



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



FROM PRINT DECLINE TO DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY: HOW REACH PLC'S TRANSFORMATION IS REDEFINING DIGITAL PR

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of the news publishing industry is fundamentally altering the environment in which Public Relations (PR) practitioners operate. This brief research-informed opinion paper examines the implications of Reach plc's 2025 financial results and strategic transition for Digital Public Relations (Digital PR). Reach plc, the UK's largest commercial news publisher, reported revenue of £518.4 million for 2025, a 3.7% decline year-on-year, while continuing to experience pressure on print revenue and disruption to digital referral traffic. At the same time, the organisation increased its focus on digital subscriptions, video, audience development and artificial intelligence. Drawing on Reach plc's corporate reporting and recent scholarship on Digital PR, artificial intelligence and journalism, this paper argues that the decline of print should not be interpreted simply as a reduction in media-relations opportunities. Rather, it represents a transformation in the nature of those opportunities. As publishers increasingly compete for digital attention, Digital PR practitioners must move beyond media-volume approaches towards the development of relevant, original, data-led and digitally discoverable stories. The paper proposes that effective contemporary Digital PR can increasingly be understood through five interconnected dimensions: relevance, originality, discoverability, engagement and authority.

Keywords: Digital Public Relations; Digital PR; Reach plc; Journalism; Digital transformation; Artificial intelligence; Media relations; News publishing; Search visibility

1 INTRODUCTION

The UK news industry is undergoing a prolonged transformation as traditional print consumption declines and audiences increasingly access journalism through digital platforms, search engines, social media and video. This transformation is important for Public Relations because PR practitioners depend heavily on news organisations as intermediaries between organisations and their publics. Changes in newsroom structures, editorial priorities, audience behaviour and publisher revenue models therefore directly influence how PR professionals identify, develop and pitch stories. Reach plc provides a particularly useful case through which to examine these developments. The company describes itself as the UK's largest commercial news publisher and operates a large portfolio of national, regional and digital news brands. Its 2025 financial results, published on 3 March 2026, demonstrate both the continuing pressure on traditional publishing and the company's attempts to develop a more digitally focused business model. The central argument of this paper is that the decline of print does not necessarily mean a decline in opportunities for Digital PR.

Instead, it changes what constitutes valuable PR content and how practitioners must create, pitch and measure media coverage.

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a research-informed conceptual approach, using Reach plc's 2025 financial and corporate reporting as an illustrative case through which to examine the implications of structural change in the UK news publishing industry for Digital Public Relations (Digital PR). The analysis combines industry evidence with relevant academic literature on Digital PR, journalism, digital transformation, audience behaviour and artificial intelligence.

Academic literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords including *Digital Public Relations*, *Digital PR*, *digital journalism*, *news publishing*, *media transformation*, *artificial intelligence*, *generative AI*, and *digital transformation*. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research directly relevant to changes in PR practice, journalism and digitally mediated communication. Reach plc's 2025 Annual Results and Annual Report, published in 2026, provide the principal industry evidence concerning revenue performance, print decline, digital development, video investment, audience growth and AI.

The evidence was analysed thematically to identify recurring developments across three interconnected areas: (1) changes in the economics and structure of news publishing; (2) changes in digital content production, distribution and discovery; and (3) implications for contemporary Digital PR practice. These themes were then used to develop a conceptual interpretation of how the changing publishing environment affects the creation, pitching, distribution and potential value of earned media.

The paper does not seek to provide a systematic literature review, meta-analysis or statistically generalisable findings. Rather, Reach plc is treated as an illustrative industry case, enabling broader implications for Digital PR to be explored through existing scholarship and contemporary industry evidence. The proposed Relevance–Originality–Discoverability–Engagement–Authority framework is therefore presented as a conceptual proposition for practitioner discussion and future empirical research, rather than as an empirically validated model.

3 THE CHANGING NEWS MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Reach plc's 2025 results provide evidence of the economic pressures affecting contemporary publishing. The company's revenue declined from £538.6 million in 2024 to £518.4 million in 2025, while print revenue declined by 4.6% to £388.1 million. Digital revenue was £128.9 million, representing a smaller decline of 0.9%, although Reach identified reduced Google referral volumes as one of the factors affecting digital performance. At the same time, Reach reported a significant strategic shift towards digital products, including digital subscriptions, increased video output and audience development (Reach plc, 2026a; Reach plc, 2026b). These developments demonstrate that the transformation is not simply about print versus digital. It represents a broader restructuring of how publishers create, distribute and monetise content. Reach's stated strategic priorities include connecting with audiences, accelerating the use of technology and AI, and diversifying revenues, with video, digital subscriptions and AI identified as important components of its digital-growth strategy (Reach plc, 2026b).

4 FROM DIGITAL JOURNALISM TO DIGITAL PR

The academic literature indicates that Digital PR has undergone a substantial transformation alongside the development of digital technologies. Huang, Wu and Huang (2017), analysing digital PR research between 2008 and 2014, found increasing attention to social media and a gradual movement from descriptive research towards greater theorisation, while also identifying a need for continued methodological development. More recently, Ki, Ertem-Eray and Hayden (2024) identified steady growth in digital PR scholarship between 1995 and 2022 and highlighted digital platforms, technology and social media as important components of the field.

This evolution is important because PR practitioners are no longer operating within a media environment dominated by a relatively small number of print publications. A contemporary PR story can now move through a series of interconnected digital environments. It may begin with PR research, which provides the evidence or insight needed to develop a newsworthy story. The story is then presented to a journalist, who may transform it into a digital article published by a news organisation. Once published, the article can be discovered through search engines, shared across social media, and potentially repurposed into video content.

These channels can generate further audience engagement, which may subsequently lead to additional sharing, discussion, search activity and further discovery of the original story. The value of a contemporary PR story is therefore

not necessarily limited to the initial media placement. Instead, a successful story can develop a networked digital lifecycle, with each stage creating opportunities for additional visibility, engagement and audience reach.

5 REACH PLC AND THE NEW VALUE OF DIGITAL CONTENT

Reach's strategic transition provides an important illustration of this changing environment. The organisation reported that it continued to sell more than half a million newspapers per day in 2025, demonstrating that print remains commercially relevant. However, its simultaneous investment in digital subscriptions, video, audience development and AI indicates that future growth is increasingly being pursued through digital channels (Reach plc, 2026a; Reach plc, 2026b).

This creates an important implication for Digital PR. The question is no longer simply: "Will a journalist publish my story?"

Instead, the practitioner increasingly needs to consider: "Why would this story be valuable to this journalist's audience, and how can it generate attention within the publisher's wider digital ecosystem?"

This represents a shift from media relations as distribution towards Digital PR as audience-value creation.

6 SEARCH VISIBILITY AND THE EXTENDED LIFE OF EARNED MEDIA

The increasing importance of digital publishing changes the potential lifespan of media coverage. A digitally published article can potentially continue generating visibility through search engines, social platforms, links and recommendation systems after its initial publication. However, Reach's 2025 results also demonstrate that this ecosystem is becoming less predictable, with the company reporting materially lower Google referral volumes during the second half of 2025 (Reach plc, 2026a). This creates an important strategic consideration for Digital PR. Practitioners should not assume that obtaining a backlink automatically guarantees long-term visibility. Instead, campaigns should consider multiple forms of digital discoverability:

Earned media + search + social + video + direct audience engagement

This represents a broader understanding of Digital PR performance than simply counting media placements.

7 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE CHANGING PR-NEWSROOM RELATIONSHIP

Artificial intelligence introduces another layer to this transformation. Recent research indicates that AI adoption is already influencing public relations practice. Yue et al. (2024), drawing on interviews with 20 PR leaders, found that practitioners viewed AI as a source of innovation and strategic opportunity while also identifying risks and ethical challenges. Uysal and Deng (2025) similarly examined the organisational dynamics influencing AI adoption within public relations, highlighting the importance of organisational conditions in shaping implementation.

Research into generative AI and PR practice in Africa has also identified opportunities alongside practical, sociocultural and ethical challenges associated with adoption (Nutsugah and Senanub, 2024). Meanwhile, research into AI and journalism indicates that generative AI is increasingly being incorporated into newsroom processes, with implications for journalistic roles, professional practice and editorial decision-making (Cools and Diakopoulos, 2024; Grimme and Zabel, 2025). Research on journalistic roles further suggests that AI adoption is not uniform, with journalists' professional identities influencing how they use and perceive generative AI (Møller, Cools and Skovsgaard, 2025).

For Digital PR, this suggests an important development. As AI makes content creation faster and more abundant, distinctive information, credible expertise and original evidence may become more valuable. Consequently, the competitive advantage may increasingly shift from simply producing content towards producing information that is sufficiently original, credible and relevant to merit attention. However, AI adoption should not be understood as an automatic or universally beneficial transformation. Research on AI implementation in public relations emphasises the importance of human-centred and sustainable implementation rather than rapid technological adoption (Christensen and Andersson, 2025). This reinforces the importance of AI literacy alongside editorial judgement, ethical awareness and professional expertise.

7.1 A Proposed Framework for Contemporary Digital PR

Based on the Reach plc case and the literature discussed above, this paper proposes five interconnected characteristics of effective Digital PR:

- **Relevance**

Does the story address the journalist's specific editorial beat and audience?

- **Originality**

Does it provide information, data, expertise or insight that is genuinely new?

- **Discoverability**

Can the resulting content be discovered through search, social platforms and other digital environments?

- **Engagement**

Does the story have sufficient emotional, cultural or practical relevance to attract audience attention?

- **Authority**

Does the story position the organisation or expert as a credible source of knowledge?

- The proposed relationship can be expressed as:

Relevance → Originality → Discoverability → Engagement → Authority

This framework is not presented as an empirically validated model. Rather, it is offered as a conceptual proposition for future research and practitioner discussion.

8 DISCUSSION

The Reach plc case demonstrates that the transformation of news publishing should not be understood simply as a movement from newspapers to websites. It is a transformation in the **economics, technology and distribution of journalism**. Publishers must increasingly compete for attention across search, social media, video, subscriptions and other digital environments. Reach's investment in video, digital subscriptions, audience development and AI illustrates this broader transition (Reach plc, 2026b).

For Digital PR practitioners, this creates a more sophisticated media environment. The traditional model could be conceptualised as: Client → Press release → Journalist → Article

The contemporary model is closer to:

Research → Story → Journalist → Digital publication → Search/Social → Audience engagement → Further discovery

The implication is that Digital PR practitioners require a broader understanding of journalism, SEO, social media, data, audience behaviour and increasingly AI.

9 CONCLUSION

Reach plc's 2025 results provide a useful illustration of the structural transformation taking place within the UK news industry. The company's continued restructuring of print operations alongside investment in digital subscriptions, video, audience development and AI demonstrates that the future of publishing increasingly depends on how effectively organisations attract and retain audiences within a fragmented digital environment (Reach plc, 2026a; Reach plc, 2026b).

For Digital PR, this transformation represents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that journalists and publishers are operating within increasingly competitive and commercially constrained environments. The opportunity is that digital publishing provides more ways for high-quality stories to generate value beyond their initial publication.

The central argument of this paper is therefore that the decline of print should not be equated with the decline of media-relations opportunities. Rather, it changes the nature of those opportunities. Digital PR practitioners will increasingly need to produce stories that are relevant enough for journalists, original enough to be newsworthy, discoverable enough to survive within digital ecosystems, engaging enough to attract audiences and authoritative enough to build trust.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

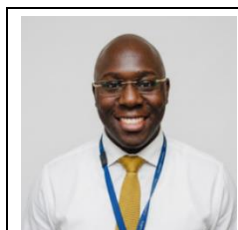
Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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