



SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING IN THE ERA OF CORONAVIRUS

Early warning systems for
companies in a changing
digital landscape

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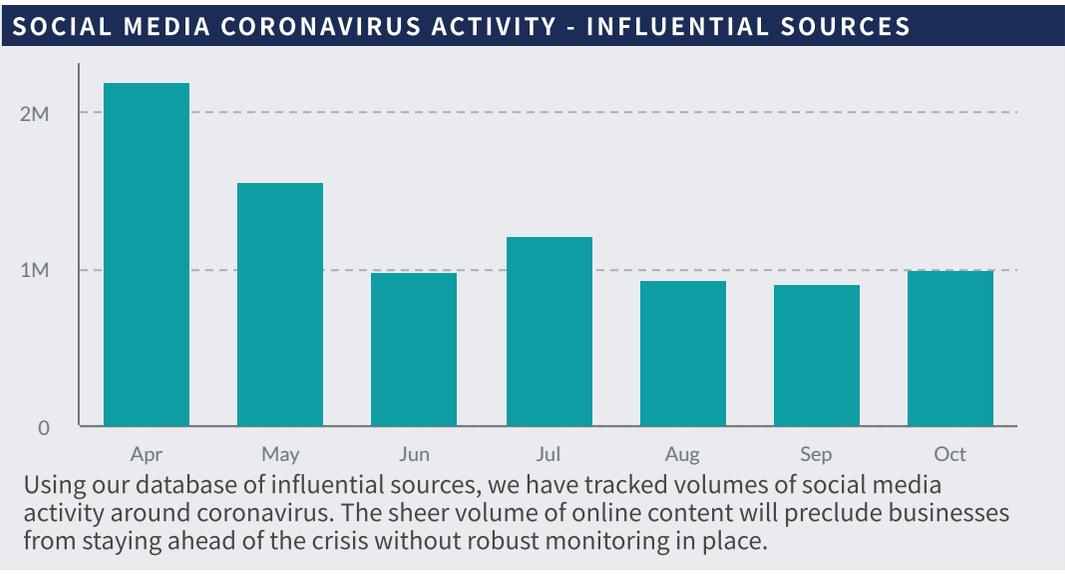
INTRODUCTION

One of the key lessons – and biggest difficulties – of the coronavirus crisis to date has been the importance of timely and accurate information in decision making.

Whether it's when to lockdown a population, furlough staff or adapt a business model, governments and businesses have all been forced to rapidly make significant decisions based on an ever-changing set of information criteria - and the quality of that data has often been central to the success or otherwise of those choices.

As we move towards the next phase of the crisis and prepare for some kind of future stability, this requirement for robust information will be more important than ever. For corporates, this means that it is essential to review the inputs on which the company is basing its decisions, ensuring that they're best suited to the requirements of the business and the situation.

A large part of data insight is going to come from social media. There is no broader and more immediate insight into the world than that provided by social. For business and government, social media acts as the mouthpiece of stakeholders, customers and activists – in real time, at pace and covering huge volume.



CRISIS AND REPUTATION

From the earliest days of the coronavirus crisis, corporates have been operating with a heightened awareness around their reputation and how they have been navigating a rapidly-changing landscape. “Businesses have never before cared as much as they do now about how they are being perceived,” says Andy Rivett-Carnac, a partner at PR consultancy Headland.

Companies are concerned their reputations can be ruined by their actions and behaviour during the crisis as they look to their peers and stakeholders for examples of how they are handling the situation. The reputational missteps by the likes of Wetherspoons around treatment of their staff during lockdown were rapidly evidenced on social media, immediately damaging their reputation and serving to warn other businesses off from making the same mistake.

At the moment there is no such thing as business as usual for companies, as all situations and behaviours are being seen through – and similarly judged on – the lens of coronavirus. As well as looking at their own actions, businesses are also concerned about the tone of their responses and communications, hyper-sensitive to the language they are using. Applications to banks for government loans and assistance during the pandemic have been overwhelming, with social media platforms inundated with queries and complaints. Yet now, more than ever it is critical that those handling the queries communicate clearly, respectfully and aligned with corporate values.

Companies are being judged through the lens of coronavirus.

CASE STUDY: WETHERSPOONS

Wetherspoons became the focus of widespread media and consumer condemnation when its high-profile CEO, Tim Martin, criticised the government’s initial lockdown and immediately laid off staff without pay.

The subsequent reputational damage informed many other businesses’ approach to the government’s guidance. “The ‘heroes and villains’ narrative is alive and well in the business media and avoiding joining the likes of Mike Ashley and Tim Martin in the latter camp is high on everyone’s agenda,” a leading PR consultant told us.



SOCIAL MONITORING IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Alongside a heightened sensitivity towards reputational damage is a knowledge that any mishaps and mistakes will be judged by the court of human opinion. And what more global, immediate and accessible court is there than a social media platform. Opinions and viewpoints are shared in real time, often before communications professionals have had an opportunity to formulate a response.

In the era of coronavirus the role social media plays has never been more important. Understanding how a locked-down population is interacting with your business, getting insight into what your peers and competitors are doing and understanding more quickly how a global marketplace in turmoil might affect your business are all going to be essential to help companies navigate the current situation.

Putting systems in place that help you to stay ahead of a changing narrative, customer complaints and stakeholder pressure is essential to help preserve your reputation and keep on top of external (and sometimes internal) noise that may cause it damage.

Social media monitoring serves as an "early warning system" in a fast-moving timeframe where traditional data sources are unable to keep up with a rapid pace of change. The ability to see what journalists, commentators, suppliers, employees and consumers are saying in real time means that businesses can keep ahead of newly emerging debates. "Social media gives us the earliest heads up possible at a corporate level," says Catriona Woolner-Winders, Selfridges' Head of PR. "It's an early warning system that gives us insight into stakeholder's reactions to and opinions on the latest developments." The headline is no longer as important as the conversation that ensues and social monitoring puts both alongside each other.

We spoke to the Communications Director of a global healthcare company with a central role in the pandemic, "Daily monitoring of the social landscape during this crisis has helped by giving us early notice of issues that arose around the globe, bringing regional or local flare-ups very quickly and urgently to the attention of the global communications team. This shortened response time. The global overview also helps us know where to put our energy, there's a general sense of "we know what's going on" so that we can prioritise."

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INTEGRATING SOCIAL MONITORING

For many corporates, social media monitoring has often been seen as part of the consumer marketing mix, helping brands to understand and interact with their customers – a powerful source of consumer intelligence that brings them closer to their target audience. However, an increasing number of businesses are recognising that it can play a far more central role in an organisation, informing not just consumer marketing decisions but broader interactions with stakeholders, whether investors, regulators, competitors or government.

Where once social insight might have been used to measure the success of a marketing activity, it is now being used to understand shareholder activism; defend against protest activity; inform ESG programmes; get an insight into the mind of politicians and NGOs; and of course to keep on top of corporate reputation.

The challenge to date has been how businesses can take the massive and messy flow of social data and make sense of it in a way that is useful to support business decision making. “Monitoring has always been about sorting the wheat from the chaff, now more so than ever”, says a consultant from a leading PR agency. The core challenge of social media monitoring is how to provide businesses with the vital information they need whilst separating it from the noise, irrelevance and misinformation that dominates much social conversation.

The vendor marketplace for social monitoring throws up a dizzying array of choices and the challenge for the buyer is to understand which is right for them. Social media monitoring’s evolution has led to three main approaches:

SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING IN PRACTICE

MANUAL

AUTOMATED

HYBRID

The first response for many companies to monitoring social media was a manual effort. More often than not, a junior in the press office or marketing team would be tasked with "keeping an eye on Twitter". Initially, there is much to commend this strategy – it can provide a top level overview of key issues, it is low cost and minimally technically complex. However, as the scale of social has grown, and its potential impact on businesses has correspondingly increased, for most companies this approach has become unsustainable.

Furthermore, in the COVID-19 era of volume and complexity, many companies simply don't have the internal resource to monitor social media manually. “When all of the team are in the office together, it's much easier for someone to see a nugget of information online and to chat to each other about it,” says the Communications Director of a global accounting and consultancy firm. “Now that's not possible social media reports that pull out specific content are invaluable to us.”



Home working hinders the ability for teams to easily share information they have come across on social media.

MONITORING IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

Once a business has navigated the complexities of specific monitoring systems, the next question is what information can they hope to gather. In an era of ongoing crisis and change in particular, what should they be looking to bring to the surface in their social monitoring?

In many ways the answer to this question is unknown. Andy Rivett Carnac of Headland speaks of an appetite for data he is seeing, noting "Information is king right now". On the other hand, inboxes and LinkedIn feeds are saturated with content. However among that content is gold dust that can really make a difference to a company's reputation and business practice and it is that gold dust that businesses can find with effective monitoring systems.

Businesses can gain valuable insights about their company and stakeholders from social media, whether that be discussions of their share price amongst investors, changing attitudes of relevant NGOs or significant issues raised by consumers about products or services.

Among the wealth of content is gold dust that can really make a difference to your company's reputation.

SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING IN PRACTICE

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The technologists' response to the challenges of social media monitoring was software. Search technology combined with automated keyword and sentiment analysis is used by automated monitoring providers to generate insight and dashboards that businesses can use to interpret the social content that's relevant to them.

The outputs of this automation vary hugely. Some providers simply offer lists of keyword matches to content on social whilst others have built vast and complex dashboard interpretation systems that help users to mine data from the social web.

An automated system offers the reach that a manual approach cannot and the use of AI to automatically identify trends and insights means that the process can be cost effective.

Software sits directly on your desktop, allowing you to control your parameters and outputs and have real-time oversight of levels of activity. For consumer and brand marketers in particular, the overview that this kind of solution provides can be hugely valuable, giving them a clear measurement of response to marketing and brand activities.

However, when used for a corporate communications purpose, this approach can fall down. Broad sentiment analysis is less informative in a crisis situation where one would expect sentiment to be negative. Whilst its useful to know that 74% of people think your advert is good, it helps little to know that 100% of people think your oil spill is bad.

Moreover, in complex and nuanced situations the span of an automated system can lead to poor quality information. It is in the nature of social media that the data it provides is messy. Content is truncated, filled with slang, abbreviations and jokes, users misspell and misunderstand. And in the era of fake news, AI can struggle to pick out reality from the alternative truth.

AI-driven dashboards are highly effective at analysing and representing huge volumes of data in an efficient way, for example graphing millions of social posts for brand sentiment. For communications teams however, these broad trends may miss the single piece of data that could make or break a business. A single post from an NGO activist signposting a forthcoming direct action may not be picked up by an automated system but spotting it could help a business mitigate a hugely costly situation.



CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CORONAVIRUS

The current situation has increased the pressure on business to behave responsibly and within an ethical framework. Social media monitoring is an important tool for guiding businesses' corporate responsibility programmes at a time when they've been under more pressure than ever to give back to society. Not only are they being judged on how their day-to-day business is being carried out, but they are also having to keep an eye on how they are contributing to society during the pandemic.

Stakeholders of all types, from MPs through to NGOs and often most vocally customers, have used their social media platforms to voice opinion and complaint, reaching wider segments of society and holding business to account.

Whereas once consumers were largely focused on product attributes for their brand choices, a business's ethical, social and governance behaviours are now an important driver of consumer perception. This has been driven to the fore by the significant choices that businesses are being forced to take as a result of the economic turmoil caused by the lockdown.

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AUTOMATED

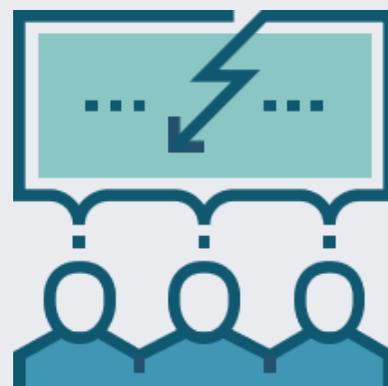
HYBRID

As social media monitoring has developed and the specific needs of the corporate communications and PR market have been recognised, a more nuanced approach has been specifically developed - hybrid monitoring solutions. These systems, such as Social360, combine proprietary search and analysis technologies to find social content that is then curated by experienced human analysts who interpret the data for corporate audiences.

These systems combine the reach of an automated approach with the granularity and nuance of a human system. Technology platforms mean that they can still cover the entirety of the social web, whilst human input means that they will pick up the nuggets of information that could prove critical to a business. According to Selfridges' Woolner-Winders, hybrid reporting can give "a qualitative and quantitative flavour of sentiment through snippets of conversation from influencers and customers" in a way that purely automated systems cannot.

They also help businesses to navigate the ambiguity of the social web. Editors understand irony, can translate slang and abbreviations and can filter out the noise and misinformation that often fogs social data.

Used most commonly by corporate communications departments, the outputs from a hybrid approach also have applicability across multiple areas of a business, from facilities and security to legal while often feeding in to daily C-Suite reporting. Outputs can be formatted to match a business's needs precisely - from top-line summaries of the key themes that matter each day through to in-depth audits or analysis of specific issues.



Hybrid reporting covers the entirety of the web while human input picks up the nuggets of information that could prove critical for a business.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CORONAVIRUS

Several prominent personalities have come under scrutiny for the way they have carried out business during the pandemic. Fashion designer Victoria Beckham's decision to use the government funding to furlough her staff came under such widespread criticism that she made the decision to backtrack on her strategy. And chef Gordon Ramsay faced a similar backlash when he announced a decision to lay off staff.

Decisions to furlough, close stores or cut dividends have been made necessary by the unprecedented external forces that are causing turmoil in every business. However, the best ways to manage these processes can be guided by clear data from social media.

Social media can provide businesses with a rapid and direct insight into consumer perceptions of their corporate activities and, by monitoring the response to the announcements of peers and competitors, can avoid the pitfalls experienced by others.

As a more stable period ensues and lockdown restrictions are eased, social media will also help brands to better understand the changed world in which they operate and how consumer's tastes have altered as a result of the crisis.

Ethical, social and governance behaviours are an important driver of consumer perception.

CASE STUDY: TESCO

When Tesco recently announced it would pay dividends despite having received financial support from the government's coronavirus support package, the might of Twitter threw itself at the supermarket chain.

Former Cabinet member Lord Adonis was particularly vocal:



MONITORING INSIGHT

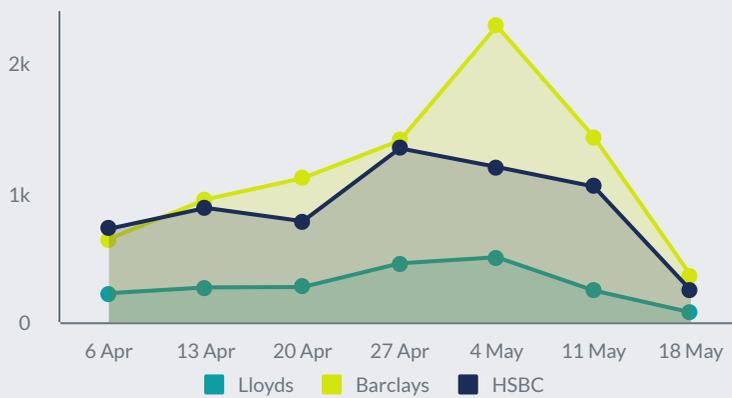
Consumer insight

Whilst tracking brand sentiment remains an important part of consumer marketing teams' work, business functions such as corporate communications also need to understand key consumer data points from social media.

The banking sector has come under especially close scrutiny from its customers during the coronavirus crisis, as banks have attempted to keep up with changes in legislation and new support packages offered by government. They have made headlines because of the issues they have had processing applications for loans and their own social media platforms have been inundated with customer queries and complaints.

Comprehensive social media monitoring can in these instances tell business the full story of how they are being perceived – in both negative and positive terms.

BOUNCE BACK LOANS



UK banks saw social media activity increase significantly over the introduction of government loan schemes, as customers clamoured to make enquiries.

Competitor insight

Understanding what the competition are up to is vital at any time, but even more so during a crisis situation and especially now when uncharted territory is being often tentatively navigated. Scanning the horizon to see how competitors are behaving and reacting can give businesses vital data to help guide decision making. The Communications Head of a global consultancy told us that social monitoring of competitors picked up news that they were proposing to cut their staff's pension contributions for a time during the pandemic. Early news of this allowed them to be prepared for the predictable onslaught of calls that they received from journalists asking if they were about to follow suit.

Selfridges understood this need to gain insight from the marketplace in real time as retailers responded to the crisis in different ways. "As we entered into crisis mode we expanded the brief of our monitoring to look at competitors to try and get a snapshot of what was happening on the wider high street," says Woolner-Winders.

Early warning of competitor activity allows businesses to be on the front foot when journalists call.

MONITORING INSIGHT

Employee insight

Along with consumers, the reaction of a business's staff to the seismic changes brought about by coronavirus can be hugely informative for an organisation's corporate function.

Whether looking at employee reaction to furlough and redundancies or discussion of poor PPE or social distancing practice in the workplace, effective monitoring can help corporates to recognise and address issues quickly, before they achieve reputational relevance.

"Early on in the crisis we picked up some discussion amongst the trade unions about the threat to cleaners of coming into work when other staff were working from home," says the Communications Director of a Global Accountancy and Consulting firm. "Social media monitoring enabled us to pick this up quickly and address the issue before it became a wider problem."

As the crisis progresses and businesses stabilise in their new ways of working, ongoing monitoring of staff's public comments on social media will be a valuable guide to company morale as well as potential logistics or public health issues.

CASE STUDY: CINEWORLD

At the start of the coronavirus outbreak, cinema chain Cineworld were forced to close all of its cinemas. The company terminated the contracts of all of their cinema employees "with immediate effect". Supported by union Bectu, employees formed the Cineworld Action Group using social media platforms to form the basis of their campaign action, amassing 1.3k members on Facebook. Their protests led to their reinstatement as the company instead made full use of the government's furlough scheme. The action group continues to fight for employee rights as cinemas look likely to remain closed for some time.



MONITORING INSIGHT

Production, logistics and distribution insight

The coronavirus pandemic has drastically affected supply chains, production and logistics. With events developing at such a pace, traditional channels of communication have often failed to keep ahead of the situation on the ground, whether that be increasing rates of infection, closed transport routes or new regulations around quarantine or social distancing. For businesses with a global presence or supply chain, monitoring these issues in every market has proven to be complex and costly.

Whilst not necessarily as definitive as a government statement, social media can provide businesses with valuable forewarning of developing situations that may significantly impact the ability of the business to produce, ship or sell their products in or from different markets.

Political insight

The importance of social media as a political communications tool has never been clearer. During the coronavirus crisis this has come even more sharply into focus. With the need to communicate changing information on a hour-by-hour basis, governments and individual politicians have turned to social media as a direct channel to their constituents. Social media activity from MPs has increased considerably since the onset of the pandemic, replacing other forms of dialogue politicians would normally use.

By monitoring this conversation, companies can not only gain an understanding of the changing situation in different markets but can also understand where political systems are breaking down under the pressure of the crisis or contributing to the spread of misinformation.

Social media forewarns businesses of developing situations that can significantly impact supply chains.

CONCLUSION

Social media monitoring was an important tool for corporates before coronavirus, but the new crisis has made it even more essential. As a PR agency director told us, "Good monitoring is like the rubbish collection, you appreciate it more in a crisis like this."

For many businesses, the increase in social monitoring activity driven by the crisis will mean a longer-term commitment to leveraging the insight that social media provides. According to one Communications Director in the healthcare industry, "This crisis - and our role in the global conversation as a healthcare company - necessitated that we step up our monitoring. I fully expect that something close to this level of social listening and monitoring will endure as standard operating procedure here in the months ahead."

The accelerated pace of both events and information dispersal driven by the coronavirus, combined with the seismic nature of the crisis means that social media's real time insight is sometimes the best, or indeed only, way for a business to not merely stay on top of the situation but in fact stay ahead.

"Good monitoring is like the rubbish collection, you appreciate it more in a crisis like this."

Social360 provides comprehensive, accurate and relevant online monitoring and insight. Our model uses our proprietary technology to scan and harvest vast online datasets and generate content tailored to our clients' requirements, while skilled and experienced communications professionals edit and prioritise this intelligence, spotting trends and identifying influencers. The result is bespoke, high-level, available across multiple media and formats and tried and tested by some of the biggest global brands. Please email info@s360group.com for further information.