



# 300 seconds

MARTIN BELAM



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Published by Emblem Digital Consulting Ltd, May 2013

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## What is 300 Seconds?

There is a new event on the London tech/media/geek scene — [300 Seconds](#). I'm very pleased to see it taking place. The team behind it describe it on the website as:

“A new series of lightning talks delivered by me, you, any one. Talks that are interesting...but short. Our aim is to hear more about the personal and professional passions of our peers in the digital community. Be inspired. Learn something new. Meet. Chat. Engage. If you aren't used to standing up in front of people, it's a great place to practice your presentation skills in a safe and friendly environment. Or test out a new presentation you are working on. Maybe you do this all the time, but want to tell people about something new or exciting, or a new angle on a familiar topic. Grab an attendee ticket. Then come along to an event, grab a drink, listen, learn and be inspired.”

The event sprung out of [a #teacamp a few weeks ago](#) discussing how to better promote equality in tech, and providing more speaking opportunities for women seemed one avenue to achieve that. With a chance to practice speaking in public, and the ability to point to a track record of having done it at 300 Seconds, hopefully some of the contributors last night will go on to speak elsewhere.

At the start of last night's event [Hadley Beeman](#) said it was about moving to a world where we hear from “the brilliance of the many, not just the few.” We don't want to be exclusionary, she explained, this is not just for women, and indeed last night's line-up featured a mixed gender line-up — albeit with the usual bias hugely reversed.

It is [a topic I feel passionate about](#), and one that I believe makes our industry poorer for everybody involved, not just for people with a specific type of reproductive set-up. I think we make better products when we make them with a more representative mix of people contributing to their development, and I'd like to see conference line-ups that more accurately reflect the make-up of our profession and of our species. [Sharon O'Dea](#) called out Apps World Europe in her introduction to the event. The argument that of all of the people that could be found with something interesting and worthwhile to say

about apps in the whole of Europe only one woman is worth listening to out of fifty people selected is unsustainable. I'm very proud of the rather more balanced gender mix in the line-up of [EuroIA](#) that we'll shortly be announcing.

It is a complex issue though, with roots in the ways that technology and science education is gender-stereotyped at an early age, through to the culture and hiring practices of tech firms, and to the attitude of those putting together events. My closest colleague over the last decade always argues that she isn't put off doing anything because of gender, she just doesn't fancy doing it, and there is an argument to be made that a self-selecting bunch of people confident enough to step up on stage to talk about their ideas isn't the best selection mechanism for knowledge sharing anyway.

But since having a daughter myself I've become more and more concerned that her future career choices will be shaped not by what she wants to achieve, but by what is considered the "default" gender in certain industries like ours. By nature and nurture she is bound to end up on the geekier side of life, and at the age of 3 her favourite things currently include princesses and fairy tales and robots and Daleks and fighting pirates and dinosaurs.

I dread a future conversation if she ends up opting for a career in technology or the media which goes something like this:

Her: "Dad, I've noticed the tech/media world is pretty crappily sexist and it is pissing me off"

Me: "Yes, it has been this way for some time"

Her: "Oh. So what did you do to try and alter that?"

Me: \*awkward pause\* "Erm...well...y'know...I'm a man, so...erm...well it didn't really...erm..."

Of course, the most obvious way for me to support something like 300 Seconds is to blog about it, so here is my ebook compilation of my notes from the evening.

## “3 awesome things we’ve learnt from gov.uk design” – Lily Dart

[Lily Dart](#) works at [dxw](#) and she was talking about some of their work with [Gov.uk](#). Giving a quick outline of the award-winning project, she said that they were making “decisions based on user-testing, which is very exciting.”

Her first point was about the value of legibility. She compared the font size of Gov.uk to the BBC News website, and it was one of the rare occasions where you see the BBC website being cited as an example of inferior accessibility design. Gov.uk is vastly more readable. Lily said that font size is often only thought of in terms of accessibility and minority user groups like those with visual impairment, but actually making things easy to read is good for everyone.

She also praised the use of whitespace — “nice big seemingly blank patches” — in the design to focus the user on what they should be paying attention to, and avoiding distracting them with something else. She joked about how frequently other clients, when faced with whitespace, will ask “what can we do to fill that hole up?” As an attitude it is an entertaining print throwback — whitespace used to cost extra paper, but now costs no extra money for pixels.

The font used is based on UK road signs, which Lily said is a “nice cultural reference touch”, but also practical, as it was designed to be extra readable at distance and in adverse weather conditions. I have to say when I look back at some of the tiny fixed font sizes I’ve used on web site designs in the past I shudder with the typographical and readability horror of it all.

Lily’s second lesson was a reminder that design can help or hinder, and she showed examples of how Gov.uk had progressed from their original alpha release by removing unnecessary images and confusing icons from the visual presentation. Lily said the overuse of elements that were meant to be helpful, like icons, actually ended up being less helpful than omitting them altogether. Aesthetically pleasing doesn’t mean usable, she added.

Her final point was one that, if you are a regular reader of my writing, you’ll know is a subject close to my heart — “release first, refine later”.

## **“How To Digitalize A Small Town” – Pippa Davies**

[Pippa Davies](#) is working on a project to bring digital skills and technology to small towns in Wales, which involves 4 locations. Pippa said they have to avoid the towns feeling like they have descended as a digital occupying force, and that means spending a lot of time on the relationships with people, rather than the technology solutions. As well as needing to get the support of the politicians and officers of local and county councils, they need to get to all generations, and to find “digital champions” who will make “digital stuff” with them.

They hold workshops to teach digital skills including blogging and ebook production. Pippa said that social events were incredibly important to making the projects a success, and it is surprising how even people who “post pictures of themselves half-nude on Facebook” need encouragement to upload other types of content.

Pippa touched upon one of the curses of being a techie, that they constantly need to fight against the instinct to build things for people, and instead teach them how to build it themselves. They don’t always resist the temptation, and she had perhaps my favourite quote of the evening, about a pain I share as a code-dabbler rather than full-time professional coder:

“I haven’t made a website for fours years and everything has gone responsive. It’s a bloody nightmare.”

## **“Going global with a social media campaign” – Charlotte Curle**

[Charlotte Curle](#) of Standard Chartered was talking about a social media campaign she’d been involved with which used Liverpool FC to promote the bank’s charity which combats blindness. Each year Premier League teams are allowed a one-off change of sponsor on their shirts — I did not know this — and they opted to use it to back a campaign called “What’s your perfect match”, for example fish and chips or, in my case I guess, music and robots.

The social media campaign ran on 12 different localised Facebook pages, and people who entered had a chance to win limited edition signed shirts, or to bid for a limited number of them in an auction. Charlotte said Liverpool fans “really do not let you walk alone”, and the campaign reached over 10 million people on Twitter. Charlotte observed that football is a much sexier message for people to push than banking or blindness.

The KPIs they claim to have increased were a mix of the concrete — £23k raised by the auction and an increase in traffic to their donations page — and the social-media-wankspeak-abstract. I’ve no idea how a 1818% increase in “people talking about this” on social media actually translates into the real world, or how it compares to the immeasurable number of people actually physically talking about something following different types of campaigns. I was reminded of a couple of sessions at the recent [#FTMedia13](#) conference, where it was pointed out that big data and big numbers are great, but if you can only see the numbers from your own silo, you really can’t tell if you are doing well or not compared to your competitors.

Given that the event was being held in Facebook’s London office, Charlotte rather bravely cited “Facebook’s rules” as one of the problems with the campaign. It was difficult as well, she said, to run the competition uniformly across the globe, as different countries have different regulatory rules around competitions, polls and prize draws. She also noted that football isn’t popular everywhere, and that they would have got more traction in India with a campaign based around cricket stars rather than Stephen Gerrard.

## **“Health Professionals and Social Media” – Anne Marie Cunningham**

[Anne Marie Cunningham](#) of Cardiff University was also talking about social media. She claimed not to be a techno-evangelist, although she’s sent about three times as many tweets as I have so she can’t be that shy about it. She argues that anyone at all interested in the future of medical education ought to be using Twitter, and her main route into it had been from trying to get in contact with everybody else on the planet who shared her passion for it.



One lesson she had learned was that if you are going to raise uncomfortable subjects then you need to be prepared for a strong reaction. She put up a slide of some of the lovely things she had been called when she wrote a blog post questioning the way some doctors use slang about patients in social media environments. “Humourless old trout” and “PC stasi bigot” were two of the choicer ones.

She quoted the concept that the “God particle” of the medical profession is “trust”, the thing that binds the practitioner and patient together. Social media usage might undermine this. Would it be alright, she wondered, if a doctor was using a pseudonym, and then posting about how they felt burnt-out? After [Night Jack](#), I’d think a lot of public service front line bloggers had to think long and hard about whether to carry on. Anonymity, context, identity and privacy are all big issues in the doctor/patient relationship, and ones which can fit uneasily in the social media sphere.

## “Folding Drupal” – Laura D

[Laura](#) used images of her hobby oragami to illustrate the power of Drupal modules — chunks of code that have a singular function within the publishing system. When you first install Drupal with just the core, you don’t get the most amazing site. She explained that there is a Drupal module of not “hacking the core” because “bad things happen”, but explained how adding modules allows you to expand the capabilities of the CMS. That includes adding different content types which I always love to hear — I love a bit of structured data, me.

Because the system is Open Source, you get the advantage of “contrib modules” which anyone can add. They will, of course, sometimes not work as advertised or break things, but, being Open Source, you can get them fixed pretty easily. Rather delightfully, to illustrate a deformed contrib module, Laura had a slide of a badly-folded piece of oragami, and then explained that she’d had to get someone help her to make it look shoddy because she is no longer capable of making crumpled folds.

## **“Digital Democracies: the good, the bad and the OMFG LEAVE ME ALONES” – Alex Blandford**

[Alex Blandford](#), who formerly worked in the digital team at the UK’s Parliament lamented to all too often “digital democracy” means “someone being a bit of a dick to their MP.” There is also a disconnect between the ambition of getting citizens more involved in representative democracy and the fact that something like the Pensions Bill is a really really dull long 94 pages that you need to be a professional to understand and interact with.

Alex suggested that MPs are overwhelmed by email, and that a lot of the tools built on the web to help users contact their MPs are effectively broken. Having [worked on TheyWorkForYou a tiny little bit](#) way back in the day, being able to contact MPs by email seems to have gone from a scarcity to a futility in a decade. Alex said some MPs have even changed their email addresses to avoid the deluge of messages coming out of tools like Change.org. And the email that gets through is carefully filtered by staff who see organised campaigns as just copy and paste with no legitimacy to it. A common attitude among researchers apparently is that “It’s just people on the internet”. Incredibly reminiscent of the Mail Online’s view that two critical messages on a BBC website is evidence of “viewer’s fury” but that thousands of complaints about Jan Moir articles are simply orchestrated Twitter campaigns which can be easily dismissed.

Twitter got a bit of a kicking from Alex as well. It is good for being funny, he said, but it isn’t good for engagement with elected MPs. “The amount of Twitter nasties you get,” he said “is just depressing.” I should add that I slightly disagree here about MPs and Twitter. [Walthamstow’s MP Stella Creasy](#) is absolutely aces at it. But Alex made a really good point that people shouldn’t think the quick click of digital democracy and online tools was the only route to their MPs — they still have surgeries which are by far the best way to get their ear, he said.

## **“Agile Development and User Experience – best friends or bitter enemies?” – Darci Dutcher**

[Darci Dutcher](#) describes herself as an “agile UXer” and works for the company behind Moonpig. She was addressing the age-old battle between good and evil UX and agile. She said “I’ve been doing UX for my entire career, and I first encountered agile in 2002. Let’s just say it didn’t go very well.” She described a somewhat common scenario, where a couple of books are plonked on a table, and a company bigwig declares “we are doing agile now.”

Darci reminded us of the content of the introduction of agile, that 80% of IT projects were ending in failure. To be clear, I have no doubt that agile is one of the very best ways to write software, and that it suits developers very well. It can cause stress fractures elsewhere in the business though. And being reminded that agile existed in 2002 made me feel old. And sad that it still seems so much hard work for businesses to implement and cope with.

She also reiterated the problems it causes UXers — “the patchwork quilt”. If you are always designing the very minimum to ship every fortnight, you don’t necessarily get the overall coherence in design that you want from a product. UX teams can often be seen as a bottleneck by developers — there are a hundred devs at the Guardian who will testify to my ability to hold a project up whilst “drawing”. Frustratingly for UXers, tweaks to designs and interactions often get de-prioritised in favour of adding more features.

But Darcy argues UXers and agile developers can and should be best friends. The opportunity to test and iterate is so much more rewarding than spending months doing up front speculative design of something that might work. I’d much rather have real usage data telling me I’ve designed something wrong then fix it, than keep polishing a fictional Omnigraffle document of what we might one day have. As Darcy put it: “Learning is more important than getting it right the first time.”

## **“Being a Social Introvert” – Melinda Seckington**

[Melinda Seckington](#), who helps run a gazillion events and blogs at [Miss Geeky](#), gave a very honest assessment of what it is like to be an introverted person who ends up doing lots of high profile things in social environments. I nodded sagely along to a lot of what she said, whilst simultaneously huddling into my laptop and taking furious notes so that nobody would speak to me. Melinda says that because she does so many public things, people are

surprised to hear her describe herself as a “massive introvert”. A lot of the time people confuse introvert/extrovert with shy/outgoing, when it is more about what helps you recharge and regain focus.

I don't think anything has ever explained it better than [this cartoon](#), but Melinda had a lovely analogy of the introvert as the “social caterpillar” at events. We might have a tendency to go into our cocoons, but our antenna are finely tuned and during an event we'll be actively participating online. We'll be the people active on Twitter because it allows us to take part in an event and be social without the pressure of actually meeting new people face-to-face. Like caterpillars we consume a lot, listening and analysing events as they go along. Like, I don't know, obsessively blogging them and then turning that into ebooks with cross-references back to other events we've attended. And finally, Melinda said, we have our moment to fly, as she did by standing up and talking at 300 Seconds.

And the lowest thing I have ever done at a conference in order to avoid having to make conversation between sessions so I can have my introversion recharge moment? Pretending to be on the phone to my mum whilst in the queue for food...

## **“What can you unlearn from an unconference?” – Ella Weston**

Also on a conference theme was [Ella Weston](#) of WPP, talking about their exuberant unconfereces, and illustrating them with a picture of the attendees at a recent event in Indonesia taken by a drone that was there for the occasion. These were not low budget affairs. [WPP Stream](#) is usually held in warm outdoor places, and Ella explained “I never know what is going to happen at my own events until I get there and they tell me.”

The unconference starts with a big blank timetable and people can fill it in as they wish. She talked about having robots doing rude dances, and people running PowerPoint karaoke, where you have to give a talk using a deck of slides you've never seen before in your life. Ella said by taking away some of the things that make conferences difficult, it becomes easier for everybody to contribute and listen.

## “London Shop Fronts” – Emily Webber

[Emily Webber](#) from the Government Digital Service delivered my favourite talk of the evening. It wasn't about her work, but about her hobby, [documenting quirky shop fronts around London](#). She beautifully described the way that they document changes in London and in society — pointing out, for example, that most launderettes seem to have a design and typography style that dates from before washing machines were ubiquitous in the home. It is like whatever made a launderette look like one got frozen in time at the point they became less important.

She described her site as “a collection and obsession”, and half-joked “I've read a bit about collecting and I won't go into the psychological problems it can indicate”. He typed as he shuffled past his thousands of CDs clogging up the living room that he never plays anymore.

Emily described them as the backdrop of the everyday, saying they define the area you are in. London has a rich history, and these shop fronts are the products of this history, sometimes showing multiple layers. She pointed out one photo in particular, of a shop front that started off as an off licence and which now features tiny little holes where the shop also runs mini cabs, a nail bar and a hairdressers.

Emily's project reminded me of [Katherine Green's photo-record of some of the older shops that exist on Wood Street in Walthamstow](#), where I used to live. Katharine got some of the longest-serving shop owners on the street to pose in their businesses, nearly all of which represented a type of shop that is rapidly disappearing. In fact, in the 6 or so years since the project, at least two of the businesses have folded, and the characters that ran them have disappeared from the local community. Mind you, we do still have a 99p store that also doubles up as a Bible and religious text shop, which has got to be pretty rare. And we have [a Viking Store](#) now.

Emily Webber's [London Shop Fronts](#) site has apparently nearly 2,000 pictures now, classified into types, and looks like the kind of place you could lose hours of internet time to.

## Thanks and acknowledgements

There were two other talks on the night I haven't mentioned so far. I can't do justice to Camilla West's talk about the joy of the Dyson airblade hair-dryer, since without the visuals or the comic timing of her delivery it just won't make sense. And I also found it impossible to write-up Sally Moss' talk about "Women and weight training" — her message about healthy eating, exercise, and promoting positive body image is well outside the scope and expertise of this particular blog.

I'd like to thank all the speakers on the night — this ebook wouldn't be possible without their efforts — and the organising team, particularly Sharon O'Dea, Ann Kempster and Hadley Beeman, as well as Facebook for hosting the evening

## About the author



Martin Belam is the founder of Emblem, a digital consultancy offering user experience design, information architecture and training services. He has spent over a decade building digital and mobile products for brands like the Guardian, Sony, Vodafone and the BBC, and now works with clients in the publishing, media, arts, heritage and culture sectors.

Martin helps organise This Is LDNIA, and the annual EuroIA conference, and writes about UX, journalism and digital media at [martinbelam.com](http://martinbelam.com). He can be found on Twitter as [@MartinBelam](https://twitter.com/MartinBelam).

## About Emblem

Emblem is a digital consultancy offering user experience design and training services.

## Our clients

Emblem works with organisations and start-ups in the publishing, media, arts, heritage and culture sectors. Clients include Trinity Mirror, Arts Council England, the Natural History Museum, the BBC, Guardian, Which? and the Imperial War Museum.

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