

FAKE NEWS AND COMMUNICATIONS

HOW PRS CAN REACT TO MEDIA TRUST
ISSUES AND THE RISE OF FAKE NEWS



Summary

In a year of global change, fake news rose to the top of the political and media agenda in 2016 as both potential US presidents and political pundits worried about its impact and influence.

For communicators and journalists, however, it shone a spotlight on news itself and how news was being reported, produced and distributed and highlighted the challenge in ensuring the public – and other members of the media – were able to identify the real news and dismiss falsehoods.

In this white paper, we look at the communications challenge presented by fake news and how it is affecting trust over all in the media. We explore what this means for communicators, what they think and what journalists from CNBC, BBC and BuzzFeed think about the issue.

In addition, using exclusive survey data, we show how important this issue is in the eyes of the UK public and what the implications are for brands, communicators and PRs.

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Introduction

The media has come under unprecedented scrutiny over the last few years. Concerns over privacy and journalist behaviour have been examined by the Leveson inquiry in the UK and last year, thanks to the US presidential campaign and the European referendum, the idea of fake news – where falsehoods are reported, written about and spread on social media predominantly – has taken hold of the public imagination.

Overall, it seems the prevailing issue is around declining trust in media brands. The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, a global annual study, showed that the media saw the greatest decline in trust of any institution in 2016-2017, falling to just 43%. A perhaps unsurprising result given that 2016 was the year that ‘fake news’ hit the headlines.

Fake news and post-truth are politically charged terms, propelled into the English language by the Brexit vote in the UK and the presidential election race in the US, but the impact is wide-reaching, shaping media distribution and consumption. The outcome for public relations professionals, therefore, could be substantial.

A loss of trust in mainstream media could devalue earned media in the traditional sense, and fake news stories, rapidly shared on social media, have the potential to severely harm brand reputations. Therefore PR professionals should prepare risk mitigation strategies.

One thing is certain; adapting to the new media environment is crucial. PRs must learn to distribute their content in today’s digital-led media environment without compromising on quality, honesty or transparency.

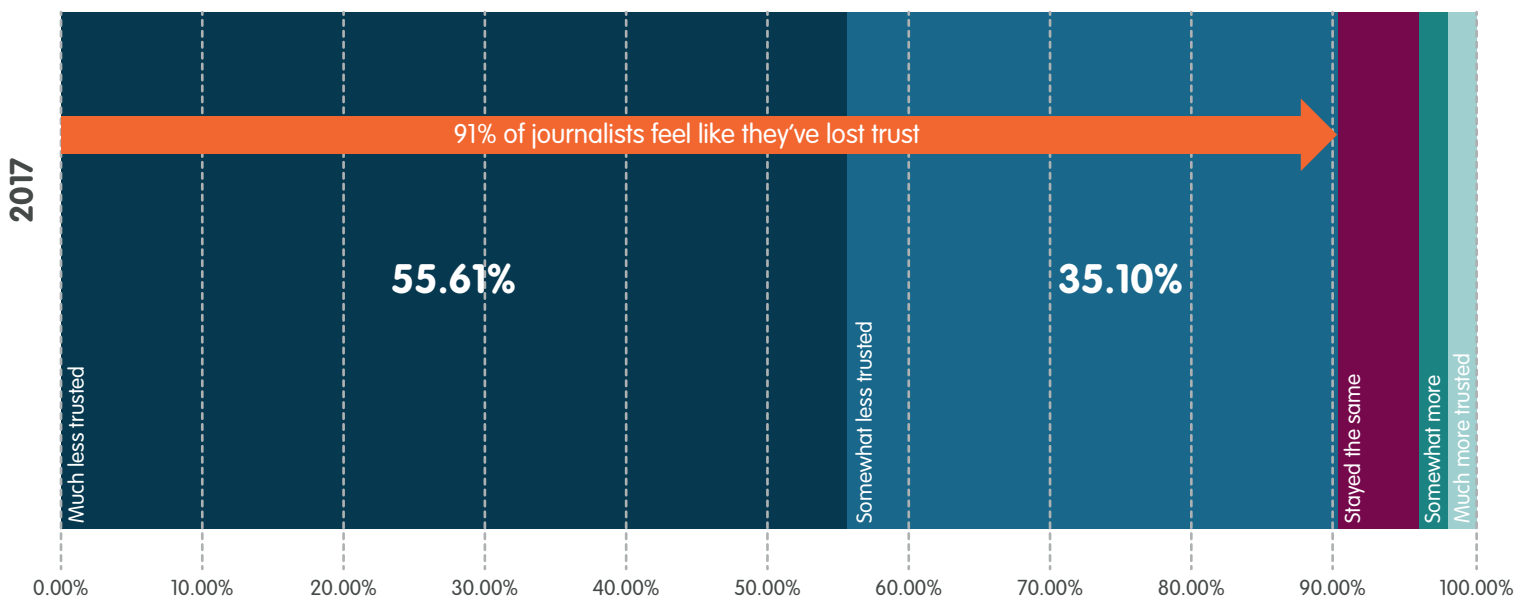
In a media environment that is changing at a rapid rate, communications professionals should stay ahead of the curve by continuing to play to their core strengths.

Howard Bowden, media trainer and co-founder at Generation, said: “Ultimately, the job for PRs is to adapt to changes in the media landscape. But while the landscape will always shift and develop, stories stay the same. It is stories that remain at the heart of building trust between brands and customers.”

Infographic: Journalists struggle to hold public trust

At a time when 81% of senior marketers believe earned media is as or more effective than paid media, according to Outsell research, communications executives are starting to recognise the power of earned media to share their brand's message and increase market share in this changing consumer climate.

Journalistic perception of public trust (US and Canada)



Source: Cision 2017 State of The Media report - 1,550 journalists

Journalists and influencers feel they are losing the public's confidence, now more than ever, and 91% of journalists believe that the media is somewhat or much less trusted than it was three years ago. This lack of trust aligns with the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, which this year saw the public's trust in the media drop to a level matching distrust in government officials.

Analysis: How PRs can help journalists win back trust

Journalists and media brands are losing the public's trust. According to CNBC's Arjun Kharpal, W's Adam Leigh and PLMR's Ollie Lane, the media should work together to win back trust.

After 2016's seismic political events, the media has had substantial problems with trust, in particular as a result of the fake news concept.

Cision's State of The Media Report 2017, an annual survey of 1,550 North American journalists (see page 3), shows that as many as 91% of news media professionals believe the media is either "much less trusted" or "somewhat less trusted" than it was three years ago.

But despite a perception of falling trust, 92% of the respondents claimed to value facts over speed; up 4% from 2016.

Building a trusted brand

CNBC's technology correspondent Arjun Kharpal says this concern over media trust in the US is something he has also seen in the UK.

He explains: "With fake news proliferating the industry, publications – more than ever – have to make sure they are being accurate, smart and thorough."

Adweek 2017: A brand survival kit in a world of fakes

The BBC and BuzzFeed joined Weber Shandwick at an Advertising Week Europe event in March in a session titled: 'Navigating the New Abnormal: A Brand Survival Kit in a World of Fake News'.

The panel comprised Danny Whatmough, head of social, EMEA at Weber Shandwick, Vivian Schiller, editor-in-chief at Weber Shandwick, James Montgomery, director, digital development at BBC News and Jim Waterson, politics editor, UK at BuzzFeed and was chaired by Joey Jones, head of public affairs at Weber Shandwick. Speakers discussed the role that digital has played in the transformation of media, and explored how this has affected trust in both media and other brands.

Here are a few of the key points made by the journalists and PR professionals as they offered guidance for navigating the current news environment:

The website, as a primary destination, is over

According to the panellists, consumers and audiences are no longer accessing content through owned-web pages. Montgomery said: "The cornerstone of the BBC's brand is the fact that you can trust its news. But, trust in all brands and institutions is falling across the Western world, and we are a part of that.

"One of the causes is the way content is distributed across social media, and certainly one of the things we talk about a lot at the moment is how to make sure that content consumed indirectly is attributed back to the BBC. We want readers to know that it's BBC content they're consuming, and that – therefore – they can trust it."

This trend has implications for the monetisation of content.

Schiller added: "The only way, at the moment, for a publisher to make money by living exclusively on platforms other than its own is through branded content, whereby the publisher gets paid for impressions across any platform since the content itself is effectively advertising."

If there's no e-commerce element, argued the Weber Shandwick representatives, then there is no need for content to appear on a brand's own page. It can live natively on other, more reachable or commonly accessed, platforms.

Not all fake news is equal

According to the Scale of Intent, originally published by First Draft News, fake news can range from the relatively benign, satire and parody, which has no intention to mislead (though it sometimes does), to entirely fabricated content, which is produced with “deceptive intentions”.

In between these two extremes are other iterations of fake news such as cases of manipulated content, where genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive, or false context, where genuine content is shared with false contextual information.

To Waterson, it is the middle-ground which is the most threatening in the UK.

He said: “When we were trying to do some research into fake news in the UK, as we looked into what’s been shared and what’s gone viral, we found it was often a story from a title such as the Daily Express, the Mail or The Independent, which had an incredibly partisan headline stretching facts to the absolute limit. That was our equivalent of fake news – the headline didn’t really stand-up to scrutiny.

“From a brand perspective, I’d have thought the main worry would be that one Tweet which gets re-Tweeted 5,000 times, which has a kernel of truth, which has a picture which is misdescribed, which gets aggregated by 10 sites before anyone has noticed what’s going on, and then a correction is put-out the following day, but no one is reading by that point.”



Left to right: James Montgomery, Danny Whatmough, Vivian Schiller and Jim Waterson

Apolitical is no longer an option for brands

Citing the Kelloggs and Breitbart example – where the food company chose to withdraw advertising from the news and opinion website, with social media backlash on both sides as a result – Whatmough said: “It’s a really interesting situation at the moment, where brands have to make choices.”

Whether they choose to advertise on certain platforms or not, brands are aligning themselves with certain ideologies or politics in ways which they haven’t always in the past, he explained.

Schiller agreed, adding: “Staying out is no longer an option. Things that were once ordinary are now being politicised. Something that, two years ago, would have been totally anodyne, is now a political statement. It’s very difficult to sit on the sidelines.”

- **The Adweek session took place on Monday 20 March 2017.**

Analysis: Is fake news a PR challenge?

Fake news is high on the agenda at the moment, but Cision and Gorkana's UKPulse data on media consumption shows that many people take information from online media with a pinch of salt. Media professionals from Weber Shandwick and Generation discuss what fake news really is, and whether it affects PRs.

Annually Cision and Gorkana conduct an UKPulse survey which asks 10,050 nationally representative respondents across the UK about trust. With the focus on fake news in 2016 and its alleged impact on the EU referendum and presidential election, those surveyed were asked: "Do you trust or distrust a particular source?"

Out of 26 categories, which include various information sources from national newspapers to Wikipedia, the five most trusted sources were, with the most trusted first: friends, family and personal contacts, national radio, local radio, community sites/online forums and banks/financial institutions.

Respondents valued personal contacts as markedly more trustworthy, with 72% of respondents noting them as a trusted source of information. This is higher than the rest of the top five. For instance, national radio had 56% of respondents noting it as trustworthy and local radio, community/online forums and banks/financial institutions were all selected by 54% of the surveyed audience.

The channels often seen as proponents of fake news received a much lower trust vote. Social media led as some of the least trustworthy sources of information, with only 18% noting Facebook as trustworthy and 17% noting Twitter as a trusted source.

Barnaby Barron, senior client insights manager at Cision and Gorkana, says: "These results add another level of complexity to the 'fake news' rhetoric and show that there is a relatively high level of distrust towards both social media and online news.

“Understanding the best methods and most trusted media formats to reach your target audiences is key.”

Fake news is a term that covers a multitude of media sins

Jonathan McLeod, chairman UK corporate, financial and public affairs at Weber Shandwick, says: “In, and of itself, it will not have as much impact as people are suggesting. But the issue is that, as a term of art, ‘fake news’ is now an umbrella for a multitude of sins.”

He continues: “The most concerning of these is the so-called ‘echo chamber’ effect through which platforms such as Facebook serve users with news – fake or otherwise – which reflects their own opinions.

“The second issue is the run-down of investment in high quality journalism. Without newsrooms, fact-checkers, editorial lawyers, sub-editors, research teams, and good old-fashioned journalistic skills, the production of defensible and original news content is severely undermined. That is a problem for democracy and the press’ ability to speak truth unto power, about which we should all be concerned.”

Opinion: Why fake news is a real issue for PR



Howard Bowden, media trainer and co-founder at Generation, looks at the rise and rise of fake news, and why it's a challenge for PRs.

If 2016 was the year the post-war political rulebook was torn up, it feels like an even more seismic 12 months for news. By which I don't mean the subject matter – grim though it's been – but rather the way news is consumed.

Brexit and Trump demonstrated, depressingly, how we now live in a post-truth world – and high fives to Oxford Dictionaries' PR for declaring 'post-truth' 2016 international word of the year. Nothing illustrates this better than fake news websites, which publish hoaxes and misinformation to drive web traffic, primarily via social media sharing.

It's not like fake news is new. BBC Online tells me the term dates back to the early 90s, when as an ex-hack I remember The Daily Sport and its diet of 'World War Two Bomber Found on Moon' headlines being thrust upon an unsuspecting, and ultimately low circulation, public.

But that was before social media. Now, real and fictional stories are presented in such a similar way online that it's often difficult for consumers to tell them apart. There are hundreds of fake news sites, from those which deliberately imitate real life newspapers to government propaganda sites, and those which tread the line between satire and plain misinformation. Many are basically unfunny versions of Viz.

The creator of UK fake news site, Southend News Network, defended what he does and said: "People read a headline and don't even bother to check the content before sharing it." Ouch. But then again, who among us hasn't been guilty of that in the last year/week/24 hours?

So what do PRs need to consider in the post-truth fake news era?

Be aware. And ensure your client is ready to swing into action should the worst happen. Asking colleagues for thoughts on the subject, I heard one horror story about a children's soft drink brand which fell victim to a story claiming one glass featured 12 teaspoons of sugar. The story was absolute nonsense, but was picked up by the nationals, and the client retractions were paltry. It killed the business. Fake news costs.

It's also vital to remember that stuff on social media can become a story for traditional media because it's happening on social media. People have forever gossiped, b*****d and talked glowingly about brands, celebs and hate-fuelled political movements, but from now on, if it happens on social media it legitimises itself as a potential story for everyone from MailOnline down. See assorted 'Internet goes into meltdown over...' headlines in 2016 for more info.

Most of all, don't try to embrace fake news for your client. A very wise PR buddy reminded me recently to never, ever tempt fate, and we've seen many cases this year of innocuous brand campaigns get unfairly ripped apart on social media.

Of course there are no definitive rules in media relations, and you can bet that as you read this, somewhere out there a challenger brand's PR is planning an, oh-so-clever, campaign to position itself within the fake news trend. Just don't come running to me when it goes badly wrong.

Consumer agency insight: ilk



Amy Airey, PR director at ilk agency, speaks about the industry's measurement challenge and how it relates to the future of media. Data and strategy-driven PR, she says, will "help to tackle the fake news epidemic".

Is fake news a challenge or an opportunity for PRs? Why?

Fake news is both a challenge and an opportunity for PRs. A huge part of our job is to be on top of the media agenda and capitalise on reacting to it, but this is completely undermined if a chunk of the news that's in the public domain is fake. Initiatives like The Independent's In Fact are probably going to increase in popularity to try and tackle the fake news agenda, so we're looking forward to seeing more come out of the woodwork.

Are your clients aware of fake news and how it might affect them?

I'm not 100% confident that they are, so it's our job to educate them on this, and direct the type of content they're putting out to avoid being caught-up in the fake news crossfire. Fact checking to identify misinformation is, and will continue to be, key (and this includes us vetting information clients are sending us).

How does fake news affect your ability to measure the effectiveness of your media campaigns?

Regardless of the strength, factual accuracy and merit of a story you push out, it can always be kyboshed by something out of our control (natural disasters, political news, etc). Fake news simply adds to the likelihood of our stories not being picked up and somewhat undermines the art of storytelling that PRs have mastered. But there's a whole host of things in the industry that can now affect the influence of our campaigns – just think about social media algorithms sifting and filtering through our content.

How else has the media and media relations changed since you first started out in PR?

The shift is phenomenal – from the way we distribute news to the way it's curated, the channels used and how it's consumed, you literally can't go a day without learning something new in PR. Everything we're doing is more data driven and more strategic, which, ironically, will hopefully help to tackle the fake news epidemic!

What is the PR industry doing well with regards to media relations, and where is there room for improvement?

There's always room for improvement in tailoring our approach to media relations rather than just blanket sending news because it's quicker. How are we meant to earn the respect of the media if we're accidentally sending them something irrelevant because our media lists are out of date? In terms of what we're doing well – I think the quality of content is generally increasing, as well as the industry's ability to piggy back on the news agenda and bring even the most obscure/seemingly disinteresting of brands to the fore.

And measurement, well, where do I start? There's certainly room for improvement here, and it's the job of both the PR to explain, and the client to understand, what can be delivered and how. PR is a process that needs to be mutually beneficial to clients, producers of content and its consumers, but we all know brand awareness and perception is a very tricky thing to tally.

Opinion: Considerations for PR professionals navigating a fake news world



Jennifer Phillips, the founder of 4L Strategies, shares her tips for PR professionals navigating the current media environment.

It is unlikely that there is a PR professional in practice today who isn't familiar with the coverage fake news is receiving and how it is spread. It's entirely possible that some of those reading this piece have experienced it firsthand, for although it was the US presidential election in 2016 that pushed fake news into the spotlight, several brands – and even the Pope – have been the subjects of fake news stories that spread like wildfire on social networks.

The ramifications for the practice of public relations are dire if fake news continues unabated. There are two principal areas of concern for PR practitioners: one; the impact of fake news on our clients, and two; the impact of fake news on our profession. For each area, there are steps that communicators can take to address or mitigate the damage from what has emerged as a significant problem for our industry.

For clients

Clients are vulnerable, as several major brands have learned. Pepsi and New Balance, to give just two examples, have each been on the receiving end of public anger over stories that were later deemed to be fake.

- 1** Monitoring and social listening are the first line of defense. PR pros need to be vigilant about identifying fake stories as early as possible.
- 2** Have a plan in place, particularly if your brand or CEO often takes stances on political or cultural issues – but even if that isn't typical, it's a good idea to have a plan that is thought through.
- 3** Assess the situation if a fake story is identified. It's possible that by reacting too strongly or too early, the story will be amplified rather than contained.
- 4** Address the issue directly if the story starts to spread. Share facts, be direct and be calm.

For our profession

The implications for the PR profession go deeper and are more difficult to address.

Each year PR firm Edelman publishes the Trust Barometer, a survey of how much trust the public holds in four major institutions, including the media. The 2017 report showed an almost complete collapse of trust, so much so that Edelman labelled 2017 “Trust in Crisis.”

What PR professionals need to keep in mind:

- 1 This is a global issue. The public’s lack of trust in the media stretches across countries, and of the four institutions studied, the media saw the largest drop in trust, down five points from 2016 (even in 2016 it was less than 50%).
- 2 Our profession relies on the third-party validation that earned media provides. If people don’t trust the media to provide objective news, the efficacy of media relations evaporates.
- 3 The social channels we have come to depend on to reach target audiences are part of the problem. Complex algorithms examine what people click on, and then deliver them more of what they like to read, establishing a feedback loop that creates the perfect conditions for fake news to proliferate.

What can we, as PR professionals, do to address this growing problem?

- 1 Don’t be part of the problem. Don’t share fake stories, and don’t pitch outlets that peddle fake news stories – even if they fit your pitch and have large audiences. Fact-check everything to your satisfaction before publishing or pitching.
- 2 Authenticity and transparency are important to people. Be honest and direct, and work with your clients so that they understand how critical this is for their reputation and yours.
- 3 Be supportive of those taking a stand against fake news. We’re in this together.
- 4 Relationships matter more than ever. When working with journalists be reliable, do not lie or shade the truth, and hold yourself to the highest possible standards.

The rise of fake news is eroding public trust in the media – trust that was already on the decline. This presents a real threat to a core part of the value proposition of public relations. The PR profession can and should be part of the solution.

Corporate agency insight: Portland



Gregor Poynton, partner and head of content and brand at Portland, offers advice for tackling fake news and other media issues head on. PRs can help journalists, he says.

Is fake news a challenge or an opportunity for PRs? Why?

Rumours can have a real impact on your corporate reputation and your stock price. Be that fake reports of corruption in a gaming tournament or misleading reports on a company's ethical or health standards.

For more nefarious PRs there is an opportunity to distract competitors and the media with rumours. You could imagine less reputable agencies creating networks to tweet fake stories at politicians and the media and give themselves a competitive advantage.

Are your clients aware of fake news and how it might affect them?

Yes, it is something that many of our clients are aware of. The UK media market is lucky in the sense that most fake news sites can't make enough money from ads to target it specifically, but for our global brands and governments it's something we think about regularly.

We create a tailored response to fake news for each client. For some it is just about creating live monitoring tools to flag rumours early, for some it's to ensure crisis processes internally are as efficient as possible and for others we work with former police officers and cybercrime specialists to make sure that an organisation is able to deal with fake news.

How does fake news affect your ability to measure the effectiveness of your media campaigns?

For our proactive campaigns it doesn't. The key is to have a sophisticated approach to measurement which combines state-of-the-art tools and a human eye – which takes into account authority and source not just raw numbers.

Where is there room for the PR industry to improve, with regards to media relations?

What could be improved upon is the understanding that it's not just about an article in a newspaper any more. It's about how that article, which should tell an interesting story, can then be repurposed across a range of formats for all channels. There isn't much money in journalism anymore, but we have many incredible journalists in the UK, and so PRs need to make it easy for journalists to repurpose content.

What is Portland doing to prepare and adapt for the media model of the future?

We are developing an integrated international boutique with global hubs staffed by communications professionals with deep specialist knowledge across health, internal, corporate communications, public affairs, digital, content production, research and more. But most importantly we understand how these specialists work together to create integrated campaigns through insight, strategic direction, creativity and content to deliver results for our clients.

Opinion: How fake news affects the measurement of PR

Orla Graham, senior client insights manager at Cision and Gorkana, has looked at fake news in relation to PR measurement. The reputability of different media sources and the impact of what they publish is harder to measure than ever before, she says.

Fake news has been a huge topic of conversation lately, but the vast majority of this has related to political news, where voters get their information or whether or not companies should advertise on sites deemed to be hosting fake news. However, there has been little discussion or debate around the impact of fake news in the realm of PR and communications, which is something that has become an issue for some of our clients.

Fake news is a particular problem for organisations which operate within the public sector or within industries where regulation and policy are a large focus of communications activities.

For example, companies within the agrochemical and pharmaceutical industries have to contend with a lot of false information circulating (on social media in particular) about their products and activities. Complex scientific research and processes get generalised, confused and misrepresented. But when does the communications team decide to react to this, and when do we as a media intelligence agency alert them to this sort of content and recommend action?

If you look at any social media conversations around topics like pesticides or genetically modified organisms you'll see all of the big names in that field linked to all sorts of nebulous and dramatic claims: "They're invading Ukraine!" "They're trying to wipe out the bees!" Some are valid and are based on legitimate research, some are based on very suspect research and some started off with a vague relationship to the truth, but got conflated and misinterpreted along the way.

The line between what is and isn't mainstream news is not as clear as it used to be. The rise of the likes of Infowars and Breitbart makes that obvious. Many of the social media accounts which circulate misleading news stories have thousands and thousands of followers – so it's easy to see how something that starts off in the dark corners of the internet can make its way to the Facebook feed of an unsuspecting member of the public, and shape their impression of a topic.

For a lot of these companies, a key audience group is the general population, because public opinion and sentiment towards these controversial issues informs the decisions made by legislators. If there is widespread outcry against GM food, for example, then regulators may be more inclined to restrict its use, supermarkets won't want to sell it, and people won't buy it. So, education and countering fake news becomes an important factor for PR and communications teams.

Making sense of this, deciding what to respond to, when and how, is no easy feat. A keen understanding of the media landscape, research into the true influence of social media activists and "journalists", and tracking things like public opinion in correlation with fake news to understand the relationship between the two, is important to help see the wood for the trees.

Conclusion

Industry experts agree that, for PR professionals, the impact and repercussions of fake news in its many guises are diverse. Agencies and communications teams are providing their clients and organisations with strategies and plans to prepare them for issues which may arise from the nature of the modern media environment, especially online media and social sharing.

Despite the threat of fake news, Cision and Gorkana's UKPulse survey and Edelman's Trust Barometer show that the majority of people remain sceptical of media outlets, preferring to trust their nearest and dearest. This lack of trust may cause problems for PR professionals, who rely on the media to raise awareness of and build engagement with the brands that they represent.

A continued focus on transparency and accountability, as well as adherence to a high standard of ethics, may provide the PR industry with the tools it needs to help the media win back public trust.



Sources

www.gorkana.com/news

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