

Pitches from BBC Innovation labs (Yorkshire) Introductory Day and Feedback

Group 6

Our project was designed to appeal to Technophobe Telly Addicts. Over 6 million adults, an older group, of which 75% are women. They're not interested in the Internet, and 90% of them are unlikely to start using the net anytime soon. 60% of this market own digital televisions.

The usual interactive TV device with a keyboard won't engage this audience. They are unlikely to adopt mobile phone web browsing or use a computer or even have access to one. They have no interest in learning how to use a keyboard. Our group decided to look at the digital TV revolution and build a system without a keyboard: no onscreen keyboard, no keyboard on your lap. It would only use 8 buttons (left, right, up, down, blue, red, yellow, green), perhaps with an OK button in the middle. The system could use existing remote controls. BBC transmissions would have a set of metadata built into them, which would refresh every 30 seconds, like an electronic programme guide. The digital receiver would have built in browser capability or be connected to an external device through available ports to allow data transfer. Essentially, you could press a single button, and the metadata transmitted with that programme would take you to a simplified webpage, graphic or text. If, for example, the user was watching a news article about dyslexia, the metadata would link to a webpage about dyslexia. The metadata would help the user to interact with the services offered by bbc.co.uk

If you're watching a programme, you don't want to be interrupted. You don't want a web browser popping up and spoiling your entertainment. So if you record the information onto your digital TV box hard drive (a lot of them now come with hard drives) that metadata could be stored as well as the recorded programme. During playback, the viewer can pause the programme and view the web information when they want to. So if you're watching Only Fools and Horses and there's a Robin Reliant in the scene, you can pause the programme and find out about the history of Robin Reliants and even where you can buy them.

There's also the possibility of using a log file to generate predictive programming. Users wouldn't just be sucking information from the web, the topics they're exploring and the shows they're watching could be recorded into a log file. If the BBC analyse that data, they can determine their interests and suggest what they might want to watch next on any of the BBC channels.

Tony Ageh: I'd commission those ideas. I'm not sure about the pop up, but everything else is exactly what we're looking for. We've got 4 or 5 teams working in these areas. We're not so arrogant to assume that just because there's a need for these things that we can actually develop them. We've either got to be very clear about very detailed briefs so that we can pick up on these ideas, or we've got to create a mechanism by which you can send treatments in and we can work out what the next stages of prototyping, developing and build for scale are. The obvious challenge with this idea is the number of different browsers set into set top boxes. The Robin Reliant example is quite nice, but I might have pressed it because I want to know who that actor was or what that piece of music was. It needs to be vague enough that it's of value no matter what it is, or that it has some degree of specificity built in.

There's a lot of stuff on the blogs at the moment Infax; a catalogue of every BBC programme ever made and how the librarians have categorised it. I would suggest that if this team develop this idea (if you want to work together on this), and this is exactly the kind of stuff we're looking for, they should use the blog discussions around Infax and use them as their starting point. If you sent me a treatment on these, I would commission them tomorrow.

Jem Stone: There are details about this on the Backstage site (backstage.co.uk). We've just run a competition based on the TV Anytime Data, but the data is still there, metadata based around the TV and radio schedules. It's worth having a look at this to see what interesting things you can do with this data. It's all freely available, and designed for you to experiment with. The TV version of Backstage is due to launch in a few weeks. That will give you resources and help in terms of thinking about how to actually get cheap, effective BBCi or interactive prototypes out.

Group 5

Our project was designed for BBC loyalists; expert Internet users who access websites from home and at work and are mostly middle aged men. They like politics and news. We wanted to explore ways of utilising the BBC's huge archive. We thought about how media channels are becoming more ubiquitous. In your home we've got TV, Internet, digital radio, phone, PSPs, iPods, and that's going to keep growing. Taken to its extreme, picture frames are available to show images via USB and I presume e-wallpaper and things like that are being developed. With all this media, all these platforms and this huge archive, we thought it would be a good idea to use it all at the same time. Our pitch is ambient BBC, another way to watch and engage. If our target audience is in a relaxed mood they might put deciduous trees as a key word into their ambient BBC system. The BBC would pump images and sounds from the archive that had a tag of 'deciduous trees' and make an ambient moodscape, through sound or on any of the visual platforms. There are apparently 600 hours of tiger footage. Imagine endless tigers wandering through your bedroom!

You could have ambient news, so you could ask for all the news on the Middle East, current stories and history. So as you're walking through the kitchen you get Tony Blair saying 'I never said...' and by the time you're in the front room you'll hear him from six months ago saying exactly the thing he never said. Your input devices for controlling BBC could be as simple as a key word input, or it could sense your moods or what colour you're wearing. We also talked about a data driven system delivering content based on your TV, radio or web choices and how far down a particular track you've explored. The project would use existing technologies and resources but is a completely new way to consume the BBC.

Jem Stone: We've got very few visual representations of how users are using the BBC. I know of a few projects that are in development, but we definitely want more of those. It's quite hard getting data on how people use bbc.co.uk and other BBC services, but data is available. We'd like to commission interesting ways of showing how users interface with our stuff, so when they come to the BBC home page, it actually feels like 10 million people using this website every single moment. The same goes for Rahul Chakkara, the controller of BBCi, which is a mass-market service now. Millions of people use interactive television every week, and he'd like to reflect that. He'd like people to feel that there are lots of other people using it at the same time. We'd love to see some more nifty ways of doing that so send them in.

Tony Ageh: I think this is great, apart from being a bit bonkers. You've recognised that there's so many millions of keystrokes and pieces of data that should be interrelated with each other and just aren't. It's quite clear that you can easily put together a profile of users' needs or mood states. It's certainly something we very rarely think about, mood states, and the audience's sense of media being around all the time and living culture rather than simply consuming it. Those things are absolutely great. The interrupt ability of everything right down to your wallpaper I personally find a bit scary, but it seems to be the way things are going. It's quite hard for me to think about how we would prototype something like this. Matt talked about the stapler thing, and Stan talked about Semacode. If this were a real project, you should look at how we've taken baby steps in that direction first. With the stapler you see something happening, click your fingers and grab the moment. That then brings information related to that moment to you and moves it to whatever device you happen to be using, so there's a real sense of ubiquity. With our current level of technology, it's difficult for us to imagine how we could take even baby steps towards this project so while I'd be keen to talk about it conceptually, but it would be quite hard to deliver it in the short term.

Group 4

This project is aimed at late adopter families; who are very likely to start using the internet, into technology, into kids' entertainment, 7 out of 10 have digital TVs, 6 out of 10 are likely to use bbc.c.o.uk when they go online. Our prompt card included content history (which we interpreted as the history of content,) mobile web and we've got tracking technology. We thought about narrative and the history of storylines and characters. The user group already have and feel comfortable with interactive TV, so we thought about using this as a hook to get them online. It's scaled complexity. A big interest of this group is soaps. What all soaps have in common is multiple storylines with lots of different characters and fast-moving plots. We thought it would be really cool to be able to press the red button and track back in history all the way back to when a character first appeared on screen. Video clips would be connected to each one of those events, so you could search for every time Kat Slater shouted at a dog and watch all of those clips. We also thought you could track back through a single storyline, isolating it from the other stories that are running simultaneously and watching the edited highlights of that story. As well as being interested in the soap, this group are interested in the actors, so you would be able to track back through what a particular actor has been doing when they're not in the soap, celebrity news based delivered on a visual timeline. We then wanted to let those users go online and author their own playlists and send them to their friends. When they clicked on the link they could then see your own mini-story of East Enders events. You could almost edit your own version of East Enders using clips or characters that are important to you.

Tony Ageh: There's a shocking lack of fun applications or interactivity on our website. It's very difficult for the audience we're talking about to find an entrance point. There's a lot of worthy stuff. They can teach their kids spelling or trigonometry or whatever it is, but actually those things are very meaningless. The whole point of the soaps is that they're living dramas. They're personal, and are things people are passionate about. This is exactly the sort of entry point that we need to either encourage people to come to the internet in the first place or to move through the scales of interactivity from email to something more involved about creativity, storytelling, self-expression. I'd be keen to support that and I know that in Alan Yentob's area that's exactly the sort of thing they always imagined we would have by now. We've come up with heaps of stuff around news but very few things that are actually fun.

Jem Stone: I think the idea of annotating a soap or drama makes sense. This week one of our colleagues came up with a prototype that allowed you to annotate a radio show by the audio waves, so that comments could be added at particular points, 3 seconds in or 4 minutes in. Maybe the stuff you're describing could do the same thing for video.

Group 4: We were thinking of opening up the tagging to East Enders fans themselves

Jem Stone: We're very good at getting people to do things at the BBC. What we're not very good at is reflecting on that activity. We encourage people to do all sorts of things, but we only publish a small amount of that content on the site, or we only reflect a bit of the activity. I think Frank alluded to it earlier on: that we used to get thousands of emails on our news site, people commenting on the stories, 90% of which didn't get read. We just didn't have time to read them. Now we've actually got user-moderated systems in place instead. If users are offended by letters, we'll take them down, which is much more sustainable. Ways of allowing and encouraging users in to play about with our stuff is a common theme today and we just want more of that. We don't mind if it's not on bbc.co.uk either.

Group 3: Our target group is older online explorers, who are kind of new to the internet, keen to explore, open to guidance and love news and politics, health and science and so on. They read broadsheets and have moderate levels of trust with respect to news and information. We also had blogging, activists, kinaesthetic technologies and smart homes as prompt cards. I'm not sure we've got a product with this, but we've definitely got an ethos. We looked at home in a broader sense, thinking about the areas that people live in and we liked the idea of integrating populations. We took the scenario of a village and explored the idea that people could contribute to some sort of virtual story or news space, where users could add stuff to a database. You could pick the story up on a laptop, a PA or a mobile phone as you travel through. Messages or links to content would be picked up as you travelled through the area that could be filtered out. If you are not interested in local church groups, that layer of information could be filtered out. The content is produced by local people, so could cover particular local issues. Some member of the local community might have lots of time on their hands, and they might want to produce a news article or piece of information into the database. The local stories could also feed into BBC newsrooms and they could establish a dialogue between the community and people passing through. I grew up in a little hamlet with about 50 people in and it's quite a close-knit community. The older generation are set in their ways, so if you can provide some sort of dialogue between those people and the people who are passing through then if there's a problem with dog turds for example, then there might be someone who's passing through who could provide a solution or point them in the right direction. This project would allow older online explorers to explore other avenues and perhaps connect with a wider community on a new level. That's the premise, but we don't really have a new product so much as we're using technologies we've talked about today to enhance an environment and allow people to explore their own environments in a new way. The other thing I like the idea of is people being able to use Stan's Konnexions technology to explore a whole other range of information, which perhaps might provide an unexpected solution or idea, using an element of randomness.

Tony Ageh: It's a shame you haven't got a product, because I would commission that one as well. That's exactly the sort of thing we're looking for, at the end of the value chain we are interested in. The BBC has a shortage of channels that provide a feedback mechanism, particularly around this group of people, who have information, knowledge and experience that will be lost forever unless we capture it. We need to find mechanisms to get it out of their heads and store it so the younger generations can access it. The People's War opened up centres inviting people to tell their stories and they would be recorded, which captured a wealth of information around the war. Secondly, they've obviously got time on their hands, and it would be great to exploit the curtain twitcher syndrome, where people who see what's going on are able to contribute to the pool of knowledge. I would definitely buy into the idea of contributing to the news agenda. There are 60 odd newsrooms around the UK. Local news is where we have the vast majority of our news journalists, I think about 7000 of them. Down in London, people forget how important Nations and Regions are in terms of news generation. I would definitely buy this. We need to start developing around this.

Jem Stone: The ways for users to leave a trace or make a difference to our site are actually quite limited. It's a particularly rich opportunity for the BBC to be a catalyst for different ways to get people to engage.

Group 3: I forgot to mention the whole idea of people producing something to provide some sort of social commentary for their environment. We were talking earlier about how it would be really useful to use the BBCs thousands of snippets of specialised video footage. We imagined these older users to have quite specialised interests, and thought it would be really useful to have a search engine like Google Images for BBC archive footage so you could find a 4 or 5 second clip and bring it into your own production. It might be something that was filmed in that village, or that's related to a local industry.

Jem Stone: You probably know we do have a project called the Creative Archive. That's doing a number of pilots over the next 6 months. It's already done a project with Radio 1 which allowed listeners to download 200 or 300 clips and do VJ stuff. There's also a news project and an education project that's coming up. So we are absolutely looking for ways of navigating around what will soon be thousands and thousands of clips.

Audience member: I've actually used that and really liked it, but you can't actually VJ with it, because the clips are too low quality. Is there a plan to enable higher quality clips to be distributed through that sort of mechanism?

Tony Ageh: I don't think there's a plan, but we definitely would if there was the demand.

Group 2

Our target audience were Interactive Drama Queens. They're beginners online, enjoy interactive elements and post comments. They are likely to contribute online. We had high definition video, personal mobile video and peer review or user generated content for our prompt cards. We thought about creating a TV station called Victoria that can be controlled by users through a mobile phone. With a mobile phone you have an avatar and the avatar receives messages through a network. The messages contain short clips of the TV programme and you see what's new and what you're friends like. When you actually go to the TV channel and watch it, you see what's highest rated and what's recommended for you. You get personalised content strictly tailored to a female audience. It's called Victoria and if the BBC wants to open it up to the male market, you could just create another avatar.

It would take the form of an interactive screensaver on your mobile phone. It says something about the need for human connectedness within that female age group. They're interested in what their friends do, being connected to them, and what that says about themselves. It follows the idea of Pocket Pals and Tamagochis, but this screen saver would always be on. You could also build in a bit of locative media. As you went past a park that was going to host a BBC roadshow, your chosen avatar would pick up the information, which in this case is party girl. You'd obviously roll it out so you could choose other characters to be your avatars. When first introduced, some key bits of personality would have to be built in, but that once you'd reached a critical mass the users would fill out that character through their own input.

Ideally it would use an existing network, it could be integrated it into MySpace or whatever there is in the UK. The content needs to be real-time to attract this audience. Perhaps it might focus on a particular drama, or alert you as you walk past a particular building that there's a shoot for that drama going on inside. That would get the users engaged.

Tony Ageh: I think this idea anticipates a problem that's going to hit the BBC like a train, which is that as we're developing more and more interactive ways of distributing media and allowing people to access on demand, we are destroying one of the most important parts of television viewing, which is communal viewing, viewing that people talk about. It's incredibly antisocial if you're sitting in a house at night with someone and you're watching TV and it's a programme that you don't want to watch to suddenly get up and start watching something else in a different room. What you normally do is moan at your mates "I don't want to watch this". I think this really identifies with that problem. TV is about me and my friends, it's about sharing with my friends and creating a personalised experience I can share. If we don't start to anticipate the fun and the pleasure of shared content quite quickly, we could find ourselves building isolated ghettos of unwatched content and ruin the beauty of TV output. Again, there's a lack of fun engaging things on our website for what in reality is the majority of our audience. People enjoy being with their friends, talking with their friends and sharing media with their friends.

Jem Stone: You said maybe the BBC could integrate with others networks and we'd especially like to do that. We have no intention of building another white space, another blog. We're interested in what users are do in those networks and in how we can make connections. We're looking for ways of representing what the UK is doing in the same way that our radio networks and TV shows do, but by looking at what they're doing in social spaces.

Group 1

Our group was the secondary internet users. We decided to redefine that as tabloid-reading, apolitical, techno-savvy, self-focused users. We didn't actually come up with a name for the product, but it reminds me of my gran, who used to shout at the TV all the time. We're now in a position to give those people a voice. One of our cards says political, but these users are more likely to watch East Enders than Newsnight. In EastEnders there are lots of political subjects, and people have an opinion about them without even realising they're political. Pat Butcher might talk about asylum seekers. A little icon could appear on the corner of your screen inviting you to use your digital remote to access information and take part in the programme there and then. Alternatively, using your stapler you can capture information and go back to look at it at a later date. When you go to look at this information, a statement slider would appear with a sliding bar ranging from 'I totally agree' to 'I totally disagree'. You move the slider across to match your viewpoint. From that starting point, the system will offer more information in a bid to affect your viewpoint. If you think asylum seekers shouldn't be allowed in the country, it would give you the opposing argument. You'd could then change the position of the slider if your opinion has changed. Then you'll be given the option to video blog and record yourself making a political statement, commenting on Pat Butcher's views on asylum seekers. At that point you can go back to view the programme which has been paused while you've been doing this, or you could choose to look at other people's views and statements. That's the project in a nutshell.

Tony Ageh: Somebody said earlier they wanted to see more access to the stuff that's already on the site. If you look at the tools that actually on the site, we've probably got all the tools to do that now on the bbc.co.uk site. The BBC is a great institution and I don't want to sound like I'm running it down, but I think it's the world's greatest institution and I wouldn't work for anybody else and I don't think anybody else has ever taken responsibility about media on behalf of their nation as much and for as long as the BBC, but I think it's also important to be reasonably candid. I think there's a po-facedness and a sort of snootiness in the BBC around tabloid readers. There's one-size fits all news and journalism our website, and we don't accept that the vast majority of people in the UK read tabloid newspapers, that their opinions are formed from a different perspective, but they have opinions.

Group 1: We came at it from a gossip headline angle: "Blunkett's dog in sex allegations". That might be the headline, and from that one headline people may have an opinion, but they don't know the facts behind it. This service would attempt to give them those facts. From grabbing a gossip headline or from someone making a remark on TV, you can have take that away using your stapler and go and research that on the web, or use your digital TV to go straight in and look at facts beyond the headline. Your opinion actually means something because you're more informed. It's about taking big brash tabloid statements and putting some fact behind it. You start off with one mindset and that gradually changes through using information provided by the BBC.

Tony Ageh: The tools already exist. It just needs someone to hammer it all together. Radio 4 did something called The People's Law last year where they had a number of propositions and they were going to vote for a law that would be agreed by the people. They were going to get a politician who would stand up in parliament and support that. The law they came up with was the Tony Martin law – if someone breaks into your house you should be able to thump them until they give you your stuff back. The politician in the end stood up in the house and spoke against that. So you have this problem with these institutions – no matter what the people say they want those of us who think we know better refuse to let them have that. It's a hack, it needs to be done through backstage. Just get on and do it, and it'd be great fun. A friend of mine once gave the BBC website to the students on his journalism course and told them to turn it into a tabloid version of the same stories. It was brilliant. It was hilarious and witty: it was Have I Got News For You which I think is exactly the sort of thing your talking about – taking real news and making it accessible and fun and entertaining and moving the debate on a little bit at the same time.

