

PR's love-hate relationship with 'brand journalists' – and why it matters

March 2015

A report by



Executive summary

When brands become publishers they face a number of challenges and one of the biggest is producing enough quality content. In an increasingly crowded world of content, standing out through quality is important.

That's why Collective Content and DWPub undertook this crucial research. Quality content depends on getting access to the right people – and that can be hard if public relations (PR) professionals ignore your calls, emails, tweets and more.

We surveyed 174 PRs at the end of 2014 and start of this year and asked them how they interact – if at all – with so-called 'brand journalists'.

For one thing, as seen in Part 2 of our report, the term 'brand journalist' is contentious. We and many of those we questioned would contend that a journalist means being independent. Brand journalists – perhaps a better name would be brand content creators – can be many good things but independent is rarely one of them.

Our research found that PR professionals understood the terms 'content marketing' and 'brand publication'. PRs were less comfortable with 'brand journalist' and positively troubled by 'native advertising', something relatively new undertaken by online publications.

Working relationship?

We found the issue of brand journalists to be a polarising one when we asked PRs about their interactions and the way they treat them.

A significant proportion of PRs say they work with brand journalists the same way as they do with traditional journalists. A significant proportion also don't, while the question about whether brand journalists would ever be treated on a par with traditional journalists caused an almost even split across our survey sample.

Why is this such a polarising issue? And what will it mean to the brands hiring professional writers and other creatives?

Conflict

While there were several reasons for PRs to be less inclined to work with brand journalists (see Part 3), the overriding reason was conflict of interest. Over half mentioned that or the very similar reason "Goals of those paying for the content".

Respondents told us:

- "Brand journalists are not journalists. They are publicists (albeit with great writing skills)."
- "Editorial independence will always add greater value."

Depressing reading for brands hiring all these writers, right? Well, maybe not.

There were positive comments about being more open to this brave new world of content creation. This wasn't just about PR self-interest in a world of fewer traditional journalists to work with in many sectors. It's about audiences and quality content.

“Brand journalists – perhaps a better name would be brand content creators – can be many good things but independent is rarely one of them.”

Brand value

Ultimately, brands that realise the value of quality content as a way to engage with and win/retain customers will keep on investing in branded content and those who create it. On one hand they can hope that the means to generate this content isn't made harder by PRs who are suspicious.

But it might not be about hoping. Remember the same brands that hire an in-house team or agency to create content usually have an equivalent set-up for PR. In that respect, we'd expect this final comment to become less common:

- "Proving the value of participating in other firms' activity to clients is hard... even to those who are currently engaged in their own branded content campaigns!"

“Ultimately, brands that realise the value of quality content as a way to engage with and win/retain customers will keep on investing in branded content and those who create it.”

Methodology

We surveyed 204 respondents from the DWPub database over 60 days at the end of 2014 and start of 2015. Of these, 174 were in PR, split 90:10 between agency and in-house roles. The other 30 respondents were mainly journalists and other miscellaneous respondents. The focus of this report is on the PR community in the UK.

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Introduction

Content marketing and related disciplines such as native advertising – we'll get to definitions in a moment – are on the rise¹. But as brands try to become credible publishers in their own right, often bypassing the traditional media they've worked with for decades as both advertisers and influencers, there is a big problem. That problem is quality.

For every media owner, there might easily be a thousand brand publishers now up and running. That's a lot of content and not much of it is what we would call media-grade.

So how do the best providers ensure they produce this quality, media-grade content? One answer is to speak to those they write about and other expert commentators. To seek opinions, check facts, find interesting angles.

In short, those creating for brands must act like journalists. In some cases, brands reach out and hire current or former journalists to accomplish this. In others, they must ape the best processes editorial teams have developed over the years: for example, by creating brand newsrooms.

This report examines how brand journalists work with public relations (PR) professionals, one of the key routes to quality content.

For the record, we don't like the term 'brand journalist' – something like 'brand content creator' is preferable and is used at times in this report – but it is what the market and many of those we surveyed are using. See our box out on page 7 for more on this naming issue.

We surveyed 174 PRs in the UK in December 2014 and January 2015, asking them about their comfort levels with terms such as 'content marketing' and 'native advertising', as well as phrases such as 'brand journalist' and 'brand publication'. We then asked about current and future relationships with this type of content creator and about what were the biggest barriers to non-journalists generating high quality output.

Why is this research important?

This report is essential reading for both PRs and brands.

PRs

PRs must always be keenly aware of the activity that best serves their clients or employer. Sometimes that means being reactive, sometimes proactive. Sometimes the 'p' in PR is about public relations, very often it is more press relations. However, we're at an inflection point.

Over the past decade, analogue pounds have been swapped for digital pennies. While publications and outlets have added profits from online channels, most have seen revenues overall suffer. Newsrooms have shrunk. Freelance budgets have declined. There is a smaller universe of professional journalists for PRs to work with².

“For the record, we don't like the term 'brand journalist' – something like 'brand content creator' is preferable.”

¹70 per cent of B2B marketers are creating more content now than a year ago. Source: [Content Marketing Institute 2015 B2B benchmarking survey](#)

²Definitive figures are almost impossible to source but [studies in the US](#) point to an overall global decline in the number of professional journalists. Other studies (NCTJ) suggest the number has remained stable for the last decade or that there may now even be [too many staff journalists](#) for the number of publications.

In short, this has meant the ranks of the professional media have declined (note, this doesn't include bloggers and others who don't make a living from their work) while the number of those hired to produce content for brands, often via agencies, has grown. Often, it's the same people making the move from one paymaster to another.

So what will this new world mean for PRs? This report goes some way to answering that question.

Brands

On the flip side to this change in the PR-journalist dynamic, as implied above there are now many more people who can work with PRs. They're just not all journalists.

Brands have gone out and hired these people, many of whom bring years of journalism and editorial experience, as well as others who are marketers by background, often skilled copywriters, videographers and more.

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There is perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime chance for brands and agencies to snap up some of the best editorial talent, across every subject. These professionals, understandably, will often still want to work their sources, to look for the most engaging, exclusive angles. Most still want to work with PRs.

For brands, this report will look at the challenges their swelling ranks of creators will face, as they seek to produce media-grade content.

Whether a PR or brand marketer or someone else in this brave new world of content, we hope you find the following results as fascinating as we did.

We'd welcome the chance of an informal follow-up chat.



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Part 1: How PRs work with brand journalists

We kicked off our research by asking respondents about comprehension of a number of the terms we hear today. But we'll come back to them in Part 2. Instead, let's get to how PRs and the growing group of non-traditional journalists interact – and might do so in the future.

In asking the question that we show answers to in Fig 1., the idea was to get an idea of the gene pool. Are brand journalists already part of the PR universe?

Of those we polled, fully three out of 10 told us they haven't had any contact with this group, which was higher than we expected. For one thing, a common refrain in our research was PRs saying modern content marketers are nothing new.

One told us: "Again, a new term appears to have shifted an old product into the digital age. These contacts/opportunities were there previously, it was how important clients believed their audience to be."

Another told us that years earlier he had "cut his teeth doing advertorials". In-flight magazines, long a staple of most airlines, were cited several times.

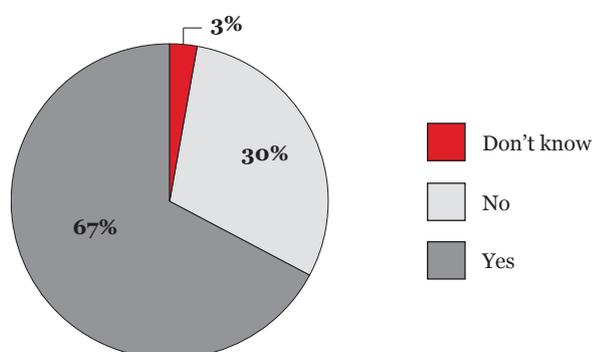


Fig 1. Have you ever been contacted by someone creating content on behalf of a regular organisation – e.g. a company or government department – rather than print/online/broadcast media?

Fully two-thirds of respondents have in the past been contacted by brand journalists, working for a company or even a non-commercial organisation such as a government.

Three per cent weren't sure.

“A common refrain in our research was PRs saying modern content marketers are nothing new.”

‘Brand journalist’?

We used this term throughout our research. That's because it is commonly used and understood – by PRs, brands and indeed some individuals who do a certain type of content-centric work.

But is it the best term?

To us, a journalist only comes with the independence of a traditional media entity (whether as a staffer or freelance). Even then, commercial and state-funded media can be dogged by claims of bias. And increasingly those who work as reporters and editors – not having signed up to work in a one of dozens of new content ‘studios’ or ‘labs’ – are being told they must balance traditional and commercial content creation, with all the problems that throws up³.

But a remit to take strong, sometimes harmful positions on the activities of organisations (who might well be advertisers – biting the hand that feeds you, as it were) is central to most western media.

We acknowledge that some readers here will strongly dislike ‘brand journalist’ for the above reasons.

³At the time of writing, the latest case of this happening involved [Condé Nast](#).

Equal treatment?

Next came a big question: Do PRs, in practice, discriminate between journalists and non-journalists? The implication was that journalists get better levels of engagement, though of course the question left room for it to be the other way around.

The Fig 2. pie chart very clearly shows an even split between those who treat the new breed of content creator the same way as traditional journalists versus those who don't. There's a big slice of 'Don't know' (19.4 per cent) then an almost equal split between treating these enquiries/people the same and not – 39.4 per cent do, 41.2 per cent don't.

The stark split shown here was the biggest theme of this report, in terms of PRs, and in Part 3 we share some of the comments our sample made, giving reasons on both sides.

“High-touch activity such as briefings and especially press trips still come out as more the preserve of regular media.”

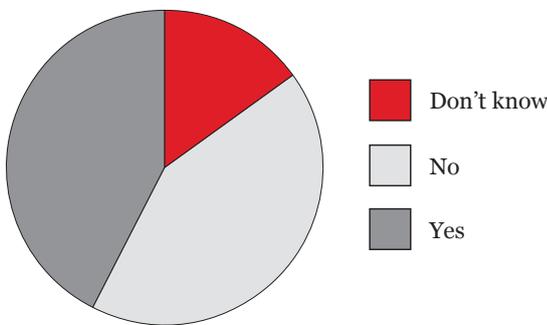


Fig 2. Do you treat these enquiries in the same way as you would when contacted by media?

Second-class content?

Our next questions and answers, in Fig 3., were meant to flesh out the kind of activity that takes place with non-traditional enquiries. To what extent are brand journalists treated the same way as traditional journalists? (The previous Q/A was more an opinion – this was based more on hard facts.)

If PRs were to tell us about their experiences only with traditional journalists, we'd expect the following columns all to hit 100 per cent.

In Fig 3., we have only included answers for those who say they do deal with brand journalists (the 'Yes' group in Fig 1). Even with that smaller group of 116 as our sample base, high-touch activity such as briefings and especially press trips still come out as more the preserve of regular media. Basics such as checking placing of quotes and checking individuals' credentials are commonplace.

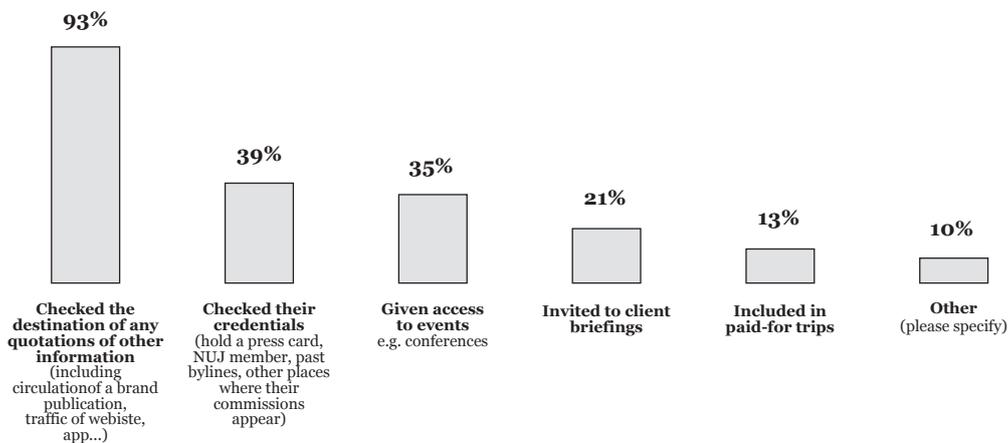


Fig 3. Which of the following have you done in relation to working with brand content creators? (Multiple answers allowed)

Do we have a future together?

The last question on this subject was a big one, ideally giving us a snapshot of the world as it is and giving us an idea of how things are changing. Again, we'd argue, it shows a PR community split in half.

In Fig 4., first look at the extremes. In answer to the question 'When do you think brand content creators will be treated on a par with traditional journalists?' just 17 per cent replied 'They are now'. Compare that with the 42 per cent who replied 'Never'.

There are then various degrees of 'it's happening' but we'd argue it isn't a huge leap to group the 'Over 3 years' slice along with the 'Never' camp. Add them together and the 'No' camp comes to 52 per cent.

This perfectly illustrates the split down the middle, showing the expected acceptance of this growing type of content creator into the PR world.

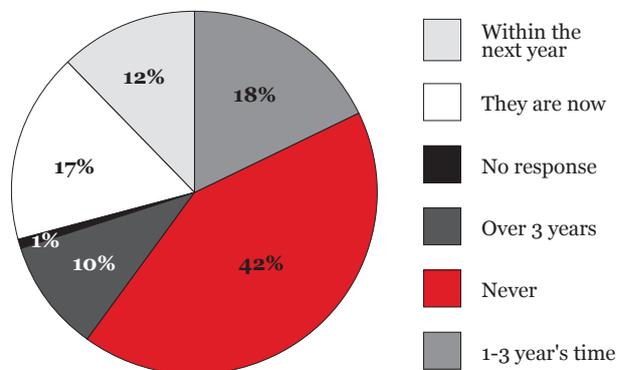


Fig 4. When do you think brand journalists will be treated on a par with traditional journalists?

Part 2: Defining some terms

We should acknowledge at this point that not all the phrases we've used in this report are universally understood by every reader, nor by every respondent to our survey.

There are several conclusions we might be inclined to draw from Fig 5.

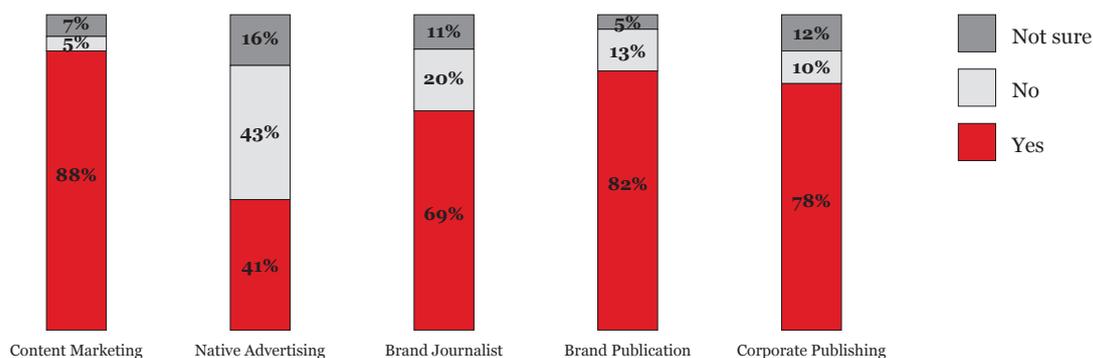


Fig 5. Would you say you understand these terms?

The first is that PRs say they understand 'content marketing'. Each respondent might have a unique definition in mind but the point is that they are for the most part comfortable with the term. Even 'brand publication' is considered well understood, as is the lesser-used 'corporate publishing'.

Also, when we recalculated this same chart using only those who had answered 'They are now' in Fig 4, and then again for those answered 'Never' – two extreme groups we might call 'embracers' and 'rejecters' for short – the understanding of the terms is in favour of those who are more inclusive of brand journalists.

The one exception to this – for which we have no definitive analysis – is the term 'native advertising'. To clarify, those PRs who told us they are 'Never' likely to treat brand content creators the same as journalists are more likely to say they understand the term 'native advertising'.

Could it be they aren't impressed by that trend, which they feel they understand well, and so lean more towards more traditional editorial content and journalists?

“For every organisation keenly attuned to best practice, there are others who don't disclose the source of content, who pollute pages with inaccurate or poor quality content, who do any number of things a traditional publisher wouldn't.”

Back to Fig 5., where we start to see increasing numbers of 'No' and 'Don't know' for 'brand journalist' and especially 'native advertising'. That's the reason we expressed some caveats about the term 'brand journalist' earlier in this report.

It would seem that just as native advertising, a big growth area for publishers, is controversial, content marketing, more broadly, can be too. For every organisation keenly attuned to best practice, there are others who don't disclose the source of content, who pollute pages with inaccurate or poor quality content, who do any number of things a traditional publisher wouldn't.

That could also be why a large number of PRs aren't comfortable with the term 'brand journalist'. It's not in the same league as 'native advertising' but worth noting.

The problem with native advertising

Although some of those we polled rightly told us “publications have been doing advertorials forever” (or words to that effect), there is something a little different about native advertising.

It means publishers placing brand content, often created by some of the brand journalists we've referred to in this report, in the flow of regular content – for example in an online news river or the news pages of a newspaper. The content is usually clearly labelled as being by and from an advertiser, just as it usually would be if a microsite, supplement or similar.

But even with disclosure and quality content that doesn't overly sell an advertiser, PRs aren't happy. Our research showed those who are most comfortable with the term tend to be those least likely to deal with brand journalists. Does that mean PRs are wise to a practice they don't like and act accordingly?

There seems to be a feeling that much native advertising is trying to hoodwink readers. If that happens – and it kind of doesn't matter whether it's intentional or accidental – brands, publications and even individual writers can be hurt.

And while most publications use commercial or non-staff writers to create that copy, some publishers are talking more and more about using their regular editorial teams.

That can be a problem for editors and writers. One respondent told us those in that position – asked to do something they never signed up to when hired – must “choose between their job and their career”.

Native advertising will remain at best nuanced, at worst damaging.

Part 3: Reasons for the PR split – and why it matters to PRs, brands and content creation

Last of all, we were interested in the why of all this. Why would brand journalists be treated differently? Why does that matter?

The overwhelming reason that came out was around conflict of interest. The answer 'Goals of those paying for the content' came out top with 58 per cent of answers – and this question might have implied both a conflict of interest as well as PRs simply not wanting to fuel other organisations' marketing. As one respondent put it: "Proving the value of participating in other firms' activity to clients is hard... even to those who are currently engaged in their own branded content campaigns!"

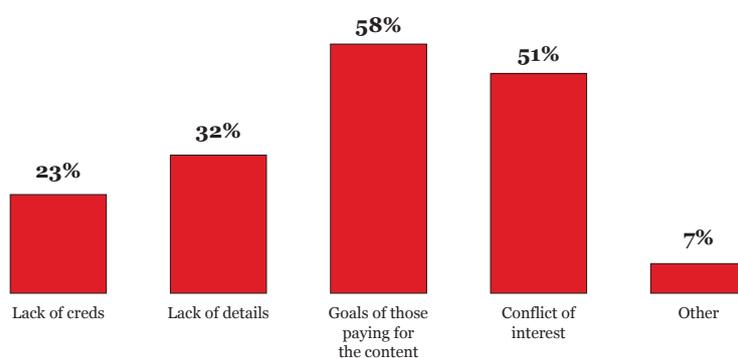


Fig 6. Which of the following reasons might cause you to treat brand journalists differently to traditional journalists?

But 'Conflict of interest' was also high, at 51 per cent, followed by 'Lack of details' (32%) meaning information such as where a quotation might appear or audience numbers/quality, 'Lack of creds' (23%) for any writer making an enquiry and 'Other' (7%).

“In my experience of responding to requests from brand journalists, they are highly qualified, experienced and respected print journalists, who have taken on brand journalism because it offers a higher income than traditional editorial roles.”

Here's what some of our respondents had to say about conflict of interest, including the term 'brand journalist':

- "Are they really journalists? I'm not convinced they are on that side of the divide... maybe I still don't understand the term?"
- "Brand journalists are not journalists. They are publicists (albeit with great writing skills!)."
- "Depends on titles - for example, Grand Designs could technically be seen as a brand publication, yet we treat it in the same way as any other magazine - because its readers do too."
- "Our clients don't necessarily take it seriously and too often there is a conflict of interest or the editorial is overly biased. But hopefully with the rise in quality of content as a discipline this will change."
- "Editorial independence will always add greater value."

But there were an equal number of more positive comments:

- “Brand journalism is nothing new. Professional services firms have been doing it for 20-plus years and are head and shoulders over most consumer brands. If a trusted brand, it is a terrific way to engage with clients/customers. But if not done well it can be equally damaging.”
- “I expect more professionalism from brand journalists than I do of regular journalists - eg keeping to deadlines, being responsive.”
- “I think we should be open to them; times are changing and we need to embrace this.”
- “In my experience of responding to requests from brand journalists, they are highly qualified, experienced and respected print journalists, who have taken on brand journalism because it offers a higher income than traditional editorial roles.”

Part 4: The future

Our research has shown a split, almost down the middle, in how PRs deal with a mostly new group of content creators. They've been referred to in this report as 'brand journalists' but we'd rather just see them called 'brand content creators'.

This is important for brands using PR – given how the new group is expanding at the same time as traditional journalist numbers decline (not in every country nor every sector, we should add).

The PRs we asked rightly question the independence of brand journalists, given how their work is for a single paymaster, usually one with obvious commercial goals.

At the same time, others spoke of their positive experiences, often with ex or current journalists doing this kind of work. And almost a third – we were surprised to learn – told us they'd never had any contact with them. We bet that will change.

“In many categories, quality content will be all the more possible when engaging established and savvy PR pros. But what if half those PRs think less of the people you're paying to create your content?”

For brands trying to create media-grade content, in competition with traditional content sources, this report might also be equal parts worrying and encouraging.

In many categories, quality content will be all the more possible when engaging established and savvy PR pros. But what if half those PRs think less of the people you're paying to create your content?

That's what our research revealed and it is an important challenge to overcome. Brands will have increasingly deep pockets for this kind of activity and quality will improve over time but there is work to be done to convince PRs and the world more generally that brand content is valuable and worth consuming.

We'll leave you with perhaps one of the most balanced and interesting comments we heard:

[Brand journalists] will never be the same as [traditional] journalists because they are not independent news sources. However, they have a role to play providing genuinely interesting and insightful content about their industries. Having access to key experts in specific sectors and more time than journalists means they can provide more insightful content. To be successful they will need to produce something different to traditional journalists, which draws people in. If they get this right they could be very beneficial to both the media industry and their clients.

Methodology

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Collective Content is a content marketing agency. Our network of writers, designers and videographers produces media-grade content, so companies can have better conversations with their customers.



DWPub provides tools to help PRs and journalists to connect, collaborate and tell stories more effectively every day, including the ResponseSource Enquiry Service and FeaturesExec Media Database.