

Audience Research

A briefing paper for people experimenting with digital media

JISC Content

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Researching your audiences is essential to deliver services which provide the maximum public value.

This is a briefing paper for people in the public sector who want to find out more about digital media and who want to research how their audiences interact with them.

The media revolution

Until the 1980s, media relied primarily upon analogue broadcast models such as newspapers, television and radio. With the emergence of digital technologies and the internet, a range of powerful new channels is now available to connect content creators with their audience.

Recent developments have massively increased the ease with which individuals and organisations can create on-demand digital media such as podcasts and videos, interactive sites that provide a personalised experience to users, and a wide range of channels for users to contribute to services, such as wikis, commenting, content rating and so on.

The worldwide web was designed to share information, and the current growth in sites that make this sharing easier, such as Wikipedia and YouTube, demonstrates that there is enormous demand for user-generated content.

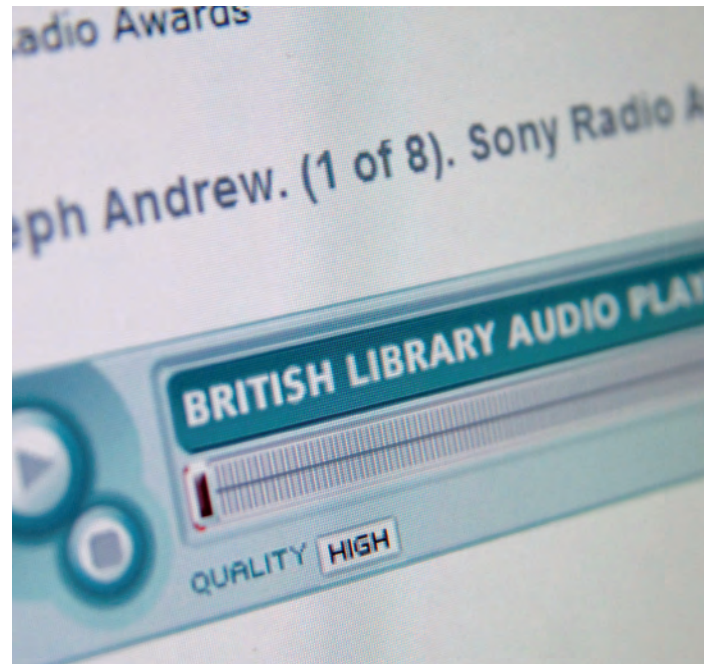
All of these approaches have been used successfully by a range of content providers. Podcasts and vodcasts allow users to consume content on portable media players when it is convenient to them. User-generated content such as reviews, wikis, forums and rating systems can engender a greater sense of ownership and community amongst users, and can increase the value of the original resource through these contributions.

Audiences increasingly want to receive information instantly, at any time, in any place, and through a range of devices.

Digital media is (not) easy

Creating new digital channels is easy – in principle. Podcasts can be created on almost any computer, videos and vodcasts can be made with a little effort, and a wide range of tools and platforms is available to deliver elements such as forums, blogs, wikis and ratings systems. Of course, making media which is useful, informative, well-presented and accessible is as difficult as ever!

Audience research can be used to assess the reach, uptake, quality and impact of media. It can help you answer questions such as: Who are our audience? How many people use our media outputs? How and why do they use our media outputs? Are they



satisfied with the current media outputs? Understanding non-use of media is also important; for example, to understand why your media activities are not reaching all your target audience.

Researching audiences for digital media

Focus on the target audience

The internet allows you to reach enormous global audiences at, essentially, no marginal cost after the resource has been created. Despite this, it is essential to consider the internet as a channel to your target audience, rather than seeing it as the target audience!

Avoid technology-led enhancements

Developers enjoy implementing current 'hot' technologies. It can be tempting to develop services to take advantage of the new technical possibilities, as an experiment as to whether there is user demand for them. However, it is more beneficial to determine what requirements exist within the target audience for your service, and then to investigate which technologies could help you meet these requirements.

For example, many services have recently developed blogs and podcasts, whereas user feedback is that an improved search facility should have been the priority.

Accessibility of digital media

Understanding how your audience interacts with your service can help you to focus design and effort on those features that will have the greatest benefit.

When considering how to enhance your service, it is important to maintain its accessibility. The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 requires you to make your website accessible, and multimedia and interactive features are not exempt from this legislation. For example, how will a deaf user benefit from a podcast?

Accessible design will have broader benefits too – accessible sites need to be well-structured, and a well-structured site is easier to use, syndicate, and adapt.

The role of web analytics

Simple website statistics, such as the number of 'hits', will not provide an insight into your audience. More complex web analytics can help you to understand the behaviour of users of a site, but it is necessary to place the findings in context. For example, if a high proportion of visitors only views one page, does this mean that they found what they were looking for immediately, or that the first page was irrelevant and they did not have the patience to investigate the site more deeply?

Communities do not form around tools

If you attempt to build a community around your service, you are likely to be disappointed. Successful online communities tend to fall within two groups: very broad (eg Flickr), or a community of practice. Most communities of practice already have functional communication channels – trying to displace these is very unlikely to succeed, and is probably not desirable anyway.

Syndicated content and mash-ups

An increasing challenge in the 'Web 2.0' environment is how to understand the usage of your content through syndication. If you provide access to your online content through a format such as RSS, it can be difficult or impossible to measure usage through web stats directly – and if your performance is measured through web traffic, this is a problem. A broader approach to measuring uptake and impact is needed.

Finding out more about audience research

To help you get started, The Guide to Researching Audiences will provide you with some useful and practical information, including a discussion of the various research methods such as surveying and web statistics. The Guide sets out the key activities in the lifecycle of audience research, which are driven by your target audience.

The use of 'Web 2.0' concepts within communities of interest is receiving some analysis, particularly within the professional e-Government community at [ePractice.eu](http://www.epractice.eu).

Many resources are available that offer guidance on **podcasting and vodcasting**, including a White Paper from the University of Missouri, and an article from Culture24 on 'Podcasting and Museums – Shock and Awe or New Opportunities?'

New Media Knowledge, a not-for-profit body, runs an informative website which has articles, White Papers, courses, events and online debates on digital media.

There is also a wealth of support available on the **creation and management of digital materials** from sites such as JISC Digital Media. JISC TechDis provides guidance on disabilities and technology in the education sector (but are more widely applicable), including an 'Accessibility Essential Series' and a 'web accessibility evaluation tool'.

Additionally, the Market Research Society (MRS) provides some best practice guidance to promote the **professionalism of research on the internet**.

Further reading

The Guide to Researching Audiences

<http://sca.jiscinvolve.org/2009/02/05/download-audience-analysis-toolkit>

ePractice.eu

www.epractice.eu

University of Missouri Podcasting & Vodcasting – A White Paper

www.tfaoi.com/cm/3cm/3cm310.pdf

Podcasting White Paper: What You Don't Know About Podcasting Could Hurt Your Business

www.podblaze.com/Podcasting_Marketing_Media_Business_WhitePaper.pdf

Culture24: Podcasting and Museums – Shock and Awe or New Opportunities?

www.culture24.org.uk/places+to+go/east+midlands/leicester/art37770

New Media Knowledge

www.nmk.co.uk

JISC TechDis

www.techdis.ac.uk

JISC Digital Media

www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk

Market Research Society internet research guidelines

www.mrs.org.uk/standards/internet.htm

The Strategic Content Alliance

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This briefing paper and The Guide to Researching Audiences have been prepared by Curtis+Cartwright Consulting Ltd on behalf of the Strategic Content Alliance. They are part of a series of guides developed to support people in the public sector understand their digital audiences and deliver audience-focused services.

This work is part of a wider initiative led by the Strategic Content Alliance, which aims to support UK citizens gain best value from the public investment that has been made in digital content.

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