

BABEL



TELCO'S 2021 VISION

*The Impact of Covid-19 on Marketing and Media Relations -
From the Journalists That Matter*

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INTRO

Over the past 18 months, the mix of covid-19, global lockdowns, and the rapid switch to digital everything / everywhere / any time, has forced businesses to adopt different approaches to reach their target audiences. This has included the telecoms industry, a sector Babel has long represented, and the media which cover it. We therefore set out to examine how the landscape has impacted telecoms journalists during the first half of 2021, how the decision to move Mobile World Congress has impacted news cycles, and - crucially - how PRs can best engage with them in our current climate.

To understand this, we sat down with some of the most influential journalists in the space: Scott Bicheno, editorial director at Telecoms.com, Iain Morris, news editor at Light Reading, Keith Dyer, founder and editor of The Mobile Network, and Harry Baldock, news editor at Total Telecom. They shared a host of interesting insights and shone a light on how the last 18 months of lockdowns have

impacted PR and journalist dynamics.

One key change felt across all sectors is the speed at which digitalisation has accelerated - which in turn has impacted how people want to consume content. Scott Bicheno of Telecoms.com, for instance, told us that the publication's podcast has been doing well. Like many trade titles today, Telecoms.com (as the name suggests) is digital-only which, he said, gives it "the advantage of being able to track which stories are read most, so, naturally, we are more inclined to cover the popular topics."

Iain Morris, Bicheno's podcast partner in crime, agrees, highlighting the "move to so-called digital formats like podcasts and video-based interviews" as a top tech trend over the past 18 months. This was also echoed by Total Telecom's Harry Baldock, who revealed his outlet has seen an increased demand for video content, together with increased viewership and longer digital engagement times for digital content. Baldock observed, however, that - as with written content - there's a potential for oversaturation and fatigue, making it particularly important to be creative and strike a balance with different content types.



NO (LONGER) SUCH A THING AS A FREE LUNCH?



The changing format for engaging both journalists and the wider market was also a key topic of conversation, as global lockdowns continue to force businesses to adopt different approaches to engage stakeholders. [Virtual events](#) have been in, while journalist lunches have been out, much to the sadness of both journos and PR professionals. When asked about how the pandemic has changed the way PRs engage with press, Keith Dyer, of The Mobile Network was quick to respond: “Fewer drinks invites!” Iain Morris of Light Reading admits too that “I have seen hardly any PRs since the pandemic started (Babel is a rare exception).”

The same seems to apply to meeting with telecoms businesses. However, it's worth noting that this may be a missed opportunity. Morris told us, “I am happy to meet anyone at any

time and have been for months, but I sense companies are still wary of holding face-to-face meetings and I'm not convinced that will change soon.” Telecoms firms: get those journalist meeting invites in the post ASAP!

Despite forced cancellations of events, postponed meet-ups and multiple let-downs, there was one determined drumbeat we heard throughout H1. In fact, for many in telecoms it was probably the phrase we heard most often, but were most skeptical of: MWC21 is happening. Yes, it took place with much reduced footfall, and yes, many of the big names weren't there in-person this year. But the Fira still opened its doors and – bar the covid restrictions – many of us were still able to meet with customers, partners, media,, and vendors during the June event.



*I have seen hardly any PRs
since the pandemic started
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MWC OPENS A NEW ERA FOR HYBRID EVENTS

Events like these have traditionally been key points in the year for marketers and media alike. They've offered opportunities to network with communicators and take the temperature of the media landscape, get a feel for how your company is reaching its target audience, and find out what you can do to better get your voice heard through the channels that matter to you. However, note the use of 'traditionally': while MWC went ahead, it was hybrid in form, with massively reduced numbers wandering quietly through eerily cavernous halls.

Is this the future of the trade show? Has covid-19 changed the format forever? "Absolutely," thinks Baldock. Yet that's no bad thing: "While virtualised events cannot truly replicate a live event experience, especially when it comes to networking, the quality of these experiences is improving rapidly as the industry becomes more adept."

There's no doubt that the hybrid model needs some work though. In a recent discussion with Tom Seal, reporter at Bloomberg, he told me that while he did find it possible to join some of the major conferences and keynotes at

MWC, he was unable to craft a story with an exclusive angle as there was no opportunity easy way to ask questions or interview the speakers after the sessions. Furthermore, he said that some sessions that he wanted to attend, he couldn't. As a result, he covered news from the show much less than previous years.

Iain Morris also believes that the postponement of MWC and the hybrid nature of the event means that it's more difficult for journalists to find interesting stories. Delaying the event, said Morris, "meant looking for stories elsewhere." He continued: "the cancellation of physical events, including smaller press conferences, has forced journalists to either be more proactive in finding stories or simply regurgitate what the newswires and national publications are writing."

It's clear that journalists still get more when they can craft their own stories and interview executives face-to-face. For that reason, any question of whether live events will die out is likely to be put to bed, with MWC's postponement underscoring just how much journalists want to be in the thick of the action.



WHAT'S DRIVING THE NEWS AGENDA?



Even during the June show, fewer exhibitors meant fewer stories. There was one big item driving the news agenda, though, and that was the role of the public cloud in telecoms. News from AT&T that it is building its 5G core network on Google Cloud, generated many headlines during the week of MWC. And of course, TelcoDR - a Babel client - had the most popular stand at the show this year - Cloud City - which showcased some of the greatest innovations in public cloud technology in telecoms. TelcoDR's activities and bold opinions during and around MWC caught the attention of both trade media and nationals across the globe.

Outside of the cloud, a number of key themes have been firmly fixed on the radar of trade titles throughout the covid-19 period. Morris mentions "open RAN, 5G plus telco and vendor strategy" as of particular interest to Light Reading readers.

Whatever the trends are now and into the future, what's of particular interest to Bicheno, he said, is "how operators are adapting to changing ecosystems, whether that's the deployment private networks for novel vertical partners (i.e., manufacturing, healthcare, and aviation) or the growing development of Open RAN as an

alternative to the traditional vendor ecosystem." This was echoed by Dyer, who stated his interest lies in "new vendor innovation in mobile networks, evidence of changing network operator business models, and insight into mobile operator network investments."

At the start of the year, we held [an online event with Ray Le Maistre](#), editorial director at TelecomTV and previously editor-in-chief at Light Reading. Le Maistre said that "Energy efficiency and power supply - the topic of sustainability - is becoming a very big deal in the strategies of all large (telecoms) companies." He continued: "We have a specific channel for sustainability and for a reason."

Le Maistre highlighted that we need more use cases and solid examples of the industry differentiating what 5G can deliver, versus what could be delivered by 4G. He also wants to hear more about operators branching beyond their traditional business areas, citing Orange's move into banking, Telstra selling renewable energy to consumers and SK Telecom becoming a deliverer of Amazon products. Diversification strategies are incredibly important and can provide an interesting and unique story for the media.

**“ Is this the future of the trade show?
Has covid-19 changed the format forever?
Absolutely. ”**

TELLING TALES

The topics of the stories telcos tell are not the only thing that matters to the media. It's also about how telcos tell them. Le Maistre commented that, with any content, it's critical that companies effectively communicate the impact of whatever the topic is upon three key areas: people, technology, money. Anyone who comes with a pitch which details all three will definitely get a briefing, he said.

Expanding on the point of how best to communicate stories, Le Maistre warned against using jargon. Most marketers know they shouldn't do it, that it doesn't read well

for journalists or their audiences (is it really a 'world-first?' How many times have we read about an 'innovative' solution? etc.), so why is it that tech jargon continues to find its way into so many telco press releases? Instead, brands need to talk about money, investments, ROI, and tech strategy in a detailed and easy to communicate way. If you have this in the bag, you'll get coverage, said Le Maistre. And while the traditional press release still has its place in a PR strategy, Le Maistre also highlighted the value of video resources and data-rich infographics in conveying stories.

TAILOR YOUR MESSAGE TO DELIVER VALUE

Thinking outside of the press release box, avoiding jargon and thinking 'people, technology, money' is only one part of it, though. The other 'must do' is to tailor the pitch to the specific remit of the journalist. It may sound obvious, but in conversations with our journalist friends, it's something which is far too often overlooked by telco marketers and PR agencies alike. In Bicheno's experience, "PRs know very little about the job of the journalist. This is evidenced by the generally weak and generalised nature of pitches and press releases I receive."

Whether meetings take place virtually or in-person; whether news is shared via a press release or during an in-person meeting; whether new relationships are struck up in a corridor at a tradeshow or in a Slack break-out

room: Bicheno's perspective (and indeed that held by much of the telco trades) highlights the importance of solid media relations, partnering with an experienced PR agency, and working with professionals with a deep understanding of both the telco sector and the telco press. Messaging should be targeted; tailored to both the journalist and their readers; and should always deliver value to both of these parties. The interviews that follow will offer tips and tricks for helping brands ensure that they do just that. Leading editors and journalists from the UK's most prominent tech trade titles share how the landscape has changed for them during the first half of the year, what the future holds for tradeshow, and how PRs and marketers can best engage with them to get their voices heard.

-Paul Campbell, Director, Babel

“

...brands need to talk about money, investments, ROI, and tech strategy in a detailed and easy to communicate way.

”





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SCOTT BICHENO, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, TELECOMS.COM

Which stories are you most interested in at the moment and why?

5G, OpenRAN, kit vendors, geopolitics, regulation. As a news-led publication we are entirely concerned with stories we think will be of greatest interest to our audience on a given day. Being entirely digital we also have the advantage of being able to track which stories are read most so, naturally, we are more inclined to cover the popular topics. As the list implies, our audience is most interested in the overarching topics and narratives that affect the telecoms industry on the whole.

What advice would you give to vendors looking to get cut through in Telecoms.com?

Do interesting things. That may seem glib and unhelpful, but it really is as simple as that. Unless they're of seismic significance product launches, deal wins, appointments, impending webinars, and anything else that may get you brownie points from the VP of marketing, but is of zero significance to anyone outside the company, are not interesting.

How has the GSMA's decision to move MWC to June 2021 impacted the news cycle?

Definitely gave us less to write about. Superficially it simply delayed the MWC focus but the fact that this year's event is destined to be a shadow of pre-pandemic ones is of far greater significance. What will there be to write about? What incentive is there for journalists to endure the considerable hassle of travelling to Barcelona? I like the public cloud as much as the next person but the prospect of being evangelised to by a succession of vested interests just isn't adequate compensation for everything else that will be missing.

Are you as inclined to take virtual briefings as you are in-person briefings?

No, but I'm not really a fan of briefings at all.

What can companies do to ensure you get value from virtual briefings?

Say something newsworthy that I can't get from a press release.

What's something most PRs get wrong about your role?

They don't know anything about it. To expand, it's my experience that PRs know very little about the job of the journalist. This is evidenced by the generally weak and generalised nature of pitches and press releases I receive. Even a decade ago companies went out of their way to get to know the journalists that covered them but no longer, and it's an exceptional agency that bothers to meet journalists these days. In many ways the severing of the connection between companies and journalists greatly simplifies my job, however, as I just write what I want, unencumbered by 'relationships' with the subjects of my stories.



IAIN MORRIS, NEWS EDITOR, LIGHT READING

Which stories are you most interested in at the moment and why?

Still covering everything as the generalist at Light Reading, but especially interested in public cloud, open RAN, 5G plus telco and vendor strategy. Those are all hot topics and interesting from a geopolitics perspective to readers as well, while monitoring the big firms on the vendor and service provider side aligns with the interests of our audience, too.

What advice would you give to vendors looking to get cut through in Light Reading?

Smaller vendors are interesting where they seem especially disruptive and we've run a few pieces recently on open RAN startups for this reason – so that is definitely an entry point. Companies that have something interesting to say are always worth hearing out but everyone is excited about their own sales pitch so we have to be careful there. Clearly, if companies have made some headway with a Tier 1 service provider there is more scope for writing about them.

Are you seeing increased demand for digital content (e.g. podcasts, videos etc)?

We are - I know the Telecoms.com podcast that is done on Fridays is very popular and has helped to raise the profile of both sites.

How has the GSMA's decision to move MWC to June 2021 impacted the news cycle?

It has meant looking for stories elsewhere, mainly. I think generally over the pandemic the cancellation of physical events, including smaller press conferences, has forced journalists to either be more proactive in finding stories or simply regurgitate what the newswires and national publications are writing.

Are you as inclined to take virtual briefings as you are in-person briefings?

Definitely – it depends on the topic and company rather than the format and it's often more convenient to do it this way. What you miss at events, I think, is access to senior executives in the same place at the same time, as well as presentations and conferences. You also miss those casual meetings and chats that can't be scheduled and that occasionally lead to the best stories.

What can companies do to ensure you get value from virtual briefings?

One thing they can avoid doing is dedicating too much time to presentations and not allowing enough for Q&A and that occasionally happens with the shift to Zoom rather than a simple phone call.

Do you think the trade show format will be fundamentally changed as a result of the pandemic?

Unfortunately, yes. I think smaller and more specialized events will probably bounce back and believe there is still an appetite for the trade show, but I'm not that optimistic we'll see in excess of 100,000 visitors at MWC again. And I think one problem is company management questioning the need for these events. Deals got done last year in the absence of MWC.

How has the pandemic changed how PRs engage with you?

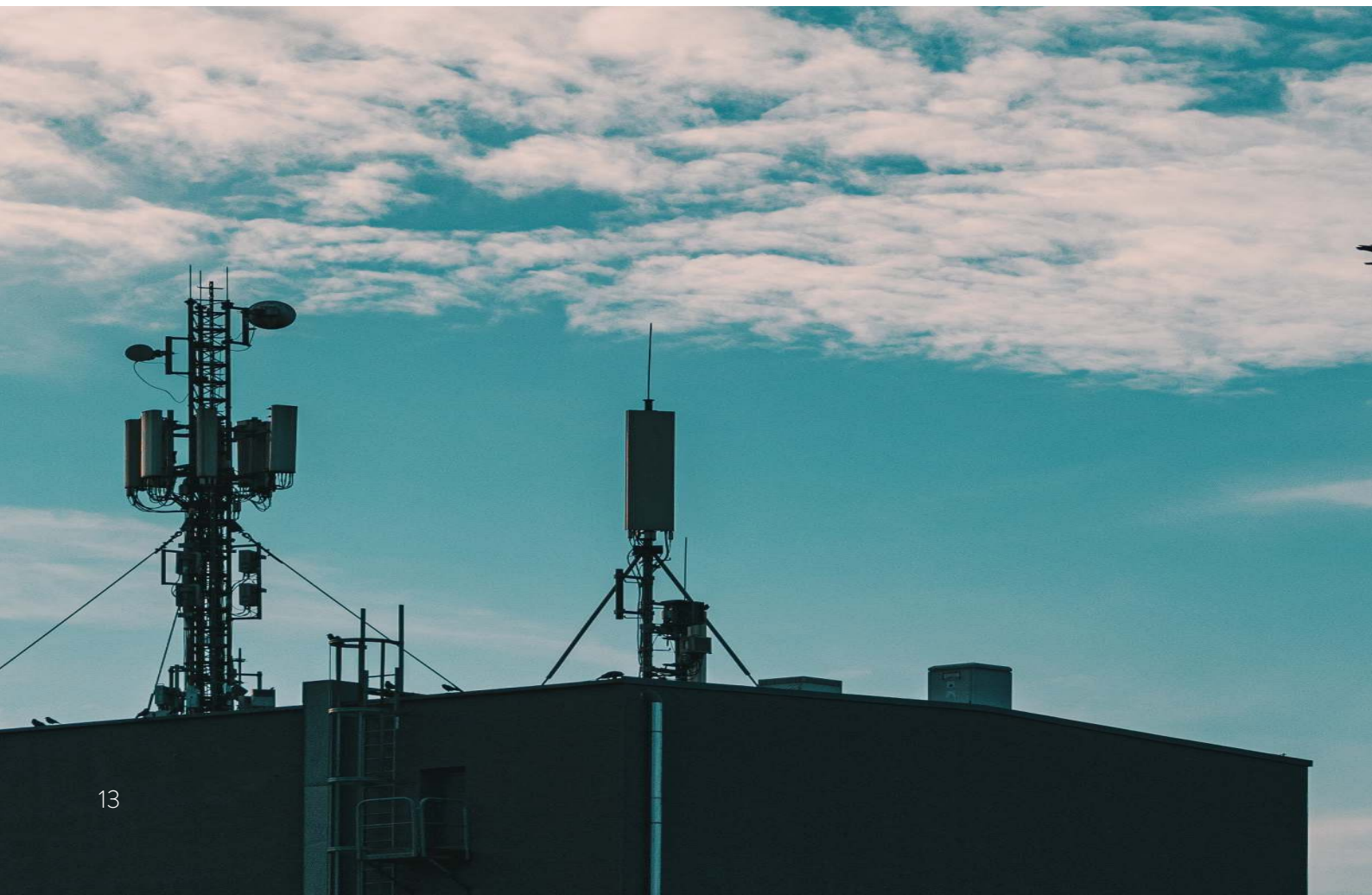
It hasn't, massively, because it was largely email- and phone-based anyway, but I have seen hardly any PRs since the pandemic started (Babel is a rare exception).

What's the biggest mistake you've seen PRs make over the past year?

I actually think PRs have done a pretty good job on the whole (not just saying that!), although it's true that some people I used to engage with on a face-to-face basis have been very quiet. I suppose you could say that is a mistake – not stepping up on the phone or email side as a substitute, although there has been relatively little of it and I can understand why PRs don't want to bombard journalists with emails and phone calls.

What's something most PRs get wrong about your role?

I think probably not appreciating who our core audience is – telecom network people interested in fairly specific network topics. There are lots of PRs that send emails about tech companies that are really tangential to what we do. That's fairly commonplace.





KEITH DYER, FOUNDER & EDITOR, THE MOBILE NETWORK

Which stories are you most interested in at the moment and why?

New vendor innovation in mobile networks, evidence of changing network operator business models, insight into mobile operator network investments.

What advice would you give to vendors looking to get cut through in TMN?

Think about the messages: How are you helping mobile network operators (or their technology suppliers) meet the challenges they face? Why should a network or OEM CTO or someone in their office care about what you are saying?

Has your audience changed in any way over the past year?

It's grown. We've also seen a lot more engagement for assets like market Reports, whitepapers etc.

How has the pre-MWC period differed this year from previous years?

It's been a lot quieter in the build up. Seems to have taken the sting out of the New Year rush.

What can companies do to ensure you get value from virtual briefings?

Keep them short and targeted – what are you here to say? Avoid packing them with 3-4 execs vs one journalist, don't use it as an opportunity to step through a company .ppt.

How has the pandemic changed how PRs engage with you?

Not a lot. Fewer drinks invites!

What's the biggest mistake you've seen PRs make over the past year?

You've all been wonderful. I suppose a few too many pandemic hooks on the story pitches, "In the light of Covid" etc but that's to be expected and probably client- driven anyway.



“ How are you helping mobile network operators meet the challenges they face? ”



HARRY BALDOCK, NEWS EDITOR, TOTAL TELECOM

Which stories are you most interested in at the moment and why?

I think there are many hot topics in the telecoms industry right now. 5G, of course, can be very exciting, especially when it comes to specific use cases. However, the technology is still in its infancy and is broadly overhyped - in many cases, these use cases being 'unlocked' by 5G don't really need it and could instead be achieved over LTE.

Personally, I think the most interesting process to observe right now is how operators are adapting to changing ecosystems, whether that's the deployment of private networks for novel vertical partners (i.e., manufacturing, healthcare, and aviation), or the growing development of Open RAN as an alternative to the traditional vendor ecosystem.

What advice would you give to vendors looking to get cut through in Total Telecom?


Be succinct, be engaging, and tell us what you are doing differently from your competitors. Sometimes the best stories are not those with the biggest brands or services behind them, but those that showcase a unique approach to a common challenge.

Are you seeing increased demand for digital content (e.g. podcasts, videos etc)?

Yes, we have definitely seen a demand for video content increase throughout the lockdown period, with increased viewership and longer engagement times for digital content. As with written content, however, there is a potential for oversaturation and fatigue when it comes to digital content, so it's important to be creative and try to strike a balance of content types.

Do you think the trade show format will be fundamentally changed as a result of the pandemic?

Absolutely. While virtualised events cannot truly replicate a live event experience, especially when it comes to networking, the quality of these experiences is improving rapidly as the industry becomes more adept. It also offers some unique advantages, such as improved accessibility. I think we will see trade shows increasingly take a hybrid approach to their events, trying to combine the best qualities of both live and virtual experiences.



**“ Be succinct, be engaging,
and tell us what you are
doing differently... ”**



ABOUT

BABEL

**WE UNDERSTAND.
WE CREATE.
WE DELIVER.**

Babel is a highly experienced telecoms PR agency. During our 15 years in operation, we've worked with dozens of telecoms companies, from RAN to core vendors, network assurance and testing providers, and wholesale carriers.

Recent Babel clients include some of the industry's biggest brands, such as Ciena, Amdocs, Orange, BICS and VIAVI, as well as start-ups and mid-sized brands, such as TelcoDR, Parallel Wireless and Cohere Technologies.

We've helped create campaigns focussing on some of the most important technologies and issues across the mobile and fixed broadband sectors – from 5G (NSA and SA), to OpenRAN, FTTX, the digital divide, IoT, M-MIMO, cloud adoption, network sustainability and infrastructure sharing. We know the telecoms sector – including the journalists, analysts and the issues driving change within the industry – better than anyone.

We provide complete communications solutions for telecoms brands through a three-pillar process, focused on delivering business impact. We immerse ourselves in our clients' business, getting to know their market drivers, differentiators, and competitive landscape, and use these insights to create campaigns that produce meaningful results.

To find out how Babel can help drive results for your business, please contact Paul Campbell:

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