

Part 3: Earned media in a coronavirus world

As we end our second working week of official lockdown and the monumental Government updates on the pandemic have slowed, it seems we're starting to settle into this new working world. Brands are finding their feet on the comms front and we're seeing more elements of 'distraction news' creep through - a welcome respite for many.

But there's no denying that the coronavirus is still dominating the papers and our air time. In previous years where we may have been overwhelmed with April Fools, understandably, brands have dropped out, including [Google](#), a brand famed for its annual pranks.

While the print media seems to have announced most of its big changes, there may be rocky times ahead for the onlines. This week, newspaper publishers across the country [joined forces](#) to plead with advertisers to stop blocking ads from appearing next to stories that mention the coronavirus pandemic. Without change, this could cost the industry around £50 million in digital revenues and put more jobs at risk.

Here's this week's snapshot of the earned media agenda. While we may appear to be in a somewhat settled period, we do expect this will change as we approach the end of the initial three week lockdown.

NATIONALS

The number of pages dedicated to Covid-19 has decreased - we're now on an average of 10 pages each day. Although the topic still dominates throughout the paper, we are noticing it eases up as the week progresses, with the nationals looking to fill their pages with more light-hearted stories.

And there's nothing more light-hearted than celebrity culture. Celia Walden commented in Tuesday's Daily Telegraph how celebrities can be the perfect Covid-19 distraction. Almost all tabloids covered Kelly Brook's two stone weight loss and the Beckhams' latest \$24 million dollar Miami skyscraper; the absurdity of their lifestyles appears to be a welcome remedy for consumers. Thus said, brands are still treading carefully when it comes to collaborations and it may be some time before it feels tonally right to partner with them again.

Real life, first-person case studies are also getting more traction than ever before. The public now have a vested interest in [ordinary people doing extraordinary things](#), and it's these 'normal' people who are becoming the new 'celebrity'.

Conversely, the business pages of the nationals continue to strike a more sombre tone as they look to report on the economic impact on industries. Over the last week, there has been a great deal of analysis on which sectors are struggling, with some charities voicing their fears, and yet more spotlight on the implications of this global pandemic for retailers. SMEs and their struggles to get bank loans is a big focus – expect much more of this in the weeks ahead. However, it's not all doom and gloom; some companies have witnessed a surge in sales, as the nation seeks to [beat the boredom](#).

Part 3: Earned media in a coronavirus world (cont'd)

COMMUTER AND REGIONAL TITLES

Commuter publications have been further hit this week. City A.M. has scrapped its digital version, now running as online only, while the Evening Standard has laid out plans to furlough a sector of its staff and reduce salaries by 20 per cent.

Furthermore, regional titles across the country are making tough business decisions in response to a fall in advertising spending. JPI Media has suspended its print production of free newspapers and furloughed a wave of journalists, with further pay cuts for remaining staff looming. Despite this, industry commentators believe there is an important role for regional media to play at this time as people have a heightened awareness of what is happening locally to them as they spend more time at home.

LIFESTYLE

The lifestyles continue to use coronavirus as a news-hook for much of their content. This week, [Grazia printed an NHS dedicated issue](#) with NHS frontline staff featured on the cover, rather than the usual celebrities. Cause-related stories continue to dominate with Elle publishing a list of [100 Independent fashion brands to support during the Covid-19 pandemic](#).

Product round-ups to enhance the lockdown experience are still being featured, with Stylist including [17 mood-boosting pick-me-ups for under £50](#) and Red's list of the [Best outdoor toys and games for kids](#). However, some are trying to focus less on the pandemic with Cosmopolitan dedicating a lot of space celebrating [Transgender Day of Visibility](#).

BROADCAST

As expected the coronavirus continues to dominate much of broadcaster's remits, but there are still small opportunities for brands to get cut through. For example, Lorraine, You and Yours and This Morning, have all broadcast helpful styling at home beauty tips this week, in addition to celebrity interviews and masterclasses for doga (yoga with your dog); content in which brand placement is entirely possible.

Many stations have applied substantial changes to their schedules and production. Local BBC radio stations have introduced a 'Make a Difference' slot - a daily summary of positive initiatives taking place in each region. Additionally, Radio 5 Live's regular phone-ins are now solely focused on debating issues relating to the pandemic.

As many broadcasters are having to adapt and report their stories from their own homes, BBC regional reporters are now cooperating across the network and with other broadcasters to an unprecedented degree. As such, they are sharing material so that they can cut down on the amount of camera operators and reporters all attending the same event. But while they may be sharing resources, and working with a smaller team, the scope of what they cover is significantly reduced. Producers at This Morning have said, after trawling the weekend papers, they found just four stories they would consider covering, whereas previously there would have been up to 35.

Part 3: Earned media in a coronavirus world (cont'd)

TRADES

While coronavirus content is still peppered throughout the trade titles, other news is starting to get cut through. Real Business this week substituted the bad for the good, championing [an £8m investment in ceramics firm, Emma Bridgewater](#), particularly notable given the struggles facing the retail sector at the moment. Journalists are becoming more receptive to pitches on a variety of topics, as industries look to retain some form of 'business as usual' amidst this global crisis.

This is not to say that we are returning to a pre-pandemic state of play in the trades, far from it. Many titles are still in a state of flux, with editorial teams shifting in their beats. However, the appetite for some semblance of normality is certainly increasing as the weeks go on.

OUTTAKES

The challenge brands face is one of balance, and how to generate authentic consumption in the home that makes a real connection with their audience. Here are our earned-media outtakes for this week:

1. Good deeds should be done with intention, not for attention:

- The campaigns being praised are those that are done with genuine good intention, and minimal self-promotion - Budweiser launched [savepublife.com](#), an initiative that encourages people to buy a gift card to spend at their local pub at a future date. Meanwhile, [Inditex](#) announced it will be manufacturing face masks and other medical equipment with a simple statement.
- When too overtly branded, media and consumers alike are quick to call brands out. [Brewdog](#) felt the heat after it announced it will be producing hand sanitiser with an overly branded marketing image of the product

2. As the impact of loneliness grows as a result of the pandemic, brands have a role to play:

- A [care home group](#) has relaunched its "Adopt a Grandparent" campaign in a bid to help battle loneliness amongst the elderly, as fewer people visit during the coronavirus pandemic
- [Virtual nightclubs](#) are also popping up and [well known DJs](#) are [hosting sets](#) online to provide an antidote to feelings of loneliness and boredom amongst teens and millennials

3. Celebrities are giving consumers a bit of light relief amongst the negative Covid-19 news, but brands mustn't think a collaboration is a quick win. It will be some time before it's tonally right for brands to start pushing products with a famous face.

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4. This is an opportune time for brands to demonstrate their CSR credentials, but it must be in sync with the current climate
 - The airline industry has faced a lot of criticism over the last few weeks, for its treatment of staff and customers . However, EasyJet and Virgin Atlantic have gone some way to redeem themselves in the media this week by offering their staff as volunteers for London's new Nightingale hospital

5. In the same vein, this is also a prime moment for brands to showcase their company culture and the leadership qualities of their respective CEOs
 - Timpson has won praise for continuing to pay its staff in full after stores were forced to close

 - Meanwhile, a number of supermarkets have already committed to paying staff bonuses to reward them for continuing to work through this pandemic