8 ESSAYS – THE KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE PROGRAMME: A COLLABORATION BETWEEN BBC R&D AND THE ARTS & HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL
Welcome to 8, a one-off newspaper from the Knowledge Exchange Programme, a collaboration between the BBC and the Arts and Humanities Research Council or, to be more specific, between UK academics and BBC staff. So why’s it called 8? The simple answer is that the Knowledge Exchange Programme (KEP) produced eight research studies in total, covering everything from how the BBC works with user generated content and how older users use digital services to the development of a 3D online world designed for children.

Of course, the other reason is that 8 is a rather more intriguing title than others we could have gone with. You know the sort of thing – Enabling Knowledge Partnerships in the 21st Century – Key Strategies for Future Innovation. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but the idea with 8 is to move away from the standard executive summary.

8 does have some of the stuff you’d expect from a more conventional publication. There are contact details for all researchers on Page 23 and on Page 11 there’s an official view of KEP’s aims from BBC R&D’s Rowena Goldman and the AHRC’s Joanna Pollock. On Pages 12-13 you can see a map of the connections built by one of the research projects. The eight studies themselves are online at the KEP blog (www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange). You can read them now. Many BBC staff already have and their recommendations are already being implemented.

But the real idea with 8 was to do something in the spirit of KEP, which is all about openness, about building networks and about finding new ways to share knowledge and ideas. You hear a lot about this kind of thing at the BBC these days. In May this year, the Director General, Mark Thompson, gave a keynote at the Journalism in Crisis conference at the University of Westminster (where I’m the Course Leader for the BA degree in Journalism) and talked about BBC partnerships in the context of local news.

The AHRC/BBC KEP, which has been running for four years now, is an indication that this isn’t just talk, that the BBC is moving towards a more open approach. To reflect that, 8 tries to open things up further, to build more links and push the ideas forward. Rather than simply summarise the KEP studies, we’ve brought in writers and creatives from outside the BBC to give their take on the overall trends revealed by the research. Their brief was to reflect the individual studies but also to be provocative, to suggest new directions for the research and the BBC.

How provocative? Well, on Page 10, Bill Thompson suggests that the BBC’s duty to push for digital inclusion will see its influence and power decline. Overall, the writers here are positive about the more open, sharing BBC championed by the KEP studies. In fact, they want more. Several suggest the BBC should become a kind of open platform, a space where others can build on foundations it lays and maintains.

That’s easy to say but implementing it will be rather harder. The KEP research represents a step in the right direction. It tries to go beyond jargon to remind us that different people use media in different ways for different reasons. They’re a reminder that the idea of ‘public service’ can’t be taken for granted any more - there are lots of different publics now and their concept of service has changed radically. The KEP studies and 8 showcase some of the work being done towards redefining what a public service represents.

Helen Thomas, head of BBC Yorkshire and a participant in a KEP study into regional archive content sums it up nicely. “In the future, the BBC working in partnership will be the norm. It will be an open organization, which embraces content created by communities, individuals and employees.”

So – enjoy 8. Enjoy the essays, the graphics and the pictures – all of which were taken by the KEP participants. Most importantly, read the studies and get in touch, either with the academics, the researchers or the contributors to 8 if you want to find out more.

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In 1980 two pop stars died: John Lennon and Ian Curtis. Lennon’s assassination was big international news at the time and now survives in several media archives (including the BBC’s On This Day website) as a defining moment of that year.

Curtis’ suicide made the cover of a few indie music magazines, and whilst it’s recently been commemo-
rated in the vogue-ish biopic Control beloved of 40-somethings like me, his death has never really been more than a minor blip on the national psyche.

Two pop star deaths, two very dif-
f erent outcomes in terms of com-
memoration and a place in what we
might now call ‘the digital archive.’
And yet when I try to map my own
memories of 1980 onto either of these ‘national’ events, it’s certainly Curtis’s suicide that burns brighter and fits in more seamlessly with my own experience of the times.

Lennon was a remote, mythic, *old* figure from the 1960s and 1970s as far as I was concerned. Curtis was young, contemporary and person-
ally relevant. He killed himself on my 16th birthday. Joy Division’s al-
bums were the soundtrack to my ad-
olescence (I still play them today).
I aspired to his clothes, his haircut,
his funny way of dancing, his angst
(Embarrassingly perhaps I still do).
His death defined 1980 as a grim,
sad, grey year (Check it out, it really was).
His music reminds me of what I felt like when I was 16.

In short, here is an example of how personal memories can map more easily and powerfully on to one national event than on to another. My personal circumstances, my age, my socio-economic back-
ground, my emotional baggage, my own archived media acquired since that time - all glue me to one particular public moment in time rather than to another.

And even though Lennon is un-
doubtedly the more important fig-
ure historically and his assassination a symbol of society’s ongoing obses-
sion with show business, celebrity
and fame by any means possible, it is Curtis who defines 1980 for me, and it is the memory of his death that etches easily into my memories of me.

Not that I have too many memories of me. None that I can share with you easily, you’ll be pleased to hear. When I think of where my memo-
rries lie and how I might share them, like many other people my mind first turns to a small number of well-
organised photo albums, a couple of teenage diaries , a box of letters, some books, a set of scuffed LPs, one shirt I refuse to throw away and few manky C90 cassettes. This is what remains of my so-called youth.

I then turn with terror to the frankly
much larger number of unorgan-
ised photos that have either been dumped higgledy-piggledy in a huge
box since about 1990. Or – worse – I’m forced to contemplate all the
digital images sitting somewhere on
my computer, on various memory
sticks, or on sites like Flickr and Pa-
casbook, generally unloved and ign-
nored (“0 views”), waiting patiently
for the time - some time in my old age
methinks – when they might finally
be tagged and dated properly, printed
perhaps, timelined and organised into
‘sets’ and finally *shared.*

Oh how the rest of my family are rel-
ing that Christmas Day far in the
future when grandpa (great grand-
pa!) finally forces them all to sit down and bask in his digital memories in all
their banal glory. I’m sure you and
the rest of the world are waiting on tenter
hooks for my personalised, digitised
’memo-blings’ of how Ian Curtis and
I defined a decade...

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I defined a decade...

If nothing else I hope by now that you’re getting the idea of how messy, muddled-headed and downright im-
practical this business of preserving and sharing one’s memories can be.

At one end we have media executives imposing their cultural hegemony upon us, choosing to commemorate Lennon not Curtis, asking for mem-
ories of the Miners’ Strike, but not membranes of Norwich City beating Bayern Munich (damn!). And at the other we have our collective in-
ability to generate and organise per-
sonal media in any way that might
make it accessible or – dare I say it? – meaningful to anyone else.

Sometimes, in my darkest Joy Di-
vision-inspired moments, I actually
fear for our memories.

Technology makes our pre-digital
stuff obsolete. Mainstream media foregrounds historical events in which ordinary people don’t seem to feature in any significant way. And our digital detritus is so badly or-
ganised and distributed across um-
teen different platforms and services that it’s almost impossible to find and track it, let alone share it with loved
ones (and/or complete strangers).

And even when we do attempt to make our presents felt (contrib-
ting to the Ian Curtis section of lasttribute.co.uk perchance), we only
seem to be reinforcing a sense of how arbitrary and subjective are the
forces which lead a person into
pooling their memories into the
growing ocean of international digi-
tised (mainly internet-based) me-
dia – and how choosy and selective people can be about the aspects of
national memory they elect to rein-
force and validate.

Now, before my message gets too
doomy let’s celebrate the fact that it’s not too late to unpick this mess.

And indeed let’s also admit that the proliferation of low-cost screens
personal computers and mobile
devices, the possibility of broad-
band access (in most places) wed-
ded to practically free web-based services is providing us right now
with a wonderful opportunity to de-
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of us what we actually get to see and hear; decide what is important *before* the rest of us actually get our hands on the material and start to do our own formal ‘remembering.’

The AHRC/BBC KEP research study ‘The Miners’ Strike: A Case Study in Regional Content’ does an excellent job of highlighting the problems associated with this seemingly tentative opening up of archive material to people who lived through the events that the archive describes. As co-author Heather Powell eloquently puts it:

“The choice of the Miners’ Strike 1984/5 for this research was an inspired one... For those who lived through it, few other events had such an impact on their social and political lives. The memories of those events have been translated into folklore by the communities directly involved. Through this research we can begin to understand what is important to communities about how they are represented in the archive. We can also start to understand the passions and sense of ownership the BBC audience has when engaging with what is essentially their archive.”

What becomes very clear in interviews with miners, other members of the mining community and police officers alike, is that there’s a deep, deep distrust of the story that is being sold by the archive material. The complaints listed are becoming the common litany recited against television in general: ‘bias...dumbing down... an economic agenda... stereotyping... anti-northern prejudice... a disproportionate focus on violence and confrontation.’

This is not the place to talk about addressing fundamental historical issues such as these. But I would suggest that these complaints could well be interpreted as symptomatic of the loss of control people feel about the recording and re-telling of shared experience in general.

Getting at the ‘truth’ of a memory can be contentious at the best of times. Just think of how family stories can be contested fiercely by all who sit round the table - with mum, dad, children and even the dog all remembering something different, all attempting to impose their will and establish their ‘version’ of things.

When we feel that we have no control over the telling, that someone else - a stranger - is calling the shots about what gets presented and represented about our own lives, then a fierce sense of injustice can kick in and feelings of sharing our memories, we hoard them.

Instead of story and informed opinion, we opt for cheap comment and rebuttal. Just think again of that familiar meal taboo - how many times did you combat someone else’s version of events with a sarcastic remark, by shouting or simply leaving the room? Or was that just me?

And yet what the Miners’ Strike study also demonstrates beautifully is how the addition of eyewitness testimony, the recording of personal story and discursive, group conversation, the capture of varying dialects, accents and points of view offers a much richer picture not just of the events themselves, not just of the impact on the people who lived through those times, but of what it might be like for any human being to be subjected to those pressures and have to make the difficult decisions as a contracted employee about when to go to strike, when to picket, when to commit civil disobedience, when to stand up for yourself, your family, your comrades or your community.

For sure, all this is a ‘no-brainer’ for most people engaged in professional content-making in a digital age. Anyone can see that offering participants, witnesses and the public in general the chance to attach their own stories and comments to BBC material, and use the material itself as the engine for public discussion and debate is ‘A Good Thing.’

The problem comes, though, in the methods the BBC chooses to adopt when capturing the variety of voices, stories and debates that coalesce around BBC output. And it’s a problem too choosing what platforms, technologies, and content management systems the BBC should support in order to reach out to its audience in this more open, collaborative and participatory way.

One suspects that within the BBC, as with other broadcasters, there was until recently a tendency to see ‘interactive’ technologies, and primarily ‘the web’, as the catch-all answer to these conundrums.

And in an associated trend, senior producers and editors bracketed all forms of audience contribution to the process of story-making and debate under the somewhat disreputable and impersonal catch-all term ‘user generated content’ (or ‘UGC’).

This in turn led to an explosion of on-air pleas to ‘email or text us your views’, to the setting up of presenter blogs supporting dozens, if not hundreds, of hastily typed (and hard to search or filter) comments, masses of audience boards dominated by a handful of voluble nutters, statistically meaningless votes and polls and a plethora of online photo galleries (of sunrises, sunsets, red setters etc) that remained online with no contextualising editorial, no associated media and no obvious explanation of their original reason for being.

As another of the KEP studies, ‘ugc@thebbc: Understanding its impact upon contributors, non-contributors and BBC News’ indicates, though, the ugc backlash has begun.

This research project attempts usefully to replace ‘ugc’ with the more practical term ‘Audience Material’ and also identifies that there are many different kinds of Audience Material. It strongly promotes a shift from what it calls Audience Comment to Audience Content and even suggests that more programme makers should be developing Audience Material Policies.

(One people might think it disturbing that hardly any BBC programmes have such a thing already, despite so regularly soliciting for audience feedback via the phone, via email, via blog, via SMS, via Facebook, via Twitter.)

The shift from comment to content - again, probably universally thought to be ‘A Good Thing’ - has led to some interesting experiments such as the Island Blogging programme in Scotland whereby a significant group of citizens have been encouraged to share personal material through a digital community in general via personal blogs. Notable too is MemoryShare, a bold attempt to allow people to share and browse memories of life experiences online and see them in the context of recent and historical events.

The BBC’s move into web-based ecosystems such as the blogosphere, Facebook and YouTube naturally has implications in terms of ownership and curatorship. More sophisticated BBC producers and editors, for example, are already realising that there’s no longer a need to hoard Audience Content. By encouraging its use on other sites such as YouTube or Flickr, the stats show that it’s still much easier to reach a wider public.

The BBC’s move to a ‘no-brainer’ model of participation involving the use of broader and more general BBC online resources such as ‘Have Your Say,’ the introduction of presenter and guest editor blogs, a suggestion box for stories and packages that the programme might consider developing and a campaign of sorts to get listeners to start on their own blogs, or express themselves through third-party services such as Twitter.

At Radio 4’s Today programme, for example, the traditional message board was closed down in favour of a more ‘distributed’ model of participation involving the use of broader and more general BBC online resources such as ‘Have Your Say,’ the introduction of presenter and guest editor blogs, a suggestion box for stories and packages that the programme might consider developing and a campaign of sorts to get listeners to start on their own blogs, or express themselves through third-party services such as Twitter.

Over time the plan has been to make use of linking and embedding as a way of ‘windowing’ audience material on the Today website rather than actually hosting and supporting Audience Content. By encouraging the use of the tag ‘#today’ on all related web content, it has also become possible to search across 3rd party platforms and web environments for Today-related comment and content that audience members have published in places far away from the BBC’s online realm.

Quite how many active informed citizens out there have the inclination, the technology skills and the free time to interact in this way is questionable. It still feels very much like a minority sport. In any case, in online spaces such as YouTube or Flickr, the stats suggest that it’s still much easier to watch rather than participate.

It’s also notable that, in the case of the Island Blogging project, when the
BBC attempted to withdraw technical support of the in-house blogging platform and encourage the audience to set up their own blogs using third party software, activity amongst the citizen bloggers dipped. Left to their own devices, the general public management they set up with life and stops recording it.

There is a suspicion here in both these examples, in fact, that the key driver for introducing new ways of participating and co-publishing has not been an altruistic dream on the part of BBC management but an increased level of granularity and texture in terms of contribution and participation. But, as the ugc@bbc study notes, even as digital technology, some BBC programmes receive at least 100 stills and videos from the general public and yet still very little of the material is used. Access to the archive is made up of the programme making. Most ‘ugc’ sent into the BBC, one suspects, get very little attention at all.

There is a strong insinuation throughout the report, too, that the people who send in this kind of material are not representative of the audience as a whole, and therefore extreme caution should be exercised about offering them any kind of platform at all.

It is true that the people’s motives for becoming bloggers, vloggers, mobloggers or ‘tweeting’ can be suspect. You’ve probably heard one or all of these: they have too much time on their hands; they crave attention; they have a particular and narrow social activity and are attempting to hijack a media channel for their own purposes; they are geeks who love technology for its own sake (photosynth.net/Default.aspx); or they are simply ‘sad’. A third KEP research study ‘A Public Voice: Access to Digital Diary and Interactive Narrative’, though, does a clever thing by using a focus on the formal practice of Digital Storytelling to confront head-on this issue of self-publishing and posting as a minority sport, and even confirms that it’s not just media professionals who can getgence about the quality and publish with very few constraints in terms of technical know-how and social restraint. And with technologies such as RFID tags and ‘spimes’ (location aware artefacts) it will soon be possible to allow buildings, vehicles and personal objects to speak for themselves so that we don’t have to spend time doing it for them.

For example, with all the outdoor war memorials in this country quietly decaying, and the names of our war heroes being rubbed away by the rain, is the answer to retype all those names on the web and get someone like Richard Hammond to flick a camera up the nose of every surviving war veteran? Well maybe.

But a richer, more adventurous and ultimately more social and pluralistic solution might be to turn the war memorials themselves into intelligent, communications hubs which can talk to you about themselves and the history they represent (if you ask them nicely) and on to which personal content can be stuck via mobile wireless technologies. Public monum-ents as both publishers of BBC content and receivers of Audience Content – now there’s a thought.

Which then only leaves the second caveat arising out of the Public Voice study; that is, a certain cultural bias about what kind of content is deemed to be valuable, of use or ‘interesting’.

For TV producers whose job it is to entertain as well as inform, the infra-ordinary represents a huge challenge. How is it possible to make the miners’ strike archive, for example, something entertaining?

And yet ignore the seemingly banal and irrelevant stories and one risks leaving out what many in all communities were seen as under-represented despite playing a central role in the events of the day. Was this because their stories were deemed irrelevant at the time? The ugc@thebbc study indicates that people over 60 are less aware than younger people about how to submit Audience Material and become involved in programme making. Does this mean that old people should be left out of the digital revolution?

The fact is that most memories can be subjective, hazy, captured in bits, sometimes require an almost architectural stimulus – one’s presence in a particular location at a certain time of day, the social element of face to face interaction, voices and gesture, the structure of a line of thought from one moment to the next and from one ‘platform’ or ‘scene’ to the next, and paper and spoken work to video...

This process of memory making and sharing memory takes time and resources, it requires facilitation, and it has no ‘point’ to it. And we’ll need to allow this pooling and organisation, this all runs counter to its culture and probably seems irredeemably slow and expensive. However, technology might yet come to our rescue in this regard with the emergence of location-aware mobile applications that might offer us the time and space we need to interact with and interrogate the world around us, to create a ‘scene’ to the next, and paper and spoken work to video...

But digital memories do not exist in isolation and they have a quiet but powerful cumulative effect. And they benefit from life on a network where they can be linked, tagged, recaptured and repurposed. The more memories the better, in fact (just as last.fm gets better the more music tracks you feed it).

The challenge for all of us – for big corporations right down to individ-ual citizens – is going to be to make sure all of our memories are available in a searchable, safe and *usable* form. For the BBC that isn’t just mean opening up a digital archive (which must and will happen over time), but more importantly will be about developing in partner-ship with audiences effective ways of ‘prepping’ personal media for sharing, merging and mashing in a socially responsible way, and will also involve using a variety of collaborative storytelling techniques and formats – some screen-based, some not - that make it much easier for people from any kind of back-ground to add to pools of public digital memory.

At one end we have media executives imposing their cultural hegemony upon us, choosing to commemorate John Lennon not Ian Curtis, asking for memories of the miners’ Strike but not memories of Norwich City beating Bayern Munich (dammit!). And on the other we have our collective inability to generate and organise personal media in any way that might makes it accessible or – dare I say it? – meaningful to anyone else

And we’ll need to allow this pooling without pressing people too much about the ‘point’ of each contribu-tion. After all, most of us probably can’t tell you the ‘point’ of the scrips of the past we choose to keep. I still have my Ian Curtis RIP button badge, for example. It’s cheap, it’s not very pretty, it’s badly made and it has no real ‘point’ to it. And yet it’s still a little bit of me tucked away in a drawer, waiting for the day when it might become part of a bigger story; the day I can make sense of it all - and work with others perhaps on how to arrange the memories into a New Order...
TOWARDS A NEW MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy in the age of YouTube, Twitter and Google? Some argue that online youth cultures now understand more about this than traditional academics and media professionals. So what do this new generation need from the BBC and what can it learn from them?

Back in the 1980s, as part of a research project on “genuineness” in teachers we asked a group of 11 - 13 year olds how bad a teacher might be with technology before they could be considered beyond hope. The children were very precise with their prescription: “when they are mousing off the edge of the table and puzzled by the fact that their cursor has stopped moving” was their crisp definition of hopelessness.

Fast-forward to the 21st century and we questioned another group of 11 - 13 year olds, this time about literacy, but it was their teachers’ literacy we were exploring. The children were asked “what would you expect a literate teacher to be able to do?” and their answers included editing a Wikipedia entry, uploading a video to YouTube and being able to switch predictive text on and off on a mobile phone (they laughed when they said this one).

You will note their expectation that teachers, as experts, would be net contributors. Some schools, on seeing this list, worry about the cost of the professional development courses needed to bring their staff up to speed. Yet the many schools that have thought to ask their children to enable that development themselves have been delighted by the seriousness brought to bear by the students as they build effective CPD (Continuous Professional Development) for their own teachers.

In many ways these two tales illustrate the central issues facing us as we explore notions of media literacy: given the pace of change of emerging media, it is all too easy to begin with a deficiency model of viewers and learners - policymakers reason that knowing “how to” needs to be mandated for their own teachers as experts, would be net contributors. Some schools, on seeing this list, worry about the cost of the professional development courses needed to bring their staff up to speed. Yet the many schools that have thought to ask their children to enable that development themselves have been delighted by the seriousness brought to bear by the students as they build effective CPD (Continuous Professional Development) for their own teachers.

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So – when we talk about ‘media literacy’, we are faced with two key questions: Just which media are involved? And precisely do we expect to be literate? This essay explores the need for an entirely fresh look at media literacy as we approach the end of the first decade of what is already a remarkable new millennium.

Let’s start with the pace of change. So much of what technology touches can be graphed with an exponential curve - a gentle start leading to a rapid steepening. Breathtaking technological breakthroughs become rapidly mundane and completely ubiquitous. Yesterday’s Quantel Paintbox becomes today’s MacBook Pro and tomorrow’s ‘phone. This exponential curve has a profound effect on policy. In the last century, there was time for reflection, time to pilot and explore, followed by time to trial the consequent prescription or policy (remember Green Papers?) and then finally opportunity for iteration and development.

That’s all gone now. A mass of new and affordable technology for making media is breaking like waves on a shore. Suddenly children are recreating scenes from films using games as authoring tools (known as machinima), 3D printers are spitting out objects that are otherwise impossible to machine, GPS track sticks are adding a sense of “where” to our sense of “self” and, of course, ingeniously creative media savvy youngsters are inventing everything from new ways of flitting to the viral spoofing of flash mobbing.

At this point, what any academic ideas of media literacy might bring to the party these youngsters are enjoying is questionable. Clearly the approaches from those seeking to define modern media literacy to those already living it needs to be responsive and participatory, not prescriptive. The BBC, having announced it is to appoint a small media literacy team to report to Online Access Champion Seetha Kumar has a massive opportunity here as it broadens its role to become a “supporting hand” to the rest of the media sector.

Secondly the education system that seeks reluctantly to embrace media literacy - from school to university - has been built around systemic convenience. So much of what passes as acceptable practice exists only for the convenience of the system, and certainly not for the learners. We have a curriculum wrapped around the factory learning concept of “met before”: as students turn over their test papers, their teachers outside the exam room fret, worrying whether everything on the paper has been properly introduced and covered previously. The students turn their papers over nervously hoping for “no surprises”.

In a world where our lives are characterised by the unexpected - from a collapse of banking to the new weather resulting from global warming - nothing could be less appropriate than a “met before” curriculum. Media is clearly heading towards a place that we haven’t been to before. The curriculum should surely prepare us all with a strategy for the unexpected. But in education, we have substituted valuing ingenuity and unique endeavour for uniformity and conformity. Worse still, we have done this at exactly the time when in economic terms we have ceased to value, or need, uniformity and conformity. With the ground changing so very publicly under their feet, presumably it is the media faculties and researchers who should be pioneering a move back to ingenuity and unique endeavour. There is no better place to start than with a new sense of media literacy.

Of course, in times of severe change, systems fight to protect themselves. But it’s clear now that the central impact of technology economically is that it breaks cartels. Any organisations that seek to vouchsafe their futures by building barriers around themselves - for example by substantial merger activity, or through legislative requirements - will be doomed because technology has tipped the power balance back in favour of folk. Just look at the way online music fans are now calling the shots for the once powerful record companies, whose only response is to plead for protective legislation against “pirates”.

The media industry is also characterised by artificial cartels. Inevitably then, it has come under siege from its formerly passive but now empowered consumers. Currently, it is impossible to think of a broadcasting organisation that is not in fear of its life. In this context, it’s all too easy to see the traditional idea of ‘Media Literacy’ as an ‘old’ school tool to protect professionally produced TV shows with their edited and scripted content, whilst simultaneously sidelining the informal creativity of youngsters shooting videos on their mobiles. Why would one be legitimate media, while the other is seen as the transient chatter of a tech-crazy generation?

Of course, the history of youth culture offers an interesting contribution to this debate too, as subsequent generations seized on the autonomy afforded by whatever media was accessible to them - dominantly music - to make their voices heard. But while most decades can boast a unique youth culture, the current one apparently has no shocking fashion, no Punk or Grunge. Kids are still demonised of course, but for doing nothing, rather than for doing the wrong thing. But look harder and you realise there is a Noughties culture too. It’s just that previously user-generated media and consumer media clashed in the same spaces: music, fashion and dance.

But current youth is not to be found in areas populated by previous generations. The chattering classes are largely not to be found in online forums devoted to machinima or fan fiction. Youth users-generated media leaps virally and unheeded from phone to phone and achieves status via word of mouth in social networks. Youth culture has been led to new and often unseen places. The question is how should media literacy, as a broad concept, respond to that?
So, where might we look to locate a new media literacy? Surely in the in-between space that technology has opened up beyond ossified old certainties.

How about the space between viewer and broadcaster, which is where we find BBC3's "Lily Allen and Friends?" Allen's use of new media is well known — she used MySpace to connect with and build up a fan base, opening up about her anxieties about weight and body image, all without the mediation of professional music journalists. She now uses Twitter to maintain her celebrity profile, picking fights with überblogger Perez Hilton and snarking about Susan Boyle. So it was natural when she wound up on broadcast TV for her to see no difference between old and new media channels, to create this kind of in-between space as she highlighted new music in the MySpace Band and YouTube Hero slots on the show.

Alternatively, try the nearly-now space between "now" and "not now" where texting lives. Surely the most media illiterate sight in modern Britain is a middle-aged business executive glued to the immediacy of their BlackBerry, misunderstanding that neither txt nor email are phone calls needing an instantaneous reply, and thus completely missing the opportunity that texting has offered the possibility of user discourse through providing a pause to reflect, research, re-present, retract and relish (the 5 Rs).

Taken as a whole, this in-between space is almost wholly unregulated. We regulate the broadcasters, but not the viewers' broadcasts, we regulate teaching quality, but not learners' teaching. This is a digital Wild West and it desperately needs the ability to critique, deconstruct and judge that a newly broadened media literacy might bring.

This all leads us to an exciting conclusion as we strive to get a grasp on media literacy in the 21st century. To summarise - the pace of change precludes policy reflection and prescription, education itself needs to embrace uncertainty and insecurity, new technology will accelerate and broaden its contribution to a wider definition of media and young users will run further and faster ahead. In fact, far from being 'digital natives', they are digital cosmonauts, leaving the comfort of their orderly world to seek out entirely new galaxies of opportunity.

And it is, inevitably, with these youngest users that we should start to re-imagine media literacy. It should be their actions, pastimes and culture, which determine where media is leading us. And as we follow, we should not be judgemental. Instead, it is to these new places, be they mobile phone clips or geo-tagging video, that the insights and disciplines of media theory should be brought to bear. A curriculum focus defined by the immediate needs and actions of its learners might helpfully prototype a new direction for education too.

Which leaves the question of whether this might prototype a new broader role for the BBC, one also defined by the immediate needs and actions of its learner viewers. The BBC could just passively watch and report, of course. But surely it can do better than that. In a world where Twitter postpones its scheduled maintenance shutdown to allow the post-electoral Iranian protests to continue, it is clear that the global tools flourishing in these new in-between spaces are of real significance. People are using their tech-savvy to make an impact that traditional strategies and channels rarely offered. But what role is there for national public service when a global public are serving themselves?

There has already been much navel-gazing of course and useful finessing of existing practice. The KEP research study "age@bbc: Understanding its impact upon contributors, non-contributors and BBC News" confirms that "The Today programme and PM, both broadcast on Radio 4, have clearly found that the audience will respond online" and have "designed their website to accommodate their audience's wishes". The report "A Public Voice: Access, Digital Story and Interactive Narrative" clearly demonstrates that digital storytelling is an effective means for institutions and organisations to connect with members of the public. "Virtual Worlds: An overview and Beyond Rock" confirmed children's frustrations that it didn't work on their web-enabled games devices and Apple Macs. All this finessing and detail could, of course, improve current offerings.

But surely this is THE defining moment of substantial opportunity. Everything I've talked about above cries out for more than finessing - it cries out for change. Paradoxically, our current moment might be the perfect moment to do something radical.

We have a distracted, squabbling government; we have an Internet built erroneously around resources (with its URLs) but populated by people searching for a way to instead reveal their identities through micro-blogging and beyond; we have a collapse of traditional business models so that a huge blurring has occurred between public and private... and, finally, we have a nation struggling to redefine literacy.

Surely all this defines that moment of opportunity. It is time for the BBC to seize the high ground. If the Internet needs a learning layer to allow newly literate learning to proceed, a layer which offers threading, narrative structures, memberships and a temporal base, then the BBC has, for a little longer, the resources to build it and to contribute what would effectively be an API (an application programming interface) for learning to the world, an open network structure, a public space on which everyone else could build useful tools and services.

Thanks to the new interactive personal media technologies, I can be literate in a 21st Century way, wherever I am in the world. I can build learning for myself, with my community, throughout my life. Why shouldn't these functions be provided by an organisation that has at its heart a mission to "educate, inform and entertain", that seeks to let "nation speak unto nation" and whose history shows an unequivocal commitment to a literate democracy?

There is a chance here to be substantially proactive, to do something remarkable for the world, before the funding is gone. And for the bean counters there is the comfort that Google, which has given the world great functionality as a service, has a current valuation of over $100bn and is sitting on a cash mountain with an annual income of greater than $20bn, compared to a declining BBC annual revenue of under £4bn. If it took some risks, the BBC could perhaps become a Google-like platform for the new form of media literacy.

There is a chance here to redefine learning and broadcasting and to rediscover, in one great leap, the BBC's soul and perhaps to begin a new renaissance led by young voices. Of course the educational and broadcasting fundamentalists will cry out. They will express doubts about the "new" and proclaim faith in the "old". They will profoundly mistrust the voice, and fashionableness, of youth. They will espouse steady iteration.

But they will be wrong because education, and media too are surely two of the last great cartels of the 21st century. To avoid the fate faced by the music industry, both will need to urgently re-imagine themselves. Why shouldn't they do that together? It is hard to imagine any better place to start than with our learners, that is already being re-imagined by ingenious children. Far from subverting it, getting media literacy right, and building a new model of global learning on top of that, might just save education and broadcasting too. Just maybe.

"What do children want from the BBC?"

If the young are leading the way when it comes to developing a new kind of actively engaged media literacy, this KEP study, What do children want from the BBC?, is interesting things to say about the way they currently interact with BBC content and how the corporation should respond. Focusing mainly on BBC's Newsround its key findings were:

- Children and young people see themselves as citizens and want to play a more active role in the public sphere. Newsround provides children and young people with a unique outlet that prioritizes their voices. It makes their ideas feel important.

- Adult news frequently ignores children's voices and perspectives.

- Newsround is an important tool for citizenship development. It contextualizes information for young people in an appropriate and accessible manner.

- Children over the age of 12 feel that they have outgrown Newsround yet express the idea that they are not quite ready for adult news. A teen news provision should therefore be developed.

The team behind the KEP study say it’s clear that children want a news service that is designed for them. They still watch the TV bulletin more than they go on the website, so every effort should be made to retain and extend this provision, complementing it with availability and different types of uses/interactions on different platforms. But at this point in time, it is important to keep in mind that not all young people are technology-savvy, nor do many want to be. At least not in the highly interactive/creative way some assume."
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In doing so I unwittingly unleashed a storm of activity that resulted in a dozen separate events throughout the UK over the next three weeks and a sixty page submission to the Digital Britain team that provided a perspective from many people who might not otherwise have made the effort to get involved.

The meetings were organised online and most of the reporting process was done using a collaborative web service called Huddle, another demonstration of the importance of internet access for anyone who wants to be engaged citizen in the modern age.

The content of the discussions was wide-ranging, covering everything from how to encourage entrepreneurs to the details of connecting your community to fibre optic broadband, but a common thread at all of the events was a strong feeling that the proposals in Carter’s interim report did not go far enough, and that digital inclusion should be a key priority for government.

When the final report was published on 16th June, it was not possible to claim a direct connection between our deliberations and the radical suggestion that a small levy on telephone services should be imposed to pay for providing next-generation broadband access to areas of the country that would not be served by commercially minded internet service providers. However, there was much greater sense of the necessity of getting everyone online and of offering government support where the market could not deliver.

In particular, she emphasised the need for more work to explore what she terms “the soft impacts and the social effects” of getting people online. The research carried out under the AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange Programme is relevant here as several of the projects look at how digital technologies are changing the environment within which television and radio programmes are made and consumed, whether because of new digital delivery methods or through the emergence of online communities around the BBC’s content, and a change to content consumption habits is one of the key social effects of online access.

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A broadband tax might be one way to build a network that reaches all of Digital Britain. But inclusion is about more than technology. Does that mean the BBC can play a leading role in bringing everyone online?

The KEP research was deliberately broad, with work ranging from a study of a children’s virtual world and the use of archive regional content to the difficulty older viewers have with electronic programme guides. All eight projects share a concern with the consequences for the BBC of the transition from the scheduled broadcast of radio and television programmes, accompanied by largely asynchronous interaction with audiences, to the modern media world. This area has clear implications for how we devise strategies to encourage inclusion since if we can encourage online engagement with popular TV and radio content we are giving audiences a reason to get connected, and once they are online then there is a reason to engage with other services.

Understanding Engagement in the Dig-

The relevance to the broader debate around inclusion is obvious in the KEP study ‘Listener Online Engagement with BBC Radio Programming’, which looks in detail at online fan cultures around a number of programmes, including The Archers and Wake Up With Wogan, and contrasts BBC-provided conversational spaces like the Discuss the Archers Messageboard with the fan-created Archers Addicts site. It is less explicit, but also present, in the Miners’ Strike project had simply been an internal BBC project. The Miners’ Strike brings many issues to the foreground that might otherwise have been neglected if the project had simply been an internal BBC project. The Miners’ Strike study is clear about this benefit, not-

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The Former Audience

The importance of the BBC’s active involvement with well-grounded research into the way people engage with its output should not be underestimated, and there is a great deal in the research findings that should be taken into consideration for new projects or in reviewing continuing work. The recommendations advanced in the Alone Together report have already been implemented at BBC Blast as part of an effort to transform the project into a learning environment capable of inspiring young people and encouraging their creative use of the online services.

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of the project was designed to look at how the BBC’s regional public audiences might interact with ‘sensory’ archival sources, in what sense they could access and utilise these materials as part of their own memories of historical events, what issues and problems may arise, and ultimately how these findings could be used to inform future archival activities, digital accessions, academic practice and drive programming.

However there is another and more fundamental issue that informs all of the research projects, one that is directly related to digital inclusion but that also has significant implications for the BBC and other media organisations. All eight research projects dealt either directly or indirectly with the way that network societies challenge the model of the audience that has informed the development of mass media including newspapers, radio and television, and they highlight the fact that the current way of thinking about audiences cannot persist in the new media world.

In the old days of one-way broadcasting of radio and television it was possible to disregard the fact that audiences are not simply passive recipients of programmes but participants in a rich discourse built around shared experience and values, a discourse that is mediated by complex feedback loops. The sheer numbers of viewers for popular programmes and the reach of the main channels meant that a simple model was good enough for most purposes, and aggregate measurement and audience engagement were enough to guide strategy and satisfy those charged with the stewardship of public funds.

Any communications theorist would have been able to point out that models which treat the audience as passive recipients of content were unlikely to withstand the kind of examination, especially when radio and television audiences are concerned. Audience for cinema and live performance may have been passive submission over the decades, and the raucous groundlings of The Globe Theatre are long gone, but the word “audience” is simply not adequate as a catch-all term for those who have paid a variable degree of attention to some or all of an audio/visual stream.

We have never really known what the people listening to the radio or watching TV were really doing, how they engaged they were or what their experience was. The easy availability of online catch-up and multiple channels means that all we can really say of an “audience” today is that, like an electron associated with a nucleus, there is a non-zero probability that an audience member has some awareness of having been exposed to the content in some manner. Any thing else is just hopeful speculation.

The complexity of the audience was clearly shown in the research done on older viewers, the KEP study “Inh­hibited Exploration in Older Customers of Digital Services”, where much of the work done seemed to undermine the hypotheses put forward by (presumably younger and more able-bodied) researchers about why the older population will not use interactive services, explore EPGs or engage with enhanced visual content. The researchers discovered that the main limiting factor seemed to be related to a TV watching time budget, recognition perhaps of the fact that TV is not seen as a productive activity. “Many of our respondents do not wish to spend more time watching TV. This in itself is a substantial barrier to the take-up of interactive services to the extent that these services are classed as TV-watching.” Given this, the hopes that traditional broadcast programmes may help digital inclusion by luring traditional viewers may prove to be groundless. Elsewhere in the Inhibited Exploration study the researchers strain hard to find an experimental protocol that would demonstrate the validity of their central hypothesis about resistance to novelty in the older television-watch­ing population, but the data failed to convince this sceptical reader.

Talking Back

If the simple model of an audience as passive recipients of presented content is inadequate, even for older viewers who are generally less digitally literate than younger people, then what sort of model will work? One alternative is to treat those who watch, listen to, read or interact with BBC content as co-creators of a shared experience that is smeared over the timeline. In fact, the KEP study “Listener Online Engagement with BBC Radio Programming” argues strongly that this has always been the case for radio at least. “Perhaps more than other traditional forms of mass media, radio has always been in a position to give audience a voice.”

The BBC’s regional public audiences a reason to get connected, and once they are online then they are in a position to engage with other services.

It is interesting to note in the Listener Online Engagement study that “easily the most common gripe among BBC Radio message board users is the role and behaviours of the moderators.” This is just one indication of the shifting balance of power between the ‘former broadcaster’ and the ‘former audience’. The shift is not of course, reflected fully either in BBC practice or in the legal system, where those who host forums and discussions may find themselves liable, but the continuing pressure from those who choose to engage with the BBC and other content providers to determine the terms of that engagement may result in change over time. A few months ago the Facebook social network attempted to change its terms of service in a way that was perceived as giving it more control over the material uploaded by users, but a storm of community protest led to the site backing down and eventually holding an online vote on a range of options for its terms of service. If this sort of democratic engagement can be demanded of a private company then it may be hard to resist it when it is asked of the BBC.

In analogue days the dialogue between producers, governors, government, audience researchers, wider society, reviewers, commentators and those watching the programmes was stifled, carried out through limited channels under the control of either the broadcasters or other media organisations, and there are still hints of this approach in some of the research done under the Knowledge Exchange Programme. For example, elsewhere in Listener Online Engagement study we find: “Our recommendation would be that rather than regarding the ‘anti-fan’ and ironic fan postures adopted by like the website as a whole, as a successful adjunct to the programme – a broadening of its cultural wings and a sign of the passionate engagement of some listeners.”

If we can encourage online engagement with popular TV and radio content we are giving audiences a reason to get connected, and once they are online then they are in a position to engage with other services.
Fortunately this view is not widespread, and the rest of the Listen Online Engagement study acknowledges that the world has changed, noting that “fan cultures, as the independent development of the Facebook site attests, have their own modalities and conventions, and cannot be predicted or indeed controlled.”

This is an important point. In the digital/network world the model of media as one-way communication of a message or some content to a receptive audience is no longer workable. It was never a complete description of what was happening, and work from McLuhan onwards recognizes this. Newtonian mechanics was sufficient to support three centuries worth of engineering and astronomy but was eventually replaced by relativity because it could not cope with the very small scale, and now the ‘billiard ball’ model of audiences, which treats audience members as solid objects that have to be hit hard with a sitcom or drama in order to get them to move, has lost its usefulness.

Sharing the Word

Any strategy for encouraging engagement with BBC content in ways that will also enhance digital inclusion must take account of the impact of online engagement that can occur when content is made available over digital distribution networks. Supporting this engagement will require flexible licensing of content, a willingness to allow fan communities to emerge even when they use material in ways that might be considered infringing, and an ability to host communities within BBC services without trying to control or manage those communities.

This transition may well be a difficult one for the Corporation which has historically been identified with Cartesian values or as the nation’s ‘Auntie’, and there are likely to be instances where the old and new models come into conflict. The difficulties involved can be seen in the outcome of the BBC Creative Archive Project (www.bbc.co.uk/creativearchive) which ended in 2006 after raising many people’s hopes that it marked a permanent shift in the BBC’s approach to making old content available for reuse. The signs are that the baton has been passed to the new BBC Archive team who are currently developing their strategy.

It is also important to ensure that other players can benefit from the BBC’s growing expertise and understanding. The widespread dissemination of the outcomes of the KEP research is a vital part of this, but it needs to go further. In particular, as the BBC integrates the research findings into its production processes and strategic thinking, those changes need to be communicated to other broadcasters and media companies, whether or not they are perceived to be rivals for audience share or online communities.

Other broadcasters will obviously be interested to see how the BBC manages online communities, exploits its archive and engages with older and younger members of the community, but any information provided cannot be limited to other media players and those who see themselves as rivals for TV/radio audiences or public service funding. The whole range of engaged authors in the digital age, including YouTube publishers, bloggers and the rest must also be included in the conversations. Doing this poses a serious challenge, since it is important that the BBC does it effectively and efficiently even though it will - as it must - decrease the Corporation’s audiences, reach and influence over time and may even make it harder to justify current levels of public expenditure.

The internet is one of the most powerful agents of creative destruction that we have ever invented, and its impact is being felt in all areas of the economy and the wider society, here in the UK and around the world. As we understand more about how the network can be used to promote the BBC’s public purposes - and the KEP research is part of that process - we are also beginning to appreciate how doing that undermines the relevance and reach of the content it currently offers on television and radio. The BBC has a duty to be inclusive. It clearly realizes this – hence the recent appointment of Seetha Kumar as its Online Access Champion - and the KEP research is part of that process.

Why Inclusion Matters to the BBC

Digital inclusion is clearly important for government at all levels, since it is only through having online citizens that the work of transforming public services, with consequent improvements in efficiency and much-desired cost savings, can be achieved. Indeed, in the Digital Britain report, the Government announced that Martha Lane Fox was its new champion for Digital Inclusion. It is also important for the BBC, both because it is a logical development of the Corporation’s historic role as a provider of radio and television to the UK as a whole and because the Charter explicitly requires it. The Charter obliges the BBC to promote its public purposes through: “the provision of output which consists of information, education and entertainment, supplied by means of television, radio and online services and similar or related services which make output generally available.”

These services are not just restricted to those who pay the licence fee, either, since Clause 57 states that: “In this Charter, a reference to a “licence fee payer” is not to be taken literally but includes, not only a person to whom a TV licence is issued under section 346 of the Communications Act 2003, but also (so far as is sensible in the context) any other person in the UK who watches, listens to or uses any BBC service, or may do so or wish to do so in the future.” The BBC is therefore forced to engage in a world that is rapidly moving online and heading away from the old media model of linear scheduled broadcasts of audio and video content to one of interactive, conversational media available on any device at any time, and to do so in a way that does not leave anybody behind.

Unlike commercial broadcasters who may decide that certain segments of the market are simply unattractive, or online service providers who can tell government that cabling up rural areas is too expensive, the BBC must make effort to provide a service for all want it or may want it in future.

Bill Thompson
In the context of the BBC's current partnerships agenda, the AHRC/BBC Pilot Knowledge Exchange Programme now looks very prescient. It started life back in 2005, as a series of conversations between BBC Future Media and Technology staff and arts and humanities academics, conversations that eventually grew into something more serious. Whilst there is a history of BBC Research & Development working with academics from the technology research community, this is the first time the organisation has put in place a formal collaboration agreement to work with arts and humanities academics.

Four years on, those early conversations have led to a series of collaborative research studies now in the public domain, a nascent online knowledge exchange network between academia and the BBC, and a host of ‘best practice’ lessons on what to do/what not to do when planning a partnership like this. In fact, we think we now have an exemplar model of how a large public service cultural institution can work to best effect with the academic community.

That’s not to say there isn’t more to be done – the legal framework for engaging with universities being probably the most pressing area to address. But overall the KEP has delivered fantastic results. It has generated recommendations that are already influencing content, services and policy within the BBC, along with academic papers and conferences based on unprecedented access to BBC content and resources. Most importantly, it’s laid the foundations on which to build new models of collaboration with academia to even greater effect.

This pilot programme has shown that deep level academic research which analyses public service content and explores how people want to consume and engage with it is key to unlocking the full business potential of digital content experiences. This research has the potential to reshape how we deliver future content, in ways we can all be a part of.

Knowledge transfer is central to the innovation process – our economy relies on the creation of cultural capital through the generation and exploitation of knowledge – and the AHRC has knowledge transfer in its DNA. The breadth of expertise in an academic community that encompasses the entirety of the arts and humanities, from physical theatre and public law to publishing, is tremendous and already contributes hugely to the wealth of our nation. It is vital and urgent, however, that opportunities to realise the potential of this community to make a real difference beyond academia are discovered, developed and delivered.

We hope that this KEP will act as a springboard for the AHRC and BBC Research & Development in their work to remain at the cutting edge of the collaboration and innovation agendas. This relies on our stakeholders being made aware of the programme and its successes. Our hope is that this paper will encourage them to sit up and take notice.

Rowena Goldman, Strategic Partnerships, BBC Research and Development

Jo Pollock, AHRC Knowledge Transfer Programme Manager

The AHRC/BBC Pilot Knowledge Exchange Programme: www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/KnowledgeExchangeProgramme.aspx
So how did the KEP work in practice? How did the relations between BBC staff and academic researchers develop and how did ideas build and flow?

This map shows the connections set in motion during one KEP study, ‘Virtual Worlds: An overview and study of BBC Children’s Adventure Rock’. It expands on an initial concept developed with the BBC by the design agency Radarstation and seeks to translate the innovative but necessarily scattered activity of a truly collaborative, multi-disciplinary project into a format that makes sense. Taking its cue from the KEP itself, it blurs a few boundaries and mixes things up a bit. Think of it as part timeline, part mechanical diagram.

From left to right, it shows the different stages of the collaboration (over two years or so) between University of Westminster academics and the production team working on Adventure Rock, BBC Children’s virtual world for kids. Branching off from the central timeline are the different relationships the project established and supported, from the development of the project proposal on to the later dissemination activities. The map also tracks the outputs and deliverables, attempting to bring some kind of quantifiable sense of worth to what can be a rather nebulous concept – that of the value of building relationships.

According to BBC R&D’s Brendan Crowther, the toughest aspects of working on collaborative Knowledge Exchange are tracking the people and organisations involved and establishing where the findings are deployed. During the period they were active the eight projects funded by the KEP built up a staggering number of relationships and touch points. Perhaps now we’ve got this map, people working on collaborative projects in the future will at least have a rough idea of where their journeys might take them and who they might meet on the way.
For any modern parent, it’s a familiar scene. You stand over your children’s shoulders, however covertly, watching as their nimble fingers flutter over the keyboards, nunchucks and touch pads of their digital devices. An Arsenal-themed PowerPoint sits under three separate browser windows – one for chat, one for music sharing, one for Bebo or Facebook.

Someone’s sending links of pics for the PowerPoint; fingers flutter back a rebuke, adding their own snippet of information-plan-emotion. (The mobile intruders regularly into the exchange, an angry buzzing fly trapped in a tin). And like some kind of domestic water-feature, the sports or cartoon channel shimmer, murmurs or explodes at the other end of the room, the TV merely an ambient input, waiting to be turned into the full spectacle of a console game.

Yet strip out the flashy and mutable interfaces of these technologies, bracket off the sheer plenitude of material available to the digital child, and what kind of behaviour do we have here? Nothing too far, I’d suggest, from the classic moment of play – that developmental scene present in most human societies that have achieved some distance beyond scarcity or sheer survival, and can thus provide a surplus of toys and materials for their impressively ludic young ones.

Despite the hi-tech means, collages are still being built here, songs still being sung and learned, teasing and hazing is still being conducted (across the input boxes), intensely imagined worlds of heroism and camaraderie are still being created and explored (frame by frame, level by level).

It’s not that our children aren’t ‘digital natives’, whose amateur (i.e. passion-driven) literacy and facility with ICT presents such a challenge to less ‘playful’ generations (across the input boxes), intensely imagined worlds of heroism and camaraderie are still being created and explored (frame by frame, level by level).

So what public service role might the BBC perform in the emergent tumult of interactive culture? It might be to bring some kind of institutional or infrastructural gravity to an otherwise weightless, Darwinian whirlwind of applications and ventures. Perhaps, when faced with a legion of young players, it might be useful for BBC policy makers to return to some of the deeper play paradigms for guidance.

The ethology of play – its role in animal behaviour – tells us that play happens in conditions of relative surplus, and relative safety. The lion-cubs fight and chase, groom and explore – in short, pursue their adaptive potencies in an area which is usually delimited and overseen, even at a distance, by parents. Play also usually happens at an expense of physical energy, which builds up as a result of adequate nutrition and standards of health in the animal.

To what extent might the BBC, in the new media landscape, perform this distant paternal role? Not the ‘paternalism’ of old, but the parent as a guarantor of the robust sesu-
rity of the ‘ground of play’? By both nurturing the capacities and health of digital players, and also providing tools and platforms (or even cleared savannah!) for their play, the BBC could find its secure footing in the interactive society.

From reading some of the AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange Programme essays, one can see the BBC’s role as the ‘distant parent of the play generation’ already being realised. We have to recognise at the start here that the BBC has had a long history of thinking developmentally and educationally about its television programming, from idiosyncratic approaches like the late (and sorely lamented) Oliver Postgate to the work of Anne Wood, with shows (like Tumblebbies and In The Night Garden) informed by cutting-edge research in child psychology.

It’s fascinating to read children’s assessments of the utility of the classic BBC news programme Newsround in the KEP study “What Do Children Want from the BBC? Children’s Content and Participatory Environments in an Age of Citizen Media”. The researchers are right to carefully draw out the already existing models of citizenship that lie in the minds of the show’s target audience, the 7-11 age-group – the need to “know what’s going on in the world”. (If I can make a personal note here: very often my youngest daughter would make a clear declaration that “Newsround was the best show ever”, precisely because its editorial agenda gave her a sense of mastery over a world of news.)

They are also right to pick up the demand from the children themselves that Newsround could open itself up more to the possibilities of news creation, audio/visual/textual, that lie within the hands of the play generation themselves – literally, these days, as the mobile phone adds more multimedia functionality. As the technology editor of BBC Online News Darren Waters said at a recent conference on Twitter and real-time media, the BBC is evolving its own strategies on ‘citizen journalism’ – finding ways to establish protocols on monitoring and verifying content that comes in from outside the corporation.

Perhaps one constituency they could easily involve in forming these strategies are the budding ‘citizen journalists’ of a children’s news audience. And, as the Children and the BBC study points out, the BBC also needs to begin to embrace a distinctively teenage audience, somewhat lost in the gulf between Newsround and the often punishing, baffling or tedious agenda of adult news. Indeed, in terms of the emotional intensities that shape much perception of daily reality in childhood and teenagehood, there might be much to be learned from applying social media tools to the experience of children’s news.

As the media analyst Clay Shirky said recently, these playful communications platforms do lend themselves to waves of mass emotion driving awareness of news facts – positive in the light of something like the Obama campaign and its harnessing of national idealism, negative in the way that the swine flu epidemic creates waves of panic on platforms like Twitter. Is this a real awareness building and critical media literacy opportunity for the BBC and young audiences – perhaps ‘playing’ with the idea of social media frenzies, doing a ‘Memewatch’ and subjecting them to critical analysis? Channel Four have provided a lead in this area with their multimedia show for activist kids, Battlefront (www.battlefront.co.uk), which mixes media criticism with advocacy of issues, all of its content very much driven and created by the users/viewers.

Yet I was delighted (and not at all surprised) to notice from the paper that the news topic valued by all children over all others, by a very clear points lead, was – sports! Again, as a play-ethicist, I would want to stress that the play moment for 21st century kids - however ‘networked-individualist’ they are - will still be rooted in some of the psychological constants of development. In short, their whole bodies, as well as their minds, need excitement, exertion, testing, and basically throwing about in these growing years – and it’s no surprise to see that sporting activity, our most esteemed physical play form, is what kids most want to watch from their news show. For them, physical bliss, self-possession and change is always big news.

To the Corporation’s credit, it seems to realise (without much forethought) that developing the capacity of young players is a multi-sensorial, multi-disciplinary affair – an event in real time and space, involving bodies, percepts and affects, and not just something which can be exhausted in a platform, interface or gameplay. The paper “Alone Together: Social Learning and Blast” is a detailed assessment of the impact of the BBC’s Blast project, an extremely well-meaning initiative that aims to nurture and encourage the performing and creative talents of the BBC’s young viewership.
Yet there are some fascinating tensions revealed by the report, mostly around the lack of integration between the live Blast road shows (3-4 day events where classes and competitions around all kinds of media skills and art forms are staged) and the online community – which to some extent fuels participation in, and archives the results from, those shows.

Clearly, in a wider online environment which hardly lacks in opportunities for upload of material which is then shared with peers, the Blast site itself somewhat palls in comparison with the rude, anarchic vigour of Bebo, Facebook, MySpace or YouTube. The children and teenagers themselves seem to recognise that posting such material to a BBC site implies a kind of cultural approval or status above and beyond the usual social-networked meleé – and in the message boards, seem to seek out the expert “mentors” that respond to their work.

But in a media environment where voracious meritoric talent shows command mass audiences (and mass hysteria) on one side, and hundreds of millions of iterators and media-tors decide to upload their content for whatever audience they can find or amass on the other, BBC Blast sits quite curiously – part arts college or amass on the other, BBC Blast's managers or its peers.

I wonder whether this report also shows that Blast Online should be more about what the media theorist Simon Yuill calls “distributive practice”. Should Blast be a repository and conservatory for transmitting good technique, in as many art forms, and to whatever enables the development of depth of complexity, as is requested? This would make it much more than a “me-too” of existing user-generated content platforms.

The difficulty, but also the exciting possibilities, of situating the BBC in the contemporary matrix of play culture is only made more acute by the paper on “Virtual Worlds: An overview and study of BBC Children’s Adventure Rock”. This is an excellent reflection on the strategic challenges of creating an immersive, 3D online gameplay for 7-12 year olds. The authors and game-makers seem well aware of the developmental possibilities of virtual worlds for children – in terms of an active relationship to media, an experience of agency and world-creation, the re-hearsal of responsibility for others, etc. Their sagacity is reminiscent of The Sims’ creator Will Wright’s observation that all his games have been inspired by Maria Montessori’s theory of toy-play as the most powerful educational tool.

It’s certainly understandable, as the Virtual Worlds study says, that the BBC needs to “keep up” with commercial immersive virtual worlds (World of Warcraft, Lego Universe, etc) in order to maintain audience share in the future. Though this might sound strange coming from a play advocate, I wonder whether the BBC should get too deeply involved in the hugely capital-intensive enterprise of creating massive multiplayer online worlds, at least with the same ambitions for richness and graphical excellence as commercial rivals. (And one should always remember just how “non-commercial” some of the core investments are in these “synthetic worlds”, to use the American economist Edward Castronova’s term. By which I mean the heavy investment in gaming platforms by both military establishments in the US, and state-totalitarian sources in China).

Perhaps looking towards a “distributive practice” of game culture might be more in tune with the Corporation’s ends, if you accept the framing of the BBC as “parent of play”. For example, the subculture of machinima – that is, moulding and hacking game engines to enable stories to be told – seems to me to be crying out for the kind of TV broadcast/online-platform integration that the BBC managed with theDansokh’s virtual-box game shows. Simon Yuill’s main project is to create what he calls a ‘social versioning system’ for game-creation. In this, local communities are given both the tools to create virtual worlds, and encourage to reflect on the social, economic and ethical rules they embed into those worlds. This strikes me as a classic developmental template for the BBC to explore with its audiences. It’s not as if the BBC hasn’t seeded the environment with playful and powerful technological riches before: remember the BBC Micro.

The BBC’s overall relationship with a now mainstreamed culture of digital play – always driven by young and teenage audiences but now, of course, including the ‘greyestron’ generation of older gamers – is a crucial matter for the Corporation’s continuing legitimacy as a public-service media organisation.

There are plenty of other beasts, both sleek and rough, in the digital jungle – whether cavorting on the commons, or at battle in the marketplace. In these varied terrains, many enterprises can pursue their “adaptable potentiates” to their hearts’ content – all of which diversity and change brings energy and incessant change to our now dominant play culture. But beneath the tumult, there are deeper, socio-biological contours of play in human nature: the need for a platform of stability and resource upon which all the enriching experiments of play behaviour can flourish. For me, this is a great opportunity for the BBC – but to grasp the moment, I believe it must develop its own, public service version of a play ethic. By which I mean an ethos that justifies defending, sustaining and supporting the ‘ground of play’ as a crucial moment of human development. We know the one that’s encoded into the very DNA of that famous nubbly-brick manufacturer: lego. Which means: to play well. What might the BBC’s version of that be?
Audiences online now expect to do a lot. Interactivity is not just about time shifting and personalising any more. It’s about participation, remixing, collaborating. How can the BBC engage the new active audience in relationships that work for everyone? 

On the 16th June this year, the government’s Digital Britain report was launched. Its conclusions sparked debate and discussion and will no doubt continue to be picked over in the future. Many early readers criticised the report for fence sitting, for not going far enough or thinking radically about the future. However, in one respect, the Digital Britain report is a sign of how much business as usual is being changed by interactive media technologies.

Flick through the report and on page 10, you’ll find a description of the Digital Britain unconferences. There are further references on pages 225 and 226, describing the contributions from the unconferences that made it into the final document. Indeed, Lord Carter actually attended a report follow-up unconference in Birmingham on 17th June and joined in the discussions taking place.

Much of what does appear in the Digital Britain report comes via the usual official channels, the usual government and business suits. But the unconferences represent a new kind of contribution. So what is an unconference?

The working definition that’s developed over the last few years is that it’s a participant-driven event centred on a theme, problem or purpose. Some have suggested that it does for event participation what the Web 2.0 did for the net. The idea is to create conferences that develop and evolve in response to contributions from the participants. Agendas and schedules aren’t set up beforehand. They emerge as participants get involved. Ideally, there’s no audience at an unconference, just lots of participants.

On Page 8 of this newspaper, Bill Thompson talks about how he fired off a frustrated tweet about the level of discussion at the Digital Britain Summit, a rather more conventional sort of conference involving the great, the good and Gordon Brown, which took place in April this year. Bill suggested doing an unconference instead. That initial tweet bore fruit in hours, rather than days. It resonated with many people who were following the Digital Britain summit online and carrying on a real time conversation about it via Twitter – coordinating contributions by using the hashtag #digitalbritain. And it led to several weeks of frantic activity as people around the UK organised Digital Britain unconferences, generating ideas that eventually found their way into the final report.

It’s worth looking more closely at how these events were organised. They’re a great example for organisations that want to think about how best to work with a newly active audience. Once people had declared a desire to get involved, a Yahoo Group was quickly set up to co-ordinate efforts and link initial volunteers together. The result: the idea of a set of UK-wide, volunteer-organised events with the aim of producing an alternative report that was as widely representative as possible but also offered positive, realistic contributions for the final Digital Britain report. It would also extend the work of Joss Swin and Paul Johnston of WriteToReply.com with their commentable version of the Interim Report and ‘False Digital Britain Report’.

A week after the Summit - and with a nod from the Digital Britain team that they were listening - a website was launched (digitalbritain unconference.wordpress.com) with these simple instructions: “Anyone can attend or hold an event and associate it with Digital Britain Unconferences, you’ll just need to summarise your discussions and hold it by 13th May 2009! Yes, time is very tight.”

By the 13th May, twelve unconferences had taken place from Glasgow to Truro in the South West. All attendees were encouraged to read the Interim Report and the level of engagement and serious thinking across each event was exemplary - subjects covered went from next generation broadband and digital inclusion through to issues of rights, opportunities for building billion-dollar businesses and an Uploaders Manifesto. The events included a virtual discussion focusing on rural issues related to Digital Britain and a family unconference held in Tunbridge, Derbyshire, as well as large events of over 50 people in London and Manchester. Meanwhile the tweets and use of the hashtags kept the conversation alive and everyone up to date.

The results of each event were compiled into one document, edited and summarised by a volunteer team of four editors. The unconference report was duly sent to (and warmly received by) the Digital Britain team on 26th May - just over six weeks after the original idea was hatched. A few days later it was also put online and those involved with and supportive of the conclusions were encouraged to add their name as a signatory.

It should be noted that most of those involved have never met and very few of them know each other; each event was organised locally. Such a speedy reaction and strong collaboration under similar circumstances would have been impossible even a few years ago. Now it’s relatively easy to make happen, thanks to the real-time connections of microblogging and a collection of freely available, easy to use technologies and social media such as WordPress, wikidot, Eventbrite (an event organising and ticketing service), Yahoo Groups, UStream (a few of the events were video streamed), Huddle, Flickr, Scribd, Facebook and more.

As one of the unconference report editors, Alastair Duncan (former CEO of MRM Worldwide from 2004-2008) commented: “This is not an example of ‘citizen journalism’. Nor is it just ‘social media content’. It is a solid and coordinated effort by a considerable number of smart and committed people, living by the network, connecting as individuals, with a concrete belief that Britain has to be a successful and leading country in all aspects of the digital world.”

In Here Comes Everybody, his best-selling examination of new online group-forming tools and their effects on society, the American new media academic Clay Shirky argues that “when we change the way we communicate, we change society.” It’s a big claim. But the unconference story shows that the web really can act as a new lever or catalyst for communication and collaboration in the real and virtual world. In this particular instance, it helped strengthen participation and citizenship within the democratic process – one of the key BBC public purposes.

The collaboration represented by the Digital Britain unconferences represent the highest levels of user activity online. More importantly, for the BBC, it also shows how results can work together, coordinate themselves and work with an organisation to make something happen without being confrontational.

The AHRC/BBC KEP research studies show that the BBC is doing all it can to learn how to work with interactive technologies and the people formerly known as the audience. To be fair, over the last ten years, we’ve all been learning what interactivity really means.

Initially, people focused on the idea of individual user control, of content on demand, of personalised schedules and time shifting. That’s clearly important – look at the success of the iPlayer. But now interactivity has developed beyond personalisation to include the idea of participation, of co-creation and collaboration, involving professionals and audience in a potentially open-ended process.
Often when a website offers the opportunity to comment on an article, video, photo or other piece of media, it is not always made clear as to why and for whose gain this opportunity is being given - and whether the comment will be heard or in what context.

The KEP studies look closely at how the BBC is changing its approach in response to interactive media technologies. They reflect the changes the Corporation is trying to make as it grows more involved with its audience. The BBC is affectionately called Auntie but it’s not without good reason. Online, some BBC message board users in particular feel that the approach taken is “Auntie knows best”. In the KEP study ‘Listener online engagement with BBC Radio’, one user cooly claims that “the moderators treat us like children!”

In contrast, those involved in the un-conferences were able not only to have their say but know that, in doing so, they were part of a larger process leading towards a goal, and that their voice might not only be heard by their fellow un-conference attendees but also by government, that their conversations might make a difference.

The important thing there was that technology was just an enabler, something that allowed people to create a collaborative community. The Listener Online Engagement study shows that, when it comes to specialist music fans, a similar sort of community develops around BBC content online. “The online activities were communal rather than individual; they were set within a virtual environment rather than determined in any simple way by technologies; and they involved cultural activities which were developments of, but distinct from, offline fan activity. It is necessary, therefore, to place contemporary radio broadcasting in a wider context than seeing the internet as a new channel through which radio can be broadcast, or a new medium to promote those broadcasts.”

It is also worth pointing out the social capital gains in being involved in these kinds of activity online. These gains extend both within the virtual environment (increase in Twitter followers, links and comments to blog posts, personal mentions by others, becoming more well known within the ‘community’) as well as beyond it. That’s one reason for the BBC to encourage this kind of activity.

What’s important from a BBC perspective, though, is to think through how the desire within individuals to increase their social capital can be utilised and to understand that any solution will not be universal across BBC services. Simple examples might include user moderation of message boards and allowing the rating of user comments by a simple plus/minus button (see Facebook as an example). The KEP study “A Public Voice: Access, Digital Story and Interactive Narrative” also reveals that, when taken to the level of story telling and media creation, users can also experience improved self-confidence, self-esteem, aspiration, and acquire new skills.

The KEP research also shows how much social capital a moderator or official BBC voice may have, when joining in the conversation online. It can have the power to either encourage further contributions or halt them, even if unintentionally. The KEP study ‘Alone Together: Social learning in BBC Blast’ shows that this was a particular problem for BBC Blast and offers useful advice. “Mentor expressions of preference carry more weight than the teenagers because they represent the adult expert voice. The mentors need to approach the message boards as a potential learning space, and need to be aware that their answers are not simply responses to a particular post. Instead they represent how to answer questions and offer criticism. They have the power to develop or prevent the discussion and encourage or dissuade users.”

Another useful lesson from the un-conferences is that they happened because the Digital Britain team themselves said they were listening (via email to the organisers). They also gave channels via which they could be contacted and showed they valued the exchange by joining in the conversation, and responding encouragingly. Often when a website offers the opportunity to comment on an article, video, photo or other piece of media, it’s not always made clear why and for what and whose gain this opportunity is being given - and whether the comment will be heard or in what context.

The KEP study ‘ugc@thebcc: Understanding its impact upon contributors, non-contributors and BBC services’. Simple examples might include user moderation of message boards and allowing the rating of user comments by a simple plus/minus button (see Facebook as an example). The study recommends instead that the phrase be replaced with ‘Audience Material’.

Allowing audiences to submit material to the BBC immediately says, “we’re listening”, but without responding to every comment, it is not always easy to prove this. In addition, high volume causes all sorts of organisational headaches, from moderation to finding the newsworthy and usable photograph amongst the mountain of contributions. Quoted in the ugc@thebcc study, Peter Horrocks (editor, BBC Newsroom) notes: “The dilemma is that the insatiable resource requirement around just dealing with comments doesn’t seem to me is generating enough, or will not in the future, generate enough extra value for the kind of effort that we need to put into it.” Peter Rippon (editor, Radio 4’s PM, iPM, World at One and Broadcasting House) adds: “I don’t think the BBC should be providing platforms for just noise which you can find anywhere on the Web anyway.”

But listening is important and can lead to many positive benefits, as the ugc@thebcc report points out elsewhere: “If it were not for these important spaces for debate, many news stories and the case studies and eyewitness accounts which accompanied them would have never been found.” One way forward is suggested by the ugc@thebcc study by Head of Editorial Development for Multimedia Peter Clifton, who talks about actually focusing more on the real added value insight in User Generated Content.”
One example might be the use of real-time responses and the inclusion of the real-time layer of conversations that can now be experienced on services such as Facebook, Twitter and other microblogging services. It is now commonplace for mass open conversations to happen on Twitter whilst a TV programme is in progress. Many have suggested that media proliferation and interactivity has led to fragmentation and the end of national viewing experiences. Interestingly, perhaps we’re seeing the rise of new kinds of shared experience, especially on Twitter. Creating shared spaces simply through the use of hashtags.

Hang out on Twitter (circa 2.5 million users in the UK, roughly 7 percent of the internet users) when The Apprentice, Britain’s Got Talent or even Question Time is on and you’ll soon find many viewers are Twittering as well as watching. Users have designated programmes with their own hashtags (in the case of the programmes above #apprentice, #bgt, and #bbq). These can be used to search for comments within Twitter and so keep up with what others are saying virtually in real time, creating a very large chat room. For example:

@naiser: anyone else shocked hate didn’t win #apprentice was to sure she had it - implacable and yasminas chocs seemed vile

@helenthornber: Reviewed the tweeting from @sometimesWatson and I last night whilst watching the #apprentice & drinking the 2nd bottle of wine - funny!

This phenomenon happens with events, like the Digital Britain summit mentioned before, and was spotted by those within the BBC’s Have Your Say and those running the news site who used it to good effect during the June 2009 UK Council and EU elections. The BBC team integrated viewer tweets into a live update page, mixing in texts from viewers as well as official BBC material and News 24 live video feed. This gave viewers comments context and added texture to the overall story being told, immediately extending the journey of the audience in both directions (to and from Twitter and the BBC). The presence of other material aggregated from across the BBC together with links to more content and visualisations created a rich audience experience, but also one that reflected audience views.

Such integrations of content only solve part of the puzzle. Some lessons about how to create responsive structures can be drawn from the experiences of computer manufacturer Dell over the past few years. But it was UK writer Charles Arthur that first observed in the July of that year: “Want to complain on Dell’s website about its customer service? Too late - the Customer Support Forums, operational until last Friday, have been shut down, apparently to try to quell bad publicity there about Dell products and especially after-care service.”

A month later Jarvis, chimed in with an open letter to Michael Dell and Michael George, pointing out that when you lose a customer, you also potentially lose the custom of the customer’s friends, due to widespread use of blogs and customer rate and review sites (an early form of user generated content). Dell took a while to respond. But a year later, they were trying to make up for lost ground, telling customers: “We’re spending more than a $100 million — and a lot of blood, sweat and tears of talented people — to fix this… In the coming days and weeks the people responsible for improving Dell customer service are going to join the conversation.”

One response to improving customer service was IdeaStorm, launched in 2007. Customers can post business ideas, vote, promote or demote ideas and also see what ideas have been implemented by Dell through this process. Their aim was to build an online community that “brings all of us closer to the creative side of technology by allowing you to share ideas and collaborate with one another. The goal is for you, the customer, to tell Dell what new products or services you’d like to see Dell develop. We hope this site fosters a candid and robust conversation about your ideas.”

To create this atmosphere of listening, Dell explains very explicitly how everything works, suggesting that the company expect and is prepared to listen to and what will be done in return. The process is made very clear and expectations are managed carefully. By the beginning of June 2009 (two years after launch) the Dell Community had contributed 11,789 ideas, promoted (or voted) for ideas 667,042 times and sent in 2009 (two years after launch) the company expect and is prepared to listen to and what will be done in return. The process is made very clear and expectations are managed carefully. By the beginning of June 2009 (two years after launch) the Dell Community had contributed 11,789 ideas, promoted (or voted) for ideas 667,042 times and sent in 84,543 comments. In return Dell has implemented 337 ideas. Some of the implementations are quite small but some have been significant – such as the ideas to not eliminate the choice of XP as an operating system and to offer Ubuntu pre-installed as an alternative open source non-Microsoft operating system.

Good structures enable an efficient use of everyone’s time and resources and also ensure that each contributor has value and can be filtered by the organisation/company and the community or contributors itself. As the Listeners Online Engagement Program study notes: “Ultimately, in order for BBC Radio to best serve its listeners’ requirements in terms of message board provision, it needs to first decide what its purpose is and how it understands and communicates its own interactivity – whether it aims to encourage interaction between users or between user and BBC. Features and tools can then be modified to better reflect those goals.”

This thought should be extended to all BBC online engagement activity. IdeaStorm works because there is a carefully crafted structure with a clear purpose that in turn focuses Dell’s ability to listen and respond. The same structure won’t work everywhere. The BBC needs to pay attention to specifics, to tailor its approach to the needs of different audiences using different services at different times. The KEP research is part of that process and is perhaps just the beginning of a larger effort to look closely at what the audience is doing online and listen more effectively.

### Beyond UGC – five types of audience material

The KEP study @thebbc argues that we should use the term ‘audience material’ rather than ‘UGC’, which it refers to as a ‘catch-all’ that covers up the complexities of what happens when audiences interact with the media. The study goes on to suggest there are five main types of ‘audience material’:

1. **Audience content** – includes audience footage, audience experiences and audience stories (i.e. tip-offs of stories not on the BBC news agenda)
2. **Audience comments** – that is, opinions shared in response to a call for action
3. **Collaborative content** – produced by the audience with support and sometimes training from BBC professionals
4. **Networked journalism** – professionals and amateurs working together to get a story
5. **Non-news content** – photos of the weather or wildlife

Ideas and conversations about BBC programmes are already happening across the BBC website and, as the Listener Online Engagement study shows, the level of trust in the BBC operating spaces such as the message boards is high – despite the ‘Auntie knows best’ feel. The passions that are shown by users of Dell computers are small in comparison to those held by BBC users such as Archers devotees and specialist music fans. The Digital Britain unconferences were a small example of what can happen when you get this right. Imagine what could happen if the BBC found the right way to channel the ideas and passions of its audience.
Many believe knowledge exchange networks will play an increasingly important role in innovation. Does the AHRC/BBC KEP establish some useful pointers for the future?

The idea of a partnership between the BBC and the Arts and Humanities Research Council was first suggested in 2005 by Matt Locke, then head of BBC Creative R&D. Even then it was clear that this kind of high profile partnership would offer enormous opportunities to both the BBC and academia as a flagship for emerging Knowledge Transfer strategies. Matt recalls that among his aims in establishing the partnership was the desire to speed up BBC research cycles, make research more accessible beyond the organisation and more iterative and responsive to shifting trends such as the move towards social media.

So four years on, how has the AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange Programme done? Has it delivered on Locke's original aims? Is it a valuable prototype for research-led innovation? Does it offer useful models, not just for the BBC, but for other organisations looking to build knowledge in a more open, responsive way?

The focus on social media now looks particularly far-sighted. Since the KEP was first discussed, platforms and services which allow us to communicate, share and critique have become part of everyday life: Google maps, the iPhone, Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, You Tube. Meanwhile services still in development such as Google Wave continue the relentless march of technological progress. Social media creates all sorts of challenges for traditional media organisations. In the words of Chinese blogger and social entrepreneur Isaac Mao: “The emergence of Social Applications that can communicate and cooperate, by allowing people to output content from one service to another, is letting users pump their memes into a pipeline-like ecosystem. This interconnectedness allows memes to travel along multiple online social networks and potentially reach a huge audience. As a result, such a micro-pipeline system is making Social Media a true alternative to broadcast culture. These new technologies are reviving Sharism in our closed culture.”

In fact, in the last few years it’s become clear that the ‘media and technologies formerly known as new’ have been combining, converging and occasionally colliding with established mainstream media, resulting in new platforms and applications. Services like BBC iPlayer and plans to ‘remobilise’ the archive as new content for a new context signal the Corporation’s desire to stay ahead of the game. But nowadays such progress more often than not involves combining the human and the social with technological innovation. Success in social media often depends on the degree of insight by designers into human interfaces and social behaviour as well as the potential of new media technologies.

That’s one place where the contribution of the KEP research is clear. The eight studies cover a wide range, touching on everything from the challenges of collected, connected and generative content and the combining of old or existing content to new contexts for display and distribution, design for user participation, the rethinking of ownership of public and private data and questions around identity, representation and responsibility in an era of collaborative networks. More importantly, by generating a programme that has supported the exchange of knowledge, skills and methodologies between UK Arts and Humanities academics and BBC staff, while also involving the ‘public’ in diverse forms, the KEP has led to forms of action or practice-based research combined with invaluable reflection and interpretation.

In return for gaining unprecedented access to material and being able to participate in processes of debate and decision-making that are normally internal to the BBC, academics brought a capacity for critical reflection on contemporary trends, as well as methodologies for analysis and skills of interpretation. That said, the willingness of the BBC to let academics move in and root around their day-to-day activities was a risk and something I find particularly impressive, given the capacity of academic researchers to ask difficult questions. Whether all organisations would be brave enough to follow this approach is a matter for discussion.

Developing Synergy
One aspect of the KEP that worked well and should be applied elsewhere is the early identification of the priority research themes. That encouraged BBC departmental hosts to get involved and attracted high calibre academics. Rowena Goldman, who took the initiative forward with the BBC and academia and act as a flagship for emerging Knowledge Transfer strategies. Matt recalls that among his aims in establishing the partnership was the desire to speed up BBC research cycles, make research more accessible beyond the organisation and more iterative and responsive to shifting trends such as the move towards social media.

In return for gaining unprecedented access to material and being able to participate in processes of debate and decision-making that are normally internal to the BBC, academics brought a capacity for critical reflection on contemporary trends, as well as methodologies for analysis and skills of interpretation. That said, the willingness of the BBC to let academics move in and root around their day-to-day activities was a risk and something I find particularly impressive, given the capacity of academic researchers to ask difficult questions. Whether all organisations would be brave enough to follow this approach is a matter for discussion.
The AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange Programme – An 8 Step Plan

In the Beginning: It all started with a conversation between BBC Future Media & Technology and the Arts and Humanities Research Council to explore mutual benefits of knowledge exchange between BBC staff and arts and humanities academia.

Tell Me More: A series of jointly hosted Knowledge Exchange Summits was held between the two communities to bring everyone together and provide a catalyst for dialogue.

Heeding Advice: In consultation with the two communities, a paper was produced outlining possible scenarios for a formal partnership between the BBC and the AHRC.

Formalising the Relationships: One of the strongest recommendations was for a Pilot Funding Call for collaborative research projects. This resulted in the selection of 8 co-funded Knowledge Exchange Awards.

The Future of the Collaboration: To support and grow the community beyond the funding call, an online knowledge network was developed, beebac, where academics, industry practitioners and BBC staff could collaborate.

Drilling Deeper: At the end of the Knowledge Exchange Awards, five of the 8 projects were allocated additional Knowledge Infusion funding to enable further examination of the key findings and the production of usable concepts and prototypes.

Getting it Out There: An extensive programme of dissemination has been undertaken by the BBC and the AHRC, including the distribution of the project reports, press releases, exhibitions, conferences, presentations, learning lunches, seminars, book chapters and articles, a BBC Knowledge Exchange blog and this very publication.

Time for Reflection: The BBC and the AHRC are currently engaged in an extended period of evaluation and assessment to inform future models of collaboration between academia, industry, research councils and other publicly funded bodies.

The researchers on the project were also aware of the value of their partnership which crossed academic, broadcast and public spheres: ‘Through this research we can begin to understand what is important to communities about how they are represented in the archive. We can begin to understand the passions and sense of ownership the BBC audience has when engaging with what is essentially their archive. We are on the threshold of new forms of broadcasting and collective engagement in content generation and selective scheduling. Traditional models and orthodoxies, programming and gate-keeping roles are being re-defined and as this study forcefully demonstrates, a new participant public is keen to engage with the BBC not just as passive consumers, but as active partners.’

This project loops relevance from past into present, connecting with those who have been the subject of broadcast material dealing with socially challenging and politically significant events. It tackles unresolved issues about how national TV represents regional events and provides scope for a renegotiation of ownership and authenticity, opening up what the authors of the Public Voice study call “the space for recuperation,” something that can emerge through research which sensitively excavates layers of buried meaning. Again, this all has particular relevance for the BBC in its attempt to redefine its relationship with the public. But other organisations that want to use social media to build new relationships with their users would do well to look at this research.

The Borderline between Learning and Knowledge Exchange

Stepping back slightly, one of the key things the KEP research reveals – and something that could have interesting policy implications in the future – is the shifting terrain between ‘learning’ and ‘knowledge.’ The idea of knowledge as an emergent and collaborative process has become very current over the last four years, not least due to the nature of networked media, which encourages and facilitates distributed innovation. But how do institutions – such as media and academia – best adapt to and capitalise on such models of networked organisation? The KEP research is a useful prototype here, something that can contribute not just to new discussions in media organisations but also to debates about the future of teaching, learning and research in universities now.

One of the challenges that arose for participants in this programme, including the BBC and the AHRC itself, was the need for working methods that facilitated interaction between different fields.

The contracts between the BBC and the lead universities involved in each project were based on the Lambert Report guidelines for knowledge transfer between academia and industry. However, as many of the academics have pointed out, the nature of non-commercial research and the desire, on occasion, to use social software to disseminate findings meant that, in practice, the legal agreements were sometimes constricive. The single most important lesson learnt from the programme may well be that the legal teams from both communities would do well to sit down and re-align the goal posts for any future partnership model. However, the joint contract that the BBC and AHRC developed for the programme is still robust enough to have been used as a template by the AHRC in other Knowledge Transfer contexts.

There are many examples of mutual learning from the KEP that could be further utilised. Making the learning and knowledge accessible is a vital task, one which may require going beyond the lengthy and scholarly reports to help draw out key recommendations or insights. Lizzie Jackson, one of the ‘critical interface’ figures involved in the research (who during the period of the programme moved from a role at Future Media & Technology in the BBC to a role at the University of Westminster) has recommended the introduction of training sessions and that resources could be made available to others at the BBC and academia drawing on the lessons of these unusual collaborations.

From Mass Observation to Mass Conversation

But what of the broader issues around this collaboration? As a public service broadcaster, the BBC’s responsibilities include transparency and accountability. There is a strong argument that the BBC has an obligation to share aspects of research co-funded with another public agency. The recent appointment of Sir Tim Berners-Lee, asked by Gordon Brown to help make UK public data transparent, interoperable and publicly accessible, reflects a growing policy trend towards openness. Jack Straw has recently suggested that organisations in receipt of public funding should be encouraged to publish data freely.
This is a particularly strong argument where knowledge is generated through collaboration with the public. The methods of research employed by the KEP research teams support iterative feedback and reflection on BBC projects at beta-stage. There is a sense here of public experimentation - building on models such as the famous Mass Observation projects in the 1930s, which sought to make ‘an anthropology of ourselves’ in another period of intense socio-political transition.

Whilst the BBC’s concerns are of course primarily the delivery of high quality content, it is also an organisation that needs to adapt and explore ways to engage differently with its stakeholders and partners. The idea of being at least in part open access laboratory and test bed for future media is something the BBC might seek to further encourage, building on current initiatives like Backstage. Apple’s mixed ecology approach (opening up its platform for new iPhone applications which in turn benefit its sales) provides a good model for how to combine quality with innovation, standards with access.

**Measuring Success**

Professor John Ellis Chair of the British Film & Video University Council asked me recently, ‘how do we create value from non-commercial activities?’ That seems to go to the core of the question I’m exploring here.

If the knowledge generated by the KEP is emergent and relationship-based then it will continue to develop and accrue value over time - it doesn’t stop with publishing reports. Knowledge is embodied and transferred through people. Through ongoing evaluation we can track this value over time in projects inside and outside the BBC. The results of arts and humanities research are often long-term and can only be fully appreciated through an appropriate lens. Media timescales are frequently speedier and swift application of knowledge can require the deployment of new techniques. The beautifully distilled and timely KEP study ‘User-Generated Content: understanding its impact on contributors, non-contributors and media companies and can act as brokers and halfway houses, connections to the public, academia, technological research, artists, designers and media companies and can act as brokers and halfway houses, facilitating a different kind of knowledge sharing from the ‘lab’ to the public domain. This would extend the work of the KEP, taking it to another, more accessible level.

Similarly, two Arts Council England-funded placements a few years ago in the BBC’s (then Creative) Archive allowed artists Vicky Bennett and Chris Dorley-Brown to spend six months within the BBC. Though low cost relative to the AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange projects, these achieved spectacularly successful results. In the same vein, as part of the Arts Council’s Knowledge & Participation programme, Dorley-Brown to spend six months within the BBC. Though low cost relative to the AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange projects, these achieved spectacularly successful results. In the same vein, as part of the Arts Council’s Knowledge & Participation programme, Dorley-Brown to spend six months within the BBC. Though low cost relative to the AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange projects, these achieved spectacularly successful results. In the same vein, as part of the Arts Council’s Knowledge & Participation programme, Dorley-Brown to spend six months within the BBC. 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This paper is one of the outputs from the AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange Programme led from within BBC R&D by Innovation Culture and at the AHRC by the Knowledge Transfer Team. Innovation Culture provides a central support resource for a wide range of BBC divisions, making it more effective to undertake collaborative work. The AHRC’s Knowledge Transfer Team is charged with supporting bespoke KT schemes, working with the academic community to embed a culture of impact and KT. The KEP has a number of homes on the web where you can find out more or contribute. beebac is an online network for BBC staff, media practitioners and academics. It enables you to find people and projects you want to be involved with, explore areas of mutual interest and exchange ideas and resources. Sign up to the beta trial of beebac at beebac.welcomebackstage.com. You can download all the KEP studies from the blog at: www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange.

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What do you think the BBC will look like in 10 years time?

Professor David Gauntlett: “In general I think the BBC has to become a true facilitator of people’s own creativity, enabling them to easily create and share media experiences. This will co-exist with a smaller amount of high-quality landmark productions by professionals. But these professionals will always be challenged by the amateurs to do better!”

What surprised you most about the findings of the KEP study?

Dr Cynthia Carter: “How strong young teens seem to want a news service of their own and how important the news is to children and young people, despite widespread views that they find it ‘boring’.”