

## Updating the BBC R&D's 'People, Media and Behaviour' model: A student-centred approach

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*This paper describes an example of Knowledge Exchange in action, focusing on the collaboration between the Department of Languages, Information & Communications (InfoComms Group) at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and BBC R&D (Research and Development). The paper explains how the collaboration was set up and what it set out to do (aims), provides an overview of results and outlines plans for future developments.*

*Keywords (3 max): Knowledge exchange, audience and user research, student involvement*

### Aims of the collaboration with BBC R&D

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The collaboration between MMU InfoComms and BBC R&D started in the summer of 2010 when BBC R&D, after its move to Salford, was seeking to work together with universities and other organisations in the North-West. In this particular case, the R&D team were looking for an external organisation to help them update the 'People, Media and Behaviour' model (Winter, 2004).

Thus, the aims of the collaboration were set out as follows:

- To update a theoretical model used by BBC R&D to conceptualise users and audiences of media content and media technologies
- To contribute theoretical knowledge to the field of audience and user research in digital interactive media
- To involve students to allow them to benefit from the collaboration
- To enhance teaching and employability for students
- To allow staff at both institutions to build their portfolio of publications

### The 'People, Media and Behaviour' model

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This psychological model was developed by a BBC to help understand 'what people do and why' with media content and media technology and what people 'get' from it (see Appendix). The model is used "as a precursor to detailed predictive work in the form of strategy or even service development" (ibid. p. 41) and contributes to the wider development of the BBC's future interactive services.

At the heart of the model are a set of cognitive goals and emotional drives that can help explain people's interaction with media content or media technology. The model was developed before the arrival of interactive digital media (e.g. YouTube, iPlayer, Facebook, Twitter, Nintendo Wii) and therefore BBC R&D considered that it needed updating, as well as validating through audience and user research.

The BBC model (as it will be referred to here) is based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and while not specifically mentioned in the BBC paper, it relates to the uses and gratifications approach (Blumler and Katz, 1974). This socio-psychological approach views people's media choices as conscious responses to individual needs (such as information,

maintenance of identity, socialisation, entertainment). The approach has its limitations in that people's reasons for media use are difficult to measure as a lot of media behaviour was later found to be unmotivated and habitual. Further, the approach ignores wider socio-economic factors influencing media use (McQuail, 2010). Similar limitations apply to the BBC model (see results section). However, uses and gratifications-type approaches are still popular among researchers and have been applied to digital forms of media, such as video games (Lucas and Sherry, 2004), the use of Facebook (Smock, Ellison, Lampe and Whon, 2011) or user-generated content (Shao, 2008).

## **Student involvement**

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Our work as academics at MMU is student-centred first and foremost. Therefore, the InfoComms team wanted to get students involved in this project from the start to share with them the benefits of working with the BBC. The author, together with colleagues, was preparing to teach a new Year 3 undergraduate module at that time, focusing on audience theory and research. It was decided to run student group research projects in this module, the results of which would feed into updating the BBC model.

The student research projects have now been running over three consecutive years, with 24 projects completed so far. Issues relating to social media, content generation online, new technological devices and media use amongst different groups of the population have been investigated. The topics were suggested by both the tutors and the BBC R&D team.

The importance of developing research skills in undergraduate students is being widely acknowledged as it contributes to creating autonomous learners (Walkington et al, 2011). The BBC also recognised the value of having students as researchers and 'co-producers' of knowledge (McCulloch, 2009) as they can access wider groups of the population via their own social networks (both online and offline) and home communities to use as research participants.

## **Learning Outcomes**

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Each year, the module is taught over a twelve-week period in a weekly one-hour-lecture, one-hour-seminar type slot. The lectures introduce the students to audience theory and theories related to the use of technology, audience research methods and how to collect, analyse and present data. A guest lecture by members of the BBC R&D team gives an overview of some of the projects undertaken at R&D, the BBC model and its relevance to the R&D team's work.

At the start of term, the students are tasked to form small groups and choose a topic. Over the course of the term, they have to prepare a group presentation and an individual report based on their topic by conducting a literature review, collecting primary data (e.g. through surveys, focus groups, interviews, usage diaries and/or online observation) and analyse it quantitatively and/or qualitatively. They are required to base their research on, and apply their findings to, the BBC model.

The intended learning outcomes are:

- Team working skills
- Practical research experience

- Analytical skills
- Presentation skills
- Report writing
- Employability

The last learning outcome, employability, is contributed to by gaining an insight into the work of BBC R&D. The involvement of the BBC increases 'student engagement' (Kahu, 2012) and also gives students an incentive to do well in their projects. Using an 'authentic learning environment' (Herrington and Herrington, 2006), i.e. working on projects proposed by the R&D team that will potentially feed into an updated BBC model, shows the students that what they are learning and researching is relevant in a professional context.

While the student projects are of variable quality, the results of the best ones have been fed back to the BBC R&D team in the form of summary presentations from the InfoComms team. The group slides and individual reports from the best groups have also been shared with the BBC. Last year the best overall group presented their project to the BBC, something that will be repeated this year.

Feedback has been collected from the students on their learning experience. Initial results suggest that they value the BBC involvement but in many cases do not like the group work if not all group members contribute equally.

## **Results from the student projects**

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The projects investigated which goals and drives were relevant to the topic under investigation and if any other factors were of significance that could be added as new goals and drives.

In 2010 topics included, for example, students' use of online video, exchange students' use of the internet, older people's use of the internet, ethnic minorities and music, and user participation and content generation online.

In 2011 students researched, for example, the link between TV events and social networking, shared media experiences in relation to football, simultaneous media use in the home, women's use of gaming, the use of tablet PCs, online dating and illegal downloading.

In 2012, student projects included the impact of the 2012 Olympic Games on women's social media behaviour, consumption of BBC news on different platforms amongst different age groups, the royal weddings of 1981 and 2011 as shared media experiences, the impact of reality television on young people and moral perceptions of film piracy.

This breadth of topics has produced a large amount of data. The following is a summary of the findings from three years of student research in relation to the BBC model, based on the author's interpretation of the results:

One of the main drives identified across a number of projects was 'socialisation'. This is not surprising as a lot of digital media usage now includes a social networking aspect. Further, social networking is not just about 'socialisation', but a whole set of other goals and drives apply to this activity. This also depends on whether a user is a recipient of content (in which case the goal 'inform' could apply) or a producer (when 'self-actualisation' becomes important).

- The social element of shared media experiences like sporting or national events (e.g. the recent royal wedding) is increasingly experienced virtually with the help of social media. This means that additional goals and drives that users fulfil by being part of such an event (apart from the socialisation drive) are now being mediated virtually.
- When traditional types of media move online, e.g. television and video on the internet as found on the BBC iPlayer or on YouTube, different goals and drives become relevant.
- Reality TV now forms a large part of the television schedule. With many different sub-formats, motivations for watching Reality TV shows have also increased and now cover all goals and drives found in the model.
- When a user's environment and circumstances change, a type of media use can become invested with new goals and drives. For example, when moving to a different country, the internet and social networking are used more for 'stability' than before.
- Different sections of the population may associate different goals and drives with certain media activities, for example based on gender, age, ethnicity or location (urban/rural).
- When a new technological device, such as a smartphone or tablet PC, is bought and gets incorporated into the user's life and daily routines, the goals and drives associated with it can change at different stages of this 'domestication' process.
- Other factors influencing people's interaction with media content and media technologies identified by the projects include convenience of use, cost, branding/marketing, privacy, ethical considerations and social context of use.

In conclusion, the BBC goals and drives are still valid and apply to recent developments in digital technologies. However, there is a strong indication from the findings that a revised model needs to take into account the wider socio-cultural context of user experience, such as age of the user, gender, socio-economic background, family situation, education, employment, lifestyle, personal tastes, habits and the specific context at the particular time of use. Furthermore, media factors also play a role, such as availability, publicity and awareness of media content/technologies (see McQuail, 2010). Some of these are discussed in the BBC paper, but need to be integrated into the model.

### **Impact and future work**

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Recent feedback from the R&D team suggests that the student projects have already made an impact on their work. The BBC model is currently being redeveloped internally, acknowledging the socio-cultural context of use, with the MMU student projects being one of the influential sources for this. So the first aim as set out above has been met, although the additional factors need to be investigated further in the next round of student projects.

The R&D team sees the benefits of the collaboration in that it gives them the opportunity to gain insight into a large number of relevant areas through the great spread of topics and that it lets them explore areas they otherwise could not. Also, the projects provide them with an understanding of different communities (including ethnic minorities) and age groups they may

not have easy access to themselves. Furthermore, having a student perspective on the topics from 'digital natives' is also seen as beneficial as it correlates with the BBC's interest in how audiences of the future will use technology. One comment from a member of the R&D team about the research was, "It opened our eyes to things we previously haven't realised." Other comments included that it will inspire future thinking in the department and that some of the student projects may also inform work in other departments at the BBC related to younger members of the audience and their media use.

Work still remains to be done to meet the other aims of the collaboration fully. For the InfoComms team, plans are to fully analyse the data from the student projects and assess the student experience more comprehensively with the aim of generating academic publications in the field of audience/user research and/or pedagogical approaches in higher education.

Future plans with BBC R&D are to expand the collaboration into other areas, including a joint conference workshop, funding applications for further research, involvement of doctoral students and a Masters programme with an overseas partner and broadcaster involvement.

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