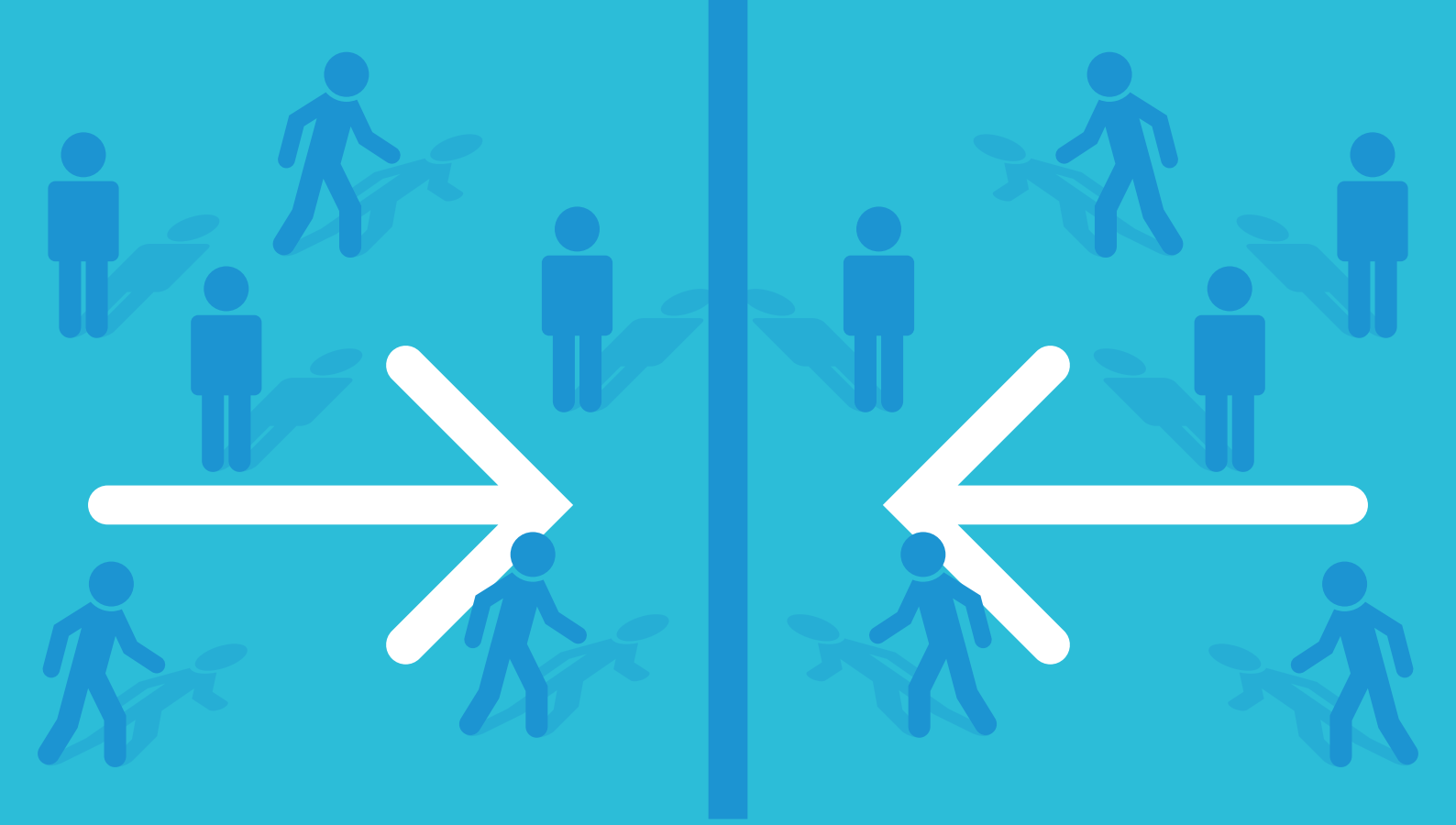
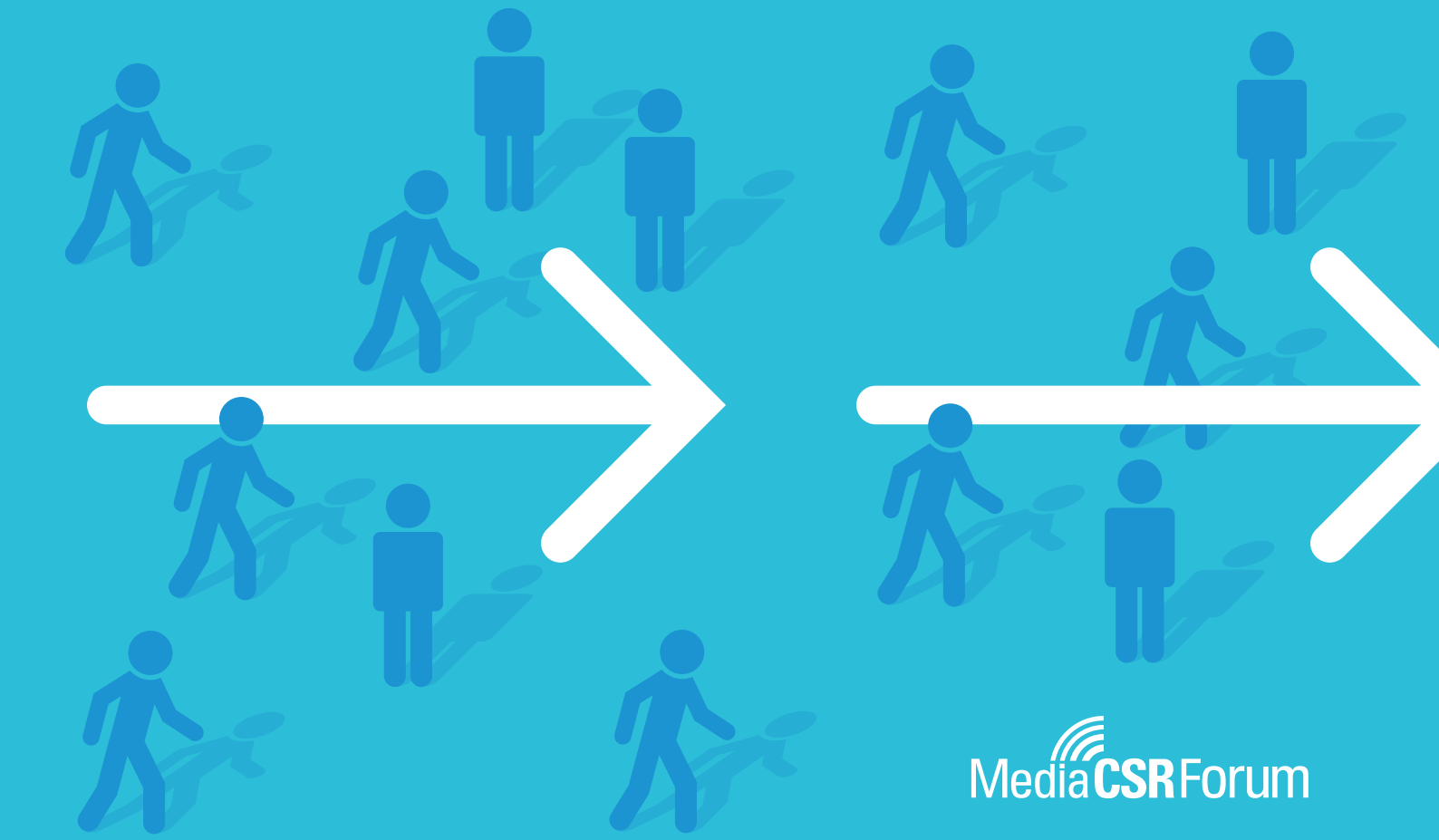


Mirrors or Movers?

Framing the debate about the impact of media content



MediaCSRForum

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The Media CSR Forum

The Media CSR Forum is a partnership between 20 leading media companies, spanning the full range of the media spectrum, from scientific publishers to advertisers. Established in 2001, the Forum provides a platform for members to share and promote best practice around social and environmental performance, through meeting with stakeholders, research and other joint initiatives. Sister forums also exist in France (Media RSE Forum) and the Nordic countries (Nordic Media CR Forum).
www.mediacsrforum.org
@MediaCSRForum

Carnstone Partners LLP

Carnstone is a specialised management consultancy working globally in the area of sustainability and business strategy. Rooted in a sound technical and commercial understanding, we provide advice and support to large companies, international organisations and NGOs. Carnstone works with around a fifth of the FTSE100 and a similar number of FTSE250 companies across all sectors. Carnstone has provided the secretariat to the Media CSR Forum since 2003 and has worked directly with 10 media companies in recent years.
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Summary

Does media content mirror or move society? Is it just a reflection of current norms or does it actively change who we are and how we see things? And if it does change us, what responsibility does that place on media companies?

Relatively speaking, media companies make up only a small fraction of global business and resource usage, yet they command an inordinately high share of 'voice'; a voice that is both powerful and pervasive. The media sector's footprint may be modest, but its 'brainprint' is enormous.

Should the sector actively seek to shape public debate, change behaviours and promote sustainable lifestyles as its contribution to social responsibility?

This is a new and contentious suggestion. There are many different views and it raises important practical and philosophical issues, not least around the influence of media content in a democratic and liberal society.

This report – based on interviews and discussions with industry representatives, academics and other expert commentators – aims not to answer the question but instead to provide a framework and structure for this vital debate:

Section 1 introduces key questions and explains how the report was produced.

Section 2 argues that the media sector as a whole has a good track record of managing its own impacts and that the direct impacts of the sector are relatively modest. But it points out that this view ignores the huge influence of media companies and their potential to influence others.

Section 3 explores the context of the sector, demonstrating its complexity, the rapid pace of change and the importance of 'convergence'. These all present challenges to existing business models, regulatory approaches and bring in to sharp focus the importance of public trust for the sector. It also looks at how the sector is currently responding by analysing the recent sustainability reports of ten large media companies.

Section 4 proposes a model of six 'modes' by which media moves society, supporting each with case studies to illustrate:

Questioning: Challenging existing practices and structures in society, highlighting adverse effects and bringing to light hidden information which leads to subsequent changes in policy or behaviour.
Campaigning: Deliberately taking a partisan stance on an issue, topic or product with the explicit aim of selling, changing behaviour or raising money.
Inspiring: Stimulating action via changed perspectives, alternative futures or by highlighting different ways of behaving.
Silencing/Amplifying: Ignoring or restricting voices on certain topics, events or groups, knowingly or not, with the effect of creating a particular representation of society which differs from the reality. Or, conversely, giving disproportionate voice to, or coverage of certain topics, events or groups, again creating a particular representation of society which differs from the reality.
Normalising: Introducing or legitimising forms of behaviour that may otherwise be unknown or marginal.

Section 5 sets out the arguments for and against the core idea: That media companies should actively manage their content in an attempt to be more responsible. It raises key questions around the legitimacy and right of media companies to act in this way, and the potential damage to editorial independence and creative freedom if they do so. On the other hand, there is the argument that if media already changes society, this process should be made more transparent.

Section 6 explores the difficulties of measuring impact, the different effects on different audiences and the immense complexity of a modern media society. It concludes that tools are available, but, at this stage, they are costly and limited.

Finally, Section 7 opens the debate, inviting politicians, academics, regulators, campaigners and educators to consider the following questions:

- Do stakeholders agree that media content moves society (rather than mirroring it)?
- Are the six modes we suggest the correct ones? What have we missed?
- Should media companies take responsibility for the impacts of their content?
- If so, what conventions and safeguards should be in place over the undesirable effects of blurring editorial/creative processes and corporate responsibilities?
- What are the implications for wider societal questions such as media literacy, media education and regulation?
- What tools do media companies need to begin to address this?

Introduction

Does media content mirror or move society? Is it just a reflection of current norms or does it actively change who we are and how we see things? And if it does change us, what responsibility does that place on media companies?

These are the fundamental questions that led to the writing of this report.

There is a greater sense than ever that **business must stand alongside governments and civil society to tackle the big problems we face.** On the one hand, we are realising the limitations of government power.[1] On the other, societal expectations on business have grown alongside the scale and influence of companies.[2] **It is now not only accepted but expected that businesses play their part.**

Companies have responded with a range of strategies. Early actions centred on philanthropy; diverting resources to tackle social and environmental problems. Many developed sophisticated approaches to address social and environmental risks. **Leading companies are now starting to align social and environmental objectives with their commercial strategy,** moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to finding the unique contribution which they can make in the pursuit of sustainable value. And so we see manufacturers closing the loop to recover and re-use waste product. We see retailers with a holistic 'cradle-to-grave' strategy through their entire supply chain. It is clear that sustainability is not only about managing risks, it is also an agenda ripe with opportunities.

What of the media sector? What is its unique contribution?

So far the sector has been treated as 'low impact' in terms of its direct sustainability effects. But **surely its biggest impacts are intellectual and psychological.** Relatively speaking, media companies make up only a small fraction of global business and resource usage, yet they command an inordinately high share of 'voice', a voice that is both powerful and pervasive. Media content, in all its forms, touches the daily lives of almost every human being on the planet. **Its footprint may be modest, but its 'brainprint' is enormous.**

Is the unique contribution of the media sector that of shaping public debate, changing behaviours and promoting sustainable lifestyles?

This is a new and contentious suggestion. There are many different views and it raises important philosophical issues, not least around the influence of media content and its production in a democratic and liberal society.

This report is based on interviews and discussions with industry representatives, academics and other expert commentators (see the Acknowledgements on page 42 for a full list of those who have contributed). Recognising the huge diversity of opinion, it does not aim to provide definitive answers. Instead, **it aims to generate a more structured discussion on the topic by providing a framework for debate. We will leave it to others to define what is 'right' and 'wrong'.**

Enjoy this report – and please do join the discussion at http://mirrorsormovers.com or on Twitter #MirrorsOrMovers

Direct and indirect impacts

Any media company intending to pronounce externally on social and environmental issues must first look inwards. Before they start discussing how to be greener or more philanthropic, they would be well advised to first ask those questions of their own organisation.

In fact, **the media sector as a whole has a good track record of managing its own impacts.** Since the formation of the Media CSR Forum (MCSRF) in 2001 (and indeed before, in many cases) media companies have measured and reduced emissions, supported charitable causes, striven to be a fair employer to all and pursued many other activities (see Box 1).

Media companies have even looked beyond their own boundaries into the wider creative ecosystem of partners and customers who, between them, may account for a reasonable fraction of, say, global carbon emissions and electronic waste. For example, research indicates that television accounts for 1.8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, with over 70% of that happening at home.[3] It is generally acknowledged that the energy consumed in the use and production phases of information and communications technology is the largest contributor to the carbon footprint of consumer devices, rather than the production and distribution of content.[4] Those who can are actively encouraging low-energy set top boxes, promoting the 'switch off' message and so on. Looking upstream, initiatives such as Albert in the UK and Ecoprod in France bring together broadcasters and production companies to understand carbon impacts and to do more with less.

Box 1. Selected examples of MCSRF members' programmes to manage their direct impacts since 2001

In-house

Reed Elsevier, through recycling, incineration, and the creation of energy from waste, currently diverts 64% of its waste from landfill and aims to divert 75% by 2015 and 100% by 2020.

Guardian News and Media has developed a unique volunteering programme, through which its employees share their professional skills with local community partners.

Sky has been carbon neutral since 2006 and has committed significant resources to low carbon technology and employee education to lower its GHG emissions.

Sector initiatives

The Creative Diversity Network is a UK initiative to improve multicultural and disability representation both on and off screen.

Albert (UK) and **Ecoprod (France)** are both collaborative initiatives to encourage and facilitate more environmentally responsible TV and film production.

PREPS (Publishers' database for Responsible Environmental Paper Sourcing) is a joint initiative between publishers to develop a better understanding of responsible paper supply chains.

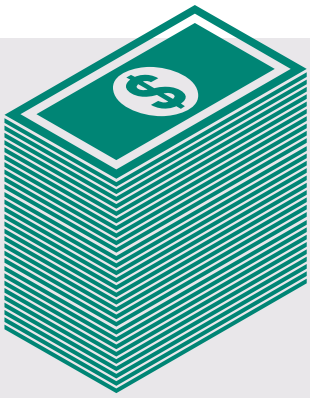
The idea behind this report is not that direct impacts do not matter. Nor is it that they have been so effectively addressed that nothing remains to be done. It is a question of scale. **Compare Vivendi (one of the world's largest media companies) with Rio Tinto (a global mining company) and the issue becomes immediately clear. Despite comparable revenues and even employee numbers, the impact intensity differs by two orders of magnitude.** If both companies put the same effort into tackling, say, carbon emissions, Rio Tinto could be expected to save almost 100 times as much.

So, do we shrug our shoulders and categorise the whole sector as low impact and low importance in a resource constrained future? To do so would ignore the huge influence of media companies in the education of children, changes in consumer behaviour, the sharing of scientific research and a hundred other ways that media companies can play a vital role.

RIO TINTO VS. VIVENDI – OPERATIONAL IMPACTS COMPARED[6]

Revenue

$10billion
Rio Tinto

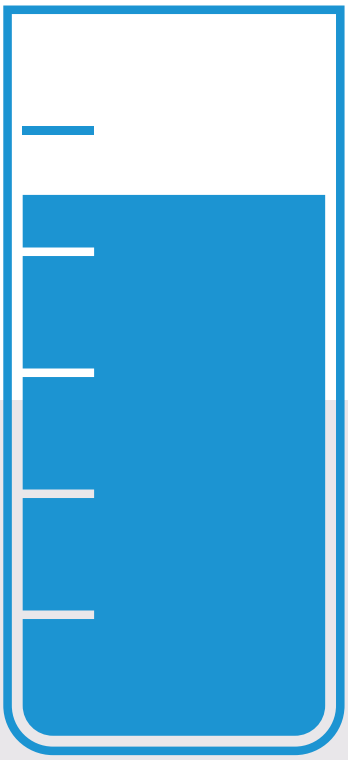


$29billion
Vivendi

Employees

71,000
Rio Tinto

58,000
Vivendi



Water usage

447,000 million litres
Rio Tinto

538 million litres
Vivendi

Greenhouse gas emissions

41,000,000 tCO2e
Rio Tinto

473,000 tCO2e
Vivendi

Setting the context

NEITHER NEW NOR UNIQUE

The argument over the influence of media impacts is not a new one. There is a history of debate over media's influence: From revolutionary pamphlets coming off the first printing presses to suicides attributed to social media, a long sequence of events and issues demonstrate over and over again the power, and sometimes controversial nature, of media content.

Nor is social influence restricted to media companies. Most companies, whatever the sector, actively promote themselves and their products through corporate communications, branding, product messages, etc. Many go further, targeting particular demographics with particular 'lifestyle' messages. In the context of sustainable development, some brands are explicitly seeking to guide consumer behaviour[6] in an attempt to reduce the whole-life impacts of their products and services.

The main difference between the influence of the media sector and that of other sectors is reach. Media companies usually command larger audiences, they probably have more frequent contact with those audiences and they certainly have much longer hours of exposure than the direct cultural influence of any other sector.

RAPID CHANGE

The media sector has been one of the great commercial success stories of recent years, enjoying attractive and rapid commercial growth and a secure place in the affections of investors. Media companies enjoy good margins and high stock valuations.

At the same time, it is a sector in continuous flux. The past 30 years have seen the opening up of broadcasting and associated deregulation, the development of global media conglomerates, profound changes in the ownership and operation of the

press and technological change. The sector has ridden each successive wave applying its stock-in-trade creativity to create value.

But today's wave is perhaps the biggest: Converging media is fundamentally redefining the rules of the game. Almost every media company is re-thinking its business models to adapt to consumers' rapid move online. Content is being shared across platforms. New technology is making content accessible anywhere, any time. And many consumers have become accustomed to not having to pay for media content. In response, some companies are focussing on their role as content producers. Others are concentrating on offering the best platforms. Some are doing both. Some traditional revenue streams and circulation models are shrinking fast. At the same time, other models are enjoying explosive growth. There will inevitably be winners and losers.

This is an important backdrop to any discussion on the influence of media content. These technological changes have thrown up thorny issues around media literacy, privacy and data protection. **The rise of social media has profoundly changed the nature of the conversation between media and audiences.** Companies are rightly focussed on the need to retain audience share. New regulatory models are emerging.

On the other hand, convergence presents new opportunities to interact with audiences. It enables media companies to have conversations with audiences, providing information and gauging reactions almost instantly. It allows them to understand in detail how users interact with their content.

COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY

The media sector is far from homogenous. Within the broad classification of 'media' there is a huge range of activity, from peak-time television to specialist technical publications. The members of the Media CSR Forum include:

- Commercial and public service broadcasters
- Local and national newspapers
- Publishers of books, magazines and journals
- Digital or e-learning companies
- Internet service providers
- Satellite and cable TV providers
- Online search and directories
- Business to business information providers
- Creators, planners and carriers of advertising

Each of these sub-sectors experiences different pressures and has different types of content. Any discussion on the subject of content influence must recognise this huge variation.

TRUST AND REGULATION

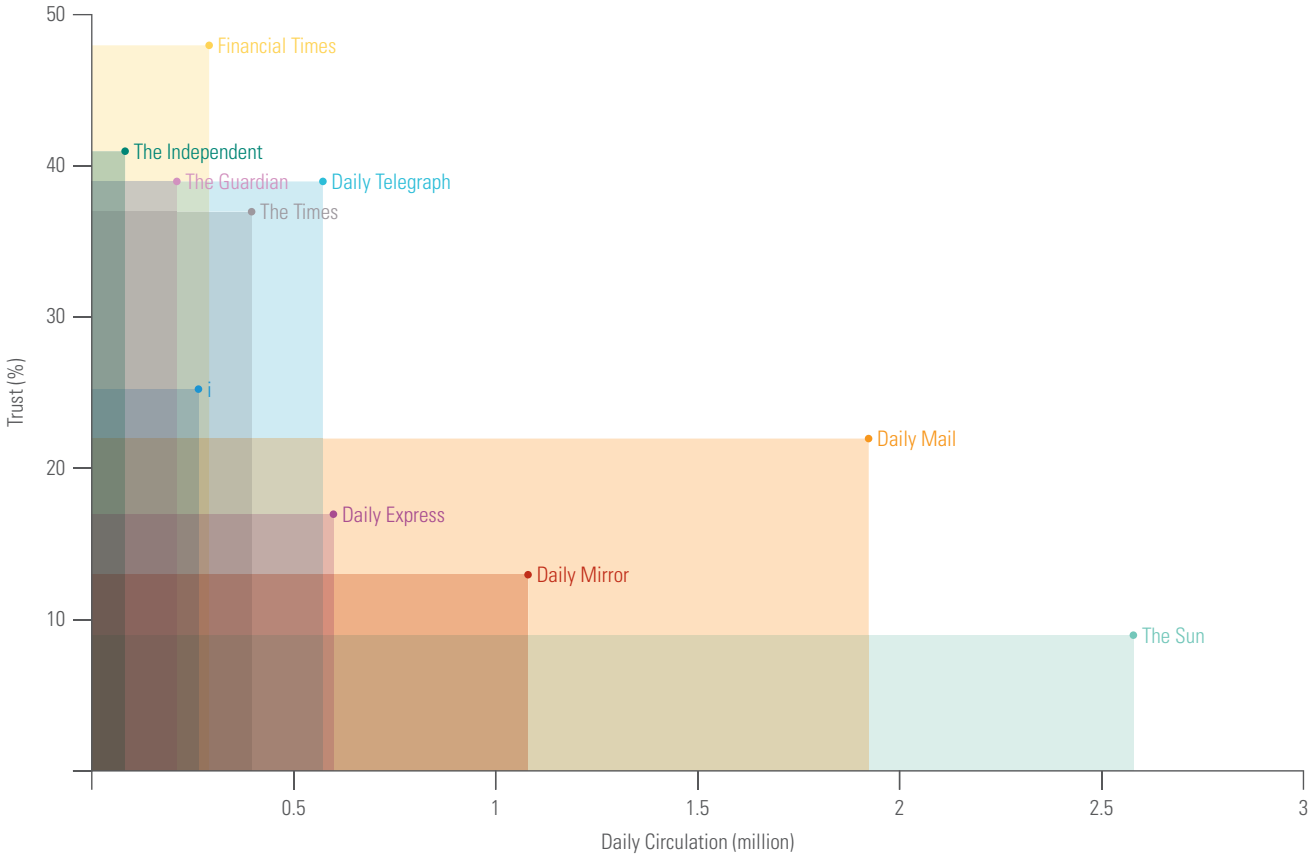
Companies in all sectors thrive on public trust, but in the media sector the commodity is perhaps uniquely valuable. Consumers turn to broadcasters, newspapers and books for information and they need to be able to trust what they see, hear and read. There is a long tradition of the media sector actively pursuing public trust: CP Scott, founder of the Guardian, famously believed that the character of a newspaper should consist of the following qualities: "Honesty; cleanness [today interpreted as integrity]; courage; fairness; and a sense of duty to the reader and the community".[7] **Public trust is a key issue for many parts of the sector,** with consequential attention paid to editorial policies, transparency & accountability and creative independence.[8]

Despite this, levels of trust in media are wavering. In one recent study, just 53% of "informed publics" stated that they trust the media, only slightly above the 50% recorded by financial services.[9] **The direct business impact of these perceptions is hard to understand. For example, levels of trust do not seem to correlate directly with newspaper circulation** (see the chart opposite)[10] and different sub-sectors within the wider sector enjoy very different perceptions in the public mind.[11]

But one direct consequence of public trust is the political and public appetite for regulation. Press regulation is a current and emotive topic and not the direct subject of this report. It is the subject of active debate in the wake of the UK phone hacking scandal and the subsequent Leveson Inquiry and Report. However, **in general, it can be argued that the higher the level of public distrust and disquiet, the greater the freedom conferred on Governments and regulators to act.**[12]

Issues of trust – particularly embodied in questions of governance – also have the potential to affect other stakeholder relationships. Investors, for example, actively assess how media companies manage environmental, social and governance (ESG) risks, with their conclusions affecting the general sentiment surrounding the sector. In the last couple of years, organisations such as the Global Reporting Initiative[13] (GRI) and the European Sustainable Investment Forum[14] (Eurosif) have issued guidance on what the material social and environmental risks are to media investors and how media companies should manage their investor disclosures

Newspapers: Trust vs Circulation



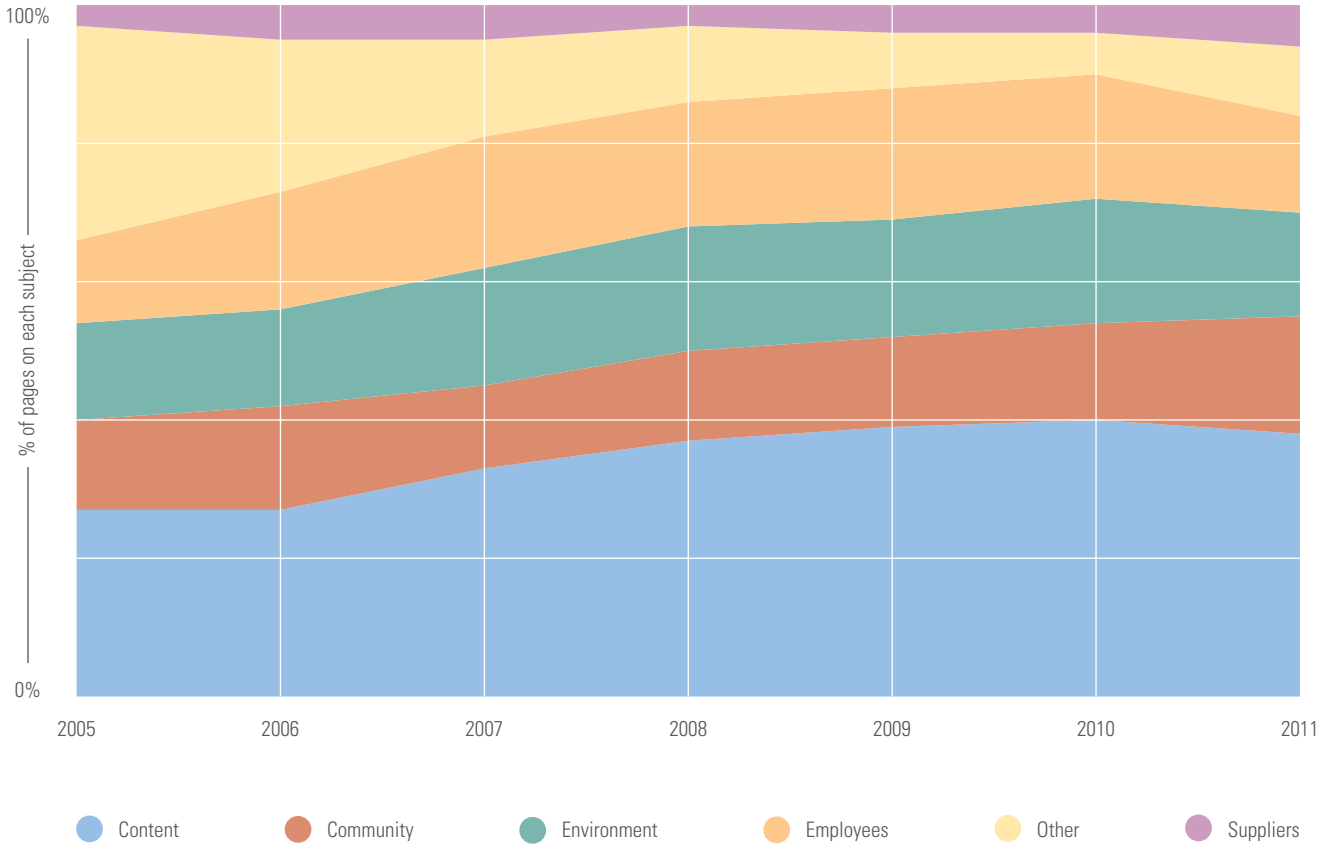
in this area. Examples of these nebulous concerns crystallising into direct investor action are still rare. One example is the Church of England's investment bodies' divestment from News Corporation in 2012, citing that the company had "failed to hold senior managers to account" in the wake of the phone hacking scandal.

These trust-related effects – the response of audiences, the regulatory consequences and the effects on other important stakeholder relationships – are important markers of long-term value for the sector. They create both opportunities and threats for media companies. And the public's reaction to media content is perhaps the most powerful driver of trust.

HOW HAVE MEDIA COMPANIES RESPONDED?

How have media companies responded to these pressures? Are they taking this agenda seriously? One way to answer this question is to look at their public reporting.

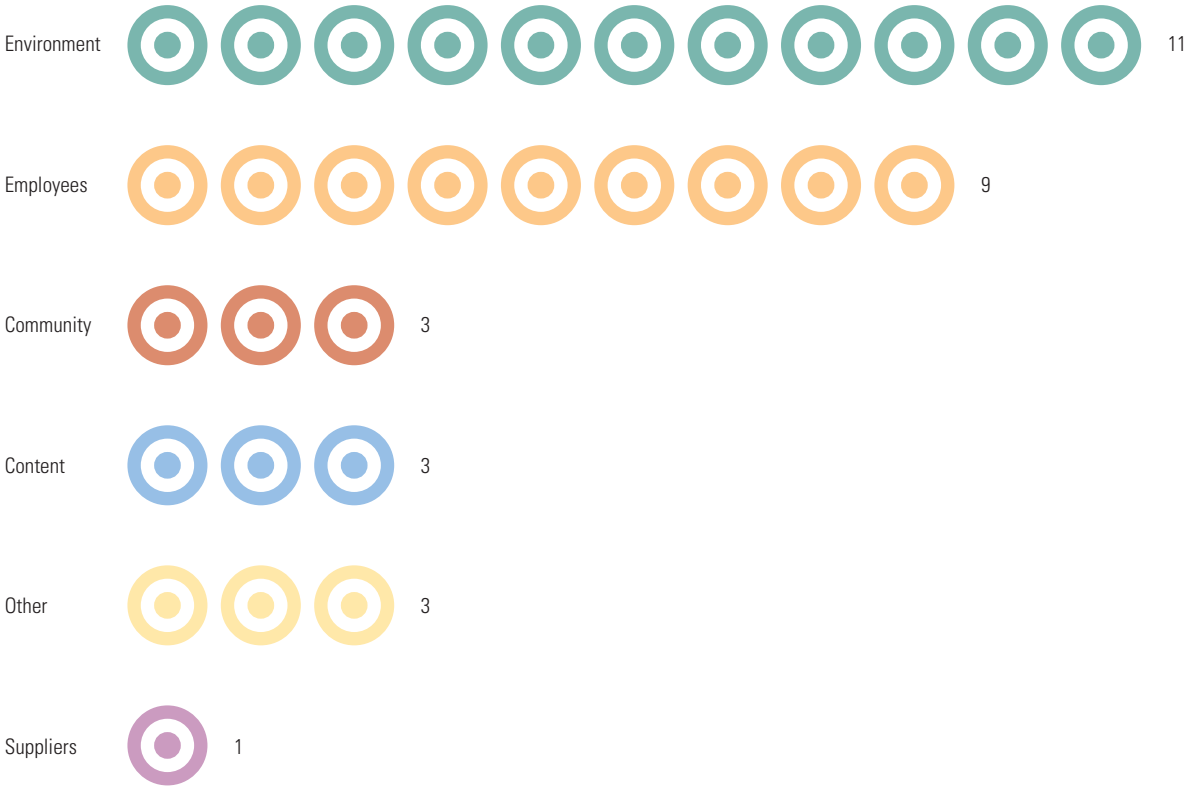
What do media companies talk about in their CR reports?



The first chart above shows an analysis of the sustainability reports or relevant sections of the annual reports of 10 media companies since 2005.[15] The number of pages allocated to each section was calculated as a percentage of the overall report and these percentages were then averaged across the 10 company reports. Over that period, **discussions on content have accounted for 27%-40% of companies' reporting efforts,** with the majority of the space taken by the more traditional topics of suppliers, community, environment and employees. The second chart looks at the number of key performance indicators (KPIs) published by each company in their most recent reports. **The evidence suggests – not surprisingly – that media companies are much more comfortable with metrics in areas where more readily quantifiable data is available;** environment and employment leading the way.

Nonetheless, it is clear that reporting on content is firmly on the agenda, and 40% of a public report is a considerable amount. We can conclude that the idea of content as a social (or environmental) impact is established.

What do media companies measure in their CR reports?



Average number of KPIs per report

When we look in more detail at what is reported, we immediately note that **most reporting on the impact of content is 'by exception',** usually focussing on three topics:

- Editorial guidelines and policies to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of information (in news organisations, academic publishers and so on).
- The impacts of on-screen or in-print social campaigns, often with a charitable angle.
- The use of investigative journalism and the breaking of new stories.

The emphasis is heavily on content *which has been conceived specifically for impact.* At this stage, there is much less attention paid to the effects of entertainment or advertising, or to the wider mass of 'background' content that forms the bulk of a media company's output, and which may in fact have more lasting power over the audience.

The wider questions are the subject of growing stakeholder interest and form the subject of the next section.

The influence of content

MAPPING A SHIFTING SECTOR

Understanding and mapping media influence is complex. Do we take a platform-based approach? But the same content now appears on multiple platforms. **Do we divide companies into types?** But convergence means that most media companies now do more than one thing. **Do we look at audiences?** But one person is exposed to hundreds of media sources in a week.

Classifying media companies by geographical scope, content delivery type or business model is bound to be muddled. The converging nature of the media landscape suggests that most larger media companies are international in reach, multi-platform and generally busy re-(de)fining their business model.

There is no single, right way to understand the subject. However, to foster a meaningful debate on the topic, we need a framework that will help individual media organisations map their potential impacts and spheres of influence. To this end, we suggest a model that may provide a common vocabulary and ultimately help in developing a strategy towards actively managing content impacts.

DEFINING THE IMPACT MODES

We suggest there are potentially six modes – or six different ways – in which media content affects society, whether this effect is intended or not. We use the word 'society', but in many cases specific audiences or groups would be a more appropriate term. However, going into such detail, e.g. by separating direct from ripple effects, is beyond the scope of this report. But this model may be helpful in exploring where the influence of a media company starts and stops. The following pages outline each different mode of influencing with practical examples to illustrate its utility.

Note that these six modes are not exhaustive – for example, we have not included the simple idea of 'informing', preferring instead the more active ways in which the information provided drives change. Nor are they exclusive – campaigning and inspiring are closely linked and often overlap, and silencing and amplifying are two sides of the same coin. Three of these modes tend to be much better understood and consciously debated: Questioning, campaigning and inspiring are established media functions and – as such – are often already subject to regulations and other active controls. The others – silencing, amplifying and normalising – are more subtle and currently seem to be much less discussed and considered.

IMPACT MODES AND CONTENT TYPES

For the reasons given above – convergence, multi-platforms, complexity - it is extremely difficult to objectively and meaningfully classify content types. Nevertheless, we need a place to start as we consider which impact modes might affect which companies. One simple model might be that a piece of media content will generally have one of three purposes:

- To sell – advertising, campaigning, editorial, political broadcasting, etc.
- To inform – news, education publishing, documentaries, current affairs, etc.
- To entertain – comedy, drama, magazines, music, etc.

(In fact, a given film, article or book may span two or even all three categories, but will usually be skewed more heavily towards one of the three). The different influencing modes we suggest above may then apply differentially to these three

continues on p27 →

The six modes are…

Questioning

Challenging existing practices and structures in society, highlighting adverse effects and bringing to light hidden information which leads to subsequent changes in policy or behaviour.

Campaigning

Deliberately taking a partisan stance on an issue, topic or product with the explicit aim of selling, changing behaviour or raising money.

Inspiring

Stimulating action via changed perspectives, alternative futures or by highlighting different ways of behaving.

Silencing

Ignoring or restricting voices on certain topics, events or groups, knowingly or not with the effect of creating a particular representation of society which differs from the reality…

Amplifying

…or, conversely, giving disproportionate voice to or coverage of certain topics, events or groups, again creating a particular representation of society which differs from the reality.

Normalising

Introducing or legitimising forms of behaviour that may otherwise be unknown or marginal.

Questioning

"THE RADIATION BOOM" (THE NEW YORK TIMES)

From 2009, investigative journalist Walt Bogdanich wrote a series of articles for the New York Times. These revealed systemic over-exposure and misuse of radiation treatment on US patients. While the use of radiation has become increasingly common and saved many lives over recent decades, the articles examined the harm that can be caused when the technology is misused and errors pass unidentified. Potential detrimental effects include acute illness and even death. The articles prompted US authorities to improve safety standards and introduce further measurements to reduce the likelihood of its unnecessary use.

"UNDERCOVER CARE: THE ABUSE EXPOSED" (PANORAMA, BBC)

A 2011 episode of the undercover documentary unveiled the assaults, brutality and abuse of residents with learning disabilities and autism by staff at a privately-run UK care home. It also revealed the failure to act by the social care authorities after complaints had been made by a former staff member. Following the programme, six staff members were jailed for their actions and the home was closed. The UK Government ordered a review of the failure to investigate the whistleblower's account and a more wide-ranging inquiry into the commissioning of social care for vulnerable adults and the elderly.

Campaigning

DOVE CAMPAIGN FOR REAL BEAUTY (OGILVY & MATHER)

Launched in 2004, the campaign aimed to reinvigorate Dove's products sales by starting a global conversation about the need for a wider definition of beauty for women and to challenge beauty stereotypes. The various phases of the campaign have regularly featured women whose physical appearance did not conform to the stereotypes typically portrayed by the personal care retail sector and the advertising industry more widely. It is unclear what the overall impact has been but the subsequent media debate and coverage can be credited with pushing the issue of media stereotyping of female beauty firmly onto the agenda.

HUGH'S FISH FIGHT (CHANNEL4)

The TV series fronted by celebrity cook Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has brought wider public attention to overfishing and other unsustainable practices in the fishing industry. With the help of NGOs, fishermen, companies and policy makers it has openly campaigned to ban the industry practice of discarding dead unwanted fish. Episodes have visited key fishing regions around the world showing viewers how the fish on their plates is sourced. To date, the campaign has played a significant role in supermarkets changing sourcing policies and MEPs in the European Parliament voting to ban discards. This followed direct lobbying by those involved with the programme and audience activism through the accompanying website, Twitter and emails.

Inspiring

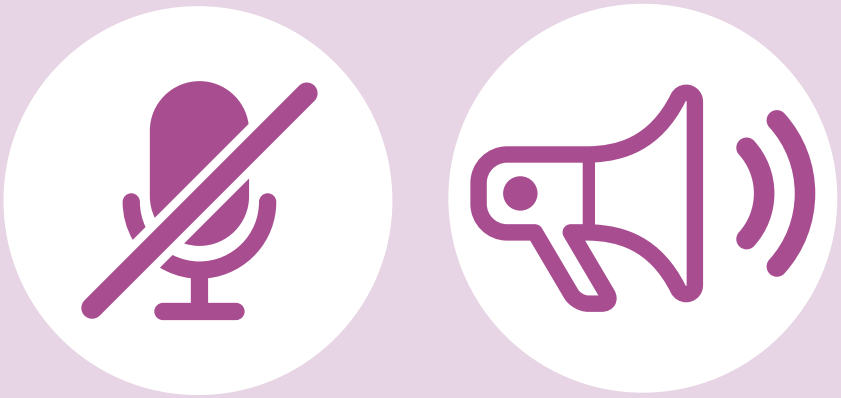
PARALYMPICS (CHANNEL 4)

It is of course hard to judge the lasting impact of the coverage so soon after the event but initial surveys suggested that Channel 4's coverage of the 2012 London Paralympics – nearly 500 hours of coverage, which was a 400% increase on the 2008 Paralympics – had a significant effect in changing public attitudes towards disability. Independent research[16] has shown that two thirds of viewers felt it favourably changed their perceptions towards people with disabilities, while it also appeared to shift the Paralympics from being viewed as a disability event to a display of sporting excellence in its own right.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH (LAWRENCE BENDER PRODUCTIONS AND PARTICIPANT PRODUCTIONS)

The 2006 documentary film written by and starring Al Gore has been widely credited with increasing public awareness of human factors contributing to climate change and the severity of the crisis. A global survey conducted by The Nielsen Company and Oxford University[17] found that two thirds of people who had seen the film had "changed their mind" about global warming and 89% said watching the film had made them more aware of the problem. The impact can also be measured in how it inspired key individuals to take action. Stuart Rose, CEO of the retailer Marks and Spencer, claimed that he was inspired to launch its Plan A campaign as a result of seeing the film.

Silencing/Amplifying



MMR VACCINE CONTROVERSY (MULTIPLE MEDIA)

Due to vast media coverage of a 1998 scientific paper linking the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine to autism in children, vaccination rates dropped sharply and the incidence of mumps and measles increased resulting in deaths and severe injuries. The controversy lasted over ten years in the UK and much of the news reporting media was heavily criticised for providing a misleading picture of the evidence to support the theory. Multiple studies were conducted to evaluate the evidence and none were able to establish the link claimed by the original paper. However, many media outlets continued to support the theory until the scientific paper was fully retracted in 2010. In the UK, 300,000 children aged 10-16 remain unvaccinated and scientists see this as a long-term public health threat.[18]

MISSING CHILDREN IN NATIONAL US NEWS COVERAGE

Following the discovery of three missing women in Cleveland, Ohio, a research paper[19] on the comparative media coverage for missing children received much wider attention. The study found that just under 20% of news coverage related to African American children while they accounted for a third of missing children cases reported to the FBI. And in terms of gender representation, girls accounted for 57% of cases but only 38% of media coverage. The paper argues that a number of factors, including newsroom diversity, news operation routines, media ownership and commercial motives, may play a role in the findings. It also points to the ethical responsibility media companies have due to the important role media coverage plays in finding missing children.

Normalising

THE HARVARD ALCOHOL PROJECT (MULTIPLE MEDIA)

The Harvard Alcohol Project is a striking example of media companies partnering with public health experts to harness the media's powers of persuasion to normalise an alien concept. The project launched in 1988 and introduced the concept of "designated drivers" in an attempt to curb alcohol-related road fatalities in the United States. Major television networks and Hollywood studios agreed to participate, e.g. by inserting anti-drink driving messages directly into the storylines of popular shows such as "Cheers". Polling demonstrated the Project's success in normalising the concept and it has been credited with contributing to a substantial reduction in road deaths. It is also notable that an estimated $100 million of airtime was leveraged through only $300,000 in annual grants to the project.[20]

BRAZILIAN SOAP OPERAS (REDE GLOBO NETWORK)

A 2008 academic paper "Soap Operas and Fertility: Evidence from Brazil"[21] examined the impact that prime time soap operas aired by Rede Globo had on Brazil's fertility rate, which saw a decline from 6.3 in 1960 to 1.9 in 2010. The research found that soap operas commonly portrayed affluent and smaller than normal families in a setting which audiences could relate to. It credits the programming with contributing to a rapid demographic shift which saw a decrease in fertility rates across the country from cosmopolitan to rural areas. The research was unusual in that it was able to compare the Globo network's spread through Brazil with corresponding regional fertility rates – a control which would be hard to replicate in technologically developed societies.

→ continued from p19

simple categories. For example, content which 'sells' is much more likely to influence through the campaigning or inspiring modes. Content which 'informs' is more likely to be silencing, amplifying and questioning. Content which 'entertains' is often overlooked in debates about influence, but the case studies above suggest that it has powerful normalising and inspiring effects.

The table below illustrates how the different content types might be mapped against the six different modes, with the circles illustrating a ○ lesser, ● greater or ◎ medium effect. There is no definitive answer, and individual companies will reach different conclusions depending on their unique circumstances. The idea is included here simply to provide companies with a possible place to start in mapping their influence.

Content mainly…	Question	Campaign	Inspire	Silence	Amplify	Normalise
…To sell	◎	●	◎	○	○	◎
…To inform	●	◎	◎	●	●	◎
…To entertain	○	◎	●	○	◎	●

This model is not intended to be prescriptive in setting out a certain path of action. It is intended to provide a vocabulary, a framework and a diagnostic tool. For a media company wanting to actively manage its influence, the first challenge is to map where existing impacts reside, what modes are already in play and only then to consider what the desired future should look like. Needless to say, this will vary between companies: Some may want to focus on work in just one category, say, normalising certain behaviours, whereas others may opt for a combination of all six to deliver on their strategy. **There are also significant questions around regulation and democratic 'voice' which we will begin to explore in the next section.**

Should media companies actively manage their content impacts?

The preceding sections have helped define the question and made a case that the social and environmental impacts of media content outweigh those involved in its production. We have seen how the different types of media content, through six distinct influencing modes, can change attitudes and drive action among specific audiences and in wider society.

If it is the case that media content influences society, and that media companies are seeking to be responsible, does it necessarily follow that they should actively manage their content in an attempt to be more responsible?

There are arguments both for and against this proposition.

> "The opportunity, for the creative story-tellers within broadcasting, is to weave sustainable behaviours and a positive vision of our future into great TV, creating programming which normalises sustainability for a mass mainstream audience."
>
> —Daniella Vega, Head of Corporate Responsibility, Sky

For → THE POTENTIAL FOR GOOD

Many people already have an interest in setting the media agenda. Most campaigners, researchers, politicians and special interest groups wish they could get more airtime for their message, be it in news coverage, entertainment or through advertising. The media is the megaphone through which they address society and they fight to grab it for their few minutes. **Individually, each stakeholder can legitimately argue that more exposure for their idea would make the world a better place;** the population would be better informed, more inclined to act, less at risk of harm and so on. So it follows naturally that if the media company was acting responsibly, it would cover their topic more extensively. Additionally, some companies see this as a commercial opportunity, e.g. Channel 4's Chief Creative Officer recently stated that "acting as an agent of social change" is one of three pillars of the broadcaster's content strategy.[22]

Against ← THE NEED FOR EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

But in this argument, we see the main reason we keep our media under close scrutiny. We hope to ensure that it treats opposing views fairly, explores the evidence behind claims and generally supports the plurality, complexity and fine balances within our society. To make a change in this balance is a very big thing, and for most types of media organisations we expect such decisions to be transparent. A media company is often a private entity, having no formal democratic mandate and ultimately existing in the interests of its owners. Consequently society has defined controls and conventions – explicit or implicit – that separate the editorial and the corporate. In most media companies the editors and creatives operate independently from the marketeers, financiers and proprietors. **Taking an active stance on content influence must acknowledge the uncomfortable fact that we are opening the door for the corporation to influence the content. Many may consider this sacrifice an unacceptable price to pay for responsibility.**

For → IT'S ALREADY HAPPENING – MAKE IT EXPLICIT

On many issues we do not expect balance. When covering a stabbing no-one expects the reporter to explore the alternative pro-murder stance. We have a clear social consensus that murder is wrong and our media reflects this. The same can be said for law-breaking in general, the protection of children, human rights and multiple other issues.

This leads to the classic formulation of the status quo: The media reflects society as it is today; it does not lead society to where it should be tomorrow. The good editor can take a single line on issues where there is social consensus, but must present the debate where society differs. According to this argument, the media's role is to be a perfect lens through which society views itself with no distortion or filters. The media just reflects what is already being said.

But, of course, this is an oversimplification. Investigative journalists uncover new issues. Media campaigns drive change. What we read and watch very rapidly becomes normative; something long known by campaigners for and against social change. The case studies on pages 22–26 show how media influences behaviour.

The preceding argument has been made around news media, but the same principles can be applied to almost all subsectors. We can ask if the editor of a journal shows favouritism for a particular topic or stance, leading it to greater prominence. Does the talent scout for a record label define the next new trend, or simply pick up on what is already happening in the clubs? Does the feature film change the way we see gender roles, or reinforce the tradition?

In the face of these examples, arguing that media does nothing but simply reflect societal norms and behaviours seems hard to justify. And so, if it is already influencing society, is it not better that this is done consciously and in a manner that can be held to account?

Against ← VOICE AND LEGITIMACY

When an issue is new, or when attitudes are to be changed, what gives a media company the right to do it? In what capacity are they acting? A political interviewer grilling a politician is understood to be putting questions on behalf of 'everyman'. Advertisers sell on behalf of their sponsors. An investigative journalist is uncovering the truth in pursuit of a fair and transparent society. These views are in line with the etymological baggage of the term 'media' as an 'intermediary' or simply the 'middle'.

The situation is much less clear in other cases. Take as an example the idea of normalising a behaviour change around environmental practice. Some green campaigners would argue that we should see recycling or low-impact living as a matter of course embedded in all real-life drama. Others would disagree, arguing that the media is not there to "preach to us"; they are not elected members of society with the mandate to advance particular social policies. **Do media companies have a legitimate right to seek to change society in this way? Indeed, within the industry there is a strong view that 'preaching' in this way will alienate audiences, reduce ratings and actually undermine the public trust which the sector needs.**

SO SHOULD THEY?

Arguing that companies 'do the right thing' by consciously managing their output for particular social ends is extremely difficult. It raises profound questions about legitimacy, balance and independence. On the other hand, the social and technological context is creating powerful drivers for media companies to take more active responsibility for the impact of their content. So what should they do? **There is no right answer.**

Media companies occupy an uneasy space between being private corporations serving a market and (inter)national institutions. To return to CP Scott, they have a "moral as well as a material existence".[23] **One possible response is that they – like all of us acting as citizens – must determine for themselves what they think to be right, and then pursue it. But – unlike the rest of us – having such enormous influence as they do, they must undertake this process consciously and transparently, underpinned by a high degree of self-awareness and reflection.**

Understanding and measuring influence

Is it possible for companies to control the influence of their content? Can a media company ever know what impact its content has? Understanding and measuring the influence of content is practically and conceptually challenging.

CONTENT AS CARBON

Companies are (rightly) held accountable for the greenhouse gases they emit, gases which rise into the atmosphere affecting the chemistry there and building up a warming layer around the Earth. It is easy to think of content the same way – programmes, books and articles escape into the ether where they affect the delicate balance of our social chemistry, warming, cooling, inciting or calming as they do so. Controlling the 'brainprint' is like controlling the carbon footprint; find the things with a negative effect and curb their emissions. Find the positives and accentuate.

But this analogy is misguided. One gramme of carbon dioxide behaves the same way whether it is emitted in London or Lima. But a particular piece of content will have different effects on different people depending on their levels of media literacy, their existing values, prior knowledge and even their mood. This problem is about unpredictability.

"How do you measure action and impact inspired by content at a global scale? It's something we have been thinking about for a number of years without much success."

—Head of CR of a major media company

Consider the example of humour. A joke on an edgy topic may offend half the population but the other half will laugh along because it is clearly not a serious point being made – to them anyway. When the Top Gear team make it to the North Pole in four-wheel-drives some people think they are being irreverent, others that they are guilty of promoting a crime against the environment. The question would be whether we can find anyone whose own emissions of carbon have been affected negatively or positively by the stunt. The debate has raged for years over whether violent content produces violent behaviour – in millions of people it clearly does not, but in a small fraction of the population, whose experiences and personalities predispose them, it may well do. Is that the fault of the content, or the individual?

The second problem is one of attribution. Atmospheric chemistry is (relatively) simple compared with the unimaginable complexity of the thousands of messages we each receive every day. Our gramme of CO2 joins a handful of other gases in the atmosphere, reacting in a way that we can model in the lab. **Our piece of media content is added to a lifetime's worth of other messages, with each individual being exposed to different ideas** (an effect which is intensifying as the internet allows much more personalised consumption). It is difficult to say whether it was coverage of the Olympics that inspired someone to take up running again, the general buzz surrounding it, or the increased promotional activity from their local running club.

> "There's an incredible amount of money put into research by the advertising industry into proving through qualitative and quantitative research that this and that type of communication will impact behaviour and purchasing behaviour. If that's the case, then how is half an hour, when you have a consumer's full attention, not going to influence their view on things like violence in society, or consumer behaviour or whatever it is?"
>
> —Participant at Media CSR Forum validation workshop

For all this complexity, there are countless examples of media content leading to profound social change. When it strikes a resonant chord, content can transform understanding and behaviours, almost literally overnight; from supermarkets selling out of an unusual ingredient used by a celebrity chef to the withdrawal of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) following the publication of Silent Spring by Rachel Carson. There are other excellent examples on pages 22–26.

So we can, it seems, sometimes trace the impact of content retrospectively, but it is much harder to predict in advance. The six-mode model we outlined earlier may help, but we acknowledge the difficulties with unpredictability and attribution.

MEASURING INFLUENCE

Despite the challenges, there most definitely are techniques for measuring the impact of media content. In fact it is an essential discipline for one subsector of the industry – advertising. New campaigns are carefully tested, refined and targeted before – and after – surveys are done, and ultimately the key test is whether more product leaves the shelves. The same techniques can be applied elsewhere, although there is no doubt they are costly. Considering the model from section 4, this type of thinking would perhaps best fit the 'campaigning' and 'inspiring' modes.

During the research for this project we uncovered a number of examples of measuring the impact of content. **A good example is the Taru project, an Indian education-entertainment (EE) radio soap, which strategically employed media role models to promote certain behaviours.** Academic researchers rigorously measured the immediate and longitudinal effects of the soap through a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, surveys and content analysis of listeners' feedback, as well as monitoring data on the sales of condoms, pills and pregnancy strips. They found that exposure to the soap led to strong audience effects on gender equality, family size, and adoption of contraceptives.[24]

It is notable that many media-influence impact studies have been undertaken in societies with less access to media (so the results of one intervention are easier to understand) and applied to media content tailored to achieve certain social outcomes. The unexpected and unlooked for are harder to spot, as is any media impact in our relatively media-saturated society. To this end, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Knight Foundation have recently declared that strategic investments in media measurement have the potential to be transformative. They have committed seed funding to **the Media Impact Project, aiming to develop methods to capture the deeper effects of media content on individuals and society.** The project will bring together social and behavioural scientists, journalists and data analytics experts. **Part of the initiative's remit will be to collect and share best practice in understanding shifts in people's knowledge, attitudes and behaviours relating to their engagement with media.**[25]

> "Money, bandwidth, creativity and good processes are the challenges facing you when you try to measure media impact. But these challenges can all be overcome."
>
> —Sean Southey, Executive Director, PCI-Media Impact

All this suggests that the measurement problem is difficult, but not impossibly so. The tools are there, albeit undeveloped, expensive, and somewhat unproven in wider use. There are good examples of media content leading to measurable social change. Further, this is one area where new technologies should help, allowing companies to interact with audiences as they receive the content, surveying attitudes and behaviour in real time.

The key is being selective, choosing the right tool for the job, and being proportionate. In most cases, a plausible argument will be enough: "we gave the issue airtime and raised awareness with 10m viewers". In some cases more careful analysis might help: "of the 10m viewers, 24% said they were now more likely to visit their GP to get checked out". Only in extreme and carefully targeted examples do we need to go the whole hog: "GP visits rose by 17% and there were an extra 1,300 cases referred to specialists for treatment." Simply put, the measurement options fall into three broad categories, from simple to complex: input, output and impact (see Box 2 below). **It is clear that measuring input and output is fairly straightforward, while understanding impact requires a much more tailored approach.**

Box 2. Measuring content impacts

	Type	Units of measurement
SIMPLE	Input	Resources committed to content production and distribution, e.g. cash or working hours.
	Output	Output generated as a result of the input, e.g. hours/pages of content produced, downloads, audience reached, etc
COMPLEX	Impact	Behavioural change achieved as a result of the output, e.g. awareness levels amongst the audience, increase in GP visits, policy changes, etc.

Where next?

There is a plausible and persuasive case that media companies should take greater responsibility for the social impact of their content. This report has illustrated the rising tide of policy, market and stakeholder pressures in this direction.

The old argument – that media simply reflects society as it is – looks increasingly hard to defend. We have shown six modes in which media content leads to social change and there may be more. Some media content sets out deliberately to drive change. Media moves us; individually and collectively. **The content we read, watch and listen to shapes our society. Understanding and responding to this will help media companies manage risk, develop public trust and ultimately create long term value.**

> "It is a matter of time before media companies start looking at their brainprint. At the moment the risk of not managing the brainprint is very little, but you get an indication through such things as the Leveson inquiry and the increasing intolerance of parents towards advertising to children."
>
> —Solitaire Townsend, Co-founder, Futerra Sustainability Communications

> "Is it possible for the media industry to respond to sustainability issues as a whole, akin to examples in mining & extractive industries? Maybe not, but I am confident that we will be able to find some common ground to work on"
>
> —Frank Krikhaar, Global Corporate Responsibility Manager, Aegis Media

And yet it is no simple matter for media companies to merely add this to their list of 'things to manage'. **There are huge questions around the legitimacy and the practicalities of media companies. Many in society would advance profound objections to the idea of private corporations driving change in this way.** The conventions and tools required are in their infancy.

Media companies cannot make these decisions in a vacuum.

THE NEED FOR DEBATE

Media influence on society is a topic that we are all affected by, and the discussion which we aim to provoke must involve everyone; politicians, academics, regulators, campaigners and educators as a starting point. For all the reasons outlined above, we would be extremely suspicious of any near-term response framed in terms of what media companies 'should' or 'must' do. Instead we believe there is a need for other stakeholders to respond to the debate and to this report.

Our questions are. . .

- Do stakeholders agree that media content moves society (rather than mirroring it)?
- Are the six modes we suggest the correct ones? What have we missed?
- Should media companies take responsibility for the impacts of their content?
- If so, what conventions and safeguards should be in place over the undesirable effects of blurring editorial/creative processes and corporate responsibilities?
- What are the implications for wider societal questions such as media literacy, media education and regulation?
- What tools do media companies need to begin to address this?

This debate will take time, no doubt producing dead-ends and false starts. Collaboration is key – the designated drivers example quoted on page 26 worked because the concept was embedded in 150 shows on mainstream TV. **The fragmentation of media makes this need for collaboration even more significant.**

The media companies involved in the production of this report have differing views on the topic of content influence. Some have already actively researched it. Others are considering it for the first time. It affects companies differently depending on their place in the sector. **No-one wishes to impose a manifesto or model which all must be bound by.**

Instead our intent is to start a discussion and to help frame a debate which, in the long term, will enable media companies to play a fuller and richer part as responsible corporate members of the society to which we all belong.

Three Practical Next Steps

What can media companies do while this debate is in progress? We suggest that there are three practical next steps:

1. Consider the important areas for your company – perhaps using the model we propose in Section 4. Which types of content, and which modes are most significant for you?

2. Include this topic - and the six questions above – in your discussions with stakeholders. Share what you learn with media peers.

3. Begin an internal discussion with colleagues responsible for content. Do they recognise this issue? What are their concerns?

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Useful sources of further information

Through the Looking Glass: Corporate Responsibility in the Media and Entertainment Sector by Jules Peck, Seb Beloe, Francesca Müller and Frances Scott, published by SustainAbility Ltd and WWF-UK in 2004. The discussion paper provides a summary of the essential corporate responsibility issues relevant to the media and entertainment sector. It identifies the main impact of the sector as being psychological and intellectual rather than environmental.
http://www.grainesdechangement.com/docs/medias/Through%20the%20Looking%20Glass.pdf

The Common Cause Handbook by Tim Holmes, Elena Blackmore, Richard Hawkins and Dr Tom Wakeford, published by Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) in 2011. The report looks at the values that promote or inhibit a more sustainable, equitable and democratic world. It calls for an acknowledgement of the importance of "intrinsic" values and the "frames" that embody and express them.
http://valuesandframes.org/download/reports/Common%20Cause%20Handbook(2).pdf

Think of me as evil? Opening the Ethical Debates in Advertising by Jon Alexander, Tom Crompton and Guy Shrubsole, published by Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) and WWF-UK in 2011. The report explores the cultural impacts of advertising and concludes that the potential impacts should be of pressing concern for a range of third sector organisations working on social and environmental issues.
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The Filter Bubble: What The Internet Is Hiding From You by Eli Pariser, published by Penguin in 2011. The book explores how internet companies are gathering data on users and using this data to determine interests, relationships and views.
http://www.thefilterbubble.com/

Media Sector Supplement published by Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) in 2012. The tailored company sustainability reporting guidelines provide a framework through which media companies can report their sustainability performance and include measures on the effect their content has on their audience.
https://www.globalreporting.org/resourcelibrary/MSS-Complete.pdf

The Media Sector Report published by Eurosif in 2012. The report describes the major environmental, social and governance challenges facing the media sector and the associated long term risks and opportunities these pose for investors.
http://www.eurosif.org/images/stories/MediaReportLowRes.pdf

Corporate Responsibility and the Media by Prof David Grayson CBE, published by the Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility, Cranfield School of Management, UK and Centrum für Corporate Citizenship Deutschland in 2009. The paper discusses how CR is covered in the media and the media's own corporate responsibilities.
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Does it matter? Material, Strategic or Operational? An analysis of sustainability issues in the Media Sector published by the Media CSR Forum in 2013. The report provides an analysis of social and environmental issues facing the media sector and prioritises them according to whether they are material, strategic or operational issues for media companies.
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