process

that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, 2011). The PR function takes on several roles within an organization. PR practitioners provide communications advice, engage employees, plan and execute communications programmes, perform media, community, government and stakeholder relations, and manage the organizational image/brand, as well as issues and crises (Lages & Simkin, 2006; APR Accreditation , 2012). PR people deal with consumers, trade customers, shareholders, financial and industry analysts, policymakers, public interest groups and the media (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.342).

“In helping to define and implement policy, the public relations practitioner uses a variety of professional communication skills and plays an integrative role both within the organization and between the organization and the external environment” (PRSA, 2011). “PR people are expert content creators who author Web sites, speeches, bylines, position papers, op-eds, brochures, Q&As and, of course, press materials” (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.343). Crafting messages and storytelling is a fundamental part of public relations practice (Hallahan, 1999). As such, it makes sense for the PR function within organizations of all types to take on a brand journalism role and produce content for their organizations’ owned channels.

PR practitioners finally have the “freedom, tools and channels” to move beyond pitching stories to journalists and become corporate storytellers and communicate with audiences through a variety of platforms and pull them into the brand experience (Pickard, 2011). In a presentation at Humber College, PR expert Robert Pickard emphasizes that every company can tell its own stories like a media company, thus PR people must “think like story writers and media producers” (Pickard, 2010).

With the continuously shifting media environment and ever-changing online atmosphere “traditional media relations strategies such as news release and media kit preparation and distribution are shifting to practices that are more relevant to a social media environment” (Morton, Tindall & Waters, 2010, p.241). Kintzsler contends that the PR practitioners that are garnering the most success are “the creative ones” or the ones who have been able to look past the traditional PR skill sets to listen and engage. “Despite the warning signs, PR pros who are still wrapped up in press releases will miss out on a far bigger opportunity – brand content creation” (Kintzsler, 2012). In the past, the PR practitioners relied upon expensive wire services to deliver their news. It was not directly accessible to consumers, and organizations looked to journalists to get media coverage. The new model and new media allow quality content to “rise to the top” (Kintzsler, 2012) via search engine optimization (SEO) and with the power of social media.

#### **2.4.5 *Organizational PR function meets the digital consumer***

In the context of today’s “conversation age,” loyal customers expect an increasingly profound, engaging and personalized relationship with brands and organizations (Falkow, 2010; Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011). Studies show that healthy consumer-brand relationships (Huber et al., 2009) and customer experiences (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2012) generate a favourable impact on consumers’ repurchase intentions. Customer care experiences shared in online forums, blogs and rating systems are extremely important to organizations, as they can help raise brand awareness through “word of mouse” (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2012, p.337).

With all of the options available to the modern-day media consumer, audiences are forgoing traditional media for content providers and Internet distribution platforms that are

tailored to their needs and preferences (McDowell, 2011, p.38). Public relations practitioners in all types of organizations are conscious of the impact of the blogosphere (Jin & Liu, 2010), the variety of new communications channels and emerging digital media (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2012), and changing consumer preferences on their PR and communications practices.

Trust and transparency were ranked as equivalent to ‘quality of products and services’ according to the 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer and are increasingly critical elements in brand-customer relationships (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.337). “Consumers rely on brand knowledge stored in memory to make quick, stress-free purchase decisions of which they gladly will pay a premium price” (McDowell, 2011, p.43). This gives organizations with strong brand equities an advantage when communicating directly with consumers through their blogs, corporate Websites or social media channels.

Although research indicates that consumers are more likely to trust third-party blogs compared to company blogs (Jin & Liu, 2010), corporate blogs remain a “primary information source for key publics” (Jin & Liu, 2010, p.431). According to the 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer, the majority of consumers need to see information 3-5 times to believe it (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2012). This is why it is important that organizations communicate directly with their consumers and with third-party bloggers via owned media in a transparent fashion. An article in the Harvard Business review states that users increasingly look to online communities that actively post and verify their information as a first step in gathering data and forming an opinion (Fichman et al., 2009).

Since PR practitioners are responsible for building relationships with key organizational stakeholders, it seems logical that the PR function take on the role of engaging with consumers

via owned media channels. There is much consensus indicating that PR practitioners should be responsible for social media within an organization (Falls, 2008; Odden, 2006; Rose, 2008; cited by Avery et al., 2010). As organizations and PR practitioners progressively move towards owned media publishing models, what are the implications on earned media? If organizations can create and diffuse quality content through their own channels, which is fed with social media, will PR practitioners continue to seek that hard-to-earn coverage in mainstream media? And, what will be the impact on the PR practitioner/journalist relationship?

## **2.5 The PR Practitioner/Journalist Relationship**

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### ***2.5.1 The PR/journalist dynamic: a love/hate relationship***

The PR/journalist dynamic is renowned as a complex, love/hate relationship (Turner, 2011; Kintzler, 2012). According to Segwick, “the journalist/PR relationship is a symbiotic one - we both need each other; it is all about timing and relationship building” (2012). Jim Macnamara maintains that though some journalists are hostile towards PR, referring to it as the “dark side,” and don’t recognize its usefulness in their reporting, a great deal of evidence shows that PR “has a major influence on media agendas and content” (Macnamara, 2009, p.3).

In the 1940s, the PR industry was predominantly associated with deceit and manipulation (Dinan & Miller, 2007). Although some theorists argue that the industry has come a long way in this regard, PR practitioners are still, in some cases, viewed as “spin doctors,” capable of engaging in deception (Dinan & Miller, 2007) or at the very least, of twisting the facts in their favour. The “dark side” of PR that tries to downplay or suppress negative news is what gives

practitioners a less desirable reputation (Goldsworthy & Morris, 2008), which is most prevalent in the eyes of journalists who are often the ones trying to uncover a story. Though some PR practitioners willingly take on this more questionable role, the true essence of their job lies in acting as an “intermediary, or even a facilitator, between different sectors of the public sphere” (Boily & Chartrand, 2012, p.237).

The rapport between these two interdependent professions has been widely researched for over 80 years (Macnamara, 2009) and continues to be a topic of discussion as the media environment changes. Avery, Lariscy and Sweetser state that “whether relationships are marked by cooperation or contentiousness, there is recognition on both sides of mutual need and dependence, creating a symbiosis in which they coexist” (2010, p. 190).

Social media has increased PR practitioners’ ability to access journalists through its platforms such as blogs and Twitter (Folkens, 2011). New platforms on the Web are also emerging to help journalists and PR professionals connect and share stories on social media. Reuters’ journalist, Anthony De Rosa, suggests using MuckRack, an online tool that features a daily outline of the topics journalists are talking about on social media (Looney, 2012).

### ***2.5.2 Do PR practitioners still need journalists to the same extent?***

Previous sections of this literature review have endeavoured to demonstrate that consumers are increasingly looking for news and content that is tailored to their preferences, unique, and easily shareable. They also prefer content that has been recommended by their peers, and use web technologies such as RSS feeds, aggregators and social media channels to follow the organizations and news outlets they prefer. Private, public and non-profit organizations are

realizing the power the web has given them to become publishers in their own right and create content that attracts consumers to their websites and social media channels. This raises questions as to whether organizations and PR practitioners need journalists to the same extent today as they did a few years back. Up until a few years ago, PR depended almost exclusively on the media to convey messages through credible and editorial channels to reach a large audience (Gerth et al., 2011, p.63). Nowadays however, PR practitioners may use their own digital media channels to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media and utilize their energy to target specific publics directly (Avery et al., 2010, p.193).

News companies' limited amount of resources has increased journalists' dependence on PR materials as a less costly alternative to investigating and editing full articles (Gerth et al., 2011, p.63). It has also fuelled the prevalence of media-catching, where journalists look to PR practitioners for story ideas (Morton et al., 2010). This is a shift from the traditional media pitching, where PR would propose story ideas to journalists. Research, industry publications and professional websites on communication show that there has been a shift in the dynamic, however, it continues to be an important one, as it is "highly unlikely that new media will enable practitioners to ever completely circumvent gatekeepers (journalists) to place their stories in the news" (Avery et al., 2010, p.191).

### ***2.5.3 Taking on new roles to favour the digital era***

PR and journalism are increasingly being referred to as "converging" and "interdependent" occupations that "collaborate and compete over the social role of public news supplier" (Reich, 2010, p.799). Their roles have been progressively changing over the last decade

with the rise of digital technology, and this is likely to continue to be the case in the coming years.

The Oriella Journalism Study<sup>5</sup> revealed that the “common factor across all [their] reports going back five years has been the importance of the underlying story behind every campaign, and the need to make full use of every discipline – on –and offline – to tell it” (Oriella Journalism Study, 2012). The report highlights the importance of employing “the full range of storytelling assets,” and not depending on the press release, but rather supporting stories with “video, images, infographics and opinion-led content that sets out a clear point of view” (Oriella Journalism Study, 2012, p.10). As such, the content PR practitioners are using to build their owned media sites will often also be of interest to journalists.

A survey of 2400 journalists across the globe conducted in 2011 by MyPRGenie and CommPRO.biz indicates that reporters are increasingly using social media in their daily reporting and are open to receiving pitches on these tools. Results showed that 54.8 percent of respondents “*follow and friend*” communications and PR professionals on Twitter, LinkedIn and even Facebook. This means that they follow the postings, stories and activities of PR pros and “be-friend” them on social networks.

Though the news has changed, journalists are still in need of information. However, the digital media landscape is such that PR practitioners should provide this information in “easy-to-identify digestible sections” (Robbins, 2010). They also look for images, quotes, video,

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<sup>5</sup> The study was performed by the Oriella PR group and surveyed 613 journalists from 16 countries across North America, Asia Pacific, and Europe in April and May 2012.

backgrounders and fact sheets, tagged information that is easy to find, and embed codes for multimedia (Robbins, 2010).

## **2.6 Conceptual Framework and Rationale for the Study**

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### **2.6.1 PR in the Digital Era: Grunig & Hunt's Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations**

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations is one of the models that make up Grunig and Hunt's *Four-Model Theory of Public Relations Practice* (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Introduced in 1984, the "Four Models" is one of the most renowned theories in the field of PR and describes four distinctive approaches to the practice of public relations and demonstrates how PR has progressed over a 130-year time span (Sledzik, 2008). A University of Florida blog (Ratter, 1999) concisely defines each of the four models (see Appendix B). The Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations best represents the approach that is being used by PR practitioners in the digital era with the advent of content marketing and the "organizations as publishers" phenomenon. This model shows "how PR has, does, and should work, and has grown in acceptance to become the basis of the practice, measurement, and ethics of modern PR" (Paarlberg, 2010).

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model was identified as the "ideal" of the four models of public relations according to Grunig and Hunt. Professor Michael Turney from North Kentucky University describes the characteristics of this model in greater detail. He affirms that it is dependent on honest, transparent two-way communication and reciprocity rather than unidirectional persuasion (Turney, 1998). Emphasis is placed on mutual respect and understanding, as well as negotiation, and openness to change and compromise. The model

requires that PR practitioners considerably adjust the way they function in order to accommodate their publics (Turney, 1998). As mentioned in previous sections, PR has a reputation of being linked to spin and manipulation, however, Grunig and White contend that for PR to be efficient, it needs to be “symmetrical, idealistic and critical and managerial” (2002, p.307). Some academics like L’Etang (1996) and Pieczka (1996) believe Grunig and Hunt’s Two-Way Symmetrical Model to be too idealistic, and perhaps it was at the time of its conception. However, with digital and connective media, the characteristics described by the Two-Way model have become crucial for PR practitioners.

Paarlberg states that the Two-Way Symmetrical Model has proven to be robust since social media fits into it well (2010). One of the authors of the theory, Jim Grunig states that, “New media have the potential to make the profession more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible” (Grunig, 2009, p.1). Unidirectional, persuasive tactics used by PR to influence their publics and obtain media coverage are thought to be ineffective in the world of digital and connective media. As outlined in the literature review section (see pages 2 to 22), the digital consumer values unique content, engagement and participation, trust and transparency, and community. Journalistic content must therefore possess as many of these attributes as possible. And, since PR practitioners are increasingly becoming “journalists” within their organizations, they must take a proactive approach and embrace the characteristics of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model of PR in their interactions with both the media and their target audiences. This approach is very much based on the reciprocity described by the Two-Way Symmetrical Model.

This model applies to the way the organizational PR function is being shaped by the world of digital and connective media. In the literature review section (see pages 2 to 22),

emphasis was placed on the fact that organizations are becoming “hubs” of engaging, consumer-focussed content. Meanwhile, media companies are moving away from the one-way “we read, you write” model of communication, in favour of dialogical journalism, which encourages the consumer to interact with the journalist and/or news provider, and even provide user-generated content. The digital consumer’s thirst for conversation, transparency, customization, unique content and socialization has created a media landscape that fits into the Two-Way Symmetrical Model of PR, which is based on mutually beneficial exchanges.

### ***2.6.2 Agenda-Setting Theory in the digital era***

Agenda Setting Theory states that the mass media set the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain news items (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997). The theory was established by professors Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1968, who determined that the principal outcome of news media was agenda-setting. One of the main tenets of the theory is that the media decide whether stories are of importance and should be covered – or not (Riaz, 2008), thus acting as news “gatekeepers” (International Agenda Setting Conference Website, 2012). Agenda Setting Theory suggests that audiences determine the relative importance of issues from the news media, incorporating similar sets of priorities into their own agendas (Riaz, 2008). Until recently, the media have set the tone and decided the weight of certain topics and the details relating to those topics. Fundamentally, the subjects that the public is aware of and concerned about at a given point in time have typically been “a by-product of media gatekeeping” (International Agenda Setting Conference Website, 2012).

In the past decade, PR scholars have looked more closely at the impact PR efforts have on media coverage. “According to Sallot and Johnson (2006), in 107 interviews with journalists,

one-third of them estimated that between 60 and 100% of US news content involves contact with public relations practitioners” (Morton, Tindall & Waters, 2010, p.244). Meanwhile Tilley and Hollings (2008) contend that “journalists are worried about the ways in which public relations material can shape the news agenda by providing easier access to content from particular sources” (Morton, Tindall & Waters, 2010, p.244).

The new media landscape has weakened journalists’ gatekeeping role, since social media increasingly shapes what the public needs and wants to know (Fletcher et al., 2012, p.817). Consumers turn to their networks to discover news items that might be of interest to them, and through sharing, social media and search-engine optimization, they are playing a more prominent role in agenda-setting. As organizations of all types move towards becoming publishers in their own right, and PR practitioners take on brand journalism roles, they now have the ability to bypass journalists to reach their target audiences and engage with them via a variety of platforms. PR practitioners previously relied solely on journalists to publish their content in media outlets. And although research suggests that PR had a great impact on agenda-setting by deciding which information journalists should have access to, this influence has been amplified by digital media, since they can now publish what they want and reach their target audiences without necessarily having to go through journalists. What’s more, organizational news that becomes popular on social media channels and blogs will often get picked up by the mainstream media. Organizations such as World Vision, The Aurora Healthcare Centre, conEdison (NY) and countless others have seen their content appear in the news media as a result of content marketing efforts. The key driver is now the audience. Therefore, digital media has reduced journalists’ gatekeeping role and consequently had an impact on their agenda-setting power.

### **2.6.3 Communication, Power and Counter-Power**

In his article *Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society*, Manuel Castells emphasizes that power relations are largely dependent on socialized communication (2007, p.240). He also states that though the media are not the holders of power, they represent a major context where power is decided. The rise of mass self-communication, brought on by digital and connective media has given social actors the ability to “challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society” (Castells, 2007, p. 248). In his article he discusses how the media have traditionally acted as gatekeepers of the stream of information that affects public opinion; however, the new media environment disrupts this “single axis system” to create a fluid “multiacity” of power. Although Castell’s article is focussed on political communication, his perspective can also be applied to organizational communication.

Just as political actors use the Internet to “bypass traditional media and quickly distribute a message” (Castells, 2007, p.255), organizations and PR practitioners are doing the same. As news companies continue to struggle with changing gatekeeping standards and demands for interactive, consumer-driven content, organizations of all types are taking advantage of new platforms to assert a wider, timelier and more direct influence on their target audiences. PR practitioners, therefore, do not have to depend solely on journalists to reach their organization’s stakeholders anymore, and by making these stakeholders part of the communication process, organizations are likely to benefit from what Castells refers to as the “emerging realm of mass self-communication”.

#### **2.6.4 Main research question and rationale for the study**

The fields of journalism and public relations are rapidly changing as a result of the ever-evolving digital media landscape. Innovative technologies and social media trends are inescapable and are having a very real impact on consumers' content preferences. Organizations of all types (private, public and non-profit) are taking advantage of the digital media landscape to become publishers in their own right and use their owned media channels to communicate directly with consumers (through content marketing), circumventing journalists and mainstream media, who have previously acted as gatekeepers. This research aims to demonstrate how significantly digital media have changed the media landscape and as a result, the way news about organizations is disseminated, and the roles and relationships of PR practitioners and journalists. It will shed light on and provide insights to the following question:

***In what ways has new digital media altered the manner in which news about organizations is disseminated, and, subsequently, the roles of PR practitioners and journalists?***

There exist a plethora of news articles, scholarly papers, books, seminars, workshops and blogs (McDowell, 2011; Curran, 2010) that attempt to understand the changing media landscape and how it is affecting the public relations practitioner-journalist relationship and the ways organizations get their news out to their publics. Much literature on the relationship between journalists and PR practitioners focuses on the love-hate relationship that exists between these two functions.

This research examined the environment in which journalists and PR practitioners currently operate: the digital media landscape. This environment has had an impact on the way news about organizations is disseminated. That is, organizations (private, public and non-profit) are increasingly becoming publishers in their own right and using their websites, social media channels and multimedia platforms to provide unique, journalistic content directly to consumers, and most importantly, to engage in a dialogue with them. PR practitioners are generally the producers of such content within their organizations, and are now in a position to use digital media channels to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media and utilize their energy to target specific publics directly (Avery et al., 2010, p.193). The changes in the media landscape as a result of the ascent of digital media are undoubtedly having an impact on the roles and relationships of PR practitioners and journalists. This project has drawn from scholarly literature on: the relationship between journalists and PR practitioners, digital and social media, modern-day newsrooms, as well as the trend of organizations as publishers, user-generated content, agenda-setting and power. Rather than focussing solely on the PR-practitioner journalist relationship, it has focused on the macro trends that are affecting the roles of both professionals.

**The objectives of this research were:**

- i. To describe through a thorough review of literature:
  - a. The trends in the new digital media landscape and how they have changed news reporting and the mainstream media;
  - b. The digital consumer;
  - c. How digital media are changing the way media companies and journalists operate.
  - d. How news companies and journalists are adapting to the new reality.
  - e. The trend of organizations (private, public and non-profit) using digital media to become publishers in their own right, using owned media channels.
  - f. How PR practitioners are taking on a journalistic role within their organizations.

- g. How the roles and relationships of PR practitioners and journalists are changing as a result of the digital media landscape.
- ii. To conduct interviews with 5 journalists and 5 PR practitioners in Canada in order to substantiate the literature review and complement it with further findings.
- iii. To provide a thorough discussion of findings in order to highlight current trends and provide journalists and PR practitioners with valuable insights as to how their field is changing and what the implications are.

Though there exist several studies on the journalist-PR practitioner relationship, most of these scholarly studies focus on how PR practitioners should build relationships with journalists and vice-versa. Now that PR practitioners are essentially becoming journalists for their organizations and are publishing content on their owned media channels, they no longer have to necessarily “pitch” their stories and make them palatable to journalists in order to reach their target audiences. The “gatekeeping” role of journalists is not as strong, and PR practitioners do not need to “push” their agendas to journalists to have them heard – they can now use their owned channels to share relevant content with their target audiences.

This research aimed to investigate the digital media landscape, the power it has given organizations to communicate directly with their audiences and become publishers in their own right, and the impact it has had on the roles of PR-practitioners and journalists. The rationale for this study is to demonstrate how the digital media has changed the traditional roles of PR practitioners and journalists, because of the larger changes it has brought to the organizations and news companies they work for.

This study served to aggregate best practices, guidance and research from scholarly sources, trade journals and industry publications to provide a summary of the most relevant literature on this topic. It strived to shed light on the most effective methods for creating and

disseminating an organization's content through both traditional and new media outlets. The empirical research has been used to substantiate the literature on this topic and fill in any gaps.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

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### 3.1 Overview

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A qualitative research design was used to gather empirical data for this study, since PR practitioners' and journalists' perceptions with regards to the impact of digital media on their respective roles and organizations were essential to gain a better understanding of the modifications the digital media landscape has had on their trade. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted during the months of June and July 2013. The researcher interviewed five PR practitioners and five journalists, each possessing diverse backgrounds and levels of experience.

The interviewees were selected using a non-random<sup>6</sup> sampling strategy. Each participant constituted a unit of analysis and was strategically chosen as a result of his/her experience, knowledge and expertise. Clear criteria were established from the beginning to ensure that participants had a superior level of knowledge regarding the research question and subsidiary dimensions under investigation. Interviewees were selected based on the following criteria:

#### **Journalists or PR practitioners who:**

- Have worked for a major Canadian or American media company as a journalist, reporter, producer or editor, in the last 5 years for a minimum of 3 years; **and/or** have worked for a Canadian or American organization (public, private, non-profit, agency) as a PR practitioner in the last 5 years for a minimum of 3 years.
- Are aware of the trends/changes that are/have been affecting the media landscape.
- Have a general understanding of digital media trends that affect their profession (social media, search engine optimization, content marketing).

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<sup>6</sup> **Non-random or non-probability sampling strategy:** where each unit of analysis in the population does not have an equal chance of being selected (Eid, 2011, p.10).

- Journalists who have collaborated with PR practitioners in their jobs.
- PR practitioners who have collaborated with journalists in their jobs.

A snowball<sup>7</sup> sampling strategy was used in certain instances since some participating PR practitioners and journalists recommended peers who they deemed might be suitable and interested in participating in this study. One of the ten participants of the study was found as a result of snowball sampling.

The interviewees selected are all renowned experts in their fields (i.e. journalists that write for major newspapers or work for major networks, or are scholars or directors of journalism programs and speak out on trends in the journalism industry; and PR practitioners who are from major agencies or consultancies, and are experts on content marketing and social media.) All of the interviewees have followings on Twitter, their blogs, or the mainstream media. As such, they would be easily identifiable if they were described. Therefore, due to ethical considerations, the interviewees' backgrounds are not described in detail, as they all met the original criteria outlined in the participation letter (Appendix C, p.122).

Two sets of interview protocol were developed: one for journalists and another for PR practitioners (see Appendix E on page 126 for interview protocols). The decision to have two different sets of interview protocol was strategic, since PR practitioners and journalists are experiencing the changes to the media landscape within different contexts. The interview protocols were developed based on a review of congruent literature and some of the questions were used in both sets of interview protocol.

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<sup>7</sup> **Snowball sampling strategy:** a non-random sample in which the researcher begins with one case and then, based on the information about interrelationships from that case, identifies other cases and repeats the process again (Eid, 2011, p.332).

The research was approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, file number 03-13-10 on June 3, 2013. At the beginning of each interview the researcher reiterated the topic and some of the ethical considerations related to participating in the study. Some of these ethical considerations included:

- The research study was approved by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board;
- Interviewees' participation in the study would involve discussing trends in their profession and the risks incurred in this study are no greater than participants would encounter in their everyday life;
- Participants' identities would be protected using pseudonyms;
- The interviews would be transcribed and participants could see their transcripts if they wished;
- Interviewees would be directly quoted in the researcher's final thesis.

Participants were sent the consent form (see Appendix D, page 124: Consent Form) approved by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board and were asked to sign the form prior to their interview.

All interviews were recorded by the researcher. The two interviews conducted in person were recorded using a standard digital voice recorder, while the eight others (conducted by telephone) were recorded using the *NoNotes* recording application available on the iPhone. All of the interviews were subsequently transcribed by the researcher. This process produced approximately 95 pages of transcript notes. The dataset was then manually categorized in an

Excel spreadsheet and subsequently analyzed in order to gather generalizations that would then be used to compare and contrast with the literature review and form the discussion and analysis section of this study.

### **3.2 Why Qualitative Interviews: Rationale for the Selected Research Method**

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In a qualitative study, the researcher tries to “immerse him/herself fully in a range of data while being very alert to new insights throughout the process of gathering the data” (Eid, 2011, p.131). Interviewees are likely to be chosen based on their knowledge and expertise (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.173). Qualitative research aims to validate existing views, using data such as words, images, documents, observations and transcripts from which themes or generalizations are pulled and organized so as to present a clear picture (Eid, 2011, p.144). By contrast, a quantitative research “attempts to isolate specific elements and uses numbers and numerical correlations within value-free environments to measure and analyze the causal relationships between variables” (Brennen, 2013, p.3). By contrast to qualitative research which relies upon soft data, cases and contexts, quantitative studies rely upon hard data (numbers), variables and hypotheses (Eid, 2011, p.135).

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate how digital media have changed the landscape in which journalists and PR practitioners operate and the impact of these shifts on the roles and relationships of these two actors. The digital media landscape has given organizations and their PR people the power to communicate directly with target audiences, and become publishers in their own right. It has also significantly eroded the traditional journalism model, raising important questions about the future of news companies, their products and

journalists. There exist several views and opinions regarding the future of content disseminated by both organizations (public, private and non-profit) and news companies. As such, a qualitative research design was most appropriate since it offers the potential to capture and validate these views using real-life experience and insights of professionals in these complementary fields. Conversely, a quantitative research method was not selected, because the study aimed to obtain descriptions of the realities faced by participants, in order to examine how shifts in the media landscape have affected these realities.

In order to gather the qualitative data, the researcher carried out interviews. The experience of participating PR practitioners and journalists was essential to demonstrate how digital media have affected their fields and roles, and how news about organizations is disseminated. Interviews allowed the researcher to hear people's accounts of their experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.173). In this study, interviews enabled the researcher to obtain empirical data in the form of expert opinions and perceptions that served to substantiate the literature review, which consists of research gathered from scholarly sources, industry publications, reputable news media and relevant trade publications. Inductive reasoning could then be generated to develop generalizations for discussion and analysis.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, based on two pre-established sets of interview protocol (one for journalists and one for PR practitioners) that are administered to all participants. The semi-structured approach allowed for some flexibility in terms of follow-up questions and gave the respondents the opportunity to "delve more deeply into some of the topics or issues addressed" (Brennen, 2013, p.28). The interview questions were open-ended in order to enable an unlimited number of answers, a richness of details and

unanticipated findings, as well as creativity and self-expression on the part of participants (Eid, 2011, p.279).

### **3.3 Recruitment and Selection of Participants**

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#### **3.3.1 Sample size**

According to Brennen, the appropriate number of interviews to complete a qualitative research study varies depending on the “length and depth of the conversations, the information obtained, the topic area and the focus of your research project” (2013, p.30). It is essential to interview enough participants to gather significant viewpoints to gain a good understanding of one’s topic (Brennen, 2013, p. 30). Brennen states that when the researcher begins to hear the same information over and over again from different participants during the interview process, he/she may realize that the data collection phase has reached a point of saturation. At this time, it is appropriate to conclude the interview process (Brennen, 2013, p. 30). In this case, the objective was to conduct eight to ten interviews. The researcher decided to aim for ten, and do fewer interviews if the data collected became redundant. In the end, all ten interviews were concluded, except for one, as the PR practitioner had to exit the interview early for an urgent matter. This proved to be a sufficient sample size for the purpose of this study, especially due to the robustness of the interviews that were conducted.

### ***3.3.2 Sample selection and recruitment***

The participants were selected using a non-probability or non-random sampling strategy, using purposive sampling, since all interviewees had to fit particular criteria. It was essential for both PR practitioners and journalists to have a significant degree of experience in their respective fields and be knowledgeable of the current trends resulting from the inescapable presence of digital technologies in the media landscape. PR practitioners and journalists were identified through Twitter, reputed PR news sites and major Canadian media outlets. The researcher was personally familiar with many of these individuals and their areas of expertise as a result of social media. The researcher found no evidence that knowing some of the respondents had any direct bearing on the information collected. As mentioned earlier, snowball sampling was used in one case, as some participants recommended other professionals in their field for the study.

Five PR practitioners with diverse backgrounds were selected. Four of these individuals had agency experience, and several also had experience working in the PR function on the client side. Some of these individuals had also worked as journalists in the past. Five journalists were also selected. These individuals all had experience with major Canadian news organizations. The participants were contacted via email to solicit their interest in participating in the study. Once they confirmed their interest, the researcher sent them the Letter of Participation and the Consent Form. They were asked to sign the latter prior to the interview. The interviews were scheduled during the week (Monday to Friday), between 9am and 5pm. They consisted of one sixty-minute session with each participant. All ten candidates that were approached to participate agreed to be interviewed.

### **3.4 Data Collection: Interviews and Transcriptions**

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Two of the interviews were conducted at the researcher's office at the University of Ottawa, since the participants lived in the city and were available for face-to-face interviews. The remaining eight interviews were conducted over the telephone. This approach was chosen because the only other participant from Ottawa was not available to meet in person due to a hectic schedule, and the seven other interviewees were out-of-towners. All of the sessions were recorded to ensure the accurate collection of information. Sessions varied in duration, but were all between forty-five and sixty minutes in length. The researcher introduced the topic and reiterated the information provided in the Letter of Participation and Consent Form. After ensuring that the participant wanted to proceed, the interview process was initiated, abiding by the interview protocol. The questions were asked in the order in which they appeared on the interview protocol and participants were given the opportunity to provide extensive answers and examples.

Once all ten interviews were completed, the transcription process began. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for the most part. However, the researcher removed a few select sections where participants went off-topic, as they were not relevant to the research study.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Strategy**

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Following the interview transcription, the researcher began to organize and code the data using a manual categorization process. The researcher decided to pursue a manual categorization process rather than using software because of the ease of use and visual advantages. The two sets

of interviews (journalists and PR practitioners) remained separate for the data analysis. The researcher first organized the data collected in the interviews with journalists using a table in Microsoft Word. The data was placed in a table, where the vertical axis contained the interview questions and the horizontal axis held the names of the participants. Their responses to each question were extracted from the verbatim transcripts and placed under each corresponding cell. A second table was produced using the same procedure to hold all of the data collected in the interviews with PR practitioners. Subsequently, the data was coded using two colour coding systems. First, the researcher coded the quotations that were most relevant using the following system:

- Red = Extremely relevant
- Blue = Very relevant
- Bold = Somewhat relevant
- Black = Not very relevant

The content was considered “extremely relevant” when it was directly related to arguments/ideas presented in the literature review (which includes theoretical concepts and observed professional practices) – these were the quotes that were mostly used in the discussion and analysis. The “very relevant” quotes were also directly related to concepts and ideas from the literature review, but were either too long or not as strong, so could be used as supporting arguments. The “somewhat relevant” quotes supported the arguments, but were repetitive or sometimes used stories/examples that would take too long to explain in the context of the dissertation. The “not very relevant” quotes were very few, since the questionnaire was quite focussed. Some of the interviewees did, however, go off topic (i.e. talk about social media, Gen Y, PR vs. marketing in an organization etc.) In these cases, the quotes had little to do with topic at hand, and as such were not considered as part of the discussion/analysis.

Secondly, the researcher extracted the key concepts from the literature review and placed them underneath the interview questions (in the far left column) to which they corresponded. She then used the highlighter function in MS Word to highlight the quotes that corresponded to these key concepts for each question. The colour coding of key concepts was used to cross reference these concepts from the literature review in the interview transcripts. Since there was so much information and much of it was “relevant” or “very relevant”, the colour coding of key concepts allowed the researcher to look at all the quotes that used specific terms and refer back to the literature on those concepts.

Using these two coding mechanisms allowed the researcher to classify the data during the indexing process based on (1) relevance, and (2) key concepts. The data sets in the tables were reviewed several times to efficiently index the data. Successively, the researcher selected the headings for the data analysis section of this thesis based on the major themes and sub-themes that emerged, and extracted the most relevant quotations to support them. After categorizing and arranging the data excerpts, the researcher was able to better understand how digital media have changed the roles of PR practitioners and journalists with regards to the manner in which news about organizations is disseminated. The findings are described at length in chapters four and five.

### **3.6 Critical Perspective**

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Upon completion of any empirical study, there are aspects of the methodology that the researcher might change if the project were to be repeated. It is important to report these items,

as they could be useful to researchers studying a similar topic or collecting data from the same type of participants.

In this particular study, the researcher was able to contact participants and get an initial response quite easily. Knowledge of experts in both the fields of PR and journalism and how to best reach them definitely facilitated the process. One of the restrictions that were prevalent amongst all participants was time and availability. As noted in the literature review, journalists receive hundreds of pitches per day and have fewer resources to meet their deadlines. PR practitioners are also extremely busy and often have multiple competing priorities. Half of the interviews conducted had to be re-scheduled at least once, and one out of ten was not completed (even with multiple attempts to reconnect with the participant). There is no definitive solution to this challenge, since it is part of the reality faced by these two professions. For example, it was difficult to get participants to sign and send the consent forms prior to their interviews. Signing the consent form required them to print it, scan it and re-send it via email. Since many of these individuals were constantly “on the move”, the interview day and time often arrived and they still had neither signed nor sent the form. Although they verbally agreed to participate, it took several follow-ups to obtain the signed form after the interview. In the future, it might be a good idea to obtain permission from the Ethics Board to get verbal consent from participants such as these, especially when the nature of the research is non-controversial.

Another comment I received from many of the participants was that they preferred to not use a pseudonym and have their identity concealed. Many of the individuals interviewed write publicly on topics linked to this study either in the news media, a corporate blog, their personal blog or via social media. Being cited in a research such as this can add to their credibility. In addition, some participants did not agree with the principle of anonymity. As such, a researcher

might consider discussing with the Ethics Board whether it is possible to use real names in a study and what steps might be taken to do so. In this study, the researcher considered doing so after conducting seven interviews, but decided against it in the end. This decision was made because even if the concept would have been approved by the Ethics Board, it had been so difficult to get responses and signatures from the participants the first time around due to their busy schedules. In addition, it was possible that a minority of the respondents would not have agreed to disclose their names. It was thus decided that pseudonyms would be used in order to ensure consistency.

One encouraging aspect of the chosen sample was the breadth and depth of their expertise. All of the selected participants were renowned experts in their respective fields and in their cities. Some of them are even known at the national and international level. Although it was a challenge to work around the schedules of these individuals and get feedback at certain stages, the quality of the interviews was worth the effort. It would definitely be interesting to conduct focus groups with participants of this caliber to hear and see them engage with one another and capture their interactions on the subject matter. This might be difficult, however, due to the fact that several of them live in different cities. It might be an interesting project to consider if funding were available.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis

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The following section highlights the results of the study and analyses the data collected. Sections 4.1 to 4.3 present the results of the interviews with journalists. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 focus on the results from the interviews with PR practitioners. The remaining sections draw upon the data collected in both interview sets.

### 4.1 News Companies and the New Digital Media Landscape

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#### 4.1.1 Navigating the challenges in search of opportunity

One of the themes that prevailed in the interviews with journalists was the major transformations that the digital revolution has brought to the media landscape and their profession. These changes have raised several challenges and left news companies struggling to define their strategic directions:

- **Journalist #5:** *So the way content is created, the way it is distributed, the way it is paid for or not paid for, all of those things have changed in some fairly fundamental ways and so media companies, I think, are grappling with all of these challenges. How they really create the content has changed, how they get it to their audience or their readers or consumers and how they monetize it.*
- **Journalist #1:** *Newspapers are super crunched now. Plus they are trying to deliver news on so many different platforms at once [...] So, I am a reporter and suddenly I am shooting and editing video myself. We're expanding in all these areas, but at the same time, really worried about the future and what it will hold for journalists.*
- **Journalist #2:** *Essentially what is happening is that news organizations have to find new ways to tell stories.*
- **Journalist #3:** *I think people are increasingly turning to places like Twitter for their news and it can be very challenging on platforms the like that to get the facts right.*

These are just some of the challenges interviewees felt news companies are dealing with. All of the interviewees stated that the current business model does not work anymore. Other major issues brought forth were monetization in the face of declining advertising revenues, dropping subscriptions, increased competition and diminishing time and resources, which are affecting the quality of journalism.

#### **4.1.2 *Where's the loyalty? Single news outlet vs. multiple sources***

With the advent of aggregators, RSS feeds, customizable news sites and curation platforms, the modern-day news consumer has the choice to view up-to-the minute, customized information from multiple sources, including niche publications. Although older demographics still have an affinity towards legacy outlets like the Globe and Mail, and routinely tune into CBC's The National, interviewees confirmed that the younger customer tends to be less loyal to particular media brands:

- **Journalist #5:** *Lots of people don't go to a newspaper or a website and just read what's there. They go looking for where they can find multiple sources of content from multiple publishers.*
- **Journalist #4:** *The idea of appointment journalism is gone, so that people may still get the Globe & Mail in the morning but they are not as tied to it as they once were. [...] That loyalty is absolutely gone.*
- **Journalist #3:** *I think that because of RSS feeds and Twitter and all these things, we've become, I guess, outlet agnostic.*

This presents a conundrum as traditional and digital media outlets strive to reach younger audiences in order to broaden their consumer base.

### 4.1.3 Monetizing the product: pondering paywalls

News outlets are increasingly experimenting with paywalls in an effort to remain profitable in their increasingly competitive arena characterized by plummeting advertising revenues and subscriptions, a considerable amount of free online news content and an array of alternative channels that audiences look to for news. The participants were unequivocally apprehensive when it came to the topic of paywalls as a solution to monetize media companies' online content:

- **Journalist #3:** *I think they are an interesting conundrum. Online content has always been free and I think for the public there's a huge reluctance to pay for content. I think the issue with paywalls is, it doesn't provide a seamless experience for a user [...] I don't think that at the end of the day paywalls are going to be the solution for the cost of content.*
- **Journalist #5:** *Personally, I believe the paywalls are sort of, what I like to call a sand bag strategy. So, they keep the water from coming in but they are not a long term solution to the problems that media companies are facing. [...] Pay walls work best when either you have a huge brand like the New York Times, or your content is really, really targeted and focused on a specific audience.*
- **Journalist #1:** *As a journalist, I feel that we should not give our product away for free because I understand the investment that goes into it. [...] We have to figure out how to get people to pay for what we do because journalism important for a free and democratic society, but it's expensive.*

All of the interviewees believed that their product should not be given away for free; however, paywalls were not necessarily the right solution for all media outlets. The key point that arose was that paywalls could work if news companies provide high quality, unique content. One participant emphasized that publishing content behind a paywall that resembles content which other outlets are offering for free, begs the question “why is it behind a paywall”? There is recognition of the need and importance to monetize content. However, the general consensus is

that news companies are very much in the experimentation stages when it comes to this concern in the context of the digital media landscape.

#### ***4.1.4 A new age: participation, social media, blogging and citizen journalism***

The digital media landscape is providing opportunities to those who previously may not have had a voice to share their opinions and insights. Social media, blogs and other Web or mobile-based tools have made it possible for anyone to become a publisher. This does not necessarily mean that everyone who publishes material will have an audience or exert an influence. However, those who have a particular interest or expertise in a subject matter now have an outlet to share and, if what they publish is interesting, people will begin to follow:

- ***Journalist #4:*** *I think that a lot of media organizations and journalists are in denial about how effective bloggers are becoming.*
- ***Journalist #5:*** *With the rise of blogging and social media of all kinds, the tools to distribute content are available to anyone and that includes people in the field that you are writing about – so they are now your competition.*

Interviewees expressed that bloggers and citizen journalists who are experts in particular fields now have the ability to publish. Some of these individuals already have a great deal of credibility and essentially become competitors for journalists who are writing about the same beat. One of the participants makes a good point about how these platforms are not responsible the decline of the media industry as we know it:

- ***Journalist #2:*** *I don't think blogs and bloggers and Twitter are to blame for newsrooms having to lay off hundreds of people.*

Journalists should focus on the opportunities that have resulted from these forums and the valuable contributors that have risen to the top thanks to digital media. In fact, one of the interviewees stated:

- **Journalist #1:** *With Twitter and citizen journalists helping professional journalists on big stories – directing them to people affected – it’s much more intermeshed with the community, which I think is very positive.*

Experts and enthusiasts are not the only ones who are taking to their computers and mobile devices to share their opinions online. As described in the literature review, news is becoming increasingly participatory and interactive. Interviewees emphasized the importance of engaging consumers in the news process:

- **Journalist #1:** *I think journalists and newspapers now understand that readers want a relationship with us. Part of this is through blogs, posts, comments or exchanges – customers want to be part of the story and have a say in it.*

In fact, all of the participants interact (or have interacted) with their audience in some way.

- **Journalist #2:** *When people write us on Twitter, we absolutely will write back to them and engage with them; I think that again, it is a really positive thing.*
- **Journalist #1:** *We did online chats so readers could come in with their questions, so I did do that. Other reporters do more; they post on Facebook and sort of have this ongoing conversation all the time.*

The interviewees expressed many similar opinions regarding participatory journalism and engaging consumers in the news process. They view this trend mainly as an opportunity for journalists and outlets to get closer to their consumers and to obtain interesting content:

- **Journalist #5:** *I think if you are not sort of taking advantage to some extent, of users and consumers and their desire to interact with you or to create content themselves, you are kind of missing a huge chunk of what makes the media industry interesting right now. [...] I think that interaction with your audience is a crucial aspect of the job.*

- **Journalist #2:** *It's refreshing in that it is acknowledging that this is something that is important, this is something that is a part of what we do, and I think that's great.*
- **Journalist #3:** *I think especially as a freelance writer, its value that I give the outlets that I work for. But I also think it is one of the neater ways that media is changing.*

All interviewees also cited that news companies are recognizing the value of making the audience engagement a vital part of the news process and many of them appreciate this:

- **Journalist #2:** *Something I really like about my outlet is they will encourage, for example wading into the comments, responding to people.*
- **Journalist #1:** *We use much more of that. There was a folio [centre-section] this week that had people writing about their own experiences about the end of life debate. We tend to run much more essays, especially online, but usually it is in the context of a journalist-shaped piece: ex. Here is an overview, and then here are these [user-generated] voices.*

Although news companies recognize the importance of user participation and social media, some of them are still trying to figure out what is the best model for them and how to regulate it. One of the participants highlighted this challenge:

- **Journalist #3:** *I think they all encourage, sort of being on social media. [...] The degree of interaction is still something outlets are working on as far social media policy and that sort of thing.*

Journalists post their content to social media channels including Twitter and Facebook in order to increase engagement and promote sharing. Participants all stated that their news companies' sites have buttons and tools that facilitate sharing on social media. The tool of choice for the journalists interviewed in this study was Twitter. However, some use Facebook, Linked In and Google+ as well.

## 4.2 The Digital News Consumer

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### 4.2.1 Preferences and motivators

The digital consumer obtains his/her news from multiple platforms and sites using different devices such as computers, tablets and mobile phones. As mentioned in section 4.1.2 younger consumers tend to be less loyal to particular media brands or outlets. During the interview process, participants were asked about what motivates consumers to purchase subscriptions to particular media. The main motivators that resulted from this question were trust, loyalty and quality:

- **Journalist #1:** *They want information they can trust. So that is the main motivator.*
- **Journalist #2:** *I think for a lot of Canadians there is a very strong sentiment that 'I want to receive and support Canadian media. I want to receive a Canadian viewpoint; I want to know what is going on in my country'.*
- **Journalist #4:** *They are also saying give us news that has some consequence don't just give us A-Z and say okay, we have given you the news. Give us something that we can hang onto.*

Political preferences and lifestyle choices were also stated as playing a role in consumers' decisions to subscribe to a specific media outlet. As described in section 4.1.2 loyalty to specific news outlets has decreased. Some of the interviewees cited who consumers might follow to get their news:

- **Journalist #3:** *I think that they've certainly diminished that loyalty, I think that in this day and age people are more loyal to voices and personalities and reporters who they feel they can trust or they like their point of view.*
- **Journalist #4:** *The audience is now way ahead of the media. And they will go to where they think they can get the most interesting, not necessarily the best or the most reliable story, but certainly what their social media or their social cohort tells them is the most interesting place to go.*

Participants' views were consistent with research findings presented in the literature review, which state that consumers increasingly look to their peers and the people they follow on social media to receive their news.

#### **4.2.2 *Plugged-in, up to date, overloaded***

The digital consumer has access to the news at all hours of the day. Whether it's via news sites, blogs or social media, they receive "bites" of information, without necessarily entering into the details. Participants emphasized that this has an effect on the type of news journalists are creating:

- ***Journalist #1:*** *You get more minute-by-minute updates, so it's easier to be more informed throughout the day about what's happening on a particular issue. But I think the more thoughtful, analytical piece suffers.*

Consumers are often suffering from information overload, due to the amount of messages they are exposed to on a daily basis:

- ***Journalist #4:*** *What I am sensing now is increasing media fatigue. [...] There is too much stuff and not enough of it is being put in a form that is useful.*

Interviewees stated that this is causing audiences to shift to niche sites that are more personalized. These can be the sites of brands and organizations that create journalistic-like content for target groups:

- ***Journalist #1:*** *There are just so many sites for people to choose from. We are such a busy culture and it just adds to the competition. People end up going to niche sites to find things that suit their interests as a consumer of media – something that you were not able to do before.*

### 4.2.3 Engaged: like, tweet, share

Besides looking to social media to obtain news, the digital consumer also likes to share on these channels. Participants stated that sharing on social networks resembles typical human behaviour in several other situations. The same way people join book clubs to discuss what they are reading, or cut out recipes to give to their friends, they now share all types of information on social media with the click of a mouse:

- **Journalist #5:** *I think that [sharing] is a normal sort of human behavior that social media really taps into, so when you read something and you think it is interesting, you often want to share with somebody. It just really wasn't that easy before, you had to physically pick something out of the newspaper and hand it to them or you had to tell them about it and they had to go and get a newspaper, it was just cumbersome. Social media allows you to share things incredibly quickly and so with a click, if you see something interesting you can share it with anyone else who might be interested. [...] Most of us want to appear to be informed about things to our friends and sort of social circle; [...] social media taps into that.*
- **Journalist #4:** *People love to gossip [...] I think that is one of the appeals of social media, is that you can kind of dish it out.*

## 4.3 Embracing a New Reality: News Companies and Journalists Adapt

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### 4.3.1 Quality vs. immediacy: a balancing act

The news cycle has changed a great deal since the advent of digital media. In a close to real-time context, journalists no longer have the luxury of waiting until the next day to file a story. News is constantly breaking on social media and newsrooms have fewer resources to keep up. Participants agreed that this has had an impact on the length, depth and quality of journalism:

- **Journalist #1:** *I think there's less analysis and context. But that's a super-general statement – there are still excellent pieces – especially in the weekend papers. I think*

*probably as a rule it's more focussed on the new media and less focussed on the next day's story.*

- **Journalist #5:** *Lots of media outlets are trying to be faster and trying to be first with information, and in some cases making mistakes.*

Although consumers and readers are benefitting from getting more up-to-the minute information, journalists fear that the more in-depth, analytical piece suffers.

- **Journalist #1:** *I worry that the quality and breadth will suffer and that it will be somewhat of a vicious circle – that people will look elsewhere for their news.*
- **Journalist #2:** *People who are good at social media, do it in such a way that you can understand the bigger story from what they are saying. You know, if you look back at the tweets, they link to the bigger story that people are talking about.*

One interviewee stated that not all news pieces need to be short, but that journalists should be able to produce concise, media-rich chunks of their articles so as to make it easier for audiences to share.

#### **4.3.2 Looking to the future**

All the interviewees agreed that the future of journalists and news companies is uncertain. However, they are adapting to the new environment and predicting what may be in store for their industry. One of the interviewees stated that consumers fundamentally want media that informs and attracts them:

- **Journalist #4:** *People will want the media that they find most useful, interesting, informative, diverting, all of those things. But there will always be a need for smart journalism, journalism that has an impact.*

The media through which stories are delivered, however, will continue to evolve:

- **Journalist #5:** *It's no longer just a newspaper or just a magazine. You have multiple channels through which people want to hear your content and so you have to figure out how to get it to them in the most efficient way possible, whether it is mobile or web or print or some combination of those things.*

#### **4.4 The Other Side: Organizational PR, Digital Media and Content Marketing**

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##### **4.4.1 Trend alert: brands and organizations as publishers**

As stated in section 2.4 of the literature review, brands and organizations are using their owned media channels and content marketing to broadcast news and information to their target audiences, and are in some cases circumventing news outlets. These organizations and brands have become publishers – a trend that has picked up to a great extent in 2012 and 2013. All of the five PR practitioners that were interviewed in this study stated that their organizations or clients are in fact publishers, and that this movement is on the rise:

- **PR #5:** *I think it's growing rapidly. I think that over the next five years you are going to see easily a doubling of the number of companies that are practicing brand journalism. If you look at my company alone I think we probably have 7 projects right now with various companies that you can classify as brand journalism projects, and this time last year I didn't have any.*
- **PR #4:** *Yes definitely every company is a media company now right.*

According to interviewees, the primary benefits of publishing content related to an organization's product or service in their owned channels are customer engagement and control:

- **PR #2:** *In general, it is important because when it is done well, it actually serves the end user, the customer, so much better than traditional advertising. When organizations follow the right approach to content marketing and actually produce content that is*

*useful, interesting and valuable to people and not purely the self-promotional it can genuinely help users and customers.*

- **PR #3:** *You have a controlled message and you have control of target; those are the two critical things that owned media enables you to do.*

By contrast to paid media (advertising), content marketing provides target audiences with useful or interesting information on the topics surrounding one's organization and presents it in such a way that customers want to engage and share. One participant highlighted that content marketing allows you to promote your organization at a much lower cost than traditional advertising:

- **PR #5:** *through content marketing you can take a fraction (5-10%) of that budget and expose your company and products in ways that are far greater than you could ever do with taking out advertising. You have all these free distribution channels: you have YouTube, you have Email newsletters, you have your own Website, and you have all the social media channels, so it is certainly inexpensive to be able to market your services and your products as compared to the traditional advertising and media roads.*

Content marketing also allows organizations to select the messages and types of content they want to put out. Although the majority of feedback obtained about this new trend focussed on its positive aspects and the opportunities it offers, two participants warned of the drawbacks of producing content that is too promotional or brand-centric:

- **PR #1:** *If you're not carefully crafting your content, and you're speaking in a voice that doesn't suit this kind of environment (i.e. a voice that is less candid, and more promotional, let's say a voice that older PR teams may have used in producing their content), you end up driving away your audience in the long-run.*
- **PR #2:** *If all you do is talk about yourself even in ways that are useful, then you are missing out, because the vast majority of people don't want to hear a brand talk about itself. They want the brand to talk about things that are of interest to them. And so you have to figure out what the intersection point is between who you are as a brand (and your product), and what are the things that the people who you want to talk to, value and are interested in.*

#### **4.4.2 Social media: a key element of content marketing**

The rise of content marketing can be attributed in great part to social media and blogs since these platforms allow essentially anyone to become a publisher. Social media is a key component of content marketing since it provides different platforms to organizations, who seek to directly reach their audiences, engage and share their content in various formats. All of the PR practitioners who participated in this study indicated that they use the following social media to a great extent:

- **PR #1:** *Twitter, Facebook, Linked In, Instagram, Vine, Tumblr, Wordpress, Pinterest, Google +*
- **PR #2:** *Twitter, Facebook, Linked In and Google +*
- **PR #3:** *Twitter, Scoop.it, Tumblr and You Tube*
- **PR #4:** *Twitter, Linked In, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram*
- **PR #5:** *Linked In, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Google +*

Social media is a crucial part of their work as content marketers. They use these channels for several purposes:

- **PR #2:** *So there is an element of trying to be there and engaging and living and connecting with people who have similar interests to us. And the other is obviously we use them as channels to push out the content that we are creating and to help people be informed.*
- **PR #5:** *Staying connected with our customers and distributing our content. So we distribute our content for all these sites but then we also use them to promote our conferences our workshops and our consulting practice - so basically for everything.*
- **PR #1:** *Primarily for pushing content. Actually, Twitter and Facebook are primarily for customer service, and content is a secondary emphasis. Vine, Pinterest and Instagram are for pushing content. Tumblr is for re-sharing content and engaging the community. So I would say that some have a heavier customer service focus, but on both of them we're looking to listen to our community, engage them, re-share the content and push some of our own content.*

Therefore, social media has enabled organizations to disseminate journalistic-like content from their owned channels to target audiences, as well as engage with them in multi-directional conversation.

According to the interviewees social media has also had a positive impact on brand equity, customer service and trust.

- **PR #1:** *Absolutely, yes. Especially our customer service. It has increased the trust in the brand. Our ability to respond to questions effectively and quickly – we have received specific tweets that have confirmed that.*
- **PR #2:** *I think that when you do it right, when you have the right measure of those things, it absolutely can create an increased level of trust, because trust comes from connection.*

On the other hand, one interviewee highlighted that it also provides a platform for consumers to express negative comments about the brand.

- **PR #1:** *For consumers, it is very popular to express negative comments towards companies and organizations in the interest of affecting change.*

Meanwhile, another participant stated that the impact social media engagement has depends largely on how the organization goes about it:

- **PR #2:** *At the same time, if you do it wrong, it is a really easy way to destroy trust because if your blog is just purely self-promotional, if it has a tone that turns people off, if the content on there is poorly written and poorly edited, then you're going to have the opposite effect. So it really matters how you go about social and how you go about blogging and if you do it right, absolutely brand equity and trust increase, because what it means is that people ultimately feel more connected to it. They feel like you tie the corporate entity to human voice and a human presence and maybe they even feel like they've gotten to know some of the people there and that is tremendously powerful.*

Therefore, simply being on social media is not enough – it is the execution that matters in order to use these channels to their full potential and build lasting relationships with one's followers.

## 4.5 Marketing Content in Owned Media Channels

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### 4.5.1 Owned media: channels and tools

Modern-day organizations produce unique, journalistic-like content to disseminate in their owned channels. Interviewees stated that they use a range of tools including blog posts, photo, video, curation tools, social media posts and RSS feeds to broadcast their content across these channels:

- **PR #5:** *Our content runs the gamut from video, social media posts and updates, news articles, podcasts – almost any aspect of content that you can think of, we cover.*
- **PR #4:** *So we do multiple formats: we do podcasting, we do video production, we have an editorial team that researches and writes stories, and we use photography. We have a team of web and application developers here, so we do application development, internet content development.*
- **PR #3:** *I use blogging just as a primary tool. I use curation on my website and in other curation tools like Scoop.it, which is growing leaps and bounds for me. I use Twitter for micro blogging. I extended out through Tumblr and I'm just starting to look at how I can innovate using YouTube and video.*

Audiences are increasingly moving towards channels that are tailored to their preferences. As such, interviewees confirmed that organizations have to ensure a presence in these channels in order to reach their target markets:

- **PR #5:** *So, as a new platform comes out and all of your consumers are migrating and joining that platform, Pinterest is a great example, you've got to be there. You've got to be on top of mobile strategies, you've got to be on top of video. So you have to make sure that your organization understands where the audience is, and then be there – hopefully before they are. So you really don't get any kind of break in the action. You need to be constantly adapting and I hate to use this cliché but it's a cliché for a reason; you've got to fish where the fish are.*
- **PR #1:** *On networks that don't allow channelizing of content (like Twitter), we've channelized our content based on the topic, the audience and the content they are likely to be interested in. On Facebook you can use narrowcasting and targeting. A big one we use is multilingual targeting. We also use post targeting that allows us to target by*

*demographics. On Pinterest we've been creating different boards which allow people to decide what they are interested in.*

While it is important to ensure a presence on the social media channels that your audience uses, PR #2 made a good point about taking the time to consider whether or not to develop a presence on a particular social media platform:

- **PR #2:** *Sometimes choosing what you won't do is just as important as what you will. And if you can find those communities of interest that are really well aligned with what you are trying to do, you shouldn't worry that you are not on a particular social platform at that moment because maybe you are meeting the people that you need, and you don't have to be on that channel.*

Therefore, some of the interviewees emphasized the importance of experimenting on all relevant social media platforms if your consumers are there, while others cautioned that organizations should properly assess the situation before taking on too much. Of course, the decision to produce content for multiple platforms also depends on the resources an organization has on hand to create engaging, quality content for these platforms, monitor them and interact with their audiences. Interviewees also mentioned the value of consulting their audience directly across various social media channels in order to gain additional insights.

#### **4.5.2 Owned media: audience-centric, always on**

Participants disclosed that the content they produce to best reach their target customers via owned media channels is audience-focussed:

- **PR #2:** *So a big piece of the content that we create is quite simply anticipating and reacting to the questions, concerns and needs that our users have. [...] We have existing users who will write guest posts for our blog about how they are using our product, and how it's valuable.*

- **PR #3:** *Definitely, it's all about trying to answer the needs and the questions that you think your customers have in their minds.*

One of the participants highlighted that effectively marketing content on owned media channels requires an “always on” approach, since audiences expect you to interact with them on different platforms as well:

- **PR #5:** *In the old days you would publish to your website and walk away from that and say “that's it, I'm done.” Well now, you can't do that. I mean, how many customers are on Twitter, or on Facebook, or on Pinterest, or on Google Plus? You have got to cover all of those areas to be able to make sure that you are leaving little bread crumbs out there so your customer can come back to you and find you. So content has got to be everywhere. Now it takes different forms, so it maybe a story on your website, a tweet on twitter or a visual on Pinterest, but it is all coming from the same content, the same story if you want to look at it that way... What I like to say is when it comes to content “waste not want not”.*

As mentioned in section 4.5.1, it is not always feasible for an organization to be on all of the social media platforms, as they need to constantly feed these channels with good content in order to be effective. Another participant pointed out related challenges faced by organizations who decide to pursue content marketing:

- **PR #3:** *I mean, it is all about quality and frequency and so I think the big challenge for content marketers and companies that want to be publishers or use content marketing to reach their audiences, is finding and creating great content of quality and keeping frequency.*

### **4.5.3 Owned media: content is king, but format and ‘shareability’ are queen**

The quality of content produced by an organization is fundamental to their content marketing strategy. This is especially important in the increasingly cluttered media landscape.

One of the participants effectively described the type of content organizations should create:

- **PR #5:** *People will not share something that they are bored with. So what I mean by that is that the stories that you write have to immediately engage the reader, starting with the headline, right off the bat they have to start selling “you have to click on this headline because this is going to help you, or it is going to help your career.” So you have to practice that thing I call refrigerator journalism. There has to be content that is so good that you want to cut it out and put it on your refrigerator.*

As discussed in section 4.2.2, the digital consumer is singularly plugged-in and increasingly consumes content in ‘bites’. This is causing PR practitioners and journalists alike to abandon traditional ways of producing longer-form content, in favour of shorter, media-rich content. The interviewees confirmed this trend:

- **PR #1:** *I think it’s changed substantially the way we write content in the organization. I think that things are getting shorter. Brevity is key, and I think we’ve headed in that direction in every piece of content that we share.*
- **PR #2:** *There’s a lot of talk that with these short form platforms out there, you should be creating content that’s “snackable”. In the sense that it is very easy to consume in that moment and self-contained in the 140 characters of the Tweet, for example. It expresses itself in those constraints. So it’s getting down to the atomic of unit of what you are trying to communicate.*

In addition to packaging content using more concise formats that are tailored to social media platforms, PR practitioners who participated in this study cited the importance of creating content that audiences will want to share:

- **PR #2:** *If you try to make something that will make people happy or surprise them or delight them then you have a much better chance of having something that is sharable because you are creating an emotion, you are creating a reaction and I think that is really the key.*
- **PR #1:** *You need to be brief, interesting, effective, and where appropriate, personal. That’s the best way to make it shareable.*

Using owned channels to produce good content is essential for organizations who are seeking to take on a brand journalism role in the eyes of their audiences. In fact, interviewees stated that effective content marketing is at the heart of social media engagement:

- **PR #4:** *Without content, it is difficult to convene a community really if you have got nothing to talk about right? So I would say, it is the hub and the social media are the spokes – it is really at the center of it.*

#### **4.5.4 The PR practitioner's role in the publishing organization**

As more organizations move towards a content marketing or brand journalism model, PR practitioners are taking on more of a content-producing and journalistic role. Participants confirmed that the PR department is the 'natural' home of content marketing and that PR should be telling the organization's story:

- **PR #5:** *I think that of all the departments in any corporation, PR is best suited for it. Content marketing and brand journalism have to be somewhat neutral in their approach. You can't be slamming your customers with relentless marketing messages, which is what advertising does and marketing does. PR people are naturally inclined towards social media because it is all about relationship building.*

One of the participants stated that a challenge that might be faced when shifting to an audience-centric content marketing culture is that the PR department's view might be different from the marketing department's view.

- **PR #3:** *Brand journalism is a lot different from the marketing department's view. [...] It's often a tug of war. You need to convince people that no, you can't talk about yourself; you need to talk about what the consumer is interested in and what problems your product solves. It's a real challenge to take the 'marketing' out of content marketing.*

Therefore, getting internal buy-in regarding the ownership of content and the organizational content marketing strategy is extremely important. Another participant who works for an agency highlighted that clients who come to them know about social media, but struggle with content development due to a lack of skills and resources.

## 4.6 PR and Journalism in the Digital Era: Reciprocity and Competition

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### 4.6.1 *Owned media and content marketing: rival to mainstream media?*

As more organizations produce unique, journalistic content for their audiences and distribute it through their owned channels, there is concern as to how this will affect the role of mainstream media. Both the journalists and PR practitioners interviewed in this study weighed in on this topic. From journalists' perspective, the responses varied. One journalist who studies these trends in particular, cited that that content produced by organizations in owned media channels can definitely be seen as competition for the mainstream media:

- **Journalist #5:** *It is just a hugely disruptive factor. So if your role as you saw it before was to reach audiences or readers and give them content about a specific topic, if the brands and companies and corporations or organizations or entities of all kinds who are involved in that sector are publishing their content themselves and producing high quality content that's a competitor, you now have a new competitor.*

One of the PR practitioners who was interviewed cited that the mainstream media is losing some of its audience to individuals (such as bloggers) and to organizations who publish valuable content:

- **PR #1:** *Traditional media and its share of audience is dropping, so where is that going? I think some is going to the individuals and some is going to organizations. [...] I'd say the most effective ones are already influencers who have created their own media channels.*

Contrarily, other participants see journalistic content produced by brands and organizations as minimally threatening, since they believe that consumers will continue to look to the mainstream media for unbiased information:

- **Journalist #3:** *If I am reading an article on Red Bull's website versus an article on the Globe & Mail, like it or not, I am probably going to have more trust in the Globe & Mail. So I think if anything it makes the source more important. [...] I think you sort of have*

*more expectations that you are not getting marketing messages, so it's helpful to mainstream media outlets.*

- **Journalist #1:** *I don't really see them as replacing. I think people know what they are getting there and it is what they are looking for, but I don't think it is necessarily replacing news media. I see them as quite separate.*

#### **4.6.2 Owned media vs. earned media: PR now has options**

Since the advent of social media has allowed organizations to reach their audience directly, PR practitioners are less dependent on journalists, as they can communicate directly with their target audiences. The PR professionals who participated in this study stated:

- **PR #5:** *What I think has changed, what you are going to see is the intensity of desire for earned media is going to wane. So in other words, if in most organizations, it used to be live or die to get your story published in a third party publication, as the years go on I don't think it is going to be as important because if I am delivering news and information directly to my customer, a customer that sits in my database (you know, my prospects, my current customers). I'm going to recognize that I have a huge amount of influence through the news and the information I deliver that can't really be replicated in any other way.*
- **PR #1:** *I think the dependence for a while now has been non-existent. [...]Owned media makes it much more attractive for corporations to push their own content and then find the influencers that are interested enough to share it.*
- **PR #4:** *So getting your story covered by mainstream media is still as important as it ever was. It's just that because it is so difficult to do, the self-publishing trend has occurred.*

Some organizations forgo the mainstream media and directly launch their products or initiatives on social media platforms according to another interviewee:

- **PR #3:** *Yes, I would say you could launch a new product entirely on social if you knew what you were doing without the support of traditional media. But the irony is if you did it so well on social media, like Red Bull, then immediately the media picks it up as a story because hey, everybody is talking about it.*

One of the journalists interviewed highlighted the fact that owned media has given organizations whose voice was previously less strong, opportunities to publish their stories:

- **Journalist #1:** *I think for non-profits it really gives them this tool to tell their stories and so there's richer information as a result. They are the tellers of their own story, which would not have been possible prior to the digital revolution.*

It may be more challenging for smaller organizations or non-profits to generate buzz the way larger corporations do. However, they are now able to tell their stories, and generate communities of interest, which include niche influencers, thanks to social media.

Although PR practitioners in all types of organizations now have the option to publish their content in owned channels and still reach their target audiences, there is a continued added-value of garnering earned media coverage according to the PR professionals that were interviewed:

- **PR #2:** *You know I don't think that earned media has diminished in terms of its value at all. It's still really important because frankly the vast majority of organizations, their owned media will still not be as credible as earned media.*
- **PR #4:** *The earned media still has the same credibility factor than it ever had. Also you have the integrity of the publication; you have the integrity of the actual journalist that gives you that third party endorsement, and not to mention the wider distribution.*

The journalists who participated in the study also confirmed that from their perspective, earned media is still important for organizations from a reputational standpoint, since it consists of a third party, voluntary endorsement:

- **Journalist #5:** *I guess the value of that earned media, the whole name suggests that you somehow convince someone to do something related to you that you are not paying for. So they have done that because they feel something strongly about you or your brand or your product and that's the best possible sort of marketing you could imagine. [...] So, to the extent that you can help people who are fans of you or your product reach out and influence others, that's the best of all worlds, that's the best thing you can possibly imagine.*

- **Journalist #1:** *I think it's a reputation/buzz thing. For decision makers and people who really influence - the opinion-leaders in the conventional sense – I think earned media really matters. Especially for the older generation. I think for the younger generation, it's a different story.*

Journalist #1's final point about the younger generation suggests that perhaps there will be a shift in the impact of earned media as these individuals who have different media consumption habits become the primary news consumers.

Finally, all of the PR practitioners interviewed have had some content from their owned channels generate pickup from the mainstream media. Some have even benefitted from re-posts of owned content on reputable news or trade publication sites:

- **PR #3:** *Quite often my blog post will get picked up by PR Daily for example. I have been interviewed by the New York Times about news releases and by other media because they find me through my profile and various channels.*
- **PR #5:** *Oh yes all the time. As a matter of fact, you can see in the back end of Google analytics our stories are picked everywhere- regularly by various blogs of the New York Times, we get picked up by Forbes, in ways we don't even know. We don't even pitch them, they are subscribing to our news beat, they see something and then they reference it in their blogs or sometimes even do a whole story about it.*

This of course varies depending on the type of organization, and whether or not the news they publish on their owned channels is of interest to the general public or to the target audiences of certain beats or trade publications. For one of the interviewees, media pickup from owned channels is less common:

- **PR #1:** *Not frequently. Usually the content we produce that gets picked up by the media is pitched as we are producing it, so they may get it from an alternate source such as a media release. Although it does occasionally happen – there has been some content that is picked up by media sources.*

This highlights the importance of organizations producing content in owned channels with their audiences as the primary target. Earned media will follow if the topic is appropriate and there is a good angle.

## **4.7 Journalists and PR Practitioners: changing roles and relationships**

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### **4.7.1 Journalists as gatekeepers, role disrupted**

Organizations' use of owned and social media channels to publish their news and distribute it to their audiences and to influencers has disrupted journalists' gatekeeping role. The PR practitioners interviewed confirmed that journalists have not been gatekeepers for quite some time:

- **PR #4:** *Yeah that's gone. It's a thing of the past right now. They used to be a key gatekeeper between the audience and the brand or the organization but there are so many ways around the journalist now that the floodgates are open. Yeah it's not a role anymore.*
- **PR #1:** *I think the journalists' gatekeeping role has been dead for years. Obsolete. I think their role is evaporating and the notion that a communicator can be good at communicating everything is ridiculous.*
- **PR #5:** *The gatekeeping role that journalists play has been decimated over the years and it is going to continue that trend. And in fact you can see that there is kind of collective anger on the part of a lot of journalists over the fact that no one really has to beg them anymore to do stories. It is one of the most profound changes in the media that I have seen in my lifetime.*

PR practitioners and organizations can now circumvent journalists and reach their audiences directly through their owned platforms. They can also reach bloggers and other influencers in their domain who follow them on these channels. This may be frustrating to journalists and news companies, as they are no longer primary "gate" through which the news flows.

As such, one of the journalists interviewed suggests that journalists take on more of a curating role in deciding what makes the cut as newsworthy in the mainstream media, and what doesn't:

- **Journalist #1:** *It's not as much of a gatekeeping role as a curating role. I mean it's still gatekeeping, because journalists still decide what's newsworthy and what's not. There's room for more stories on electronic media, but it does not always make the actual paper. I think that there's still a gatekeeper function for this. There are more avenues with all these different media to get noticed by the gatekeepers. They can also sort of by-pass the gatekeepers if they can get to these other sites where they can reach their target/niche audiences.*

Three of the other journalists who participated in the study agreed that journalists no longer have the same gatekeeping function:

- **Journalist #3:** *Absolutely. I think that there is increasingly the sense that, media no longer owns the news.*
- **Journalist #4:** *They haven't been gatekeepers for a while. [...] They can't be gatekeepers because there is no more gate; there isn't even a fence! So that is what is allowing this flow of content to come in.*
- **Journalist #5:** *I think it has disrupted it and is continuing to disrupt it.*

Journalist #5 elaborated that though journalists have lost much of their gatekeeping role, since organizations and brands have become publishers, they still maintain a competitive edge because the quality of content is not up to par with that of news companies:

- **Journalist #5:** *So the only sort of benefit that traditional media has at this point is that lot of those blogs and sort of brand-created media just isn't very good. So, that's the only sort of competitive advantage, is that traditional media theoretically, the quality of their content is better. But that may not always be the case and in fact in some cases it isn't the case. So it just means again your content has to be that much better than it used to be because you now have way more competition.*

The final journalist interviewed was opposed to the notion that journalists are no longer gatekeepers:

- **Journalist #2:** *No, I don't think it does because I think that the role of journalists is to tell the story in a responsible contextual way, whereas the company is always going to be putting their most positive message. So I think that, again people, readers and consumers will recognize that.*

This participant believes that journalists' gatekeeping function remains intact because they still get to decide the news that makes the cut into mainstream media, and therefore benefits from the credibility and reach of these traditional outlets.

#### **4.7.2 A shift in power**

The rise of digital media and the content marketing movement has challenged the formerly established power relations between journalists and PR practitioners. The journalists interviewed confirmed that the media has less power:

- **Journalist #1:** *I think they [PR people] have more avenues/tools/opportunities to get on the national agenda and to get attention than they used to have. So I think the balance has shifted a lot. People can reach others in many different ways compared to prior to the digital revolution, so the media is much less powerful.*
- **PR #1:** *Yes – a lot of the power that they still have today is in the process of evaporating because there's just not enough emphasis placed on these individuals as storytellers.*

The media has lost a great deal of its power, since organizations and individuals can now publish and promote their own stories. These stories will proliferate as a result of social networks if the content is of interest to the target audiences. Journalist #1 pointed out that though there has been a shift in power, journalists have hopefully benefitted from increased interconnectivity with their stakeholders:

- **Journalist #1:** *But also, hopefully, more connected and more community-based in a way. That they kind of work together and that the media is better as a result.*

One of the PR practitioners interviewed states that owned media has opened up an array of possibilities to organizations who wish to influence their audiences:

- **PR #5:** *I think it has really diminished the power of the media by giving organizations so many different alternatives. That's really the key thing, me as a PR person I don't have the sense that I'm powerless anymore. I can get my message out through so many different channels today that I don't have to be so disappointed if I'm not covered. That in a sense, has diminished that influence of the media covering me.*

#### **4.7.3 PR pros as agenda setters**

PR practitioners are often the purveyors of messages from their organizations or clients and are the key contacts for journalists who are trying to access information. This trend has changed in some ways because of digital media, since reporters are now able to find other sources and ways of getting the information they need. According to one of the journalists interviewed, PR professionals have less impact on agenda-setting than they previously did:

- **Journalist #5:** *Certainly not as much as they used to, no. Well, I think again, there are just so many sources of information that it's easier for me or any other media professional to sort of come across things that they find interesting or make up their own minds about things that are important instead of basing the decision on whether a company decides to issue a press release about something.*

The other journalists interviewed believe that PR practitioners still have agenda-setting influence, but it depends on the topic and the pitch:

- **Journalist #1:** *Yes, they definitely do. People would pitch me on stories and why they mattered and I would listen and would often get good stories. Reporters are always open to a good idea. It has to be a good pitch, but then you can definitely shape the agenda.*
- **Journalist #2:** *They definitely can. I think that it is the role of the journalist to question and not accept things at face value.*
- **PR #5:** *Oh absolutely yes. That may be the case where they have always had impact, I'm not sure if they have more impact or less. But a good PR person always had impact on setting the news agenda because even in the old days, the PR person representing the*

*organizations controlled to a certain extent things like announcements, how crises were dealt with. So a PR person being on the inside still has an impact on setting the agenda. Now they've lost a lot of that impact because there are so many ways for a story to get out, you can't control the story anymore.*

The final point reflects how much easier it is for the story to get out and spread in today's digital media landscape, suggesting that PR practitioners might face more challenges to control the story in this environment.

#### **4.7.4 PR professionals and journalists: working together in the digital era**

All of the interviewees on both the journalism and PR sides agreed that the relationship between journalists and PR practitioners, though complex, is a symbiotic one. PR practitioners interviewed cited that journalists still rely on PR to a great extent:

- **PR #3:** *Journalists still need PR people for story ideas, good ones; the difference I think is that PR people don't need journalists as critically as they used to. Journalists used to be the only channel and now they are important, but one of many channels.*
- **PR #4:** *I'll tell you what it is today: today journalists have a lot more respect for PRs than they did in the past. I think they see us more as collaborators and friends instead of how we were seen before, as kind of the gate between finding the truth. What are the benefits - well they need us more than ever because they have fewer resources to get content, to get their stories and so on. But in another way, they have more direct contact with spokespeople too.*
- **PR #1:** *Organizations, the individual, even at this point is becoming the broadcaster. Journalists are content repurposers, so they need content creators in organizations to give them material to work with. I think it's a symbiotic relationship in many ways.*

The journalists interviewed all stated that they depend on PR for their reporting to a certain extent – some more so than others. One in particular said:

- **Journalist #4:** *I think journalists do [depend on PR] more than they are prepared to admit.*

Another journalist focussed on the mutually beneficial aspects of the relationship:

- **Journalist #1:** *Journalists can get good information that informs their readers and makes their stories richer and PR people can get their message out. So definitely there is reciprocity there.*

Journalists cited that people – personal connections and relationships with PR, were often the most useful to them in their reporting:

- **Journalist #1:** *The personal connection and relationship. If I knew a particular PR person for example at a university, I could call them up to say I am working on this piece, do you have anybody, can you help me find somebody? So you end up working together, but it's more personal, relationship building.*
- **Journalist #2:** *People...we talked earlier about exclusives and wanting to be the first with things, so if there is a press release that is sent out to a blanket list and it is something that would be exciting to have first, then it is not the best thing for a journalist.*

Other things journalists mentioned that they look for from PR practitioners are quick response time, information and ideas, and originality.

Although PR practitioners now have their own channels to disseminate content, as mentioned in section 4.6.2, they still aim to get media coverage in earned channels. As such, it is important for PR to know how to best feed their information to journalists in the digital era.

Three of the journalists that were interviewed in this study stated that they had little use for press releases for the most part:

- **Journalist #1:** *For me, I found them not necessarily an effective way of communicating.*
- **Journalist #3:** *I can't think of very many stories that I have generated based on the press release, I think that I am generally never looking for sort of canned stories that everyone else is writing.*
- **Journalist #5:** *I think they are in most cases virtually useless, so I'd much rather have a blog post somewhere that has a whole bunch of extra information attached to it or video clips or links to different things and so on rather than just a traditional kind of mass produced thing that just has hand quote from the CEO.*

One of the other participants cited that press releases can be useful, depending on the content:

- **Journalist #2:** *Sometimes, they can be. Traditional press releases can give you some basic information that you often need and usually more often than not you have to use the contact on the press release in order to ask some follow-up questions and what not.*

News releases can therefore help to keep journalists informed, but are not necessarily the best way to entice them, since the content is usually non-exclusive and often follows a prescribed format.

Meanwhile, on the PR side, all of the interviewees are moving away from news releases. Although some admitted that they still do in fact use them, the focus is shifting towards content creation, blogging and social media to connect with journalists:

- **PR #1:** *Increased focus is put on the creation of content and influencer targeting. With so many emails hitting journalists' inbox, our media team does not find much value in sending out mass emails. So we've got programs like Muck Rack that allow us to target the journalists and the influencers that are most likely to be interested. We're creating an influencer base and we're interacting with fewer journalists, but also we're encouraging individual employees to build relationships with journalists as opposed to just bombarding them with information.*
- **PR #4:** *The kind of content and story format. You know the press really is not what it once was. We tend to not send out press releases. We tend to send out links to blog posts that are 250 words long and perhaps linked to an info-graphic or some kind of social object that you want the journalists to use on their own website, in their own content.*

PR practitioners are using the content they are publishing in their owned channels to reach the media and pitch their stories. They are also reaching out to journalists via social media:

- **PR #2:** *For media coverage, certainly we do reach out to journalists when we have news and information to share, there is no question about that. Social media is a part of that in the sense that by keeping journalists out there up to date about what is going on, we hope that it might spark story ideas for them.*
- **PR #3:** *Yes, I mean, journalists...I'd say in my experience, 60 or 70% don't mind a social media pitch if it is really tight and when you've got something to offer.*

- **PR #5:** *Occasionally, yes. I think everyone should. I think, you know, I always tell people “follow [on social media] the journalists who are in your market, get to know them, study what they’re writing about and when you do, communicate with them - don’t be pitching stories to them - just help them out”.*

Although some journalists are open to receiving pitches on social media channels, this tends to vary. The PR practitioners interviewed all stressed the importance of getting to know the journalists who cover their beat and determining what is the most effective way to approach them for a story. One of the interviewees summarized this very well:

- **PR #3:** *I’m a knowledgeable user of Twitter. I find I know how to connect with journalists using it. You really have to do your research and know how to pitch and what is appropriate.*

This was further emphasized when participating journalists were asked if they liked to receive pitches on social media:

- **Journalist #1:** *Yes – I think that can be a good tool – it’s quick.*
- **Journalist #2:** *I don’t know; social media to me is not the best venue for pitching.*
- **Journalist #3:** *Not so much, it depends on my relationship with the PR person.*
- **Journalist #4:** *No.*
- **Journalist #5:** *Yeah, I’m not opposed to it. Obviously I wouldn’t want that to become the main thing that I get [...] but it’s a good point of first contact.*

The varying answers reinforced the importance of relationships between PR practitioners and journalists in order to promote mutually beneficial exchanges, where journalists efficiently get access to good stories and PR professionals garner earned media coverage.

For the most part, the journalists interviewed agreed that the advent of content marketing and organizations as publishers has improved the quality and diversity of PR content. One of the

journalists interviewed emphasized that as more organizations embrace roles as brand publishers, the quality of content produced will increase:

- **Journalist #5:** *I think the more that brands and organizations see themselves as media companies trying to produce high quality, sort of journalistic content of some kind, the more they do that, the better that content is going to get and therefore the more useful it's going to be.*

Some of the journalists stated that these sites could be useful to journalists in their reporting, since they are content-rich:

- **Journalist #1:** *They're better for background, they're often better written, so they are easier to understand on the fly. [...] In some ways these are a tool for mainstream media. You know they are a place you can go to get story ideas or people you can feature in your stories. You can link your readers to them if they are well done, if they want more information.*

One of the interviewees was not completely convinced, since owned media sites tend to be filled with marketing messages:

- **Journalist #4:** *Sometimes. But other times they are so clearly self-aggrandizing that it's just obvious that it isn't really going to be valuable.*

This emphasizes the importance of PR producing excellent content that is based on topics surrounding their organization or brand as opposed to about the brand itself. One of the PR practitioners elaborated on this:

- **PR #5:** *They have to be very careful to do it right, in other words if you really want to succeed in becoming a good brand journalism company, you really have to write stories and produce content that looks almost identical to what customers would expect out of a traditional journalism site. And that is hard to do, it's not easy because the typical organization is going to want to market intensely to their prospects. And that can have the effect of destroying the credibility of the organization.*

#### **4.7.5 PR practitioners and journalists – future orientations**

As the media landscape continues to evolve, and new trends surface, the roles of journalists and PR practitioners will continue to be re-cast. When asked to identify what PR's role would be in the coming years, interviewees stated that PR practitioners would continue to be organizational storytellers, and increasingly reach their target markets directly. One of the PR professionals stated:

- ***PR #1:** Identifying the people who are willing to give your organization their free time because of their passion for it and then rewarding them to build a stable base of influencers who will spread your messaging is the most essential.*

These passionate individuals will be brand evangelists and serve to propagate news about the organization. In order to maintain their attention, enthusiasm and devotion, the organization and in particular, its PR people, will have to produce quality content that resonates with them. This will be one of the challenges faced by organizations that lack the resources to do so:

- ***PR #3:** One [challenge] is, how do you feed the beast, in other words how does a company perform the role of brand journalist when they are not trained to do it nor do they really have the expertise to do it.*

Another PR practitioner believes that there will be less pressure to obtain coverage from the mainstream media, as owned media sites increasingly become a point of reference for their target audiences:

- ***PR #5:** I think there will be a gradual diminution of that pressure to get 3rd parties to write about you and to comment on you. In other words, as these brand journalism sites succeed and there will be a kind of confidence factor and organizations will see that they may not need that 3rd party affirmation as much as they thought they did. And as their organizations gain credibility as publishers, it will almost become not even a necessity.*

As for the future role of journalists, interviewees on both the PR and journalism sides agreed that it is being recast. In particular, that journalists and news companies will move away from the role of the broadcaster or storyteller, to that of a curator.

- **PR #1:** *I think journalists have to re-cast their role now that there's an initial broadcasting from a company that portrays itself to be objective. Journalists are increasingly becoming pundits. Their role is no longer to report but more to curate and do investigative work.*
- **PR #4:** *I guess they are...so they are curators, which I already mentioned to you. So they are curating the content about that and I guess they are kind of, not so much consumer advocates anymore because consumers are their own advocates but they are, I guess, arbitrators is the better word.*

In addition, journalists will play a role in ensuring the integrity of organizations by continuing to provide an unbiased perspective

- **PR #5:** *Keeping them honest would be one role; there is always going to be a role for journalists to be able to play the truly independent voice in the market. So even if brands publish great media sites, they're ultimately not as independent as the independent media and so I think one role from a journalist standpoint is to point that out.*
- **Journalist #2:** *I think that it is the role of the journalist to question and not accept things at face value.*

From the interviews, it is evident that the media landscape has undergone, and continues to experience several changes that have affected how news is produced, disseminated and consumed. These shifts are redefining the roles and relationships of journalists and PR practitioners. The following section will compare the interview findings with the research highlighted in the literature review and discuss salient points.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

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### 5.1 News Companies and Journalists' Adaptation to the New Digital Media Landscape

This study illustrated how the new digital media landscape has fundamentally changed the way content is collected, produced, distributed, consumed and shared (McDowell, 2011), giving audiences the ability to access it through a variety of platforms based on their needs and preferences (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2012, p.342). The trends in the news industry outlined in the literature review were validated by the journalists who participated in the empirical portion of this study.

First off, the way audiences consume news has substantially changed. Studies show that most online consumers want news that is portable, personalized and participatory (Mitchell et al., 2010) and do not express loyalties to a specific news source (Pew Research Centre, 2010). They also tend to receive news from people they follow on social networks (Fletcher et al., 2012, p.815; Lavrusik, 2010). The journalists interviewed contend that today's news consumer prefers to view news and content from multiple sources, providers and distribution platforms that are tailored to suit them (McDowell, 2011, p.38). They also agree that there is no longer the same loyalty to specific media outlets:

- **Journalist #3:** *I think that because of RSS feeds and Twitter and all these things, we've become, I guess, outlet agnostic.*
- **Journalist #4:** *The audience is now way ahead of the media. And they will go to where they think they can get the most interesting, not necessarily the best or the most reliable story, but certainly what their social media or their social cohort tells them is the most interesting place to go.*

There continues to be experimentation with monetizing the Web through digital subscriptions and paywalls (Mitchell and Rosentiel, 2012). However, the journalists interviewed all agreed that news companies have yet to find the optimal solution. One journalist summarized many of the business challenges news companies are dealing with:

- **Journalist #5:** *So the way content is created, the way it is distributed, the way it is paid for or not paid for, all of those things have changed in some fairly fundamental ways and so media companies, I think, are grappling with all of these challenges. How they really create content has changed, how they get it to their audience or their readers or consumers and how they monetize it.*

One of the main challenges is generating unique content that is not easily replicated by competitors (McDowell, 2011, p.46); material that has an added-value, encourages user-generated content and incites social media conversations. All of the journalists interviewed agreed that interacting with their audiences is essential and that it can lead to different story angles and bring them closer to their communities. One journalist stated:

- **Journalist #4:** *I think this is part of the power of this digital media, which is that every time we do a story, there is someone out there who knows more about it than we do. And the trick is getting that person into the story, and to create the sense of exchange with the public which I've called the **porous membrane** because you are putting information out there, but you are also able to get information back.*

Audiences are now more than ever involved in a process that was previously reserved for journalists (Karlsson, 2011, p.279); they are commenting or providing on articles and news items, they are publishing their own content and they are sharing these materials amongst their social networks. However, this raises questions as to the reliability of citizen journalists, bloggers and news consumers as sources in media articles. News companies are still struggling with how participation should fit into existing newsroom logistics (Jönsson & Örenbring, 2011, p.128) and journalists are more amenable to experiment with interactivity. It is important to highlight that all

of the journalists who participated in the study use social media, interact with their audiences and think that this is essential in today's media landscape.

With increasing responsibilities linked to updating news in an “always on” world and engaging with audiences on social media, journalists also face the challenge of “wearing many hats”. They are now not only responsible for producing a story, but also disseminating it on social media and responding to audience comments. In addition, they are faced with striking a balance between quality and immediacy (Karlsson, 2011). Participants confirmed that this is prevalent within most news organizations:

- **Journalist #3:** *absolutely, that's something that, I think it is one of the top challenges that these organizations are facing right now.*

As mentioned in the literature review, social media challenges journalists' gatekeeping role and enables the public to essentially decide which news is most valuable (Fletcher et al., 2012).

Therefore, there is a greater urgency to create quality content that speaks to consumers and incites them to share. Interviewees validated the importance of this:

- **Journalist #5:** *I think it's a range of things, one of them is probably brand, so the New York Times has taken advantage of some of that, but I think fundamentally, it's high quality, really targeted content that readers can't get anywhere else.*
- **Journalist #3:** *I think number one is breaking news and timely news and feeling like this is important stuff that is happening right now that my friends or my network needs to know about.*

All interviewees emphasized that news companies are still trying to find the best model.

However, a couple of the interviewees mentioned that Forbes seems to be on the right track.

## 5.2 Brands and Organizations as Multidirectional News Hubs

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Digital media have given brands and organizations the opportunity to publish journalistic-like content through their owned channels and directly reach and engage with their target audiences (Avery et al., 2010). As mentioned in the literature review, this has enabled audiences to earn equal, and in some cases, greater influence than the mainstream media that they have previously relied on to help them extend their reach (Solis, 2010) and tell their stories. The use of owned properties to produce and distribute an organization's content has been coined *content marketing* or *brand journalism* and is growing rapidly (Bonn, 2012). The PR practitioners interviewed in this study validated this point:

- **PR #2:** *I think that certainly towards the end of 2012 and into 2013 the trend of brands and organizations as publishers picked up a huge amount of momentum. I also see it from small businesses which do this because it's cost effective.*
- **PR #3:** *Absolutely. It is the flavour of the day. I'll say it is something that organizations have always wanted and needed to do but didn't necessarily do the same way until social media came on the scene.*

As highlighted in the literature review, organizations are producing compelling stories, and sharing them through their owned channels via social media to attract core audiences, as well as a general public that might be interested in some specific “nuggets” of information (Nisen, 2012). “Retailers, banks, airlines are rapidly recognizing the importance of content to their brands” (Bonn, 2012). Customers flock to these rich sites because they know they will find what they are looking for and be able to engage and share with the organization and with others who are interested in that topic. Interviewees agreed that these niche sites allow them to create a community for their customers:

- **PR #2:** *I would actually argue that the opportunity today is even better where people look to these tailored channels, because you know that the people there are interested in that topic.*

The literature surrounding this topic stresses the importance of producing audience-centric content that uses storytelling rather than pitching (Content Marketing Institute, 2007).

Interviewees also emphasized the importance of this element:

- **PR #1:** *We have a large community around us and by focussing on them you avoid the hard sell, which doesn't work nowadays. The hard sell can negatively impact your marketing. We share news about the community, content that is interesting to them. We don't focus on the brand, unless it is something the community likes hearing about.*

One of the interviewees (PR #5) underscored the fact that organizations need to practice what he calls “refrigerator journalism” on their owned channels, by posting content that one would want to cut out and put on their refrigerator. The importance of quality, frequency and brevity of content came up in all of the interviews, as these elements greatly contribute to sharing on social media. Good content is at the heart of social media (Brenner, 2012). One of the interviewees stated:

- **PR #5:** *It's absolutely everything. Without great content you can't have great social media- it is very difficult. The only reason anybody would ever follow you is to get great content, so you cannot break that link between social media and content, it's almost impossible to build a significant social media following.*
- **PR #2:** *By breaking it up into little chunks and telling the story. A little bit at a time you can build a picture of what your story is, like one brush stroke at a time. So deliver different strands of the story at different times through different channels and eventually in the mind of your audience they will build up a full picture of the story by digesting it in little bites.*

Social media channels are the spokes of a content marketing hub, as they allow organizations to disseminate content, but also to incite conversations amongst their audiences. Interviewees all agreed that social media can have a positive impact on brand equity, customer service and trust, but it needs to be transparent and employ the right tone. This is in line with

Berlin-Zipfel and Capozzi (2011), who stated that social media helps organizations to “humanize” their brands if it is employed with authenticity, transparency and believability.

The organizational PR function is increasingly taking on a brand journalism role, and there is much consensus that PR practitioners are best equipped to lead social media efforts within organizations (Falls, 2008; Odden, 2006; Rose, 2008; cited by Avery et al., 2010). The interviews with PR practitioners reinforced this finding:

- **PR #1:** *PR pros should definitely also be telling the story of the organization. I think there are two major roles emerging in social media: the storytellers and the community managers – and I think PR people need to be playing both.*
- **PR #4:** *Yeah, that’s exactly right; the profile of in-house PR department is changing. Yes they are the reporters; they are the in-house reporters. Their job is to seek out and find stories and help the organization tell them.*

Therefore, PR practitioners need to be telling the organization’s story, while at the same time interacting with the community. This role fits into *Grunig and Hunt’s Two Way Symmetrical Model of PR*, described in section 2.6.1, which was previously deemed by L’Etang (1996) and Pieczka (1995) to be too idealistic. Grunig stated, “New media have the potential to make the profession more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible” (2009, p.1). In fact, this is the role PR professionals will have to take on in order to be successful, as trust and transparency are increasingly valued by customers (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011). PR was previously viewed as unidirectional and manipulative (Dinan & Miller, 2007). However, digital media have driven it to fit several elements of the Two-Way Symmetrical model by instilling values of honest, transparent two-way communication and reciprocity rather than mere unidirectional persuasion (Turney, 1998).

Those who participated in this study brought up some of the challenges that organizations and PR professionals will face as their role is redefined. One is ensuring that they have the skills required to perform their new functions. Interviewees suggested that PR professionals take journalism classes and that they become well-versed in new media and social engagement tactics. Another concern was organizational culture. Even if the PR and marketing departments become experts at marketing content through owned channels, senior management needs to be educated and informed so that it understands the fundamental shifts that are taking place with regards to content, engagement and frequency of communication. In addition, PR and marketing must work closely together in order to devise a research-based, customer-focussed content marketing strategy. Furthermore, the interviews brought up questions as to which social media channels an organization should be on. One interviewee emphasized the importance of being ‘everywhere’ your audience is:

- **PR #5:** *So content has got to be everywhere. Now it takes different forms, so it maybe a story on your website a tweet on twitter or a visual on Pinterest, but it is all coming from the same content, the same story if you want to look at it that way... What I like to say is when it comes to content “waste not want not”.*

However, another respondent stated that you can’t always be everywhere and that choosing what you don’t do is just as important as choosing what you do. This should be part of the preliminary evaluation that is conducted in putting together content marketing strategy.

### **5.3 Earned vs. Owned Media: Finding the Right Mix**

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Until just a few short years ago, organizations and their PR practitioners depended almost solely on news outlets to convey their messages through credible editorial channels in order to

reach large audiences (Gerth et al, 2011, p.63). As described in the literature review and further supported by the qualitative interviews that were conducted, digital media have given organizations the power to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media and directly seek out and engage target audiences with their editorial content (Avery et al., 2010, p.193). One interviewee emphasized that this has allowed organizations to take on a broadcasting role in their industries:

- *PR #5: So it's a huge trend and it's a trend that has a lot of power among organizations because with traditional media dying, they recognize they have this opportunity to become the principal voices within their niche.*

Most of the interviewees pointed out that owned media channels have become competition for mainstream media outlets, since the quality of content is increasingly good, and they provide information that caters directly to their audiences. However, all of the participants pointed out that organizations will continue to rely on earned media coverage to a certain extent because of the credibility and reputational status it carries. When a journalist from an outlet like *The Globe and Mail* writes a positive story that involves an organization's product or service, you can count on the integrity of the source. One journalist who participated in the study suggested that this is as important as ever. Most customers see third party articles in the mainstream media as unbiased and are more likely to trust this information. On the other hand, research shows that younger generations are more likely to trust their social cohorts than the mass media (Fletcher et al., 2012).

Some of the other participants in the study suggested that there will be less "intensity of desire" to get earned media coverage as content marketing becomes more widespread. High quality content on owned media channels that does not take on a promotional tone, but rather tells a story, informs and entertains target audiences, and allows organizations to interact with

them directly has proven to be highly effective. It also allows organizations to control the message and ensure a higher frequency of exposure. The following quotes from two of the interviewees provide a description that encompasses many of the afore mentioned elements:

- **Journalist #5:** *I think that more and more you are seeing PR practitioners look at reaching the markets they want to reach directly. And, because in some senses that's more effective, you have less chance of your message being distorted, you have the ability to target people directly instead of kind of trying to reach them through a third party, which will be more efficient. And so, I think that is one of the big shifts that we are seeing – that desire to go direct. And that's a threat to all the sort of media third parties who used to benefit from that, from being a middle man.*
- **PR #5:** *I mean the Wall Street Journal and New York Times trade publications, they can all do stories on you but you can't ever control whether you reach prospects every day the way you can with a brand journalism project. There's just no comparing the two. I mean you are lucky if you get a story written about you once every few months - here you are writing stories every day. You are really able to expose yourself and your product every day to your prospects. So it is a far more powerful technique but at the same time that does not mean you are going to throw away what you knew in traditional PR. There is no reason to stop doing traditional PR at the same time.*

Therefore, it is important for organizations to find the right mix of owned and earned media. This differs depending on the size of the organization, its target market and its product/service offering. Many organizations and small businesses that previously had no editorial voice are now able to reach and interact with their niche audiences as a result of content marketing through their owned media channels and social networks.

As confirmed by all of the PR practitioners who participated in this study, organizations that are publishing rich content on their owned channels can often benefit from this content being picked up by the mainstream media. The high quality content found on these channels is more helpful to journalists in their reporting. And, as suggested in the literature review, news companies' dwindling resources have increased journalists' dependence on PR materials (Gerth et al., 2011, p.63). This has created an opportunity for PR practitioners and journalists to work

more closely and create mutually beneficial opportunities. In general, the journalists interviewed found content marketing sites to be more useful in their reporting than traditional PR tools:

- **Journalist #1:** *They definitely are. They're better for background, they're often better written so they are easier to understand on the fly. You need to understand what an organization does in a short period, and this is easier because of these websites and the quality of content on them. It's quicker to understand what something is all about and to find a contact or a source. So it's definitely helpful, especially as resources get tighter and tighter at newspapers.*

The literature review and empirical results indicated that it is unlikely that PR practitioners will ever be able to completely circumvent gatekeepers (journalists) to get their stories into the mainstream media (Avery et al., 2010, p.191). However, the dependence on these gatekeepers to reach target audiences and influencers (such as bloggers) is far lower nowadays.

One of the PR practitioners interviewed suggested that 'virality' is the new earned media:

- **PR #1:** *Nowadays you can break it down into the many influencers who act as re-broadcasting towers who re-tweet you or re-share your content. So I think it provides us with an increased diversity of metrics of the type of media we are receiving and its actual value. I would say that the term itself has been replaced. Earned media is virality nowadays.*

Thus, the added-value of earned media is credibility, endorsement, amplification and heightened reach, and not necessarily broadcasting and engagement, which can be carried out through owned channels, via social media and niche influencers.

#### **5.4 A Complex Dynamic, Magnified in the Digital Media Landscape**

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Research has shown that PR and journalism are often referred to as 'converging' and 'interdependent' professions that both collaborate and compete (Reich, 2010, p.799). Avery, Lariscy and Sweester state that there is "recognition on both sides of mutual need and

dependence, creating a symbiosis in which they coexist” (2010, p.190). Two of the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review provided some context surrounding this dynamic and how it has evolved in the digital era.

The majority of interviewees agreed that journalists’ gatekeeping role has been decimated as a result of digital media. This has affected their strength in setting the media agenda. As described in the theoretical framework section, the Agenda Setting Theory states that “mass media set the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain issues” (International Agenda Setting Conference Website, 2012), acting as media “gatekeepers”. Research has shown that PR efforts have previously had a significant impact on setting the agenda (Morton, Tindall & Waters, 2010; Sallot & Johnson, 2006), since PR professionals can control and even “spin” the messages that their organizations communicate to the media (Hollings, 2008). The interviews conducted brought forth a few points with regards to agenda-setting. PR practitioners no longer feel the need to “beg” journalists to write stories about them, since they can write their own stories for their content hubs and use social media as “spokes” to spread them. If the story is of interest to their target audience, and these individuals go on to share it and re-share it, PR practitioners have the ability to ensure their organizations have a voice in their markets.

The interviewees confirmed that often journalists pick up material from their owned channels. As such, PR practitioners still have an impact on setting the agenda – sometimes even more so than in the past. A contrasting viewpoint presented by one journalist suggests that PR practitioners have less influence on setting the agenda because there are now so many sources for journalists, and they are much easier to access as a result of digital media. Another journalist stated that good pitches and information from PR professionals can definitely shape the agenda. Although PR practitioners have less control over their messages, since it is much easier for a

story to leak as a result of social media, they still have access to privileged information which can often make a difference.

One journalist interviewed affirmed that journalists still maintain a gatekeeping role because they tell stories in a responsible and contextual way, and ultimately get to decide what goes into the mainstream media. This may be true. However, some organizations and bloggers have just as many followers as journalists and news companies. Therefore, it is not difficult for them to circumvent the gatekeepers and reach target audiences.

Manuel Castells emphasizes that power relations are highly dependent on socialized communication (2007, p.240). The literature review described what Castells referred to as the “single-axis” system, whereby journalists acted as gatekeepers of the information that affected public opinion. This system evolved into a “multi-axis” of power as a result of digital media (Castells, 2007), giving individuals and organizations the power to bypass traditional media and distribute a message to their audiences. One interviewee emphasized that news outlets’ power has decreased as a result of the sheer number of sources nowadays:

- **PR #5:** *They also have less power because there’s so much noise out there. Think about when I was growing up, there were 4 major channels on TV, and that was it. And so imagine the power of those gatekeepers. Today for any given subject there are hundreds of media outlets, hundreds of bloggers, hundreds of sources of information competing all for a share of that reader, if you want to think of it as a reader or information consumer. So that has really diminished, or I should say that it has spread influence across the various outlets.*

Other interviewees suggested that PR practitioners no longer feel “powerless”, because they now have other avenues to tell their stories and get attention. In addition, by sharing valuable content directly with customers via social media, it can become “their content” (Brenner, 2012). In that sense, your audiences become broadcasting towers within their own

circles. Therefore, the new media landscape definitely fits into what Castells referred to as the “emerging realm of mass self-communication”, changing gatekeeping standards and favouring consumer-driven content.

Further research surrounding the agenda-setting roles and power-relations of journalists and PR practitioners should be conducted in order to better gauge how they have changed. Additionally, research regarding audiences’ perceptions and who/what shapes their personal “agendas” could allow academics to determine the extent to which social networks may have eclipsed traditional media in setting the agenda.

## **5.5 Redefining Roles and Relationships to Favour the Digital Media Landscape**

The literature review and empirical research in this study have demonstrated that the roles and relationships of journalists and PR practitioners have significantly changed as a result of the macro-shifts in their organizations, provoked by the new digital media landscape’s tools, techniques and platforms.

As demonstrated in section 5.3, there is a need for organizations to find the right mix of owned and earned media that works for them and that best reaches and engages their target audience. On the other side, journalists can benefit from the richer content that is being produced by PRs for their owned channels. It is imperative that organizations and news companies see the need to redefine the roles of PR practitioners and journalists in order to meet the demands of the ever-changing information-seeker.

Many organizations are taking on a real-time newsroom approach in order to establish a presence in the increasingly social, digital and mobile world (Armano, 2012). Literature on the PR function suggests that PR practitioners are “expert content creators who author Web sites, speeches, by-lines, position papers, op-eds, Q&As and, of course, press materials” (Berlin-Zipfel & Capozzi, 2011, p.343). It therefore makes sense for them to take on a corporate storytelling role and communicate with audiences (Pickard, 2011). The vast majority of interviewees agreed that the PR function should increasingly take on a brand journalism role within organizations. However, a frequent preoccupation that was identified in the interviews is that some PR professionals lack the training to produce the high quality materials that content marketing on owned channels requires. This means that organizations need to invest in training for these individuals, hire journalists to take on some of these functions, or enlist external PR agencies to provide support and consultation. PR practitioners also need to work to identify influencers, in order to encourage them to act as re-broadcasters and brand evangelists in influential circles surrounding their organizations. This includes the mainstream media, but also, bloggers, industry experts and other individuals who can exert an influence.

Meanwhile, the majority of interviewees suggested that journalists can no longer just be storytellers. In order to add value, they must become curators, pundits, content re-purposers and arbitrators. They should use their skills to stimulate discussions amongst audiences and provide an independent voice that keeps organizations and individuals honest and reliable. Here is a re-iteration of what one of the PR practitioners offered as journalists’ new role:

- ***PR #1:*** *I think journalists have to re-cast their role now that there’s an initial broadcasting from a company that portrays itself to be objective. Journalists are increasingly becoming pundits. Their role is no longer to report but more to curate and do investigative work.*

Therefore it is up to news companies to provide different takes on the content available to them from the many owned sites that increasingly provide a richer, customer-focussed experience. This also requires additional staff training as well as a great deal of experimentation to see which type of content works.

The relationship between journalists and PR practitioners has always been a collaborative but competitive arrangement (Avery, Lariscy & Sweester, 2010). This continues to be true in the digital media landscape. Many of the interviewees pointed out that the rich content produced by PR practitioners and distributed via owned media channels is seen as competition for the mainstream media. On the other hand, as organizations produce higher quality, journalistic content, it will become more useful for journalists. The lack of resources in the news industry has created a need for better content to help journalists in their jobs. All of the interviewees emphasized that journalists and PR practitioners still need each other and many stated that there is likely an imbalance in the relationship at this time:

- **PR #3:** *Journalists still need PR people for story ideas, good ones. The difference I think is that PR people don't need journalists as critically as they used to. Journalists used to be the only channel and now they are an important one, but they are also one of many channels.*

Other interviewees suggested that there is reciprocity in the relationship and that this should be taken advantage of. One journalist in particular sees the future relationship as a collaboration:

- **Journalist #3:** *I think eventually that they are not necessarily going to be a competitive arrangement. I think if they both sort of boost each other I think that brands have money to pay for content which increases, which drives up the value of content and then drives up the value of writing. So I think if anything, it's potentially a win for everybody.*

In order to make the most of this dynamic, journalists and PR practitioners should focus on building personal relationships with one another. Most of the journalists interviewed identified people and personal connections as most useful to them in their reporting. An increased focus should also be placed on relationship-building via social media and specialized platforms like Muck Rack and others that help facilitate connections between journalists and PR practitioners. One surprising finding from the interviews was that some of the journalists preferred to not receive pitches from PR professionals on social media. This was interesting considering that many blogs and PR conferences suggest that Twitter is a good forum for pitching.

PR practitioners should stray from the news release (Kintzler, 2012) as they are no longer relevant in a social media environment. All of the journalists interviewed stated that the press release was not the best way to entice them – some said they found them to be outright useless. In order to create better relationships with journalists, PR people should focus on the same elements that improve their relationships with their audiences, namely: targeting, engagement, format and high quality, non-promotional content. The content should be produced with the audience in mind. However, if there is a possible media angle, it could be mutually beneficial to collaborate with a journalist who might be interested in the topic.

Furthermore, journalists should practice media-catching and look to PR practitioners for potential story ideas (Morton et al., 2010), seeing as these individuals are increasingly producing content that is fit for the mainstream media.

In the end, both professions need to focus on the audience, the story and the format. This was consistent in both the literature review and the interviews. According to the Oriella

Journalism Study (2012) the “common factor across all [their] reports going back five years has been the importance of the underlying story behind every campaign, and the need to make full use of every discipline – on –and offline – to tell it” (Oriella Journalism Study, 2012). This is directly in line with a statement from one of the interviewees:

- **Journalist #3:** *I think increasingly you are going to see storytelling that, no matter what the media, journalists will use every asset that they have at their disposal to tell a whole story [...] a lot of the content that I may have once written as a longer form story will be a photo and a blurb.*

Therefore, compelling storytelling to fit the digital media landscape and the various platforms it offers is the key to succeeding in this environment and earning a captivating audience who will create buzz surrounding your story.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

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### 6.1 Summary of Findings

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It is evident that the digital media landscape has forever changed the way audiences consume news and content. Consequently, news companies and organizations of all types (private, public and non-profit) have had to adjust their models to accommodate the digital consumer. News companies are coping with challenges such as monetization in the face of declining advertising revenues, dropping subscriptions, increased competition and diminishing time and resources, which are affecting the quality of journalism. Meanwhile, organizations like airlines, tech companies, clothing retailers and charities are becoming publishers in their own right, and using their owned media channels to communicate directly with target audiences (through content marketing), circumventing journalists and the mainstream media, who have previously acted as gatekeepers. This study aimed to show how these trends have altered the manner in which news about organizations is disseminated, and, subsequently, the roles of PR practitioners and journalists.

The literature surrounding these topics indicates that there have indeed been notable changes in the way the digital consumer seeks out news and information. The rise of social media has created an environment that favours multi-way communication, where audiences and activists have a greater voice and can become influencers within their own circles. People increasingly look to social media for news and information and have a tendency to trust people within their social networks. They also consult niche sites for content that suits their needs and

preferences and follow these sites using social channels, RSS feeds and other applications. This has created competition for the mainstream media, as there are now so many sources. The findings from the empirical portion of this research were consistent with the literature review and validated the opportunities and challenges brought forth by the digital media landscape.

The participants of the study also confirmed that audiences continue to look to news companies and journalists to get a third party, unbiased view on issues. The mainstream media also drive a large portion of social media conversations and now provide up-to-the-minute news on important issues 24 hours a day. As mentioned in the literature review, news companies are redefining their priorities and models to better fit the new media landscape and remain profitable. Journalists' roles are evolving as a result. The qualitative interviews substantiated the literature, which contends that journalists are no longer media gatekeepers and that digital media has taken away a great deal of their power.

On the other side, as organizations of all types increasingly reach out to their audiences with editorial content through their owned channels, PR practitioners are taking on new roles as brand journalists within their organizations and reaching out to their target audiences and influencers directly. They now have the power to bypass journalists by producing content that moves the needle in their niche or industry. The literature surrounding content marketing stated the importance of re-focussing PR efforts on storytelling and problem solving in order to directly reach audiences and influencers and transform them into brand evangelists. Although the interviewees agreed that this is definitely the right approach to take, they brought forth additional implications. For example, it is not always easy to make the cultural shift within an organization and to recruit and train employees to produce the type of content that can feed social media and

draw in audiences. In addition, both the literature review and interviews conducted highlighted that although audiences could now be reached using owned media channels, PR practitioners should still aim to garner earned media coverage due to the credibility and reputational status it brings.

As the roles of PR professionals and journalists are recast, they are attempting to navigate the new digital media landscape and redefine their relationship with each other. This relationship has always been a complex one whose intricacies have been widely researched by scholars (Macnamara, 2009). The focus of much of the research on these professions however, has been on the love-hate relationship that exists between them and how they should optimize their dynamic. The rise of digital media and the trend of content marketing have essentially disrupted the pre-existing relationship between these professions, by weakening the gatekeeping role of journalists and giving organizations and PR professionals a voice and the tools to take the media into their own hands.

The findings of this study are significant because they demonstrate that though the digital media landscape has brought forth many questions and challenges, it has also provided journalists and PR practitioners alike with the opportunity to produce truly audience-centric, collaborative and participatory content. It is also enabling them to redefine their roles and relationships, as they adjust to the macro-trends of this new environment and to the transformations that their respective organizations are undergoing as a result. This research provides some insights as to what these new roles should look like. Furthermore, it shows how they can benefit from taking on a more collaborative approach in their relationship in order to leverage each other's strengths.

## 6.2 Tangible Implications and Recommendations

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The findings from this study have implications on the way news companies redefine the roles of their journalists, and organizations reshape the roles of their PR practitioners to better suit the digital media landscape and reap the benefits of audience-driven content marketing. It is clear that PR practitioners still see the value of earned media, despite their ability to directly reach their audiences via owned channels. Meanwhile, the participants confirmed that journalists can indeed benefit from the richer content that PRs can provide through their owned channels. Although some of the interviewees view organizations' content marketing efforts as competition for mainstream media, others see it as an opportunity for journalists and PR practitioners to boost one another and create better products that meet the objectives of both sides.

It is recommended that PR practitioners continue to take on the role of organizational storytellers or "brand journalists" within their organizations. As an increasing number of organizations take on a content marketing model, they must focus on creating content that is of value to their target audiences, that is engaging and shareable and that can be compared to articles one might see in the mainstream media. They should avoid talking about themselves and rather, focus on solving problems, presenting ideas in a new light and involving their customer and influencer base. Organizational PR practitioners should become expert content creators and disseminators that build stories around their organizations. As such, they should also be encouraged to seek out training and development opportunities to improve their journalism, social media and content marketing skills. Furthermore, senior-level PR practitioners should strive to present case studies to the leadership of their organizations to show the value of content marketing in a digital media landscape. It is also important that PR professionals continue to

conduct good media relations and find the right mix of both owned and earned media for their organizations.

Meanwhile, journalists should take on more of an investigative role in their reporting. They should abandon their functions as “broadcasters” and strive to become curators, arbitrators and repurposers that stimulate online discussion and provide meaningful and credible insights. News companies should continue to experiment in order to find the model that best suits their target audiences and operations. They should look to the trendsetters such as Forbes, Mashable, The Huffington Post and The New Yorker, while remembering that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model in the dynamic digital media landscape. Furthermore, journalists should increasingly engage with their public and with experts, bloggers and citizen journalists that can provide varying angles, context and opinions that will make for richer stories. This must of course be done with prudence, taking into account the integrity of sources, checking facts and applying sound journalism practices. News companies should continue to develop standards and guidelines for journalistic content and social media in order to uphold the integrity of their establishments.

As for the journalist-PR practitioner dynamic, both parties should take steps to make this relationship more fruitful in order to favour an always-on media landscape where content is king and resources are scarce.

This study has brought forth recommendations for both journalists and PR practitioners. They should both focus on their audiences, as well as on the underlying story and the format they use to tell it. Content should be optimized for social media, which means making sure it can be broken down for various social platforms as well as digital devices. In addition, emphasis should

be placed on producing rich content such as photo and video to increase the value of stories and posts.

PR practitioners should continue to look at journalists as key partners, even though they may not “need” them to the same extent anymore. Journalists may no longer be gatekeepers. However, they do hold the keys to the mainstream media, which can definitely bring credibility that provides added-value to an organization or brand. PR practitioners should experiment with new platforms to interact and build relationships with journalists as well as bloggers and influencers in their industries. They should focus on finding the best ways to connect with these individuals and discuss how they can partner with each other to produce mutually beneficial exchanges. Meanwhile, journalists should take advantage of the rich content produced by PR practitioners. They should see PR as a tool that can help them build more robust stories and support them in their increasingly demanding jobs. Furthermore, journalists can benefit from building better relationships with PR professionals by sharing with them the types of content they are looking for and how they like to receive this content. Both journalists and PR practitioners should strive to connect and collaborate in ways that are “out-of-the-box” in order to leverage each other’s strengths and ultimately produce better content that engages their audiences.

### **6.3 Limitations of this Study and Opportunities for Future Research**

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The findings of this study were very much in line with the expected outcomes. The researcher works in the field of public relations and has followed the PR practitioner-journalist

relationship and the trend of content marketing intimately as it has evolved over the past few years.

The rationale for this study was to demonstrate how digital media have changed the traditional roles of PR practitioners and journalists, because of the larger changes they have brought to the organizations and news companies they work for. The vast majority of the trends outlined in the literature review were substantiated by the qualitative interviews and new perspectives and ideas were brought forth to complement the literature and make for more robust recommendations.

However, as with any research project there were of course some inherent limitations. As mentioned in section 3.6 (critical perspective), some of the aspects of the methodology were not amenable to the participants since many of them are difficult to reach, always travelling and receive too many messages. The researcher was extremely pleased with the caliber of interviewees, since they brought a great deal of breadth and depth to the study. Still, it would be worthwhile to examine a more interviewee-friendly process for the two professions involved and discuss the possibilities with the Ethics Review Board. Furthermore, it might be interesting to conduct focus groups in a future study in order to collect additional information based on the interactions between the participants.

As the researcher analyzed the data, she realized another limitation: journalists and PR practitioners can only offer certain insights regarding the structure, human resources and business models of their respective organizations. Therefore, it would have been interesting to get some perspectives from the senior management of certain brands or organizations who have implemented a content marketing strategy or are in the process of doing so. It might also have

added value to interview news company executives to discuss their strategic directions. This is definitely an area that should be investigated in future studies.

Another perceived limitation of the study is that it does not investigate the role of paid media or advertising in the digital media landscape. The researcher thought that this was definitely an important piece. However, she decided to focus on editorial content, since the scope of investigating both was extremely broad. Still, it could definitely add value to pursue further research regarding the implications of the digital media landscape on traditional advertising. Another topic of interest would be the structure of an organizational integrated marketing and communications team that must work to produce content for owned, paid and earned media.

It is evident that there are several opportunities for future research surrounding content marketing, owned, earned and paid media, the journalist-PR practitioner relationship and the digital media landscape. One key stakeholder who drives all of these efforts is the audience. It would be beneficial to pursue research on the digital consumer's perspective of owned media channels to learn what they think of organizations' use of brand journalism and social media channels and whether they believe it compares to mainstream media. The research could take into account generational differences to see if older people have a higher trust in mainstream media than younger ones. In addition, it would be interesting to see whether audiences viewed content in owned channels as biased and to what extent.

Furthermore, this study demonstrated that the digital media landscape has created several opportunities and challenges for media companies and organizations of all types. Social media have given audiences a voice, making them the central drivers of online content. By eroding the traditional "we write, you read" model of journalism, digital media have given organizations and

PR practitioners the power to become broadcasters and reach out to their consumers directly and through their own journalistic-like hubs of content, using social media as the spokes to promote multi-directional interactions. Although this phenomenon can be seen as one of many threats to journalists and mainstream media companies, it can also serve as an opportunity for them to recast their roles as content curators who stimulate public discourse and repurpose the content from multiple sources to provide richer angles and insights.

The digital media landscape has indeed eroded journalists' gatekeeping role. However, PR practitioners continue to see the value earned media brings to their organizations. They must now find the right mix of owned and earned media to meet their organizational objectives. Journalists, on the other hand, can benefit from better quality PR resources to assist them in their reporting. As both occupations redefine their roles in the digital media landscape, one thing is for certain: they continue to be converging disciplines that will benefit from collaboration and reciprocity now more than ever.

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## APPENDIX A: Owned, Paid and Earned Media - Defined

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### Owned vs. Paid vs. Earned Media

Media type	Definition	Examples	The role	Benefits	Challenges
Owned media	Channel a brand controls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web site</li> <li>• Mobile site</li> <li>• Blog</li> <li>• Twitter account</li> </ul>	Build for longer-term relationships with existing potential customers and earn media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control</li> <li>• Cost efficiency</li> <li>• Longevity</li> <li>• Versatility</li> <li>• Niche audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No guarantees</li> <li>• Company communication not trusted</li> <li>• Takes time to scale</li> </ul>
Paid media	Brand pays to leverage a channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Display ads</li> <li>• Paid search</li> <li>• Sponsorships</li> </ul>	Shift from foundation to a catalyst that feeds owned and creates earned media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In demand</li> <li>• Immediacy</li> <li>• Scale</li> <li>• Control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clutter</li> <li>• Declining response rates</li> <li>• Poor credibility</li> </ul>
Earned media	When customers become the channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WOM</li> <li>• Buzz</li> <li>• "Viral"</li> </ul>	Listen and respond — earned media is often the result of well-executed and well-coordinated owned and paid media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most credible</li> <li>• Key role in most sales</li> <li>• Transparent and lives on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No control</li> <li>• Can be negative</li> <li>• Scale</li> <li>• Hard to measure</li> </ul>

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

URL: [http://blogs.forrester.com/interactive\\_marketing/2009/12/defining-earned-owned-and-paid-media.html](http://blogs.forrester.com/interactive_marketing/2009/12/defining-earned-owned-and-paid-media.html)

## APPENDIX B: Grunig and Hunt's Four Models of PR

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### **Grunig and Hunt's Four Models of Public Relations Practice - Summarized (Ratter, 1999)**

Model Name	Type of Communication	Model Characteristics
<b>Press agency/ publicity model</b>	One-way communication	Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audience to behave as the organization desires
<b>Public Information model</b>	One-way communication	Uses press releases and other one-way communication techniques to distribute organizational information. Public relations practitioner is often referred to as the "journalist in residence".
<b>One-way asymmetrical model</b>	One-way communication	Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audience to behave as the organization desires. Does not use research to find out how it publics feel about the organization.
<b>Two-way symmetrical model</b>	Two-way communication	Uses communication to negotiate with publics, resolve conflict, and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its public(s).

# APPENDIX C: Participation Letter

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## Letter to Prospective Participants

**Maria Scopelliti, M.A. Candidate**  
Department of Communication  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Ottawa

Dear Participant,

As an M.A. candidate from the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa, I am currently conducting a thesis study. The title of said research is: *Gatekeepers no more: digital media, content marketing and the roles of journalism and public relations*

Having received the approval of the University's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity, I am seeking journalists and PR professionals to participate in one-on-one interviews regarding the changes they have experienced and are continuing to experience in their profession as a result of digital media.

The participants in this study will consist of journalists or former journalists who:

- Have worked for a major Canadian or American media company as a journalist, reporter, producer or editor, in the last 5 years for a minimum of 3 years.
- Are aware of the trends/changes that are/have been affecting the media landscape.
- Have a general understanding of digital media trends that affect their profession (social media, search engine optimization, content marketing).
- Have collaborated with PR practitioners in their jobs.

I am also looking for PR practitioners or former PR practitioners who:

- Have worked for a Canadian or American organization (public, private, non-profit, agency) as a PR practitioner in the last 5 years for a minimum of 3 years.
- Are aware of the trends/changes that are/have been affecting the media landscape.
- Have a general understanding of digital media trends that affect their profession (social media, search engine optimization, content marketing).
- Have collaborated with journalists in their jobs.

Your participation will be required for approximately sixty minutes. Your involvement will include a one-on-one interview with the researcher, conducted in English.

Your identity will be kept entirely private and confidential, through the use of a pseudonym. The questions asked will therefore not pose any personal risk to you. The answers that you provide in the

interview will be audio-recorded. They will subsequently be transcribed, printed and kept strictly confidential at the University of Ottawa. All participants will be asked to sign a consent form.

Your participation in this research would be highly valued. Should you be interested in participating in an interview, please let me know if you prefer to conduct the interview in person or by telephone.

Should you wish to participate in an interview in person, we could meet at a coffee shop in Ottawa. I will ensure that the location selected has a table where we could privately conduct the interview in order to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. Otherwise, I would be happy to contact you by telephone or meet you at your office or my office if you prefer.

Your contribution to this research is greatly appreciated. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

**Maria Scopelliti**

## APPENDIX D: Consent Form

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### Consent Form

<b>Title of the study:</b>	<i>Gatekeepers no more: digital media, content marketing and the roles of journalism and public relations</i>
<b>Name of researcher:</b>	Maria Scopelliti, M.A. Candidate, Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Dr. Pierre C. Bélanger, Ph.D., Full Professor, Department of Communication, University of Ottawa
<b>Invitation to Participate:</b>	I am invited to participate in the above-mentioned research study conducted by Maria Scopelliti.
<b>Purpose of the Study:</b>	This study aims to examine how digital technology has changed the way news about organizations is disseminated and the impact this has had on the roles of journalists and public relations professionals.
<b>Voluntary Participation:</b>	I will be given the opportunity to participate in one interview session with the researcher (either in person or over the phone – whichever is most convenient for me). The interview session will last approximately sixty (60) to ninety (90) minutes, during which I will answer interview questions related to the fields of journalism and public relations. The session has been scheduled for <b>(date and time to be agreed upon with the researcher)</b> . The location of the session will either be at a coffee shop in Ottawa or by telephone. The session will be audio recorded and notes may be taken.
<b>Risks:</b>	Participation in this study requires approximately sixty to ninety minutes of my time with the researcher. It requires that I talk about trends in my profession. The potential risks incurred in this study are no greater than participants would encounter in their everyday life.
<b>Benefits:</b>	<p>My participation in this study will contribute to the academic understanding of how digital media have changed the way news about organizations (public, private, non-profit) is disseminated and how the roles of journalists and PR practitioners have evolved as a result.</p> <p>My involvement in this research may stimulate future quantitative study in this area, or provide journalists and PR practitioners with valuable insights as to how their field is changing and what the implications are. This will help them guide their future content marketing strategies, as digital media continue to affect the field in which they operate as well as the roles within that field.</p>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	I have received assurance from the researcher that I may be directly quoted in

**and anonymity:** publications or presentations of the study. A pseudonym will, however, be used to ensure anonymity. I understand that the information I share will remain confidential and only be used for the researcher's study. I also understand that as with any study, there are limits to anonymity and confidentiality, for example if my interview is conducted in a public place, such as a coffee shop. However, the researcher has assured that she will make every effort to safeguard my anonymity and confidentiality by ensuring that the interview takes place in a quiet/secluded area if I choose to do the interview in a public place. Should I prefer to do the interview over the phone, at my office or at the office of the researcher, this is also an option.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected, both hard copies and electronic data, including audio tapes, transcripts, MP3s, notes and interview protocol) will be kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's home throughout the entire research period. The data stored on the researcher's personal computer will be encrypted with a password. The data will only be accessible to the researcher and her academic supervisor. Once the researcher has defended her thesis, her supervisor will keep a copy of the research data for a period of five years (from 2013 to 2018) in his locked office. A copy of the data will be stored at the University of Ottawa during this retention period. Following the 5-year retention period, all research data will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed. Participants will be given the opportunity to review transcripts following the interview.

**Acceptance:** I, *(Name of participant)*, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Maria Scopelliti of the Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts at the University of Ottawa, which research is under the supervision of Professor Pierre C. Bélanger, Ph.D. I understand that direct quotes from my interview may be used in the researcher's thesis.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

# APPENDIX E: Interview Protocol

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## Interview Protocol – Journalists

### Digital media landscape

1. What are some of the key challenges faced by news companies in today's digital media landscape? How is your news company dealing with these challenges?
2. What type of impact have blogs, social media and user-generated content had on professional, paid journalism?
3. In your view, what impact have news aggregators, customizable news sites and RSS feeds had on consumers' loyalty to specific news media brands? What about paywalls?
4. In your opinion, what motivates consumers to purchase subscriptions to certain media? (I.e. as lifestyle statements, quality of journalism, to share with their networks?) How do you envisage the future of news produced by reputed media companies?

### The digital consumer

5. Why do consumers share their news on social media? What do you do to make your news more shareable?
6. Do you interact with your audience? Does your media outlet encourage it? How do you engage with consumers in the news process? (Through social media posts? Blogs? Comment sections on your media outlet's page? Other?)
7. Do you encourage user-generated content? Does your news company? What is the impact of user-generated content in the journalistic process?
8. Consumers increasingly receive short-form, media-rich news - how does this impact the type of content you create? What do you see as a model for the future of journalism? Has immediacy had any impact on the quality of journalism?

### Organizations/brands as publishers

9. As more organizations produce unique, journalistic content for their consumers, using owned media channels, what is the impact on mainstream media? To what extent will organizational PR practitioners continue to focus their efforts on getting earned media coverage?
10. What kind of impact will organizations' use of owned media, blogs and social media have on journalists' "gatekeeping" role?
11. With the augmented quality of owned media content, what is the value-added of earned media for organizations?
12. Are the owned media websites produced by organizations helpful to you in your reporting?

## **Blogging and social media**

13. Do you use blogs (corporate or amateur) for story research or reporting?
14. Do you use social media? If so, which social media networks do you use? What do you use them for? (Story research, interacting with PR practitioners, interacting with your audience, other?) Do you like to receive pitches on social media?

## **Relationship with PR**

15. What do you think of traditional press releases today? Which tools are most useful to you in your reporting?
16. Do you depend on material from PR practitioners for your reporting? To what extent?
17. What do you look for from PR practitioners in today's digital era?
18. Do PR practitioners have any impact on agenda-setting? To what extent has their ability to publish owned content affected the media's role?
19. To what extent has the trend of organizations as publishers improved the quality and diversity of PR content?
20. What do you think of the relationship between journalists and PR practitioners nowadays versus 10 years ago? What are the advantages to reciprocity between journalism and PR?

## **Interview Protocol – PR Practitioners**

### **Organizations/brands as publishers**

1. Does your organization see itself as a publisher? What do you think of the trend of brands/organizations as publishers? Do you think organizations are moving towards this model?
2. As organizations increasingly use owned media to tell their stories and their target audiences, what is the impact on their dependence on mainstream media and journalists? What is the value-added of earned media nowadays?
3. Why is content marketing so important? In your view, what impact does it have on your content getting picked up by mainstream media outlets? What is your experience with content marketing?
4. What type of content do you market in your owned media channels? Which tools do you use (social, video, audio, stories, apps, RSS, etc.)? What do you find helps drive search engines?
5. Do you produce content in owned media with journalists in mind, or consumers?

### **The digital consumer**

6. As consumers move towards distribution platforms that are tailored to their preferences, how do you/your organization communicate and engage with consumers?
7. Why do consumers share their news on social media? What do you do to make your organization's news more shareable?
8. Consumers increasingly receive short-form, media-rich information - how does this impact the type of content you create?

### **Search-engine optimization**

9. What do you/your organization do to drive search engine optimization?
10. What impact has content marketing had on your search-engine optimization? What about on consumer engagement? How do you measure this?
11. How do you use multimedia and social media to increase your search-engine optimization?

### **Blogging and social media**

12. To what extent does communicating with consumers via blogs and social media increase brand equity? Does it increase consumer trust in your brand?
13. Do you use social media? If so, which social media networks do you use? What do you use them for?
14. In your opinion, what is the impact of content marketing on social media engagement?
15. Do you communicate with journalists via social media? Do journalists pick up content in your owned media and blogs?

### **Role of the organizational PR function**

16. Do you think the PR function is taking on the content-producing role within organizations? Should PR practitioners take on a journalistic role within organizations?
17. Are traditional (paid) advertising and earned media (media relations) being replaced by content marketing, driven by owned media channels?
18. Nowadays, many organizations have the opportunity to have the same influence as the media – what should they do to take advantage of owned media channels? To what extent has their ability to publish owned content affected the media's role?

### **Relationship with journalists**

19. How have your media relations strategies changed as a result of the new digital media landscape? Do you still focus on news releases? How much emphasis do you (and your organization) place on earned media? How do you think this will evolve in the future?

20. If organizations are capable of reaching and engaging with their consumer base through owned media channels - what should the role of journalists and media companies be? What is the impact on journalists' "gatekeeping" role
21. What do you think of the relationship between journalists and PR practitioners nowadays versus 10 years ago? What are the advantages to reciprocity between journalism and PR?
22. To what extent has PR practitioners' ability to publish owned content affected the media's role? Do PR practitioners have any impact on agenda-setting? Do journalists have less impact on agenda-setting now that virtually anyone can publish and go 'viral'?