Digital Thought Leaders
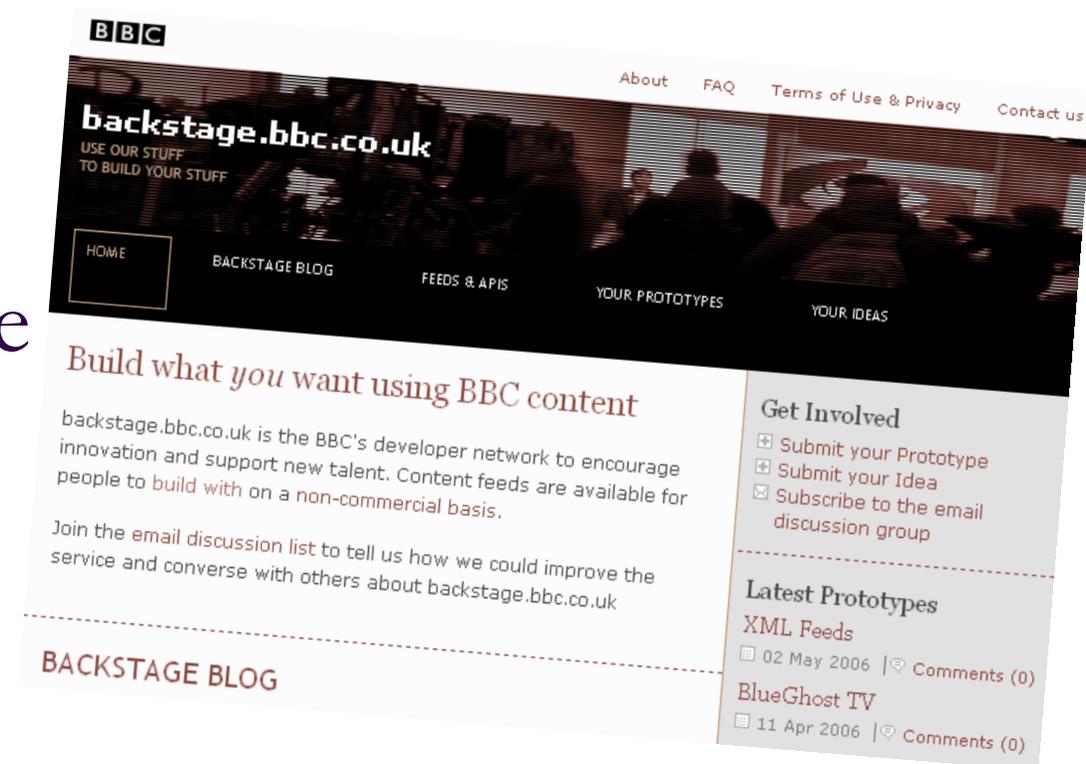**Pete Clifton**
Head of News Interactive
BBC.co.uk

"Readers want more control and want to be more involved."

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Making sense of a digital world
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Pete Clifton heads the largest online news operation in the world. BBC News Interactive enjoys the support of a worldwide network of correspondents and the incredible BBC editorial machine. Already the site tops 4 million unique viewers a day, but now they are changing their publishing model to embrace convergence and user generated content. With the BBC's behavior able to influence the UK online media market, all eyes are on London's White City to see how the new services perform.

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BBC leaps at Web 2.0 publishing

The vision of increasingly flexible content - distributed across multiple platforms - is the vision of convergence we've heard for a decade. Now it is happening, and the BBC's News services are providing a laboratory for other media groups to study the publishing models of content production in the convergence landscape. Add to that the drive for user generated content and online social networking, and it's clear that BBC News is wholeheartedly embracing the principles of the Web 2.0 models; approaches native to networked media rather than traditional models that have been transposed to the screen.

Announcing for the first time in public details of the corporation's plans, Clifton revealed what Web 2.0 means to the BBC, and how readers and viewers will be able to participate. He's clear that "readers want more control and want to be more involved", and his team have devised a path that enables this. The BBC has come a long way since the early days of its tentative online footprint, the joint venture with ICL and the creation of its own ISP. Clifton's focus on pre-eminent content, allied to user participation, reflects a powerful model for publishing – "a glorious opportunity" – that looks set to propel the four million daily unique viewers they enjoy to much greater heights.

New platforms and reading environments are also on the way: "They want the news in the form they want it and when they want it, they want to see what other sites are recommending. They look to us for quality journalism". And contrary to the views of many publishers, the BBC is conscious that while on the one hand personalisation offers greater relevancy, viewers themselves are aware that it breaks the serendipity of media, and hence react against it.

Key developments
The expansion and development of the BBC News websites includes a range of key developments, including:

- Customisable front pages
- More local content, more readily displayed
- Weaving video more deeply into the site: the banner on the site will be carrying video promotions and strongly push links to a much wider range of other videos
- Making more of key assets: there will be a live feed of the News 24 channel
- User activity will be harnessed by opening up a perspective on what the whole audience is viewing

The last point resonates with some of the features that Google and EBay have, and with a community of 4 million viewers every month, the BBC's sites have the volume to unlock real value through connecting users to stories based on popularity and interest.

Speed read

The BBC's news websites are world class in every way.

The group is embracing the new paradigms of user involvement with a range of content and distribution initiatives that invite greater participation.

Citizen journalism is to be actively promoted, using all media formats.

RSS feeds and content repackaged for mobile will be playing an important role in extending reach, while enhancements to the news player will create on demand TV.

BBC content is being opened up to third party developers, and a greater transparency is being created in both the corporation's ideas and its audience data.

The BBC Interactive News services will act as a laboratory to study content and publishing genres in the networked society.

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Citizen journalism

User generated content has become the must-have core for many publishers' interpretation of what Web 2.0 means for their media group. But much 'user gen' material generates little more than a hunger for server space and no audience to follow. When user-gen is on topic, managed, and harnesses a community's endemic interests, great things can happen. That's why the BBC's offer to its users – indeed anyone even aware of the BBC's brands – is so powerful.

> In news organisations we all have to embrace citizen journalism…someone always knows more about an event than you do

"Much has been said about citizen journalism", explains Clifton. "We all have to embrace this in news organisations". The BBC's stats are impressive: 20,000 emails of news and views on July 7th 2005, including 20 pieces of video content which in a single day became iconic pieces of footage. "Someone will always know more about an event than you do. The BBC is fortunate to have a willing and engaged audience, but any serious media organisation needs to be doing this". As to the sceptics who fear for the quality of user-gen, Clifton is clear media groups need to get the framework right first and that it's not just about putting stories up on the site: "we have a whole team who validate stories and when they're sure they'll share this widely with the news websites and other media channels in the BBC". Clifton is clear of the need "to bring BBC values to this information", but it's also clear that the BBC have the right formula for this in place.

Key performance indicators; what do you track?

The BBC tracks the same standard metrics as most online media groups: impressions, clicks and numbers of streams all feature prominently. But soon some of that data will be shared more widely. Clifton explains that "there's a live stats portal on the new site that delivers realtime information about what's most popular in every section. This will give a window into

Backstage
The new development area that encourages viewers to develop their own software applications using BBC content. This rapidly expands the development community and broadens the thinking.

what is getting the biggest audience".

The portal will also give other parts of the BBC a chance to see what audiences are most interested in. "It won't change the running order in television news, but it may influence what we deliver more on in future", says Clifton, citing several examples where extra features and pages have been created for high audience stories.

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As so often is the case with the accountability of digital media, this can be a mixed blessing. When Clifton explains that "whenever we write a story about Britney Spears in our entertainment pages, it always tops the list" you're left wondering what the editors of other channels make of BBC News Online's audience.

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Desktop tickers; new generation

Launching at the end of May (2006) will be a desktop ticker with a range of indexes a viewer can chose from. If a viewer hovers over a headline on the ticker a four paragraph version of the story pops up. Interestingly the model no longer relies upon drawing audiences into the site, it's about building engagement on the user's terms: "we're not going to impose on them the way they read the news". In spite of the frenzy of activity to own the desktop in the nineties – and waves of push-media publishing that delivered little, the new generation of tickers could make for a powerful addition to the publishing mix.

What will the future hold?

The BBC will be working hard to capture the potential assets of its audience, and convincing those more nimble photographers, skilled writers, and prolific video-ers to share their work. Not only does this stretch the corporation's coverage even broader and deeper, it also stimulates a new publishing genre and a level of audience participation that is bound to resonate well with the BBC's charter: 'inform, educate and entertain' may soon have 'involve'

added. But it's no easy task: Clifton talks much about the importance of "consistent messages about how to get content into the BBC".

We'll be getting readers to write or film material for us... resulting in a range of content that would never have seen the light of day otherwise

However, he is clear that "video is sure to be the biggest growth area in user content. Finding ways to showcase our readers' content will be a big priority for us later in the year. On occasion we'll be getting them to write or film material for us. The result is a range of content that would never have seen the light of day otherwise". There's a political dimension too: the BBC's recent Creative Futures project highlighted some of the challenges facing the corporation and as one criticism was a public perception the BBC placed itself "on a pedestal", citizen journalism could be a useful element in addressing change.

Video is sure to be the biggest growth area

The BBC is clearly practicing what it preaches. On the week of our interview the Local Government Elections had corporation bloggers clicking away, reminding how far old auntie beeb has already come in the journey into the blogsphere. Even heavyweight Nick Robinson is now a regular blogger, although that's nothing compared to what will happen when a new project - The Editor's blog – really takes off. This is a staff space for unedited comments and posts about how the corporation works: all the behind the scenes gossip could soon be spilling into the public domain in a project that will certainly test editorial integrity.

And finally, a story about RSS

It would be oddly remiss if in championing an era of user participation and journalist bloggers, RSS feeds didn't get a mention. But the BBC is rolling them out with a twist: searchability. The

RSS: major focus for driving audience

The BBC is weaving RSS feeds into its strategy as an important way of making content accessible. The feeds allow viewers a more convenient way of visiting hundreds of their favorite sites without having to use their bookmarks. Fresh headlines are regularly pushed to the RSS reader, making it much easier to keep track on a large number of sites.

feeds will be spreading across the entire site and within the next few years they expect 10% of their traffic will be coming from this.

In other news...

More new tricks with the content are underway. And the wrappers are being taken off a place that will showcase them. Backstage.bbc.co.uk is a new public space where the developer community can play with the large pools of the content the BBC sites have. It's designed to encourage innovation, and could see rapid proto-typing of unexpected permutations of the user interface. "People may be discovering new ways to present our content" explains Clifton. As an example he cites one viewer who "created a way to interrogate the site that allowed the recreation of front pages for any day in our archive". Interestingly – and insightfully - the BBC has now offered him a job and his tools are being built into the architecture.

There's also a new willingness to share: "The new creative archive is a way of us tagging and badging our content. The content that we create ourselves can be shared because everyone has funded putting this together".

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As for delivery of content to new platforms, Clifton is convinced that "having the systems in place to deliver the content across different platforms is the key. We won't be making new content for mobiles, but making more of our current content available". One of the current developments is the launch of a two minute video loop of news designed to go live for mobiles in the summer. The BBC's syndicated headlines are already appearing in a few new places, from public concourses at railway stations to inside train carriages themselves.

Implications: our take

Content is still King, but increasingly this truism of nineties web publishing is being matched by a second phrase: 'The audience is Emperor'. Clifton joked about the buzzwords - "Web 2.0: whatever it is" – but he jokes from a position of both strength and rich insight, having seen what works as well as what doesn't. On personalisation the BBC has been cautious about the simple tools that use categories to drive content selection because they inevitably cut off the serendipity media. But smarter personalised pages are certainly on the way now. Their enthusiasm for user-generated content is palpable. Major news events are providing an

impetus for citizen journalism. The history of citizen journalism can be tracked back through September 11th and into the early nineties, when emails from the heart of war zones suddenly brought frontline perspectives to online newsrooms. On July 8th 2005, the six o'clock news was made up entirely of viewers' mobile phone video footage, material shot by amateurs unexpectedly caught up in the previous day's tragic events. When society is under pressure, digital media is providing an important release valve.

Alongside the debate about use participation, and the much quoted 'Web 2.0' phenomena, there is the reality of convergence. What unfolds over the second half of 2006 and 2007 at the BBC will be a laboratory for understanding convergence. The broadband newsplayer has been reworked to provide the basis of TV on demand. Radio programmes are already available long after broadcast, and increasingly the online audiences for niche programmes will start to exceed those of the traditional linear broadcast programmes.

The scale of the BBC interactive news operation is vast. An annual budget of around £16m for 400 editorial and technical staff. Arguably even this is outweighed by the scale of advertising for the service, which enjoys hundreds of thousands of cross promotional messages from its radio, television and magazine divisions. British media groups don't come bigger than this. Which is why the corporation's model for online has such an influence on the wider market.

Aside from the immediate competitive pressures on audience time, there's a wider issue: the BBC will influence the nation's expectations for its domestic online media. Arguably this will stretch further than the shores of one island, but the reach of BBC news websites within the UK means any shift in the scope of its online services has the potential to raise the competitive bar. If the corporation is successful in the adoption of Web 2.0 publishing principles, then this will certainly be the case. And this shift will take place within 18 months.

Much has been made about the savings the BBC is currently making. The investment is giving them scope to be able to invest more to create a structure of flexibility. There's also a pledge to remove what Clifton described as the 'silo-like' thinking inside the corporation. His vision is that all broadcasters should be commissioning material with more than one platform in mind.

Actions

Try out the new Backstage area

Consider the implications of video, RSS, and desktop ticker content on your sector and develop ways to harness them

Consider how you could harness 'user-generated' content in your business – from FMCG brands to the boards of large corporations – there are models to suit you

Resources & Links

BBC.co.uk – Log on, sign up, try it out

http://backstage.bbc.co.uk - For a backstage developer's pass

DigitalStrategyConsulting.com/thoughtleaders for more interviews - contact us to sign up for the email edition of Digital Thought Leaders

And share with us your comments about this interview and the BBC's plans

Digital Training Academy courses, including:
    Web 2.0 strategies for publishers developing online social networks
    Techniques for building and nurturing
    The role of citizen journalism
    Organising your team for agile and innovative development
    Media in the digital networked society

Meet other Digital Thought Leaders

Here are three other Digital Thought Leaders who are pioneering user-generated content. Their brands and models are each different, but in times of huge economic and social change, this type of knowledge becomes a critical success factor. That's why we created the Digital Thought Leaders interviews: to bring you closer to people and brands shaping the digital networked economy.

Vince Broady, Founder, GameSpot.com

Ten years ago, Vince set out to create an online magazine for gamers. What he's succeeded in building is one of the web's pioneering community sites, with millions of avid gamers chatting, messaging and now videoing for eachother. GameSpot is a laboratory of early adopters.

Antoine Clement, Elle.fr

For sixty years Elle's magazines have been media icons. Under renewed enthusiasm they're embracing the web, and they're taking on board the new models of publishing. With 39 editions and 20 websites, Clement's brands have come a long way from a single media proposition. But only continued innovation will let them succeed in an increasingly challenging online market.

Craig Newmark, Founder Craig's List

This vast network of local communities covers 175 cities in more than 30 countries. The List offers a free place to post adverts and information, and it's triggered a wholesale migration of classified advertising in North America.

Training and Development from Digital Strategy

If your firm wants to harness the power of Web 2.0 publishing strategies, blogs, rss feeds and analytics, then why not talk to the team here at Digital? Our network of senior associates can deliver the hands-on expertise you need to change the way your team behaves, enabling them to understand and implement new publishing strategies. We can work with you to support the rapid prototyping of new ideas and the building of simple tools that will allow you to use these new insights to improve your conversion rates, unlocking more of the value from the digital channel investments you've already made. Our range of training services spans executive briefings for boardroom colleagues to hands on workshops for data analysts and marketing managers. Call us to find out how we can help your team achieve more.

About the author

Danny Meadows-Klue has been a commentator on the digital networked industries since 1995. He managed the UK's first online newspaper and has helped run web businesses ranging from mass market portals and consumer magazines, to online stores, search and email services. Among his industry roles he is the co-founder and former chairman of the UK and European Internet and Interactive Advertising Bureau, and has been lecturing on digital marketing for more than a decade. He set up Digital Strategy Consulting in 2000 to help firms accelerate their businesses through digital networks.

About Digital Thought Leaders series

In times of huge economic and social change, knowledge becomes a critical success factor. We created the Digital Thought Leaders interviews to bring you closer to people and brands shaping the digital networked economy. They are based on private interviews or lectures we've participated in, and are published monthly. We also publish similar insight papers to accompany our own talks and training workshops, to unlock the potential of your team.

Our company support programmes includes

- Coaching and mentoring for senior management
- Customised in-company training programmes
- Management clinics for critical issues
- Workshops for staff at all levels
- Research briefing services
- Training and development

If you found this edition of Digital Thought Leaders useful then contact us to receive more digital insight briefings and ebooklets

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