



Internet
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Future Trends Working Group

Future Trends Volume 7: The future of social

Introduction

It's not easy predicting the future of social media. Not many people can honestly say they saw Facebook's acquisition of Whatsapp coming for example. The growth of the medium over the last few years has appeared at times so random that accurate prophecies are hard to come by.

In this latest instalment of white papers from members of the IAB's Future Trends Council, contributors from a range of companies including Future Foundation, Partners Andrews Aldridge, TMW, CEG Europe and of course the IAB offer their thoughts about key recent trends which shine a light on where the medium is heading.

In his official statement on the Whatsapp acquisition, Mark Zuckerberg explained that Facebook's mission is "to make the world more open and connected". Only time will tell how the big and small players in the social landscape will contribute to this global trend for increased openness and connectedness. Hopefully this paper will help to highlight some key trends to watch as social media marches on.

Stuart Aitken
Editorial Manager
IAB UK

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Are you human or are you social?

Karen Canty, Head of News at Future Foundation, takes a look at some key trends powering the future of social media.

The meteoric rise of social media has been well documented over the past decade. Social networking is a majority activity in all global markets researched by Future Foundation. In 2013, 67% of the UK population engaged with social networks – forecast to rise to more than three quarters by 2020. Mobile social networking goes from strength to strength – more than 40% in the UK use smartphones to access their social networks, predicted to rise to 72% in 2020 (nVision).

And this is all happening while the industry daddies are barely out of short trousers - Facebook is just 10 years old, with a current valuation of around \$100bn and a global usership of 835m. Twitter entered the fray in 2006 – its value now hovers around the \$14bn mark. Even niche newcomers like Snapchat and Instagram are scaling the heights of popularity at a hitherto unknown pace.

So what does the future hold? Can social networks really continue to grow at this breakneck pace? Is there room for innovation? How do consumers feel about it? What about monetisation? And how on earth can brands keep up?

First, it is worth noting that interest in and usage of social networks seems to be reaching a plateau. According to nVision, 45% in the UK say they are using social media less than a year ago – and there are also reports that numbers of teen social networkers are declining (counterbalanced by a steady growth in older users – we predict a 26% growth in 65+ social networkers by 2020). So while we don't believe social networking is going to disappear, we may well be starting to see evidence of fragmentation, with room for diversification, innovation and change.

The power of anon

Anonymity and privacy, and the sorts of controversy awakened by the NSA revelations, will become key focal points of social media in the coming years. The permanent, traceable, public shareathon that has been so bountiful for brands will evolve as consumers increasingly seek selective invisibility. There are many valid reasons for consumers to cover their online tracks: taking the embarrassment out of complaining, seeking delicate medical advice, avoiding targeted advertising – these will all continue to grow in importance and alter the landscape for brand engagement.

As the sharing culture driven by social networking matures, we will also see consumers growing less tolerant of being bombarded with irrelevant posts from other networkers and brands. Over-sharing is becoming culturally gauche and many will grow acutely demanding of the quality of their online connections, focusing on those that are genuinely relevant, entertaining and purposeful – and hiding from or cutting out those that aren't.

We see a growing role for private networks, where sharing can be smart, specific and tailored without compromising anonymity; and of filtered social feeds of information to provide access to advice and recommendation on a case-by-case, personalised basis.

Even the business of perfecting one's online image is a form of anonymity. Our trend Performative Perfection explores how we are increasingly striving to perform a perfect self at all times - not just how we look but also how we have fun, interact with others, even define our successes in life. Perhaps hiding in the anonymous shadows of the web may become the only place we can express our true selves.

Personal net growth

In a persistently uncertain economy, we are seeing growing evidence that the savviest citizens are harnessing online channels for personal and professional development: accruing new skill-sets, broadcasting their expertise and building a picture of themselves as thoroughly employable people.

Professional sites like LinkedIn and Jobster help propel employees to new professional heights. Crowd-funding sites like Kickstarter and Kiss Kiss Bank Bank help start-ups and entrepreneurs fund their dreams. Websites like London-based The Amazings allow older citizens to share their talents and pass on skills to younger generations.

It is not much of a leap, therefore, to imagine a future where the quality of our personal networks becomes a powerful biog-asset, with employers seriously impressed by just how many people an applicant knows and by the richness of their social interaction with them. This is a world where networks power social capital to become labour market capital.

Narrative data

Native marketing is the buzzword du jour in marketing circles, with social media providing the perfect platform for an endless stream of offers for consumers to personalise, co-create, be part of the journey, engage engage engage! But how much of this do consumers really want? Where is the threshold between enough and too much? What role does Big Data play in making best use of the information being created about and by consumers?

To date, native is often just about the story – but the true native reaches the native needs of the consumer. The story comes to life because of the people who consume it, rather than those who create it. The brand, in other words, is just a prop. And if you plug networked data in to this (the strings of information that emanate from our connected devices and social networks), you start to see how permission based, Big Data driven, native appeal campaigns will create genuinely useful, engaging, insightful stories about our lives.

Narrative Data is Big Data made personal: it means individual insight and self-exploration on a previously unseen personal level.

The future is wearable

Tim Elkington, Director of Research & Strategy at the IAB, explains why wearable technology and the internet of things will play a key role in the evolution of social media.

Classmates, Friends Reunited and Bebo. The history of social media is littered with networking sites that once ruled the roost but have since fallen by the wayside to be replaced by the behemoths of Facebook and Twitter, which seem to have an unassailable grip on social media eyeballs. But where next for social media? Surely if we can learn anything from the past then it is that sites within this space will rise and fall - and change.

It's unlikely that the current social media landscape represents its full maturity. But what will drive future developments in this space? Just as Facebook has rapidly adapted to mobile usage to the point that more than 50% of its revenue comes from mobile devices, the next wave of advances in social media will be driven by changes in technology and in particular two things – wearable technology and the internet of things.

Wearable technology gives social media applications and sites the ability to go hyper-local, possibly through proximity technology that could allow people who don't know each other, but who share interests, to meet at events like conferences and festivals. Wearable technology could also further enhance people's relationships with brands by combining the current engagement they have with brands via social media with location based services available through mobile.

[Business Insider](#) estimates that by 2018, 9 billion 'things' will be connected to the internet, roughly equal to the number of smartphones, TVs, tablets, wearable computers and PCs combined.

What will happen if social media goes beyond people and household devices (such as the much used internet connected fridge example) are pre-loaded with their own social media identities and profiles? Imagine inviting someone to dinner and discovering that their fridge had talked to your fridge about which starter would go best with your main course and ordered the appropriate ingredients.

A network of connected devices with social media profiles with a person sitting at its centre might seem a long way off, but then the world that we inhabit now that can [generate up to 150,000 tweets per second](#) probably seemed far-fetched to the founder of Friends Reunited when they were initially brainstorming in Barnet in 1999, some 15 years ago.

The future of social search

Chris Buckley, Director of Digital Engagement at TMW, outlines some key developments in the world of social search – and explains the role of Google+ within the Google search experience.

In order to grasp where the concept of social search is going we need to start by understanding where we are now. As we all know, “social search is a type of web search that takes into account the Social Graph of the person initiating the search query” ([the most common definition of social search](#)).

However, today the world of social search is a confused place where Google tries to be good at social and Facebook tries to be good at search. Not a single day goes by that we don’t hear contradicting opinions about social signals helping organic search rankings. Although the integration of Google+ in universal search results is getting there, it’s still difficult to understand the potential of social search. So where do we go from here and what can we expect from the major players?

The future

One of the most interesting and likely concepts for the future of social search is based around it becoming less of a search activity and more of a ubiquitous, seamless discovery. The idea that users don’t have to search but are instead presented with super-relevant results is a promising one. The relative success of ‘Google plus Your World’ (Google+ enhanced search results) and the failure of the majority of social search engines would suggest that users don’t mind being shown the mixture of social and generic web search results but they don’t necessarily want just social results.

So how can anyone pull that off? It seems that the odds are stacked against small search/social start-ups. In order to evolve social search results and make them intelligent, smarter and even more relevant you need data...a lot of data...data about the real world entities and connections between them, data about the web, search behaviours, individuals, brands and how they interact. If you think about it there are only two and a half companies that can really do that. Google has the knowledge graph, knows the relationships between semantic search entities and is already prepared for processing natural language search queries (Hummingbird). Facebook has the social graph and a huge number of active users. Bing... well what Bing has got is the political correctness. Bing is a good ally to have in the Google vs Facebook war in social search.

So in future, social search, in particular Google+ integration with Google universal search results, will be smarter and users will not only see relevant social activity in their search results but also content related to what they search for. Social search will try to predict what you really want or what your next search will be and will give you an answer. After all, Google knows where you are (Google Now), your life routine (location history), what you’re up to (arguably Google+) and how people feel about your search topic (sentiment analysis model).

One of the most important measures of success for Google and other search engines is how quickly they can present you with an answer. This has led to the model whereby these days you don’t even have to click on a search result. Thanks to the structured data and semantic search, the answers are there, waiting for you, whether you want to define something, calculate, get weather forecasts or information about top attractions. The next step (already trialled by Bing in the past) would be to do the same with social and email data.

The role of Google+

It’s no secret that Google is on the never-ending quest for improving relevancy of their search results. There are generally two aspects to it – weeding out the spam content bad stuff and increasing the

number of high quality and relevant content. Let's focus on the latter and how Google+ content impacts search results.

Prominence and integration of G+ and main SERPs

Google has woven various Google+ elements into the SERPs (search engine results pages). In its simplest form, the personalisation of search engine results is hugely influenced by users' Google+ activity. Individual publishers can benefit from linking their Google+ profile with their website through the authorship mark-up. That will increase the exposure of their content in SERPs and prove to Google they are indeed the authors of their own content. What's in it for the brands? Brands can integrate their Google+ pages with Google search results and propel their social content straight onto the first page in search results (by using special publisher mark-up). Let's also not forget about the impact of well-optimised Google+ Local listings on Google local search results.

Debate about direct impact of G+ on SEO

Over the last three years we've had an abundance of posts, guides and studies on how Google+ impacts non-personalised organic search rankings and SEO strategy. So does it? The fact that the debate is still going on suggests that there is still a lot of confusion and no one knows for sure. It's great that the ranking factor correlation studies from both [Searchmetrics](#) and [Moz](#) have confirmed that the number of Google +1s is one of the top ranking factors but, as we all know, correlation is not causation. After all it makes perfect sense that brands which bothered with investing in Google+ have already implemented extensive SEO strategies. The truth is that Google doesn't use social signals from G+, FB and Twitter in the same way they use links. Moreover, the tests and studies presented by [Search Engine Land](#), [Econsultancy](#) and [Moz](#) suggest there is no direct benefit on ranking positions at all. Even Matt Cutts (Head of Webspam at Google) [has recently confirmed](#) that Facebook and Twitter signals are not part of Google search ranking algorithm. However, what the industry generally agree on is the fact that Google+ does help with content discoverability and getting new content indexed by Google.

Benefits

There are at least three important benefits of using social content (Google+ in particular) to enhance experience of Google search users. Firstly, since Google+ is heavily integrated into Google search results it's possible to get your social content in front of people from outside your circles... for free! Secondly, depending on your Google+ influence, you can use the platform to get your content indexed a lot quicker – some links shared on G+ profiles can get the linked page indexed in less than 5 minutes! Thirdly, it does have an indirect effect on SEO rankings – the more people see your content the higher the chance of someone linking to it, which in turn improves your rankings.

What should brands do?

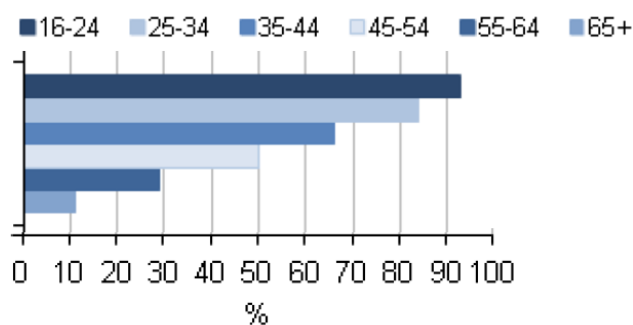
- Have an active G+ brand profile
- Establish presence in Wikipedia, Freebase and other data sources of Google's knowledge graph – semantic search
- Implement microformats and structured data – semantic search

Social media – the next 5 years

Dr Alison Sprague, Partner at CEG Europe, looks at some key trends in the development of social and media wonders how the landscape will change in the coming years.

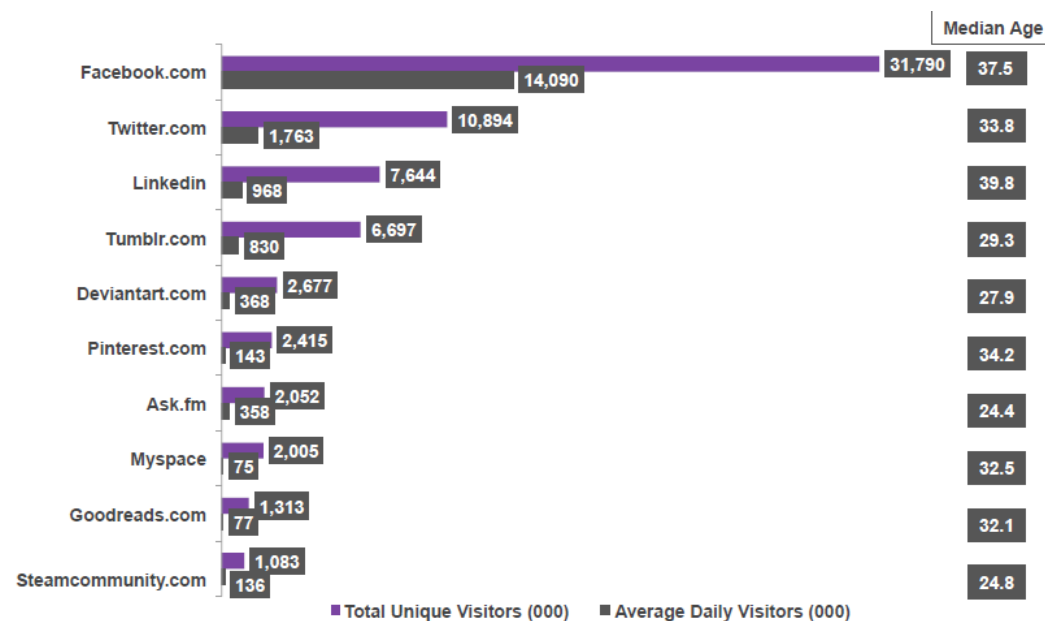
It seems hard to believe that Second Life launched in 2003 (although UK mainstream media only started talking about it in 2006, possibly because its GDP in Linden dollars had reached \$64.). Reuters had its own journalist there (Adam), embassies were opened, as were shops and IBM spent \$10m of its marketing dollars on Second Life in 2006. At its height Second Life boasted around 4m monthly visitors, today that figure is 1million. These are the global figures, so perhaps it wasn't quite as big as we thought. Social media as a concept however looks here to stay, even if some of the big ones come and go. It's a popular pastime in its own right and popular across most age groups, especially amongst 16-24 year olds, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Proportion of people accessing social media by age



Source: ONS, 2013

Figure 2 shows a snapshot of unique visitors to the top 10 social media networking sites in the UK in 2013.



Source: comScore UK Digital Future in Focus 2013

Of course there are literally hundreds of sites to choose from, many with specialist interests. Figure 2 doesn't for example show Instagram which has yet to reach the top ten. Its user base increased by more than 1000% in 2013 just on mobile. More generally, mobile access is increasing at a rate of knots.

One particularly interesting feature of social media is the way it interacts with traditional media. There is of course significant interaction between social media and traditional media, especially in two genres: news and entertainment. For example, traditional print newspapers are now fully-integrated media properties, incorporating the print and digital versions; the digital version typically comprising an online version of the newspaper that is further integrated with social media. Not only do social media drive traffic to news websites, they break news - two prime examples being:

- "[New York plane crash: Twitter breaks the news, again](#)" - Twitter users broke the news of the incident around 15 minutes before the mainstream media alert.
- [Japan earthquake and tsunami, March 2011](#) - at the time, members of the media reported that Twitter was the only functioning communication tool immediately after the earthquake.

Social media are firm features in the living room. While watching TV, [almost 80% of us now have a second device at hand, with around 48% active on Twitter](#). Around a quarter of us use social media for TV programme recommendations and social media enable programme participation, including influencing the narrative of programmes. So social media, while having status and functionality in their own right, are additionally heavily intertwined with traditional media, thereby enhancing their functionality and improving the overall user experience.

So what next? How might the social media landscape look in 5 years' time? This is particularly tricky – after all, who would have thought that Second Life would pale into insignificance or that Twitter would take off?

Perhaps there are some lessons from traditional media. Take TV for example. While in the UK there are 40 plus channels available on Freeview and hundreds on cable and satellite, the traditional channels (BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Five) still command a and audience share of 52%. Add in their portfolio channels (ITV3 etc.) and the market share increases to 73%. The remaining 300+ channels thus make up the remaining 27%.

Hazarding a guess that the social media marketplace mirrors such trends does not appear unreasonable. That means that around four to five will continue to take the lion's share of traffic (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr and Instagram (?)) with another hundred or so taking the remainder. Like TV channels there'll be further new entrants and exits. But unlike TV, there is the opportunity for some of the new entrants to reach the top four. But it seems highly unlikely that Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn will relinquish their top five positions given the life stage of social media and the different functions they serve.

Where next for content?

**Andrew Smith, Chief Strategy Officer and Nisa Bayindir, Social and Content Strategist at Partners
Andrews Aldridge, examine the future of content on social media.**

When media theories and mass communication models emerged in the 1930s, there was naivety around the effect of mass media messages on people. With the arrival of television in households, it was argued that messages on TV acted like magic bullets, piercing right through the psyche of the audience, conveying messages undistorted and as intended by broadcasters and marketers.

We've come a long way since then and of course the Magic Bullet Theory is deemed obsolete today. However, in the early days of social media we once again saw magic bullet naivety rear its head. There was the initial thought that on social media, 'all businesses win' with promises of high conversion rates, increased customer loyalty and improved profit margins through basic social media practices.

Audience evolved with the medium

Today, social media is far from a marketing device firing magic bullets because it has reached saturation. Some marketers learned this the hard way as audiences got wiser and began to show their lack of interest on company social media pages. This proved that audiences don't care about brands' social media egos, they care about what's really in the brand story for them. Too much hard sell pushed on social media merely creates a censor mechanism.

Only the 'most engaging' stories survive, therefore we've noticed the necessity to adopt a pull model using relevance and storytelling rather than a push model. Brand storytelling skills proved to be the key to audiences' hearts and minds. Today, most customers are not looking for tangible, but abstract value on social media. Forrester's social media customer [research](#) showed that, while around 50% of people who engage with brands are interested in brand conversations, a whopping 40% follow brands to simply read entertaining and compelling content.

Content marketing and the evolution of social media milieu

As a result, content has become the quiet friend that we're learning to take seriously. According to the UK centric Content Marketing Benchmarks report by The Content Marketing Institute and the DMA, 71% of marketers have someone overseeing the content marketing strategy and yet only 42% of marketers have a documented content strategy – the disparity here is self-explanatory.

2013 was the learning curve year during which most marketers suffered from a 'rabbit in headlights' situation. Nevertheless, some global brands planted and began reaping the seeds of Content Marketing. Remember Coca-Cola, a global brand which announced their creative bankruptcy in 2004, became award winning content publishers by 2011 with their "[liquid and linked](#)" content strategy and long term vision crafted for 2020.

Social media practices are changing. Empathy, relevance and adaptability are more important than ever and some global brands like Coca Cola, Oreo, Burberry and Nike picked up on this earlier than others. Nowadays it's almost sacrilege to create social media copy drowned in exclamation marks, supported by stock imagery, topped with an *engaging* question at the end. We need strategy to help us on the path to fruitful content marketing.

One key difficulty at the moment surrounds finding the right channel for the right brand message and conveying this message within the appropriate context – before the competitors do, of course! Let's go back to basics: content without context is a blunt tool. In search of the most suitable context, native advertising have become the most prominent model, and caused a massive buzz with brands and

marketers. A recent [poll](#) conducted by IAB UK showed that 52% of member respondents say they 'know what native advertising is, but need more information' on it. The survey also revealed that 20% of respondents described themselves as 'experts' on native advertising, while a further 12% conceded that they had 'never heard of it'.

The hype over native advertising has developed so fast that its rules are [still being fleshed out](#) by the IAB's Native Advertising Task Force. As it finds its feet, it is an ad model that has proved to be rewarding for marketers.

The never-ending chase for the customer on-the-move

New social channels have rapidly mushroomed in the digital sphere and deciding on the best fit for your campaign, being unique and innovative - without letting go of the targeted reach and engagement offerings of the safe pillars like Facebook and Twitter - has become increasingly difficult. For the sharp content strategists, targeting on the world's biggest network Facebook is like being in a gold mine. The reason for their thirst for targeting is confirmed by Janrain's recent research: 98% of social media users believe that they are mistargeted with branded content. Targeting might not have reached its maximum potential yet, but the mechanic has changed the rules of the content game forever.

Even though they don't have deep rooted targeted offerings, the abundance of new generation social media promises cut through via native advertising. Most of the new channels vary from niche ones to more mainstream ones. In terms of user database, I call most of the new generation transient content channels 'horizontal channels'. Their model is not vertical and based on in depth user data and interaction like Facebook for instance, but based on ephemeral content, investing in the attention of users where and when it's available. Snapchat and mobile chat apps for example have succeeded in putting the fire under marketers seats to find innovative ways to capture audience where they *roam*, providing an alternative to existing content social targeting models.

Content marketing and Big Data: A union to celebrate

Another thing we've learned to keep in the forefront of our minds is that mere qualitative assumptions can no longer be our compass for impactful content on social media. All content and social strategy should be data informed in the future because the smarter audience's demand for smarter content architecture will not tolerate generalizations over what works. Even though emotive and entertaining content works on social media, this knowledge only represents the tip of the iceberg. Big data pools are at every company's disposal and it's the marketers' job to unearth the useful information through which a clearer strategic picture can be drawn both for traditional and modern day marketing strategies.

While big data discussions have traditionally focused on utilizing the existing data gathered through traditional CRM technologies, social logins have come into the picture and added value to existing customer databases. Most companies are trying to digest what social media networks can offer via social CRM, in terms of connectedness and getting under the skin of customers. Social logins provide a huge, and, most importantly, user-consented potential. Furthermore, 52% of consumers on social media use social logins, give consent and expect their brand experience, including targeting, to improve in return.

The data and content union is here to stay as part of the broader 360 degree marketing piece. Would you reveal a premium sports car in a weekly women's magazine? We've learned that the same principle applies to content on social media.

Mobile and wearable technology reign supreme

Abandoning our inherent comfort zone in marketing is tough, but we are getting used to building consumer demand through content relevance in a creative and cutting edge context. Up-and-coming technological and mobile innovations can be our best weapons.

In 2013, the average consumer checked their mobile device 150 times a day, and around 60% of all online devices are now smartphones or tablets. We know that consumers' attention spans shrink connected to this growth. Brands are aiming to own the interest of always-on customers with responsive and relevant design and content, free from advertising clichés. Device and location data we gather keep rising on the list of things to consider before we create any content.

Speaking of mobile, we can't bypass the developments on the wearable technology front. Even though it's in the early days, this technology stimulates thoughts around social integration and content targeting through 'connected' wearable tech. Wherever our content lands, it needs to adapt to the shape of the device, the audience and the channel.

So what will the social media content landscape look like in 2016?

- **There will be nostalgia for the offline reality**

This doesn't mean that masses will abandon or ignore all social content from brands, but rather implies that they will not be sitting in front of a machine to connect with brands 'online'. The future of content marketing is destined for 'offline' finales for online dialogues, with the offline/experiential activation as the ultimate goal where the customer is in the driver's seat. All content will be structured to utilize digital means to come alive offline and inject data-informed customization. Content will be so well packaged and calculated that it will be a part of every day life and seem coincidental or serendipitous.

- **Authentic and holistic ubiquity will be standard**

We will see solid integration of wearable tech in tailored content for audiences in their native, offline setting. For content marketing, holistic won't be just a buzzword, it will be embedded in everything we do. Think time, occasion and place – not just trendy social media channels. We will know where the customer is and use our big data pool to target them in real-time with the right message through their choice of device with their favourite subject cleverly embroidered in the brand content, as they are on the move. Responsiveness and fast data churning algorithms will become key factors.

- **Brands will be primary publishers**

Social media channels and their offerings will be thoroughly digested and turned into smart CRM tools, which we'll milk for more data. But in content marketing terms, social media channels will be the devices and not the destinations for good content. We will see more brands as publishers of their own authentic content, spread across different technologies and gadgets, free from the limitations of social media 'pages'. So we will see social media channels' transformation into different businesses.

- **B2B content marketing will be at its most lucrative**

We're already seeing some effort on the B2B front on social media by big players like Dell. But by 2016, B2B content marketing will be the golden goose. While privacy concerns on social media will raise further caveats, marketers will discover highly rewarding ground on the B2B front, with more accommodating user groups. This will be due to the easier value exchange between B2B communications, and content marketers will take advantage of this. While LinkedIn is the best place to be now, it's only a matter of time before we see new, smarter and more versatile channels to home B2B content. We can also expect more wearable and mobile gadgets to target the B2B realm.

- **The Internet of Things will provide fertile ground for targeting**

The state of genuine 'connectedness' that we're so crazy about today will be widely accomplished through the Internet of Things. Our devices, gadgets, things talking to each other to store preference and behaviour data will not only empower customers, but also give marketers the freedom to orchestrate data in order to better understand the consumer. Marketers will be able to forecast, or better, target intent, decision, behavior and engagement through more intelligently structured digital campaigns covering all relevant devices. We can expect new advertising models and techniques to emerge off the back of the gadget-to-gadget communication where marketers can piggyback relevant 'gadget talk'.

- **Content 'above and beyond' digital**

We've already witnessed Google Glass, smart watches, Amazon's flying delivery drones, smart contact lenses, crypto-currencies, 3D printed *everything*, motion detectors, touch screens projected on air or water. Everything is more feasible than ever, and by 2016, the race will be about campaign specific integration of outside-the-box technology. Marketers will have to think like 'mad professors', coming up with above and beyond executions that are far from traditional to ensure significant cut through. Repurposing content for emerging technologies will have to become inherent skills for all strategists.