

Finding influence: uncovering the brand conversations that matter in the new media world

analytics **blogs** brand business

comments **community** company conversations

corporate discussed example **firms** forums

geography global group important **index**

influence influential interest issue key

lexisnexis local looks manage market **matter**

measures **media** monitoring news

number **online** organisation public **relative**

reputation sites **social** sources specific

topic twitter web websites

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Executive Summary

With one in every eleven minutes of online activity dedicated to social media, and websites such as Facebook and Twitter becoming more popular than email¹, user generated web content is now a substantial voice worldwide.

Alongside this spectacular growth comes an increase in their audience and greater power to influence business, for better or worse.

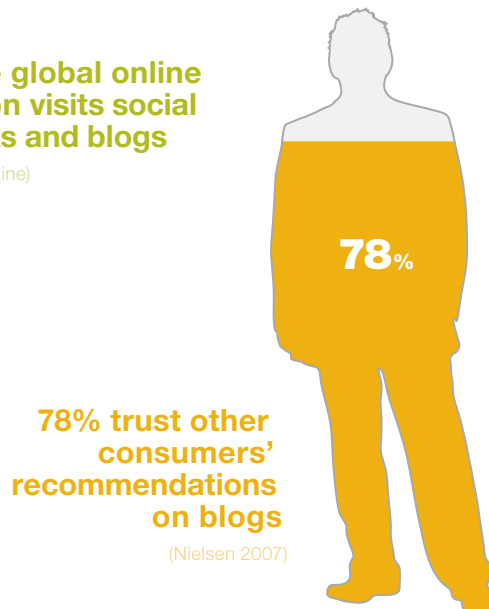
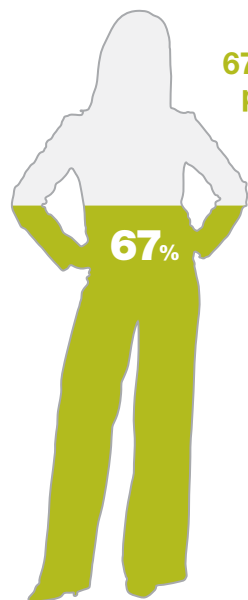
The impact social media sites are having on business is clear to see, often having a direct affect on an organisation's bottom-line. For example, the re-introduction of Cadbury's Wispa bar, which all started with a group on Facebook, led to 41 million Wispa bars being sold in their first 18 weeks.

Or there are the more common stories of social media damaging a firm's reputation, like the video posted on YouTube of rats running around a Taco Bell restaurant.

To avoid damaging your brand reputation and to stay ahead of the competition, you need to track social media sites for comments on your brands, products and executives. But with over 200,000,000 blogs how can you manage expectations and the time it would take to sift through all of these?

This whitepaper will take you through the importance of measuring the influence of social media sites and the thinking behind LexisNexis' unique 'Influencer Index'. The paper highlights the key principles for influence monitoring and helps you assess how your organisation can benefit from implementing these theories.

¹ Nielsen 2008



Social media have come of age

Today, blogs have become tremendously powerful. They've been in the rapid ascendant since the Drudge Report broke President Clinton. Whilst some, like the Huffington Post, have come to resemble traditional media, others represent niche interests yet still attract huge followings. And the forum commentary that spins off blogs and also exists in its own right has exploded too. The consequence is that conversations that might once have been confined to narrow geographies or interest groups are now completely public and – thanks to the voracious indexing of Google and aggregation sites – can be heard around the world, in seconds.

This can of course be great news for brand owners: it's the ultimate platform for 'word of mouth' recommendation. It's also the ultimate crisis management nightmare if the news that's spreading about a brand is bad.

Finding influence: uncovering the brand conversations that matter in the new media world

Time was when monitoring the media and managing brand reputation was a task that had clear boundaries. Newswires, national press and trade publications pretty much delineated the 'mediascape.' Then came the web, which for a while was a mere online reflection of traditional media, with newspaper and magazine websites struggling to find an audience, forge an identity and formulate a business plan.

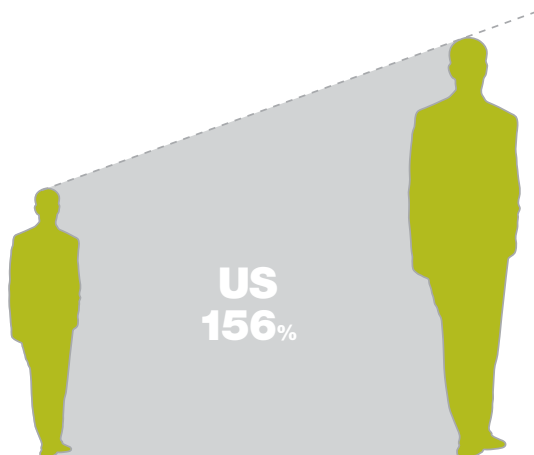
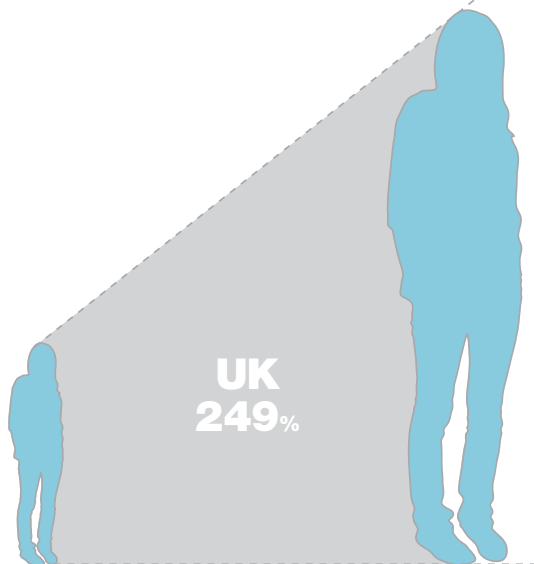
Then social media exploded on the scene. Sure, the internet had been hosting interaction and discussions, in the form of chatrooms and bulletin boards, for the decades that preceded its arrival. But once these two-way media made it out of their niche origins and into the mainstream public domain, everything changed.

The biggest increase in visits to 'member community' websites in 2008 was from the 35-49 age group

(Nielsen Online)

Mobile usage of social networking has grown by 249% in the UK and 156% in the US year-on-year

(Nielsen Online)



But where are the influential conversations?

With so much 'chatter' on the internet, the core issue is finding out which is the comment that matters to your brand or organisation. Where do you look for the influential conversations – and how do you find out, objectively, that they are indeed influential?

PSA Peugeot Citroen found that problems with its cars were being discussed in blogs and discussion forums before they hit the mainstream media. This meant bad PR, on a small scale, but also presented an opportunity to manage the story. However, with commentary on Peugeot occurring in thousands of online and offline media sources, how much effort should be dedicated to trying to manage which commentator? Spotting the potential for a more comprehensive and systematic approach, Peugeot asked LexisNexis whether it was possible to arrive at a measurement of the influence of specific online sources so the company could prioritise its activities.

This was the genesis of our 'Influencer Index'. The key insight behind this tool is simple: on the web, there is no such thing as unique, absolute influence. A blog can be influential on one issue, but has little bearing on others. Peugeot, for example, may not be interested in Techcrunch or Slashdot, but might want to know what Jalopnik is saying. The influence of a blog or forum is highly relative and depends on factors like subject, geography and community.

Mix it up

Built on this insight, the LexisNexis 'Influencer Index' uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures to determine the importance of a social media source to a user.

Market Share

The Influencer Index looks at the market share of search engines in a particular geography. In France, for example, Google is the leader, so Google's PageRank, itself an influence-based measure, is a key indicator of a particular site's popularity and influence. A Google-based approach wouldn't work in China, though, where local search engine Baidu has a 60-70% market share. So knowing a site's popularity relative to the dominant search engine in the geography you're monitoring is the first key piece of the influence puzzle.

Community

We have also established that the influence of blogs and forums depends on the extent to which they are 'embedded' in community sites. Lots of inbound links from other forums and community sites means, quite simply, that a blog has a better audience 'reach'. So in compiling the Influencer Index, we assess these inbound links, but choose them carefully, again based on geography. Local knowledge is essential to get crucial insights like the fact that Facebook has negligible presence in South Korea, where Cyworld is the dominant equivalent. Knowing which community sites matter is key.

Contribution

Finally we look at contribution – the comments or posts on a site – for these are also a core determinant of influence. Just looking at the absolute volume of comments would be misleading, because it is again skewed by context. Comparing the number of comments on a major US news site with those on, say, a Polish news site would not give a true sense of their relative local influence because of the huge difference in the online populations. So we score contribution at four levels: comments unavailable; low-level; medium (each post generates comments); and high, where the comments section is almost becoming a forum in its own right. Many British political blogs would fit into this latter category, with readers who have begun direct conversations with each other.

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Context is key

At the same time, the 'Influencer Index' considers qualitative measures that are customised to the company or brands being assessed. It assesses the industry and topics covered and looks at the number of countries involved. An international assessment of influence will, for English firms for example, always put more weighting on English-speaking sites. Finally, the index focuses on the specific topic under discussion: whether it's a specific issue, product, brand or company.

The 'Influencer Index' includes, as appropriate, new media phenomena such as Twitter. Whilst 'tweets' have a short, two-hour lifespan, they can provide real-time signposts to breaking issues, so they are monitored for this purpose. But for how long will Twitter matter? It's important for an effective index of influence to stay in step with the waxing and waning of new media. Who talks much about Second Life these days?

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The five key principles for influence monitoring

- **Relativity** – despite the internet's global ubiquity, online influence is highly relative: to topic and geography, for example. Understanding this and being able to measure it quantitatively is crucial.
- **Customisation** – because everything is relative, the measurement of influence relating to each brand, topic or issue needs to be very specific. There's no 'standard' measurement of influence on the web.
- **Typology** – classifying blogs and forums is important to defining influence: are they written by 'gurus' or 'activists', are they personal or corporate?
- **Pre-selection** – qualifying good, relevant blogs and media sources is the only way to avoid information overload. Carefully designed quantitative measures together with sound local knowledge can ensure that only the best sources are tracked.
- **Objectivity** – external ranking data is key. A website owner's own statistics cannot always be trusted!

Which types of organisation can benefit from online influence monitoring?

We've identified three key groups:

The 'blog curious' – these firms are interested, but don't necessarily know how to act or how to determine and communicate the value of blog and forum monitoring. In our experience short studies often show such firms that there is a great deal more talk about them and their brands online than they might otherwise have thought. These studies often help sceptics see the benefits of online influence monitoring and how it can prove to be a serious competitive advantage, enabling firms to take benefit from gaps in their rivals' online strategy.

The 'crisis managers' – for companies like Domino's Pizza that have seen how social media can create a board-level crisis, the argument for online influence monitoring is easily made. A prank YouTube video made by employees garnered hundreds of thousands of views in just a few days and rapidly shifted Domino's overwhelmingly positive 'buzz rating' to a negative. In an attempt to win the PR battle, the firm distributed 11,000 free pizzas and fought a rearguard action using Twitter. For those firms where reputation is a differentiating factor, online influence monitoring is an extremely important part of their marketing strategy and can save considerable embarrassment and financial losses by acting as an early warning system to any potential problems.

'Social media sophisticates' – some organisations have actively taken social media monitoring on board and are looking for more sophisticated tools such as the LexisNexis 'Influencer Index' to monitor their brands and assess the influence of specific bloggers. They want to know what sort of people are talking about them, how influential they are and what topics are being discussed. Realising how useful these media are, they see investment here as money well spent and are now thinking in terms of 'cost per conversation' rather than cost per click.

There's no question that social media have come of age. Companies are showing high levels of interest in how blogs and forums can influence their brands: and sophisticated firms like PSA Peugeot Citroen are going beyond mere crisis management to using influence monitoring as part of a proactive strategy for developing their corporate and brand reputations. However firms must be sure that they have found – and are monitoring – the right sources. Locating the real sources of influence and monitoring them over time in a fast-changing environment is the challenge. But the benefits, as Peugeot has found through its partnership with LexisNexis, are worth the investment.

Influence of blogs and forums depends on the extent to which they are 'embedded' in community sites.

LexisNexis

LexisNexis provides award-winning media monitoring and reputation management tools for the corporate market, working with leading global firms, such as Peugeot and Pfizer.

LexisNexis Analytics solutions analyse both online and traditional media to make sure you know who is talking about your brand, what they are saying and where they are saying it.

With a 35 year heritage in the media monitoring space, LexisNexis combines the world's deepest news & business content collection (Nexis®) with award-winning technology.

For more information on LexisNexis Analytics and to set up your brand reputation and media monitoring health check please call **020 7400 2984**, log-on to **www.lexisnexis.co.uk/LNA** or email us at **analytics@lexisnexis.co.uk**.

About our author



Nicolas Chazaud is a social media expert for LexisNexis, based in Paris, France. Nicolas was one of the first people in Europe to complete a Ph.D in Social Media, which he finished in 2008, with a dissertation on online corporate reputation. While completing his studies he began managing social media monitoring projects for global firms, such as Peugeot and Pfizer.

Nicolas has developed a unique methodology for managing online corporate reputation by assessing the influence of social media sites. He is now constantly engaged in developing new tools and methods of working in the rapidly changing social media space.

Nicolas has shared his thinking at a number of renowned conferences including; the International Communication Association (ICA), The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and at the Reputation Institute, in Oslo and Beijing.

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