

The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Printed paper is the preferred medium of record whilst also a sustainable marketing communications format

On January 30th, 2024, the Debating Group met at the House of Commons with the debate being chaired by Baroness Sater.

Proposing the motion, **Richard Pepper, Founder of Funky Pigeon**, began by stressing the long heritage of print, starting 570 years ago with the Gutenberg Bible. He explained that Funky Pigeon is a digital business that sells printed cards, calendars, and photobooks. These are the customer's digital photos and words put into print to share with their families, highlighting the desire of people for a permanent paper record. Pepper also worked with the charity Topic Heroes, that sought to redress the balance of children learning from digital screens like tablets – contributing to literacy slipping worldwide. Reports suggest that since 2012, America is seven points behind on literacy since moving towards digital. Topic Heroes enables children to create their own book that can be physically printed as something tangible, giving them the unique feeling you get from a book and thereby promoting literacy.

Pepper cited a report in *The Guardian* that a major survey in America had found the printed word was stronger than the digital one. It showed that reading digitally we absorb about 500 words before becoming distracted: when reading on computers there is a lot of noise, emails popping up and chatbots going off. But with the printed word there is less distraction, so we absorb information better. This is the difference between deep learning from books and shallow learning from digital. While students said they prefer digital reading because it saves carrying heavy books, when it comes to revision the majority preferred printed material that they can highlight and dog-ear to navigate it more easily.

Surveys in the UK and US suggest that physical books are read more than digital by a ratio of four to one. People may buy Kindles, but they still come back to books. A physical book has a unique touch and smell, and they look fantastic on bookcases. Pepper also mentioned Historic Newspapers, a business with millions of old newspapers, stored physically and digitally, that are repurposed and sold to celebrate milestone birthdays.

Moving to security, Pepper noted that digital content can be hacked and content stolen or destroyed – his own former company amongst them. So, was digital a strong enough medium for record? The advance of artificial intelligence brought further risks to our reliance on digital to store our records. He asked whether something as important as a will

should be kept solely as a digital record rather than as a physical piece of paper. On a digital record the beneficiaries changed – paper was permanent.

Pepper reiterated that his business was digital *and* print, and that they print things because people want physical printed copies. People want physically to hold their records for the future. This might change in time, but where the internet started just 41 years ago, printed paper has been with us for 570 years. He concluded that paper is still the preferred medium of choice - and for our children to benefit from all the knowledge we have, the best way to teach them is to use digital, but keep them linked to the printed word.

Opposing the motion, **John Booth, Managing Director at Carbon3IT**, began by acknowledging the benefits of printed media. A physical document could be viewed as a tangible and credible resource; branded to capture attention and have brand recall; have archival value for historians; offer respite from digital screen fatigue; and, reach people for whom technology is unfamiliar or unaffordable. But he argued that such advantages could also be found in digital media.

Booth accepted that printed paper is the preferred medium of record in sectors such as the law or banking, but perhaps these are stuck in the past? Lawyers can arrive in court with boxes of printed evidence for jurors and court personnel to trawl through - which was not pleasant. Most banks now provide electronic communications and some have eliminated paper entirely. Moving onto libraries, they could be hard to access and what you want may not be immediately available. Older books and documents, such as the rolls of legislation held by Parliament, are difficult to access in their original form and unwieldy to handle if you can.

However, digital media has revolutionised the way we interact with the world and offers many advantages: revolutionary communications, marketing, and entertainment. And as the technology evolves, digital media continues to shape how we consume and interact with information.

Digital media: allows for the instant and widespread dissemination of information, using the internet to break down geographical barriers; it enables real-time updates, keeping users informed of the latest news events and developments as they happen; it offers interactivity enabling users to click links, watch videos, interact with animations and provide comments; and, it supports multimedia elements like images, audio, video, animations, and interactive graphics that enhance user-experience and engagement.

Additionally digital media allows for personalised content delivery, with websites, apps, and social media platforms displaying content tailored to individual user preferences and behaviours, creating a more relevant and engaging experience. Moreover, it is often more cost-effective for communications and marketing than traditional print media as it eliminates the need for printing, distribution and physical storage. It also provides data-tracking and analytics with content creators and marketers able to measure the effectiveness of their campaigns.

Furthermore, digital media offers flexibility in content creation and distribution with content

easily modified, updated and repurposed to different platforms and audiences. Social media platforms facilitate the easy sharing of digital media allowing content to go viral and reach broader audiences quickly. Similarly, digital media enables advertising to be highly-targeted, using data analytics to identify and reach specific demographics or customer segments very precisely, thereby increasing effectiveness. It also has a lower environmental impact compared to print media, whilst digital media is inclusively accessible to boot, through optimisation for screen readers and other assistive technologies.

In short, digital media has transformed how we communicate, connect, and consume information. Its global reach, interactivity, personalization and analytics advantage make it a powerful tool for businesses, content creators, marketers and individuals. This extends beyond media with the digitalisation of printed content everywhere. For example, the paper-based driving test reports are now held on a fully cloud-based app with a user-interface resembling the old paper test reports with which driving examiners were familiar. The innovative hybrid mobile app provides greater flexibility and a host of tools that enhance the experience: the transition has reduced licence wait-times from three weeks to three days, reduced data error and reduced paper usage by approximately 8 million sheets.

Booth ended with a statement from the Master of the Rolls, Sir Geoffrey Vos, whose position even predates printing by hundreds of years. He has said: *“Digitalization will improve access to justice. It will enable people to vindicate legal rights and to settle legal problems in every field much more quickly, much less expensively, and without so much delay and fuss.”* The legal system has been a mystery to most people for centuries: digitalisation makes it easier because every system is designed to be usable by litigants in person. If the Master of the Rolls supports the digitalization of the legal system, Booth argued, the use of printed paper is no longer the preferred medium of record, with digital media also probably a more sustainable marketing communications format.

Seconding for the proposal, **Jonathan Tame, Managing Director at Two Sides**, drew attention to the question of sustainability. He explained that Two Sides helps tell the sustainable story of paper-based communications and packaging. Its research showed people had an inaccurately negative perception of print because of perceived environmental impacts, believing that – by contrast - digital communications are consequence-free. To save costs, organisations push customers to digital-only communications using misleading statements such as British Gas encouraging customers to ‘go paperless and save the planet.’ He pointed to the absurdity of this message, especially from a fossil fuel energy company. Such sensational anti-print messages are not uncommon despite not being based in any fact. Tame moved on to bust three of the most common myths about paper and print.

First, that going paperless saves trees. The problems of global deforestation are predominantly around agriculture - the paper industry sources its principal raw material from sustainably-managed forests. And Europe’s forests are growing in size by the equivalent of 1,500 football pitches every day. Second, that paper is wasteful and goes to landfill. Of all the materials we come into daily contact with, paper is the most recycled with 71% of Europe’s wastepaper collected and recycled - 82% for paper-based packaging. Finally, that paper production consumes water. Tame explained that the 54,000 litres of

water used make a tonne of paper was process water that is cleaned, returned to the environment, stored within the product, or evaporated as steam which then falls as rain. It does not just disappear!

Turning to digital communications, Tame argued that e-mails and web searches were not impact-free. The environmental impact of an increasingly digital world cannot be ignored: the information and communication technology industry accounts for 5-9% of all electricity use and its footprint could increase to 14% of global emissions by 2040. Electronic devices are made with non-renewable raw materials including iron, copper, rare earths as well as petroleum for plastics and require environmentally invasive mining, drilling, extracting and processing. In 2019, just 42.5% of e-waste was collected for recycling in Europe and recycling activities are not keeping pace with the global growth of e-waste – posing a significant threat to human health. Google's global data centres alone consumed 4.3 billion gallons of water in 2021. Tame pointed out that by contrast, paper is made from natural, renewable, sustainable, non-fossil-based materials; it is biodegradable, highly recycled, and a crucial part of the circular economy. With even the World Wildlife Fund saying it is too complex to determine whether one medium is better than the other, Tame argued that the environmental impact of paper cannot be held against it.

In conclusion, Booth noted that 6% of UK households and 37% of the global population have no access to the internet, limiting their access to digital media. Meanwhile, consumers like paper, with 79% of those in the UK wanting the ability to opt for it as a communications medium. Meanwhile, 56% of UK consumers are concerned with digital security issues and 59% understand that organisations pushing for digital are motivated primarily by cost savings. He added that research by Royal Mail showed that, on average, direct mail was interacted with four times more than digital. So, organisations should not be concerned with the environmental impact of print and paper – after two millennia, paper will likely stand the test of the time for the future.

Seconding for the opposition, **Emma Newman, Chief Revenue Officer, EMEA, PubMatic**, recognised paper as a tangible and tactile experience that can be perceived as more authoritative in certain contexts. However, she suggested that paper comes with environmental concerns and practical limitations. The digital ecosystem has expanded to connect more people on more devices, activate a wealth of data and build intelligent networks that allow digital marketing communication to reach across thousands of media properties at the touch of a button. Moreover, digital media allows for real-time updates and dynamic content modification that empowers communicators to refine their content based on changing circumstances. This dynamic nature not only ensures relevance but also reduces the need for resource-wasting reprints.

Focussing on sustainability, Newman acknowledged that electronic products need energy and have a carbon footprint. But for PubMatic's UK operations, nearly 98% of electricity usage was in data centres that were powered exclusively by renewable energy. With data centres increasingly important in delivering relevant, impactful, digital advertising experiences Newman saw an opportunity to prioritise data centres that employ renewable energy – enabling the digital industry to grow, while simultaneously reducing its carbon footprint. Coupled with commitments to sustainability that reflect consumer values, the

transparency of data-driven marketing operations allows participants to identify inefficiencies and be proactive in reducing carbon emissions.

Newman stressed that digital media is considered more sustainable than print for a number of reasons. Firstly, it enables global distribution without physical transportation. Secondly, digital media allows for instant updates and modifications, eliminating the need for reprints. Thirdly, Newman noted that sustainability is a hard sell if it does not also drive economic growth – the IAB UK's 2023 Digital Dividend report found that for every £1 spent on digital advertising, a £4.80 contribution was made to the UK economy; digital advertising supported small and medium-size enterprises by generating an additional £26 billion in sales. It had even helped with the cost-of-living crisis by saving consumers £18 billion through free ad-supported services and the discovery of cheaper products. Newman reiterated that this was all being delivered by an industry committed to achieving a net zero impact by 2030.

Newman also noted that driving sustainability included educating and inspiring the public to take action, with the majority of that messaging delivered digitally. Through articles, videos, social posts, podcasts, games and an array of digital communications, the message of sustainability was reaching people through their preferred medium – whether reading, watching, listening, or playing. Paper, for all its tangible qualities, cannot animate, speak out loud, play a video, be translated in real time, or be shared with distant family and friends at the click of a button.

Much of this digital media was available for free, Newman pointed out, because it was funded by digital marketing and advertising. This made the digital ecosystem more accessible for businesses too, with digital marketing solutions enabling local businesses to target local consumers to encourage more sustainable local shopping that also revitalises local communities. Charities, community groups, artists, local government bodies - and more – also all benefited, meaning that much of what contributes to a rich culture and creates lasting value is promoted and discovered digitally.

Through the immense and immediate reach of digital communications, low-cost production, and increasing accessibility, Newman argued that organisations around the world can easily align their efforts in order to pave the way towards a sustainable path for all media. With digital media, driving impactful change towards a greener future is easier and more effective as it moves beyond one-size-fits-all communication methods that can often be wasted or ignored.

Newman concluded by asserting that the boundary between digital and physical media was becoming blurred and that paper was increasingly becoming an extension of digital media and marketing. By combining the strengths of both these media, organisations can create a well-rounded and effective communication strategy that caters to diverse audience preferences.

The chair thanked the speakers and opened the debate to contributions from the floor.

Discussion from the Floor

Nick Roberts, a technology consultant, highlighted the unique allure of printed media, but noted that, partly driven by the pandemic, most businesses now operate mostly digitally - Microsoft Teams increased its usage space 120% during the lockdown in the UK. He highlighted how much crucial data was stored in 'the cloud' and explained that Cognizant went from zero to 40 million because they transformed the sales and marketing landscape through digitisation. Print had been replaced by digital media because it was more efficient and fit-for-purpose.

The next speaker, Tijs Broeke of Hewlett-Packard supported the motion, noting the acknowledgment by the opposers that they need paper to complement digital - and because he wants his child to spend less time on screens. He concluded that without paper, the world would engage even less with real life.

Carrie Klepzig of ePS stated that she was for the motion, saying that as a chief marketing officer she got digital 1,000% and clearly technology has its place, but remained concerned that it comes with health repercussions, especially for children constantly looking down at screens.

The next contributor - Anna Krutova - was pro-digital, pointing out that one of the speakers had relied on a phone, not paper, for their speaking notes. Addressing the security of paper as a medium of record, she noted that in Ukraine many purely paper records were lost when cities were burned, but that refugees had fled with all their 'paperwork' digitally stored on their phones.

The next speaker, Brendan Perring of the IPIA agreed that while digital communications were incredible and have empowered our lives and transformed our societies, in a world where 'truth' is under threat the ability to edit digital media may actually be a weakness. He wondered whether a 'hard' paper copy was actually an essential ally of a digital record. He cited a poem by Beatrice Ward entitled 'The Printing Office' that extolled the virtues of paper as a bastion of truth.

Gemma Mitchell of Paragon, a printing company, was in favour of the motion asserting that a billion items a year were committed to paper across commercial and government organisations which told us that a 'medium of record' requires a printed document.

Will Nicholson from TVN had come in opposing the motion. He noted that both sides had eloquently argued how each were sustainable – including paper being recycled seven times. But looking at the motion and the question of paper as a preferred medium of record he had crossed the floor, as it were, to support paper and the motion.

Another contributor from the floor, looking at the trends from Covid, noted that during lockdown she had seen the then Prime Minister choosing to communicate to every single household by paper – and that the preferred method of record was therefore paper.

The next speaker from the floor noted that text written by people who were no longer with us were still fully comprehensible and available many decades on.

Elizabeth Burman, who worked in the education sector, relied on printed material to deploy resources in countries that lacked access to communications technology. She also raised concerns over digital security and believed that for key moments in life, such as exams, students wanted pen and paper.

The chair thanked the speakers from the floor and called for closing contributions from the opposer and the proposer.

Summing Up

For the opposition, **John Booth** highlighted the word 'record' as indicative of permanency – something that is static and remains the same. Records are meant to be permanent, but they can also be lost or destroyed. Booth drew attention to the removal of permanent paper records by Donald Trump to his personal residence, arguing that digital records might have been kept more secure.

Booth suggested that in the modern world 'digital' was fundamental to the paper print process with paper documents being prepared on computers. When it comes to national records, he suggested that 'digital' is increasingly the preferred medium.

For the proposition, **Richard Pepper**, agreed that digital is everywhere, but asked if we can trust it? He asserted that the Gutenberg Bible, with first editions still in circulation after 570 years, represented 'record'. By comparison, digital was new and while it was definitely growing, he questioned whether we would be happy that all records should be held digitally? Pepper referenced the new Mission Impossible film in which thousands of typists frantically tried to transfer digital data to paper because a rogue computer threatened to delete everything. Not a million miles from possibility, Pepper suggested. He believes we owe it to future generations to pass on the knowledge that we have on paper - because research shows it simply is not passed on as effectively by digital means.

Pepper questioned the value and integrity of digital, which hoarded our data. Clearly there were some things digital did not do well. While amazing and incredibly useful, for crucial permanent records such as a will, Pepper did not think we were ready to move to digital yet. Less than fifty years of digital did not compare to the thousands of years we've been writing on paper – a lot of which survives. We owe it to future generations to pass this knowledge on and if we cannot pass it on as safely digitally, then we need to think carefully about how records are best kept.

Result

The motion was carried.

Next Debate: The next debate will take place at the House of Commons on Tuesday 26th March 2024 and will be sponsored by the Market Research Society. The motion will be: *"The real problem with polling is the way it is reported."*

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