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Breaking the fourth wall – how social media and online communities can enrich your organisation

Meg Pickard is head of communities and user experience for Guardian Unlimited. Originally trained as an anthropologist, she has conducted ethnographic research into community participation and cultural identity in Bolivia and then online. She worked for AOL Europe between 1998 and 2007 developing editorial and commercial projects and innovations and became consumer experience lead for social media products and initiatives. She is one of the longest running bloggers in the UK and has particular interests in community engagement and the emergence of new forms of collaborative media.

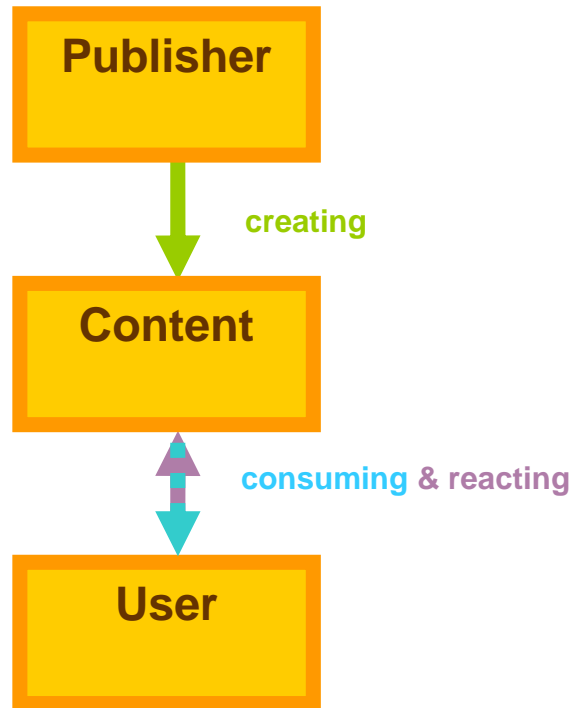
This session explored new ways of engaging audiences and visitors online between visits providing insights into why people participate online. She also highlighted the benefits that engaging with people online can offer to our organisations.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

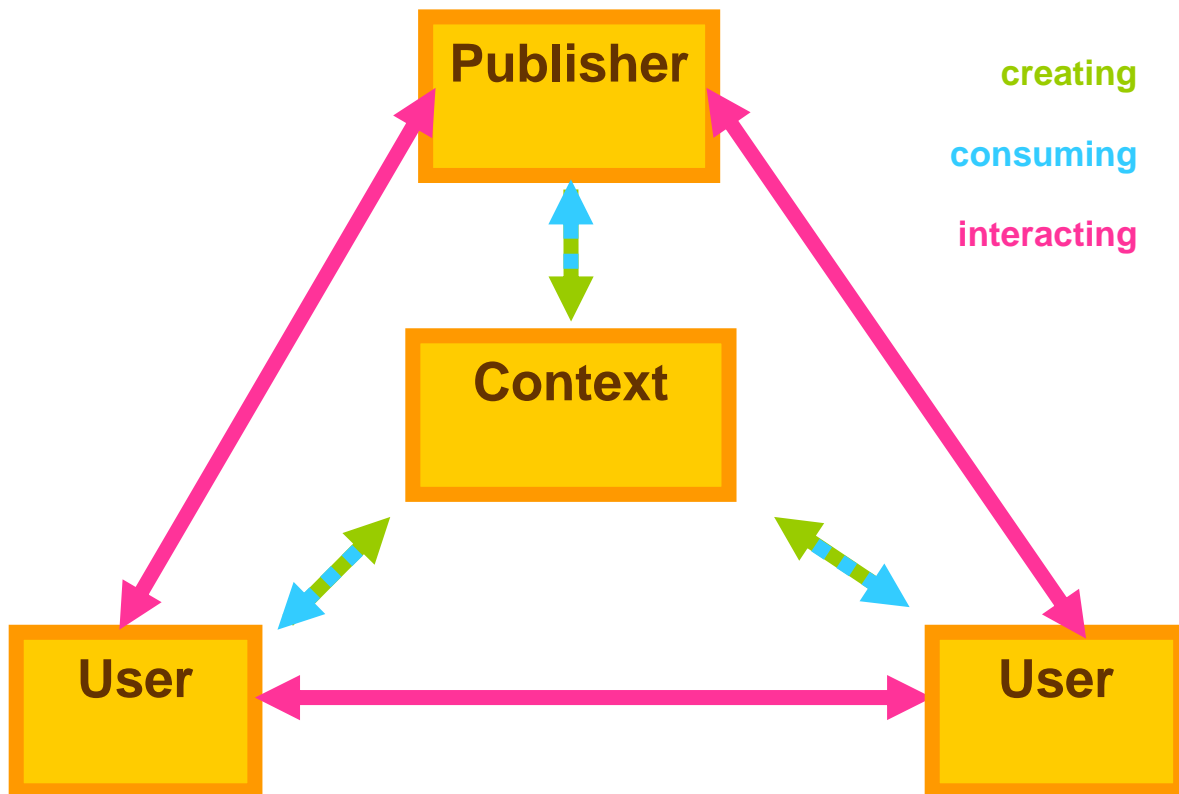
The Guardian is a very big content factory: some of the interaction includes 20 million unique visitors in June (the largest reach of any British newspaper) and something in the region of half a million user comments every month. There are a lot of people talking to each other at once!

A history lesson

For the past 300 years, publishing has been paper-based. The publisher was the voice of authority, dialogue was not part of the exchange; readers consumed passively. But reading the newspapers became a ‘lean back’ passive experience: it did not get the user involved, interested or interacting. In the last 50 years, papers changed, not just with the format but with mechanisms like letters to the editor and inviting comment; the reader was encouraged to respond or feedback. Gradually, people started to ‘lean forward’.

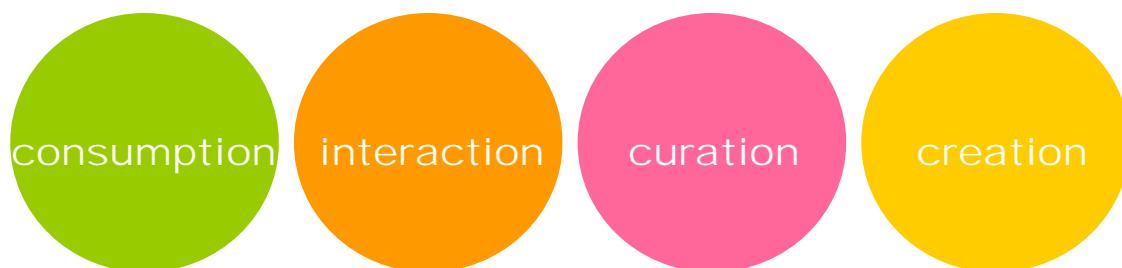


The interactive media that has now been developed has begun to shift the relationship between people and content to the extent that content has gone from being created by a publisher and consumed by the user via a process that included the user consuming and *reacting* to the content, to where we are now:



The internet makes it easier for people to have their say and get involved with content, so that publishers and media organisations need to think not just about commissioning, editing and publishing a piece, but also about what happens to that content after it has gone live. This scares everybody in media because we are moving from something that is very linear, to a place where the context is now the issue.

People approach content in different ways



User generated content dominates, which is hard for media organisations and sometimes the platform. Equally, creation can be challenging for the user. The most powerful points of interaction come from the middle two stages: interaction and curation. There are new forms of participation and contribution happening all the time: not everyone is a consumer. User curated content is another interesting area because curation is the new rock 'n' roll and is what people are increasingly doing. There's only a small proportion of people who actually have the time to set up logs, publish photos, order online, but there are plenty of people who are willing to catalogue, sort and list them (like the lists on Amazon.com). This habit of list

making and sharing is entirely altruistic. In silo organisations, these correlations and crossovers are very helpful, because users don't think in silos, they think about all the things that they care about. It is similar to a traditional editor's job, but without the writing.

Some common modes of engagement in online spaces

These are the drivers that are getting people involved in social networks, virtual worlds, and social use of the Internet in general; we are seeing these patterns again and again.

- Exploration: in terms of discovery, like Second Life
- Creation: not just about writing or publishing but writing a profile or tinkering
- Curation: reordering, assigning value (for example the way people gather friends on My Space), prioritising
- Interaction: communicating with people both known and unknown
- Acquisition: social worlds about acquiring knowledge, points in Second Life, increasingly it is about acquiring friends and status
- Performance: this is an opportunity for people to show off, to be a star, to show their skill at something

There are some other important points to take into consideration:

The Magic Number:150

This is something known about from anthropology but modern social networking sites back up the idea of an optimum number of individuals that a person can reasonably 'know' (or have meaningful contact with) within any community. Linked-in and Facebook also reflect this: less than 25 friends or contacts is very poor, more than 500 suggest that it can't be true, but 150 seems to be the magic number.

Play

Experimentation, tinkering with identity, playing with silly ideas is also important. This allows people to belong to tribes and be playful in those environments; many social environments are absolutely pivoted to that.

Heckling

It is important to realise that the audience is already talking to each other; they don't really need us to provide the platform, or a way of interacting. They may not be talking to us, of course.

Some organisations like to be heckled as it shows interest, interaction and consumption. The word originates from Dundee, whose inhabitants have a reputation for being straight-talking and the industry included hemp manufacturing. 'Heckling' is the process of softening and breaking up the fibres in hemp to make sacks and rope, a tedious and hard job, livened by one person reading a newspaper, pamphlet etc whilst they worked to alleviate boredom and 'improve' their minds. This gave all the workers some form of knowledge and then opinions

about daily events, which they then expressed in their groups. Originally, hecklers were known as people who debated the issues of the day as they were distributed. They were the most informed of the audience. Modern media organisations provide a platform for people today to do the same thing.

Conversations

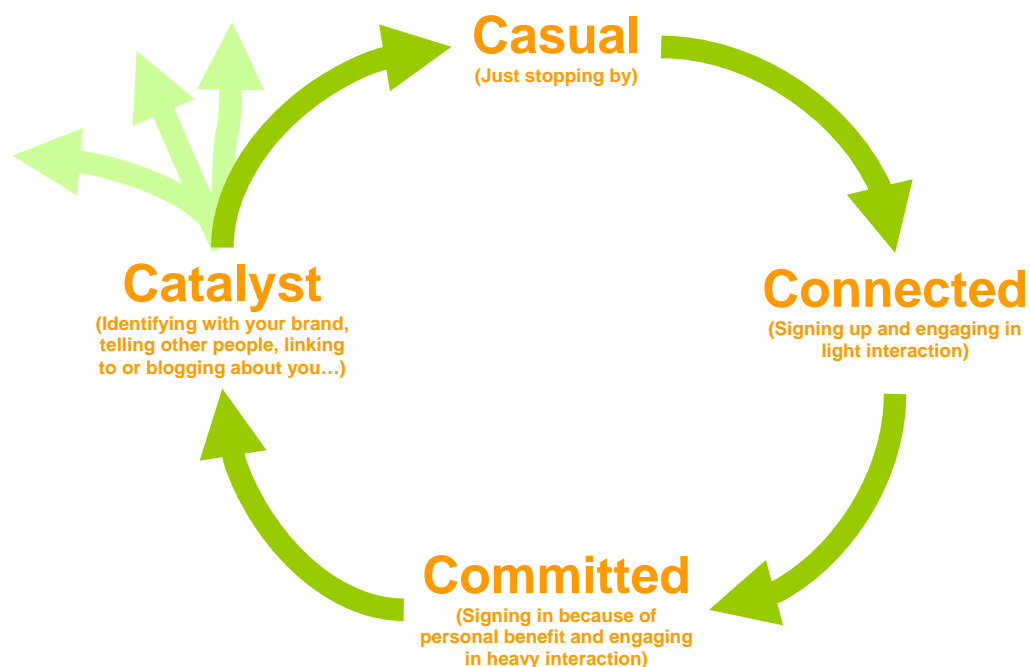
It was interesting from a user perspective to attend The Sultan's Elephant, and to see the reactions of the crowd and how that grew. People were finding new ways of trying to capture or show the value or the scale of the event from the pictures that were captured. This is about the way the people process and make sense of an experience which is sometimes very actively done through recording and sharing: active consumption.

Social networking: people often confuse this with social media. Social networking gives you both a networking experience and a social experience. This is a bolt on social experience, which could be attached to anything. It is not about the content.

Social media is a bit more like this presentation, where the experience is wrapped in the idea of sociability. This does not mean that we have to be asking for feedback all the time; when we are ready to have a conversation, we will have it in that space, right there. Social media increases relevance, emotional and social connection to content.

Engagement is a journey

The Guardian ran an exercise to identify some of its audiences, to understand the process that leads people from being 'casual' to becoming a 'connected' user, signing in and actively contributing.



If a user makes two visits, the assumption is that this signals some intention to do so (ie not by accident) and can start to develop a relationship. Of course, there is constant debate about what constitutes frequent or committed: does it have to be people who actively talk to us? Can it include people who regularly send items to friends and evangelise about us?

We call these users Catalysts and they are the most interesting, because they are doing this independently; they are so committed to the brand that they evangelise without necessarily being committed (see diagram above). It is very difficult to recruit catalysts – money is not a driver, for example – and impossible to control them, although there is a skill in handling them. At the Guardian, such catalysts are given information and functional technology to enable them to continue testing and sharing with their own communities.

Community development: what do we mean by this?

There is a holy trinity of solutions whenever we talk about community development: all of these elements are essential and interlocking if we are to create, develop and manage communities on the website.

Human solutions: who is in charge, who has responsibility for the community in their job title?

Editorial solutions: what is the proposition here, why are people getting involved, how can we help them to get more engaged; it's about how those communities are valued and the rationale for having them interact. If we don't know why we are doing it, neither will they.

Technical solutions: should be at the end of the process, but are often the starting point, unfortunately. This includes reputation management, profile management databases. Although vital for strong development, technical solutions alone will not encourage people to interact, or inspire them to contribute. The process should be 'let's give them something to talk about and then work out how'.

What is a 'community'?

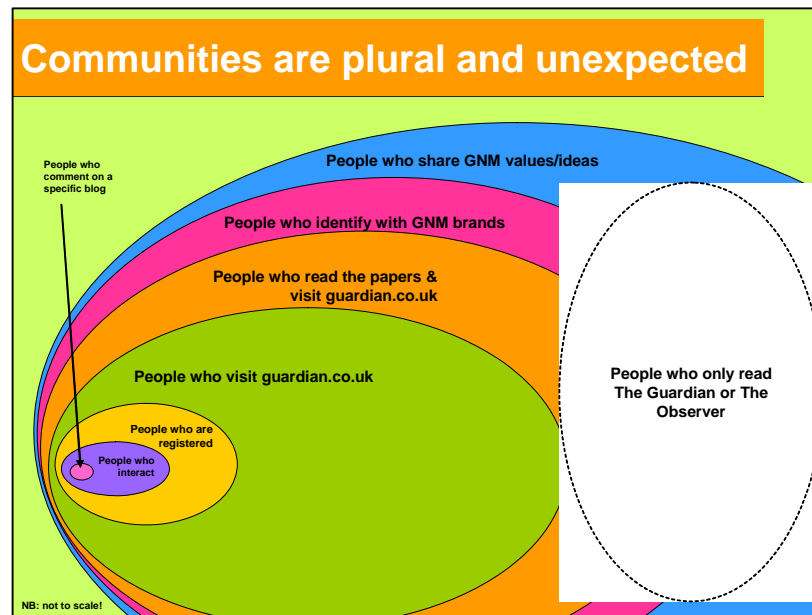
The audience was asked to consider what makes up a community using an image of people at a bus stop as an example. On the face of it they are clearly not a community: they are not conversing with each other or even acknowledging each other. Some people might argue that because they live within a short distance of each other and see each other regularly, and therefore know little things about each other, this makes a community. This one-plus-one plus-one approach is very old media. New social media believes the community comes into being and starts talking. The question is, how do we do this?

A good definition of a community is:

'A group of people who form relationships over time by interacting regularly around contexts which are of interest to all of them for varying individual reasons.'

Jake McKee, communityguy.com

Communities are plural and unexpected. This definition is good because it leaves room for several variables such as the size of a community. The definition is flexible but it is basically about people spending time with one another.



Social media doesn't have to be sociable

Social media doesn't even need to be about conversation; it can be a community without conversation, learning from others' experiences, learning from those who have gone before without having to know them.

It is not always beneficial. Social media can in fact often be very antisocial, because we chat, but not face-to-face. To assess value, we have to ask ourselves how useful the experience is. A good example is the book recommendations on Amazon. They are only reliable and useful if we know that the person compiling it has something in common with us. We come together in different groupings depending on needs: this may be age, gender or other needs, perhaps sharing a destination.

The Guardian has also been thinking about community as the people who do not interact as well as those who do. There are huge opportunities with all of the people who may share the values and ideas of an organisation but do not engage currently; don't just think about the people who are in the audience now, but those who might be and just don't know about it yet.

What's more, context is now king, not content. In fact, this could be pushed further to say that *contact* is king, because it is all very well to produce the work but we also need to discuss and meet around the work or the idea. Content might be an article about Egypt, the context might be that it is about travel; transferring this principle to other contexts, then the contact in *Linked In* becomes about professional relationships.

The long tail

This is an economic theory with social applications. A good example would be that of Amazon: 50% of their sales come from the same 20 books; the other 50% comprises 2 million books. The principle is about selling lots of very specific things to a very small group of people, but hundreds of others buying these books in one subject area. We have to think

about pleasing lots of people in small ways, instead of always thinking up the next big thing. These small things will have much more relevance and immediacy to our users.

Trouble

Communities are sometimes trouble, but there isn't as much as you think. The Guardian only has to delete about 1% of the user content on their website; worrying too much about trouble just holds up progress.

People are amazing

The one thing that we can do within social media and community generally, is help people to be amazing: to themselves and to other people. This is the key to discovering those catalysts as well. We need to find out where people are playing and help them to play there.

Transparency

Being transparent with people is very important; with users generally, not just communities. The more transparent we are, the better an organisation people think we are, because we are speaking with a genuine human voice. Do not try to distract from your own fallibility.

Questions and comments

Comment: Audiences Central recently undertook a project about people's favourite local places, asking people to submit photos to a website. Initially, they were anxieties about whether people would send unsuitable images; so far, out of 12,000 photos, they have only had to remove one.

Having very clear goals from the outset is often a good way to begin an online community, because it makes the intention behind the project/community/discussion unmistakable.

How large does your team need to be, in order to manage so much user generated content without leaving anything behind?

Leaving aside the team that deal with technical matters, such as registration, functionality etc, there are seven moderators and the head of department. The Guardian is able to provide nearly 24/7 coverage handling of user generated content and interaction. The Guardian deals with things in two ways:

- Proactive: our team covers potential areas of contention by thinking about it in advance: some subjects are, inevitably, more flammable than others
- Reactive: we rely on our users to be on 'neighbourhood watch', to spot problems and send the Guardian any problems they find

The Guardian post-moderates everything, which is quite different from other media organisations, which pre-moderate. The key is in encouraging people to care for the quality of the output: the platform belongs to the Guardian but the conversation belongs to everyone.

When did users make that shift to taking responsibility? Do you think it is because they are Guardian readers and therefore a particular type?

A lot of users are not typical Guardian readers, but drawn by liberal conversation. We can see from the conversations and the perspective being offered that these views are not necessarily those we would traditionally see in the letters page. We also watch the traffic logs; we can see when we are being attacked from other sites like the British National Party. Dissent is okay, it's about how people dissent.

The shift in taking responsibility came from a piece of technology that monitors traffic and flags up alerts, so that an item can be dealt with much more quickly. Secondly, the speedy response demonstrates to users that there is some point in reporting problems.

Many arts organisations hold back from creating communities like this because they are concerned that the artistic team or senior management team will be sensitive about critical or adverse remarks about the work being presented. Do you have any advice for preparing the team for this?

Three points:

2. If we are not prepared to have a conversation where we might not like or be comfortable with what we hear, then we shouldn't enter into it
3. We have to see criticism as an opportunity to learn from users, instead of an attack; the fact that somebody can be bothered to sit down and compose an e-mail is an indication of how much they value us
4. Online communities are about having a conversation. What better way to try and explain what we are trying to do as an organisation or with an exhibition or an event, than to get into the conversation? It gives us an opportunity to explain the background and the information. We find that when we talk to them as a person, the conversation is much more productive.