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**ARTICLE**

# **POST-DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS: FIVE BIG CHALLENGES**

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In the very recent past, the adjective “digital” was enough to imbue any noun with a sense of progress and innovation. But as time passed, a combination of abuse of the term, public acclimation to the concept and general societal disappointment gave rise to a replacement idea that occupies a similar place in today’s social consciousness: “Post-digital.”

One can already hear tell of the shift to a “post-digital” era, in which the adoption of digital tools and methods is not, in itself, a competitive advantage (Daugherty, 2019). In today’s environment, “digital does not mean revolutionary, but is rather an everyday and familiar concept,” because “real life occurs across screens, media and analog environments, all at once.” Today, “we see more critical relationships

with devices and platforms,” because “we are no longer (as) tolerant of the antiquated idea that technological innovations bring solely good things” (Rosello, 2019).

The term “post-digital” does not refer to going beyond the digital realm, but rather overcoming its most essential challenges to established mental frameworks.

After more than a decade of constant exposure to social media and mobile apps, most of us no longer:

- Doubt the growing power of individual communication as it pertains to corporations and institutions.
- Assume leadership to be immutable in any social, political or economic environment.
- Reject public exposure of behaviors and identities, both our own and those of others.
- Overreact to informational noise, which can make social communication uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

The digital world is already entrenched in our culture. We have become accustomed to “infoxiation,” volatility and hyper-transparency. We face digital downsides (privacy, manipulation, etc.) daily, and we utilize digital advantages (empowerment, open knowledge, etc.) as professionals, citizens and customers alike.

Thus, whatever name we give it, the reality is that we, as people, are entering the new decade having learned many lessons since the time when Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Twitter and Netflix made our world and lives more digital. When applied to corporate communications, these lessons will come in handy when facing down today’s emerging scenarios, in which the exponentially increasing number of technologies will come complete with new acronyms (AI, IoT, DLT, AR, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In order, “Artificial Intelligence,” “Internet of Things,” “Distributed Ledger Technology” and “Augmented Reality”.

## 1. FROM RESPONSIBILITY TO ACTIVISM

The word “responsibility” comes from the Latin *respondere*, meaning “to deliver on a promise, to respond.” If corporate communication has learned any single lesson from the rise of digital culture, it is that the more, faster responses to more people, the better. Social media demands this remain the status quo.

Today’s customers can express complaints, ask questions and share opinions in real time across an ever-expanding array of channels. It has become necessary for companies to adopt new tools, equipment, methodologies and metrics to manage this surge. In doing so, many companies have learned to verify data, initiate conversations, maintain a sense of humor and handle criticism.

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But “responsibility” has a deeper root in the Latin verb *spondere*, meaning “to promise, commit or pledge to do something.” In engaging, companies have discovered an even greater digital impact: The societal demand for public engagement that moves beyond commercial realms, or even simple “social responsibility” campaigns.

Here we find our newest challenge. Brands are expected to engage with social movements, companies are expected to pursue a purpose beyond profit, and leaders are expected to act as public role models.

Deeper still lies the true challenge. Companies are now expected to be consistent in their activism across all stakeholder interactions, be they with employees, customers, authorities, citizens or investors, because any of these groups can and will act as judge and jury. If the company’s activism is called into question, it will be carried as far as social media and blockchain<sup>2</sup> technologies can take it.

## 2. FROM ANTICIPATION TO DISCOVERY

Not too long ago, a communications director’s workday would only start after reading the newspaper, but with the digitization of the media and proliferation of social media (including blogs, networks, forums, etc.), communications has become a 24/7 job.

Corporate communications exists to safeguard company reputations in today’s volatile environment. In order to fulfill this purpose, the field has improved its digital monitoring methodology, learning to distinguish mere incidents, which are a constant reality, from true crises, which are much larger events. This is a necessary skill for identifying real dangers in the ocean of negative comments. Companies must minimize attention paid to harmless or predictable “trending topics” and determine the most (and least) influential detractor demographics.

However, in the midst of our efforts, many companies have overlooked a key opportunity to internalize an important digital (and “post-digital”) tool: The aspects of focus and perspective. There are several ways companies can change their perspectives to better understand the current environment. For example, they can adopt the point of view of the audiences whose opinions and actions they hope will eventually support the company. They can listen with an ear not tuned solely to the company’s agenda, but one that also cares for the general public. In general, companies should act under the assumption that power lies

<sup>2</sup> Blockchain is a distributed ledger technology (DLT).

not with the company, but with the stakeholders. It is only by their purchases, work, collaboration and investments that companies are allowed to exist.

When data analysis is based on these varying perspectives, it becomes possible to identify digital truths that go beyond tracking social media interactions. The utility of this kind of data is multifaceted, enabling farther-reaching audience attraction, the formation of closer bonds and faster consumer mobilization, as they are the true arbiters of any company's reputation and business. These results can be obtained with or without the use of artificial intelligence (AI).

### 3. FROM CONTENT TO NARRATIVE

One of the digital era's clearest lessons was about the importance of content. Companies learned, without a shadow of a doubt, that content is the most essential form of digital communication there is. Content creates the energy that facilitates all other consumer-brand engagement efforts.

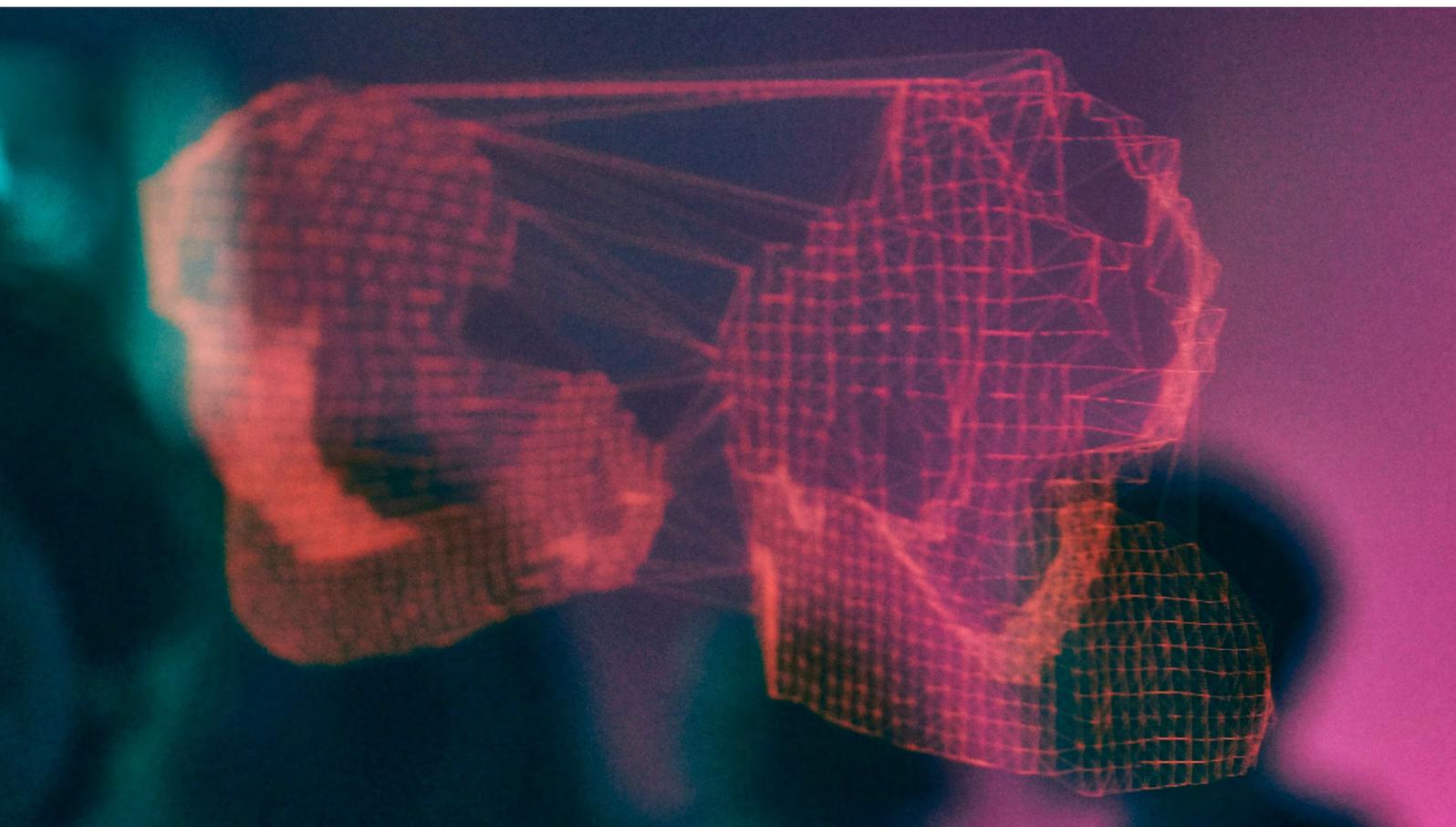
Armed with this knowledge, brands worked toward becoming their own communications medium, creating blogs, designing web pages, publishing

in multimedia formats (graphic, audiovisual, interactive and more), acting as editorial figures, incorporating themselves into internet browsers, advertising on social media and automating marketing. Thus, companies ballooned the amount of content they were putting into an already crowded digital ecosystem.

Through these efforts, companies have contributed to the digital era's characteristic environmental "noise" by adding additional corporate noise. But in the new, post-digital era, the Internet of Things will multiply content distribution channels and audio-interactive media will proliferate dramatically, so companies cannot afford to simply add to the noise.

There is now an unprecedented need to build narratives that contextualize corporate content across every facet of an institution. Strategic scripts must articulate brand identities across many stories for multiple target audiences utilizing varying channels. And these narratives must remain consistent, understandable and meaningful across many different platforms.

In the constant battle for the public's attention, companies must transmit clear signals on their own wavelength. Find a voice, eliminate noise, and choose the best channel.



## 4. FROM MANAGING TO DESIGNING

Never before have companies had so many different media channels<sup>3</sup> they could use to connect to stakeholders. Mobile apps, websites, email, social media, messaging and blogs come together to provide companies with significantly more owned media options for direct communication, lessening their reliance on journalist relations for earned media.

The variety in paid media options (social ads, adwords, branded content, native ads, influencers, etc.) has expanded as well, while also blurring the line between promotional and informational content.

But the digital era's biggest takeaway is that we must view each and every individual as a media outlet capable of affecting a company's reputation. Anyone can share their opinions and experiences with their on- and offline social networks and ultimately impact a company's positioning. Such is the power of shared media.

We must take into account individuals and their expectations, experiences and points of contact with the company to consider how these relate to the product or service. Herein lies the main challenge in post-digital communications, entailing the development of content-based experiences and interactions that meet each individual's expectations at every point of contact. This includes both the digital and analog spectrums, as well as those of screens and physical spaces, not to mention the added wrinkle of augmented reality (AR). Audience approval and endorsement will only come when companies take all these concepts into account.

## 5. FROM VISIBILITY TO IMPACT

The word "digital" refers to combinations of digits, specifically ones and zeroes, that make up data. Through this mathematical language, the digital era has revealed the truth in numbers and the realities of communication. We have seen how, despite company access to massive media audiences, only

a relatively small number of individuals reacted to content in the ways corporations had hoped.

There has been a similar change in social media. Accumulating social media impressions or increasing the number of participants in web campaigns does not contribute significant value to businesses, or at least, not beyond a mere ego boost. As it turns out, content visibility does not generate capital unless it becomes a sustainable, reliable interaction point between the brand and its stakeholders.

In the post-digital era, we now know companies

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should work to move consumers, collaborators and investors more quickly and openly through the conversion funnel.<sup>4</sup> This entails an implicit commitment to capturing stakeholder interest through customized content, relying on their consent to maintain a consistent, ongoing relationship.

It will become necessary to record and integrate data from each point of contact in order to obtain reliable indicators of stakeholder expectations, as well as whether or not they are being met. This will lead to more accurate goals and metrics, focused on the individuals in target audiences. This perspective is key to generating real capital (in the form of acquisitions, talent, investment, allies, etc.) through communications in an era where data will be (and in some cases already is) any company's most precious resource.

<sup>3</sup> Media channels are classified under the PESO model (*Paid Media*: advertising; *Earned Media*: journalism; *Shared Media*: social media; *Owned Media*: the company's own media channels).

<sup>4</sup> The conversion funnel refers to an individual's transition from a neutral individual to being drawn by a company's values to becoming a loyal customer who will make purchases from the company and recommend it to others.

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