

COLUMNS

## Social media will never overtake PR

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*Rumble in the jumble*

By [Vanessa Horwell](#)

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Scan the headlines of public relations and marketing industry publications, and you will read dire warnings about the future of PR.

Depending on who is talking, PR is take your pick *retracting*, *misguided*, *"lazy," outdated*, *becoming irrelevant* or *obsolete* as it eats the dust of ever-more-nimble and real-time social media.

The 2015 Holmes Report identifies a **5 percent drop in the growth rate** of the global PR industry.

Some pundits suggest that PR has lost its way, including former Edelman executive Robert Philips, author of *Trust Me, PR is Dead*.

Others say social media will eventually replace PR.

I beg to differ.

Not anti-social

The PR industry itself is largely aware of the fundamental changes that have taken place over the past five years changes that continue to influence how PR is practiced today and how it will be practiced two years from now.

PR professionals also have weathered similar industry-shifting changes in the sectors that support and supply it traditional media, advertising, corporate communications and others including social media.

The American Society of News Editors, as an example, documents nearly 23,000 fewer newspaper journalists working in newsrooms in 2015, down from a high of 56,000 in 1990.

The irony is that many of these journalists have stepped over to *the other side*, i.e., writing for PR firms and content marketing agencies.

The scope of social media's influence is broad and constantly being redefined, as well.

Large-scale social media, which started primarily with Twitter and Facebook a decade or more ago, now encompasses user-generated content spanning all personas and platforms: citizen influencers, social media

professionals, consumer activists all of whom are creating and posting videos, creative imagery, trending hashtags, momentary memes and instant chats and videos.

On the receiving end are target audiences with increasingly shorter attention spans.

Yes, social media is pervasive. Yes, social media has disrupted the PR industry. But it will never fully overtake PR and here are several reasons why.

PR industry adjusts as social media channels evolve

The reality is that social media is already baked into nearly every PR pro's daily routine.

For PR practitioners, social media outlets represent communication tools.

PR specialists write, speak, create, promote and advocate as always and use social media channels to communicate with clients' audiences, the public and journalists, especially reporters and editors who increasingly rely on Twitter for communication or email exchanges for interviews.

Most **PR job postings**, and the companies and organizations that hire PR experts, now require social media skills as part of a larger set of strategic communication skills.

Not every company needs a Facebook or Instagram account, for example, and PR pros can help clients decide which social media channels deliver the most impact and return on investment.

PR will remain an industry, and social media will continue to evolve as a series of channels that must be understood and leveraged to help spread the message. Both will continue to evolve, as all industries do.

But social media will not replace PR.



*Dollars and sense on social and PR*

Every new messaging application, video channel or social media phenomenon is a PR practitioner's opportunity to enhance communication.

Skilled PR professionals will explore and incorporate the right combinations of social media skills to continue to do their jobs effectively.

Social media needs PR professionals and vice versa

Whenever there is a breaking story, crisis, controversy, journalists and media reps still instinctively seek an official response or explanation from someone in PR a spokesperson, a designated representative, a knowledgeable insider.

Case in point: the Kohl's PR team turned a consumer-created, socially inspired viral video Candace Page's "**Chewbacca surprise**" into an entire PR and branding campaign.

Social media often serves as the trigger that fuels awareness, but PR steps in to handle the context, details and follow-up work.

PR and traditional media, in fact, often pick up and continue the storyline with follow-on analysis, responses, fact-checking, investigation, official statements, blog posts, fact sheets, updated FAQs and the like.

PR pitches are emailed, tweeted and instant-messaged to the media and social media influencers, and PR professionals use social Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, company blogs, YouTube and other social outlets for branding, customer service, reputation repair and messaging. It is a symbiotic relationship, with each partner playing

different but critical roles.

Social media is still growing up

The PR industry has a long history and roots, while social media is still growing, exploring, expanding and finding its way.

Once-dominant Twitter now has 320 million users to Facebook's 1.6 billion, while image-centric Instagram and Pinterest, both launched in 2010, now claim 500 and 100 million users, respectively.

Joining the party are WhatsApp (1 billion users), Linked In (450 million members) and Vine (200 million users).

Each social media outlet finds its own niche over time, and new social media channels enter the conversation every day.

Social media plays a critical role in PR, but its role continues to change and evolve with each new innovation, format and app and delivery method.

PR delivers more content and trust than social media influencers realize

The 2016 Ogilvy Media Influence Survey of 200 journalists and bloggers found that reporters trust "traditional media channels" and "editorial content" more than "company content" except in Asia-Pacific, where social media is more influential.

The reality is that in some sectors and industries, "editorial content" comes directly from PR and content professionals, who supply it to media outlets in the form of solicited bylines, blog posts, talking points and emailed answers to pre-supplied questions.

BOTTOM LINE, the PR industry is not going anywhere, despite some predictions, and it is certainly not ceding its role to social media.

Public relations and social media are different disciplines that require different skills and mindsets, even if the skills and practices overlap and co-exist.

PR professionals are cementing their futures by adopting best practice that embeds social media into the PR process. And social media experts will continue to push the envelope in a world in which the definition of "media" is constantly invented and re-imagined as a way of getting the word out.

Somewhere in between, no pun intended, is a happy medium.



*Vanessa Horwell is chief visibility officer of ThinkInk*

*Vanessa Horwell is chief strategy officer of **ThinkInk**, a Miami, FL-based business-focused communications agency that serves marketers and the technologies that drive them across the advertising, airline, loyalty, mobile, payments and travel sectors. Reach her at [vhorwell@thinkinkpr.com](mailto:vhorwell@thinkinkpr.com).*