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Checking New Media Dreaming

Abstract: This is a time for dreaming for media professionals and much is now possible – cross-platform media brands, interactivity, mobility and on-demand programming. As producers create new interactive formats are they merely following their own creative dreams, or are they considering what audiences want or might need? Audience reception studies on 'Celebdaq', the BBC's celebrity trading game, show the importance of understanding audiences when constructing interactive media.

Introduction:

This paper considers production methods, and especially, pre-production research in interactive, cross-media brand, content creation. This position comes from research into interactive presentation methods, within the BBC. I completed an audience reception study of one major interactive BBC brand, 'Celebdaq', in July 2004.

The Celebdaq study is the smaller of two data sets which will form the basis of a research project into 'Hosted Space'. I was able to be a participant observer of eight production workshops where different production teams, and five 'interactive presenters' considered different themes around interactive production techniques. This paper, however, gives results from the audience-facing data, the first to be analysed, but is supported by the emergent themes of the production workshops.

My research is also informed by my work in the BBC as an Editor in the Online Communities Department which assists with the organisation of 'user-content' across the Corporation. In addition, I was a producer in both BBC Radio and BBC New Media for many years, this gives me the perspective of having worked in both linear and non-linear production environments.

The research is timely as the BBC is about to undergo the largest re-examination of its purpose and value as a Public Service Broadcaster in response to the 12-yearly Charter Review process. The BBC's Charter defines the funding, governance and organisation of the BBC.

The questions I wish to address in this paper are:

1. How might the interactive needs of audiences be assessed?
2. How might linear production methods change in an interactive environment?
3. Is 'same-brand' content, offered across different platforms useful?
4. If there are new production methods, are they practical and economical?

BBC interactive, cross-media, production:

To illustrate the kind of cross-media content I have been examining, I give the example of the BBC's long-running television soap 'EastEnders'. EastEnders is primarily a television programme, but there is also an extended 'omnibus' on Sundays and yet another programme giving in-depth analysis on one of the BBC's new digital channels. EastEnders is also a website with an accompanying online community of fans in a message board.

Other BBC 'programmes' are beginning to follow the same pattern, such as 'Top of the Pops' the long-running charts programme and 'Walking With Dinosaurs', where it is now arguable whether the original television broadcast or the resulting CD Rom has more presence currently; the answer would definitely be the CD Rom. Commercial channels such as Channel 4 also have cross-media brands, such as 'Big Brother' which is a television programme, a further analysis programme, 'Big Brother's Little Brother', a website with chat and a fan-base, finally, there is the Big Brother mobile service. All this content, should now be termed 'brands', and they all play with space and time.

Scannell noticed a need to begin to describe the changes in media time early on in his own research, referring to 'broadcast time'¹ as a way of differentiating between real time or 'clock time'. In addition we can now add 'on demand' time, as the use of VCRs (having grown from just 5% of households owning one to around 64% by the early 90's²) and devices such as Tivo and web-streamed broadcast material contribute further shifting of content delivery. With the take up of Broadband seeing the same trajectory in adoption as the VCR, this indicates high quality broadcast services via the PC as well as the TV is becoming a reality. Ashley Highfield, the BBC's present Head of New Media and Technology believes we are entering an era of "IP-Delivered Content" which will be available "Anywhere, anyhow, anytime."

If BBC brands begin to be consumable anywhere, anyhow, anytime, I would argue, that a considerably greater awareness of media consumption behaviours will be required.

Getting to know audience members:

"In discovering who they were broadcasting to, the broadcasters had to reflect on the circumstances of listening and viewing and the conditions in which these activities took place."³ Scannell relates how the BBC's Talks department initiated the moves within the BBC to understand audiences, creating a tone of address suitable for 'anyone as someone'⁴ to feel the material had relevance to their own daily lives which showed a growing understanding that "The audience should not be thought of as a mass but as a constellation of individuals, with individual needs, tastes and opinions."

Morley's study, with Silverstone and Hirsch, into the 'Household Uses of Information and Communication Technologies' shows the wish, alongside producers to understand the role of communication technologies in both the public and private spheres. Their findings underlined how communication technologies have the capacity to bring that which is separate together, for example to "bring the outside world into the home, via television, or to connect family members."⁵ This seems increasingly apposite when interactive brands connect the broadcaster to the public,

the public to the broadcaster, *and this is new*, to also connect the public to each other enabling fan communities or communities of interest or practise. Content makers need to consider the sociability of audience members, as well as the content creation.

Livingstone noted in 1990 that: “In recent years, both interpersonal and mediated communication have been increasingly recognised as complex, rule-governed, constructive set of processes. People’s role in such communications must be correspondingly understood as knowledgeable, skilled, motivated, and diverse.”⁶

The BBC completed the latest in its 5-10 yearly large media studies (begun in the 1960’s). ‘The Daily Life Study’ collected media diaries from over 6,000 respondents from across the country who represented a good cross-section of all ages and demographics. The results clearly show a deepening digital divide with one group (often the younger consumers) able to hop between media platforms, even ‘multi-consume’. This group are happy with shifts in time and space and with registering for personalised services. Other audiences prefer to remain with linear consumption, sometimes capturing the programme to watch later.

The BBC has begun to use a range of audience analysis methods, from focus groups, to ‘InSite Surveys’ (online forms) and user-testing. The New Media departments tend to ‘user-test’, but this is often limited to analysis of the functionality of the user interfaces rather than of the editorial content. Academics often favour studies of the representation of the audience, and television schedulers consider the mass consumption of content; I agree with Seiter when she comments “Television audience studies should work to change television itself as well as the popular representation of the audience.”⁷

The background to Celebdaq:

Since 2002 Celebdaq has been a television broadcast, a web based fantasy stock exchange trading in celebrities, an online community and a mobile information service.



Photos of Celebdaq from the Set Designer, Richard Carr

Celebdaq was created on the web then extended to television; something completely new for the BBC and winning an iBAFTA in 2003. The website launched in July 2002 drawing 104,556 visits to the website on the 20th July. By 15th February, 2003 the day after the launch of the television programme on the digital channel BBC Choice, there were nearly 3 million visits each week. Celebdaq received much attention in broadcast circles and in the press. The number of regular ‘traders’, as they are known, is 150,000 at the time of writing.



Photos of Celebdaq from the Set Designer, Richard Carr

There’s a pattern to Celebdaq each week with the Celebrity Stock market itself setting the temporality. Monday is ‘knee-capping day’ otherwise known as ‘Millionaire Day’ when those who make too much money are reduced to having £10,000, with the result that players try and downsize rapidly on Sunday nights. Wednesday is the day the ‘top trader’ is announced, Thursday the ‘Daq Diary’ is published (it gives orientation around the movement of the stock exchange), and finally Friday is Dividend Day when the value of your portfolio is announced.

The communication with audience members is facilitated by both the presenters of the television programme and by the hosts of the online community in the message board.

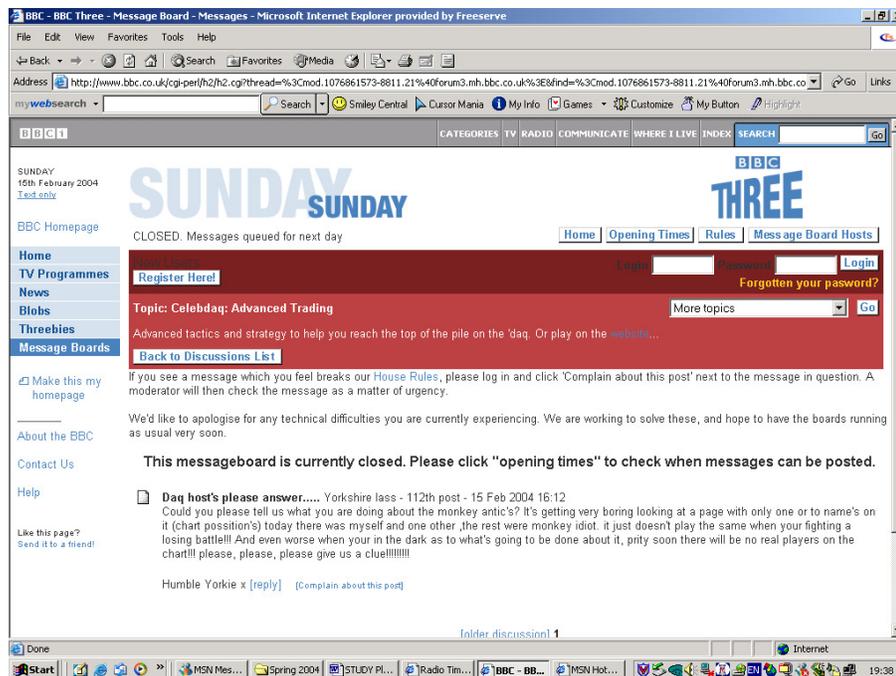


BBC News Online

According to the BBC's 'Audience InSite' survey on Celebdaq⁸ most visitors to the website, 'traders' (as they are termed) are male, aged 15-24, in full-time employment, and they are very experienced online. 53% of traders visit Celebdaq daily, mostly from home after 6pm. 49% have used the internet for over 5 years and they are high technology users (mobiles, Digital Satellite, Digital Cable). Most visited the site after recommendation from a friend. The gender split is 63% male and 37% female, with 78% living in England, and 82% of traders being childless.

To assist with this audience data, there is the ongoing presence of the Celebdaq fans, who chat to each other in the Celebdaq message board, but who have also created non-BBC communities (around 30 and growing) on yahoo, MSN and other Internet Service providers.

Matt Hills believes (2002)⁹ the "practices of fandom have become increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting, so that fans now go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode's transmission", however he doubts whether the broadcasters treatment of the fans in return shows as much homage as "CMC has increasingly placed a premium not only on the quality of the fans response (i.e. there is social pressure not to be too far 'off-thread)". There is certainly an expectation for the Celebdaq community to keep the 'House Rules', but, conversely, there is also an expectation that BBC producers be on-hand to chat to fans, and this may not be practical or economic.



bbc.co.uk/celebdaq (Message Board)

As time progressed audiences for the television programme declined, resulting in a final change of format and presenters in March, aiming to address this. The television programme was decommissioned at the end of March 2004; the website, however, continued. This was over the same weeks I undertook the audience reception study.

The Audience Reception Study:

The study consisted of one twenty-minute interview with each respondent, followed by an observation of the way they consume both the television programme and the website, including the message board community.

I found the audience members through placing a message in the BBC Celebdaq Message board and found fourteen participants. The sample was 14 people, 50% male and 50% female, with ages ranging from 23-55 but slanted heavily towards those in their mid-late 20's. All were from England; specifically, Southampton, London, Southend, Leicester, Coventry, Brighton, Bristol, and Leamington Spa. Their occupations ranged from being students to animators, a teacher, secretary, financial consultant, salesman, company director. As such, they were a representative group.

I was careful not to indicate that I had a connection with the BBC, and also kept a fieldwork diary to which assisted in monitoring problems and concerns. As one or two of the audience members knew each other, I found out during the pre-interview conversations, this was also noted in the diary.

The findings:

How might the interactive needs of audiences be assessed?

The respondents want to have the ability to access Celebdaq content on-demand, when they have time to view or engage with it. As the stock exchange has such firm points across the week, it seemed to annoy people that both the television transmissions and the web events were all scheduled at times when the average Celebdaq audience were not at home.

Suzy, who had been a trader since the second day, said: "Friday's is the biggest day so why not have those things that are gonna be for us on the days that... you know we're there on a Friday why not do it then." Eimon, a marketing manager, supported this by confirming that another peak was on Thursday nights when people were waiting for the dividends to be announced the next morning, "There's a lot of players waiting for the dividends maybe there could be something going on then, you know, late at night which is obviously anti-social hours."

Douglas, a young illustrator, said "With TV it's a case of it's on for half an hour on a Tuesday night or something you have to be in to watch it or that's that." Celebdaq TV transmissions had always been on a Friday, but with the newly launch and re-formatted programme, the transmission was moved to Tuesdays and Thursday evenings. This may have been due to an increasing understanding that the audience were likely to be out on Friday nights.

The first television presenter of Celebdaq, Paddy O'Connell, was also applauded for having an 'on-going' relationship with the players in the website message boards, something which many television presenters might find daunting. Paddy O'Connell also had his own portfolio of Celebrity shares, and he sometimes attended meetings of the traders organised by the traders themselves in London.

The website was seen as being much more important than the television programme and the hosts in the message board regarded as a vital, on-going, link with Celebdaq. Christine, a receptionist and player, said "I suppose it does help having (a permanent host) on the internet especially because the tele's only happening once a week. If you've got a constant thing going on the internet then there's always that sort of interaction going on it's not just that one slot or whatever."

The website was seen as 'permanent', with the television programme being seen as 'dressing' or even as a marketing device only. Those interviewed all expressed excitement when traders were featured on the programme, Suzy again, "It's good for us to see there was some involvement of the players even if it was only one a week it was something."

Morley stresses the importance of validation and acknowledgement of *audience members* in broadcast content "through the recitation of their names and of their familiar local landmarks and symbols. Through this process the listeners are granted (and grant each other) recognition of this virtual community, which is overlaid on the geographical space of their lives."¹⁰ He goes on to describe how the broadcaster Trevor Phillips made the decision to use a visible studio audience in his programme 'Black on Black' and opt for the "actual visual representation of our community" because this gave the viewer "a sense of solidarity with a community".

How might linear production methods change in an interactive environment?

Could the traders themselves have been incorporated into the show more? Several people commented that there "seemed to be a great reluctance to let the players have anything to do with the programme."

Being rewarded by an appearance on the television programme was seen by Alan (a cartoonist) as "A subconscious sort of incentive." James, a real Financial Trader in the City, agreed by saying, "I suppose I'd feel more involved with the Celebdaq TV programme or something else that I just be watching for entertainment if I could contribute towards the show in some way."

A very large proportion of the interviewees agreed that the linear programme was failing due to the lack of the presence of the traders. Alan, an illustrator, thought that some way of trading shares should have been on the programme, "If there's that element of playing this game you enjoy, and you could possibly be on the tele you know, or whatever, I think that would be quite exciting for people, I know I'd have fun with it (laughs). Eimon agreed that there needed to be some "relevance between the game and the TV."

Elizabeth, a senior secretary, said of the hosts "They do talk about the TV show as well but only in the sense that that they are trying to plug it to get us to watch it (laughs) which you have to tolerate because like I said I think if the TV show doesn't

get the ratings then it will all fall apart.” The traders in my sample group seemed to believe if the television programme failed, then Celebdaq as a brand would be axed, which was not the case, after the television programme *was* axed, Celebdaq was expanded to include ‘SportDec’ an online stock exchange for sports fans.

Is ‘same-brand’ content, offered across different platforms useful?

The fact that television and the web is coming closer together seemed to generally accepted as fact through comments such as “Every TV programme now has its sister site which relates to that programme...Sky’s doing it, everyone’s doing it.”

The television and web content was seen to be performing very different functions, Catherine, a receptionist said, “I see the message board as...in some ways telling you the facts when it’s closing down whatever and also information on you know things that have actually happened in the news already, whereas the programme it’s more ‘this is a suggestion of what we think is going to happen’.”

The website then, is for customer relations management, for sociability and for hints and tips on how to play the game, and to house the stock exchange trading interface itself, whereas the television programme was a kind of news gathering system on the ‘newsworthiness’ of celebrities, hence whether their resulting value would go up or down, in a predictive way.

If there are new production methods, are they practical and economical?

The presence of the hosts on the message board, and of presenters, such as Paddy O’Connell and Libby Potter (the respective Anchor and Reporter), was seen as very important indeed, but there was realism about the potential costs. Eimon said, “I don’t expect them to be listening to me 24/7.” Helen, like others, wanted the television presenters to come and meet the community in the message boards, but thought it unlikely to happen, saying the second presenters (Jenny Éclair and Joe Mace), “Might just go off and do other things whereas the message board hosts they are there all the time.”

A solution to the problem of asking for on-going contact time with BBC hosts and presenters was given by Suzy who thought that, “Finding people to voluntarily host a site for a few hours a week wouldn’t be any difficulty at all, I mean I’d love to do, I’m sure.”

There was also a growing intolerance to the voting and SMS-ing used by television programmes in order to claim ‘interactivity’. Andrew said that, “All they’re trying to do is to get lots of money to pay to pay for things.” James said, “I very rarely vote or text into a programme or anything anyway. A lot of the time it looks like a money-making kind of... like daytime TV...do you agree with this yes or no and it will cost you a pound to vote, it’s (laughs) obviously where they get a lot of money from.”

Audiences are becoming sophisticated and they know when they are being exploited or when the interactivity offered has a true value or not. They know whether the relationship being fostered between the organisation and the audience members is a true and fair one, or not. With the emergence of more cross-media brands, what audience members seem to be asking for is co-presence, consultation, and to be able to have media scheduled to suit their daily lives.

Conclusion:

It is clear that cross-media content works best when a good analysis of the audience member behaviours has taken place, before the editorial and technical production is considered. This should include media consumption habits and the technology available to those groups being targeted. If there are 'fixed points of the week' when many fans congregate or are doing the same activity online, or via mobiles, then events should be structured around those times.

Linear production methods, for cross-media brands which include a strong sociable elements and/or a strong fan culture, need to consider having both a co-present audience and even, input into the structure of the content itself. This could take the form of focus groups, in advance of the creation of the brand, or of regular user-testing and audience analysis after launch.

Consideration needs to be given to the contact with the audience members, and presenters of linear programmes would be advised to have a commitment to interact with the fan groups online. The possibility that someone from the BBC will be present in the message boards, gives a large incentive to the audience members to engage with Celebdaq, so to does the presence of other Celebdaq fans. This has a high cost implication, however audiences themselves are finding solutions.

There could be many advantages to having 'same brand' content delivered across different platforms, in an increasingly fragmented media landscape, this is one obvious solution. However, it must be understood that both the RAJAR and BARB audience viewing figures will become almost meaningless, as consumption will happen over time and across different media.

In conclusion, the Celebdaq television programme transmitted on Friday evenings. The BBC's recent Daily Life Study¹¹ tells us that on Monday to Friday between 8-8.30 pm when they are *not watching television*: 57% of 16-26 year olds are in the living room and 18% are in the bedroom. Many of the respondents complained that they were out in the evenings, particularly, Friday evenings.

31% of 16-26 year olds, typical Celebdaq users, are using other media, 3% are accessing the Internet, 11% are making mobile phone calls, 13% texting via SMS, and finally, 12% are talking on a landline phone. This shows the habit or wish to communicate with others in the early evening, something which would indicate there was the opportunity to encourage 'chat' amongst Celebdaq traders, also the consumption of the mobile service, which had just launched when the study was undertaken.

At around 9 pm young people move to their bedrooms where they begin to consume multimedia, however "solus television watching also takes place". If television does begin to be delivered by Internet Protocol (over Broadband) on a regular basis then it would seem likely that the potential for cross-media brand such as Celebdaq, to really develop. But to enable this, new holistic production methods need to be encouraged and web and Television teams must work in units, together, from conception forward.

After 9 pm, according to the Daily Life Study, 51% are still in the living room, 30% have moved to the bedroom, and 37% are consuming media other than television, such as the internet. If a better analysis of the cross-media consumption habits had taken place prior to the launch of the television programme these emergent media usage patterns might have been exploited by inviting the appropriate form of engagement across the appropriate media platform, at the right time of day.

As Jane, a second year English Student, said to me, “I thought they were completely separate from each other and that you know television was one thing and that there was just completely different people doing it from each other. So, I didn’t realise there was a connection.” I know from conversations with both teams that the Celebdaq television and web teams do communicate on a daily basis, my conclusion is that there should have been greater collaborative working from an earlier date.

With all the different means of content delivery and interactivity now at our disposal, it is becoming increasingly important for producers to work from an in-depth knowledge of audience members ‘backwards’. Audience members are very able to spot exploitation or marketing, particularly in interactive environments. Cohesion of cross-media brands is vitally important and each platform (TV, Radio, Mobile) should support the other. Dreaming of new production techniques is to be applauded, but it needs to be done in the context of both economic and strategic reality.

¹ Scannell, P *Doctoral Summer Symposium*, Westminster University, August 2003

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/heritage/story/pdfs/1980s.pdf>

³ Scannell, P, (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Life*, Blackwell, Oxford

⁴ Scannell, P, (2000) *For Anyone as Someone Structures*, ‘Media, Culture and Society’ Vol. 22:5-24, Sage, London

⁵ Morley, D, (2000) *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, Routledge, London

⁶ Livingstone, S (1990) *Making Sense of Television*, Pergamon Press, Oxford

⁷ Seiter, E (1999) *Television and New Media Audiences*, Clarendon Press, Oxford

⁸ *BBC Insite Survey*, Celebdaq, June 2003

⁹ Hills, M (2003) *Fan Cultures*, Routledge, London

¹⁰ Morley, D (2000) *Home Territories – Media, Mobility and Identity*, Routledge, London

¹¹ The BBC Daily Life Study, (2002-3) BBC Internal Publication