



# King content

*Roberta Doyle* takes a look at the changing role of the press / PR practitioner

**B**ill Gates' 1996 adage that 'content is king' has never been more true than in 2013. As our own cultural organisations tussle with the challenges presented by the fast-changing media landscape the notion of us as 'content producers' becomes ever-more pertinent. In such an environment, what is the role of the PR/press practitioner?

*With the advent of the social web, brands have been able to publish content, be it news, information or rich media, more effectively than ever before. To a partial extent, brands have always been publishers; the public relations function has acted as a primary conduit, conveying news and information from organisations to their various stakeholders and audiences.*

Indeed, I agree wholeheartedly with these sentiments from Rob Brown, founding chair of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' (CIPR) Social Media Panel.

## **Brand journalism**

Some commentators define this move towards content production as 'brand journalism'. In 2004, McDonald's chief marketing officer challenged the power of mass marketing by declaring that 'no single ad tells the whole story'. He announced that McDonalds would be adopting 'brand journalism' as the foundation for its future marketing strategy. He went on; 'We don't need one big execution of a big idea. We need one big idea that can be used in a multi-dimensional, multi-layered and multi-faceted way.'

Now, we may or may not have individual views on the values behind the brands of multi-national corporations but the powerful notion of 'one big idea communicated in a multi-dimensional way' strikes me very forcibly as an excellent driver for strategic thinking around the development of our own press offices, marketing strategies

and digital futures.

The National Theatre of Scotland is surely not alone among UK arts organisations in tackling the convergence of the press, PR, marketing and digital worlds. We have brilliant teams in each of these functions and are increasingly turning our minds to the overlaps and synergies across these areas. Our press team work ever-closer with our Web Editor, Digital Associate and Video Producer in order to ensure that communications are as seamless as possible. This can be as simple as the timings of news releases to traditional media and online journalists/bloggers or as complex as dealing with reputation management issues that periodically emerge which, in this day and age, now require as much, if not more, effort directed to online comments as to the letters' pages of *The Scotsman*.

The boundaries that once existed between the complementary functions of a communications team are becoming more and more fluid; this key strategic and business development is unquestionably one of the crucial issues for us as arts marketing professionals going forward.

As the expectation grows exponentially that our teams are now becoming 'content producers' – blogs, online diaries, videos, trailers, tweets, Facebook updates, Storify, online forums and photo-sharing sites (I counted 38 online just now before I lost the will to live, including Instagram, Dayviews and good old Flickr) – not to mention being the gatekeepers of our organisations' hard-won reputations by constant monitoring not just of traditional media but of Google too, then we have to consider radical solutions to how we service this proliferation of content channels.

## **Copy or content?**

Until the rise of digital and social channels, our engagement with the press and media was reasonably straightforward. The Internet has changed how we consume news and content and the real-time nature of

> CASE STUDY

## Content production case studies from the National Theatre of Scotland

### 1. Social Media Calls

When our Press Office team proposed a radical pilot for developing content, I confess I was terrified. Their proposal was to open up all the National Theatre of Scotland's dress rehearsals, not just to traditional press photographers, but to all and any users of social media. How right they were.

Members of the public would be invited to the rehearsal, given access to the director, cast and crew, encouraged to film/photograph/blog about the rehearsal and production and then go forth and upload to their hearts' content. The only stipulation to the social media users was to keep up their end of the bargain by spreading the word online, as well as acting within our accepted union broadcast agreements.

We have now been running these Social Media Calls as a standard part of our press office and digital armoury for almost three years with

great success. See this Storify link for some Social Media Call results following the

dress rehearsal of our production of *Let The Right One In* which premiered at Dundee Rep in June 2013 and will open at the Royal Court in London on 29th November.

[storify.com/NTSonline/lettherightonein-blogger-event](http://storify.com/NTSonline/lettherightonein-blogger-event)

Twitter and newspapers' own comments facilities have had a profound effect on journalism. No one is calling for an end to the traditional elements of PR however. Far from it. Defining your target, developing relationships, keeping abreast of individual titles' editorial preferences, identifying key messages, awareness of potential issues and knowing your story – these all remain central to successful results.

It's just that traditional press commentators usually now also have a presence on a range of social networks. They are probably already following *you*. Many journalists are now responsible for producing videos, blogs, Tweets, sometimes even material for broadcast. Broadcasters now often blog about their forthcoming packages or comment about other stories, including those in print.

It's not that long ago since some newspapers, online news providers and broadcasters made massive upbeat proclamations that their 'future was digital'. As a direct result, many media organisations invested heavily in providing multiple online platforms to host content. It wasn't too long after this hectic expansion that the financial crisis hit hard; staff and resources inside media organisations became increasingly restricted, with redundancies and even closures becoming the norm. One of the results of this has been that many in the press and media are more reliant than ever on PR-generated content, as well as user-generated content, to keep all their platforms populated. News-focused press release copy is often seen as a godsend by hard-pushed editorial staff juggling deadlines with pages and screens to fill.

When you take all this into account and remember that, even a few years ago, it was sufficient for our organisations to be firing out press releases, it almost feels like a previous life. Our PR/press colleagues are now diversifying into communications channels that proliferate by the day. We are no longer producing copy. We are now content producers.

#### Back to basics?

I often find it helpful to remind myself of the CIPR's definition of PR:

*The discipline that looks after reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.*

As we embrace this stimulating new world of content production, it's worth re-stating to ourselves some of the fundamentals – what are we producing, why are we producing it and who's it for? The essentials of PR/press remain, in my view, absolutely identical to those of the

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dinosaur era of press releases and 10x8 black and white production shots; know your market, tailor your message, foster relationships and understand what success looks like. Current trends inside many of our organisations need to be checked; the tendency for us to be panicked into following the pack because our board members complain that another arts organisation has more followers online than we do is a sign that a) we are in uncharted waters but b) any minute now we're going to hit an iceberg.

### Getting right to the heart of it

I believe there's a generational opportunity for arts communications specialists to help keep audiences at the heart of our organisations by embracing this 21st century development in communications strategy. It's resolutely not about technology; it's about re-asserting what PR/press is actually for. There are limitless opportunities for us out there to help raise awareness of the world-class cultural organisations – large and small – we are lucky enough to have in the UK.

Let's get together across our arts marketing world to map out our thinking on this critical issue of 'content' and what it means for PR, press, marketing and communications professionals. Perhaps we could revisit first principles on who we're trying to reach, why we want to reach them, how best to do that and how we need to resource those strategies. Back to Bill Gates and his premise that 'content is king'. In the same breath he said that the 'broad opportunities for most companies involve supplying information or entertainment. No company is too small to participate.'

He could've been talking about us. ■



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## 2. Enquirer

Our production of *Enquirer* (Glasgow, London and Belfast, April to November 2012) was a fascinating verbatim piece devised from 45 interviews conducted with journalists all over the UK. The script was constructed from the journalists' own words and shaped into a devastating promenade, site-specific piece which evolved into a critique on the state of journalism today. That *Enquirer* was created while the Leveson Inquiry was sitting made the piece even more topical.

Our Press Manager, Marketing Manager and then Publications Editor created a content plan around the production which included two remarkable strands – one was editorially based and centred on a long-form editorial penned by the co-director of *Enquirer*, John Tiffany. This was to be the centrepiece essay for the programme that accompanied the show. Our press plan included the placing of this essay – basically an elegy for UK newspapers – with the *Sunday Herald* and *The Observer* as a newsworthy and synchronous item of 'content' about the production. The essay ran in both newspapers at the time of our performances.

The second content strand for *Enquirer* saw colleagues work in direct partnership with the *London Review of Books*, sponsors of *Enquirer*, to create a wealth of riveting content for a micro-site launched to coincide with the production. Cast interviews, ongoing rehearsal footage, backstage material, editorial, audio and photographs were used to populate and refresh the site throughout the nine months of the production's life.

[www.heraldscotland.com/mobile/news/home-news/in-praise-of-the-press.17370314](http://www.heraldscotland.com/mobile/news/home-news/in-praise-of-the-press.17370314)

[www.theguardian.com/media/2012/oct/07/journalism-crisis-enquirer-play](http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/oct/07/journalism-crisis-enquirer-play)

[www.enquirer.lrb.co.uk/](http://www.enquirer.lrb.co.uk/)

