

Afternoon Keynote

David Sabel, Head of Digital Media and Producer NT Live *Evolving digital strategy at the National Theatre*

David started at the National Theatre in September 2008 when he was doing his dissertation for his MBA. He produced the pilot seasons of NT Live, the pioneering project to broadcast shows from the National live to cinemas nationally and internationally, and the National's first documentary, *Making War Horse*, and *Alan Bennett and the Habit of Art*, which is still available to download. His presentation explored how the digital strategy at the National Theatre is changing as a result of insights gained from evaluating NT Live. He outlined how NT Live has opened up opportunities to rethink the way in which they engage with audiences and provided insights for other delegates on emerging opportunities for developing content.

His presentation led into Hassan's research which was more about the evaluation of the engagement into NT Live. He wanted to talk about NT Live, to recap about it briefly, but mainly about how it is shifting a bit now, the thoughts and changes it has triggered. When Julie Aldridge (Director, AMA) had asked him to speak, he wondered if he was the right person, as he doesn't work in the marketing department, and most of what he does isn't related to marketing, except for the specific marketing of NT Live. But actually increasingly digital and Discovery, which is what they call their education department but is about wider public engagement too, are blending with marketing. There is a lot of digital activity that happens through the marketing department with specific sales messages, which he wouldn't consider himself to be the expert in. His role is more about producing content: it's a new role – the post and the digital media department of five has only existed for a year.

One thing that has been really important has been the buy-in they had from the top, from Nick Hytner (Director) and Nick Starr (Executive Director), who embraced digital, and have been at the heart of thinking about how it forms part of the overall strategy at the National. They also understand how his role cannot sit on his own but has to have tentacles into the marketing, the education and the press departments. There is no such thing as a head of paper, and similarly, digital is just a tool.

[David played the trailer for NT Live:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyBcneZHDag>]

NT Live was launched with *Phèdre* in June 2009 to take a series of plays and broadcast them in cinemas around the world: initially it was just planned for the UK, as it was about access for people outside London who wouldn't otherwise be able to see the National's work or at least not so frequently. They went internationally, initially because it was a way of subsidising the UK screenings as they'd never have been able to get enough screens nationwide to make it financially viable. But also because it was an incredible opportunity from the branding and profile point of view. They launched it in the spirit of an experiment, and made that message part of the marketing at first, without wanting to sound lacking in confidence. But they

considered that there was a huge thing to overcome in terms of people considering seeing it in a cinema being deadening to the art form.

Boldly, they were not worried about cannibalisation, because they always felt that it's not the same experience – you can never quite replace the experience of being in a theatre. The idea that it replicated, through being live, some of the excitement of the theatre experience interested them, and the feedback they have had so far bears that out. People applaud at the end of the screenings; they feel more like they are sitting in the theatre than the cinema. But the National went into it not knowing if it would work, if they could do it well – the important question artistically. They were lucky to have actors of the calibre of Helen Mirren and Dominic Cooper to take the leap of faith with them.

On the first night, after the broadcast, emails started pouring in to the feedback email at the National, which normally gets a couple of emails a day (“I couldn’t find the loos”, “I enjoyed that production”, “People were coughing too much in the theatre – can you do something about it?”): but there was a flood of emails from Newcastle and Birmingham and Iceland and, five hours later, from New York. They were overwhelmed by the feedback and how engaged people were: they weren’t just thank you emails but long engaged emails. It felt like the National Theatre meant something for the first time to lots of new people.

From an NT Live point of view, the challenges they have are that there are 350 venues in 20 countries round the world, and there is very little marketing budget to engage such a diverse base. The trailer is a key tool but getting the space can be tricky. They are very dependent on the individual cinemas to do the marketing themselves, and some are inevitably better and more active than others. A huge part of the marketing effort is giving the cinemas digital assets – because there isn’t the budget to print posters and leaflets – to customise, personalise and print themselves, plus a widget that can be hosted on the venues’ sites but can be updated centrally by the National. They also need to get people to act as ambassadors for them: they’ve created low-res print at home assets with a section at the bottom that says ‘Your venue is...’, so it can be adapted with the relevant cinema, as the cinemas are taking the bookings.

That means the National are not capturing the data. They reach audiences through Facebook and Twitter, and also through emarketing: they have freepost postcards that are handed out at the cinemas for people to sign up for NT Live emails. So far these emails have been used for traditional marketing messages, but they are looking at ways of using them in a more creative, content rich way. The people who’ve signed up probably want more than just ‘Now book for this...’, and with the National’s library of assets and content they should be able to find ways of developing the emarketing. The low-res assets were a difficult decision, because they want everything that the National Theatre puts out to be of the highest quality and within their control, but letting go to a certain extent is a good thing. As long as the branding is correct and so on, the important thing is for the message to be out there. The National looks to the Tate as a model for building relationships and engagement: you come to the National site not just to book tickets, and the experience with the National does not start and end with the rising and falling of the

curtain. One of their missions is to be much more transparent, to get people to go to them to have a content-rich experience and to curate that.

They've created a Google maps interface so that people can find the nearest venue close to them: they want to develop that further so that you get different content depending on where you are looking from, and also target the dates – which vary slightly mainly because of time differences – to the right people depending on location. The UK content would be different, as people in the UK do have a different relationship with the National (i.e. they could get to the National to see work in the theatre, or they could see them on tour).

In terms of getting people to think about the National site as a place for content and engagement, they are looking at two-way broadcasting and interactivity. Through the internet – and eventually on mobile devices – they want to get people to engage more: this is happening to a certain extent on Facebook (they have a separate NT Live Facebook page) – a relatively small number but an actively engaged number which they are sure they can increase.

Feedback shows that people want programmes: they do this in some cinemas but the logistics are hard, sending out stock and so on. If you look on the NT Live website, you can see that they have started offering digital programmes – their first really digital commercial enterprise on the site – which are the same price as their traditional programmes, but offer a lot of extra digital content, so you get a podcast of Nick Hytner's platform talk on *Hamlet*, and a behind the scenes pre-show video. This has just started to grow after positive responses: it's a downloadable flash file with a text-only version that can be printed out and taken to the cinema. This has made them think about digital publications. They want to work out how to curate digital content, as it is not inexpensive and takes a lot of time, so they need to get it right. So they are wondering about having a quarterly publication, which might be things that have been uploaded in the previous month, but presented in a different way.

Hasan Bakhshi, Director, Creative Industries, NESTA
Satisfaction guaranteed? Measuring satisfaction, attitudes and perceptions

Understanding the impact that our digital initiatives have on audiences involves a lot more than just measuring online behaviour (as valuable as that may be). In this session, Hasan explored how to measure how satisfied people are with the experience they have with our organisations via digital media. It drew upon some key findings of an in-depth research study conducted by NESTA on the NT Live pilots, including the impact this project has had on developing new audiences and changing public perception of the arts.

He kicked off with a quote from Nick Starr at NESTA's Advancing the Arts seminar:

“Those of us who have grown up working in the arts are good at developing hunch and instinct. We are not so good at developing a series of tools, a kind of rigour of analysing things and then proceeding stepwise through where the analysis takes you, to a hypothesis which you then go back and re-examine and test if you possibly