

**Speech to the CBA Conference Friday 17th February 2006 by Simon Derry, BBC
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Thank you for inviting me to give this presentation today. The broadcast training world is in a state of profound change and in this speech I want to talk about three things: The commoditisation of the media industry, the battle to maintain quality while resources diminish and whether e-training solutions hold the key to improving industry standards.

The broadcasting industry has changed very quickly and profoundly in the last 10 years and we all know that there is going to be a step change again in the next 10 years. We now live in a multi-platform world where the advent of the internet and mobile technology has changed the original idea of broadcasting.

Competition for viewers and listeners has intensified as new content providers are launched and traditional broadcasters diversify both their programme offer and the platforms they provide content on.

Providers of content, whether it be news and information, entertainment or education have to think about services that can be provided through traditional broadcasting or now more and more commonly on demand through the internet or cable providers. New delivery platforms through the internet or the mobile phone make niche services both possible and profitable because you can reach more consumers for less cost.

This change in technology means that the relationship between the provider, the media company and the consumer, the audience has dramatically changed.

I must apologise using an economics term but I think media has become a commodity – that is it is ubiquitous, there's a lot of it and the consumer is king.

Rather than in the past where it was narrow focused and controlled by broadcasters who constructed schedules of programmes and worked with audience researchers to work out what were the best times for particular programmes to be broadcast.

Today that 'push' model of broadcasting is being replaced by a 'pull' model where the audience can demand what it wants when it wants and it can interact with it – enabling the consumer to be more in control, making it accessible to all.

This poses particular problems for media companies. How do you make sure that content is relevant to the audience? Is it possible to allow mass participation while maintaining strong professional standards?

The key to answering both of these questions is in the quality and professionalism of your staff. The content provider may no longer be the sole contributor to the output but it must

still be the editor. Professionalism in the media is even more important because acute judgements need to be made on what is acceptable and what is not.

Credible media companies must have rigorous editorial processes in place to make sure that content going live meets up to exacting quality standards. To do this, companies need to make sure that their staff are armed with the necessary skills to work in this fast and competitive environment.

The quality of journalism will ultimately be judged on the accuracy and objectivity of the stories written and the programmes made. If high standards are going to be maintained in this new world then journalists must have the right editorial skills and need to become adept at using new technology so they can become compositors and publishers as well as creators of their work.

The solution seems easy. Spend more money on training and developing your staff and you will be able to be a market leader in the 21st Century. And wouldn't we all like to do that!

The reality is somewhat different. New technology has led to the proliferation of more competition in the media landscape and this has meant that markets have fragmented more – putting pressure on advertising revenues. Many media companies have less to work with not more.

If companies are to survive and prosper in this new world they need to be lean efficient organisations that marshal resources effectively. In the harsh commercial world this is readily apparent when a new market entrant can steal not only audience but market share - persuading advertisers that their product is bolder, brasher and better than the traditional competition. This can happen across platforms already and as convergence occurs may well intensify.

This affects both commercial companies and public service ones. It is argued that you can become a dinosaur very quickly in this multi-channel, multi-platform world. Consumers, regulators and governments are demanding more services from their media providers.

So the dilemma facing media companies is this - there is more demand for a diverse range of services but not necessarily the extra resources to make new programming available using their existing business models.

All broadcasters have therefore been looking at how they can improve and streamline their services to make best use of their current resources and develop new ways of getting quality content to audiences. Key to this is developing the 'talent' of the organisation.

Developing that talent can come from a number of different sources. Gone are the days when an in-house training and development department provided everything. Now courses

are provided by business schools; niche providers who design bespoke services; and of course equipment & software manufacturers, all of these complementing the services provided by the in-house division.

Indeed the media world has developed a great deal in the last 30 years and in the UK where 20 years ago the BBC provided much of the technical and production training for the UK television industry for instance – now the industry has grown and although the BBC still has a leading role there are now many players in the media skills transfer business.

In the past, at the entry level into the industry, media businesses chose graduates from traditional subjects and trained them up accordingly into the new world of radio and TV. Now with new platforms being developed all the time, and with resources being tight, media companies expect graduates to come with knowledge of broadcasting techniques. For many media jobs in the UK and around the world, firms now expect prospective employees to have postgraduate qualifications in subjects as diverse as journalism and computer generated graphics.

Having said that however an organisation like the BBC is still hugely committed to developing its staff and the advent of new technology has allowed training to be disseminated more evenly and to a much broader range of staff than has been possible in the past.

This is because with broadband connections interactive on demand training modules can be completed by staff at their desk top. It means that all staff who need to complete a certain module can be sent a link to that particular course and asked to complete it. Take up and completion rate are monitored.

However this style of computer based training is certainly not the nirvana that our cost conscious accountants and cash strapped managers would like it to be! Information gathered from various surveys of online learning systems showed that initially there was a high drop out rate.

There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly e-learning systems were not very interactive. Universities, training departments and schools just used the web to upload content without thinking how people used the new medium of the web. Secondly technology had not got ahead of people's imaginations – what people wanted to deliver was often too ambitious and didn't work and thirdly there were a lot of design flaws – many courses were too long or too complicated to understand for those of us who are not particularly technically minded.

However the main problem that e-learning systems have is that they are not people. We are all social animals and if given the choice we like to learn from each other. The international training & development community therefore came up with the idea of blended learning.

As I am sure many of you are aware blended learning is bringing together some of the methods of distance learning perfected by a number of universities and using them through new e-learning solutions. More user friendly interactive training packages have been developed that allow trainees to do courses at their computer screen or workstation and these are combined with face to face traditional training sessions alongside video presentations or in some cases video conferencing allowing trainees access to certain key practitioners who are unable to attend training sessions in person. Technology has caught up and courses now contain live video, real time web chats with tutors and web forums – all of these make blended learning more about communicating with trainees and engaging them in a learning dialogue.

In the modern wired office the creation of this blended learning allows a consistency of approach to developing staff and improving skills across an organisation at a systematic and measurable rate.

Unfortunately for those of us who haven't got such a hot wired office technology solutions are less attractive. Or are they?

I work for a part of the BBC called the World Service Trust and we have been developing our own blended learning solution. It is called i-learn and it based on 9 bit transfer rate – the same download capacity of a fax machine – or rather slow to modern whizzy broad band connections. The idea is to provide the same amount of content but package it in such a way that it can be downloaded reasonably quickly by trainees anywhere where there is a phone line and an internet connection.

The system is run off a central content management system and is currently catering for journalism training – we have over 200 modules in radio, TV, & Online written by practicing BBC journalists and print journalism modules – authored by the Guardian Foundation, the charitable arm of the British Broadsheet – now Berliner format Manchester Guardian Newspaper. We have been able to translate the system into at present 15 languages. The results have been amazing – particularly for languages that we would not expect to have worked well because of infrastructure or practical problems.

We were able to translate the modules into Somali. Over 300 Somali journalists have logins and are registered to the system. Of those 250 have completed at least one course – each course consists of roughly 20 modules. The feedback has made interesting reading. Contrary to our expectations many of them would like longer courses – all of them did not find the download time a barrier to completing the course and most of them found the way the courses were structured helped them to better understand journalism methods and practice.

In Sri Lanka we have been working with journalists from across the country, Tamil, Sinhala and others to try and promote better journalism coverage. Our local partners have adopted the i-learn system. It has been give to 60 journalists and a different programme to 12 managers. Both groups have been given two sets of courses. Of the 60 journalists who were given training and access to the i-learn system – using the blended learning principle of a mixture of face to face training alongside the i-learn modules – 57 have successfully

completed both sets of courses. All of the managers have completed the courses.

I use the Sri Lanka and Somali examples because I want to emphasize that the digital age has arrived for all of us and it can hopefully provide some solutions to help better equip the broadcasters and media professionals of tomorrow serve their audiences effectively.