

**Navigating the Storm: Understanding the Canadian
Media Landscape and How to Navigate for
Maximum PR Impact**

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Abstract:

This article explores the history of journalism and public relations and tracks the influences that have shaped their history, with a focus on the last 20 years.

The last two decades have brought dramatic changes to the way people consume news, who and what they trust, and even shaped social mores. The key driver has been the rapid advances in technology; in particular, the internet and mobile technologies, which have inspired the rapid development of social media platforms. Combined with the promise of business opportunities, social media has made rapid gains over traditional media.

How is it that public relations practitioners, who have traditionally earned their bread and butter through relations with traditional journalists, can pivot to maximize the new opportunities brought forward by the changing media landscape?

Navigating the Storm: Understanding the Canadian Media Landscape and How to Navigate for Maximum PR Impact

The Canadian media has been through tremendous changes in the last two decades, impacted by advances in technology, the advent of the personal computer, smartphones, and the electronic communications they have facilitated and influenced.

The internet, with all its versatility and its seemingly never-ending capacity to change radically, continues to shape the way we communicate with each other, as well as our habits, beliefs and expectations. Sound bites and short articles have increased, feeding the development of “fake news.” Bots are writing content (Deleuse, 2019). Many of us have grappled with the alarming news of a shrinking attention span, often compared to that of a goldfish (McSpadden, 2015), luckily found by Reisinger (2016), to be itself, “fake news,” a concept that has risen to prominence with the increase in independent sources and churnalism, where pre-packaged content replaces fresh, investigative journalism.

Technology is clearly shaping our daily habits and our consumption of media. Almost 60 per cent of earth’s eight billion people are considered to be “active social media users,” as defined by Hootsuite in their Global Media Overview for 2021. However, as noted by White (2021), early evidence of news dissemination seems to indicate that humans have always had a penchant for gossip (Consider *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*).

This article explores the chronology of the trends that are impacting the dissemination of news today and how practicing public relations in 2021 differs from the same job, before 2000. As it looks at the technological, social and journalistic changes, it will consider the impact on media consumers, journalists and the public relations professionals, who, along with their clients, want the caché of traditional media and the uptake of social media (Kiefer, 2013).

Finally, it presents the means for practitioners to pivot and even thrive in these changing times.

The Media and PR - Growing up Together

Looking briefly at the history of the development of media helps us to understand where we have been and how we have developed. It may also reveal the common themes that stand up to the test of time, and which will remain an integral part of our communications in the years to come.

The earliest records of a newspaper, Caesar's *Acta Diurna*, or *Daily Doings*, produced in 59 BCE, is believed to have documented events, births, deaths and daily gossip (Media and Culture, n.d.). It is easy to imagine an early role in public relations for someone with a knack for promotion, perhaps with a little government-relations thrown in.

Coincidentally, the widely touted first recorded act of public relations occurred during that same year, noted by Wilcox (1998), with the discovery of a stone engraved with the words: "Vote for Cicero, he is a good man."

Technology Moves the World and PR Changes Everything

The invention of the printing press in 1440 changed everything, and began to move the world as the availability of the printed word allowed literacy rates to climb (Lee, 2010).

The first newspapers sprung up in Venice in 1566, with a focus on politics and military conflicts of the day, but it was 1609 before the first newspaper was printed on the revolutionary printing press. Capable of producing 4000 papers per day, the increase in production was a staggering 1000 times more than was previously possible. The paper, *Aller Furnemmen*, (*An Account of all Distinguished and Commemorable Stories*), was printed in secret from prying eyes, as all papers were government controlled (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

That all changed in 1644, when early influencer John Milton made a statement against the English government's control of books and newspapers, and the tide was turned. With Milton's *Areopagitica*, a carefully worded statement against publication censorship, the government ceded control of newspapers. Freedom led to more frequent publications, advertisement and market reports, and the role of journalists changed (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

Continued Growth

Jumping ahead 100 years and leaping continents, the first press release is thought to have come from New York's Columbia University in 1758 (Wilcox, 1998).

In another 100 years, the invention of the steam driven two-cylinder press made it possible to publish the first affordable "penny" paper, *The New York Sun*, in 1833. While the original printing press could print 125 papers an hour, the new version could print 18,000 copies in that time (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

By the time the penny press had been established, US President Andrew Jackson had hired the first American press secretary, former newspaper editor, Amos Kendal (Wilcox, 1998). It was the beginning of a trend in politics. Meanwhile, society grew with advances in industry, urbanization and social movements that included women's rights, antislavery and prohibition, many of which were fueled by publicity.

Wire Services Connect Cities and Journalism Diversifies

The telegraph, developed by Morse, arose on the scene in 1846. With its arrival came the formation of the Associated Press (AP), a cooperative of five major NY papers (University of Minnesota, n.d.), which subsequently led to the development of more wire services between major cities. The speed in which news could be communicated meant that editors had access to breaking news. Further, collaboration between papers is said have enabled more reliable reporting (University of Minnesota, n.d.). Newspapers garnered mass appeal for reliability, followed not far behind by the shadow side of journalism and the development of sensationalism encouraged by a rivalry between newspaper giants William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer.

Stability and Globalization

In 1900, the first publicity bureau opened in Boston. By this time, Marconi's famous signal advanced radio, soon to bring the first audio broadcasts into people's homes. A decade later, the Marconi company was responsible for a perfect marriage of PR and technology when it established a department to distribute news releases about its achievements in wireless technology (Wilcox, 1998).

By the end of WWI and WWII, press relations had developed into wartime propaganda and been rebranded as public relations. The field grew along with the booming post-war economy as globalization created an even greater need for companies to communicate with their diverse audience groups which could be separated by time zones and space from the communities in which the companies were located.

The Rapid Emergence of Technology at Work and at Home

The fax machine, like public relations, found footing in WWI when photoelectric cells made it practical for sending images and maps. In fact, the German military faxed artillery targets from airplanes by radio, the first application of wireless fax (Coopersmith, 2014).

By the early 1970s, there were an estimated 70,000 fax machines in use in the US; by 1980, the number had grown to 250,000. Ten years later, there were 5 million (Rhodes, B, 2020).

The first computers began to arrive in offices in the 1980s and saw a steady stream of advances, including the emergence of the World Wide Web in 1990. Access to and use of email continued to grow. The fax machine was on its way out. As computer technology advanced, internet use exploded, reaching 55 million users worldwide in 1997 and jumping to 400 million by 1999 (Phrasee, 2016). During this time, there were unprecedented changes to the way people worked and communicated.

Mara Bartolucci, AVP Institutional Advancement and Communications at the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, was working with major tech firms as these changes began to show up in the workplace. She recalls in 1991-1992, pulling a portable computer around Chicago for business, "It was as big as my suitcase with a 6x6 green screen. The keyboard

would clamp in and it would allow us to plug into the mainframe to access and corporate administration systems.” She could email others as long as they were using that mainframe. “When we first started teleconferencing, it cost about \$100,000 or more to implement. Today there are apps built into Office 365 that allow us to do it without huge capital investment. It happened in a very short time period.”

She recalls Blackberry as a real agent of change for their role in teaching users how to text, citing the early search engines as major game-changers as well. “Before that,” she says, “we had to use Boolean searches.”

Working with companies involved with CERN, she also recalls the discussions about convergence, though how that would manifest was uncertain before the iPhone arrived. Today, she says, you can do so much with much less effort. “You can find out about people and research anything before you need to talk to them.”

Social Media Begins to Shape Us

Social media platforms began to develop in 1997, with SixDegrees emerging as the first social-circle network model. More advanced platforms continue to emerge twenty years later, impacting the way we work and interact in as great a way as the printing press brought the pre-industrialized world into what we consider the modern age.

Here is an overview of some of the most impactful networking sites and influences that have driven and reinforced change:

LinkedIn

This professional networking site was launched in 2003 and has become an important platform for jobseekers. Apparently 48 per cent of all jobs on the site are posted exclusively on this platform (Darrell, n.d.). It boasts 300 million active users and 700 million members (Bump, 2020). Looking for a new position or an employee? LinkedIn is where you need to be. LinkedIn is said to make its users more honest, considering all their contacts can see their job histories and descriptions.

Facebook

Launched in 2004, Facebook is the largest social network in the world and claims more users, at 2.5 billion people, than there are inhabitants of China, the most densely populated country in the world. Put another way, if just India's Facebook users alone were to form a nation, it would be the fifth-most populated country globally (World Population Review, n.d.).

Since launching, Facebook has added nuances to the word "friend" and "like," and become a giant influencer, perhaps increasingly recognized for its darker side. In an interview with *The Atlantic* reporter Adrienne LaFrance (2020), Joshua Geltzer, a former White House counterterrorism official, said Facebook's size gives its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, an unprecedented degree of influence over the world. Geltzer believes the amount of control Zuckerberg can exercise by changing algorithms has a tremendous effect on people's cognition and beliefs.

Indeed, "Facebook has bragged about its ability to influence the outcome of elections. Unlawful militant groups use Facebook to organize. Government officials use Facebook to mislead their own citizens, and to tamper with elections. Military officials

have exploited Facebook's complacency to carry out genocide. Facebook inadvertently auto-generated jaunty recruitment videos for the Islamic State featuring anti-Semitic messages and burning American flags" (LaFrance, 2020).

YouTube

The single most visited website in the world, YouTube was launched in 2005, when its founders realized an opportunity to create a single place for sharing videos. After being sold to Google, its user base grew and it became an important platform for gaming and vlogging.

It's the second most popular channel for businesses to share their video content and the most popular search engine following Google. It boasts 2.3 billion users and receives an estimated 500 hours of video content every minute. In 2020, YouTube admitted to making over \$34 billion in advertising in three years (Tankovska, 2021).

Twitter

When Twitter emerged on the scene in 2006, it provided a platform for the lay journalist. Anyone with an account and followers could now report the news as they understood it. It was one of many changes stemming from the technical revolution that would impact the way people consumed the news and reduce our dependence on traditional media.

Twitter launched itself into popularity with the world's first Tweetwall at South by Southwest in 2007 (Luckerson, 2013), and gained a passionate user group that became involved in the development of some of its iconic characteristics including hashtags, the implementation of the @ symbol and the retweet. Twitter forced users to condense messages to 140 characters, a

limitation that remained until 2018, when the number was doubled to 280 to reduce the time required to think about tweets and which would serve to increase actual conversations (Luckerson, 2013). In 2021, Twitter boasted 192 million daily active users, though it trails behind Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest (Ling, 2021).

iPhone

Not only is social media playing a larger and larger role in our lives, but the devices and platforms themselves have influenced the way we communicate in writing (brief), even inspiring “text speak”- popular, short forms of words and commonly understood acronyms.

The introduction of Apple’s iPhone in 2007 created a focus on imagery that would shape culture and reinforce a trend in platforms that would showcase them. (Media and Culture, n.d.)

Instagram

Instagram was created to showcase photos taken on mobile phones, and launched with Apple in 2010. Taking only eight weeks to develop, it was an instant hit. When it launched October 6, 2010, it attracted 25,000 users that day (Blystone, 2020). With filters, hashtags, networking and more and more powerful cameras developed to feed it and other networking sites, it has continued to increase in popularity.

In 2019, the market research company eMarketer predicted that Instagram would reach 117.2 million users by 2021, while according to other estimates, its user base actually reached one billion this year (Barnhart, 2021).

Pinterest

Pinterest is an image sharing social media site that launched in 2010 and presently claims 340 million monthly active users globally (Hashmi, 2020).

It is widely used for sharing hobbies, recipes and images and is perhaps the least controversial and innocuous of the popular social media platforms.

The Wrap

As social media platforms continue to spring up, the common denominator, aside from digital networking, appears to be the emphasis on image and video. Bartolucci believes that fewer words can reduce meaning and nuance, creating the need for higher vigilance. “It’s easy for people to make mistakes online,” she says, “and start a conflict.”

In 2005, seven per cent of all American adults were on social media. By 2008, the number had increased to 25 per cent. Three years later, it had doubled to 50 per cent, and by 2015, 65 per cent of all American adults were online and networked (Pew Research, 2021). Worldwide, the number of people on social networking sites rose from under a billion in 2010 to 2.72 billion in 2019 (European Commission, n.d).

“Social media can work for good or bad,” says Bartolucci. “It can help cut through the messages, but can also be a large part of the noise. Since there is no governance, it becomes very difficult for those who aren’t extremely savvy as news consumers. People who have dangerous opinions are given a platform. Additionally, social media as curated content is troublesome.”

Bartolucci believes social media has led to a loss of honour and respect for professional communicators because the vehicles are widely available, and “everyone thinks they can do it.” She notes the difficulty in measuring what is actually read and taken in. “We measure popularity and that is supposed to tell us something. It doesn’t mean it’s a good product. It doesn’t measure value or sustainability. It’s become a popularity contest.”

Business Pressures Traditional Media

In the US, news media shrank 30 per cent between 2000 and 2013 (Kiefer, 2013). Canada has been subject to the same pressures, and the growth of social media along with the mergers of the media titans have impacted this country as well. Looking at just print journalism, in 1990, 17.3 per cent of daily newspapers were independently owned, a figure that shrank to six per cent by 2017. Mergers also led to a reduction in areas served, and between 2008 and 2019, the number of daily newspapers in Canada dropped from 139 to 75. Newspaper and magazine revenues were halved (CMCRP, 2019).

In addition to an already troublesome scenario, not only are there now fewer publications, but monopolies abound; notably, in New Brunswick, all of the newspapers are owned by the Irving family.

In terms of broadcasting, layoffs and reduced job security have beleaguered Canada’s national broadcaster, CBC/Radio-Canada, and mergers have left the private Canadian broadcasters in increasingly poor shape. In 2015, Bell owned 21.4 per cent of market share in Canada. The next leader was Shaw with 13.4 per cent, Rogers with 8.3 per cent, and Quebecor with 7.5 per cent (Watson, 2018).

The concentration of media ownership has drawn criticism from the Canadian public in the past 10 years over concerns, noted by Baluga (2014) that “media concentration is compromising the potential contributions of the media to public life.” In fact, the concerns go back decades; almost 20 years ago, the Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications launched a study of the Canadian news media, duplicating examinations by the Davey Committee in 1970 and the Kent Commission in 1981 over concerns of mergers. It has been noted that the recommendations of this study have never been implemented in a meaningful way (Media Concentration in Canada, n.d.).

With little regulation, large media companies continue to control the flow of information from traditional news sources, which continue to dwindle. While this article was being researched, on February 3, 2021, Bell Media announced a round of cuts that stand to impact “hundreds of employees” across Canada (Bliss, 2021). Additionally, in March 2021, Rogers announced it was to acquire Shaw for \$26 billion, in a move reported by Jordan (2021) that official overseers have committed to “probing.” These large corporations make it difficult for smaller, independent companies to compete and survive.

What is all this Doing?

The ubiquity of social media platforms, the diminishing traditional media and potential reduction in journalistic standards impacts us all on many levels.

Speed of Light Responses

Perhaps one of the most glaring differences between the media climate of the late 90s and today is the swiftness through which the public digests and responds to information. Or perhaps digest is being too generous, as the response time for any admonishments, particularly call outs

on social media, has diminished from days to minutes and makes crisis management an even greater challenge.

A noticeable groupthink mentality appears to have emerged, encouraged by the anonymity of the internet. This phenomenon has also affected the type of response required, in addition to its swiftness. Bartolucci feels that reputations can be made or ruined in a matter of minutes.

Self Publishing

Journalist Faeza Dawood runs her own social media channel. She shares her struggles with the speed and power of self-publishing:

My website and YouTube channel gives me a great amount of professional freedom in terms of time and content, but exercising responsibility toward the viewer is an ongoing struggle, and that means resisting the temptation of pressing the YouTube 'Go Live' button at free will.

I have to assert my professional judgement as a reporter, cameraman, editor and producer to retain credibility. There is an underlying concern for aspiring journalists though. For no fault of their own, they are operating in a virtually 'free for all' zone when it comes to using social media (Dawood, 2018).

Dawood also acknowledges that “social media now dictates journalistic norms to a great extent,” adding that “Many seasoned journalists today ask 'what happened to good old-fashioned journalism?' It was a passion that motivated journalists to find scoops, dig deeper and weigh every word several times before publishing or broadcasting.”

Bartolucci believes that many reporters have become irresponsible and reactive, moving pieces of news around, the result of which is the obfuscation of the truth. “They create muddy water,” she says, “and data is now being pulled, not pushed out. People are receiving targeted content and sometimes very slanted views.”

As can already be seen on some websites, robots are moving into journalistic spaces. In some cases, managing voice overs for journalists, and, in some unfortunate cases, writing for them. According to a 2019 report in Business Wire, news agencies are using them for writing, infographics, dynamic video and more (Deleuse, 2019).

Story Size

With more users accessing sites with their phones, mobile is driving optimization and leading to a decrease in the average length of a news article. According to Liao (2016), there is a general decrease of the 500-to-700-word stories in favor of either very short (less than 300) words or long, engaging stories of over 1000 words.

Trust for Traditional Media

Since 2001, Edelman Public Relations has been publishing an annual Trust Barometer, surveying and reporting on the attitudes of more than 33,000 respondents in 27 countries relating to government, business, media and NGOs.

In 2020-2021, according to the survey, both social and traditional media have lost public trust. Traditional media, which started the year with a much greater level of trust than social media, lost eight percentage points, while social media lost five per cent.

Globally, 59 per cent of those surveyed reported a belief that journalists were purposely misleading their audiences through lies and exaggerations. The same number believe that the majority of news outlets are more concerned with ideology than informing the public. In terms of their ability to remain objective and non-partisan, 61 per cent do not believe the media is doing a good job. (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021)

From a media perspective, Edelman has shown that 75 per cent of journalists feel pressure to create content that has the potential to go viral, and may lead with sensationalist slants for that reason. There may be a relationship to increasing fake news (Liao, 2016).

Trust in Social Media?

Of the 33,000 people surveyed in the Edelman Barometer, 57 per cent of respondents share or forward news items that they find to be interesting. Of those, only 29 per cent have what Edelman describes as good information hygiene, meaning that they are normally engaged in reading the news; that they avoid information echo chambers, (reading only what supports their current opinions); and that they verify the information and do not amplify unvetted information.

In 2017, Kanter reported that “fake news” was damaging trust in social media sources, as demonstrated in a survey across Brazil, France, UK and US in relation to election coverage (Business Wire, 2017).

Despite the proclaimed distrust, a Pew Research report in 2018 stated that one in five American adults often get news via social media, a slightly higher ratio than those who report receiving

their news from newspapers (16 per cent). This was the first instance of social media surpassing print media as a news source in the US (Shearer, 2018).

Blurred Lines

Shelagh O'Donnell, a senior practitioner with the Ontario Tourism Education Corporation, says that social media has blurred the lines between casual bloggers and journalists, and that it has made hosting high-profile media events more challenging in terms of vetting who should be granted access. "It used to be very straightforward to determine who was an accredited journalist, when reporters from mainstream news outlets worked specialized beats and just showed their press cards at the door," she says. "Today, with the plethora of independent online journalists and bloggers, it requires a closer look to determine who the top influencers are based on their impact and reach."

In terms of issues management, O'Donnell says it can be more complex now in terms of deciding what to respond to. "Before social media," she says, "when you were dealing with negative perception, it was more straightforward to gauge your response based on how or where the perception surfaced. Today it is more difficult. Digital and social media comments can rapidly escalate, making it more challenging to discern whether to just let something die down and not fan the flames, or whether it may develop into a larger issue if not addressed quickly."

How Can a Practitioner Pivot?

In an environment of shrinking journalists, reduced trust and an increasing social media presence, how can PR practitioners put their best foot forward? Taking stock of the current climate has yielded innovative models, business ideas, common sense and practical

applications to the traditional public relations model as circumstances have dictated.

To conclude, the following is a look at the creative and adaptive public relations solutions to the pressures and opportunities resulting from the last two decades of rapid technological and socioeconomical changes.

PESO

In 2014, the concept of PESO was introduced by Gini Dietrich in *Spin Sucks*. It stands for Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned, the four types of media that should be considered when promoting a product, service or idea; this incorporates traditional marketing tactics such as advertising (Paid), traditional media relations (Earned). Social media (Shared), and media and collateral produced through blogs and other marketing material (Owned). O'Donnell says that she refers back to this model constantly, finding her client-side work much less siloed than it may have been in the past. "Ideally, with Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), you have all four channels working together to deliver the strongest message possible. It's a much more strategic way of working."

HARO

According to Mark LaVigne in *Proactive Media Relations: A Canadian Perspective (2020)*, as far back as 2005, journalists were far too busy for phone calls and generally preferred email. Today, many have moved beyond email, and are reaching out through social media with queries.

Peter Shankman took it a step further in 2007, when he launched Help a Reporter Out (HARO). A reversal of the media release, HARO is based on the concept of media catching. In response

to a diminishing number of journalists compared to PR practitioners, HARO provides a platform on which a reporter casts out a story idea or subject and waits to find out what kind of response he or she receives from the public relations practitioners subscribed to the service.

After 14 years, HARO continues to thrive. It is little wonder, considering that according to the Canadian Media Concentration Research Project (CMCRP), in 1987 there were four people working in the publicity business for every journalist, while in 2019, the imbalance had ballooned to an astonishing 15:1 (CMCRP, 2019).

HARO is considered to be a great way for a practitioner to garner some high stakes ink and begin to build the kind of relationship that works for busy journalists and themselves.

Maintain Relationships

O'Donnell says her most successful strategies have involved really tailoring her pitch and doing as much of the work as possible. "The days of simply writing a news release and sending it on the wires are long gone. It's blood, sweat and tears!"

"Sometimes you have to help build the story," she says, recalling the hours she put in to gain national coverage for a story for the CNIB:

The journalist I worked with was very prescriptive. I spent hours helping her build a story with content and interviews that she felt her producer would green light for national coverage. We worked like partners, the subject got national attention and really moved the needle in terms of getting government attention for our charitable cause. It was time well spent resulting in coverage and awareness that simply could not have been purchased, and from that time forward, I've had a solid relationship with that reporter.

O'Donnell believes in investing time to understand how journalists work, to build their trust and make their jobs easier with meaningful and substantive content. "That way," she says, "they will keep coming back to you."

Go Local

Wendy Vincent, partner at Konvo Media, has been practicing media relations for over 20 years. She recalls the rich ecosystem of journalists with whom she developed relationships when she was working for CBC, and with niche clients in the hip-hop and spoken word areas of the arts in the late 1990s.

She was working at the Royal Ontario Museum many years and cutbacks later, when two Discovery Planet programs, *Daily Planet* and *Innerspace*, were cut by their parent company, Bell, and remembers the impact it had on her work at that time.

"Losing the *Daily Planet* was a blow at first, but unfortunately, similar to other changes in the media landscape, we had to take a deep breath and move along, albeit with holes in our database," says Vincent. "We waited to see where the producer contacts landed, and if said contact would resurface somewhere with an interest in editorial about the ROM. These were relationships to maintain and leverage. This is where the 'relations' in the media relations comes in. Giving a news tip about latest ROM happenings to a newly reassigned producer would go a long way toward fortifying career credibility."

Despite the ongoing cutbacks in the media, Vincent says she has found her niche in and around her community in Durham, Ontario. “It’s hyperlocal,” she says, though she doesn’t limit herself and continues to work in Toronto and abroad.

Although she has a generous following on her own social media accounts, Vincent says she doesn’t engage that much in social media. She says she does see newer reporters reach out on the social platforms, but feels uneasy about the trend and still prefers to pick up the phone.

Become an Expert on Metrics

O’Donnell believes the growing emphasis on social media and digital content makes communicators more focused on metrics. She recalls the days when publishing a piece on the front page of a major paper was meaningful in of itself, while today, Media Ratings Points and Google Analytics have become more prominent discussion points. Their ability to provide analysis of variables including tone, quality and impressions provides more of the kind of evaluation that she believes organizations require from their marketing communications teams.

Learn to Thrive in a Crisis

Building expertise in issues management and crisis communications within this environment is helpful to anyone working in public relations. Build up your toolkit and be prepared should anything come up in our extended virtual environment. Take extra care in media monitoring and get comfortable with the judgement calls that may make the difference between the loss of reputation and a quick and judicious response.

Build Your Own Following

To exist in business or anywhere these days generally requires a decent social media presence. Having your own following as a practitioner can also be a strength. Consider putting in the extra time to build followers on your own professional account. It will give you a platform when you need it, provide a barometer for social temperature and keep your tech skills nimble as the changes continue to whirl and carry us forward.

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