



## Manchester Media Scene

Alex Connock is an unabashed proponent of MediaCityUK – and a fan of the BBC – and wants indies like his company Ten Alps to work with the BBC to make it, and the Manchester media scene in general, as great as it can be.



Alex Connock  
CEO Ten Alps

I am an effusive and un-incentivised (in that no one's paying me) fanatical proponent of MediaCityUK. I just don't get the whole BBC thing of saying everyone is moving there, and then letting the staff moan about the place unchallenged in the BBC's own publications and *Broadcast*. I know the BBC is a democracy – but couldn't you have some balance?

Contrary to popular BBC belief, White City is not fifteenth-century Florence as far as cultural destinations go. In fact White City is less of a tourist destination than Salford Quays. And actually when you get people up to see the countryside, the villages, the restaurants of Manchester, people completely get it. You can see other big names starting to move up now, like Nicky Campbell and Peter Allen – and we've had the key appointment of Peter Salmon. I think in five years time BBC North will be an incredible place to work, and the whole Manchester/London dialectic will seem like ancient history.

But for MediaCityUK, and media in Manchester in the wider sense, I think there is still a huge gap that people like me do need to help fill: the lack of venture capital.

Manchester has ambitions to be the next Silicon Valley – a media/tech/knowledge economic hub with global impact. But there is barely any venture capital available for start-up businesses...while Silicon Valley has 40 per cent of all the venture capital in the entire world. It's a big project, but one thing I want to do over the next five years is help drive a

Opposite: Afghanistan, Mission Impossible? made by Blakeway, a Ten Alps company, Channel 4 Dispatches

massive change through that situation and make Manchester a finance hub for people who want to invest in the media and tech industries.

It's this simple: more venture capital = more great businesses = more great jobs. I say bring it to Manchester.

From our Manchester office, you can see much of the north-west of England – an industrial revolution landscape laid out before you. These are the actual buildings and bridges of the economic boom that made 1850s Manchester the modern-day

Shanghai of its day. And the boom isn't quite over for some. Ten miles away are the hills where I live, near the collected footballers of the premiership. If there is a recession in the rest of the world, there certainly isn't one in football. The other day I was at a local party and someone said to me: 'Ah yes, you're the people in the house without a cinema.' When

Londoners are snobbish about the living standards in the north – and I am sure many of them still think *Coronation Street* is a documentary – I always feel they need to come and have an actual look around.

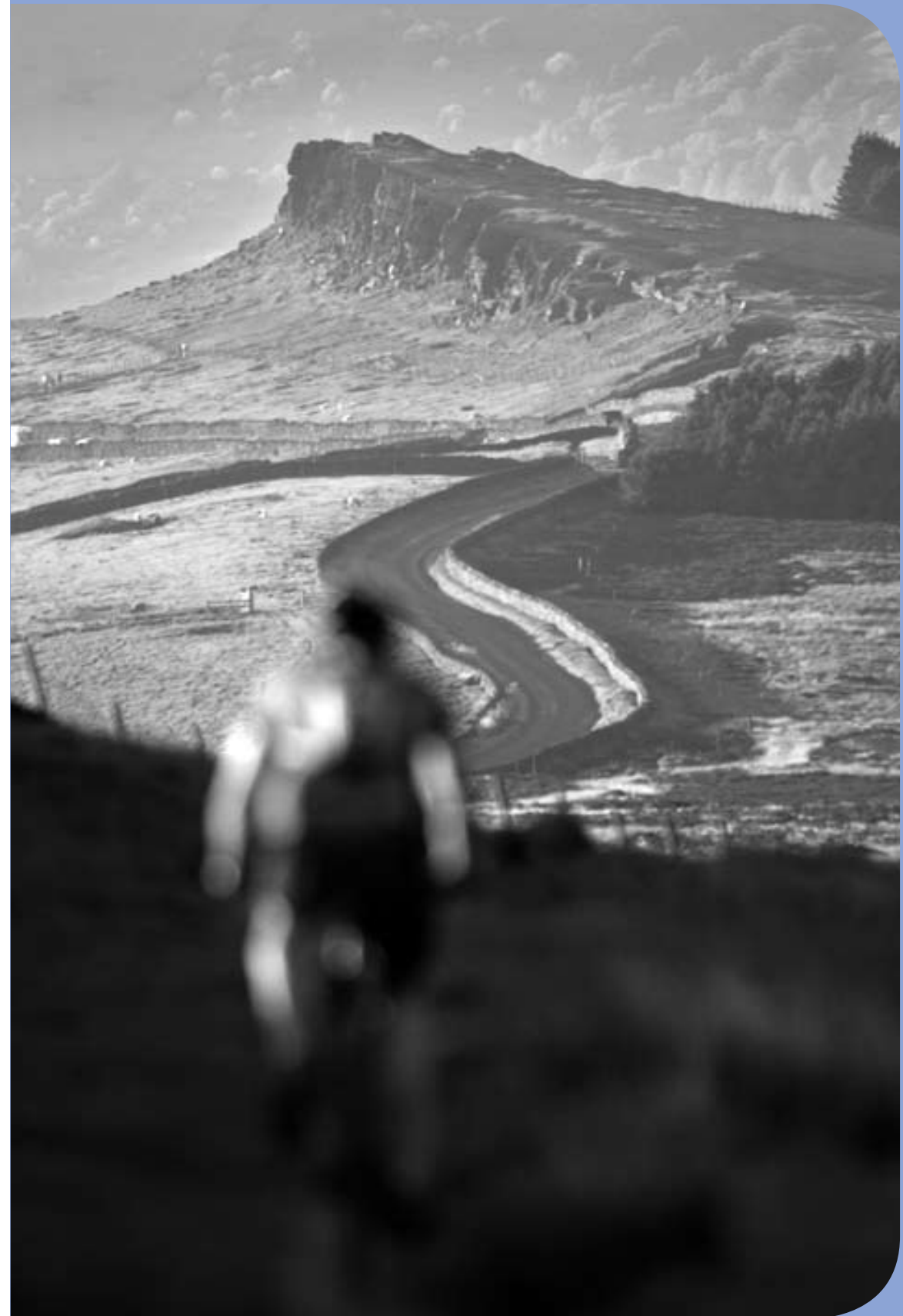
Growing a business is essentially like trying to nail a banana to a trifle, in that even when you are achieving what you set out to do, it's quite hard to tell.

But the spirit of entrepreneurship is alive and well at Ten Alps. Every business unit is run by someone who either founded it (before it was bought) or cut their teeth in growing it – like Dawn Boyfield at the exponentially growing online



Iran and the West, made by Brook Lapping, a Ten Alps company, for BBC Two

Opposite: Windgather Rocks, Peak District, overlooking Manchester. Picture by Alex Connock.



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corporate responsibility content production unit DBDA, or Brian Lapping (CBE) at the iconic TV production business Brook Lapping. And of course there is Roger Graef at Films of Record, a company we proudly own, one of the pioneers of fly-on-the-wall documentary. I find him so inspirational to talk to that I actually try to find spurious excuses to set up meetings.

And I am surrounded by clever entrepreneurs at the plc level of the company too – Adrian Dunleavy (Glaswegian boss of the £55m turnover, sales-driven Communications division, also resident in Cheshire) and Londoner Nitil Patel, who runs Finance and the Content division, including the TV operations. And there is co-founder Bob Geldof, and Chairman Brian Walden, the political interviewer – neither known for being slow-witted.

In fact, what you come to realise in running a company is that first you need people cleverer and even more driven than you are, so that they are chasing you up, rather than the other way

around. Second, you need to know that while Donald Rumsfeld got the war in Iraq totally wrong, he at least came up with a good aphorism about risk.

Rumsfeld talked about ‘known unknowns’ being manageable, and that’s true in our business: we know some of our TV ideas will

be bought and some won’t, we never know which in advance, but we can manage that risk.

It’s what Rumsfeld called the ‘unknown unknowns’ that are the toughest problem. What news will impact our business that we have absolutely no idea about? How can we do five-year business plans when so much of business is un-forecastable



Congo’s Forgotten Children, made by Blakeway, a Ten Alps company, for Channel 4 Dispatches

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beyond 12 months out, and would still be unforecastable even if you threw a Kray supercomputer at the problem?

These are the imponderable things in the media that keep me awake at night. We’re all at the mercy of chaos theory. The best we can do is structure the chaos. That’s why we went into business media. It might be seen as boring, but at least it gave us visibility. I’d rather be boring and visible.

As the Marks and Spencer advert might say, Ten Alps is not just any TV company – it’s a multi-platform factual media company. Instead of segmenting the TV industry on the conventional independent production model of factual/drama/entertainment and serving all the markets, we have staked our future very clearly on factual only, but we’ve gone cross-platform. That means that we are as big in online and print as we are in TV. For an era when all media brands seem to sit across multiple outlets, we think that’s right for the times.

And we had a good 2008-9 financial year: we actually seem to have grown profits, despite the recession. We are pretty much the only listed media company I know who didn’t have a profits warning. But now the challenge is to keep that up. That means constant innovation – or permanent revolution, as the communist theorists described it – or the company shrivels as so many media stars have done.

And let me sign off with this dose of cloying sentimentality:  
I love the BBC.

We make programmes for the BBC in Manchester, but we are not BBC Manchester. We care about the BBC, work for it, get paid by it, watch and pay for it. The only difference between us and BBC staff is that in our case the cheque goes indirectly, rather than directly, from BBC Finance into our personal bank account. Big deal: a question of bank transfers.

In the past decade there has been far too much ‘them and us’ between the BBC and indies. It’s been mutual, misplaced and pointless – and it’s time for it to stop. This is not a zero-sum game between the BBC and its suppliers. This is a time of amazing challenges and reinvention of the whole media economy (never mind whole economy). And in the BBC we have an amazing, unbeatable, global brand. Let’s all work with it to make it, and the Manchester media scene in general, as great as it can be. I’ll do the same with Ten Alps, only smaller. ■

*The Cheshire village of Prestbury, with a 11th century church and 16th century bank*



Alex Connock studied music at Manchester Grammar School and was the school organist. As a teenager he used to play the organ at funerals for £5 a time in Timperley Congregational Church in south Manchester. The average age of the congregation was 80-plus, so this was actually a fairly robust line of business. With a musical gap year spent playing the piano in hotels in Val d’Isère and Corsica he went on a scholarship to St John’s College, Oxford where he edited *Isis*, the Oxford University magazine, and achieved the networking miracle of being a contemporary of Boris Johnson, David Cameron and Charlie Althorp – and not knowing any of them. He added a Master’s degree at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York, and gained an MBA at INSEAD in Fontainebleau where he is currently Entrepreneur in Residence. He is on the board of Manchester Metropolitan University and the advisory board of Salford University’s media school.

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