

SIMON NELSON

New ideas, new audiences

The BBC's multiplatform team wants ambitious ideas. Below, Simon Nelson tells **Lucy Rouse** about his vision and, overleaf, the commissioners give their tips

Even Simon Nelson thinks his title, BBC Vision controller of multiplatform and portfolio, is “completely barmy”. He says he was saddled with it before he took the job three years ago.

In practice, Nelson runs certain functions across BBC Vision, such as scheduling and subtitling. The multiplatform part of his remit covers all BBC Vision's new media services.

“I see my job as transforming the whole of the BBC's TV operation into something that thinks and operates across all media,” he says. He commissions new forms of content and develops new ways of accessing existing BBC TV content.

But how radical is he prepared to be? Would he ever allow viewers to see new episodes of, say, BBC 1's *Spooks* on the iPlayer before transmission on TV? “I'm prepared to be pretty radical, but I'm also realistic. The explosion of on-demand TV is hugely significant, but it's far from being the dominant way that audiences consume content.”

Turning what was BBC television into a multimedia operation is a tall order. In many cases, the remit means repurposing content and presenting it in different media to new audiences.

But there is new content, as on the Comedy Extra site on bbc.co.uk, where new and existing talent can try out ideas. Animators have brought audio clips of Radio 4's *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue* to life with short films, and Simon Day of *The Fast Show* has created new characters and short-form formats.

FACT FILE

Career 2007-present: BBC Vision controller of multiplatform and portfolio; 2000-2007: Set up and ran BBC's radio and music new media operation; 1998-2000: head of strategy for BBC Radio; 1997-1998: strategy manager, BBC Radio; 1996-1997: brand development manager, *The Independent*; 1992-1995: manager, Dimples wigs and toupees

Family Married with three children

Wish I'd invested in Playfish – fascinating online gaming enterprise

Watches iPlayer on PS3, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Doctor Who*/Sarah Jane Adventures, *The Restaurant*, anything by Charlie Brooker

Dislikes *Wizards of Waverly Place* and the TV wallpaper that most kids' TV channels pump out; World's Fattest, Most Disgusting etc; contrived mission docs



Bite-sized comedy is, says Nelson, “packaged together in the most sophisticated ways we can” – for instance, with appropriate tags so that it is picked up elsewhere online. He says BBC genre commissioners need to develop search engine optimisation skills for the new world of multimedia content.

New avenues

In drama, Nelson's biggest project is *E20*, the online project being created around *EastEnders*. “That's completely different to comedy, where instead we're taking a TV brand into a new environment with new characters, and investing in young writers and actors to develop the talent base of *EastEnders*,” he says. He hopes the new online storylines will mean the online drama can be enjoyed in its own right or together with the estab-

lished BBC 1 soap. A lot will depend on how people choose to interact with the developing drama online.

In factual, Nelson aims to copy the Nature model whereby current and archive content is segmented across services such as Wildlife Finder, Earth Explorers and Earth News. He hopes the BBC's wealth of information on cosmology, stars and planets can be presented in similar ways to that from the Natural History Unit.

Next will come history and the arts. The BBC has announced a potential partnership with the Public Catalogue Finder to make around 200,000 publicly owned paintings, most of which are never on display, searchable and available to view online. Under the working title *Your Paintings*, it will be a new service on bbc.co.uk. The BBC's history archive will also be spun out into new products and services. And one of bbc.co.uk's most successful web services, the Recipe Finder, is being relaunched, taking on board lessons learned in the Nature project.

He feels the BBC is uniquely well placed to help create a market, or audience, for online content. “Few organisations in the world have a platform as powerful as the BBC,” says Nelson. So does he think the corporation's critics are justified in thinking its online scale and ambitions should be reined in?

“The first question is: ‘Are we delivering the BBC's purposes in new and exciting ways; is what we're doing genuinely distinctive?’ Almost



EastEnders web spin-off E20



Strictly Social



Child Of Our Time

without exception that is the case. Then it's a question of the appropriate level of investment at different moments," he says. "These are delicate balances. It's something we've had to get better at, becoming more conversant with market impact. But online is only going to become more important as a way of communicating our public service mission to audiences.

"For the moment, levels of investment are broadly right. At least 25% of what we do is money that goes out of the door to the creative sector in the UK. So we're having a hugely positive market impact."

At this point, Nelson is interrupted by his four-year-old daughter, at home with chicken pox, who has hit a snag on the CBeebies website. He goes to help, but says she has already dealt with it remarkably well herself.

"Anyone who's complacent about the future of TV and doesn't believe the rules are being rewritten should look at those under 15 and the way they engage with the web and gaming."

He names a string of current projects, from *Strictly Social*, which allows viewers to comment on BBC 1's *Strictly Come Dancing*, to *Shownar* (working title) which aims to reflect online buzz about TV content, and

'Anyone who's complacent about the future of TV should look at those under 15 and the way they engage with the web and gaming'

Lab UK, a platform for mass scientific experimentation which will feed into TV programming including the *Child Of Our Time* series and science strand *Bang Goes The Theory*.

With such a wide remit it's impossible to cover all Nelson's projects here. But he remains open to new ideas. The more innovative, the better.

MULTIMEDIA STRENGTHS

"Helping audiences find and discover the programmes and content we make for them that they know about and the stuff they don't or wouldn't find otherwise," says Nelson. "A large part of the job is to bring the worlds of content and technology closer together."

MULTIMEDIA WEAKNESSES

Nelson says programme support is "interesting". "Many new people are sniffy about programme support. I will with agree that the last thing we want is a bog-standard, bolt-on programme support website." But he says it's easy to do more. "With marginal additional effort we can create extremely powerful, project-rich support websites."

➤ *Simon Nelson is speaking at the search and navigation masterclass at The Media Festival on 19 November*

HOW TO PITCH TO ...

SIMON NELSON



Do

- Think about the BBC's public service mission. Why should the licence fee be spent on this?
- Come with big cross-genre propositions or ideas of real scale and ambition
- Get web-savvy people involved from the start – designers, software engineers etc



Don't

- Dismiss or be sniffy about TV as a medium
- Dismiss TV talent. "Putting experts from one field in contact with another is one of the best ways to create genuine innovation and success"
- Think of the web as merely a bolt-on to TV

HEALTHCHECK ... MULTIPLATFORM

Shopping List

TARIFF SEE GENRE BREAKDOWNS OVERLEAF

Nelson says he's looking for "new ways to transform the content that we make", either by extracting and repackaging things from existing programming, syndicating content and creating new content.

More ...

- Truly multimedia, interactive ideas
- Drama ideas that can work on TV and in interactive media
- BBC content and applications for mobile devices
- Public service content or technology delivered in new ways

Less ...

- Talk of "immersive worlds" that actually mean Flash games or pages on Bebo

FIVE BIG INVESTMENTS TO DATE

- 1 **Wildlife Finder**
URL bbc.co.uk/wildlifefinder/
- 2 **EastEnders E20**
URL bbc.co.uk/eastenders/e20/
- 3 **Doctor Who Dreamland**
URL bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/
- 4 **Lab UK**
URL bbc.co.uk/labuk/
- 5 **Dragons' Den online**
URL bbc.co.uk/dragonsden/pitches/



FIVE SMALLER INVESTMENTS TO DATE

- 1 **Strictly Social**
URL bbc.co.uk/strictlycomedancing/play/
- 2 **Chartjockers**
URL bbc.co.uk/chartjockers/
- 3 **Adam Curtis blog**
URL bbc.co.uk/adamcurtis/
- 4 **Shownar**
URL shownar.com/
- 5 **Brian Pern**
URL bbc.co.uk/comedy/extra/show/p003cmwm

