

## **Text from Tony Ageh's Presentation at the JISC Digital Content Partnerships event, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2010, Goodenough College, London**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. My name's Tony Ageh and I am Controller of Archive Development at the BBC and my task is to make the BBC's archives accessible to the public. This is a big task – because it's a big archive.

The problems are not only to do with its size – but size is certainly an issue.

I'll give you a few illustrations:

If you think about the TV programmes alone, despite the few notorious omissions and deletions, we've still kept more than 400-thousand, complete programmes. The very best or most important ones, in fact. And that's a lot of viewing. There's nobody in this room who could live long enough to watch them all – unless you went without sleep... and did nothing but watch television for the rest of your life.

But the programmes are only the start...

In our Written Archive Centre at Caversham, just one of our 27 archive centres across the UK, we have over 7 and a half miles of shelving. It's full of amazing documents and papers – including Winston Churchill's speeches, The Beatles' contracts and Spike Milligan's original scripts, to name but a few.

Elsewhere, we've got more than six million stills and photographs – almost all, by the way, under BBC copyright. We have four and a half million items of sheet music. And over 100-thousand hours of sport footage, much of which has only ever been broadcast once and some, never at all. And as well as one of the world's largest record collections, we've also got the world's smallest playable record.

Now, we need to find a way to let people get at this fabulous resource, but, as much as I'd like to, we can't just throw open the gates and shout 'help yourselves!' For one thing, only some of the archive is in any kind of digital format and for another nobody would know where to look. We are going to have to move slowly and carefully if we want to make the archive truly open and to put it to use as a vital natural resource in the age of networks.

So, first of all we need to understand the scale of the task ahead.

Just transferring, in real time, the one million-plus hours of tape and film alone that the BBC holds, would take 120 years of continuous copying... just to get them into digital format.

From that perspective the job might seem too big for us to tackle, and in fact... it is. Even if we could do the digitisation, where are we ever going to find the time or the resources to identify and classify and catalogue all the programmes, or acquire the server space and the bandwidth needed to make them universally available?

As things are today, no public service organisation alone has the resources needed to realise the full potential contained within its own archives while still carrying out its primary functions. We could probably do the digitisation if we stopped creating any new programmes and dedicated the entire BBC to the task for a couple of years, but I don't think that's a viable solution.

And anyway, this is not just a problem for the BBC.

I'd say that no organisation of any size, that has amassed real value in its archives, has the resources available to get the best out of them.

I call this the archive paradox: if you've been around long enough to have accumulated substantial reserves of archived material, you almost certainly won't have the resources to

exploit them. It might change in future as more material is originated using digital systems, but anyone with a substantial collection of artefacts or analogue recordings is stuffed. Sorry.

Except there is a way forward, and it's the way we are exploring at the BBC.

We think that the key to unlocking value within the Nation's archives is collaboration; that by working together, with other organisations who share the same or similar issues, will allow us to share resources and solutions, and that therefore forming meaningful partnerships is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century way to making real progress.

This is a key element of the BBC Archive Strategy, known informally as the Digital Public Space initiative: and, in a nutshell, is the BBC working closely with public institutions and other partners to create an open, online environment in which publicly-held cultural media and related materials would be held, found, used, shared and amplified.

The BBC Archive Development team has been building partnerships with archives, libraries, museums and other holders of public content. These include the Arts Council England, British Film Institute, British Museum, National Archives, British Library, V&A, National Maritime Museum and JISC.

Such collaboration brings us all immediate benefits in terms of efficiency and interoperability based on common standards, but it also makes sense from an editorial perspective, one that carries great weight within the BBC and makes my job a lot easier.

For instance, the BBC has, since the late 1930's accumulated a huge amount of material about World War 2 – but, for obvious reasons, not much about World War I. By linking with the British Library, the Imperial War Museum, the British Film Institute and the National Archives, we can all offer a more comprehensive and useful collection of material, so that together we all present a much more rounded picture of that period in history.

Of course there are other strong arguments for building archive partnerships too. Partnerships drive adoption. They reduce costs. They pool resources. The most compelling for us is that we, the BBC, don't have all the expertise or the skills, never mind the time and resources, to understand and interpret every hidden detail contained in our own archives.

You can pick almost any subject to illustrate this: Agriculture, Buildings, Computing, all the way to Z-for-Zoos – for almost anything you can think of, we've got relevant documents, sound and pictures. But in all of those subjects, there are institutions, societies and individuals who know more than we do. We could make so much more of OUR material with THEIR input.

So that's why we'll need partnerships: to release the full value of the archive.

I mentioned that we have more than a million hours of programming, and of course, TV and radio programmes are the obvious place to start. Once we've sorted out all the rights and payment issues, and ensured the correct balance between public service and the market... we'll put them on the Internet – and it'll be wonderful for us all, to be able to watch and listen again to the shows we grew up with.

But we also need to recognise that in the emerging Digital Public Space, people's media consumption habits have changed. They still love full-length programmes – but they also enjoy highlights and moments and snippets and compilations and all the new formats you can see all over YouTube.

So we'll need to offer not just whole programmes – we'll also need to do a number of things to those programmes to make them fit, to meet the future expectations and aspirations of our users.

We need to offer ways of atomising our content - breaking it down into component parts – such as scenes, chapters, sequences, individual frames, and even elements within frames.

And we need to provide the metadata that indicates in as much detail, as much as possible, what's inside the programme.

We also need to enable our audiences to add their own data to our content, and for that data to 'stick' to the material forever. This amplification will dramatically increase the value of the archived material, because it'll help people locate the contents they're really interested in, and make it more findable, more useful and more interesting everyone else.

Which brings me to the other stuff I mentioned in our archive – the unused footage, the supporting documents, the publicity shots, the scripts, the correspondence, the data and artefacts...

Here we have an immense, unprecedented – and probably priceless – record. It's a record not just of the BBC, but of many aspects of British life – and local life – over the past three or four generations.

So we really mustn't think only in terms of the programmes. Yes, we'll make the programmes available... of course we will. But we must look to go further than that.

We must find a way of making as much as possible, of this marvellous material available to everyone. It was the licence-fee payers who paid for it to be created and collected – and somehow they should be given access to it.

Now at this point, you might, say: "Hang on! If you don't have the resources to put all your programmes on the Internet, how on earth are you going to get round to all the non-programme stuff?"

It's a very good question.

Because the problem here is not just one of large scale infrastructure and automated processes, such as digitisation and rights payments – although these will be immense. It is

much more about the need for very detailed, granular cataloguing; in order to create the conditions for almost an infinite variety of journeys, for learning, discovery and self-actualisation, to unpaint the broad brush strokes of mass-media and replace them with detail and accuracy.

And the answer again is to do with collaboration. We need to go beyond formal partnerships with other organisations. We'll need to engage with our audiences, our visitors, our consumers - the end users themselves - to determine the many and vastly different perspectives on our assets.

For example, through our partnerships with JISC and also our membership of the SCA, we developed Century Share, an early attempt to allow the past to speak for itself. And now, with the BUFVC, we are together making otherwise locked away and forgotten footage from our Northern Ireland archives available to UK students who will, in the course of their own studies, add additional information and metadata, reveal buried narratives and, we hope, bring a new and personal perspective to a familiar but often generalised and clichéd, view of the past.

And although the BBC undoubtedly has one of the bigger archives, others too will need to adopt similar approaches because now more than ever, we all need to work in collaboration to unlock potential and value. In particular our Universities and Libraries who hold significant collections but face severe and potentially debilitating shortages of resources will need the help and support of larger organisations who in turn will benefit from their expertise.

In this way, I believe, eventually the whole media sector will go from a time of anxiety and contraction, to an era of growth and returning prosperity, triggered by the value we extract from the vaults.

And what about the artistic, cultural and social impact? The only answer I can give is ‘I don’t know’ – it’s not up to me. Just opening up an archive doesn’t automatically let you control what people do when they get to use it.

In fact it is up to all of us, as citizens, as creators and as entrepreneurs – some of you might have great ideas to use what the BBC has, to transform the world. Some of you may simply want to add your own stories to the mix, and see what happens.

The UK’s Archives need to work together to decide the best way to digitise the vast amounts of material we all hold, to ensure that our new production systems are integrated with our collections so that digital assets are added automatically, and to develop standards for metadata and indexing that make cross-referencing and resource discovery simple and straightforward. And we also need to create elegant systems that allow our audiences to find, use, enjoy and amplify our content.

We need to build structures that can be relied upon, as we go forward, like the /programmes hierarchy that we’ve introduced at the BBC which gives every programme a unique, persistent URL, and we need to think of how to extend that approach to cover time and place and individuals as well.

We can do all this, and more.

The archives of the world are being brought to life by digitisation and online availability, and I hope you’re all as excited as I am by the possibilities that this creates.

Thank you