Big Data

How data is driving the future of communications

We're at an inflection point in our use of data and technology.

The past decade has seen the amount of data we produce from our everyday lives expand exponentially. By 2025, the IDC estimates humans will interact with data every 18 seconds.

Data science, engineering and AI are all increasingly important for the future of communications.

Still, for many PR teams, big data can seem miles away from the day-to-day. But focusing its use in a few key areas can make a big difference.

In the following pages, we'll share five of the most important trends – and discuss how the best teams will harness data to make ideas and campaigns more impactful than ever before.

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#01 Augmented analytics

With so much data on offer, smart technologies are helping everyone get involved – and get to insight quicker.

Data may already be everywhere, but it's not going anywhere. Data volumes, which were enormous, are set to continue their meteoric rise in next decade. The IDC predicts 175 zettabytes of new data will be created annually by 2025, up from 1.2 zettabytes in 2010.

And this is a truly global phenomenon: WPP predicts that by 2030, Africa and Asia will be fully online, and industries which have been slower into the digital transition will have been transformed. With that much data on offer, companies and data scientists need to think bigger about how to work with it.

Enter augmented analytics: the use of enabling technology such as machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) to assist with data processing and surfacing insights. In essence, these technologies build on how we explore and analyse data in analytics and business intelligence (BI) platforms.

Recent Gartner reports have highlighted augmented analytics as a force in shaping big data future trends. So we can expect to see many more companies implementing technologies on data platforms, because it helps organizations make faster decisions and identify shifts in behaviour – and opportunities – more efficiently.

Ultimately, for some organisations the real power of augmented analytics comes from how these technologies can democratise analytics use within an organisation. Where previously only the highly technically skilled could manipulate data for analysis, augmented technologies help people with different skills – such as content strategists or planners – to make use of data.

Faster analysis

Who, what, where

Finding whitespace

One of the biggest challenges when it comes to big data is the scale. Even on smaller data sets (thousands vs. millions of rows of data) getting to insight can be a daunting task. Augmented analytics can help to address this issue.

One example: Brandwatch's Iris, which launched in 2019. Iris identifies spikes in conversation and then analyzes social data to surface the post, article, video, thread, or hashtag that causes conversation to grow. This automation cuts considerable time in analysis which previously would have required an individual to manually categorise data to understand drivers of conversation.
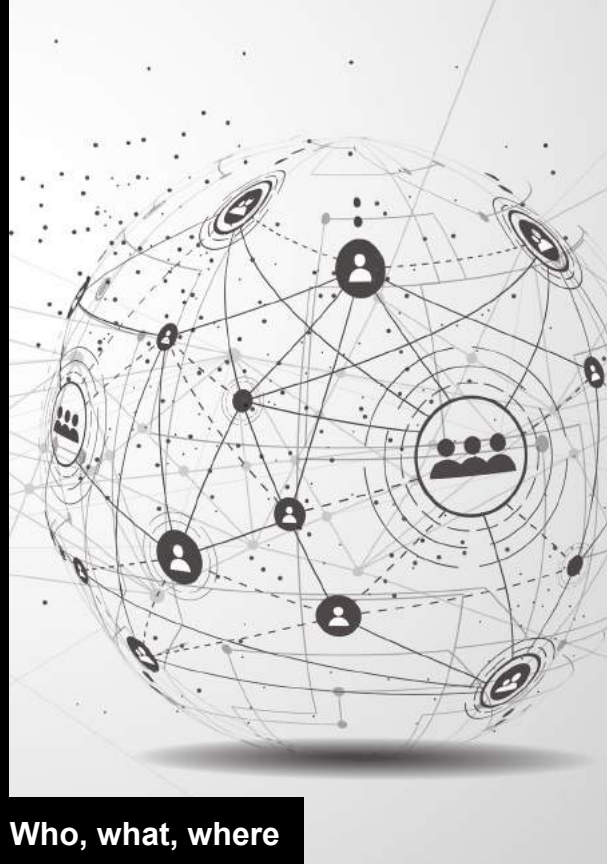
But augmented analytics can go beyond just looking at spikes in data. It can also be used to understand the who, what and where within unstructured content (ex: media coverage).

This kind of natural language processing (NLP) and network analysis can be extremely useful when trying to understand what's happening in a large analysis, particularly as it doesn't require analysts to search for specific keywords which can bias analysis. Instead, these tools help to naturally surface the names, places and topics which most commonly reoccur – leading to new insights for brands which would have previously been extremely costly.
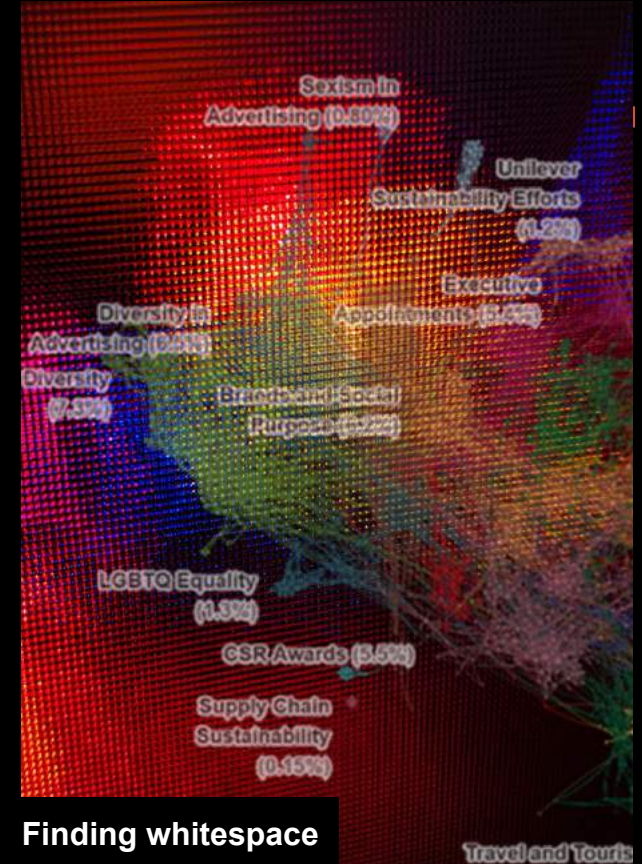
New tools, including NLP and AI, are helping marketers make sense of data, faster. These can be as simple as looking for patterns in data or more advanced uses of linguistic processing to surface novel insight.

It's why we partnered with Quid to build **Space+,** H+K's proprietary tool for understanding the white space your brand can own and stand out from the competitive set. We use AI and NLP to understand the conversation landscape across a topic, and apply a custom algorithm to surface the topic areas that have the greatest opportunity for brands.

#02 Audience insights

We're moving beyond passive data collection,
and thinking about putting the audience first.

We know that the most successful content is built with the end audience in mind, digital or not. Rather than thinking about audience data as a targeting or measurement tool, the best brands are using it as the anchor point for planning.

These audience mapping exercises bring together what you know about your audience (1st party data) with what you need to understand to build a relationship with them (3rd party data).

How data collection is changing

Privacy is the watchword for 2021, and it's going to have a massive impact on how organisations collect, use and store data.

The GDPR is just the beginning of intervention into the collection of user data. Right now much of how we track, target, and engage users online is based on cookies – but these will likely become unviable in the next ten years.

In this cookieless future, organisations will still want to use personal data such as demographics, behaviours, and interests for marketing. But this will

no longer be a passive process; they will now have to convince individuals to part with their data.

So what can you do right now?

In some ways, these shifts may represent an opportunity for PR which often doesn't rely on cookies in the same way that advertising does. Certainly we need to think about how we continue to collect and use data responsibly to tell meaningful stories to our audiences, online and off.

Notably, there are technology companies building cookie-based platforms, enabling a view into how earned media content is performing, which are exciting. However, we should be cautious about how we invest in these tools as they may only be available for a few years.

We can also make better use of the data that is available to use in how and what our audiences choose to publicly like and share. Combined with other data sets such as syndicated databases we can develop smarter ways of building even traditional media relations tools such as media lists.

Demographic:
Age, HHI, Geography

Profession and Industry

Behavioral:
What they do

1st party data provided
E.g. e-mail database

Platform/Channels:
Media Consumption

#03 Testing, 1, 2...

From uniquely created controlled environments to dark posts,
opportunities to test, learn and evolve abound.

One of the strongest markers for companies who have embraced big data is constant testing and iteration.

Jeff Bezos is famed for saying "If you double the number of experiments you do per year you're going to double your inventiveness." While he may have been thinking about changes to business structure, this agile approach to business can be equally lucrative in PR – it just takes a little planning.

There are many ways to bring testing into your day-to-day workstream. Some of these are tried and tested: concept testing, for example, has long existed across marketing and communications. Often done through forced exposure to a panel, these and other tests are one way of understanding how your target audience feels about a piece of content.

However, particularly for more complex research it is important to think about testing beyond simple survey mechanisms. Why? Responses to surveys are conscious decisions that reflect social desirability and signalling effects.

Unfortunately, most of the decisions we make in real-life are unconscious, habitual and driven by affect. People's spontaneous behaviours reveal underlying attitudes that they are unaware of or are uncomfortable disclosing.

In the context of testing, this matters because relying on reported attitudes provides a skewed picture of how people actually feel and tells you little about what prompts them to act.

This is where behavioural science comes in – creating new and novel ways to ask questions and present information to avoid these biases.

What can you do now?

One simple way to include more testing is A/B testing some of your content.

Also known as split testing, A/B testing is a simple way to evaluate which version of something your audience prefer. Specifically, it is a method of comparing two versions of something against each other to determine which one performs better.

A/B testing is essentially an experiment where two or more variants are shown to users at random, and statistical analysis is used to determine which variation performs better for a given goal.

#04 Data as storyteller

Beyond surveys: there's a lot more data can do to create engaging campaigns.

Creative data science not only helps deliver amazing insights and findings but it can be used to shape and mould creative executions.

From working with brands to understand what data they have internally that could be crafted as a great story externally – as we saw with the Cannes Lions-winning E.V.A. campaign – to using data science to create entirely new content and ideas, data as a storyteller is an exciting opportunity space for brands who want to stand out.

Another example: "The Next Rembrandt" – a campaign built with data which pushed the boundaries between art and algorithms.

The campaign centred around 'The Next Rembrandt', a 3D printed painting made from the data of Rembrandt's total body of work. From our WPP sister agency **Wunderman Thompson,** it utilized deep learning algorithms and facial recognition techniques.

It was launched at an event to experts, the press and the public who were invited to join the conversation about where data and technology can take us.

And the campaign lives on in new ways: the technology developed for the project is now used for restoration of damaged and partially lost masterpieces.

How can you use data to tell stories?

Think beyond the survey when considering the best way to create mediable campaigns. Consider other ways you can use data to craft a story, or create something entirely new.

Or take a page out of Trend #3 and consider how you can use novel approaches like field experiments to discover something new.

#05 Evolved measurement

As measurement journeys are evolving internally, how can we reframe what good looks like?

PR measurement has come a long way. The explosion of digital channels has made every touchpoint online imminently more trackable, and understandable.

But while these digital metrics can help us optimise, they aren't going to tell us everything we need to know. Measurement needs to look across the customer journey to show you the full picture of impact.

Many measurement and evaluation programmes are taking advantage of new technologies, integrating multiple datasets into live dashboards or using AI and NLP to support analysis. But they're also making use of more traditional methods (such as surveys) made relevant for the modern age with the inclusion of behavioural science.

Regardless of data sources or technology, great measurement programmes are centred around your business objective. They help you answer the questions: what worked? What didn't? And most importantly: What do we do next?

How do you know where to start?

Across all sectors, businesses are at different stages of their measurement journey.

One of the best new tools to help you understand where you are, and how to evolve, is **AMEC's** Measurement Maturity Mapper (M3).

M3 is a diagnostic tool designed to help professionals better plan their measurement and evaluation journey by clearly benchmarking where they are starting from in the process.

The result is a relative benchmark – by market, sector, organisation type or size – describing where users are in their measurement and evaluation journey, both overall and for each of component.

The M3 also provides practical advice based on results for how organisations can propel themselves along the measurement and evaluation journey.

But what does all this mean for how you run your communications?

Data-informed comms

Big data can seem miles away from the day-to-day. But focusing its use in a few key areas can make a big difference.

Audiences

+

Changing perceptions and behaviours?   Start with a deep understanding of your audience – who they trust, where they get their information, how they spend their time.

Insights

+

The future is now. Marrying tried-and-tested models of getting to insight with augmented analytics means you can figure out your next move, faster.

Evaluation

What's working, and what's not? Using data big (and small) to better adjust and measure your content strategy.

What you can do, now

#01
Look for the right technology partners to help speed up your time to insight – and democratise analytics.

#02
Be considerate in the data you collect, and ensure you know how you'll use it to improve your relationships with your customers.

#03
Test your content! Test your ideas! Don't be afraid to experiment, learn from what works and (more telling) what doesn't.

#04
Think beyond the survey. There are so many ways data can feed creative campaigns and drive media interest.

#05
Benchmark where you are in your measurement journey and plan to evolve – great measurement leads to greater campaigns!

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